Revisiting the So-called Ghaybī Workshop: Toward a History of Burjī Mamluk Ceramics

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Research concerning the material culture of the Mamluks in Syria and Egypt has made great strides in the last few decades. Much of this research, however, tends to focus on the Baḥrī Mamluk period (1250–1382), paying little attention to the subsequent Burjī Mamluk period (1382–1517). The current paper therefore seeks to bridge this conspicuous gap in the field of ceramic studies by discussing a group of underglaze-painted vessels/tiles bearing signatures such as that of “Ghaybī,” a pottery workshop active probably around the Cairene area during the fifteenth century. First, the history of collecting this group of ceramics is explored in an attempt to understand why these works have remained understudied despite there being a keen interest in them among connoisseurs from the late nineteenth century onwards. Then, based on my database that contains 427 samples of signed underglaze-painted vessels from major private/museum collections, the properties (shape, technique, and surface decoration) of the pieces produced by the Ghaybī workshop are presented taxonomically. In doing so, this study not only reveals that an apprenticeship system seems to have been established within this workshop, but also suggests that Cairene workshops other than that of Ghaybī also had a notable output and a role to play in the production of ceramics. Finally, four tiles, one from a Cairene and two from Damascene religious monuments, and one unprovenanced tile, which could be attributed to the Ghaybī workshop, are examined together for the first time. Particular emphasis is placed on the architectural context of each object, with the aim of investigating the social and cultural milieu in which the demand for such products signed “Ghaybī” arose during the fifteenth and perhaps through the early sixteenth century.

Keywords: Fustāṭ, Daniel Marie Fouquet, underglaze-painted ceramic, craftsmen, Arabic inscription

I. Introduction

Research concerning the material culture of the Mamluks in Syria and Egypt has made great strides in the last few decades (Atıl 1981; Grabar 1984; Behrens-Abouseif 2012). Much of this research, however, tends to focus on the Baḥrī Mamluk period (1250–1382), paying little attention to the subsequent Burjī Mamluk period (1382–1517). The current paper therefore seeks to bridge this conspicuous gap in the field of ceramic studies1 by examining a group of underglaze-painted vessels/tiles bearing signatures such as that of “Ghaybī,” a pottery workshop active probably around the Cairene area during the fifteenth century.

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1 Recent studies on the topic of “Mamluk” ceramics mainly concern Egyptian and/or Syrian wares produced in the fourteenth century. For instance, Walker (2004) attempts to link the change in taste in respect of the decoration of fourteenth-century Egyptian sgraffiato wares (e.g., blazons of amīrs and dedicatory inscriptions in Arabic) with the political/social turmoil following the death of al-Nāṣīr Muḥammad (d. 1341), whereas Wade-Haddon (2011) tries to identify the differences between the glazed fine wares (mostly executed in underglaze-painted technique) of Ilkhanid Iran, the Golden Horde and Mamluk Syria/Egypt during the fourteenth century.
One of the most remarkable features of the group of ceramics in question is the presence of the potter’s signature on the base of the vessels and the surface of the tiles. During the preceding fourteenth century, the dedicatory formula “mimmā ʿumila bi-rasm (among [the things] made for)” followed by a patron/dedicatee’s name was commonly used for the inscriptions on sgraffiato ceramics (Walker 2004, 68–88). However, such dedicatory inscriptions seem to have become less common during the fifteenth century. Instead, potters’ marks in naskh script, occasionally accompanied by the word “ʿamal (work of),” became more prevalent as inscriptions.

More than 30 different types of potters’ mark have been identified. Some are in the form of nisba, whereas others refer to the potters’ side business. Among them are a group of underglaze-painted vessels that bear the same inscription, but executed in more than one hand, that is to say, the works by the “Ghaybī” workshop (Fig. 1). Some believe that the word Ghaybī refers generically to a potter who has migrated from another place not only because the Arabic root gh-y-b principally means absent, but also because the signatures executed on the sherds vary from “Ghaybī,” and “Ghaybī al-Shāmī,” to “Ghaybī al-Tawrīzī.”

Despite a lack of conclusive inscriptive, archaeological or textual evidence regarding the production sites, an Egyptian origin for this group of underglaze-painted vessels is suggested because Fustāṭ and Cairo have yielded almost all of the known examples so far. Also, a Burjī Mamluk, or more precisely, a fifteenth century date has been given to this group because of their use of motifs/patterns that are peculiar to the Chinese Blue-and-White porcelain produced from the reign of Yongle (r. 1402–24) onward. Such attributions are further supported by a sudden shift in the market for luxurious Chinese wares at the turn of the fifteenth century. Following Timur’s (r. 1370–1405) invasion of Syria in 1400, the major Syrian cities seem to have halted the import of Chinese Blue-and-White porcelain until the mid-fifteenth century (Carswell 1972a, 102–103). Instead, Egypt, in particular, the Cairene area that imported Chinese Blue-and-White from the second half of the fourteenth century onward, became one of the most significant sites to consume such wares (Yuba 2013, 9–15).

Another salient feature of the fifteenth-century Egyptian underglaze-painted wares is the lack of pieces that survive in complete form and the near-absence of those revealed in the course of

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2 Although less common, the names of potters (e.g., Sharaf al-Abawānī) are also found among the inscriptions on sgraffiato wares from fourteenth-century Egypt. For examples, see ‘Abd al-Rāzīq 1967.

3 There are at least two exceptional examples that bear dedicatory inscriptions, but these could be attributed to fifteenth-century Egypt: (1) an underglaze-painted sherd at the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, inv. no. 5404/47 (“bi-rasm mimmā ‘umila li-sayyidī nāṣir al-dīn al-tarjumān”) and (2) an underglaze-painted tile at the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, inv. no. 14294. For (1), see Musée de l’art arabe du Caire 1922, 127; Abel 1930, 105, pl. XIII 65; Bahgat and Massoul 1930, pl. K 81. For (2), see the fourth section of this paper.

