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# PEREGRINATIONS

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## Traded, then Venerated: The Fictitious Sacred Histories of Two Medieval Iberian Vases

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Muslim potters living in the Iberian Peninsula produced a dazzling array of glazed ceramics throughout the Middle Ages. Along the peninsula's southern and eastern coasts, tin-glazed earthenware made in a variety of shapes and sizes, was often adorned with cobalt blue glaze and/or golden luster-painted decoration.<sup>1</sup> As early as the eleventh century, tin-glazed and lustered ceramics were being fashioned in Seville.<sup>2</sup> During the twelfth century, potters in Almeria and Murcia also produced finely glazed luxury ceramics.<sup>3</sup> By the thirteenth century, Malaga became famous for its high-quality glazed

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<sup>1</sup> The technique for producing tin-glazed earthenware and lusterware originated in the Abbasid Caliphate (present-day Iraq) in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Such wares were imported into the Iberian Peninsula as early as the tenth century. The making of tin-glazed earthenware involved two separate firings: the initial baking of tiles or wheel-thrown clay vessels, and a second firing after the ware had been covered in a white glaze made of tin and lead—and if blue designs were desired, cobalt. Lusterware required a third firing at a low temperature in a reduction kiln after the ware had been decorated with a pigment made of silver and copper compounds. See Caiger Smith, *Lustre Pottery: Technique, Tradition, and Innovation in Islam and the Western World* (New York: Amsterdam Books, 1985), 197–220. A variety of stamped, incised, and glazed ceramics (aside from white, blue, and lustered pieces) were also fashioned throughout the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages. For general information in English, see Anthony Ray, *Spanish Pottery, 1248-1898* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Carmen Barceló and Anja Heidenreich, "Lusterware made in the Abbadid Taifa of Seville (eleventh century) and its Early Reproduction in the Mediterranean Region," *Muqarnas* 31 (2014): 245-276.

<sup>3</sup> Isabel Flores Escobosa, "La fabricación de cerámica islámica en Almería," *Tudmir* 2 (2011): 9–28 and Julio Navarro Palazón and Pedro Jiménez Castillo, "La producción cerámica medieval de Murcia" in *Spanish*

and lustered pottery. Such wares not only found favor with local consumers in al-Andalus, the Muslim-controlled lands of the Iberian Peninsula, but also enjoyed great success in foreign markets, a fact noted by the famous traveler Ibn Battuta (1304-1368), who wrote, “At Malaga there is manufactured excellent gilded pottery, which is exported thence to the most distant lands.”<sup>4</sup> Further written evidence and archaeological excavation attest to the widespread popularity of the ceramics from Almeria, Murcia, and Malaga with the wares having been disseminated throughout the Mediterranean and into Northern Europe.<sup>5</sup>

Although a great deal of the pottery that reached these areas would have been put to practical and/or decorative use,<sup>6</sup> two vessels of Iberian manufacture acquired completely

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*Medieval Ceramics in Spain and the British Isles*, eds. Christopher M. Gerrard and Alejandra Gutiérrez (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports International Series 610, 1995), 183–214.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354*, trans. H.A.R. Gibb (London: Routledge, 1929), 314.

<sup>5</sup> Sources on this subject are numerous; only a few are listed here. For medieval references to the pottery industries of Almeria, Murcia, and Malaga, see the mid-thirteenth-century account of the traveler Ibn Said (1211-1286) in Ahmed ibn Mohammed al-Makkari, *The History of Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain*, trans. Pascual de Gayangos (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1840), 1: 93. Volume one of this book contains a translation of and commentary on Ibn Said’s *Book of the Maghreb*. For archaeological evidence, see Christopher Gerrard, Alejandra Gutiérrez, and A.G. Vince, eds. *Spanish Medieval Ceramics in Spain and the British Isles* (Oxford: Tempus Reparatum, 1995); Peter Davey and Richard Hodges, eds., *Ceramics and Trade: The Production and Distribution of Later Medieval Pottery in North-West Europe* (Sheffield, UK: University of Sheffield, 1983); Petr Charvat, Claire Delery, and Ladislav Hrdlicka, “Andalusi sherds from Prague,” *Archeologicke Rozhledy* 65 (2013): 198–206; Gisela Helmecke, “Lüsterkrüge aus dem islamischen Spanien im friesischen Wattenmeer” in *Rungholt: Rätselhaft und Widersprüchlich*, ed. Jürgen Newig (Husum: Druck- und Verlagsgesellschaft, 2016), 50–55; Carmen Ravanelli Guidotti, *MediTERRAneum: Ceramica spagnola in Italia tra medioevo e rinascimento* (Viterbo: FAVL, 1992); Graziella Berti and Liana Tongiorgi, *I bacini ceramici medievali delle chiese di Pisa* (Rome: L’erma di Bretschneider, 1981); Manuel Casamar, “Fragmentos de jarrones malagueños en los museos de El Cairo,” *Al-Andalus* 24 (1961): 185–190; Mariam Rosser-Owen, “From the Mounds of Old Cairo: Spanish ceramics from Fustat in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum” in *I Congreso Internacional Red Europea de Museos de Arte Islámico* (Granada: Patronato de la Alhambra, 2013), 163–187.

<sup>6</sup> Plates, pitchers, bowls, etc. obviously would have served as tableware; basins were used for washing hands; apothecary shops acquired cylindrical jars to store various medicines. In some instances, exported Andalusí bowls, along with other traded wares, assumed a decorative purpose as they were mortared into the façades of churches throughout the Mediterranean. See Berti and Tongiorgi, *I bacini ceramici*, 43; David Abulafia, “The Pisan Bacini and the Medieval Mediterranean Economy: A Historian’s Viewpoint” in *Italy*,

fabricated provenances and fantastic histories after having left their place of origin. This article focuses on two separate instances in which richly decorated vases created in al-Andalus by Muslim potters in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries came to be viewed as Christian relics.

