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Original Research Article

Conceptual Interpretation of the Nishapur Third and Fourth Century AH Buff Pottery Motifs by Focusing on Zoroastrianism

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Abstract

Pottery is one of the art products through which one can discern the social conditions, lifestyle, culture, and religion of the targeted society, as it closely connects with people's lives. Based on the conducted excavations, third- and fourth-century AH potteries are among the most creative artifacts of the early Islamic period. These works were neither known in previous eras nor continued to be produced in later centuries. Various pottery samples have been discovered in Nishapur, giving rise to different theories about their motifs. However, the theories have yet to present valid and sufficient evidence. The research questions are: What themes inspired the motifs of the Nishapur third- and fourth-century AH buff potteries? Did pre-Islamic culture and ideologies influence them? After studying historical books, examining a wide range of the Nishapur pottery motifs, and analyzing them, an attempt was made to interpret the conceptual meanings of the pottery motifs. During the Samanid era, a revival of the sources on Zoroastrianism was witnessed. Observing the social and religious symbols of ancient times in the Nishapur buff potteries provides a suitable ground for exploration in this field. It seems that Zoroastrianism had the most significant influence on the pottery motifs. This research has a qualitative and strategic system. Further, it is basic research based on the objective. Given the research method, the study is historical research conducted inductively. The current paper was analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method.

Keywords: *Buff potteries, Nishapur, Zoroastrianism, Barsom, Haoma.*

Introduction

The Nishapur third- and fourth-century AH potteries are very well-known. In this respect, extensive research has been conducted on them so far. However, these studies only include white background potteries. In practice, a group of potteries with a buff background, despite their unique features, have received less attention, and unfortunately, comprehensive research has not been done on them. These potteries, which have motifs such as composite

creatures of cow/human, humans performing unspecified actions, and unidentified objects in their hands, neither have their roots in the ancient art of Nishapur nor have they been repeated in subsequent periods. They were produced only during a specific historical period and did not continue afterward.

Various theories have been proposed regarding these motifs in Islamic pottery art. However, most of them have not provided conclusive and convincing examples in this regard. Therefore, this study seeks to document the motifs' various conceptual and

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content dimensions. This research investigates the relationship between Zoroastrianism and motifs by exploring texts related to Zoroastrianism and analyzing the motifs on the vessels.

Research Method

The research employs a qualitative and strategic structure. In fact, based on its objective, it is fundamental research and, in terms of research method, is historical. The research was conducted inductively. The present paper was analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method.

Literature Review

So far, independent research has yet to be conducted on the content of the motifs of the Nishapur third- and fourth-century AH potteries. Ms. Oya Pancaroglu (2013) published *Feasts of Nishapur: Cultural Resonances of Tenth-Century Ceramic Production in Khurasan* “, an English paper related to the research topic. This study traces the vessels’ origins to ancient feasts but does not provide sufficient reasons for this. In this respect, Askari Al-Mouti (2017), in his *Nishapur Painted Ware’s Content Readout with Focus on Apocalyptic Beliefs and Astronomical Predictions*,” examined the motifs from the perspective of apocalyptic beliefs and astronomical prophecies. Furthermore, Changiz & Rezaloo (2012) wrote *Symbolic Evaluation of Animal motifs in Nishapur pottery (3th - 4th century AH)*”. This study partially analyzed the symbolic meanings and direct influences from pre-Islamic motifs while introducing animal motifs. In addition, Chitsazian & Roustaei (2013), in their “*Assessment and analysis of symbolic drawing of animal motifs (paintings) on potteries of 3rd and 4th century AH in Iran*,” introduced third- and fourth-century AD pottery animal motifs and examined them symbolically.

Mirzaee & Moradkhani (2019) jointly authored “*Reflection of Mithraism on Designs of NeyshaPur Potteries in Samanid Era*”. They considered the potteries to be a connecting link between the pre-

Islamic and post-Islamic periods. They identified the motifs and symbolic images as closely related to the rituals and customs of pre-Islamic religions in Iran. In *Iconographical Criticism of the Ship Seated Bowl from the Samanid Nishapur pottery*”, Sibuye (2020) analyzed one sample and interpreted the Manichaean concepts. Indeed, analyzing the motifs by considering only one vessel and disregarding the rest of the collection may not lead to a definitive conclusion.

