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Original Research Article

A Study on the Apparent Origins of the Designs on Nishapur's Buffware Pottery from the 9th and 10th Centuries AD

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Abstract

Nishapur's buffware potteries are the center of attention for their unique designs. These potteries were neither known before the 9th century AD nor did their production continue after the 10th century AD. None of the theories proposed about this pottery mentioned any sufficient and credible evidence. Apart from exploring the apparent origins of the pottery designs and examining a proper number of artifacts, this study attempts to provide reasoned evidence regarding the sources of inspiration and the visual similarities of these designs. In fact, the research questions are: What is the apparent origin of these designs? What are the roots of the form of the clothes, shoes, fabrics used, composition methods, scattered plant elements in the background and figures' hands, white circular spots on the hair, and the decoration of horses, and what are they influenced by? This investigation does not address the content-related issues of the designs but focuses solely on their formal origins.

This period witnessed the formal influence of the Sogdia region, Central Asia, and the art of the Sassanid era. It seems that the peace and security during the reign of the Samanid emperors, the existence of the Silk Road extending from China to the Mediterranean shores that caused trading to thrive, led to the significant contribution of the Sogdia region on influencing the drawing style on these pottery designs.

This study used a qualitative and strategic goal-oriented structure and it is of the fundamental research type. Regarding the research methodology, this research is of a historical kind. The data were analyzed and discussed with a descriptive-analytical approach.

Keywords: *Buffware Pottery, Nishapur, Charles Wilkinson, Central Asia, Sassanid.*

Introduction

Nishapur's pottery pieces from the 9th and 10th Centuries AD are well-known and have been the subject of many theories. However, these studies have primarily focused on white-ground pottery, and another group of pottery, characterized by a buff-colored background, has received less attention despite its unique features. This group of potteries which includes designs such as human figures with strange clothes and unfamiliar compositions, neither have any roots in Nishapur's earlier art nor their

production continue in the 10th century AD; They were only created during a specific historical period under the rule of the Samanid kings and their production stopped afterward. Generally, the appearance of these designs is significantly different from the soft, moon-like faces that emerged in Iranian Seljuk art in the 11th century AD and continued after the Mongol conquest.

In the meantime, orientalist studies have conducted studies about these works, and their findings will be reviewed, and related visual evidence will be presented later in this article. Various theories have been proposed

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regarding these motifs in Islamic pottery, but most have not presented substantial and documented examples. Information extracted from a larger number of samples used in Nishapur's pottery during the Samanid period can significantly clarify many existing ambiguities and explain the necessity and importance of further understanding the living drawings on these potteries. Hence, this research aims to document the various aspects of these motifs comprehensively. This study is a qualitative, question-oriented research without a hypothesis.

Literature Review

No research has been conducted specifically on the source of the formal inspiration for the designs on Nishapur's pottery from the 9th and 10th centuries AD, excluding their content. Similar studies have mostly focused on the overall symbolism of human and animal motifs or their evolution in pre-Islamic arts, albeit with incomplete analyses.

The study conducted by Chitsazian & Roostae Hlani (2011) titled "Symbolic Evaluation of Animal Motifs on Nishapur's Pottery from the 9th and 10th centuries AD" is one of the main ones in this area. This study examines the symbolic meanings and direct influences of pre-Islamic motifs, in addition to introducing the animal designs. Another article by Chitsaziyan and Roostaei (2013) titled "Analysis of Symbolic Representation of Animal Motifs on Pottery from the 9th and 10th centuries AD in Iran" also introduces and symbolically analyzes animal motifs from this period.

Researchers like Majid Azadbakht and Mahmoud Tavousi (2011) in their article "Continuity of Sassanid Motifs on Nishapur's Pottery Designs" and Mehrdad Hampartiyani and Mohammad Khazaei (2005) in their article "Human Figures on Nishapur's Pottery" have described the motifs in general and discussed the influence of Sassanid art on Nishapur's pottery designs and their symbolism.

Other works related to these potteries have focused on the content of the designs and are not included in this study.

Research Methodology

This study has a qualitative and strategic goal-oriented structure of the fundamental research type, and regarding the research methodology, it is of a historical kind. This study has been analyzed and discussed with a descriptive-analytical approach.

