BRILL

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THE SPHERO-CONICAL AS APOTHECARY VESSEL: AN ARGUMENT FOR DEDICATED USE

Sphero-conical vessels are found in significant number in early and medieval archaeological records across the Islamic world, from Egypt to modern day Uzbekistan.[1] They were produced from at least the eighth century and were used as late as the twentieth century.[2] Despite the ubiquity of these vessels, their intended function has remained a conundrum in the field of Islamic art and archaeology. Scholars have proposed that the sphero-conical vessel may have been used as a container for mercury, a grenade, a perfume sprinkler, an aeolipile, a beer gourd, a hookah pipe, and a plumb bob.[3] Most arguments have been offered tentatively, some even with a preadmission of failure.[4] Faced with a seemingly contradictory body of evidence—which will be reexamined in this essay—scholars have agreed that the sphero-conical vessel must have been a multi-use object. By labeling it as such, scholars have unintentionally lowered the stakes of their conjectures and invited an array of equally disprovable theories. In this essay, I offer a theory of dedicated use: the sphero-conical vessel was produced and intended to store pharmaceuticals, in particular apothecary compounds in personal-use dosages.

MATERIAL FORM

Characterized by their round bulbous shoulder and soft conical footless base, sphero-conical vessels are handheld in size and usually molded in earthenware.[5] Some scholars have explained away the seeming inutility of the conical bottom by suggesting that the vessels may have been supported (e.g., as amphoras were) or suspended (e.g., as mosque lamps were). Emilie Savage-Smith, for instance, suggests that some sphero-conical vessels were used as plumb bobs, tied to a rope and suspended in the air as an instrument to "find the vertical."[6] The archaeological fact remains, however, that there is no material or contextual evidence for support or suspension apparatuses of any kind. Proof of support apparatuses might include excavated examples of stands, vessels found in situ partially buried in sand, or consistently patterned wear signs around vessel bodies. If the vessels were suspended, we might expect to find rings integrated into vessel bodies or strings attached to vessels in situ. But no such evidence exists.

We must therefore conclude that these vessels were intended to topple. So, I ask, what is the functional advantage of a vessel that does not stand on its own?[7] One promising answer to this question is that whatever substance was inside was meant to be mixed regularly and was not intended to sit or settle.[8] The conical bottom (fig. 1), or sometimes more rounded bottom (fig. 2), of the sphero-conical vessel ensures that it never sits in one position for long; as the vessel moves, its contents blend and incorporate. This mixing is further assisted by the round interior cavity of the sphero-conical vessel (evidenced in even the most conically bottomed examples) that prevents its contents from settling in crevices or depressions.[9] To counteract the possibility of spillage, the sphero-conical vessel has been engineered so that it rolls in a circular motion, always resting on one of its flat sides, ensuring that its opening remains more or less facing upwards. For less conically shaped examples (fig. 2), a weighted bottom allows for a similar orientation.[10] These features simultaneously encourage a vessel's contents to mix while also preventing its contents from spilling. I argue that the material form of the sphero-conical vessel was functionally apropos for medicinal

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