The vases examined here should be viewed as only two of the many Islamic objects that took on sacred meaning after entering a Christian context. Notably, Avinoam Shalem has written about metalwork, glass, rock crystal, and ivory items that had “two lives”—items that originally functioned in an Islamic sphere and later in a Christian setting.<sup>7</sup> Many of these portable Islamic works of art found their way into the treasuries of Christian churches and served as relic containers. The material beauty of such objects and the decorative patterns and Arabic inscriptions found on them, according to Shalem, carried an “eastern flavor” and bestowed “a sense of authenticity upon the relics enshrined within them” when looked upon by western viewers.<sup>8</sup>

While Shalem and others have examined the circumstances under which many Islamic objects took on Christian functions,<sup>9</sup> previous scholarship on the two Iberian vases examined here does not provide an explanation as to how exactly they acquired their

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*Sicily, and the Mediterranean, 1100-1400* (London: Variorum, 1987), 287; Hugo Blake, “The *Bacini* of North Italy” in *La céramique médiévale en Méditerranée occidentale, Xe-XVe siècles* (Paris: Centre national de Recherche Scientifique, 1980), 93–111; Gaetano Ballardini, “The *Bacini* of San Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 32 (April 1918): 128–131, 134–135; and Karen R. Mathews, “Plunder of war or Objects of Trade? The Reuse and Reception of Andalusi Objects in Medieval Pisa,” *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 4 (2012): 233–258.

<sup>7</sup> Avinoam Shalem, *Islam Christianized: Islamic Portable Objects in the Medieval Church Treasuries of the Latin West* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 129–137.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Anthony Eastmond, “The St. Petroc Casket, a Certain Mutilated Man, and the Trade in Ivories” in *Siculo-Arabic Ivories and Islamic Painting, 1100-1300*, ed. David Knipp (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2011), 81–97 and Miriam Rosser Owen, “Islamic Objects in Christian Contexts: Relic Translation and Modes of Transfer in Medieval Iberia,” *Art in Translation* 7 (2015): 39–63.

holy pedigrees. This study, however, will illustrate how the vases' movement, display, and appearance prompted the formulation of fictitious holy pasts that persisted for



**Figure 1** Alhambra Vase, tin-glazed earthenware with luster, h. 155 cm (with bronze additions), Malaga, second half of the fourteenth century. National Museum of Fine Art, Stockholm. Photo: Nationalmuseum.

several centuries. Advocated here is a tracing of the paths or “lives” of objects, a methodology employed first within the discipline of anthropology, but later adopted by historians and art historians.<sup>10</sup> This approach of prioritizing the movement of things as opposed to focusing primarily on their places of origin can lead to a better understanding of how, as medievalist Eva Hoffman has written, objects were “used and perceived interculturally.”<sup>11</sup> In following the paths of the two Iberian vases, it will become apparent that as they moved, knowledge of the actual circumstances of their production vanished and imagined histories filled the void.

The first of the two vases examined here is currently housed in the National Museum of Fine Arts, Stockholm. **(Fig. 1)** Bronze elements on its neck, shoulder, and base are later eighteenth-century adornments added after the vessel came to Sweden.<sup>12</sup> Initially the vase consisted solely of an ovoid body, long neck, and two wing handles, only one of which survives. Still intact are its original white glaze and luster decoration, the latter articulating geometric and vegetal motifs as well as calligraphic inscriptions. The Stockholm vase is one of a group of large wing-handled vessels, some intact, others in fragments, known as the Alhambra vases. This assembly of objects, now spread out across museums around the world, takes its name from the opulent palace built in Granada, capital of the Nasrid Kingdom (1248–1492), the Iberian Peninsula’s last vestige of Muslim-controlled territory. The vessels that belong to the Alhambra group were

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<sup>10</sup> Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–91; Eva R. Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to Twelfth Century.” *Art History* 24 (2001): 17–50, 21; Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, *The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the Early Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability,” 21.

<sup>12</sup> Merit Laine, “From the Alhambra to the Taj Mahal,” *Art Bulletin of the Nationalmuseum Stockholm* 6 (1999): 74–77.

fashioned throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, likely in Malaga.<sup>13</sup> Similar to other largely intact Alhambra vases, the Stockholm vase stands about four feet tall (122 cm).<sup>14</sup> In the 2006 exhibition of the Alhambra group, *Los jarrones de la Alhambra: simbología y poder*, the vessel was dated to the second half of the fourteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

Though made in the Nasrid Kingdom, this vase left the Iberian Peninsula, and eventually made its way to the island of Cyprus. Its fascinating itinerary as it moved from Famagusta, a port city on the eastern side of the island, to Istanbul, Prague, and ultimately to Stockholm was compiled by Otto Kurz in 1975.<sup>16</sup> Kurz noted that in 1512, a Spanish friar, Diego de Mérida, who stopped in Famagusta while en-route to the Holy Land, mentioned the vase. Mérida wrote, “In a small church in a convent is one of the stone hydrias or jars in which our Savior performed the miracle of converting water into wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee. This jar survives in its entirety and is very beautiful to look upon.”<sup>17</sup> According to the surviving letters of the well-traveled member of the Hieronymite order, Diego de Mérida was familiar with many of Spain’s southern and northern cities.<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that, while visiting Cyprus he did not seem to recognize the sort of glazed, lustered pottery that, for centuries, had been and continued

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<sup>13</sup> Summer S. Kenesson, “Nasrid Luster Pottery: The Alhambra Vases,” *Muqarnas* 9 (1992), 93–115; María del Mar Villafranca Jiménez, ed., *Los jarrones de la Alhambra: simbología y poder* (Granada: Patronato de la Alhambra, 2006), 309–319.