4 My database consists of the following examples: “Ghaybī,” “Gh,” “Ghaybī al-Shāmī,” “Ghaybī al-Tawrīzī”; “al-Shāmī”; “al-Miṣrī”; “Miṣr”; “ʿUstād al-Miṣrī,” “ʿUstād”; “Ajamī,” “Ibn al-ʿAjamī”; “al-Hurμuzī”; “al-Shā’īr”; “Ghazāl,” “Ghuzayl,” “al-Ghazāl”; “Abū al-Izz”; “Muhandīm,” “al-Muhandīm”; “al-Uṣayl”; “Darwish”; “Dāhīn”; “Ibn al-Khabīb”; “Ibn al-Malīk”; “Ibn al-ʿAjāʾīb”; “al-Razzāz”; “al-Naqqāṣ”; “Khādim al-Fuqarāʾ”; “al-Qāṭīr”; “Shaykh al-Ṣanʿāʾ”; “al-Barrānī”; “al-Muʿallīm”; “al-Baqaylī”; “Aḥmad.” See also, Abel 1930, 10–38; Jungfleisch 1931, 261–268.

5 At least one example, signed by al-Shā’īr, is reported from Alexandria. See Françoise 1999, 41, pl. 2, no. 48.

6 The chronology of Chinese Blue-and-White porcelain is firmly fixed on the basis of its inscriptions, and thus is often consulted to date its Middle Eastern counterpart. However, this methodology should be used with caution because it is not a definitive way to fix a terminus ad quem of the style.

7 For Chinese Blue-and-White porcelain examples unearthed from Syria, see for instance, Françoise 2011, pl. 12, fig. 6; Riis and Poulsen 1957, fig. 777.
stratigraphic excavations. As such, the wares in question have persistently been neglected because they fall between the disciplinary boundaries of art history and archaeology. In the section below, the history of collecting this group of ceramics is explored in an attempt to understand why these works have remained understudied despite there being a keen interest in them among connoisseurs from the late nineteenth century onwards.

II. History of Collecting Fifteenth-century Egyptian Underglaze-painted Wares at Fusṭāṭ
Since 2011, a series of investigations on 407 ceramic sherds acquired in Fusṭāṭ has been conducted by Prof. Tomoko Masuya at the University of Tokyo and the current author with the kind permission of the Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki (Okayama prefecture). Covering, geographically, regions such as Spain, Anatolia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran and China, and chronologically, the ninth to sixteenth centuries, the ceramic sherds of this collection testify to the strength of the Cairene area as a profitable market for ceramics over a long period of time. Among these sherds is a group of fifteenth-century Egyptian underglaze-painted vessels that bear inscriptions such as “Ghaybī,” “Gh,” “al-Shā’ir,” “al-Shāmī,” “ʿamal al-Miṣrī,” “ʿamal Ustād al-Miṣrī,” “ʿamal al-Hurmuzī” on their base, some of which have already been published by their previous owner, Daniel Marie Fouquet (d. 1914), a Cairene-based French physician, in his Contribution à l’étude de la céramique orientale (1900).

Fouquet classified 54 pieces of his private collection bearing the mark of the Ghaybī
workshop into 19 types and published a chart of handwriting, suggesting the works were signed by many different potters and the workshop was running even in the time of Ghaybī’s son, “Ibn Ghaybī” (Fouquet 1900, 50, pl. 7.35b) (Figs. 1 and 4-a). He also categorized Ghaybī and other potters according to their *nisba*, in an attempt to identify the origin of the potters. For instance, he discusses the Ghaybī workshop under the category “*céramistes syriens*” in the “*faïences siliceuses signées*” section because one of the sherds in his collection had a signature by “Ghaybī al-Shāmī” (Fouquet 1900, 46–52, pl. 1.18b).

Fouquet embarked on collecting ceramic sherds at Fusṭāṭ in the winter of 1886–87, when a dumping ground there was mainly being exploited as a quarry for soil fertilizer and construction materials (Fouquet 1900, 3–4). Official excavations were not undertaken at this location until 1912 and stratigraphic excavations started much later in 1968. Thus, almost all of the sherds acquired before this time lack archaeological context. Even though European travelers might already have been aware of such materials before the British occupation in 1882 (Rosser-Owen 2013, 166–167), it was Fouquet’s large-scale acquisitional activity that seems to have stimulated interest in the ceramic sherds from this location. For instance, Henry Wallis (d. 1916), a British Pre-Raphaelite painter who is best known today as a connoisseur of ceramics, assisted in an exploration at Fusṭāṭ organized by the Egypt Exploration Fund and led by Count Riamo d’Hulst (d. 1920?) in 1889. Wallis reported and illustrated some of the findings of this exploration in 1891 (Wallis 1891, pls. 1–17).

It should be stressed that the group of fifteenth-century Egyptian underglaze-painted vessels discussed in this paper appears to have been particularly favored and assembled between the late 1880s and early 1910s, when collectors had a “choice” of items to select from the ground according to their taste. In fact, not only Fouquet, but also Wallis published chromo-lithographical illustrations of this group alongside sherds of luster-painted vessels that had been avidly collected in Europe from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (Fouquet 1900, pls. 6–11; Wallis 1891, pls. 7.7–12, 17.4). A preference for such underglaze-painted vessels is hardly surprising because they bear Arabic signatures on their base, which might have been attractive to the Orientalists.

