

# MUSEO ORIENTALE

## 'Umberto Scerrato'

The Museo Orientale of the Università degli studi di Napoli "L'Orientale" is dedicated to Umberto Scerrato who founded the 'Seminario di Archeologia Orientale' at the end of the 1960s and started collecting Islamic materials for the foundation of a University Educational Museum.

The museum collection today includes – in addition to a large Islamic section enriched during the last years thanks to donations – archeological evidences from Eastern Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia, objects from Ancient Near East, Northwestern India, China and Japan. Scale models represent examples of Saudi Arabian architectures, a Chinese burial site and a Japanese capital city.



Università degli studi di Napoli  
"L'Orientale"

# Northeastern Africa

Since ancient times, the Nile and the Red Sea made of Northeastern Africa a bridge between Subsaharan Africa and the Mediterranean. The study of these connections is a traditional research interest of “L’Orientale”.

Northeastern Africa is also characterized by environmental variety because of the monsoon affecting its southern parts, the mountains of the Eastern Desert and the Ethio-Eritrean Highland. For this reason, both agricultural and pastoral areas identify the region. At last, hierarchical societies emerged in the region in the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC.

This fascinating region is here represented by findings from Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The findings from Eastern Sudan were collected in the surveys between the Gash river and the Atbara and in the excavations of the Expedition of “L’Orientale” at Mahal Teglinos (K 1). These are the earliest archeological






evidences in the Museum: ceramic sherds of the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, with an elaborated decoration suggesting an already complex production technique. Some of these materials allowed us to reconstruct an exchange network involving Eastern Sudan, Nile valley, Red Sea, Arabia and Egypt in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.

Some lithic tools and stone ox-heads, perhaps *ex-voto*, dated to the early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC, from Sembel Cushet (Eritrea), are a donation of the heir of Prof. Lanfranco Ricci. Four silver coins of Endubis, king of Aksum (early 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD), donation of Mr. Giuseppe Tringali, represent one of the oldest types of coins in Sub-Saharan

Africa: the king was represented with a local iconography but, as Aksumites had intense contacts with the Mediterranean, legends were in Greek and the weight standard related to the Roman one.



# Ancient Near East



Ancient Near East extends from present-day Turkey to present-day Iran. In this region, the first complex social organizations appeared in the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC as an outcome of the ‘Neolithic Revolution’ and, later, the first cities arose. The seals appeared in this context: they were used as property marks, and to guarantee the integrity of containers and storerooms. From the mid-4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, cylinder-shaped seals appeared at Uruk and Susa: they were suitable to impress larger surfaces than the earlier stamp seals. With the adoption and diffusion of the written texts, the seals were also used to confirm the validity of documents.

The iconographic repertoire of seals illustrated themes from all aspects of the material and spiritual life of human beings. The scenes refer to different sectors, such as: economy, political power, war, religion and mythology.

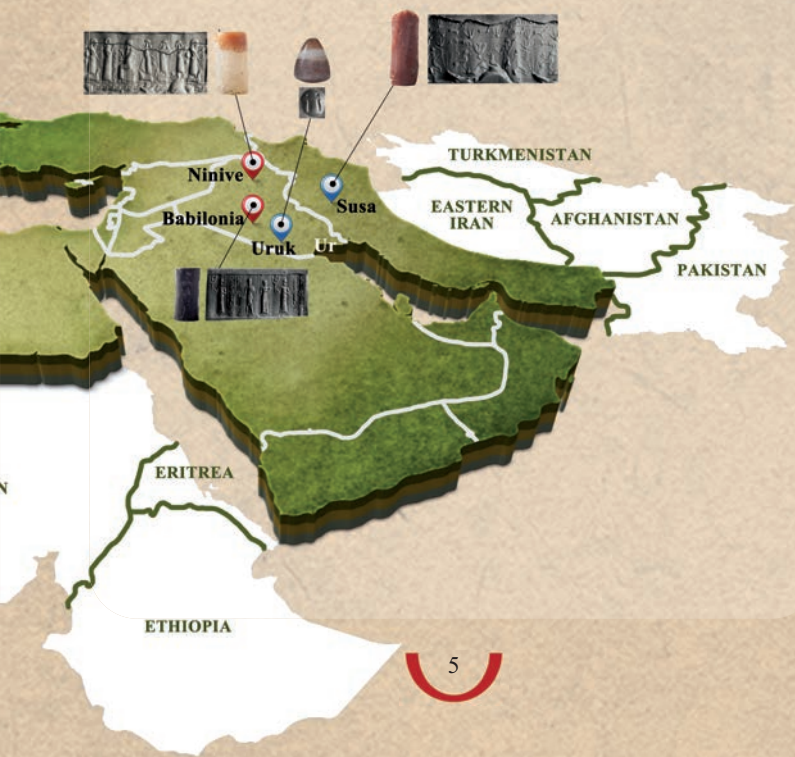
Therefore, the seals reflected the world view of the ancient Near East complex societies and their evolution over the centuries. At the same time, the precious materials used to make seals – lapis, carnelian, rock crystal, quartzes and precious metals – bear witness of the capacity of these societies to acquire luxury goods and the extension of their long-distance trade.