Theoretical Foundations

The Samanid rulers governed a vast territory stretching from the western regions of Khorasan to the borders of Turkestan. This region was known as Khorasan and Transoxiana (the land beyond the Amu Darya River) the Greater Khorasan, or the East, and it included 27 ruling regions, while some sources claim it included 30 provinces.

During the Samanid era, there was peace and security, and the Silk Road, which extended from China to the Mediterranean shores, caused trading businesses to thrive. Cities like Samarkand, Bukhara, Balkh, Marv, and Nishapur flourished due to the passage of trade caravans led by Iranian and Uyghur Turk merchants (Naji, 2008, 37).

Between 1974 and 1988, the Metropolitan Museum of Art conducted several excavations in Nishapur under agreements with Iranian authorities. The recovered pottery was divided equally between the two countries, and as a result, now a collection of over four thousand artifacts is housed in the Metropolitan Museum.

In terms of numbers, the buffware potteries of Nishapur are one of the largest groups of early Islamic pottery discovered. They have a buff-colored body (buff for buffalo) with decorations in black, yellow, and green, covered with a lead glaze (Wilkinson, 1973, 3). "Some of these pottery pieces were exhibited in the grand exhibition 'Seven Thousand Years of Iranian Art,' which opened in Paris in 2001, and were subsequently displayed on a smaller scale in several European and American cities" (ibid., 4).

In his studies, Grube mentions that according to

Wilkinson, possibly Nishapur was the unglazed pottery production center during the Sassanid era, which became popular during the early centuries after the Arab conquest (Grube, 2005, 53).

According to Grube, Fitzherbert criticized Zick-Nissen's constellations and also opposed Ettinghausen and Shepherd's reliance on Sassanid royal symbols. Instead, he emphasizes local and popular interpretations of traditional themes that originated from the blend of sedentary and steppe cultures in the 10th century. Based on numerous samples he collected, he acknowledges that the variety of combined types in Nishapur's pottery indicates broader themes of inspiration and adaptation from the culture, folklore, and myths of the Iranian and Central Asian people. For example, ancient ceremonies such as Nowruz and Mehregan continued during the Islamic era (*ibid.*, 45-46).

Sherato explicitly stated: "Khorasan was the birthplace of a type of pottery which had a great quality, featuring decorated designs of large fighting animals, and it seemed to be influenced by the steppe animal art" (Ettinghausen et al., 2015, 66).

Similarities in the forms used in Nishapur's buffware pottery and other regions' pottery, particularly Central Asia, and providing credible evidence to prove that the motifs on this pottery were inspired by Central Asian art, an analysis of examples of living figures on Nishapur's buffware pottery was conducted, and they were matched with motifs from other areas of the Great Khorasan located in Central Asia and several artifacts from the Sassanid period. Descriptions and explanations of Nishapur's artifacts are written considering the theories of Charles Wilkinson.

• Tracing the origins of the figure's clothing and background composition in nishapur's buffware pottery piece No. 1

A piece of buffware pottery from Nishapur has been found in the Metropolitan Museum with a human figure at its center (Fig. 1.a). The clothes of this figure are of a type that was unknown in Islamic art

until the discovery of this particular bowl, and it has only been observed in other buffware bowls from Nishapur (Fig. 1.b). The upper body is covered with a coat that has a narrow collar and closed sleeves. The sleeves have deep slits on one side, and the edges are fastened. The edges of the jacket are also fastened and overlap. The collars are prominent, and each of them is decorated with a group of three dots. According to Wilkinson, larger collars, although not exactly like these, seem to have originated from Central Asia and appear in paintings from the 6th to 9th centuries AD (Fig. 1.c to 1.f).

The figure wearing a skirt or apron is drawn in such a way that it appears to be folded at the top. The decorations on this dress consist of diamond shapes decorated with hatched lines. Each diamond contains a smaller diamond divided into four sections and has dots. According to Wilkinson, the highly decorated silk fabric is made in China. This drawing is seen in a wall painting in Chotscho (Fig. 2.d) and in the palace of Idyqutshahri in Turfan (Fig. 2.c). Wilkinson also states that these diamonds which are placed in overlapping circles, appear in an 8th-century wall painting as a decoration on a girl's dress. Such diamonds are also found on an 8th-century silver bowl (Fig. 2.b), in 9th-century wall paintings in Samara, and on painted glazed bowls from Syria (Wilkinson, 1973, 18).

