



A woman having wine in solitude. A wall painting from Chehel Sotoun pavilion in Isfahan, Iran, 17th century

Late Persian Bottles – the “Black Glass” of the Middle East

by Phil Culhane

Introduction

Most of us have seen the ubiquitous “Persian saddle flask” at some point in our collecting careers. Flat sided and with two or three turns of glass stringing around the neck, they are quite the oddity, and many a collection has one sitting on the shelf. But really - what does anyone know about them?

Well, if you’re like me, the answer, despite almost 40 years in the hobby, would be “darn near nothing”. Some people date them from the 1700s - others from the 1800s or 1900s. Some people don’t even think they’re Persian - that they come from Mexico

or somewhere else that they make cheap knock-offs to sell to tourists.

Three years ago, in the Spring of 2012, that was about everything I knew about “saddle flasks” - or any sort of “late Persian glass.” I didn’t even know it existed, and my opinions on saddle flasks was based on the word of mouth folklore that had made its way to me through the decades.

In the Spring of 2012, I was at an interesting point in my collecting career. Like many others, I had recently gone through a divorce, leaving my shelves empty and my pocketbook similarly



A wide-mouth saddle flask and a Type IV, both dating from the 19th century. Persians exported pickled fruit in quantity from the 1650s onwards. The Type IV has the funnel-shaped lip typical of the period. Both bottles likely blown at Shiraz.

informed. I still wanted to collect, and more than anything, I wanted to research. I needed to find an area of the hobby that was poorly understood, and not highly contested. And so, through a fluke of fate, I traded emails with a fellow collector who was looking to sell off her entire collection of late Persians - lock, stock and barrel. Silly me - "what's a late Persian?" I wrote in an email to her. The 250 images she sent in return confounded me - with colours, shapes, sizes, and more than anything else, lip finishes that simply made no sense. After 40 years, you figure you've seen it all...then someone turns your collecting world on its side.

Needless to say, a deal was struck, and parcel by parcel, Marlena's 114 piece, 25 year collection slowly made its way across a very wide country.

Starting the Research

Having published a couple of bottle books and a six-year run publishing Canadian Bottle & Stoneware Collector magazine, it's safe to say that I'm a curious sort. I like finding - and sharing - the story that lies behind a bottle. The manufacturer, the city he lived in, and what it was like at that time. A little bit of social history, if you will. I love giving the bottle a voice, helping it tell its story once again - it brings it back to life in a very real way.

With late Persians, I had met my match. With absolutely no knowledge of Persian culture or history, I was starting from scratch. None of the books I could find had more than a sentence or two on the glass of this period. I started emailing museum curators, including the Corning, the British, the Victoria & Albert, the Metropolitan, the Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar...nothing. Well - tons of curiosity - but no knowledge. Curators at Corning said that they had never seen the shapes or lip finishes I was emailing to them. This consistency - nothing published, nothing known - both fascinated and frustrated me. I wanted to be able to tell the story of this glass, but could find nothing published that would help.

In this article, I'll share as much as what I've managed to figure out so far. To this day, I continue to look, but still, I have found nothing of substance. I'm starting to accept that if I want to read it, I'm going to have to write it. So here's what I've learned so far. Much of it is intelligent guesswork - but without shards from archaeological sites (which I'm still hoping for), this is the best I've been able to find.

The Periods of Persian Glass Production

Persian glass went through three "periods", two of which are

very well understood and well documented, and one of which is passed over almost as a black glass collector passes over 1990s plastic pop bottles. There was the early period, from roughly the 7th to the 10th century, when the Persians learned glassblowing from the Romans and Syrians. There was the middle period, from the 10th to the 12th century, when the Persians made possibly the finest glass creations on the planet of that time. Then there was a quiet period. Well, not so quite - Mongol hordes invaded, turned the country upside down, and things like glass manufacture really dwindled in importance. Then, in the late 16th century, the art of glassblowing was brought back to the city of Shiraz, and the late Persian glass period began.

The Industries

Very little late Persian glass is marked. There are perhaps six sealed late Persians that I am aware of. There may be more, but let's just say that there aren't rafts of mould-blown bottles out there with manufacturers' names on them. The Persians continued making free-blown bottles - and using them - right up until the 1960s at least. Additionally, I only two of two late Persians with labels on them. So collecting this sort of glass is all about collecting the form, and not the maker.

The two largest industries that used glass containers were the wine and rose water industries. The saddle flask that we all know well was used for the bottling of wine, much of it coming from the vineyards and the merchants of Shiraz. Indeed, Engelbert Kaempfer, a German naturalist, wrote that in the first years of the 18th century, more than 50,000 wine-filled saddle flasks a year were exported from Shiraz.