Appreciated especially for their aesthetic value, seals became sought-after collector’s items, and stimulated the rise of an Orientalizing or, more precisely,





Assyrian taste. This taste manifested itself principally in sophisticated jewelry that not only reproduced themes of figurative Assyrian art in jewels and precious decorative objects, but used original seals as elements in necklaces, bracelets and earrings fashioned for high-society ladies. An example is the *parure* worn by Lady Enid Layard in 1873 gala dinner hosted by Queen Victoria, shown in a celebrated portrait presently kept, as the jewels themselves, at the British Museum in London. Lady Layard *parure*, made by the famous London jewelers Phillips Brothers & Sons, specialized in ‘archaeological-style’ jewelry, consisted in a collier, a bracelet and a pair of earrings.





# Yemen

Scale models show the most relevant buildings investigated by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Yemen, directed from 1980 to 2010 by Alessandro de Maigret.

All these buildings can be dated between 7<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and were built by the cultures of the ‘caravan cities’ of ancient Yemen.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC, Caravan Kingdoms emerged and flourished in this remote and only apparently isolated region, named Arabia Eudaimon or Arabia Felix by the Greek-Roman authors. These kingdoms, Saba, Awsan, Main, Qataban, Hadramawt and Himyar, were involved in the production and trade of herbs and spices with the Near East and the Mediterranean.

The models, realized by Romolo Loreto, represent three domestic buildings. House A at Yala, House B/B and B/E at Tamna’, and the sacred area of Barâqish, ancient Yathill, with the temples of Nakrah and Athtar as well as the city walls. The largest model shows the





sacred area at Baraqish: one of the most relevant urban built area of ancient Yemen, brought to light with an extensive excavation.

To this group of monuments investigated by the Mission, the temple of Dhat Na'man, brought to light by a Russian Mission directed by A.V. Sedov near Raybun, in Hadramawt, and the 'Great Temple' at Yeha, in northern Ethiopia, investigated by a French Mission in collaboration with A. de Maigret, were added.

For the realization of the models we followed an experimental approach and an attempt of reproducing the building following the most likely building techniques used by South-Arabbians.



# Northwestern India



The votive model in unbacked clay of a stūpa, a sacred building, from Zabul, Islamic Ghazni, can be ascribed to the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, the last period of art patronage by the pro-Buddhist political elite and of the Buddhist communities of Northwestern India. In the following century, patronage would be limited to the Hindukush region, where it used to run the westernmost trade route. In the East, in present-day Swat and in Gandhara, under the influence of the Pāla dynasty, based in Buddhist Bengal, what was left of the monastic community and the siddhas, the wise adepts, started the last transformations represented by the Vajrayāna.





In the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD, the Brahmanical power was established over the whole Northwestern India, Southeastern Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan. From this milieu are the schist fragment of stele with the representation of Gadādevī, female personification of the heavy mace of god Viṣṇu, as well as a second fragment of schist stele, with representation of Viṣṇu sitting in a temple, and the fragment of a schist frame, with representation of a standing male figure with mace in a niche. At that time, in Northwestern India, the Brahmanical gods were under the protection of the Śāhī dynasty, which was finally cancelled by the establishment to power of the Islamic Ghaznavid dynasty at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD.

**BENGAL**

**Calcutta**



# Islamic Funerary steles

The seven marble funerary steles in the Museum come from the mausoleums of the burial sites of Fustat, the ancient Cairo, and are dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. The Egyptian steles constitute the largest and best known *corpus* in the funerary production of the Islamic territories, although most of the specimens have been removed from their original position. The epitaphs occupy only one of the two faces of the steles; they are enclosed within frames and are distributed on horizontal lines. All the epitaphs begin with the *basmala* (*bismi-llah al-raman al-raim*), the introductory formula stating that everything is made possible ‘in the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful’, and end with the date of death or with a short invocation to God. With few





exceptions the steles feature at least one Koranic verse, or other expressions inspired by the Koran. The verses insist on God's absolute uniqueness, the importance of the prophetic mission and the resurrection of the dead.