In buffware pottery, the diamond shape also appears in the exterior decorations of some potteries. The decoration of the skirt on the figure in Pottery Piece No. 1 is completed by a green band along the edge. A pair of long trousers is visible under the skirt, and beneath them, shoes are depicted unrealistically with exaggerated heels, and the other parts of the feet are depicted in narrow, claw-like extensions. According to Wilkinson, this shoe style which is also seen in representations of horse riders, should be found on both a monochrome glossy bowl from the 10th century in Rey depicting a man wearing a jacket, and on a 10th-century monochrome glossy bowl from Iraq (Fig. 3.b).



Fig. 1. comparison between the clothing forms of Nishapur's buffware figures from the 9th and 10th centuries AD with drawings from Central Asia. a) Piece No. 1, The Nishapur's buffware pottery from the 9th and 10th century AD. Source: Wilkinson, 1973, 44, b) The form of clothes in Nishapur's buffware pottery. Source: <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1959.16>, c) A collar form sample in a Central Asian drawing from the 7th to 9th century AD. Source: Grünwedel, 1912, 146, d) A collar form sample in a Central Asian drawing from the 7th to 9th century AD. Source: Grünwedel, 1912, 58, e) A collar form sample in a wall painting from Central Asia. Source: www.archaeology.org, f) A collar form sample in a wall painting from Central Asia from the 7th to 9th century. Source: Grünwedel, 1912, 185

The surface of pottery piece No. 1 is filled with patterns including small circles containing a dot, open hearts, shapes like palm leaves, bow-like shapes, and roses with double lines. As observed in the motifs (Fig. 4.b), in Nishapur, this connection is only found in buffware pottery which has living figure designs. However, this style is also recognized



Fig. 2. A comparison between the fabric seen in the clothes of the human figure from Nishapur's buffware pottery and the fabric seen in the Sassanid pottery and the drawings related to Central Asia. a) Details of clothes, Piece No. 1, b) Fabric with diamond pattern as a decorative part on a silver bowl from the 8th century. Source: Ghirshman, 1957, 80, c) Fabric with a dotted diamond pattern with four sections on a wall painting in the palace of Idyqutshahri in Turfan. Source: Grünwedel, 1912, 334, d) Fabric with a dotted diamond pattern with four sections on a wall painting in Chotscho. Source: Le Coq, 1913, 143

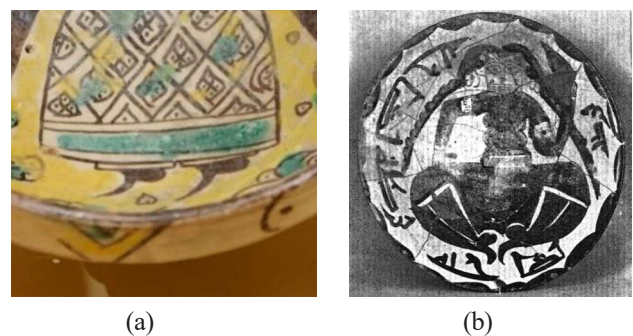


Fig. 3. Comparing shoe styles on Nishapur's buffware pottery and a bowl from the 9th and 10th centuries of Iraq. a) Details of pottery piece No. 1, Shoe style with exaggerated heels and claw-like rest of the feet, b) Shoe style with exaggerated heels and claw-like rest of the feet, depicted on a monochrome glossy bowl from the 10th century in Iraq. Source: Lane, 1947, 86

in other regions. For example, in the cave paintings of Bazalik in Central Asia, the flower and leaf shapes are arbitrarily interconnected and scattered in the background (Fig. 4.c to 4.f). Particularly, the motif placed between the base of the goblet and the bird's head resembles such shapes from Central Asia.

• **Tracing the origins of the footwear and horse tail decorating method in pottery piece No. 2 from nishapur's buffware pottery**

Another piece of pottery has been discovered in Nishapur that depicts a man on horseback (Fig. 5.a) which is currently being kept in the National Museum of Iran. The figure's legs are decorated with a square pattern alongside a black fabric with half-palm leaves drawings. In this figure, there is no connection between the cotton trousers which are probably made of leather, and the shoes. In fact, the separation between the cotton trousers and the shoes is emphasized with a border. These types of trousers which only appear on 10th-century Nishapur's buffware pottery, are similar to the high boots seen in the Bazalik cave paintings in Central Asia, worn by kneeling Tocharian merchants (Fig 5.b). Wilkinson states that there is a theory stating that sometimes straps or ropes were used for suspending such boots. He also mentions that cotton trousers date back to the Sassanid era, as they first emerged on Sassanid bronze fireplaces which were shaped like horses and riders wearing simple cotton trousers with legs covered with stains. These cotton trousers also appear on Sasanian silver plates. The excessively narrow shoes on pottery piece No. 2 (compared to piece No. 1) are similar to those seen in 7th and 8th-century paintings of riders in Pendzhikent (Fig. 5.c & 5.d) (*ibid.*, 20).