<sup>14</sup> Ramón Francisco Rubio Domene, “Tecnología y usos de los vasos de la Alhambra” in *Cerámica nazarí: coloquio internacional* (Granada: Patronato de la Alhambra Generalife, 2009), 94–107.

<sup>15</sup> Merit Laine, “Jarrón de la Alhambra,” in *Los jarrones de la Alhambra*, 156.

<sup>16</sup> Otto Kurz, “The Strange History of an Alhambra Vase,” *Al-Andalus* XL (1975): 203–213.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>18</sup> Salvador García Franco, “Fray Diego de Mérida, un viajero español al oriente en el siglo XVI,” *Boletín de la Asociación Española de Orientalistas* 4 (1968): 120.

to be fashioned and consumed throughout the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>19</sup> Instead, seeing the vase within the context of a pilgrimage church may have prompted him to believe he was gazing upon a genuine relic from the wedding at Cana.

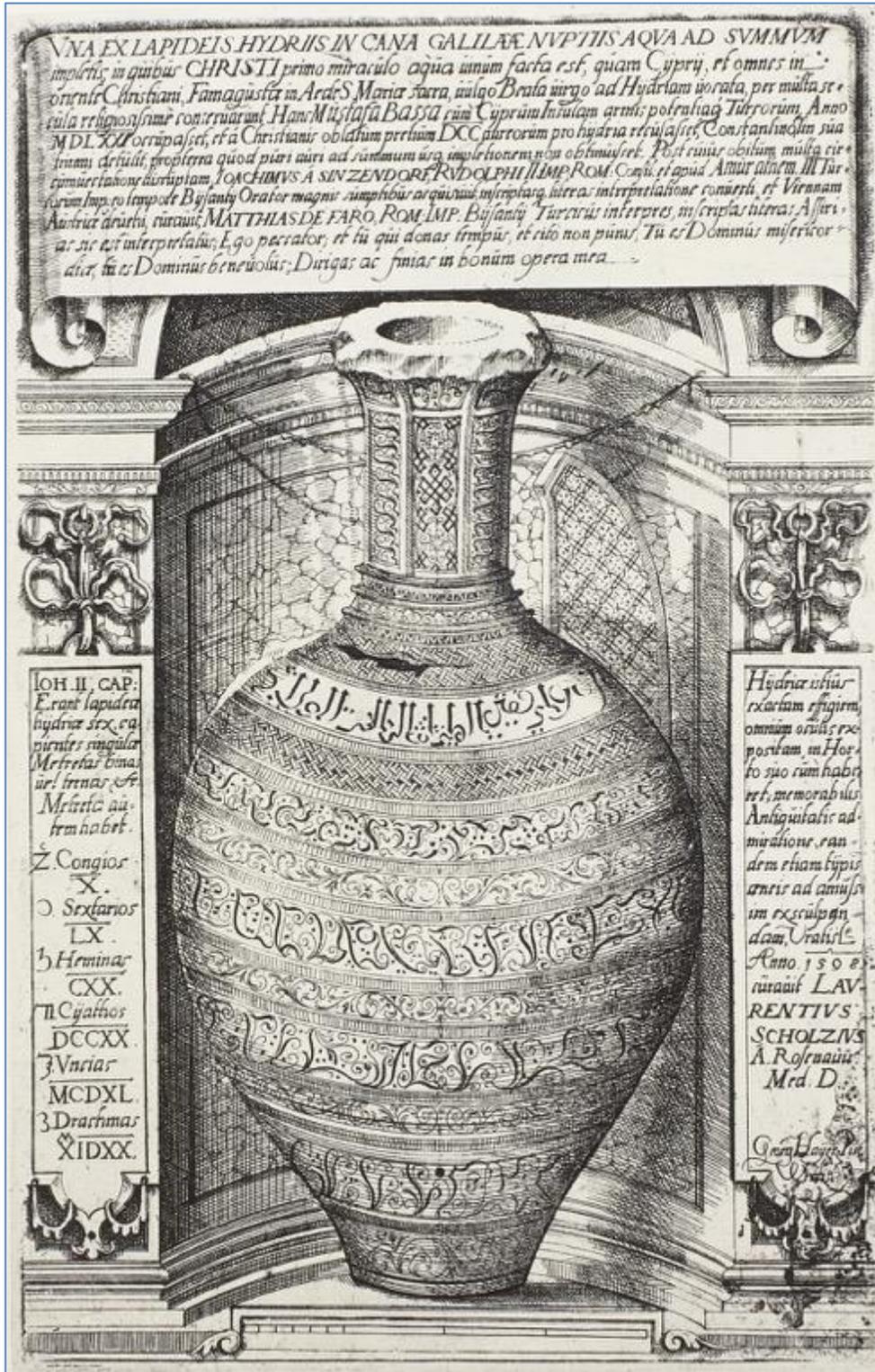
Other pilgrims stopping in Famagusta also noted the purported holy hydria. In 1553, Englishman John Locke wrote that he went to the very same church in Famagusta to see the jar. Locke describes the vase as having “ears made in the same form as painters make angels wings.” Though he was not absolutely certain of its authenticity, Locke writes that it was nonetheless “very ancient.”<sup>20</sup> Less skeptical is the 1566 account of Christoph Fürer, a pilgrim from Nuremburg, who wrote of the same church, “called S. Maria Hydria, in which on the right hand is preserved one of the waterpots in which was the water Christ at the marriage of Cana in Galilee turned into wine. It is a large earthen pot, one handle of which is completely torn off, while the other is partly broken.”<sup>21</sup> Evidently, sometime between Locke’s 1553 visit and Fürer’s in 1566, one of the wing handles broke away from the piece. It is possible that given the miraculous powers with which relics were imbued, overzealous pilgrims took the handle, or pieces of it as a sacred souvenir of their journey to the Holy Land. Though in a damaged and incomplete state, the vessel continued to retain its identity, albeit a thoroughly anachronistic one, as an indispensable item from Christ’s first miracle.

