

Egyptian Fatamid Jar 10-11C



This jar was made in Egypt in the late 10th to early 11th century during the Fatamid dynasty.

The Fatamids followed an extreme branch of Shi'ism. However, they allowed the majority Sunni population a degree of religious freedom and during their rule great wealth flowed into the country from trade with Europe and access to the African gold mines.

This jar has a glazed and lustred decoration (the sheen on this jar has been lost over time leaving the ochre colour) and includes bands of calligraphy repeating the Arabic word 'Barakah' - with blessings - and running hares. The blessing would refer to the contents of the vessel. The script is in the KUFIC style.

Calligraphy is of paramount importance in Islamic art. It played a role not just in its own right, but as a decoration on ALL other media – pottery to architecture. Arabic calligraphy is the medium through which the Qur'an was transmitted and recorded so it acted as a spiritually unifying factor in the Islamic world achieving as a result, its unique, elevated position.

It is possible that the technique of lustre was developed at Samarra (60kms up the Tigris from Baghdad) to create the look of gold and that it was Egyptian Potters fleeing the turmoil at the end of the Fatimid dynasty in 1171 that introduced the lustre technique into Iran. (This is one of several theories). Lustre is a complex technique, so it is extremely unlikely that it would be discovered independently in different locations.

Originally, lustre was used on glass then, much later, on pottery. It was achieved by first covering the biscuit pot with white slip or matt white glaze. This was fired at an appropriate temperature for the body – this has an earthenware body so would be fired between 850 and 1200 degrees. The decoration was then applied as a mixture of sulphur, silver and copper oxides and painted over the transparent glaze. The jar was then fired a second time at a reduced heat, to fix the decoration then polished to bring out the metallic sheen. Eventually, the technique of lustre spread to Europe, North Africa and Asia.