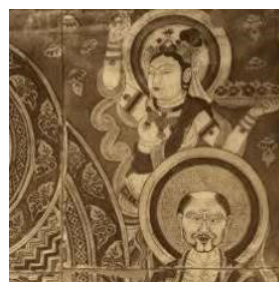
The horse in this design is as astonishing as the human. The tied horsetail is a continuation of a Sassanid tradition which can also be seen in a silver bowl from the Pirooz I era which is being kept in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 6.b). Wilkinson states: "Other bowls from the Sassanid era which are decorated with horses with tied tails are being kept



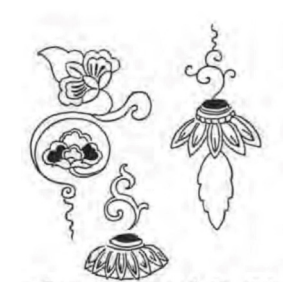
(a)



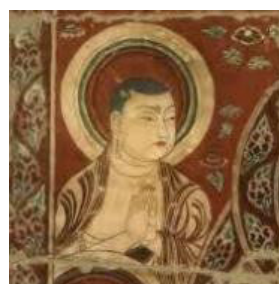
(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)

Fig. 4. A comparison between the combination and background elements in Nishapur's buffware pottery and cave paintings of Bazalik in Central Asia. a) Details of pottery piece No. 1, A background with scattered plant patterns, b) Nishapur's pottery with scattered plant patterns in the background. Source: <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-4791348>, c) A background with scattered plant patterns on cave paintings of Bazalik in Central Asia. Source: Le Coq, 1913, 110, d) A background with scattered plant patterns on cave paintings of Bazalik in Central Asia. Source: Grünwedel, 1912, 169, e) A background with scattered plant patterns on cave paintings of Bazalik in Central Asia. Source: Le Coq, 1913, 73, f) A background with scattered plant patterns on cave paintings of Bazalik in Central Asia. Source: Grünwedel, 1912, 169

in the Armitage Museum, the National Library, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Freer Art Gallery." (*ibid.*, 21).