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<sup>19</sup> On the popularity of lustered pottery throughout Spain during Diego de Merida’s time and continuing into the sixteenth century, see the 1494 account of Hieronymus Münzer, “Relación del viaje” in *Viajes de extranjeros por España y Portugal*, ed. José García Mercadal (Madrid: Aguilar, 1952), 337; Lucio Marineo Sículo, *Obra de las cosas memorables de España* (Alcala de Henares: Juan de Broncar, 1539), f. 5 verso; Pedro de Medina, *Libro de grandezas and cosas memorables de España* (Seville, 1549), f. lii.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.



**Figure 2** Georg Hayer, engraving of the so-called sacred hydria from the wedding at Cana, 29.8 x 19.3 cm, 1598. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden. Photo: SLUB Dresden, Deutsche Fotothek, Waltraud Rabich.

Moreover, it kept this identity even after its removal from Cyprus in 1571, when the Ottoman Turks captured the island. From the text of a late sixteenth-century engraving (Fig. 2, discussed below in greater detail), Kurz found that Ottoman forces carted the vase off to Istanbul. The Cypriots were apparently willing to pay a ransom for their precious relic, but the Turkish commander Mustafa Pasha kept it until his death in 1580. In 1581, the Hapsburg ambassador to the Ottoman court, Joachim von Sinzendorf, somehow managed to acquire the vessel for Emperor Rudolf II, with the vase passing into the imperial collection in Prague. In 1648 the Swedish army invaded Prague, taking the vase along with many other works of art for the collection of Queen Christina. It has remained in Stockholm to this day.<sup>22</sup>

Though thorough and impressive in its detail, Kurz's itinerary makes no mention of the trade routes that would have brought the vase to Cyprus in the first place. Precisely when the piece reached Famagusta from al-Andalus is unknown, but the Genoese, who controlled the island from 1384 to 1464, were likely responsible for transporting the vase to the Cypriot port. During that period, they maintained a well-established trade network with the southern and eastern Iberian coast, particularly with Malaga, where they had their own quarter within the city.<sup>23</sup> The Genoese also mandated that all ships, even foreign vessels, unload their goods at Famagusta, where deep waters proved an ideal dock for such activity. Therefore the vase may have been shipped to the port via a Genoese, or other foreign galley sometime in the late fourteenth or fifteenth century, but probably before 1489, when Venice assumed control of the island. Under the Venetians

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 208–212.

<sup>23</sup> Juan Zozaya, "Material Culture in Medieval Spain" in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain*, eds. Vivian Mann, Thomas Glick and Jerrilynn Dodds (New York: G. Braziller, 1992), 167; Alberto García Porras and Adela Fábregas García, "Genoese Trade Networks in the Southern Iberian Peninsula: Trade, Transmission of Technical Knowledge and Economic Interactions," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 25 (2010): 35–51.

Famagusta ceased to be Cyprus' primary port, with Les Salines at Larnarca becoming the main point of entry for foreign goods.<sup>24</sup>

From Kurz's study, it is clear that knowledge of where this vase was made, the religious identity of its makers, and the circumstances of its transport to Cyprus all but disappeared by the early sixteenth century. Nevertheless, the author did not touch upon exactly why this piece produced by Muslim potters in fourteenth-century Malaga acquired the identity of a holy relic so closely connected to the life of Christ. Looking to the site of Cyprus, and specifically Famagusta, however, provides an answer. For centuries Cyprus was an important site for Westerners en-route to the Holy Land. From the island, pilgrims could travel by sea to the port of Jaffa, where the overland journey to Jerusalem could begin. Many pilgrims made their way to Famagusta in particular, not only because of its accommodating harbor, but also because it held great importance for Christian sightseers. Though a fifteenth-century guidebook for English travelers advised the devout to dock in Paphos as opposed to Famagusta, "for many englysshe men and other also have deyed, for the ayre is so corrupt there aboute, and the water there also,"<sup>25</sup> the individual accounts of pilgrims indicate that the area, rich in relics and holy sites, was worth the journey.

Pilgrims came to the immediate vicinity of Famagusta to visit what was thought to be the birthplace of St. Catherine. William Wey, who traveled to Cyprus in 1458, wrote, "Two miles from Famacosta, in a city called Constantia, S. Katerina was born. Also in Famacosta is a chapel in the church of the Friars Minor behind the high altar and the spot

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<sup>24</sup> Jean Richard, "Kingdom of Cyprus," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph Strayer, vol. 4 (New York: Scribner, 1989), 72.

<sup>25</sup> Donald Roy Howard, *Writers and Pilgrims: Medieval Pilgrimage Narratives and Their Posterity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 22–23. Howard references *Information for Pilgrims unto the Holy Land*, printed in 1498.

where S. Katerina learned to read.”<sup>26</sup> Constantia also laid claim to being site of the martyrdom and burial of St. Barnabas, according to the accounts of countless pilgrims from Northern Europe including a Westphalian priest writing in the fourteenth century, Ludoph von Suchen, a fifteenth-century Dominican monk from Ulm, Felix Faber, and the illustrious traveler Sir John Mandeville.<sup>27</sup> A day’s journey from Famagusta, one could see the Mount of the Holy Cross, on top of which sat a Benedictine monastery housing the cross of St. Dismas, the good thief.<sup>28</sup> According to the thirteenth-century account of Wilbrand von Oldenburg, a canon of Hildesheim and later bishop of Utrecht, Helena, the mother of Constantine, had brought the cross there whole from Jerusalem. The vase, then, was located on a well-trodden pilgrimage route surrounded by other holy sites and sacred relics. The enthusiasm—or we could even say religious frenzy that pious travelers to Famagusta felt as they came ever closer to the Holy Land—is what inducted a fourteenth-century vase into the cult of Christian relics, for it is unlikely the piece was thought of as a sacred hydria from Christ’s first miracle until it reached Cyprus. Thus the power of place and the vase’s movement into such a context ignited redefinition.

