

AMIR MOHTASHEMI



Ottoman Terra Lemnia jug

Ottoman Turkey, 17th-18th century

Unglazed ceramic with monochrome decoration

15cm high, 11cm diameter

Stock no.: A5375

This unglazed earthenware jug of cream colour body is burnished and painted in monochrome brown colour. The shape of the jug, with its thick and slightly flaring neck, bulbous body and elegantly curved handle, is very similar to those of the *Iznik* jugs, yet it is much smaller than a standard *Iznik* jug. More interestingly, on the inside of the jug at the neck, there is a delicately carved filter in the shape of a blossoming flower. The painted decoration on the body is divided into four registers, where the top two registers contain poetry verses, and the lower two registers contain flower and leaf motifs.

This type of jug is generally known as a water filter jug. They are believed to have originated from the Sasanian Empire, but are widespread throughout the Middle Eastern regions, including Syria, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Iran, by the second half of the 8th century. Porous water jugs were designed to keep water cool as it evaporates. The filters, which kept out insects, were generally perforated with a variety of designs made up of ornamental, calligraphic, figurative and animal motifs.

More specifically, this jug belongs to a group of unglazed ceramics currently at the British Museum, the Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge) and Galleria Regionale della Sicilia (Palermo). Commonly known as *Terra Lemnia* wares, it was believed in the Ottoman period that clay used for making such ceramics, excavated from the Island of Lemnos in the Aegean sea, had alexipharmic properties. The tradition of excavating *Terra Lemnia* clay dates back to the Roman period, and was rediscovered by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror (r.1451-1481), who seized the Island of Lemnos from the Venetians in 1479. Inspired by literary references translated from Roman sources, the Sultan dispatched physicians to Lemnos and rediscovered the sources of *tin-i mahtum* (lit. sealed earth), the Ottoman term for *Terra Lemnia*. Following Classical sources, the Ottomans believed that such clay is of pharmacological use, and claimed it to be “exceptionally delicious and strongly scented.” For such reasons, the extraction

site of *Terra Lemnia* was protected by the Sultans, at least until the end of the sixteenth century, where extraction and transportation without permission were heavily punished. Sources also testify such clay being grated on Sultans' daily meals, and presented as courtly gifts.

One of Mehmed's entourage, an Armenia doctor Amirtovlat of Amasya (ca.1420-1495) noted that the Sultan would order for mugs (jugs) to be made using this clay. In 1582 it has been recorded that a kiln on Lemnos fired both troches and drinking vessels, some of which were given as presents to the Sultan and viziers. Eremya Çelebi described a range of forms of Terra Lemnia vessels, including mugs and bowls inscribed with "poems in praise of Terra Lemnia or the pleasures of drinking from the vessels in summer" (Raby, p.332). Our jug is the only known example with an inscription, inscribed with two separate but rhyming verses:

The upper verse:

نوش جان اولسون چاموردن افندم

'May your soul be nourished by clay, Sir!'

The lower verse:

ای عاشقنی اولدرجی شاه لوندم

'O my Brigand King, who murders his lover!'

Indeed, it seems the top verse specifically makes reference to the health benefits of Terra Lemnia. The lower verse is from a quatrain attributed to the musician and poet Buhûrîzâde Mustafa İtrî (1640-1712).

Two jugs of the same type are in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. One of which ([Kunstammer, 3130](#)) contains inscriptions, and has very similar decorative scheme to our example. It has been recorded that the Habsburg ambassador to Constantinople, David von Ungnad, received two mugs in 1577 and 1578, one from the Patriarchal Protonotary Theodosius Zygomalas, the other from the Patriarch Jeremias II (Raby, 1995, p.317). It is likely that the two jugs in Vienna now are the ones recorded by Raby above.

Raby categorised the examples from the British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum into three groups: painted, relief-decorated and stamped decoration. Our example comfortably belongs to the first group, both in terms of the painted decoration and the shape compared to others in this group.

Due to the delicate nature of the extremely thin wall of the jug, very little examples of this type of jug survived. There are some painted examples at the British Museum, London (1878,1230.353; 1878,1230.355; 1878,1230.356); three examples from Galleria Regionale della Sicilia, Palermo (6301; 6285; 6268) and examples from the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge ([OC.103-1938](#); [OC.106-1938](#); [OC.108-1938](#); [OC.109-1938](#); [C.1754-1928](#)). Ottoman interest in *Terra Lemnia* waned in the second half of the 19th century, perhaps under the influence of changing European medical attitudes.

Comparative material:

[The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge](#);

[The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford](#);

[The British Museum, London](#).

Reference:

Raby, Julian. 'Terra Lemnia and the Potteries of the Golden Horn: An Antique Revival under Ottoman Auspices'. Edited by Claudia Rapp, S. Efthymiadis, and D. Tsougarakis. *Byzantinische*

Forschungen 12 (1996): 305–41.