



Unglazed Painted Pottery from the 10th to the 13th century. Magic Motifs

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Introduction

The presence of a large number of unglazed painted vessels in the Herat Museum came as a surprise since this type of pottery is hardly found in catalogues or excavation reports from this region. Prior to the publication of the Tareq Rajab Collection in 2000¹, the Uzbekistan catalogue of the Lindenmuseum in Stuttgart was the only readily available evidence for a few examples of unglazed painted Islamic pottery.² R.H. Pinder-Wilson's statement, made in 2000 in the 'Foreword' to G. Fehérvári's publication, that the catalogue includes recently acquired types "hitherto neglected or unknown such as the fascinating group of unglazed painted pottery from Central Asia or the glazed pottery of Bamiyan in Afghanistan" is valid until today.³

This lack is surprising in light of the quantity of published collections of glazed pottery from the region. In addition, the decoration of clay vessels with painted patterns, applied with a clay slurry on the leather-hard clay, is a tradition that goes back to a very early stage of pottery making. Already in the 4th millennium BCE, black as the most predominant colour was supplemented by red-and-white coloured pigments in Iran and southern Central Asia.⁴ Soon after, the complex geometric and figurative patterns were further enhanced by the additional use of turquoise-blue and yellow pigments. Applied on fired vessels, these colours were fugitive, indicating that these vessels were not made for daily use. The tradition of manufacturing wheelmade pottery vessels with elaborate painted decorations came to an

end between the late 3rd and the late 2nd millennium BCE, depending on the region.⁵ In the 1st millennium BCE, painted pottery re-appeared in some areas, such as Londo Ware in Central Baluchistan. However, far more common and widespread were plain or monochrome glazed, appliqué, stamped, or incised types, rather hallmarked by intriguing shapes. When painted, the decorations were far from previous standards, except, of course, imported vessels. Obviously, luxury objects made from metal, glass, wood, and ivory, textiles and architectural decoration were preferred means of representing status and symbolic contents. Apparently, exceptions were Sogdia and, later, the Kabul Shahi territories, from whose urban centres some vessels with painted figurative contents are known or depicted on wall paintings.⁶

High-quality painted pottery was again produced on a large scale from the 9th century CE onwards. However, these vessels, painted on a white or coloured ground, were always glazed and represent new techniques – exemplified by Blue-on-White, Splashed and Lustre Wares. Soon after, new types emerged in Khorasan and Transoxania. Their intricate, slip-painted geometric, floral and figurative patterns under a transparent clear glaze, the characteristic colour schemes and configuration of space represent particular regional and chronological markers.⁷ While some of their patterns draw on pre-Islamic traditions, others are newly introduced. In excavations, these assemblages are usually associated with unglazed moulded⁸ and plain, rarely appliqué vessels.

Found in large numbers in many collections across the world and in excavations of urban and smaller sites as well, they must have been extremely popular, produced in vast numbers, yet precious. This abundance underscores the lack of evidence for painted, but unglazed pottery in the literature.⁹ This is the more surprising since research has shown that this pottery is, in fact, present in a couple of public and private collections focussing on the Eastern Islamic lands.¹⁰ This mis-representation probably has multiple reasons, such as the collectors'

1 Fehérvári 2000, 194–207, grouped along with moulded and plain vessels from different regions and times.

2 Kalter 1995, Figs. 267; 268; 271–273; Kalter 1997. Quite a number of vessels are kept in the storerooms.

3 Fehérvári 2000, 9.

4 Among the most well-known sites are Shahr-e Sokhta in Sistan, Namazga Tepe, and Mundigak.

5 Earlier in the Indo-Iranian borderlands and Central Asia, later in northeastern and western Iran.

6 Compareti (2011, 26; see also Puschnigg 2006, Pl. 14b), in his discussion of the 'Merv vase' from a stupa in Gyaur Kala, writes that "painted pottery is well attested in pre-Islamic Central Asia", while Marshak (2003) points to the presence of local schools in the urban centres after the 3rd century CE, and the imitation of metal shapes in plain pottery after the 7th century CE. For a discussion of the chronology of this 'new style' at Penjikent see Lyonnet 2013a; 2013b. For the wall painting see Belenizki 1980, 111. For a figuratively painted pot from Ghazni: Unesco Kabul 2012, 25; here: Fig. 147.