The vase’s decoration also contributed to its identification as a holy relic. After being brought to Prague in 1581, a painted image of the so-called hydria was made and put on display at a popular garden in Breslau (southwestern Poland). From this painting, Georg Hayer, produced a 1598 engraving documenting the vase’s appearance, provenance, and venerable, though fabricated, identity (**Fig. 2**).<sup>29</sup> The Latin text on the engraving states the following:

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<sup>26</sup> Claude Delaval Cobham, ed., *Excerpta Cyprica: Materials for a History of Cyprus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), 35.

<sup>27</sup> See Cobham for the accounts of these and other travelers to Cyprus.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Kurz, 209–211.

One of the stone hydrias from the wedding at Cana in Galilee, filled with water to the brim, [in which] water turned into wine in the first miracle of Christ, and which the Cypriots and all of the Christians of the East religiously preserved for many centuries at the Holy See of Santa Maria of Famagusta, commonly called The Blessed Virgin of the Hydria. When by the arms and power of the Turks, Mustafa Pasha occupied the island of Cyprus in 1571, and rejected the price of 1100 gold pieces offered by the Christians for the hydria, he took it to Constantinople in a trireme because the pure gold offered did not satisfy him. After his death, [and] broken by much movement, the Byzantine ambassador to the Turkish emperor Amurathem III,<sup>30</sup> Joachim von Sinzendorf, acquired it at great expense for the Holy Roman Emperor being at that time Rudolph II, and he concerned himself with the translation of the inscribed letters and took it to Vienna in Austria. Matías de Faro, Turkish translator for the Roman Emperor of Byzantium, interpreted the Assyrian letters that were inscribed as: "I [am a] sinner and You who bestows time and does not punish in haste, You are the benevolent Lord who guides and finishes my works in good." When the precise image of this hydria was exhibited for the enjoyment of all in his garden [in which] also were sculpted figures in bronze with the admiration of memorable Antiquity, Georg Hayer of Breslau engraved it in Breslau in the year 1598 under the care of the doctor Laurentius Scholztius of Rosenau.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ottoman Sultan, Murad III (r. 1574–1595).

<sup>31</sup> Kurz, 209–10. "Una ex lapideis hydriis in Cana Galilaeae nuptis, aqua ad summum impletis, in quibus Christi primo miraculo aqua vinum facta est, quam Cyprii, et omnes in oriente Christiani, Famagustae in Aede S. Mariae sacra, vulgo Beata virgo ad Hydriam vocata, per multa secula religiosissime conservarunt. Hanc Mustafa Bassa cum Cyprum Insulam armis potentiaque Turcorum Anno MDLXXI occupasset, et a Christianis oblatum pretium DDC aureorum pro hydria recusasset, Constantinopolin sua triremi detulit, propterea quod puri auri ad summum usque impletionem non obtinisset. Post cuius obitum multa circumvectione disruptam, Joachimus a Sinzendorf, Rudolph II Imp. Rom. Consil. et apud Amurathem III Turcorum Imp. eo tempore Byzantii Orator magnis sumptibus acquisivit, inscriptasque literas interpretatione converti et Viennam Austriae devehit, curavit. Matthias de Faro, Rom. Imp. Byzantii Turcicus interpres inscriptasque literas Assirias sic est interpretatus: Ego peccator, et tu qui donas tempus, et cito non punis, Tu es Dominus benevolus; Dirigas ac finias in bonum opera mea. Hydriae istius exactam effigiem omnium oculis expositam in Horto suo cum haberet, memorabilis Antiquitatis admiratione, eandem etiam typis aeneis ad amussim exsculpandam, Vratisl[avia]e Anno 1598 curavit Laurentius Scholzcius a Rosenau Med. D. Georg Hayer Pict. Vratisl." My thanks to Constancio del Alamo of The Hispanic Society of America for the above translation.

Hayer's engraving, in fact, adds another layer of false history to this fourteenth-century piece in stating that Rudolph's translator, Matías de Faro, was able to read the "Assyrian letters" on the vase. The bands of text that encircle the lower body of the vessel are pseudo-Kufic, while the larger calligraphic writing on the shoulder of the vase is an undeciphered inscription written in *naskhi* Arabic script.<sup>32</sup> This, however, did not prevent sixteenth-century viewers from attributing the writing to a pre-Islamic, Near Eastern civilization and then providing a spurious translation of the text in order to authenticate the vase's connection to the Holy Land. Rather, the piece's false identity acquired on Cyprus, followed by its journey to Istanbul, then to Prague, encouraged the fabricated translation.