Afterwards, a substantial amount of fifteenth-century Egyptian underglaze-painted vessels was unearthed at Fusṭāṭ during a series of official excavations directed by M. Ali Bahgat Bey, the curator of the Musée de l’art arabe du Caire (now known as the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo) between 1912 and 1924. After the items had been transferred to the Musée, some examples were published together with other ceramic sherds (Musée de l’art arabe du Caire 1922, 112, 127–128; Bahgat and Massoul 1930, col. pl. 4, pls. 39–44, 54.2, K–M). Meanwhile, the first—and only—monograph including the name of Ghaybi in its title was published in 1930 as an outcome of these Egyptian excavations, namely, Armand Abel’s *Gaibī et les grands faïenciers égyptiens d’époque mamlouke* (1930).

Abel’s contribution was twofold. First, he catalogued 288 pieces of fifteenth-century underglaze-painted ceramic vessels at the Musée and listed them according to the potters’ marks

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8 The sherd published by Fouquet is now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. no. 1973.79.20). See also, Jenkins 1984, pls. 15a, b.

9 See also, Herz Bey 1896, 65–66, for those assembled in Fusṭāṭ before a series of official excavations at this location.
(Abel 1930, 39–110). Second, he referred to an underglaze-painted tile that had been derived from the mausoleum of Sayyida Naфизa (discussed below) (Fig. 8-c) and associated it with the Ghaybī workshop on the basis of its inscriptions for the first time (Abel 1930, 17). Abel’s meticulous descriptions notwithstanding, this catalogue has a serious defect in relation to the quality/quantity of photographs of the back-side of the artifacts that prevents readers from assessing the quality of the different handwritings.

Even though less than a dozen fifteenth-century underglaze-painted ceramic vessels were reported in the course of subsequent stratigraphic excavations by American (1968–84), Japanese (1978–85), and French (1985–) teams (Scanlon 1984, pls. 8–9; Monchamp 2011, pls. 330.a–c, e), the studies on this topic advanced in the 1980s because “surface collections” from Fustāṭ gradually attracted scholarly attention during this period. Bengt Peterson’s short articles on “blue and white imitation pottery,” for instance, brought to light hitherto unpublished examples of such wares from Fustāṭ that were held in public/private collections in Stockholm (Peterson 1980; 1982). In addition, Jenkins (1984) examined such examples from Fustāṭ at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and proposed a hypothesis about the migratory route of the Ghaybī workshop.

Jenkins contributed significantly to the then-emerging field of “Mamluk” underglaze-painted ceramics by introducing a number of previously unknown vessels and tiles. In fact it was she who adopted a reading of “ʿamal Ghaybī Tawrīzī” for the inscription of the underglaze-painted tile at the mosque of Ghars al-Dīn Khālīl al-Tawrīzī in Damascus (c. 1420, discussed below in the fourth section) for the first time (Jenkins 1984, 104) (Fig. 8-a). Associating this tile with a sherd from Fustāṭ that bears the inscription of “Ghaybī al-Shāmī,” she confidently argues that the atelier led by Ghaybī migrated from Iran (i.e., Tabrīz) to Egypt (i.e., Fustāṭ) via Syria (i.e., Damascus) (Jenkins 1984, 104–112). In other words, she used Ghaybī’s nisba as evidence to reconstruct an itinerary of the migrating atelier. Nonetheless, her nisba theory, which is developed on the premise of identifying “Ghaybī Tawrīzī” and “Ghaybī al-Shāmī” as the same figure, is highly problematic because it only concerns what is written in an inscription, and ignores how. As is well illustrated in the chart of handwritings by Fouquet, the products of the Ghaybī workshop do not seem to have been signed by the same potter, but rather by several potters whose skill vary (Fig. 1).

Despite the constant stream of projects on Mamluk ceramic sherds from Fustāṭ that have been published over recent decades (Gibbs 2000; Watson 2004, 416–425; Vezzoli 2011), a comprehensive study of fifteenth-century Egyptian underglaze-painted wares has yet to be undertaken due to the inaccessibility of the “surface collections” still in the storage rooms of major public/private collections. As a result, our current understanding on this topic remains fragmentary, and as Oliver Watson laments, “It is paradoxical that we know so much more about the history of Egyptian ceramics in the eleventh century than we do of its history in the fifteenth century” (Watson 2004, 417).

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10 Abel gives the reading “Ghaybī ibn al-Tawrīzī,” yet this seems to be less plausible. See the fourth section of this paper.
11 For a critical review of this publication, see Jungfleisch 1931.
12 Japanese archaeological expeditions at Ahl al-Rāya district in Fustāṭ, for instance, revealed almost nothing which could be securely dated to the Burjī Mamluk period (Kawatoko and Shindo 1992; Shindo and Kawatoko 2010, col. pls. 6–7). See also, http://fustat.w-ias.jp/ (accessed August 31, 2016).
13 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 1973.79.36. See Jenkins 1984, pls. 13 c, d.
III. Vessels Produced by Ghaybī Workshop

In an attempt to contribute to knowledge on this topic, we will first present the properties of the pieces produced by the Ghaybī workshop, which are drawn from my database that contains 427 samples of signed underglaze-painted vessels from major private/museum collections. Among them, 176 samples are signed by the Ghaybī workshop. In doing so, this study not only reveals that an apprenticeship system seems to have been established within this workshop, but also suggests that Cairene workshops other than that of Ghaybī also had a notable output and a role to play in the production of ceramics.

The most common vessel shape seen in the works by the Ghaybī workshop is a small bowl (diameter of foot: 4.5–8.5 cm), but none of such examples survive intact. In addition, there is at least one example that has the form of a mosque lamp (Fig. 5-b). The fabric of the vessels by the Ghaybī workshop is fine, hard and is composed of clay, siliceous material and glass frit (i.e. so-called fritware). The soil color tends to fall around 2.5–5Y 8/1–2 (from white to pale yellow). The pieces are usually covered with a thin slip.