• **Tracing the Origins of the Knee Patch on the**

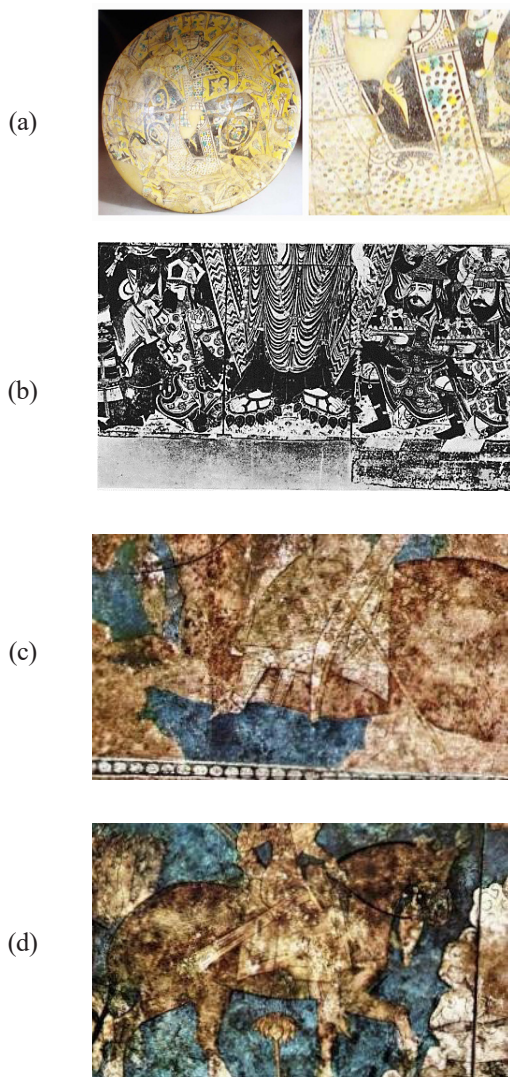


Fig. 5. A comparison between the shoes in Nishapur's buffware pottery and cave paintings of Bazalik and Pendzhikent. a) Pottery piece No. 2, A Nishapur's buffware pottery from the 9th and 10th century. Source: Wilkinson, 1973, 45, b) High boots of Tocharian merchants in a cave painting of Bazalik in Central Asia. Source: Seyrig, 1937, 12, c) Excessively narrow shoes in a painting of Pendzhikent riders from the 7th and 8th centuries. Source: Bussagli, 1979, 44-45, d) Excessively narrow shoes in a painting of Pendzhikent riders from 7th and 8th centuries. Source: Bussagli, 1979, 44-45

Pottery piece No. 3 from nishapur's buffware pottery and explaining the reason behind this type of decoration

Piece No. 3 is another pottery from the Samanid era of the 9th and 10th centuries AD, which is being stored in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 7.a). The trousers of the man depicted in piece No. 3 are

decorated with some groups of connected circles and are fashioned with peculiar knee patches with double lines which are decorated with cross signs. According to Wilkinson, such patches are not exclusive to seated figures from Nishapur, so they can be identified as misinterpretations. This case can be explained by other more ancient pieces and more detailed images. One such correct depiction is perhaps related to the 8th century, and it is painted on a wooden tablet from the Dandan Oiluq (Khotan). In this painting, a Bodhisattva is depicted sitting cross-legged with his clothes almost covered with an outer coat on the upper body and reappearing on his knees above his high boots (Fig. 7.c & 7.d). This representation appears realistic when worn by a well-dressed person, however, in the 10th century when the original meaning was forgotten, circular and oval shapes between boots and clothes were arbitrarily decorated as observed in pottery piece No. 3 (ibid., 23). An example of these patches in Nishapur's buffware pottery is found on a bowl in the Cleveland Museum of Art, where the skirts of two bearded men are decorated by similar patches like the piece No. 3, and even less logically, they appear on the skirts of two men seated on stools (Fig 7.b). Wilkinson states: "This ambiguity is in parallel with

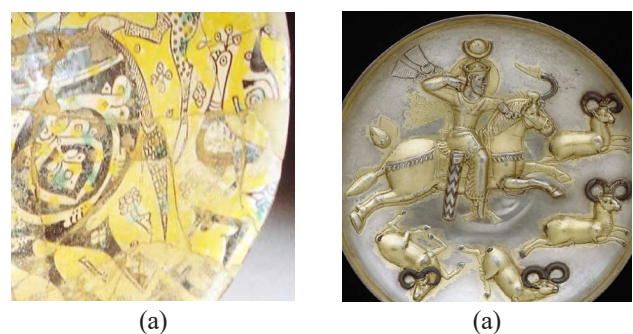


Fig. 6. A comparison between the horse tail decorations on a Nishapur buffware pottery and those on a silver bowl from the Sassanid era. a) Details of pottery piece No. 2. Tied horsetail, b) The tied horsetail is a continuation of a Sassanid tradition, depicted on a silver bowl from the Pirooz I era, which is believed to be found in Qazvin. Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/322973>

the golden medallion motif in the Freer Gallery of Art, likely from the Buyid period, depicting a man with concentric circle decorations on his knees” (*ibid.*, 23).

• **Tracing the origins of the tradition of holding plants by figures in pottery piece No. 4 from nishapur’s buffware pottery**

In Nishapur’s pottery piece No. 4 which is being kept in the Metropolitan Museum, there is an image of a person holding a cane-like plant in each hand, ending in a cluster of four dotted circles. One plant in his right hand possesses horizontal branches leading to dotted circles. In 1980, some other bowls were discovered in Nishapur which are decorated with shapes that contain leafy stems. In paintings from Central Asia which date back to two centuries earlier than these Nishapur bowls, both male and female figures are shown holding more natural plants in their hands (Fig. 8.b to 8.e). The tradition of holding flower stems persisted for centuries. For instance, see the miniature of Prince Sultan Mohammad in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Fig. 8.f).

Wilkinson states: “Another depiction of a man standing with both hands up can be seen on a bowl in Copenhagen. In this drawing, there is a crown over this man, but not on his head, and he is holding a leafy stem in each hand. A similar pose is also seen on another bowl from another private collection” (*ibid.*, 19).