The second vase that is a subject of this study boasts a similar ovoid body, long neck, and wing-like handles, now both broken off.<sup>33</sup> (**Fig. 3**) It likewise assumed holy relic status and is today kept in the treasury of S. Maria Assunta in the eastern Sicilian town of Novara. Very little material on the piece exists, and to my knowledge, no recent scholarly publications have mentioned it, but in a 1930 article published in the journal *Faenza*, Enrico Mauceri described the vase, known as the "Jar of St. Ugo." He wrote that it "was seventy-four cm high, with a very elongated neck...octagonal in form, and decorated in zigzags and lilies inscribed with geometric patterns in gold on a greenish

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<sup>32</sup> Laine, "Jarrón de la Alhambra" in *Los jarrones de la Alhambra*, 156. The eighteenth-century additions of the bronze dragon and wreath, based on a design by the Swedish artist and architect Karl Hårleman (1700–1753), obscures some of the *naskhi* inscription so that it cannot be read. See also Laine, "From the Alhambra to the Taj Mahal," 74–77 and Friederike Voigt, "Alhambra Vase" in *Discover Islamic Art*, Museum with No Frontiers, 2018. [http://discoverisalmicart.org/database\\_item.php?id=object;ISL;se;Mus01\\_A;34;en](http://discoverisalmicart.org/database_item.php?id=object;ISL;se;Mus01_A;34;en)

<sup>33</sup> My thanks to Dr. Patrick Lenaghan of The Hispanic Society of America and to photographer Maria Pia Ballarino for providing the photos of the St. Ugo vase included in this study.



**Figure 3** Vase, tin-glazed earthenware with luster, h. 74 cm, Malaga or Murcia? thirteenth or early fourteenth century. Tesoro del Duomo, S. Maria Assunta, Novara di Sicilia. Photo: Maria Pia Ballarino.



**Figure 4** Detail of vase showing glaze remnants on the body. Photo: Maria Pia Ballarino.

white background, and perforated hexagons on the upper edge. The vase is unfortunately very deteriorated. Also what remains of the handles is barely attached..."<sup>34</sup>

Based on available photographs and Mauceri's measurement of the piece, some general conclusions as to the St. Ugo vase's place of origin and date of manufacture can be reached. While most of the decoration that would have covered the vessel has been lost, some white tin glaze with luster embellishment survives on the swelling of the body. **(Fig. 4)** Scrolling stems and leaves with veins articulated using the *sgraffito* technique are discernible on the left side of the remnant. These vegetal motifs bear a slight resemblance to those rendered on examples of twelfth-century Andalusí lusterware found mortared into the façades of churches in Pisa and unearthed from archaeological sites at Murcia.<sup>35</sup> The spiral and dot pattern on the lower right side of the remnant, however, can be found on glazed wares attributed to thirteenth-century Malaga.<sup>36</sup> These decorative motifs are enclosed in a thin, horizontal band, part of which is noticeable at the top center of the glaze remnant.

Horizontal bands of glazed decoration are typically found on other ovoid, wing-handled vessels such as the Alhambra vases; nevertheless, the "Jar of St. Ugo" should not be included in that group. The piece's height, at roughly 2.5 feet (74 cm), makes it much shorter and stouter than any of the slender, more elegant Alhambra vases. In size, the St.

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<sup>34</sup> Enrico Mauceri, "Le officine sicilane di ceramica," *Faenza* 18 (1930): 10. "detta "Giarra di S. Ugo," alta centimetri 74, col collo molto allungato...di forma ottagonale, decorato a zig-zag i gigli iscritti in motivi geometrici in oro su fondo bianco verdognolo, e di esagoni traforati presso l'orlo superiore. Il vaso è disgraziatamente assai deteriorato, anche nelle anse cui rimangono appena gli attacchi..." This and subsequent translations are my own. A passing reference to this source can be found in Alice Wilson Frothingham, *Lustreware of Spain* (New York: The Hispanic Society of America, 1951), 74.

<sup>35</sup> See illustrations in Berti and Tongiorgi, *I bacini ceramici*, plates CXCVI and CXCVII, and Navarro Palazón and Jiménez Castillo, "La producción cerámica medieval de Murcia," 196-202. The decoration on this remnant has little in common with shards that Miriam Rosser Owen attributes to twelfth- and thirteenth-century Almeria. See Rosser-Owen, "From the Mounds of Old Cairo," 169-172.

<sup>36</sup> Berti and Tongiorgi, *I bacini ceramici*, 269, plates CIC-CCII.

Ugo vase has more in common with earlier long-necked, wing-handled vats, known as *tinajas*, produced throughout the Middle Ages in al-Andalus. Often used as water containers, *tinajas* were fashioned in many places, including Toledo, Cordoba, Seville, Murcia, and Malaga.<sup>37</sup> The vessels could be glazed or unglazed, embellished with stamped or incised decoration, and measure anywhere from 70 to 90 cm in height. Given the modest height of the St. Ugo vase, its wing handles were most likely shorter than the elegant ones on the Alhambra vases, too, and more like those found on earlier *tinajas*.

As for the neck of the vase, there is nothing comparable to it on either the refined Alhambra vases made in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries or on earlier *tinajas*. **(Fig. 5)** Four bands in a relief zigzag pattern make up the base of the neck. Glazed compartments compose the middle portion, which is topped with an unusual ring carved with a star pattern and vertical notches. Probably a later addition, a round, metal lid is attached to the top of the vase. In fact, given its singular appearance, the entire neckpiece may be a later addition altogether. Like its wing handles, the original neck of the St. Ugo vase may have broken off long ago. Necks and wings were fashioned separately and then slipped on to the body of such vases before firing, so it is very common to see these pieces missing or detached from surviving vessels. The painted decoration on the glazed portion of the neck of the vase is unusual too. It is a very crude rendering of the *sebqa* or diaper pattern, a pattern commonly found, though in a far more delicately articulated fashion, on necks and neck fragments of Alhambra style vases. The St. Ugo vase's neck decoration, however, seems to have been executed by a different hand from that which created the stems, leaves, spirals, and dots on the body of the piece. Perhaps at one time the neck of the vase may have had the same sort of finely painted decoration seen in the glaze

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<sup>37</sup> Paula Sánchez Gómez and Manuel Pérez Asensio, "Generalidades sobre las tinajas andalusíes del Museo de la Alhambra," *alhambra-patronato.es*, June 3, 2013. <http://www.alhambra-patronato.es/elblogdelmuseo/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/tinajas.pdf>. José Aguado Villaba, *Tinajas medievales españolas: islámicas y mudéjares* (Toledo: Instituto provincial de investigaciones y estudios toledanos, 1991).