According to their techniques and surface decorations, the vessels bearing the signature of “Ghaybī” (including other variants) can be classified into four types. While the first three types employ an underglaze technique, the last type combines the sgraffiato technique with an underglaze one. The brief descriptions of the four types are as follows:

Type 1: Blue-and-White type, Chinese style

The most prominent features of this group are the use of cobalt blue and motifs/patterns derived from those of Chinese Blue-and-White porcelain. A spray of two pomegranates/peaches on a branch, for instance, is a motif that is typical to the Chinese Blue-and-White dated to the early fifteenth century (Lane 1957, 51; Pope 1956, pl. 51-2) (Fig. 2). Other examples include a swimming duck, a flying phoenix, a pair of dears, a rosette, and so on.

14 Among them, 71 [12] pieces were acquired through controlled excavations in Egypt (numbers in brackets indicate the sherds signed by the Ghaybī workshop). For the pieces from Alexandria, see François 1999, pl. 2.48 (1 [0] pieces); for those from Cairo, see Monchamp 2011, pls. 330.a–c, e (4 [0] pieces); and for those from Fustāt, see Musée de l’art arabe du Caire 1922, 112, 127–128; Bahgat and Massoul 1930, col. pl. 4, pls. 39–44, 54.2, K–M; Abel 1930, pls. 1–31; Scanlon 1984, pls. 8–98 (66 [12] pieces). Others are “surface collections” from Fustāt, still in the storage rooms of major public/private collections: Gayer Anderson collection, Cairo (118 [45] pieces); Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (19 [8] pieces); British Museum (27 [12] pieces); Victoria and Albert Museum (46 [21] pieces; Lane 1957, pl. 16B); Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (3 [3] pieces); Musée du Louvre (14 [6] pieces); Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels (11 [6] pieces; Vezzoli 2011, pls. 10.5, 12.1–5, 12.8–11, 12.13); National Museum, Stockholm (13 [4] pieces; Peterson 1982; McPhilips 2008, 117–118); Medelhavsmuseet, Stockholm (13 [7] pieces; Peterson 1980; private collection in Stockholm (6 [5] pieces; Peterson 1980); Benaki Museum, Athens (58 [31] pieces); Kuwait National Museum (18 [3] pieces; Watson 2004, 418–421); Metropolitan Museum of Art (13 [4] pieces; Jenkins 1984, pls. 8.d, e, 10.c, d, 13.b–e, 15.a–f); Aoyama Gakuin University (2 [2] pieces; Aoyama Gakuin University 2010, pls. 41-6, 42-5); Ohara Museum of Art (14 [7] pieces).

15 The signatures executed on the sherds vary from “Ghaybī” (152 examples), “Gh” (17 examples, see for instance, Peterson 1980, pls. 5, 11; Watson 2004, 418; Vezzoli 2011, pl. 12.5), “Ibn Ghaybī” (1 example, Fig. 4-a), “Ibn al-Ghaybī al-Tawrīzī” (1 example, Fig. 5-b) and “Ghaybī al-Shāmī” (4 examples, see, for instance, Jenkins 1984, pls. 13.b–c; Bahgat and Massoul 1930, pls. 39.3, 3bis), to “Ghaybī al-Tawrīzī” (1 example, see Bahgat and Massoul 1930, pls. 39.1, 1bis).

16 An unsigned Blue-and-White underglaze-painted vessel at Louvre (inv. no. Ucad 20831 bis h) gives a complete profile of this type of bowl (height: 4.8 cm; diameter of foot: 4.8 cm; a hemispherical bowl on a short foot). I would like to thank Dr. Carine Juvin for bringing this unpublished piece to my attention.

17 This is a modified version of the classification proposed by Arthur Lane. For this, see Lane 1957, 31.
Type 2: Blue-and-White type, Non-Chinese style
Some motifs/patterns have no known counterpart in Chinese Blue-and-White. Typical examples include a heron-like bird occasionally holding a fish (hereinafter referred to as the Ghaybī-style bird motif) (Fig. 3-a), a fish, and a building (Fig. 3-b).

Type 3: Scroll and Panel type
This group is characterized by the use of geometric pattern. The most common examples have stylized white scroll motifs silhouetted in black (Fig. 4-a) or blue (Fig. 4-b), which often accompany a radial pattern (Fig. 4-b).

Type 4: Incised Black type
The fourth group combines the sgraffiato technique with an underglaze one (Figs. 5-a and 5-b).

Moreover, a quantitative analysis of the output of the Ghaybī workshop suggests that it had an apprenticeship structure. A close examination of the underglaze-painted vessels decorated with the Ghaybī-style bird motif (Blue-and-White type, non-Chinese style) reveals the existence of a ‘master’ (hereinafter referred to as Master Ghaybī), who can be recognized by his neat handwriting and the outstanding quality of his painting (Fig. 3-a). Compared to the works by Master Ghaybī, those by other potters who signed his name are mostly of inferior quality. Take two examples from the ex-Fouquet collection: one depicts a bird that pecks at a simplified version of a fish (Fig. 6-a) and another, bearing an abbreviated signature “gh” on the base, shows a bird holding a mere scribble in its beak (Fig. 6-b). On the other hand, an unsigned example in the Ashmolean Museum bears a Ghaybī bird without the fish, but which is outlined in white on a ground of greenish black scrolls punctuated by small circles surrounding three dots (Fig. 6-c). Thus, Master Ghaybī seems to have provided a pattern on which other potters could model their works and after which they decorated the surface of the vessels in their own way. The Ghaybī-style bird motif was shared among not only the potters who belonged to the Ghaybī workshop, but also various other workshops such as those of al-Hurmuzī, Darwīsh, al-Shāmī, al-Shā’ir, to name a few, so this bird was undoubtedly one of the most popular motifs circulating in the Cairene area during the fifteenth century.