7 See Franke, Glazed Earthenware in the 9th–13th century, this volume.

8 See Müller-Wiener, Relief Ware, this volume.

9 Fehérvári 2000. – Kalter 1995; Kalter 1997 (English version).

10 E.g. the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart, the Bumiller Collection in Bamberg and other private possessions, some visited and documented by the author. The Tareq Rajab Collection owns 93 unglazed painted vessels from Egypt to Central Asia, 38 of which are published by Fehérvári (2000, 190). Some vessels are kept in the Kabul National Museum. Those in the Bumiller Collection are published by P. Siméon (2016).



Fig. 1 Assemblage of painted vessels

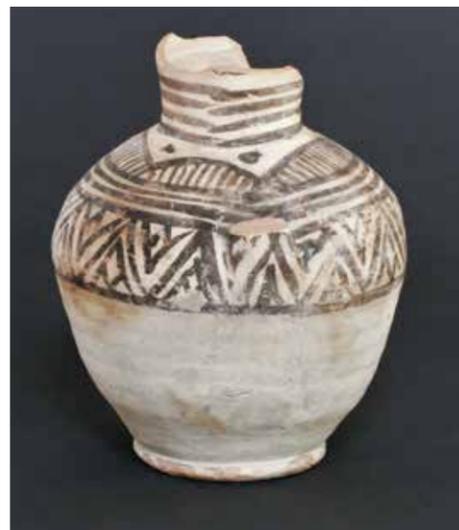


Fig. 3 Wheelmade jug, Type 1, cat. no. PP7



Fig. 5 Jug, bichrome Type 5b, cat. no. PP42



Fig. 6 Assemblage of spouted jars, Type 8, cat. nos. PP63; 64; 60



Fig. 2 Assemblage of painted miniature vessels, Type 18



Fig. 4 Wheelmade jar, Type 1, cat. no. PP1



Fig. 7 Painted jars from Uzgen
(Amanbaeva/Kol'chenko 2011, Pl. XII)

and researchers' preferences for more sophisticated and valuable items, doubts about origin and date and, in fact, a regional focus of the production and distribution of this ware.

The attempt to put these types into context suffers from this lack of evidence and of suitable descriptions and illustrations in excavation and survey reports. Furthermore, types different in technology and style, and thus probably in provenance and date, are compared and subsumed under a common name. For this reason, the issues of 'labelling', provenance and date are addressed before dealing in more detail with the particular technological, morphological, and stylistic features of the vessels in the Herat Museum (Figs. 1; 2).

An Eastern 'Pseudo-Prehistoric Ware'?

The designation 'Pseudo-Prehistoric Ware' was coined for handmade ceramics painted with mostly geometric patterns from Iran, Iraq and Greater Syria. The most detailed study was published in 1998 by J. Johns, who discussed the evidence from Bilad al-Sham, where it appeared in larger numbers as a new type after the 11th century CE.¹¹ Differentiating between vessels with a simpler

or a more complex decoration, Johns suggested to call the latter 'Handmade Geometrically-Painted Ware' in order to avoid confusion with prehistoric vessels and dated it from the 11th to the 13th century.¹² Since this period witnessed a peak in settlement density and political power, he argued against social or economic factors

as driving forces for the shift from wheelmade to handmade painted vessels and related this development rather with a widespread migration of endogenous groups of itinerant potters, referring to similar developments in Iraq, southern Iran, Arabia, and the Maghreb.