• **Tracing the origins of the technique used for imaging the figure’s hair or head covering with white spots in the pottery piece No. 5 from nishapur’s buffware**

In Nishapur’s pottery piece No. 4 which is being kept in the Metropolitan Museum, a man is standing with both hands up. His hair or head cover which is decorated with circular spots is divided into three tails on each side instead of the customary two parts. Another Nishapur’s buffware bowl which is being kept in the Metropolitan Museum is decorated with similar circular spots on a person’s robe (Fig. 9.b).

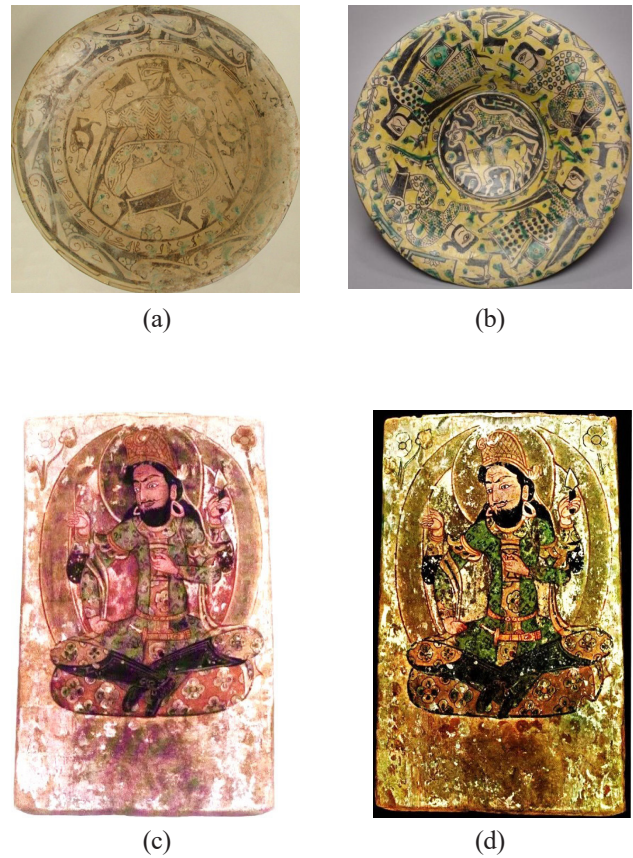


Fig. 7. A comparison between the knee patches on Nishapur’s buffware pottery and the clothing of a Bodhisattva from Dandan Oilu (Khotan). a) Piece No. 3, the Nishapur’s buffware pottery. Sources: Wilkinson, 1973, 47, b) Patches on the skirts and trousers of figures from Nishapur’s buffware pottery. Sources: <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1959.249>, c) The clothing of a Bodhisattva sitting cross-legged, as the origin and source of inspiration for knee patch patterns that appear on Nishapur’s buffware pottery from the 8th century AD. Sources: Bussagli, 1979, 57, d) The clothing of a Bodhisattva sitting cross-legged, as the origin and source of inspiration for knee patch patterns that appear on Nishapur’s buffware pottery from the 8th century AD. Sources: Stein, 1907, 125

Wilkinson mentions: “Both in this piece, in the piece No. 5, and in the piece from the Boston Fine Arts Museum (Fig. 9.c), the potter might have been confused about whether the spots represent hair or clothing” (*ibid.*, 19).

A Bazalik wall painting depicts the hair of a seated Deva similarly decorated with a series of circular spots (Fig. 9.d).