In addition, an examination of a group of underglaze-painted vessels bearing a spray of pomegranates motif (Blue-and-White type, Chinese style) indicates Master Ghaybī’s contribution in distributing this Chinese motif among the Cairene potters. As explained above, a spray of pomegranates is a motif that is typical to Chinese Blue-and-White porcelain datable to the early fifteenth century. The diverse range of quality evident in the group with this motif suggests, however, that the majority of local potters did not have direct access to the Chinese Blue-and-White that was imported into Egypt. Unlike the works attributed to Master Ghaybī on the basis of the handwriting, those made by his fellow craftsmen and other workshops are far removed from the Chinese prototype. For instance, a vessel bearing the signature “al-Shā’ir” (ex-Fouquet collection) has a surrounding border incised through black pigment, which is not found in the Chinese prototype (Fig. 7-a). As such, as far as this particular pomegranate motif is concerned, it is more plausible that Master Ghaybī was the only one who was able to copy the Chinese piece
directly.

Nonetheless, it was not just Master Ghaybī, or his workshop, that seems to have been involved in creating the underglaze-painted vessels that inspired potters in the Cairene area in terms of decoration. In fact, some workshops preferred to adopt more than three colors to decorate the inside of the bottom of a vessel. For instance, whereas al-Shāʿir workshop used green, blue and black pigments (Fig. 7-b), al-Hurmuzī workshop commonly used red pigment as well (Fig. 7-c). By making the best use of these bright palettes, both al-Shāʿir and al-Hurmuzī workshops seem to have created unique motifs/patterns whose origins cannot be traced back to the Ghaybī workshop. Those workshops’ designs included, for instance, a flower-like motif consisting of blade-like petals radiating from the center with small trefoil flowering plants coming up between them (Fig. 7-b) and a lotus flower surrounded by scrolled vines (Fig. 7-c) that seems to have been inspired by the Chinese Blue-and-White of the early fifteenth century. Such motifs are also found among a group of hexagonal-shaped underglaze-painted tiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum, suggesting that Cairene workshops other than Ghaybī were also involved in making tiles for the religious monuments in Cairo and Damascus.

IV. Tiles Produced by Ghaybī Workshop

Among the workshops active in the Cairene area during the fifteenth century, the Ghaybī workshop was the only one that added a signature to tiles installed on buildings. This section analyzes the inscriptions, style and architectural context of four tiles that could be attributed to the Ghaybī workshop either on the basis of inscription or style. Three of the tiles have a secure provenance (one from Cairo and two from Damascus) and they are all at/from commemorative structures; one for a Mamluk officer, and two for saints. These three tiles are known to have inscriptions that include the name, “Ghaybī,” yet it is only the catalogue of the exhibition *Syrie: Mémoire et civilisation* held in 1993 that refers to the presence of the signature on all three of them. Furthermore, from a stylistic perspective, a fourth, unsigned, tile could also possibly be attributed to the Ghaybī workshop.

As demonstrated below, each of the four contains valuable information about the date, consumption site, patron, and function of the tiles produced by Ghaybī workshop. In fact, given the small number of craftsmen who are known to have been recorded in contemporaneous Arabic primary sources such as *ṭabāqāts* (biographical dictionaries), the identity of this prolific potter(s) is/are more likely to be disclosed if we fully consider the subsidiary information obtained from these tiles. In some cases, even the value of the products by the Ghaybī workshop can be assessed to some extent by exploring the social and economic status of the architectural settings in which these tiles were incorporated.

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18 For the Chinese counterpart, see Pope 1956, pls. 32, 46, 51, 52.
19 Compare Victoria and Albert Museum inv. no. 27-1900 (Carswell 1972b, pl. 8, no. 47) and inv. no. 34-1900 (Carswell 1972b, pl. 5, no. 68).
20 As demonstrated by Rabbat (1998) and others, craftsmen were not recorded by Mamluk chroniclers or biographers unless they succeeded in occupying a privileged position in the Mamluk bureaucratic system.
1. Signed Panel at Ghars al-Dīn Khalīl al-Tawrīzī Mosque, Damascus (in situ)

First, we shall examine a signed panel still in situ at the original context. The panel in question is underglaze-painted in blue, black and purple, and composed of six square tiles. Bearing the inscription “ʿamal Ghaybī Tawrīzī,” it is installed on a qibla wall of the Damascene mosque elected by Ghars al-Dīn Khalīl al-Tawrīzī (d. 1423), together with more than 440 hexagonal tiles executed in the same technique (Meinecke 1988, 204–205, pl. 37b) (Fig. 8-a). According to contemporaneous primary sources and monumental inscriptions, Ghars al-Dīn Khalīl al-Tawrīzī was a Mamluk officer who served as the ḥājib (chamberlain) of Damascus from Muḥarram 823/February–March 1420, and he started constructing this mosque beside his own mausoleum in Jumādā II 823/June–July 1420 (Sulūk, 520; Gaube 1978, 92–93; Dāris 240). Thus, this panel can be securely dated to around 1420.

The central decoration consists of a pointed medallion inscribed with the word Allāh below which is a mosque lamp hanging above a Qurʾān stand that is flanked by sprays of flowers and ferns growing from the ground. The whole scene is surrounded by a poly-lobed frame, probably with the intention of representing the panel as a small miḥrāb. Given the rarity of craftsmen’s or patrons’ names being inscribed on miḥrābs during the Mamluk period (Behrens-Abouseif 2011, 393–394), the inclusion of the potter’s signature, which can be seen in the bottom right corner of the panel, may perhaps imply his privileged status as a high-skilled craftsman.

