

The flask, the inanimate but eloquent hero of this tale, is a brass handmade masterpiece, with silver carved figures, probably made in Damascus in the 40s of 1200 on behalf of the King al-Salih Ayyub, the last descendent of Salah ad-Din (Saladin).

Its graceful manufacture is similar to that of other Islamic art made in the same period, such as those for daily use displayed in Palermo, in the Palace of al-Aziz (the "Zisa"). All they bear witness to a period, in the late Middle Age, of cultural and artistic interchange and establishment of diplomatic relations between the two shores of the Mediterranean. A pleasant familiarity, in time of Crusades, when Palermo was the Capital from where the Christian Emperor reigned.

But this flask hasn't equals.

Its shape is that of a travel tool, a canteen, such as those used by pilgrims visiting Jerusalem. The figures depicted and scenes represented belong to the Christian tradition; it is one of the few items from the Islamic world that displays such a quality. The geometry of its design, hides complex (and not decrypted) hints.

And even more extraordinary is its location: this flask, together with a basin from an similar set, is in Washington DC at the Freer Gallery of Art, a museum of the Smithsonian Institution, a few steps from the Congress and from the White House. After wandering across the World, the two objects landed in a country young and unaware, certainly not otherwise rich in memories of Antiquity.

I encountered it in the summer 2001, without suspecting its existence. It was an accidental and very intense encounter.

In a place so far from the Mediterranean, that object emerged from a definite historical period with which I had some familiarity: the short peace in the Holy Land built with hard work and diplomacy by Frederick II and Fakhr ad-Din, and broken by the Seventh Crusade organized by King Louis IX of France, whose aim was to gain sainthood for himself at the price of martyrdom for many.

On first seeing it, I felt that the tool's function was something quite different than that of carrying water; I imagined that the utensil was part of a rich present, prepared by a Muslim for a Christian; a present that for some reason had not reached its final destination.

Made on behalf of al-Salih Ayyub, the gift had to be for a sovereign of equivalent majesty. Who could that be, but Frederick II, a sovereign who some Islamic historians say was the author of a "message" warning al-Salih King Louis' military preparations. The political setbacks in Italy of Frederick at the end of the 40s was a ready explanation for the failure of al-Salih's emissaries to deliver the gift.

I was further intrigued by the specific geometric arrangement of the figures and the enigmatic presence of objects and characters that make it difficult for even experts to decipher.

So, my imagination went to work. As for the meaning of those images of it, I convinced myself that the flask was both message and messenger, and extraordinary and mute spokesman, bearer not of water, but of secrets plans for a lasting peace in the Middle East.

In short, I was accumulating material for a tale of fantasy and adventure, set between battlefields and gardens in the courts of Alexandria and Damascus; between the markets of Baghdad and the affluent mosaic roofs of Palermo's Palaces. A story in which historical figures (a Persian scientist, an Egyptian general) move in the shadow of more momentous events: the conflict between different faiths and civilizations; the coronation of Manfred in the Cathedral of Palermo; the death of the last Caliph at the al-Mansur Mosque.

A few days after that passionate and creative encounter, a column of smoke rose from the other side of Potomac River. From New York, the television broadcast images of the collapse of the twin towers, once quarters of the World Trade Centre. It was useless to wait at the airport that morning: my flight back to Italy was cancelled.

And so, my draft tale remained silent. It seemed useless to give voice to a messenger that no one would listen to.

But now I throw down my notes, in an immodest act of greeting to the person who is establishing himself today in the actual Capital of the West. He, like Frederick, is the son of diverse ethnicities.

"Working for a dream" is a very tough job. The new President has to fill his flask with water, and begin a hard pilgrimage through the deserts of the Earth which are, in truth, deserts of the Heart.

Pisa, January 20th, 2009