• **Tracing the origins of the technique used**

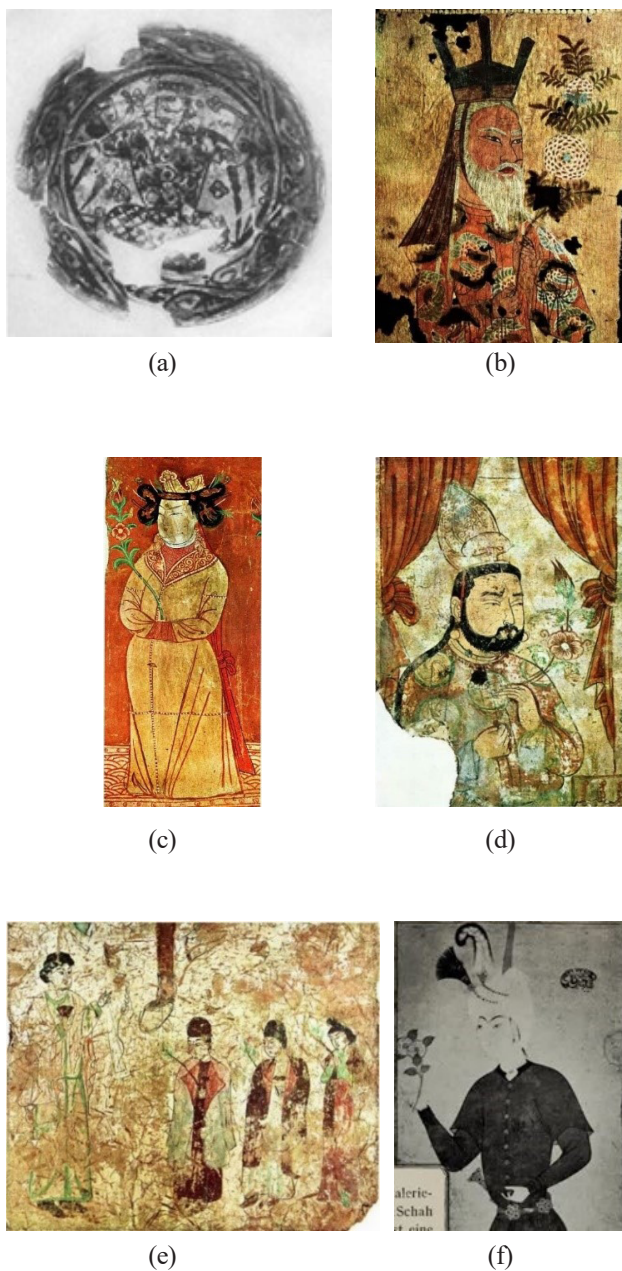


Fig. 8. A comparison between the figures holding plants in Nishapur's pottery and those in paintings from Central Asia. a) Pottery piece No. 4, Nishapur's buffware pottery from the 9th and 10th centuries AD. Source: Wilkinson, 1973, 48, b) An image of a man holding a flower from the 7th and 8th centuries AD in Central Asia. Source: Bussagli, 1979, 105, c) An image of a woman holding a flower from the 7th and 8th centuries AD in Central Asia. Source: Bussagli, 1979, 107, d) An image of a man holding a flower from the 7th and 8th centuries AD in Central Asia. Source: Bussagli, 1979, 106, e) An image of a man and a woman holding branches of plants from the 7th and 8th centuries AD in Central Asia. Source: Bussagli, 1979, 112, f) A part of the portrait of Prince Sultan Mohammad holding a flower in his hand. Source: Kuhnel, 1925, 55

for imaging the horse's stirrup decorations in nishapur's pottery piece No. 6

In image 10.1 which depicts the pottery piece No. 6 of Nishapur's buffware pottery, it appears that the decorations of the horse's stirrup represent hanging medals made from metal and colored wool. In this design, a five-petaled shape with dots on some of its protrusions replaces a conical shape. Similar decorations are seen on the representations of horses on Sasanian and post-Sasanian metal plates located in the Hermitage Museum (Fig. 10-b). According to Wilkinson, these decorations also appear on a Sasanian bronze fire altar.

Ultimately, following the change of government in the 10th century AD, the support for producing these types of potteries stopped, hence such designs ceased to reappear ever again. In this regard, Wilkinson states that though Nishapur was the main production site, it seems that such potteries did not emerge before the 9th century and as far as it can be determined, their production ceased in the 11th century (Wilkinson, 1897, 3).

Conclusion

In general, the visual characteristics of the designs on the Nishapur's buffware potteries appear to be influenced by the art of Central Asia and the Sassanid era. Some evidence and documentation were presented comparatively to support this claim. Details like decorations of the horse's stirrup and the tied horse tail which are components of the Sassanid era art were observed on metal dish samples.

Other details such as collars of the figures' clothing, narrow shoes, scattered background elements, patches on figures' skirts and trousers, holding objects such as flowers, plants, and leafy stems, decorations featuring circular spots on figures' hair or head covering, etc., are related to the art of Central Asia.