Even though this panel first appeared in print in 1972, its inscription was not deciphered as “Ghaybī Tawrīzī” (emphasis added) until Jenkins (1984, 104) did so because it had been written in peculiar style of handwriting that omits the diacritical marks and stretches the tail of the last letter, yāʾ, of Ghaybī, to the left.

However, there is a stylistic discrepancy between the handwriting of “Ghaybī Tawrīzī” and that of the craftsman we called Master Ghaybī in section three above. Based on the scant evidence available, ‘our’ Master Ghaybī always put neat diacritical marks below the first three letters (gh- y-b) (Figs. 2 and 3-a). Meanwhile, as regards the style of painting itself, the panel signed by “Ghaybī Tawrīzī” does not conform to any style of the vessel known to have been produced by the Ghaybī workshop. Also, the use of manganese purple is also a characteristic feature of this panel, a color that is not used in other works of the Ghaybī workshop. Therefore, we should not exclude the possibility that Master Ghaybī was a different person to “Ghaybī Tawrīzī.”

2. Tile at Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Inv. No. 14294 (provenance unknown)

Some tiles, however, closely resemble the vessels produced by the Ghaybī workshop in terms of their style. An underglaze-painted tile at the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo (inv. no. 14294) (Fig. 8-b), for instance, has a series of white floriated scroll patterns that is comparable to the work by “Ibn Ghaybī” (Fig. 4-a), which both could be classified as Type 3 (Scroll and Panel Type) in our proposed taxonomy. Although it is neither signed nor securely provenanced, this example, which could possibly be attributed to the Ghaybī workshop on the basis of its style, is worth discussing.

21 Carswell (1972a, 100) interprets the potter’s name as “Īsā al-Tawrīzī.” For an earlier study on the tiles adorning the Ghars al-Dīn Khalīl al-Tawrīzī complex, see Riefstahl 1937, 278, figs. 23–5.
22 See also, Drouot-Richelieu 1990, 70, lot. no. 258, that conforms to Incised Black Style, for another example which could possibly attributed to the Ghaybī workshop. I owe this information to Dr. Charlotte Maury at the Louvre Museum.
here because its drawing and inscriptions shed valuable light on the function and social context of the items produced by this workshop.

So, to the detail of the tile in question. Below a series of inscription bands is a mosque lamp hanging above a Qur’ān stand that is flanked by ḍarīḥs (domed sepulchers) covered with lattice frames. Above the ḍarīḥ on the left-hand side is a ewer and a framed dedicatory inscription and above the one on the right-hand side is a two-sided comb, while below them are vegetal motifs such as ferns growing from the ground. The motifs could constitute an appropriate iconographic formula for a funerary context. On the one hand, ewers and vegetal motifs were frequently seen in the mausoleums of the fifteenth century (Golombek 1993, 248), and on the other, mosque lamps (Khoury 1992, 13–15) and grooming aids (e.g., Massé 1938, 116) were not uncommon motifs for the gravestones of Muslims from various backgrounds.

The inscriptions read:

raʾaytu al-dahr ṭukhtalīf yadūru fa-lā faraḥu wa-lā surūr
raʾaytu al-nās kullahum sukārā wa-kaʾs al-mawli baynahum yadūru
fa-wā ʿajab li-man yuṣbiḥu wa yumsī wa-yaʿlamu anna maskanahu al-qubūr
fa-qad banat al-mulūk la-hā quṣūr al-mawt i baynahum yadūru fa-wāʿajab an li-man yuṣbiḥu wa yumsī wa-yaʿlamu anna maskanahu al-qubūr

I saw the time passing fluidly, and neither happiness nor joy persists
I saw all the people intoxicated, while the cup of death among them circulating
How strange! One wakes up in the morning and whiles away the evening, whereas he knows that his dwelling is the grave
The kings built palaces, but neither kings nor palaces remain

mimmā ʿumila bi-rasmi al-qāḍī
al-fākhūrī
Among (the things) made for al-Qāḍī al-Fākhūrī

Judging from the content and legibility of the inscriptions, as well as the images that have strong connotations of death, it is almost certain that this underglaze-painted tile was intended to commemorate a deceased personage, and thus might have been installed in a religious monument such as a mausoleum so that it could be seen by pious Muslim visitors. The fact that the inscriptions contain verses attributed to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, the first Imām renowned for his poetic talent, further implies its usage in a mausoleum dedicated to ahl al-bayt of the Prophet Muḥammad.23

Also, given the fact that the other aforementioned “Ghaybī” tiles were acquired from monuments in Cairo and Damascus, and that these cities were two of the most popular destinations for ziyyāra during the fifteenth century due to the existence of vast cemetery areas that embraced mausoleums associated with the family members of Muḥammad, it is plausible that this tile was either from a mausoleum in Damascus or Cairo, with the latter being the more likely of the two

---

23 The metre of this poem is wāfir. For the transcription of this poem, see Ibrahim and O’Kane 1988, 258. The translation and identification of this poetry is my own. The verse inscribed upon this ceramic tombstone differs from that of the modern-day edition of ʿAlī’s work. See Dīwān, 86, which does not contain two couplets starting from raʾaytu al-nās and ending al-qubūr.
Revisiting the So-called Ghaybī Workshop: Toward a History of Burjī Mamluk Ceramics

options because the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo owns this particular tile. Further investigation of the identity of “Qādī al-Fākhūrī,” a possible patron of this tile, may illuminate the provenance of this object.