Although the published pottery, often collected during surveys, shares handmade shapes, slip-painted and predominantly geometric decorations – usually monochrome black or

bichrome red and black – and the lack of a glaze, it represents a variety of different types. The material from Bilad al-Sham, for example, is different from assemblages from southern Iran, which are heterogeneous in themselves.¹³ And, while some decorative elements can be compared to the examples in Herat, the shapes as well as style and structure of the decoration are different.¹⁴ Despite this heterogeneity the appearance of coarser and hand-built vessels without glaze, painted with a rather complex, predominantly geometric decoration, at this time across a wide region is noteworthy.

Since the present paper rather targets at differentiating the material than subsuming ceramics from different parts of the Islamic world under a common name, the designation 'Pseudo-Prehistoric Ware' is not used. One reason is that the term 'ware' even more than 'ceramics' implies a somehow defined and chronologically as well as regionally distinct cultural assemblage. While it is, in fact, argued here that this is the case for the coherent types in our collection, the corpus as such is also certainly different from the western group and needs to be set apart also through its name. Secondly, notwithstanding the fact that certain vessels, in particular the decorations on Type 1, show resemblances with later 3rd millennium BCE vessels from southern Afghanistan¹⁵, a closer look leaves no doubt that they date to the Islamic period (Figs. 3; 4).

Since there is a larger variety of types in terms of shape, patterns and design structure in our corpus, for the time being the more general label 'Unglazed Painted Pottery' is preferred, since it accommodates this variability under one heading. Further archaeological evidence on the geographical distribution, chronological range and associations, not yet available now, will in future lead to more differentiated denominations (Figs. 5; 6).

¹¹ Johns 1998.

¹² Watson (2004, 127 cat. Ac.8) later extended the date to the 14th century, with reference to a vessel from Hama which contained 14th-century coins.

¹³ Whitehouse 1969; Whitehouse 1970. – Morgan/Leatherby 1987. – Whitcomb 1991; Whitcomb 1985.

¹⁴ E.g. the 'peacock-eye' pattern on a vase published by Watson (2004, 127 cat. Ac.8).

¹⁵ E.g. Mundigak (Casal 1961).

Distribution

Apart from the large amount of complete but unprovenanced vessels attributed to the Herat region, related evidence is available from the British excavations at Jam and from sites recorded during the surveys of the Joint German-Afghan Archaeological Mission to Herat. The majority of sites with unglazed painted pottery is located in the eastern and, but less so, in the northern parts of Herat Province.¹⁶ Although this archaeological material comprises mostly sherds and fragmented vessels, the shapes, fabric and decorative features are close enough to link these finds to certain types in the museum collection. Considering the presently known evidence, Unglazed Painted Pottery represents a rather abundant and hence important sub-set of ceramic production and use, occurring in association with plain, glazed and moulded wares. Therefore, its distribution patterns have the potential to reveal stylistic preferences prevailing in a certain region at a certain time. A fundamental assumption in this approach is that at least brief mention is made in publications, when this elaborately painted yet unglazed pottery was found – assuming that it is too rare and too striking to remain unnoticed.

Based on this assumption, the fact that no related material is reported in any quantities from Nishapur¹⁷ and Lashkari Bazaar, is, for the time being, considered as negative evidence of its presence there.¹⁸ The same applies to the provinces of Kunduz and Takhar in Northern Afghanistan, Bamiyan¹⁹ and Balkh²⁰, as well as Khulbuk on the other side of the Amu Darya River.²¹ However, precaution is advised considering that the catalogue 'Terres secrètes de Samarcande. Céramiques du VIII^e au XIII^e siècle' depicts only one painted vessel, without comments in the text²², although the closest comparative evidence comes from Transoxania and beyond.