**Figure 5** Detail of vase neck. Photo: The Hispanic Society of America, New York.

remnant on the body. The entire neck, or at the very least, parts of it seem to be old repairs made to what has been for centuries, an object of prestige for the town of Novara di Sicilia. Despite its condition, and given its height and the appearance of existing decoration on the body, it seems reasonable to conclude the St. Ugo vase was made in a lusterware-producing center along the eastern or southern coast of the Iberian Peninsula (possibly Murcia or Malaga) sometime in the thirteenth or very early fourteenth century.

Archaeological excavations and written records indicate that glazed and decorated Iberian vessels, like the St. Ugo vase, were frequently imported into Sicily throughout the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries.<sup>38</sup> Carmen Ravanelli Guidotti writes that *tinajas* stamped with intricate relief decoration reached the island in the later Middle Ages. For example, a well-preserved *tinaja*, which she attributes to fourteenth-century Malaga, was discovered in the Sea of Palermo in 1955 and is now housed in the city's Galleria Nazionale.<sup>39</sup> Ravanelli Guidotti also notes a fifteenth-century document indicating the sale of several large jars filled with smaller Valencian dishes to Palermo merchants.<sup>40</sup> Antonio Ragona points to the notable presence of "operis de Melica," or Malaga wares in the fourteenth-century Sicilian inventories.<sup>41</sup> Enrico Mauceri unearthed fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Iberian luster ceramics in the old city center of Syracuse.<sup>42</sup> More excavations from that Sicilian city form part of the collection of the

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<sup>38</sup> Earlier, Norman Sicily served as a site of exchange for Mediterranean goods including Iberian pottery. The many *bacini*, or bowls, eventually mortared into churches in Pisa were likely moved through the ports of the island. See Shalem, *Islam Christianized*, 96.

<sup>39</sup> Ravanelli Guidotti, *MediTERRAneum*, 55–56.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 59–61.

<sup>41</sup> Antonino Ragona, *La maiolica siciliana dalle origini all'ottocento* (Palermo: Selerio, 1975). "Operis de Melica" could refer to finely glazed and often lustered ceramics from Malaga or from Valencia.

<sup>42</sup> Enrico Mauceri, "L'arte della maiolica in Sicilia," *Rassegna d'Arte antica e moderna* 2 (1915): 102–109.

Museo Cívico, Rovereto.<sup>43</sup> Lusterware pieces have also been discovered at the Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri in Palermo, the late fourteenth-century royal Aragonese palace, and later the seat of the Spanish viceroy.<sup>44</sup> More recently, Salvina Fiorilla has noted that archaeological excavations at the southern Sicilian pottery center of Gela indicate an increased presence of glazed Iberian wares in the area over the course of the fourteenth century.<sup>45</sup>

As to how and when the St. Ugo vase made it to Sicily, a likely scenario is that the vessel came to the island in the first half of the fourteenth century, sometime after 1302, when Sicily officially became a possession of Aragon. It is during this time of Aragonese rule and increased trade with the eastern Iberian kingdom that the vase could have reached Novara di Sicilia via the nearest port, Messina. It also could have come into Sicily by Palermo—as mentioned above—as Iberian ceramics often entered from there. Two vases belonging to the Alhambra group also came to the Palermo area, possibly as a pair, but how and when these two vessels reached the island is unknown. Evelina de Castro writes that it is possible their arrival occurred in the mid-fifteenth century, and was associated with Giovanni di Burgio, an Archbishop of Palermo and friend of King Alfonso the Magnanimous (1416–1458). Burgio’s “prestige and his probably frequent appearance in courtly circles may have facilitated his acquisition of the two prized vases at a time when, as recent studies have shown, the Sicilian market for imported ceramics was dominated by Spanish products.”<sup>46</sup> The vase of St. Ugo, on the other hand, is a far

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<sup>43</sup> Ravanelli Guidotti, *MediTERRAneum*, 57.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>45</sup> Salvina Fiorilla, “Gela medieval: le ceramiche come indicatore de commercio e di cultura” in *Atti di IX congresso internazionale sulla ceramic medieval nel Mediterraneo*, ed. Sauro Gelichi (Florence: All’ insegna del Giglio, 2012), 166.

<sup>46</sup> Evelina de Castro, “The Palermo Vase” in *Los jarrones de la Alhambra*, 315.

more modest sort of vessel than either of the two Alhambra vases that came to Sicily, and could have been acquired, like much imported Iberian pottery, by a less prestigious consumer as an attractive, yet ultimately utilitarian piece.

As common as Iberian ceramic imports were in late medieval Sicily, the St. Ugo vase eventually acquired an uncommon connection to a revered holy figure in the town of Novara. According to local tradition, Ugo's vase was endowed with miraculous properties, as the people of Novara would drink water from it in order to combat various illnesses. Novara lore also maintained that the vase belonged to St. Ugo himself, though this would be impossible given that the pious holy man lived in the twelfth century and the vase was produced in the thirteenth or early fourteenth.<sup>47</sup>

Very little is known of the life of St. Ugo of Novara. The few hagiographical sources that mention this obscure figure are not consistent with major facts regarding the place of his birth, his arrival in Sicily, or even the date of his feast day. For example, the seventeenth-century Spanish Cistercian chronicler, Crisóstomo Henríquez, lists the saint's feast day as November 20.<sup>48</sup> Another source maintains it was observed on November 17, but that the inhabitants of Novara today celebrate his feast on August 16.<sup>49</sup> By some accounts, Ugo was from France; however, another seventeenth-century Cistercian chronicler, Ángel Manrique, claimed the saint was a Spaniard.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Carmine Rapisarda, *Novara di Sicilia tra leggende e tradizione* (Raleigh: Lulu, 2012), 23; Ugo di Natale, *Novara di Sicilia e i suoi figli nel tempo* (Palermo: Sicilia nostra, 1968), 168.