3. Signed Tile at Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Inv. No. 2077 (acquired from Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo)

The next example to be discussed is another underglaze-painted tile at the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo (inv. no. 2077) (Fig. 8-c). This square-shaped tile was transferred to the museum from the mausoleum of Sayyida Nafīsa (d. 825) located in the Southern Cemetery in Cairo, no later than in 1906.24

The geometric pattern of the decoration and concentric layout of the inscriptions are the most notable features of this square-shaped tile. Even though this tile bears a signature by “Ibn Ghaybī al-Tawrīzī,” none of the fifteenth-century Egyptian underglaze-painted wares—including the ones signed by “Ibn Ghaybī” (Fig. 4-a)—seems to share a style with this particular example. In the border around the highly stylized white inscriptions silhouetted in blue are the blue inscriptions in floriated Kufic script and the signature of the potter written twice in square Kufic script. The inscriptions, appropriately chosen for this commemorative structure, read:

\[
\text{tawakkul ālā khayr muʿayyan}
\]

Trust in the best, the determined\textsuperscript{25}

\[
\text{inna l-ṣalāt tanhā an l-faḥshā }
\]

\[
\text{wa l-munkar wa-la-dhikr illāh akbar wa llah yaʾlamu mā taṣnaʿūna wa-ṣadaqa allāh}
\]

Prayer restrains outrageous and unacceptable behavior. Remembering God is greater. God knows everything you are doing.\textsuperscript{26} (sūra 29:45) God speaks the truth.

\[
\text{ʿamal ibn ghaybī}
\]

al-tawrīzī

Made by Ibn Ghaybī al-Tawrīzī\textsuperscript{28}

During the Mamluk period, the administration of the mausoleum of Sayyida Nafīsa was entrusted to the ʿAbbasid caliphs who fled from Baghdad after the Mongol invasion. For this reason,

24 Herz Bey (1906, 239–240) reports the existence of a tile bearing the inscription of “Ibn Issa el-Taourisi (de Tauris),” whose provenance he gives as “la mosquée Sayeda Nefissa.” The reading of “Īsā” instead of “Ghaybī” was also repeated in Prost (1917, 43).
25 The white inscriptions in the middle are repeated eight times.
26 The blue inscriptions in floriated Kufic script can be read clockwise from the upper right-hand corner of the border.
27 Translation after Haleem 2004, 254–255.
28 Meinecke deciphered this inscription as “ʿamal Ġaibī (?)/ ibn al-Taurīzī,” and the inscription on the qibla tile as “ʿamal Ġaibī (?) Taurīzī,” arguing that “both are variations of the signature of the same craftsman” (Meinecke 1988, 205, 212). Such a reading for the Sayyida Nafīsa tile is also adopted in Abel (1930, 17) and Youssef (1986, 209), but it seems less likely given the layout of the inscriptions.
the *mawlid* (birthday celebration) of Sayyida Nafīsa, which had taken place at this location from 889/1484 onward, was eventually called “*mawlid al-khalīfa* (the caliph’s birthday celebration)” (Ohtoshi 2006, 93, 101–102). It was during such occasions that this work of the Ghaybī workshop would have been appreciated by many pious visitors.

### 4. Signed Tile at Musée national de céramique à Sèvres, Inv. No. MNC7111-1 (acquired from the mausoleum of Shaykh Arslān/Raslān, Damascus)

The last example to be discussed is a signed circular tile at the Musée national de céramique à Sèvres (inv. no. MNC7111-1) (Fig. 8-d). In spite of its inscription that clearly states “Ghaybī,” this tile, which was on display in 1993 during the exhibition, *Syrie: Mémoire et civilisation*, has never been studied extensively in the previous literature on the Ghaybī workshop. The catalogue of this exhibition attributed this tile to 1425–30, on the grounds of the dating of the aforementioned signed tile at Ghars al-Dīn Khalīl al-Tawrīzī mosque in Damascus (Institut du monde arabe 1993, 457–458).29 However, this dating seems to be incorrect, for the reasons discussed below.

This example shares much in common with the square-shaped tile at the mausoleum of Sayyida Nafīsa in terms of the concentric layout and white inscriptions. Unlike the Sayyida Nafīsa tile, however, the tile in question is executed with a *sgraffiato* technique that scratches back through the blue and black background as well as with an underglaze-painted technique. With regard to its style and motif/pattern, we could not find a parallel among the sherds acquired at Fusṭāṭ.

The name of the craftsman is written conspicuously above the beginning of Qur’ānic inscription, resulting in obliterating the first *kāf* of the word *kulṭ*. The inscriptions read:

\[
\text{qul kulṭ}^{*m} \text{ ya’malu ‘ala shākilat’-hi}
\]

Say, everyone does things their own way\(^{30}\) (*sūra* 17: 84)

\[
\text{’amal ahmadī tabrīzī mashhūr bi-ghaybī}
\]

Made by Aḥmadī Tabrīzī known as Ghaybī

The tile in question is one of a pair of tiles that is said to have been acquired in 1875 at the mausoleum of Shaykh Arslān (Raslān) Dimashqī (d. 1145), a twelfth-century Damascene saint who is best known for protecting Damascus against the Crusaders (Institut du monde arabe 1993, 457–458). As indicated in the inscription on the other tile of this pair (Inv. No. MNC7111-2; unsigned), this set was dedicated as a pious endowment for the mausoleum of Shaykh Arslān.\(^{31}\) Located outside Bāb al-Tūmā at the northwestern end of Old Damascus, the burial place of this local hero became firmly established as a center of pilgrimage for Damascene Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians by the early Ottoman period (Meri 2002, 209–210).

More important, but hitherto ignored, is the fact that this mausoleum underwent refurbishment

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29 This dating of 1425–30 is probably derived from Carswell (1972a, 100), in which the year of Ghars al-Dīn Khalīl al-Tawrīzī’s death is mistaken as 1430, as the officer is known to have died in Rajab 826/June–July 1423. See also, *Sulūk*, 651; *Dāris*, 240.