The steles in the Museum are dedicated to male figures who died in their adult age, the only exception being specimen MO181, which was carved for a woman, the mother of a high rank commander, whose irreproachable conduct is pointed out: ‘she died pure, uncontaminated by dishonor or guilt, innocent. The quill did not record fault nor error for her’. Along with short pleas for mercy, contentment and divine forgiveness there can be prayers and formulas, many of which of a particularly widespread use, such as the expression of trust in rewards and punishments after death, as well as fear for the darkness surrounding the tomb. Together with the name, the date is the only other important detail concerning the dead, about which, in fact, additional biographical information – such as the date of birth, the circumstances that caused the death or the age when the latter occurred – is almost never provided.

The date of death generally comprises the name of the day, the month, and the year that, as usual, is written in letters.





# Islamic Pottery

**B**eginning with the Abbasid caliphate in mid-8<sup>th</sup> century, pottery represents one of the most interesting expressions in the figurative arts of Islam, for its aesthetic value and technical quality. With regard to the former it displays a rich and innovative repertoire of the culture it belongs to, with regard to the latter it has resumed, and improved some ancient techniques that had been discontinued, while also experimenting new ones in which it achieved previously unmatched quality levels.

**Clay** is the basis of pottery: a natural substance whose plasticity can be transformed by heat into a strong and durable material.

**Unglazed wares** represent by far the largest output of the Islamic ceramic industry. The decoration can be painted, engraved, carved, moulded, stamped, applied, or splashed (*showcase 1*)

**Glazed wares.** Glaze is a thin layer of glass on the surface of a ceramic. The Islamic pottery is characterized by the extraordinary development of glazed production (lead glaze or alkaline glaze), generally brightened up by a rich painted (monochrome or polychrome) decoration.

**Opaque white glaze wares.** A well distinguishing Abbasid ware (starting from the 9<sup>th</sup> century) is characterized by an opaque-white glaze on a clay body, generally painted in blue, green, brown, or luster. The painted luster decoration (polychrome, bi-chrome or monochrome) often covers the entire surface of the object (*horror vacui* aesthetic; *showcase 1*).

**Slip painted ware.** This technique can be by far considered as one of the most interesting innovation – together with



luster – of the Islamic potters (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century). By mixing the colourants with the very fine clays which composed the slip it became possible to prevent the lead from dragging the colours during the vitrification, thus obtaining ornaments with well-defined contours (*showcases 6, 8-10*).

**Fritware** (or stonepaste) is an artificial white, grayish-white or pale pink fabric containing a high percentage of silica, often used for fine ceramics from 11<sup>th</sup> century onward (*showcase 1*).

The Islamic pottery on display in the Museo Scerrato is composed of two groups: the first group belongs to “L’Orientale” since the beginning of the 1970s thanks to Umberto Scerrato who, in order to provide a tangible knowledge of a consistent part of the pottery production, enriched the holdings of the specialized library with ninety exemplars. The second group is composed of an equal number of objects kindly donated in 2013 by Pittui family that was very close to Umberto Scerrato (*showcases 3-5*).





# Islamic Metalwork

**M**etalwork exhibits the greatest variation of technique, style and ornament in Islamic art.

In the early centuries the material used was mainly bronze, a metal alloy composed of a high percentage of copper and tin. Brass (copper and zinc alloy) was used by the late 12<sup>th</sup>-early 13<sup>th</sup> century. Only a small number of objects in gold and silver of the medieval period survive: the precious metals were probably used less frequently, perhaps because of a religious prohibition. The objects in bronze/copper were obtained by casting (mould or by using the 'lost wax' process) and were generally enhanced by a rich decoration.

The most common decoration techniques include incision and openwork.

A very refined production is characterized by an inlay decoration, which in Italian is known as 'agemina' from the Arabic '*ajam*', 'the Persians', because of the great skill of Iranian craftsmen: in the seam of a deep incision was poured (or wrought) a different metal, especially silver or copper.

Epigraphic bands of different sizes and in different styles of writing play a preponderant role in the decorative repertoire. The texts most frequently attested on Iranian metalwork of the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century contain sequences of good wishes for the owner, almost always anonymous.

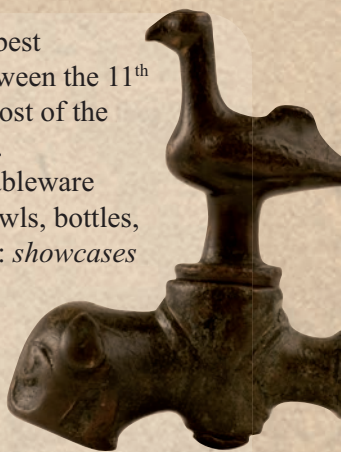
The Museum owns a group of 40 objects that, albeit small in number, is particularly representative of the Islamic metalwork from the Iranian regions.