The rose-water industry in Persia was quite extensive, and the glass used both to hold and to disperse it was exceptionally beautiful. Again, Kaempfer tells us that 10,000 bottles of rose water were already being exported annually from the Shirazi region of Persia by the early 1700s.

In addition to these primary industries, the Persians also manufactured lemon juice in large quantities. They used glass containers for the same multitude of purposes that we see it used all over the planet: oils, unguents, vinegar, medicines, perfumes and any manner of liquids requiring transport. They also used wide-mouth jars for transporting fruits, both pickled and fresh. More on those later!

The Bottles: Saddle Flasks - Type I, II, III, IV, V

With close to 100 saddle flasks sitting on my shelves, I think I'm starting to see a pattern in the glass; in the bottles and the timeframes in which they were used.

Type I - 1600 to 1675

It is tempting - very tempting indeed - to consider that Late



Three very rare, early Persians. On the left, a Type II saddle flask. In the middle, the only cylindrical late Persian bottle the author has ever seen. On the right, a "transitional" between Type I and Type II - a very long neck, and a very small base. All three bottles likely blown at Shiraz.



The classic "Type II", on which the Type was named. This particular saddle flask was given to Queen Anne by a Persian embassy in 1708. Bottle likely blown at Shiraz.

Persian Saddle Flasks went through a series of transitions very similar to what happened to black glass both in the UK and on the European continent - and at around the same time frames. Remember, there was continuous trade between the English, Dutch, Persians and others on a continuing basis, 300+ years ago. The art and architecture of the early 1600s shows long-necked, round-bottomed bottles used for serving wine - bottles that look quite similar to what I have called "Type I" saddle flasks. They come in at least four colours. And most of mine are very near mint, with very little weathering.

A word on that - the lack of weathering. In wetter climates, in North America and Europe, we expect our dug pieces to show signs of ageing - glass leached and weathered. Most of the late Persian glass you will see, on the other hand, doesn't have so much weathering. Internal content stain for sure, but seldom that been-in-the-ground feel of much North American glass. And I think that's part of why some people don't trust it. But what I've learned from my reading is that, aside from the fact that the late Persians were pretty consistent about wrapping their glass in reeds or other protective



A very scarce light yellow flask, similar in conformation to a type IV saddle, but without the stringing around the neck. The author has a small selection of these bottles, and wonders whether they may have been used as serving bottles on a host's table?



Quarter-size Type IV saddle flask, essentially the same size as a pocket flask. 19th century.



Very odd Type III Saddle flask with extensive additional stringing applied to the body. The Type III saddle flasks are darker and heavier than the Type IV's, and the lip is V-tooled, as shown in this example.

coating, the climate there just doesn't eat away at glass in the first place. One of the early (17th century) traveller's logs that I read made the point of saying that there's no real way of knowing how old something is in Persia - it is so dry that items just don't weather the way they do in England.

Type II - 1675 - 1725

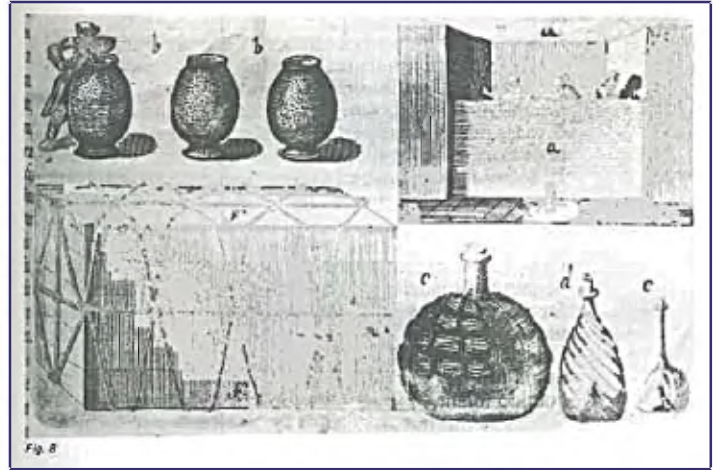
By curious happenstance, a late Persian saddle flask was given to Queen Anne by a Persian Embassy in 1708. And amazingly, remarkably, that same flask is now sitting on my shelf - 307 years later! Among other things, what it does is tell us the state of the manufacturing art around 1708 - and provides a definite point for a very different saddle flask. There is a base and a pickup, there is a more worked, v-tooled lip, and a tall, elegant form. The stringing around the neck is still quite fine, and there are often 12-18 wraps around the neck.

