



DECORATIVE MOTIFS ON CERAMIC FRAGMENTS FROM IRAN AND EGYPT

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The territory conquered by Muslims in the first half of the 7th century had a long-established ceramic industry. Islamic potters from the Umayyad era (661–750) adopted pre-Islamic technology and style of decoration. It is difficult to distinguish between pre-Islamic and early Islamic pottery unless there are Arabic inscriptions. According to the excavations, the majority of vessels were made of unglazed earthenware, undecorated or decorated with geometrical or vegetal patterns (painted, moulded, applied or engraved). The manufacture of glazed pottery, invented in Egypt during the 4th millennium BC, spread to Iranian lands and continued right up to the Islamic period.¹

We can unambiguously identify the Islamic pottery from the 9th century owing to archaeological excavations in the city of Samarra in Iraq. This Abbasid capital was inhabited for a relatively short and specific period, so the excavated items could serve as comparative material for exact dating. The Abbasid rulers admired Chinese ceramics and that encouraged Middle Eastern potters to imitate Chinese ware as well as to invent new authentic styles. Inspired by the whiteness of porcelain, they produced earthenware coated with opaque white lead glaze with a small amount of tin. Another decorative technique of the Abbasid period (749–1258) was underglaze slip painting. But the most valuable achievement of this period is so-called lustre pottery. These vessels were decorated using a mixture of sulphur, metallic oxides, ochre and vinegar² over the fired tin glaze, which after the second firing resulted in an iridescent metallic film. This technique, probably invented by glass makers in Egypt or Syria³, was re-discovered in Abbasid Iraq, continued to be employed in the Fatimid Egypt and Syria (909–1171), spread to Iran and reached its height in famous Iranian ceramics centres Rayy and Kashan in the period of the Ilkhanid dynasty (1258–1335).

Further innovation in ceramics production was introduced in Iran during the reign of the Saljuq Turks (1038–1194) and was again inspired by Chinese porcelain. The vessels became thinner yet strong enough thanks to a new material, stonepaste (fritware), made

¹ Fehérvári, G.: *Ceramics of the Islamic World in the Tareq Rajab Museum*. I. B. Tauris Publishers, London, New York 2000, p.23.

² Hillenbrand, R.: *Islamic Art and Architecture*. Thames and Hudson Ltd., London 1999, p. 54.

³ Blair, S., Bloom, J.: *Islamic Arts*. Phaidon Press Ltd., London 1997, p. 111.

of clay, ground quartz and glaze frit.⁴ In about 1200, an alkaline glaze was invented in Iran which allowed more detailed and finer underglaze polychrome painting.⁵ Another polychrome painting technique known as *mina'i*, using seven colours applied over opaque glaze before the second firing, was developed in Iran in the 12th century.

Fritware pottery painted under a transparent glaze, again greatly influenced by Chinese patterns, became popular in the age of the great empires, Ottoman Turkey (1281–1924, with its zenith between the 15th and 17th centuries) and Safavid Iran (1501–1732). In the Ottoman city of Iznik, the famous polychrome fritware painted in bright colours over whitish slip under colourless transparent glossy glaze was produced.

Other technologies and decorative techniques in the history of the ceramic industry in the Islamic lands exist, but those mentioned above are substantial considering the present collection of ceramic fragments. However, analysis of the technology and the range of colours is just one aspect of the identification method. Another aspect that is just as important is analysis and comparison of the decorative motifs on the pottery (even though the small size of the fragments greatly reduces the chance of exact findings).

The scale of decorative motifs of Islamic pottery was initially highly affected by the pre-Islamic legacy, Sassanian as well as Byzantine. Many of these features were preserved for a long time (up to contemporary handicrafts), slightly stylised or combined with other elements. From the Abbasid period onwards we can mention the authentic Islamic decorative style with its four main components: calligraphy, arabesque, floral elements, and animal and human figures.

In the Abbasid period the monumental, angular kufic script with its decorative forms was used as an important element in surface decoration. The inscriptions were painted either in a straight horizontal line in the centre of the plate or around the rim. Later, the more cursive naskhi script became popular, and in Iran the nastaliq script was widely used (since the 13th century).

The phenomenon of Arabesque has many interpretations and there are many theories about its roots. We can describe it as a stylised floral motive consisting of continuous stem scrolls with split leaves, palmettes, and geometrized and interlaced elements. The main principles are repetition and infinity. Since the Abbasid period it became an inseparable part of Islamic design and we cannot give an account of its features specific to the particular place and time of origin.

In this respect the floral elements play a more important role, particularly in later ceramics. We can clearly distinguish between the Iranian Safavid floral patterns, which often imitate Chinese ceramics, and the Ottoman vegetal and floral style of Iznik pottery adopted from the original, naturalistic style of painters of the Istanbul court workshop.