We also observed figures wearing clothes made of fabrics decorated with diamond-shaped patterns on both a silver bowl of the Sassanid era and on artifacts

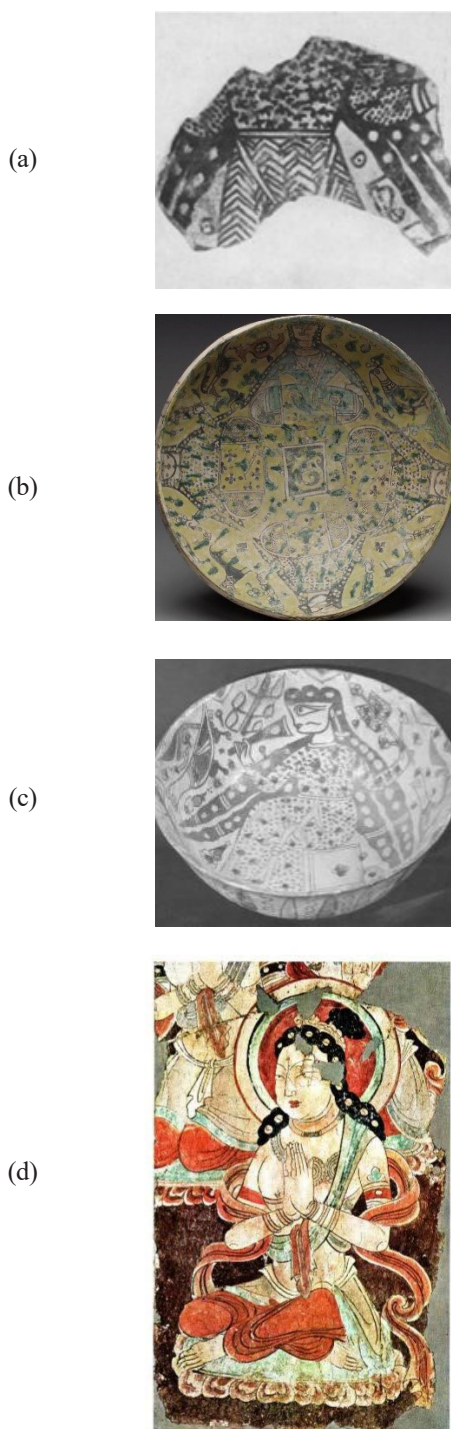


Fig. 9. A comparison between the circular spots on the Nishapur's buffware figure's hair and those in the Buddhist painting. a) Pottery piece No. 5, Nishapur's buffware pottery from the 9th and 10th centuries AD. Source: Wilkinson, 1973, 48, b) Circular spots decorating a robe or hair on a Nishapur's buffware pottery. Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/451820>, c) Circular spots decorating a robe or hair on a Nishapur's buffware pottery. Source: https://collections.mfa.org/search/objects/*nishopur, d) A Bazalik wall painting depicting the hair of a seating Deva decorated by circular spots. Source: Bussagli, 1979, 99

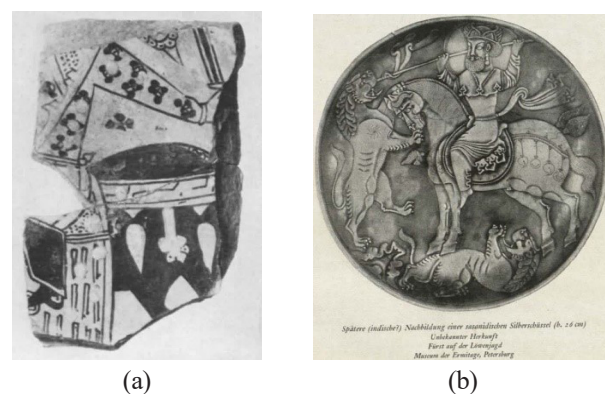


Fig. 10. Comparing the horse's stirrup decorations on Nishapur's buffware pottery from the Samanid era and a metal plate from the Sassanid era. a) Piece No. 6, Nishapur buffware pottery from the 9th and 10th centuries AD. Source: Wilkinson, 1897, 48, b) Decorations on horse's stirrup depicted on a metal plate from the Sassanid era. Source: Sarre, 1923, 202

found in Central Asia.

As explained, the stylistic features of the Nishapur artifacts are inspired by Greater Khorasan, the domain of the Samanid rulers. They were shaped in the very region where they emerged, and their evidence has been presented in this research, although their content may date back to earlier times.

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