



Monochrome Glazed Earthenware

Martina Müller-Wiener and Ute Franke

Monochrome Glazed Vessels (M. Müller-Wiener)

The application of monochrome green or turquoise glazes has been common practice in pre-Islamic Mesopotamia and western Iran, a tradition that goes back to the Parthian and Sasanian periods. The variety of forms and the wide distribution of Parthian and Sasanian monochrome glazed pottery suggest that it was most probably produced in many places. In pre-Islamic central and eastern Iran, in contrast, it is found only in small numbers. The published Sasanian pottery from Merv, for example, comprises only unglazed vessels and the surface treatment is restricted to coatings with a red slip or burnishing.¹ By contrast, pre-Islamic pottery from Susa comprises a great number of monochrome glazed vessels.

When comparing the technical analyses it appears that there was a very stable tradition of monochrome glaze-making reaching back into Assyrian and Neo-Assyrian times.² Typically, the craftsmen in Pre-Islamic Mesopotamia used soda-lime-silica glazes and applied them directly onto the body of the vessels, with no slip underneath. The green or blue colouring was achieved by adding copper to the glaze at a level of 1 to 2 %. The glaze is either transparent or opaque, depending on firing conditions. Technical analyses have demonstrated that the opacification of glazes was not achieved by the addition of tin oxide, like on some of the Islamic Opaque Glazed Wares, but rather by means of an underfired alkaline glaze.³

The manufacture of earthenware vessels with monochrome green or blue glazes continued well into the Islamic period. From the number and distribution of finds it appears that from the 8th to the 13th century this type of pottery continued to be common in Mesopotamia as well as in Syria, Egypt and Iran. Farther towards

the east, in Khorasan and Transoxiana, monochrome green glazed pottery became frequent at about the beginning of the 10th century, even if the type seems to have been produced since the early 9th century.⁴

Since the production of monochrome green or blue glazed vessels does not require a very high standard of skills, its market value was most probably fairly modest. C. Tonghini argues that, as a consequence, it was not worth trading too far from the production centre.⁵ Rather, it is most likely that a fairly large number of workshops produced such a type of pottery to satisfy local consumption needs. As a consequence, monochrome glazed pottery is characterised by strong local features, which makes it difficult to understand the chronology and origin of this type of pottery, until the publication of more finds from archaeological contexts will provide us with more information about the characteristics of the various production centres.

With regards to the eastern Islamic World, the production of monochrome glazed earthenware vessels is archaeologically confirmed for Merv, where they were found next to a kiln dating to the second half of the 10th and the 11th century, and for Paykend, where they are dated to the second half of the 10th century.⁶ Based on archaeometrical analyses and with regards to the material from Jam, A. Gascoigne speculates that monochrome green glazed vessels were produced locally.⁷ Considering the fact that forty kiln sites are archaeologically confirmed only for Central Asia⁸, it appears fairly reasonable to assume that this rather simple type of pottery was produced at a greater number of places. This is also suggested by the results of surveys and excavations, for example in the Deh Luran Plain or in Sirjan, in the Iranian province of Kirman. In the Deh Luran Plain monochrome turquoise or green glazed pottery was the most common decorated type of Early Islamic pottery recovered during the survey.⁹ Green glaze was used for utilitarian vessels, which satisfied food storage and food preparation needs and could also be used for transport. At Sirjan, monochrome green glazed wares are the most common wares found on the site, they account for 25 to 40 % of the glazed wares recovered from different trenches. Green or blue glazed vessels occur in many shapes and sizes; the spectrum of forms includes various types of bowls, basins, necked and neckless jars.¹⁰

1 Puschnigg 2006.

2 Moorey 1994, 159–162.

3 Tite et al. 2015.

4 Shishkina/Pavchinskaja 1992, 50. Siméon 2009, 95–96 gives a list of references and Central Asian sites where monochrome glazed pottery was found.

5 Tonghini 1998, 55.

6 Merv: Lunina 1962, 242 Pl. 13. – Paykend: Kondratieva 1961, 216–227; see also Siméon 2009, 95.

7 Gascoigne 2010, 124.

8 Siméon 2012, 19 Pl. 1.

9 Hill 2006, 8–9.

10 Morgan/Leatherby 1987, 81 Figs. 32–34. Unfortunately, positive or reliable dating evidence is lacking. Based on combined archaeological and historical data the excavators suggest a date of c. 950 to 1050 for the manufacture of the ware presented (Morgan/Leatherby 1987, 52).