Stylistic parallels to Central Asia were noted already in 1978 by G. Gropp in notes on a private collection of painted vessels from the Herat region.²³ A few years later, in 1995, J. Kalter presented a group of unglazed painted vessels from the Lindenmuseum and private collections in the Uzbekistan

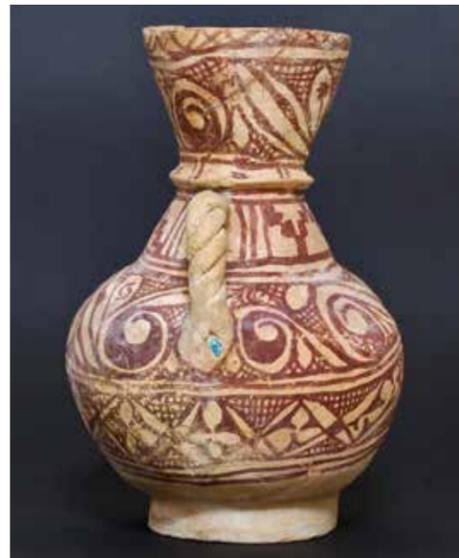


Fig. 8 Jug, turquoise inlay, Type 8, cat. no. PP63

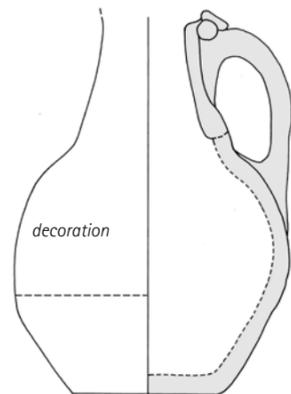


Fig. 9 Assembled jar, Type 2, cat. no. PP18

exhibition in Stuttgart and attributed most of them to Northern Afghanistan, specifically to Maymana, and to Middle Asia.²⁴ At that time, a few comparable ceramics had already been published in Russian literature.

Objects from the Kashkadarya region south of Samarqand, which are dated from the 10th to

²⁴ Kalter 1995, 116 Fig. 181. Maymana is located in Faryab and corresponds, according to Lee (1996, 13), to ancient Al-Yahudhan, seat of the Malik of Guzaganan. It is also mentioned as place of origin for high-quality copper objects and frequently also of other pottery (von Gladiss 2008; Watson 2004).

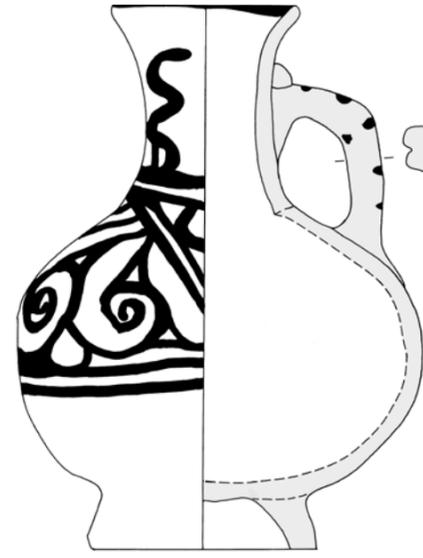


Fig. 10 Assembled jug, Type 4b, cat. no. PP27



Fig. 11 Fluted lower body, Type 8, cat. no. PP60



Fig. 12 Jar, bichrome, Type 9b, cat. no. PP67

the 12th century, resemble our vessels with some decorative elements, but have different shapes.²⁵ A better comparison is a painted ewer with a long spout and handle from Afrasiyab.²⁶ Closer parallels, however, come from the more distant Fergana Valley. These are sherds²⁷, a ewer and a painted bowl with similar motifs and comparable in style and execution.²⁸ Even more similar in all these aspects are three ewers from Uzgen in Fergana/Kyrgyzstan (Fig. 7). They were first discussed by A. Bernshtam, and later by A. Zadneproskiy who describes the painted jugs as "the most typical feature of the early medieval ceramic complex" at that site, and refers to comparisons in Afrasiyab.²⁹ As for the vessels in Herat, their typical features are handmade shapes, a coarser fabric, certain motifs and a colour-contrast effect based on reserved painting of buff patterns on a dark background. Finally, vessels with comparable shapes are also reported from Kultepe and the Turtkultepe caravanseray in Uzbekistan.³⁰ The unglazed painted pottery from Akhsiket shows a simpler decoration and a limited range of shapes.³¹

We can summarise that the vessels from Uzgen are similar in many aspects, while the other examples are only comparable either in decoration or in shape.³² This evidence is important in view of the distance between the two regions.³³ It remains a fact, however, that the majority of types attested in and from Herat are unparalleled and represent a stylistically distinct assemblage. Only further research, or the publication of yet unpublished material, will settle the question whether the missing links are attributable to a lack of research or reflect the absence of related objects. For the time being, the vessels in the Lindenmuseum and in the Tareq Rajab Collection, attributed by and large to 'Central Asia'³⁴, provide the most comprehensive and close comparisons as to shapes, decorations and style.

