At the time of the Arab conquest in the seventh century A.D., glassmaking had flourished in Egypt and western Asia for more than two millennia and glassmakers in those regions went about their business despite the momentous political, social, and religious changes taking place around them. Glassmakers inherited many of the techniques of their forebears in the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, including glassblowing, the use of molds, the manipulation of molten glass with tools, and the decorative application of molten glass. Islamic glass production from the seventh through the fourteenth century was also greatly innovative and witnessed glorious phases—such as those of superb relief-cut glass and spectacular gilded and enameled objects—that established its supremacy in glassmaking manufacture throughout the world.

While many of the objects may not have been made under a ruler’s patronage, they certainly are “fit for a sultan.” Islamic glass can be better studied according to the techniques of its manipulation—from undecorated blown vessels to mosaic glass to mold-blown, hot-worked, cut and engraved, and painted objects, though vessels produced after the seventeenth century and greatly influenced by the European trade may be studied in a proper historical context.

In the field of Islamic art, glass is a craft that often rose to excellence but has been
largely overlooked by art historians. Thousands of anonymous glassmakers, from Cairo to Delhi, proudly transmitted their knowledge from one generation to the next, experimenting with the colors, shapes, techniques, and surface decoration of this extraordinarily versatile material. Their most outstanding results, from public and private collections worldwide, encourage a widespread appreciation of the artistic forms of Islamic glass—a fitting legacy for this ancient craft.

Tools of the Glassmakers
Since the invention of glassblowing in the first century B.C., glassmakers have been using the same tools to model, manipulate, and decorate molten glass. Two molds from the medieval Islamic world are the only ones to survive, but the basic technology of nonindustrial glassmaking and the tools employed have not changed.

The blowpipe is an iron or steel tube, usually about five feet long, for blowing a parison, or gather, of molten glass. Molds are used to impress decorative patterns on the parison. Dip molds have the typical form of a conical beaker, but two- or three-part hinged molds were also used in the Islamic world. The pontil, a solid metal rod that is applied to the base of a vessel to hold it after it is cut off from the blowpipe, became a common tool in the early Islamic period (seventh–eighth century). The pontil leaves an irregular ring-shaped mark on the base that is commonly known as a “pontil mark.” Wooden blocks, jacks, and shears are used to shape an object. Blocks are used to form the gather into a sphere prior to inflation; jacks, to shape the mouth of an open vessel; and shears, to trim excess hot glass during production. A marver—a smooth flat stone or metal surface over which softened glass is rolled—is also an essential tool of the glassmaker. Of course, no tool would be of much use without a glassmaker’s dexterity and talent.

Archaeological Excavations
Scientific excavations are extremely valuable for a better understanding of the history, art, architecture, urban planning, and everyday life of a specific site. In terms of material culture, glass objects and fragments are second in quantity only to pottery at most Islamic sites, offering a wide variety of shapes, colors, and decoration for analysis.

There are, however, a number of problems related to the study of excavated Islamic glass. Only in exceptional cases do glass objects bear informative inscriptions providing names and dates. Both as luxury goods that were traded and exchanged and as simple containers for oils, perfumes, and liquids of all kinds, Islamic glass circulated throughout the Islamic world and as far as southeastern Asia, northern China, and Europe. Glass was also shipped in large quantities as cullet (glass lumps and discarded broken vessels), suitable for remelting and making new glass inexpensively. Thus, the glass of a bottle created in Egypt, for example, may have been recycled as far as Central Asia; a new object may have been made that had a chemical composition usually attributed to Egyptian vessels but a shape and decoration that suggested a different origin. While it clearly is problematic for scholars to determine their place or date of production, excavated objects may be of great help in better understanding the chronology and origin of Islamic glass. The three most prolific excavated sites that have yielded glass in the Islamic world are Fustat (Old Cairo) in Egypt, Samarra in Iraq, and Nishapur in northeastern Iran.
The influence of the Islamic world to the history of glass is reflected by its distribution around the world, from Europe to China, and from Russia to East Africa. Islamic glass developed a unique expression that was characterized by the introduction of new techniques and the innovation of old traditions. Islamic glass did not begin to develop a recognizable expression until the late 8th or early 9th century AD, despite Islam spreading across the Middle East and North Africa during the mid-7th century. Glass from Islamic Lands. London: Thames & Hudson in association with the al-Sabah Collection, Dal al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait National Museum, 2001. NK5108.9 .C373 2001. Islamic Glass in The Corning Museum of Glass. Volume One, Objects with Scratch-engraved and Wheel-cut Ornament. New York: The Corning Museum of Glass in association with Hudson Hills Press, 2010. NK5108.9 .W55 2010 v.1. Glass: from Sasanian Antecedents to European Imitations. London: The Nour Foundation, in association with Azimuth Editions, 2005. NK5108.9 .G653 2005. Hess, Catherine, Linda Komaroff, and George Saliba. The Arts of Fire: Islamic Influences on Glass and Ceramics of the Italian Renaissance. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004. Glass from Islamic Lands Stefano Carboni Thames & Hudson Londra 2001 0500976066 9780500976067 vetri e vetrate. Part of the al-Sabah Islamic art collection at the Kuwait National Museum, the hundreds of pieces in Glass from Islamic Lands date from the sixth to the 19th century, originated primarily in the Middle East and Asia and had been exported all over the world before the al-Sabah family assembled them. Stefano Carboni, associate curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has arranged the work chronologically, with 345 color and b&w photographs of lovely glasswork. This catalogue is one of the few U.S. publications devoted to glass from Islamic countries. (F1). Recommended books Glass animal.