Apart from archaeologically based attributions, analyses and clear descriptions of the manufacturing technology might contribute to a better understanding of regional and local workshop traditions and their respective chronologies. One feature that might turn out to be a significant indicator is the existence or lack of a slip under the glaze: monochrome glazes were applied either on a white or a coloured slip, or directly on the clay surface. With regard to Nishapur, C. Wilkinson mentions the occurrence of all three variants.¹¹ In contrast to this, J.-C. Gardin reports that the monochrome glazed vessels found in Lashkari Bazar always have a white slip under the glaze, whereas in Balkh the same group is characterised by the lack of a slip under the glaze.¹² Some of the objects in the collection of the Herat National Museum show traces of a red slip under the glaze, such as, for example, jar ME11 (HNM 03.28.86b; Fig. 1). The same technology of applying a red slip under a monochrome coloured glaze was also employed in Afrasiyab on vessels dating to the 10th to 12th century. This is indicated by monochrome turquoise-glazed sherds of vessels from this site with the same features kept in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin.¹³

Another characteristic feature that might prove helpful for the identification and definition of regional types is the shape of the respective vessel. Traditional pottery-making technologies are generally described as 'conservative'¹⁴ which is a result of standardisation of decisions made to manufacture consistent products that would guarantee economic security. In connection with the consistency of cultural practices such as, for example, dining habits, the result may be a kind of formal conservatism with regards to the shape of cooking and storage vessels and tableware. One example for this kind of formal conservatism is a type of ewer, which is represented by two items in the collection of the Herat National Museum (ME5 [HNM 03.27.86f] and ME6 [HNM 03.27.86g]; Fig. 2). Trefoil-mouthed ewers are characterised by an ovoid body, a flaring shoulder, a restricted neck with a decorative ring, a trefoil-shaped mouth and a vertical handle. The shape is most probably derived from the Greek *oinochoe*, which was widespread in Hellenistic times. Different local variations developed through times, but the shape survived in the ceramic repertoire for a long time. For the earlier Sasanian period the type is documented in various provinces of the empire and in Northern Bactria.¹⁵ For the Islamic period the popularity of the type is documented by specimens in the Herat National Museum made from both earthenware and fritware, as well as by one fritware ewer in the Al-Sabah Collection, which originates reportedly from Ghazna.¹⁶ Wilkinson depicts one specimen from Nishapur and remarks that the shape was very popular in the 11th and 12th century. The place where this particular pitcher was found, suggests a dating to the 12th century.¹⁷

11 Wilkinson 1973, 229.

12 Gardin 1963, 105; Gardin 1957a, 64.

13 Personal observation.

14 Hill/Speakman/Glascock 2004, 586.

15 Puschnigg 2006, 130–131. A very similar glazed example is kept in the Iran Bastan Museum. It is described as Sasanian and coming from Azizabad, Sabzevar (Cat. Tehran 1380, no. 102).

16 Watson 2004, cat. no. I.26.

17 Wilkinson 1973, 269 cat. no. 32.



Fig. 1 Green glazed jar with red slip under the glaze and clear traces of trimming (cat. no. ME11)



Fig. 2 Green glazed ewer with trefoil-shaped mouth (cat. no. ME6)



Fig. 3 Green glazed jar with diagonal grooves and impressed roundels resembling the decoration of metalwork (HNM 010.03.90)



Fig. 4 Green glazed ewer with bulbous body and high rising spout resembling metalwork models (cat. no. ME8)

Consistency in terms of technology as an indicator of regionalism in material cultures may also be observed for another group of vessels, which shares a specific kind of surface treatment. The group comprises bowls, jars and one fragmented ewer.¹⁸ The surface of the vessels is covered with a clear green glaze. In addition, it shows one or two narrow bands of incised vertical hatching. G. Fehérvári dates a jar with globular body, everted rim and comparable decoration, which is kept in the collection of the Tareq Rajab Museum, to the 12th to 13th century and allocates it to Afghanistan.¹⁹ The large number of specimens in this group in the collection of the Herat National Museum seems to indicate strongly that this is a regional type originating from the area around Herat.