Also, Azadbakht & Tavousi (2012) in the article titled “*Continuity of Motifs in Silver Dishes of Sassanian era on Nishapur Pottery Designs in Samanid Period*” as well as Mehrdad Hampartian and Mohammad Khazaei (2005) in the article titled “*Human Body on Nishapur Pottery*” have described generally the patterns and the impact of Sasanid Art on Nishapur pottery patterns and symbolism.

Similar studies have been conducted on the potteries and have focused on the structural features of the motifs. They have not analyzed the content of the pieces to declare what themes are depicted in the pottery, what objects the figures hold, or whether the images narrate a specific ceremony. Such works are not in the scope of this research.

Theoretical Foundations

Grube (2005, 45) asserts, “Khurasan is a region described by geographers as being among Nishapur in the west, Balkh in the east, Merv in the north, and Herat in the south”. The Samanids had a strong desire and motivation to establish the new Persian language as a governmental and cultural language. Art emerged during this period, and parts of its manifestations and aspects were based on an uninterrupted artistic tradition (Ettinghausen et al., 2015, 51).

Alongside Islamic rituals, which were highly valued in the Samanid realm, ancient Iranian customs and traditions were also prevalent at court and among the general populace. Some have continued until today (Naji, 2008, 34).

Bulliet as cited in Grube (2005, 45), states that the

figurative motifs on the colorful vessels not only indicate Persian traditions but also were popular among the known petty nobility of Nishapur within the democratic faction.

Richard Bulliet, a historian, interprets the colorful figurative vessels as evidence of the spread of Persian national symbols among the people because the style of the pottery imagery recalls ancient Persian themes (*ibid.*, 50).

Fitzherbert maintains that the diversity of composite types in the Nishapur pottery reflects broader themes of inspiration and adaptation from the culture and myths of Iran and Central Asia. For example, celebrating the ancient festivals, such as Nowruz and Mehregan, continued during the Islamic period (*ibid.*, 45).

We refer to Wilkinson’s report regarding the history of pottery in Khurasan. In the late 1950s, in Merv, northeast of Nishapur, an expedition from the Soviet Republic of South Turkmenistan found buff ware. The Merv buff ware was retrieved from the tenth-century level. Although stylistically different from the Nishapur buff ware, it is closely associated with it. A two-handled pottery vase was found in Merv (*Table 1*). It was decorated with seated male and female figures and was dated to the late fifth or sixth century AD.

This vase indicates that the animate buff ware of Khurasan was, if not a continuation, at least a rebirth of its tradition. Evidently, the wares originated from Khurasan and, at least in their early stages, were never indebted to Iraq, other Western Islamic countries, or Chinese ceramic centers (*Wilkinson, 1897, 3*).



The features of two women in an excellent example on a bowl in the Freer Gallery in Washington D. C. (*Table 1: Fig. 1*) are very similar to the woman seen in the Merv artifact (*Table 1: Fig. 2*). Thanks to the discovery of this vase in Merv, there is evidence that this style likely stemmed from a tradition in Khurasan and Transoxiana (*ibid.*, 6).

Given its cultural and social background, Greater Khurasan witnessed the rewriting and compilation of ancient Iranian texts and the flourishing of Zoroastrian culture in the third and fourth centuries AH.

Historians such as Bal’ami and Tha’alibi played a significant role in the survival of Iranian culture. Abu Ali Muhammad Bal’ami (*1974, 28*), the vizier of Mansur I Samanid, prepared a summary of Tabari’s History of the Prophets and Kings in Persian at the king’s command. This translation is one of the oldest and most important works in Persian prose.

In the early centuries AH, Zoroastrian priests

Table 1. The history of Khurasan pottery. Source: Authors.

No.	1	2
Fig.		
	Source: www.asia.si.edu .	Source: www.museum.gov.tn .

Description - The motif of a woman in a Nishapur pottery.

- A two-handled pottery vase from Merv with the motif of a woman from the Sasanian era, representing the historical background of the pottery in Greater Khorasan.

had notable activities. Mohammad-Taqi Bahar (1976, 146). reported, “During the Abbasid era, Iranian Zoroastrian priests in Fars and Baghdad were engaged in scientific and literary works. In the second century AH, during the reign of al-Mámūn (198-218 AH), Aturfarnbag-i Farruxzatan,’ a Zoroastrian priest, authored ‘Denkard,’ which contains the essential Zoroastrian religious customs and includes interpretations of parts of the Avesta in several volumes. Shortly before and after that, until the sixth century AH, religious and literary books and treatises in Pahlavi and commentaries on the Yashts were written by Zoroastrian priests. These contained materials and even parts from the Sasanian period. Hence, it is evident that until the sixth and seventh centuries AH, Zoroastrians in Iran were engaged in religious, scientific, and literary activities. During that time, students of Mazdean knowledge from India and Gujarat would come to Iran to obtain copies of books and learn Mazdean traditions and narratives, benefiting from this scientific exchange. Several Pahlavi and Persian narrative books that exist today testify to this”. Given the points above, the Nishapur buff pottery motifs have their roots in the geography of Greater





