

Action sheet A

What does a thousand-year-old bowl tell us about freedom?



A bowl in the collection of the Museum of Islamic Art bears an inscription. The inscription is about freedom. The inscription has been translated from Arabic into English. All 12 words of the sentence are listed below – but out of order. Together, try to form a meaningful sentence on the topic of freedom from these words. Explain your decision!

You can cut the words out, tear them off or copy them all on individual pieces of paper. That makes it easier to form a sentence.

**DO YOU AGREE WITH THE CONTENT OF THE INSCRIPTION?
WHICH LOSSES COULD THIS REFER TO?
AND WHAT DOES FREEDOM HAVE TO DO WITH LOSSES**



| | | | | |
|--------|-------|------------|-----|------|
| losses | free | is | he | good |
| free | luck! | encounters | | |
| The | even | if | one | |

Action sheet B

What do you see in this object?



Now you know what the translated inscription is:

“The free one is free even if he encounters losses. Good luck!”
الحر حر و ان مسه الضر، اليمن.

Phonetically: Al-Hurru hurrūn waʿin massahu al-Durr, al-Yumnu.

More than 1000 years ago, someone painted it onto this bowl in Arabic Kufic script.



Please look at the object closely and quietly write down your personal spontaneous association or idea about it. Also consider what it was about the object that led you to this idea. Here are some questions that may help you:

WHO COULD HAVE MADE THE BOWL?
HOW OR FOR WHAT COULD IT HAVE BEEN USED?
DOES IT REMIND YOU OF SIMILAR OBJECTS FROM YOUR EVERYDAY LIFE?
WHAT DO YOU SEE IN IT?
BUT MAYBE YOU ALSO HAVE OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT THE OBJECT!

Next, read your statements out loud to each other and explain them! With old objects like this, many questions can no longer be answered unambiguously. You can find some ideas from research on the info sheet.

Info sheet part 1

Bowl with Inscription



Object **Bowl with Inscription**
 Inventory no. I. 26/60
 Period 3rd–4th century AH
 9th–10th century AD
 Place Afrasiyab (Uzbekistan) or
 Nishapur (Iran)
 Material Earthenware with slurry paint
 Size 11 cm tall, diameter 36 cm



HOW CAN THE OBJECT BE DESCRIBED?

It's a bowl made of earthenware that has slurry paint. Without glaze, this ceramic would thus be permeable to water. The painting consists of clay mixed with paint. White and black were painted on. The fairly large bowl is round and has sides that rise up straight. On the inside is an Arabic inscription in the so-called Kufic style (very angular). The letters are elongated and seem to form a visual border to create a finish for the bowl that is pleasing to the eye.

FOR WHAT WAS IT MADE OR USED?

A bowl is first and foremost a bowl, and almost nothing is known about its use. Its shape would make it very suitable in a household, e.g. for food. Did someone eat from this bowl? Maybe it's a special item that was only used on festive occasions. The size and the design of the bowl support this. But it's also possible that bowls like this beautified a room as part of the interior design. Inscriptions on similar objects often revolve around sharing a meal and the generosity of the hosts. It can thus be assumed that these bowls were used for guests.

Info sheet part 2

Bowl with Inscription

CLASSIFICATION INTO CONTEXTS

Although Persian was the everyday language in the region in which this object originated, the inscription here was made in Arabic. Why in Arabic if the people spoke Persian? This shows the significance of the Arabic language at this time. Researchers also think that bowls were probably glazed in white at the time to imitate white Chinese porcelain. Although they weren't able to produce this, their own pottery was meant to resemble that from China. Another object in the Museum of Islamic Art, which is probably from the same time and the same place, is also designed with limited means (only black and white, no decorations). But here the colours were switched.

THE FREE ONE IS FREE EVEN IF HE ENCOUNTERS LOSSES. GOOD LUCK!

That's the inscription on the bowl. But what did they mean by losses at that time? Was it about money and possessions or more about friendship and love? The question about human freedom is also one of the most difficult ones in theology and philosophy. Theologically, this requires a definition of the relationship between God and humans: has God predetermined people's journey in life or do humans have free will? This question always received different answers in the various epochs, regions and groupings. The theologian al-Maturidi (280–329 AH/893–941 AD) saw the matter roughly like this: God created all actions and all humans, so he is the origin. But humans freely select from the actions. According to the philosopher al-Farabi (256–338 AH/ 870–950 AD), people are rational and can thus make free decisions. But for al-Farabi as well, creation is traced back to God, who controls what happens on Earth to a certain extent. Ultimately, however, one shouldn't forget that theory and everyday life aren't the same thing. People are often guided not just by theology and philosophy but also by cultural traditions and their reasoning. This was no different in the 9th–10th century AD.



Action sheet

What is your understanding of freedom?

NOW THINK ABOUT WHAT FREEDOM MEANS TO YOU.

THERE IS NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWER.
ALL THAT MATTERS IS YOUR PERSONAL OPINION!

Everyone can quietly consider in which situations freedom becomes important and what kind of idea of freedom this leads to. With which keywords or inscription would you express this?



Write everything you can think of on a piece of paper and then design your bowl!



Afterwards all bowls can be presented to the whole group.