Yet another way to define the chronological and geographical localisation of certain monochrome glazed specimens more precisely is by their shape and/or additional decoration. Often, the forms of the vessels originate from a common source of inspiration, which is metalware. In some cases this fact allows us to narrow down possible places of origin or datings, as for instance in the case of vessel HNM 010.03.90 (Fig. 3). The jar with vertical sides, a slightly bulbous shoulder and narrow everted neck is decorated with diagonally placed grooves and a horizontal row of impressed roundels. This decoration, in particular the row of impressed circles, is clearly related to the decoration of a type of high-tin bronze vessels which is usually dated to the 10th to 11th century and attributed to eastern Iran and the territory ruled by the Samanids and Ghaznavids.²⁰ Based on this parallel it can be suggested that the green glazed jar originates from the same environment.

Another specimen that can be dated and attributed more closely by means of analogy with metalwork is ME8 (HNM 03.27.86k; Fig. 4). The characteristic shape of the ewer with its high rising spout is related to a type of ewer, which is usually made of cast bronze and related to workshops in Khorasan or Afghanistan of the 10th to 12th century.²¹ Copies of this type of ewer in earthenware or fritware are fairly common, the reference to the metalwork model is more or less explicit. It appears that they were produced with slight variations of spout forms in central and eastern Iranian workshops. The spout may either be open at the top, like one moulded fritware ewer preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin and illustrated by A. Lane²², or closed, like one moulded fritware example kept in the Muze-e Abgineh in Tehran or the fragmented fritware neck in the Herat collection.²³ Both complete vessels are dated to the 12th century. Fehérvári dates a very closely related, turquoise-glazed ewer from the Tareq Rajab Collection to the 10th to 12th centuries and allocates it to Afghanistan.²⁴

18 For the green-glazed bowls see below.

19 Fehérvári 2000, 150 cat. no. 183.

20 See Müller-Wiener, Metalwork, this volume, esp. Figs. 12 and 13.

21 See Müller-Wiener, Metalwork, this volume, esp. Fig. 26.

22 Lane 1947, Pl. 42D.

23 Cat. Muze-e Abgineh 2004, cat. no. 249; reportedly from Gurgan. For the fragmented neck see Franke, Monochrome Fritware, this volume, cat. no. MF18.

24 Fehérvári 2000, 151.



Fig. 5 Simple type of lamps with rounded body, pinched spout and ring-like handle

Next to metalwork, another model for monochrome glazed earthenware vessels were high-quality fritware vessels from Iranian workshops. Iranian fritware pottery was widespread across medieval Afghanistan²⁵, where it was copied by local craftsmen. Instead of fritware they used earthenware bodies, which were covered by a green or turquoise glaze. The shape of ewer ME7 (HNM 03.27.86j; Fig. 6) clearly refers to fritware ewers with moulded decorations produced by Iranian workshops during the 12th to 13th century.

In addition to jars, ewers and bowls, another group of monochrome glazed specimens in the collection of the Herat National Museum are lamps and lanterns. For the reasons explained above, simple everyday objects such as oil lamps represent significant markers of regional traditions in pottery types and their chronologies. However, meticulous studies on the typology and chronology of oil lamps, such as the existing records of Hellenistic and Roman lamps, still have to be written for the Islamic periods.²⁶

The simplest type of lamps is wheelmade, with a rounded body, a pinched spout and ring-like handle. The same form type was also produced from cast metal.²⁷ In the collection of the Herat National Museum this type is represented with a transparent green glaze and an opaque turquoise glaze (HNM 010.03.102b and HNM 010.03.111a–c; Fig. 5). Most of the specimens have a sooted spout indicating that they must have been used. From the little information we have it appears that this type of lamp was very popular and widespread in eastern Iran and Central Asia. It is recorded from Nishapur for monochrome glazed earthenware and for glazed fritware with a clear blue glaze. According to Wilkinson the shape occurs with variations from the 9th to the 12th century.²⁸ A great number of complete and fragmented specimens with a transparent green glaze, reportedly from Afrasiyab, are