Khorasan and were not imported from other regions. When these potteries were crafted during the Samanid era, the prevailing atmosphere was one of the revivals of Iranian culture and rituals. Considering the geographical, historical, social, and cultural background discussed, we interpret the symbols in the motifs of Nishapur buff pottery as related to Zoroastrianism.

• **Yasna ceremony**

In Menog-i Khrad, which was recompiled during the Samanid era in the third and fourth centuries AH, concurrently with the production of Nishapur buff pottery, it is stated about the Yasna ceremony, “The most important Zoroastrian worship ritual is the Yasna (worship, sacrifice), which is performed in front of the fire in a part of the fire temple known as the Urwesgah. The Yasna ceremony itself consists of two parts. In the first part, the materials for the main Yasna ceremony are prepared during rituals. The materials include Ab-Zohr, a Barsom (tree branches, today replaced by metal branches), a Drōn (sacred bread), and the juice of the Haoma plant (Parahaoma)” (Tafazzoli, 1975, 105).

The images of the motifs related to the Yasna ceremony on Nishapur buff pottery, shown in Table 2, depict individuals holding cups containing Ab-Zohr.

Table 2. Nishapur buff potteries with images related to the Yasna ceremony as the most important ritual of Zoroastrianism, featuring figures holding cups, Ab-Zohr, or Barsom. Source: Author.

No.	1	2	3	4
Fig.				
	Source: www.christies.com.	Source: www.christies.com.	Source: www.metmuseum.org.	Source: www.christies.com.
Description	-Yasna ceremony -A figure holding a cup with Ab-Zohr	-Yasna ceremony -Figures holding cups with Ab-Zohr and a Drōn in a ritual	-Yasna ceremony -A figure holding a cup with Ab-Zohr or Barsom twigs wrapped in a band of fibers similar to Table 3	-Yasna ceremony -A figure holding a cup with Ab-Zohr or Barsom twigs wrapped in a band of fibers similar to Table 3

• **Image of Ab-Zohr in the Nishapur Buff Potteries**

Ab-Zohr is part of the Yasna ceremony, which Ahmad Tafazzoli (*ibid.*, 104) details in “Menog-i Khrad”, “Ab-Zohr or ‘offering to the water’ is now essentially a part of the Yasna ceremony. After the completion of the Yasna prayers, the Zar-Melavvi, as called by the Parsis of India, or Ab-Zohr, as called by the Iranian Zoroastrians, is performed. During the Yasna ceremony, Parahaoma is prepared twice. The second Parahaoma, consisting of three parts, is the Zaoθra in the Avesta. It is described with three qualities: mixed with Haoma, milk, and pomegranate”.

The motif found in Dascylium, located in Western Asia Minor, dates back to five centuries B.C. It vividly depicts the activities and work of the Magi (*Table 3*). They tie a piece of cloth called a Penom in front of their mouths to avoid polluting the fire with their breath and stand in front of an altar,



holding a bundle of twigs of a plant known as Barsom (*Vermaseren, 2004, 24*).

By closely analyzing the forms of the objects held by the figures, we see a significant resemblance between the Nishapur images, where, according to Wilkinson, they hold a cup (*Table 2: Figs. 3 & 4*) interpreted as containing Ab-Zohr and *Table 3: Figs. 1 & 2*, which depict the Magi holding a Barsom during religious ceremonies. Based on the images in *Table 3*, it is also possible that in *Table 2: Figs. 3 & 4*, the figures hold a bundle of twigs or Barsom tied with a band woven from palm leaf fibers. The band is like the Zoroastrian girdle, Kusti, and is also called Kusti (*Oshidri, 1992, as cited in Javadi & Nikoei, 2017, 57*). With this in mind, both the cup containing Ab-Zohr and the bundle of Barsom twigs have roots in the Yasna ceremony, the most important ritual of Zoroastrianism.

• **Image of Drōn in the Nishapur buff potteries**

According to “Menog-i Khrad” (*Tafazzoli, 1975, 113*),

Table 3. Relief related to Zoroastrianism with a Barsom in hands, where the branches are wrapped in a band of fibers. Source: Author.