We can see a close similarity between the early Islamic and Sassanian pottery in depiction of figures (animals, birds and human beings) and even in its composition: enthroned kings, hunting and fighting scenes. Many of the animal motifs spread throughout the Middle East (peacock, hare, duck, eye motif of peacock's feather, etc.) Advanced pottery painting technologies enabled the painters to adopt the more detailed and delicate technique of contemporaneous miniatures. This miniature-like technique, often of a narrative character, was favoured in lustre pottery (from the 12th century onwards) as well as in *mina'i* technology.⁶

⁴ Fehérvári, G.: *Ceramics ...*

⁵ Wilson, E.: *Islamic Designs*. British Museum Pattern Books, London 1988. p. 13.

⁶ Talbot Rice, D.: *Islamic Art*. Thames and Hudson, London 1965, p. 72.

Catalogue

1. Fragment of a small bowl

Egypt (?) 10th–11th century
Brownish earthenware, painted in lustre over
opaque whitish glaze.

4 × 8 cm

NpM A 21380

The inside carries repeated motives of a running hare in lozenge-shaped and lobed medallions. The outside is decorated with roughly painted circles and lines.

2. Bottom of a vessel

Syria or Egypt, 10th–12th century
Reddish earthenware, painted in lustre over
opaque whitish glaze.

Diam. 6–9 cm

NpM A 21381

The decoration consists of a pair of fish surrounded by small plant ornaments.

3. Fragment of bottom of a plate

Iran, 12th–14th (?) century
Yellowish earthenware, painted in lustre over
an opaque white glaze.

8 × 7.5 cm

NpM A 21379

The fragment carries a part of an animal body (duck?) surrounded by stylised vegetal elements.

4. Bottom of a vessel

Syria or Egypt 12th–13th century
Reddish earthenware, painted in lustre over an
opaque white glaze.

Diam. 9 cm

NpM A 21378

The fragment carries a part of a human figure surrounded by vegetal motifs.

5. Bottom of a vessel

Syria, Egypt or Iraq, 12th–13th century
Reddish earthenware, painted in lustre over an
opaque white glaze.

Diam. 7.5–8.5 cm

NpM A 21377

The centre of this fragment is decorated with a bird.

6. Bottom of a vessel

Iran, 12th–13th century (?)
Brownish earthenware painted in manganese

brown and greenish gold over an opaque
light blue glaze.

Diam. 4.5–5 cm

NpM A 21386

The bowl was probably produced in so-called mina'i technique. The central decoration suggests two-headed eagle surrounded by floral scrolls.

7. Bottom of a vessel

Iran, 13th–14th century
Whitish earthenware (fritware?) coated with
an opaque white glaze.

Diam. 7.5 × 8.5 cm

NpM A 21382

The fragment is decorated with a fish painted in cobalt blue in imitation of Chinese ware.

8. Fragment of a vessel with moulded decoration

Iran, 12th–13th century
Greyish earthenware coated with a turquoise
green glaze (with lustre?).

6.5 × 5 cm

NpM A 21387

The fragment carries a moulded decoration showing fish and floral elements in horizontal strips.

9. Bottom of a vessel

Iran, so-called Sultanabad ware, 14th century
Whitish earthenware painted in bluish grey
and white with black outlines under a transparent glaze.

Diam. 7.5–9 cm

NpM A 21385

The fragment carries a motif of a flying bird (phoenix or Persian mythological Simurgh?). The ground is decorated with leaves, flowers and other floral elements of Chinese inspiration. This type of Iranian pottery is called Sultanabad, after a town in Iran, where many examples were excavated. The real place of its origin might be another Iranian town.

10. Fragment of a vessel

Iran, 17th–18th (?) century
Fritware painted in cobalt blue with black outlines under a transparent glaze.

10 × 8 cm

NpM A 21383

The fragment carries a body of an animal (probably leopard) and floral elements on the background. The outside is decorated with lattice.

11. Fragment of a small bowl

Iran or Syria, 13th (?) century
Reddish thin body, glazed, painted in lustre and cobalt blue.
Diam. 9.3 cm
NpM A 21391

The bowl is inscribed around the rim with a repeating pseudo-kufic inscription that encircles a bird (heron?) in the centre.

12. Fragment of a plate

Iran, 17th–18th (?) century
Fritware, painted in cobalt blue under a transparent glaze.
Diam. 10.5–12 cm
NpM A 21384

The fragment is decorated with a flying bird (phoenix) and vegetal elements depicted in a very fine style.

13. Bottom of a plate

Iraq, Iran or Central Asia, (?)
Brownish earthenware inscribed in manganese brown under a transparent glaze.
Diam. 11 cm
NpM A 21389

The fragment is decorated with kufic calligraphy painted in manganese brown on a white background.

14. Bottom of a bowl

Iraq, Iran or Central Asia, (?)
Brownish earthenware, inscribed in manganese brown under a transparent glaze.
Diam. 11.5–14.5 cm
NpM A 21390

The surface is decorated with four lines of kufic calligraphy painted in brown, surrounded by green spots on a white background.

15. Fragment of a vessel

Iran or Egypt, (?)
Greyish earthenware, unglazed, slip painted.
8 x 4(7) cm
NpM A 21388

The outside is decorated with several lines of floral kufic script.

