AN UMAYYAD PHARMACIST’S MEASURING CUP

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The Koran in many places repeats God’s command, “Give full measure and full weight.” Now the Prophet Muhammad was a merchant, whose caravans traveled into Egypt and North Syria, and this idea may reflect sharp practices encountered among the people of these lands. The Moslems followed the precepts of the Koran with piety, and also with great scientific exactitude. Under the first dynasty, that of the Umayyads (661-750), the Treasury issued countless glass stamps in minute weights as standards for the coins and in larger weights for ordinary trade. The Treasury also made glass vessels of all sizes for pharmacists.

The Museum has one of these, a small narrow cup about the size of a jigger, of dark green glass, with a handle. On the side is a typical Arabic stamp in relief in Kufic letters (though in reverse) saying, qist waf, “a qist, full measure.” The letters are in the Umayyad style of writing, and the cup is thus dated at the end of the seventh or in the first half of the eighth century.

This little cup is the first one to be published that is intact and has the official measure stamped upon it. It is 70 millimeters high (without handle) and holds exactly 50 cubic centimeters, or 1 3/4 fluid ounces. But the Arabic word qist, derived from the Greek xestes, is generally understood to mean a pint, or 16 fluid ounces. Which then is correct, the evidence of this cup or the tradition of Arabic metrology? Zahrawi, a physician of the tenth century, gives us the answer in weight. He states that a qist of wine or water weighs 20 uqiyah, or about 15 ounces. A qist measure, therefore, would contain roughly 15 fluid ounces. So our small glass measure must be wrong. Somehow or other the pint stamp was put on a tiny cup whose contents is only a fraction of a pint. It should not have been passed by the Treasury. Perhaps it was overlooked because the inscription was in reverse, for which there is no reasonable explanation (except that the mold-maker forgot to make the stamp mold in reverse). Umayyad stamps for various fractions of a qist are known, and this cup should have been marked “half of a quarter of a qist.”