30 Translation after Haleem 2004, 180. The quote is repeated four times.

31 The inscription on inv. no. MNC7111-2 reads “…iḥtirām”\(^{*m} \text{’alā waqf} maqām’ shaykh’ raslān”.”
during the Burjī Mamluk period. Muḥammad b. Ṭūlūn (d. 1546), a prolific Damascene historian who wrote *Ghāyat al-Bayān fī Tarjamat al-Shaykh Arslān al-Dimashqī* (*The Ultimate Explanation on the Biography of Shaykh Arslān Dimashqī*) reports:

A nāʿīb (deputy) of Damascus, Qānṣūh al-Burj al-Chirkisī renovated this place of worship in our days, in around the [hijri] year 908 (1502–03). And he erected there a tomb for himself, but He (God) did not determine his burial to be there, and God knows best.³² (*Ghayāt*, 53)

Whether this renovation project involved the installment of the pair of tiles discussed here is not clear from Ibn Ṭūlūn’s statement. However, we can at least ascertain that the patron was an officer of Damascus, as was the aforementioned Ghars al-Dīn Khalīl al-Tawrīzī. So, was Qānṣūh al-Burj al-Chirkisī also a patron of the products of the Ghaybī workshop? If so, how can we explain the eighty-year gap between the two signed tiles? Such an interpretation would be possible only if one considers “Aḥmadī Tabrīzī” to be a different person than “Ghaybī Tawrīzī,” who left his signature on the tile panel of the Ghars al-Dīn Khalīl al-Tawrīzī mosque in the early 1420s. One may suggest that the stylistic/technical discrepancies and spelling inconsistency (“Tabrīzī” and “Tawrīzī”) seen in these two signed tiles were the result of different hands. Nevertheless, we cannot confirm this hypothesis unless more primary sources and relevant datable pieces come to light.

V. Conclusion

A thorough examination of the handwriting and painting styles of a quantity of fifteenth-century Egyptian vessels, most of which reside in unpublished surface collections as exemplified by ex-Fouquet collection at the Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, reveal the following for the first time. First, an apprenticeship system seems to have been established within the Ghaybī workshop. Second, Cairene workshops other than that of Ghaybī also might also had a notable output and a role to play in the production of ceramics.

Moreover, an extensive investigation of the inscriptions, style and architectural context of four tiles that could be attributed to the Ghaybī workshop suggests that some revisions are required of previous interpretations that solely considered the *nisba* of Ghaybī. First, the tiles associated with the Ghaybī workshop seem to have been particularly favored for commemorative structures. As such, they contain religious inscriptions such as Qur’ānic verses and the poem by ʿAlī, which are highly appropriate for such a context. Second, the products by the Ghaybī workshop seem to have been highly appreciated by the Mamluk elites, if not sultans. Third, three out of the four examples do not conform to the stylistic classification that we proposed for the vessels. Finally, therefore, we should deal with the inscription “Ghaybī” on tiles with caution because “Ghaybī Tawrīzī,” “Ibn Ghaybī al-Tawrīzī,” and “Aḥmadī Tabrīzī” may not be the same person.

³² According to another source written by the same author, Qānṣūh al-Burj al-Chirkisī was appointed as the deputy of Damascus in 906/1500–01 and died in 910/1504–05. See, *Iʿlām*, 136.
Author’s Note
The present article, drawn from my extended essay (supervised by Dr. Oliver Watson) submitted to the University of Oxford in June 2013, is based on a paper presented at the eighth seminar of Coptic and Islamic Material Culture in Egypt (The University of Tokyo, June 25, 2016). I am grateful to Prof. Tomoko Masuya and the anonymous colleagues for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this article. I also gratefully acknowledge the kind assistance of Ms. Ayumi Yoshikawa from the Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Dr. Mariam Rosser-Owen from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Ms. Alessandra Cereda from the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and Dr. Carine Juvin, Dr. Charlotte Maury and Dr. Rocco Rante from the Musée du Louvre, Paris. This work was supported by Keidanren Ishizaka Memorial Foundation, Wolfson College Research Grant, and JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 15J10363.

Image Acknowledgements
Photograph courtesy of Prof. Bernard O’Kane: Fig. 8-b.
Photographs courtesy of Dr. Oliver Watson: Figs. 2, 8-a.
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Fig. 2: Blue-and-White Type (Chinese style)
Bowl signed by Master Ghaybī

Fig. 3: Blue-and-White Type (non-Chinese style)
a. Bowl signed by Master Ghaybī
b. Bowl bearing the signature of “Ghaybī”

Fig. 4: Scroll and Panel Type
a. Bowl bearing the signature of “Ibn Ghaybī”
b. Bowl bearing the signature of “Ghaybī,” after Aoyama Gakuin University (2010), pl. 42-5.

Fig. 5: Incised Black Type
a. Bowl bearing the signature of “Ghaybī”
b. Ceramic lamp bearing the signature of “Ibn al-Ghaybī al-Tawrīzī”
Fig. 6: Ghaybī Style Bird
a. Bowl bearing the signature of “Ghaybī”
b. Bowl bearing the signature of “Gh”
c. Unsigned bowl

Fig. 7: Bowl Bearing the Signatures by Workshop Other than That of Ghaybī
a. “al-Shā‘ir,” b. “al-Shā‘ir,” c. “al-Hurmuzī”
Fig. 8: Tiles Attributed to the Ghaybī Workshop (not to scale)

a. Tile, *in situ* at the mosque of Ghars al-Dīn Khafīl al-Tawrīzī, Damascus
b. Tile, Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, inv. no. 14294
c. Tile, Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, inv. no. 2077, acquired from the mausoleum of Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, after Prost (1916), pl. X-1.
d. Tile, Musée national de céramique à Sèvres, inv. no. MNC7111–1, acquired from the mausoleum of Shaykh Arslān, Damascus.