The oldest section – which is also the best represented – dates back to the era between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> century and is coeval to most of the pottery vessels owned by the Museum.

The range of metal objects includes: tableware and/or kitchenware (ewers, spoons, bowls, bottles, tray for spices, basins, food containers: *showcases 1, 3, 5, 6*), lighting devices (lamp-stands, oil-lamps, torch-stands: *showcases 1-3*), thurification vessels (incense-burners: *showcase 2*), objects for writing table (inkwells: *showcase 6*), medical and pharmaceutical items (mortars, magic bowls: *showcases 2-5*), objects for body care (mirror, bucket and indigo crucible: *showcases 1-3*), seals (*showcase 5*), pendants (*showcase 5*), and a fountain tap (*showcase 1*).

Twenty-nine metal objects of the collection have been kindly donated to the Museum by the Pittui family (*showcases 3, 5, 6*).



# China

Porcelain, composed of kaolin and a feldspathic rock, is realized in China since very ancient times. The blue and white porcelain is obtained through a single high-temperature firing with a cobalt blue decorative motif under a transparent glaze. The cobalt comes from Iran and its use is documented in China since the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The blue and white porcelain is originally produced in the first decades of the 14<sup>th</sup> century mostly for export, because too ‘vulgar’ to reflect the taste of the Chinese literati. The exported artefacts primarily came from the kilns in Jingdezhen, a small town in the southern province of Jiangxi. Direct trades with Europe began only during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when they were established by the Portuguese. Later, other European communities, in particular the Dutch and the English, founded the East India Companies. The group of Chinese blue and white porcelain at the Museum consists of about seventy fragments from Hormuz, Portuguese emporium in the Persian Gulf and ten items of the kraak type, characterized by a peculiar decoration featuring alternate larger and narrower panels adorned with the usual Chinese iconographic repertoire.

A gilt-bronze figure of Buddha Amitāyus incised with the inscription ‘Made during the *gengyin* year of the Qianlong reign of the Great Qing’, corresponding to 1770. The Buddha, framed by a flaming mandorla, is seated in





padmāsana on a rectangular plinth. The hands in dhyānamudrā are thought to have held the vase attribute, now lost.

Amitāyus, in Chinese Wuliang shou or Buddha of Infinite Life, was often invoked to grant longevity: this image, along with thousands of others, was specially commissioned by Qianlong emperor (r. 1735-96) for his mother's eightieth birthday. The scale model shows the tomb mound of the Crown Prince Yide located nearby the Tang capital Chang'an (today Xi'an). It is a huge mausoleum with a north-south axis, reproducing an underground palace, with a long passage, a descending tunnel with four ventilation shafts and three storage niches on each side for ceramic burial objects, two mortuary chambers, the rear one with a big stone outer coffin. The mural paintings decoration represent gate towers, landscapes, honour guards, officials, female court attendants, courtly women, female dancers, grooms.



# Japan

**N**ara was the capital of Japan from 710 to 794 AD, modeled on the Chinese capital Chang'an. It had a rectangular plan oriented to the south, a direction considered auspicious. Unlike the Chinese capital, Nara had no walls, but it was protected on three sides by mountains. The Imperial Palace, surrounded by a defensive wall, was located at the northern end, where the most important avenue began.

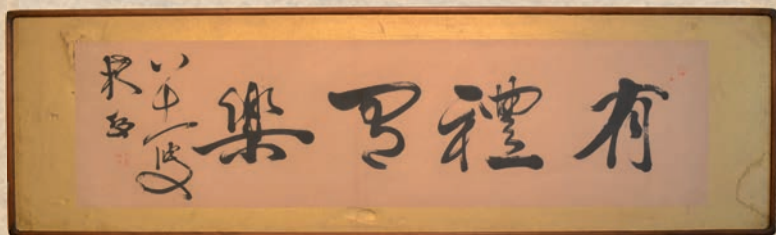
The city plan had the shape of a chess board with parallel and perpendicular streets within a grid of about 4×6 km. It is believed that, at its height, the population was 60 to 70 thousand people. Outside of this rectangle, in the east, there was the Outer Capital Gekyō, where the temple Tōdai used to stand. Within the city there were numerous Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines.







*Nakabayashi Gochiku (1827-1913)*  
Floating peaks and steep waterfalls (Sanbi Senritsu)



*Nakabayashi Gochiku (1827-1913)*  
Rites and music (Yure Sharaku)



*Scale model  
of Nara*

*Museum Director*  
**Lucia Caterina**

*Museum sections Curators*  
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**Roberta Giunta** *Islam*  
**Simonetta Graziani** *Ancient Near East*  
**Romolo Loreto** *Ancient Near East*  
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