Type III and IV - 1725 - 1920

Here we go - the Saddle Flasks everyone knows. The commonest saddle flasks - and remember - in the 1700s, Shirazi wine was lauded as some of the best on the planet - are the Type III and Type IV Saddle Flasks. The differences between Type III and Type IV can be seen in the lip, in the body, and in the glass itself. The Type III flasks have a v-tooled, worked lip. They have a narrow body, and are very, very heavy. The Type IVs, in comparison, have a funnel-shaped lip, a thicker, more bulbous body, they come in lighter and more colours, and the glass is nowhere near as dense. There are probably sub-types to be found, and I'm certain that with more study, I will find more differences. I've about 80 saddle flasks thus far, but have yet to really study them for trends.



Type V saddle flask in a jade colouring. One of the facts that confounds bottle collectors is that these bottles, pontilled and with stringing, are still used in rural Iran to this very day. Type V saddle flasks were both in the 20th century.



From Engelbert Kaempfer's 1714 treatise on the manufacture of Persian wine, this diagram shows package and shipping methods, including, at bottom right, the shapes of three of the bottle types. On the left (c), a karaba, in the middle (d) a saddle flask and on the right (e) a rose water sprinkler.

Type V - 1920 to current day

Yes, Virginia - they DO still make - and use - crudely-made blown glass bottles in present-day Iran. So there is a class of saddle flask - I call them Type V's, that are of modern manufacture, made of remelted glass and quite poorly formed, that still qualify, in my opinion. They serve the same purpose - although of course they don't hold Shirazi wine anymore, as alcohol is currently forbidden there. But they are real - they are not fakes (more about fakes later).

Karabas

These are probably my favourite pieces of Late Persian glass. If you look at the word "karaba", you will see the basis of a word that is probably familiar to you - the word "carboy". The karabas are transport bottles, intended to move quantities of Shirazi wine to distant markets, as outlined in a book by Kaempfer, complete with line drawings of the bottles and how they were packed. The karabas were made from a rougher glass



Note the rouletted lip on this tall (12") flat-sided Karaba (notice the similarity to the word "carboy"). These larger bottles were used for transporting Shirazi wine to markets.



A typical "karaba" or wine transport bottle, used for shipping shirazi wine to market.



A set of five karabas, transport bottles used to ship Shirazi wine to market. Bottles blow at both Isfahan and Shiraz.



Two wide-mouth late Persian saddle flasks that would have been used for exporting pickled fruit.

than the saddle flasks, most of the time. Bubble and inclusion-filled, they were light bubbles of glass intended to help move thousands of litres of wine to India, Afghanistan, Japan and beyond.

There are variants to the karabas - flat-sided karabas, oversized karabas, undersized Karabas...all of which fill me with delight.

Smalls

In every country, at every time, there is the need for small containers to hold a variety of medicines, oils, essences, unguents, perfumes...and there were a number of consistent styles of smalls from the late Persian period. The commonest was

a small aqua flask, usually with ribbing and with one or more turn of glass around the neck. But there were others: smooth, darker green small ovoids, yellow amber crude smalls with high pointed pushups, stunning dark turquoise smalls with a single band of stringing, as well as many, many other forms that, in my experience, are still one-offs. I even have two saddle flask shapes, one clearly 100+ years older than the other, that are less than four inches tall!

Rose Water Sprinklers & Ewers

The height of late Persian glass - and pretty much the only thing any museum has in stock - were the ewers and the rose water sprinklers. There were two sources for both - a home-grown industry alongside an import industry, probably starting in the 19th century, bringing brighter colours and smoother forms from Bohemia. It has been a challenge to date these pieces, because museums will date the same form as 17th, 18th, or 19th century - proof the form is not well understood. In my opinion, it is fairly simple to look across two dozen ewers and see which ones are newer - but the research will have to follow. Some of the ewers were decorated with paint - two of mine and a matching vase were painted with gilt patterns.

Just as with the ewers, there was a home-grown as well as an import industry for the rose water sprinklers. Although I still do not own one, I believe that some of the earliest sprinklers were Persian-made, and not Bohemian as is widely postulated, just based on the quality of the glass that I see in photos. Hopefully I will be able to acquire or at least gain access to a couple of the 17th and 18th century sprinklers in the next couple of years so that I can make my own determination.

Wide Mouth Storage Jars



A grouping of wine bottles from 5 glass-producing nations from c. 1700-1740. From left to right, Belgian, English, Persian, Dutch, northern German.



Two shipping bottles in a very rare double-gourd form. This shape was typical of Chinese porcelain for a number of centuries. The author has documented 16 examples of this shape. They are typically 24-27" tall and weight 9-10 pounds. They have a very crudely sheared lip and a very heavy laid-on string rim. Almost half the known examples are in northwestern India, but the author strongly believes they were a product of the Shirazi glasshouses. One example is in a museum in Teheran today, and the Indian glasshouses were never known to have produced this quality of glass container.