16. Ink-pot

Iran, 17th–19th century
Fritware, painted in underglaze yellow, green and blue with brownish manganese outlines.
Diam. 9.5 cm, Ht. 6.5 cm
NpM A 25892

The ink-pot consists of seven cylindrical parts concentrated around the central cylindrical vessel. Wheels and vertical strips in yellow, green and blue decorate the surface.

17. Lamp

Iran, (?)
Greyish earthenware, coated with an opaque greenish grey glaze.
Diam. 8 cm, Ht. 8.5 cm, Length (with the spout) 11.5 cm
NpM A 25 893

The circular closed body of the lamp is provided with a long spout (damaged on its tip) and relatively tall wide-open neck over the filling hole. The handle is rather angular and with a small knob.

18. Lobed bowl with moulded decoration showing human heads

Iran or Egypt, 12th–13th century
Whitish earthenware, coated with an opaque blue glaze.
Diam. 18.5 cm, Ht. 12 cm
NpM 60.255

Polylobed bowl on a foot is decorated with moulded human heads. This type of so-called pedestal bowl was produced in Iran during the Saljuq period but it is also reported to have been found in Egypt⁷. (This particular object was found in Cairo).

19. Three fragments of a tile

Iran, 18th–19th century
Fritware, painted in blue, brownish red, black and yellow under a transparent glaze.
a – 5 × 4 cm, b – 7 × 5.5 cm, d – 11 × 9.5 cm
NpM A 21376

These three fragments were a part of a square tile. The main decoration of the tile is a seated human figure in a star-shaped medallion.

⁷ Fehérvári, G.: Ceramics ...



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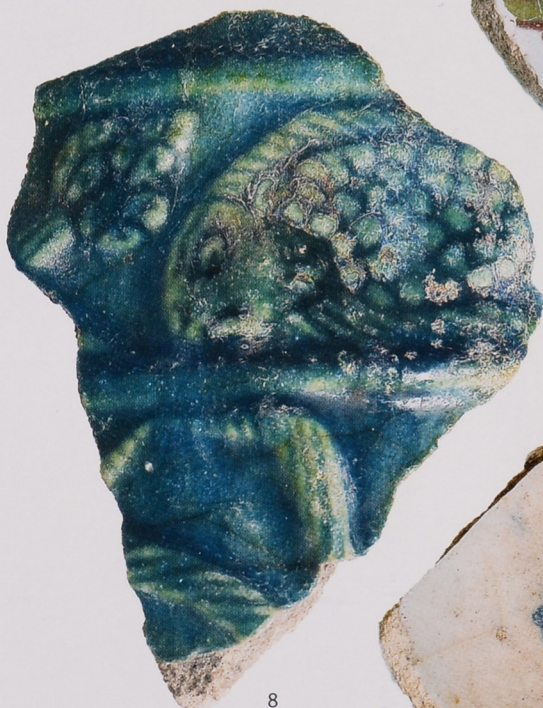
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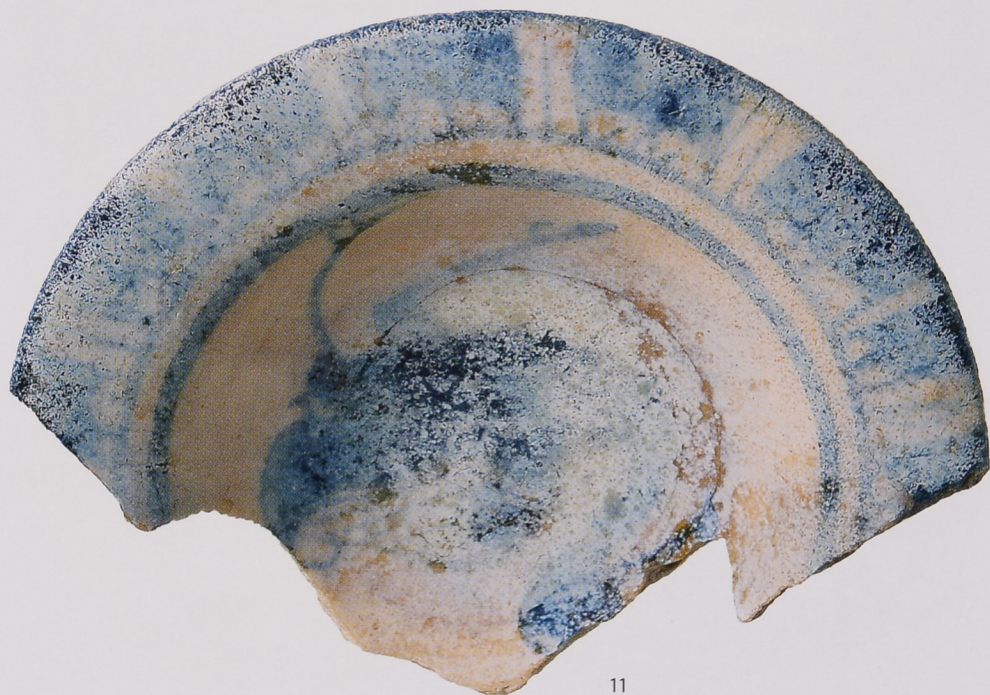
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