No.	1	2
Fig.		
	Source: Vermaseren 2004, 22.	Source: Istanbul, Archaeological Museum; as cited in Hamby et al., 2010.
Description	-The Magi at the altar, with a Barsom and mouth covering	-The Magi conducting worship, A recovered motif from Dascylium, 5th century B.C.

in Zoroastrianism, Drōn holds a special place. “In Pahlavi texts and contemporary usage, a Drōn is a thin bread made from unleavened wheat dough”. Given the Nishapur motifs and their analysis, the circular objects held by individuals represent Drōns. Alongside them, various individuals holding cups illustrate the Yasna ceremony (Table 4).

• Images of barsom and Haoma in the Nishapur buff potteries

The Haoma is an ancient plant with a prominent place in Zoroastrianism (Table 5). “The ancient Haoma is now identified with Ephedra. According to conducted research, this plant is indeed the very Haoma used in specific Zoroastrian

Table 4. Image of Drōn in Nishapur buff potteries related to Yasna Ceremony. Source: Author.


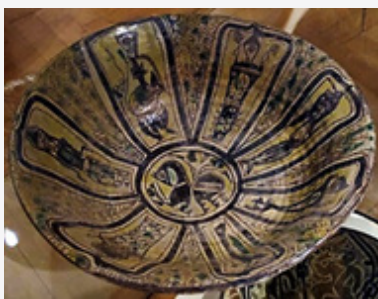




No.	1	2	3
Fig.			
	Source: www.davidmus.dk.	Source: www.museu.ms.	Source: www.anaviangallery.com.
Description	-A composite bovine creature holding a circular object as a Drōn related to the Yasna ceremony	-A circular object as a Drōn in the hands of participants in a ritual related to the Yasna ceremony	-A composite bovine creature holding a circular object as a Drōn related to the Yasna ceremony

Table 5. Ephedra or Haoma related to the Yasna ceremony and as a sacred plant in Zoroastrianism. Source: Author.

No.	1	2	3
Fig.			
	Sources: www.musee-ariana.ch.	Sources: www.lacma.org.	Sources: rasekhood.net
Description	- Ephedra in the background of the image of two figures in a Nishapur pottery	- Ephedra in the hand of a female figure in a Nishapur pottery	- Ephedra or Haoma

ceremonies” (Ghasemian, 2012, 45). Regarding Haoma, Gnoli (2005, 3775, as cited in Mazdapour & Latifpour, 2011, 206) states that Zoroastrians used a type of Ephedra in their worship ceremonies for many years. This plant grows in vast Central Asia and Iran regions and has hallucinogenic effects.

Flattery & Schwartz (1989, 67) describe the composition of the drink known as Haoma, used by Iranians in Zoroastrian rituals. They maintain that the drink consisted of the essence of Ephedra, pomegranate branches, and Ruta Graveolens.

Given the above and the image of Ephedra, called the five-petaled flower by Wilkinson, the plant shown in Table 5 is identified as Haoma. In the translation of the Avesta by Pourdavoud & Darmesteter (Eds.) (2022, 339), Haoma is associated with Ephedra. The image of this plant, with its red fruits, is featured in Kurosh Ghasemian’s *Haoma: A Legacy of Iranian Culture from Ancient Times to the Present* (Ghasemian, 2012, 99 & 102). Further, the black-and-white image of the plant is presented in Flattery and Schwartz (1989, 71)’s *Haoma and Harmaline*.

The words Haoma and Barsom are mentioned in the Avesta (2022, 337) in *Mihr Yasht*, Karda 23, Verse 88: “The enlivening, healing, fair, lordly, golden-eyed Haoma offered up a sacrifice on the highest of heights, on the Haraiti Bareza, he the undefiled (Haoma) to one undefiled (Mihr), with undefiled Baresma, undefiled libations, and undefiled words”. Furthermore, in *Aban Yasht* (ibid., 211), Karda 1, Verses 7 and 8, it is mentioned: “Who will praise me? Who will offer me a sacrifice, with libations cleanly prepared and well-strained, together with the Haoma and milk? To such a person who is loyal and devoted to me, I will bring pleasure so that he remains happy and joyous”. Regarding the nature of a Barsom, in *Encyclopedia of Myths and Ancient Rituals of the World*, Gholamreza Ma’soumi (2014, 1225) writes, “a Barsom, Baresman, or Barsman consists of cut twigs of a tree, each of them in Pahlavi is called a ‘Tāk’ and in Persian a ‘Tāb’. According to Avesta, a Barsom should be made

of plants and trees, such as pomegranate, tamarisk, and Haoma. The Barsoms are tightly wrapped in a band woven from palm leaf fibers. The band is like the Zoroastrian girdle, Kusti “.