Date

The assemblages discussed above are dated to the time from the 10th to the 13th century. The 14th century, suggested by Watson for the western handmade geometrically painted pottery³⁵, is outside the time horizon of the eastern

¹⁶ Gascoigne 2010. – Franke/Urban 2016.

¹⁷ Wilkinson (1973, 291) mentions one black and one black-and-red painted vessel, but does not depict them (ch. 12, no. 55, Tepe Madraseh: inscribed, twisted band, 11th century?; no. 112, Qanat Tepe: bottle. The latter was compared to bottles found at Dvin, Armenia).

¹⁸ Gardin 1963.

¹⁹ It is not among the Bamiyan Ware published by J.-C. Gardin, but that collection contains only selected pieces.

²⁰ Gardin 1957a; Gardin 1957b. – Lyonnet 1997. – Maxwell-Jones 2015. As a note of caution: the publication of the surveys conducted by the French Mission focussed on sites up to the 8th century CE, C. Maxwell-Jones' detailed study of the pottery from Balkh does not include post-Sasanian material. Personal communications with the French Missions suggest that no comparable pottery was found. I am grateful to R. Besenval, Ph. Marquis and P. Siméon for sharing their information with me.

²¹ Siméon 2008.

²² Shishkina/Pavchinskaja 1992, 72. Cat. 59 shows a handmade painted vessel from Samarqand, dated to the 12th/13th century. The badly preserved but probably simple decoration is similar to the Unglazed Painted Ware, just like probably the fabric, but the shape and applied cordon around the neck are different.

²³ Communication G. Gropp with U. Hallier. I am most grateful to U. Hallier for putting this correspondence at my disposal. G. Gropp referred to a vessel shown by B. Albaum and B. Brentjes 1972, and others from Crimea and Samarqand, where the excavator V. Vjatkin assigned them a prehistoric date in 1925.

²⁵ Lunina 1987.

²⁶ Kabanov 1984, Pl. 4. I am most grateful to J. Ilyasov for providing me with copies of this paper, as well as Bernshtam 1952, Zadneprovskiy 1969 and Lunina 1987. I also wish to thank K. Junker for translating the relevant parts from Russian.

²⁷ Bernshtam 1952, 260.

²⁸ Zadneprovskiy 1969 Pl. 11.1 and 12.1; for the bowl Pl. 11.3 and 12.3.

²⁹ See Amanbaeva/Kol'chenko 2011, 38; 86; 90; 91 Pl. XII, with two other comparable ewers, see here Fig. 7.

³⁰ Gritsina/Mamadjanova/Mukimov 2014, Fig. 97a: Turtkultepe, sherds with spirals and vertically aligned wavy bands; Fig. 72: Kultepe, pot with simple painting, similar in shape to PP114.

³¹ Henshaw 2010, 98 Fig. 3.26.

³² The three vessels shown by Amanbaeva/Kol'chenko 2011, Pl. XII can be compared in shape to Type 2, and the decorations to cat. nos. PP78 ('shells'); 61 (star-pattern, see Type 8); 18 and 37 for elements and structure.

³³ Particularly in view of the fact, that Herat also owns a Balbal, see Franke, Prehistory, this volume.

³⁴ Fehérvári 2000, 199 cat. no. 257, similar e.g. to cat. no. PP68; see below under 'Types' and 'Motifs' for further references.

³⁵ The jar published by Watson (2004, cat. no. Ac.8) is not considered here. It is assigned to 14th-century Syria and belongs to the pottery complex discussed by Johns 1998.