A very rare (unique, to the author's knowledge) cylindrical late Persian wine bottle. Likely dates from the period similar to its European counterparts, mid 18th-century. Note that there was ongoing commerce and communications between the Dutch, English, Belgians, Portuguese and Dutch on a continuing basis from the early 1600s onwards.



The largest and the smallest pieces of late Persian glass in the author's collection. The tiny saddle flask on the left likely held medicine or unguents; the huge double-gourd transport flask on the right was used to ship and/or store liquids; likely Shirazi wine.



The only sealed late Persian in the author's collection. The seal has been variously interpreted, but all interpreters agree that the seal is the maker's mark.



A selection of "saddle flasks" from the author's collection – demonstrating the breadth and duration of the style. Over 300 years of glassblowing is represented in this one photograph.

I had wanted to bring one of these to compete at the last US National, but of course it's called a "National" for a reason - only jars made in the USA were allowed into the competition. But there's a wide-mouth storage jar that was used for shipping pickled fruits in the late 1700s or early 1800s, it's sitting on my shelf and I'm sure every fruit jar collector in the world would love to get her or his hands on it. Not only is the glass wonderfully crude (the storage jars were clearly wide-mouth karabas), but the lip finish is a wonderful rouletted shape, and the jar is pristine. I thought it was the only one on the planet until a second, slightly less stunning but still amazing, sample made its way to become a shelf-mate last year.

In addition, I own two wide-mouth saddle flasks and know of a third. One looks like a Type III, the other a Type IV, pointing to perhaps a long-term pattern of using these bottles for storage in

addition to wine.

Other Shapes

There are round-bodied bottles from the Late Persian period - not all late Persians are flat. I've included photos of a selection of them here. These bottles include my sealed globular aqua bottle, a couple bottles that, if they were continental, would clearly be labelled "shaft and globe", and the only onion-shaped Persian bottle I've seen, complete with a "patch" applied over a weakness while the glass was still warm.

Transport bottles

One of my favourite forms - one that I'm very pleased to have acquired 3 examples of - is a form that people seem to love or hate. I call them Double-Gourd Transport Bottles. They are 24-



A very rare grouping of globular late Persian wines. The bottle on the left is sealed. All three date from the mid-17th century.



In travellers' diaries, it is written that Shiraz and Isfahan were the two glass-production centres in Persia. The bottles from Shiraz were blown from a very pure, white sand that was found a couple days travel from the city, and were said to be very pure and clear. The bottles from Isfahan, on the other hand, were blown from cullet, and were unsightly and filled with bubbles and inclusion. Based on all that the author has read, he believes these three bottles to have been blown in Isfahan. Note the very pronounced shaft and globe styling on the two bottles on either side, and the glass "patch" that has been applied as a repair to the green, onion-shaped bottle in the centre.



A selection of late Persian glass, demonstrating the wide variety in colours, shapes and styles of bottle that were made, beyond the typical "saddle flask" form.

28" tall, they typically weigh about 9 pounds, and they have a wonderful form. There is one in a museum in Teheran, and it is labelled as a vinegar bottle - which makes sense in a culture that prohibits alcohol. And as a side note - the life of a late Persian glass bottle has been a very difficult one indeed. At at least three points in recorded history, the ruler of the country has decreed wine sinful and ordered all wine bottles destroyed. The most recent occasion was in 1979, when troubling events hit the region once again. Bottles, even in museums, were smashed out of existence, if reports are to be believed.

Fakes

There is a style of bottle that looks vaguely like a late Persian - but is "fake", to my mind, never having been intended for use in holding goods. These bottles come in a range of shapes and forms, and I would suggest there are well over 1000 of them that have come out of a warehouse in New Jersey (sad to say, I own almost 100 of these boat anchors, having been sold them by an unscrupulous dealer through a trusting middle-man). I've included a photo of many of the forms with this article; there are more images on the web site if you want to see what a "naval boarding grenade" or whatever might look like. They are quite beautiful as blown glass, but horrid things when looked at as bottles.



Buyer beware! None of these are late Persian, although they often appear on ebay as such, when aren't being sold as "naval deck sweeper grenades" or other such nonsense. All of these are of recent (1960-1980) manufacture, meant for tourists, not for holding contents. They come in at least these colour and shape variations, a couple of which actually look a little bit authentic.

Assembling the collection

Luckily for me, the late Persians were very consistent traders - hundreds of thousands of glass containers left Persian from 1600-2000 - likely millions. They headed east, to India, where some are found today, and west to Europe. The collection I'm assembling has come from all over the world. Pieces typically show up in onesies and twosies in Sweden, then Australia, then the Czech Republic, then the States, then who knows where the next one might come from? It's a collection that would have been very difficult to assemble in a pre-Internet era, one that still comes together in fits and spurts even today.

If you'd like to read more about late Persian glass, please visit my web site - <http://www.saddleflasks.com> .