It appears that in some motifs, the pomegranate branches are illustrated as a Barsom (Table 6: Figs. 1-3; Table 7: Figs. 2 & 3) and in others, a bundle of them wrapped in a band of fibers (Table 3: Figs. 1 & 2). Based on the above information, a Barsom is the pomegranate branch depicted in the figures’ hands in Tables 6 & 7.

• Image of a barsom-holder or mah-ruy in the Nishapur buff potteries

The Barsom-holder or Mah-ruy is used in religious ceremonies. It is a container in which the Barsom twigs are placed and supported (Ghasemian, 2012, 25).

Comparing the cover image of “The Haoma Plant” (Table 8: Fig. 1) (ibid., Cover Image), which depicts the Barsom-holder or Mah-ruy, with the object in the figures’ hands on the pottery (Table 8: Figs. 2 & 3) confirms the belief that the motifs have a direct association with Zoroastrianism and Iranian culture.

Conclusion

In practice, to interpret and trace the origins of the motifs of the Nishapur third- and fourth-century AH buff potteries, the historical, geographical, social, and cultural background of Nishapur during the third and fourth centuries AH was first analyzed. Then, questions were addressed: What themes inspired the motifs of the Nishapur third- and fourth-century AH buff potteries? Did pre-Islamic culture and ideologies influence them? Sixteen Nishapur pottery pieces were examined.

Based on the following reasons, the research findings demonstrate that Zoroastrianism had the greatest influence on forming the Nishapur pottery motifs, given the artifacts’ social, cultural, and historical background. The most important ritual of Zoroastrianism is the Yasna ceremony, whose

Table 6. A pomegranate branch or Barsom related to the Yasna ceremony in the figures' hands on a Nishapur pottery. Source: Author.

No.	1	2	3
Fig.			
	Sources: www.bonhams.com .	Sources: www.khalilcollections.or .	Sources: www.bonhams.com .
Description	- A pomegranate branch or Barsom in the hand of a standing figure	- A pomegranate branch or Barsom in the hand of a seated figure	- A pomegranate branch or Barsom in the hand of a standing figure

Table 7. A pomegranate branch or Barsom related to the Yasna ceremony in the figures' hands on a Nishapur pottery. Source: Author.

No.	1	2	3
Fig.			
	Source: www.isna.ir	Source: www.skinnerinc.com .	Source: www.collections.vam.ac.uk .
Description	- A pomegranate branch or Barsom	- A rider and a Barsom twig	- A pottery motif conceptually referring to Ferdowsi's poetry

Table 7. A pomegranate branch or Barsom related to the Yasna ceremony in the figures' hands on a Nishapur pottery. Source: Author.

No.	1	2	3
Fig.			
	Source: Ghasemian, 2012, Cover Image.	Source: www.artcurial.com .	Source: www.clevelandart.org .
Description	- Mah-ruy or Barsom-holder	- A Barsom-holder or Mah-ruy in the hands of a figure	- A Barsom-holder or Mah-ruy in the hands of the figures

visual elements include Ab-Zohr, a Drōn, Haoma, a Barsom, and a Barsom-holder. A cup-like object seems to represent Ab-Zohr. A pomegranate branch signifies a Barsom. In this respect, some instances show that the pomegranate branch is accompanied by leaves, and others demonstrate the branches wrapped in a band of fibers. The circular form in the figures' hands likely depicts a Drōn, as if they were present at a special ceremony. The repeated motif of Ephedra, or the five-petaled flower in the works' background and some figures' hands, represents Haoma. Most intriguingly, the object known as the Barsom-holder or Mah-ruy in the individuals' hands signifies performing the Yasna ceremony in Zoroastrianism.

Notably, during the Samanid era, Pahlavi texts were revived and compiled. The Samanid rulers, while respecting the Islamic faith, took steps to revive Iranian culture. The pottery from the Sasanian period was introduced by the National Museum of Turkmenistan. This pottery bears significant stylistic similarities to Nishapur artifacts and further supports this conclusion. Afterward, with the change of government after the fourth century AH, the chaos in the country, and the rise of the Ghaznavid rulers, the support to produce such artifacts ceased, and producing this type of pottery did not continue.

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