<sup>48</sup> Crisóstomo Henríquez, *Menologium cisterciense notationibus illustratum* (Antwerp: Ex officinal Plantiniana Balthasaris Moretti, 1630), 89.

<sup>49</sup> Carlo Gregorio, *I santi siciliani* (Messina: Intilla Editore, 1999), 314.

<sup>50</sup> Gregorio, *I santi siciliani*, 312; Ángel Manrique, *Annales cistercienses* (Lyon: Boissat and Laurant, 1643), 522.

Traditionally, he is considered a disciple of the famous Cistercian reformer, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153).<sup>51</sup> Ugo was reputedly dispatched to the abbey of Santa Maria della Sambucina in Calabria before crossing into Sicily around either 1160 or 1180.<sup>52</sup> Cistercian documents record Santa Maria la Novara in Sicily as an offshoot, or “daughter” abbey of the Sambucina abbey.<sup>53</sup> This spread of the order from Calabria to Novara was apparently a consequence of improved relations between Bernard of Clairvaux and the Norman King of Sicily, Roger II (1095-1154). The abbey of Santa Maria la Novara, known today as the *badia vecchia*, was built two miles outside of the town, and may have been the first Cistercian abbey on the island.<sup>54</sup> Though there is no documentary evidence for its existence before 1193, local tradition asserts that the abbey was founded between 1171 and 1172.<sup>55</sup> Both Henríquez and Manrique believed Ugo to have been its first abbot, giving the local saint a crucial role in the spread of western monasticism into Sicily, an island previously home to Arab Muslims and Orthodox Christians.

In the late nineteenth century, author Gaetano Borghese also wrote about Ugo and the early Cistercian establishments of Novara. His dates are unreliable, but he does provide useful background about the holy man, likely gleaned from local legend. According to Borghese, “From the city and the countryside people came in droves to see the superb monastery and to visit the pious abbot Ugo, who had already risen to fame as a saint. It was extremely honorable to wear that monastic garb and to live in that order, which was

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<sup>51</sup> Marie-Anselme Dimier, “Ugo, abate a Novara di Sicilia” in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, vol.12 (Rome: Instituto Giovanni XXIII nella Pontificia Università lateranense, 1969), 773.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Lynn Townsend White, Jr. *Latin Monasticism in Norman Sicily* (Cambridge, MA; The Medieval Academy of America, 1938), 182.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>55</sup> Gregorio, *I santi siciliani*, 314.

maintained purely and rigorously for so many years.”<sup>56</sup> The author goes on to write that flooding had caused the original abbey of Santa Maria la Novara to be abandoned, and that in 1659 the monks moved to a newly constructed church. This move saw the eventual transfer of more than 130 relics to the new building, among them the head, gloves, and handkerchief of St. Ugo, as well as a “most valuable ancient vase.”<sup>57</sup> The miraculous and salutary properties of Ugo’s vase, therefore, may have been established by the seventeenth century, as local historians write that the vessel was already venerated when at the original abbey.<sup>58</sup> This may have been the reason why the vase was brought to the new church with other relics associated with St. Ugo. Though Pope Clement VIII beatified Ugo in 1604,<sup>59</sup> I have found no indication that he was officially canonized; nevertheless, beatification allows for veneration on a local level. Today, celebrations honor Novara’s first Cistercian abbot with his relics carried through the streets every August.<sup>60</sup>

Like the Stockholm vase, once on view in a pilgrimage church on Cyprus, the setting of the St. Ugo vase and its proximity to other holy relics endowed the piece with a sacred aura. The spiritual qualities attached to the vessel, and its connection to the roots of western monasticism in Sicily, emanated from its presence in churches that enjoyed a celebrated position in local lore. Both the St. Ugo and the Stockholm vases with their wing

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<sup>56</sup> Gaetano Borghese, *Novara di Sicilia, notizie storiche* (Milan: Regis e Comp., 1875), 70–71. “Dalle città e da vicini paesi correavano a gara onde vedere il superbo monastero e visitare piamente l’abbate Ugo, già salito in fama di santo. Fa sommamente in pregio poter indossare quell’abito monastico e vivere in quella regola, che pura e rigorosa si mantenne per tanti anni.”

<sup>57</sup> Gaetano Borghese, “Novara di Sicilia e le sue opere d’arte da documenti inediti,” *Archivio Storico Messinese* 7 (1906): 261–262; Borghese, *Novara di Sicilia, notizie storiche*, 72. “...pregevolissimo vaso antico.”

<sup>58</sup> Rapisarda, *Novara di Sicilia tra leggende*, 23; Di Natale, *Novara di Sicilia*, 168.

<sup>59</sup> Gregorio, *I santi siciliani*, 314.

<sup>60</sup> Mario Fonte, *Il Folklore Religioso in Sicilia* (Catania: Edizioni Greco, 2001), 227–228; See also [www.comune.novara-di-sicilia.me.it](http://www.comune.novara-di-sicilia.me.it)

handled forms and intricate decoration were remarkably attractive items that had the capacity to be singularized, and ultimately sanctified as they moved from their place of origin to foreign locations. It is clear that commerce, portability, and display served as catalysts for the formulation of their fictitious histories as holy relics. The historical facts of Mediterranean trade and the vessels' subsequent placement in sacred locations far away from where they were produced facilitated the creation of mythical pasts. 🐼