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What was cooking in Aleppo in the thirteenth century?

The origins of artificial siliceous pastes for Islamic finewares are hotly debated and many commentators see a transmission of technology from Fatimid Egypt in the 12th century, which quickly spread through to Syria and onto Iran, and production limited to a few centres. However, this theory ignores the existence of such products in earlier levels at both Syrian and Iranian sites. It also ignores various treatises on the topic and citations of multiple production centres. An analysis of al-Birūnī's (born Khwārazm 5 September 973, died Ghazna 13 December 1048) treatise on precious stones and metals, and specifically the chapter entitled *dhikr al-qīṣā al-ṣīnīyyat* ('On Chinese Bowls'),¹ clearly demonstrates that Iranian potters were already making and fully understood the characteristics of composite-siliceous pastes by the mid-eleventh century.

Local antiquities dealers have long maintained that Aleppo was a centre for siliceous fineware production in the medieval period. A distinctive fine siliceous ware was identified in the Syrian-German excavations of the Aleppo citadel and published by Julia Gonnella in 1999.² More recently Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, in her book *Raqqa Revisited*,³ has brought to our attention wasters accessed by the British Museum in 1902 reported to have been found at an unspecified factory site in Aleppo.⁴ This paper will present the evidence for this industry and discuss the similarities and differences of these numerous wares produced in Northern Syria, and discuss the possibility that some of these were created in Anatolia. While there is no evidence for a thirteenth century fineware pottery industry amongst the material excavated to date on the Aleppo citadel, these finds do help to narrow the dating of certain styles and types of decoration. Due to the unforeseen delay in returning to study the Aleppo material, this is very much work in progress, but it will lay the foundations for future studies and pose questions for group discussions.

¹ James W Allan; Llewellyn, LR; and Schweizer, F, "The history of so-called Egyptian faience in Islamic Persia: investigations into Abū'l Qāsim's treatise," *Archaeometry* 15 (July), 171 and al-Birūnī (1936), 171-2.

² Julia Gonnella (1999), "Eine neue zangidish-aiyubische Keramikgruppe aus Aleppo," *Damaszener Mitteilungen* 11: 163-177.

³ Marilyn Jenkins-Madina (2006), *Raqqa Revisited: Ceramics of Ayyubid Syria*, New York.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 68, W60; 98, W115; 100, W120; and 108, W132.