25 Gascoigne 2010, 215; 226 Figs. 6; 8.

26 An overview of some of the glazed lamp and lantern types is given by Fehérvári 2000, 133–142.

27 Shishkina/Pavchinskaya 1992, 119 cat. no. 325.

28 Wilkinson 1973, 245 cat. nos. 18; 134; 265 cat. no. 9; 278 cat. no. 9.



Fig. 6 Turquoise-glazed ewer with impressed decoration (cat. no. ME7)

preserved in the collection of the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin.²⁹ Their attribution to Afrasiyab is corroborated by the documentation by G. V. Shishkina and L. V. Pavchinskaya, which shows comparable lamps from Afrasiyab, dated to the 9th century.³⁰ A similar lamp with heavily sooted surface was found in Jam. Gascoigne reports that it was found still resting on a ledge in a small plastered alcove in the corner of a room and states that this lamp form was common in assemblages in the region from the 9th to the 13th century.³¹

A more advanced model of the same basic lamp type is represented by HNM 010.03.69 (Fig. 7). The body of the lamp is circular and open, with an inward-curving rim and a pinched spout. It is supported by a central cylindrical column, which rests on a circular tray with upward-turning rim. Fehérvári states that excavations in Khorasan, Mazanderan and Afghanistan brought forth numerous such lamps, unfortunately without giving further

29 Not published, personal observation of the author.

30 Shishkina/Pavchinskaya 1992, 113 cat. no. 281.

31 Gascoigne 2010, 124.



Fig. 7 Round-bodied lamp on central cylindrical column resting on a circular tray (HNM 010.03.69)

references. As to Lashkari Bazar, Gardin observes that a great number of fragments of this type of lamp with a monochrome green or yellow glaze were found at Bust in the vicinity of the kilns and suggests a dating to the 11th century.³² At Afrasiyab the type is represented with different decorative techniques ranging from slip-painted variants to monochrome glazed specimens. They are dated to the period from the 10th to the 13th century.³³ In Nishapur, monochrome glazed and splashed oil lamps of this type were found at Tepe Madrasah, whereas alkaline glazed specimens with a turquoise glaze dated not earlier than to the 11th century were recovered from Tepe Alp Arslan and the Village Tepe.³⁴

A third type of lamp is represented by HNM 010.04.87 (Fig. 8). It has a bulbous body and a small filling hole, and rests on a flat base. The spout follows the height of the body and is entirely open at the top. Opposite the spout is a loop handle. In Nishapur, lamps of this type were also found made

32 Gardin 1963, 131–132; 138 Pl. 28,547.

33 Shishkina/Pavchinskaya 1992, 113–114.

34 Wilkinson 1973, 234 cat. nos. 17; 267 cat. no. 25.



Fig. 8 Spouted lamp with loop handle

of metal and as monochrome glazed earthenware. It is generally dated to the 9th or 10th century.³⁵

Another group of lighting utensils are lanterns. The collection of the Herat National Museum comprises specimens of two different types. The first type has a cylindrical body which rests either on a flat base or on a ring base. The body is perforated and has a wide opening for the lamp. The slanting or dome-shaped shoulder is topped by a ring handle. Comparable lanterns are preserved in several museum collections, where they are variously dated, ranging from the 8th to the 13th century, and allocated to Iran.³⁶ Lanterns from archaeological contexts are reported from Nishapur, where only unglazed examples were found.³⁷ Furthermore, lanterns resembling those from Nishapur were found in Qasr-e Abu Nasr. In this context D. S. Whitcomb mentions that similar lanterns were also found in Samarra and Susa.³⁸

A second type of lanterns represented in the collection of the Herat National Museum has a low cylindrical or carinated body with openwork decoration and an opening for the lamp (cat. nos. 32–36). The body rests either on a flat base or on a ring base. On top there is a tapering, hollow shaft. The undamaged specimen shows a flat plate at the top of the shaft. A comparable lantern in the collection of the Tareq Rajab Museum shows a cylindrical shaft, which is capped by a small open lamp. The object is attributed to Iran and dated to the 11th to 12th century.³⁹

35 Metal lamp in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: inv. no. 38.40.133. Wilkinson 1973, 245 cat. nos. 15 and 16.

36 Berlin 1986, 83 cat. no. 115. - Fehérvári 2000, 142–143. - Watson 2004, 163 cat. no. Bb.3. - Cat. Muze-e Abgineh 2004, 28 cat. no 198; reportedly from Gurgan.

37 Wilkinson 1973, 307; 343 cat. nos. 52 and 53.

38 Whitcomb 1985, 74.

39 Fehérvári 2000, 142.