



The Nal Horizon

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Excavations at sites like Sohr Damb/Nal, Mehrgarh and Miri Qalat have definitely proven that Baluchistan, as the largest part of the Indo-Iranian borderlands, has never been an isolated area, but a strategic region for cultural interactions in the 4th and 3rd millennia BCE. In this patterned cultural landscape, “not only precious materials and utilitarian items, fragile goods such as pottery, but also technological know-how, ideas and styles...”¹ were moving in different directions on the trails of the Baluchistan valleys. One of these commodities to be traded so far was Period II pottery from Sohr Damb/Nal, the so called Nal Ware.

Thanks to the excavations of the German-Pakistani Mission at the site of Sohr Damb/Nal, the occurrence of this particular type of pottery is ascribed to Period II, dated between 3100 and 2800/2700 BCE.² The distinctive shapes, the remarkable palette of painting colours and the sophistication of decorations have set Nal pottery apart since its first mention in 1904.³ This ceramic production was soon recognised as outstanding for its technological characteristics, not shared by other wares in the region.⁴ Its distribution in Baluchistan is mostly focused on the areas of Khuzdar, Kolwa, Las Bela and Kirthar, but the presence of Nal pottery is recorded also in other distant regions, such as eastern Iran or the southern parts of Afghanistan.⁵ With the exception of a single trench, this ware was



Fig. 9.1
Polychrome pottery
from Sohr Damb/Nal
Period II domestic
contexts, Trench II

retrieved from all excavated parts of the site at Sohr Damb/Nal, from living areas as well as burials, indicating that it was both part of the domestic as well as of the afterlife world (Figs. 9.1; 2). The Nal pottery is characterised by fine or very fine fabrics and a medium to coarse production. The thickness of the vessels' walls ranges from 1 mm to 1.5–2 cm for the coarser ware. Usually, the fine ware is wheelmade, whereas the medium to coarse ceramic assemblage is manufactured combining initially the use of coils and later of turning devices. Standard shapes at the site employed in daily activities were globular jars with short necks (Fig. 9.3), carinated beakers with very thin walls, biconical pots and globular bowls. These bowls can be black, brown or red-slipped, often bearing a decoration on the upper part framed by a ridge appliqué (Fig. 9.4). Special forms include small sized bowls with lobed rims and canister pots (cat. nos. 583–610). Not only the repertoire of shapes represents a distinctive feature of this production, but especially the decoration sets this particular ware apart. Nal pottery is, in fact, usually very finely painted: the

- 1 Franke 2008b, 651.
- 2 Goersdorf / Franke 2007.
- 3 Marshall 1904/5.
- 4 Jarrige et al. 1995, 82.
- 5 Franke-Vogt 2003/4, 87.



Fig. 9.2
Polychrome and
monochrome
pottery from a burial
excavated at Sohr
Damb/Nal Period II



Fig. 9.3
Group of
jars and pots,
cat. nos. 571, 261,
494, 574, 575

intricate decorative motifs offer only a glimpse into a very rich imaginative world, which mixed everyday life items with fantastic representations.

The diversified repertoire includes geometrical, faunal and floral elements inserted into panel-like structures or continuous friezes, usually painted

on the upper walls of the vessels. Loops, multiple crosses, stepped motifs and concentric circles are among the characteristic geometric elements of the figurative representations, often displayed in intricate combinations (Figs. 9.5–7), enriched by special applications like bosses or ‘knobs’ (Fig. 9.8). Pipal leaves, birds, fish and especially hybrid animals constitute the remarkable repertoire of vegetal and faunal decorative motifs (Figs. 9.9; 10). These designs tell about a rich life, in which nature with its landscape and wild animals played a very important role. The variety of the colour palette used for filling the decorative fields is impressive, comprising black, red, yellow, white and blue (Fig. 9.11). The use of such a wide range of pigments not only conveyed a deeper complexity to already very intricate motifs, but also attested a very high level of technology reached by the craftsmen. When studying Nal pottery, it becomes obvious that much time was spent on producing these quite fine artefacts, and that craftsmen acquired very specialised skills, mastering the art of painting, the firing conditions inside the kiln and the production of a variety of pigments. These procedures require a deep knowledge of the chemistry of colorants and, particularly, their reaction under different firing conditions, attesting an expertise rooted in the technological development at the site.

Notwithstanding the huge amount of information already gained through fieldwork carried out by the German-Pakistani Mission to Kalat, complete vessels usually represent a rarity during excavations. Therefore, the work on the collection is of great significance for archaeological research and a unique opportunity to integrate complete shapes and motifs into the typology, facilitating a reliable reconstruction of the original aspect of the fragmented potsherds from the site. It is now possible to considerably enlarge the repertoire and gain new insights into the manufacture of Nal pottery, whereas the correlation with the material from excavated contexts permits to assign these unprovenanced specimens to the phases of Period II.



Fig. 9.4
Polychrome bowl
with ridge appliqué
decoration from Sohr
Damb/Nal Period II,
Trench VI



Fig. 9.5
Fig. 9.6

Polychrome potsherds
from Sohr Damb/Nal
Period II, Trench IIIa



Fig. 9.7
Polychrome potsherd
from Sohr Damb/Nal
Period II, Trench VII



Fig. 9.8
Nal pottery with
bosses appliqué
decoration,
cat. no. 340

Fig. 9.9 Polychrome potsherds from Sohr Damb/Nal Period II, Trench II



Fig. 9.10 Polychrome pot from Sohr Damb/Nal Period II, Trench II



Fig. 9.11 Polychrome potsherds from Sohr Damb/Nal Period II, Trench IIIa



Variability of Forms and Motifs in the Nal Repertoire

The confiscated material represents a good opportunity to define a variety of shapes from the Nal, Period II, tradition. For example, the biconical pot documented by H. Hargreaves⁶ is one of the distinctive types in the Nal repertoire and it is well attested in the collection, cat. nos. 465–561 (Figs. 9.12; 13). The variability of this form type can now be more easily evaluated (Fig. 9.14). A particular group of biconical pots, cat. nos. 473–482, 487–493, 501, 502, shares a similar form and decoration. The outer shoulder is finely decorated with a pipal motif, one of the most common floral patterns in the Nal repertoire. The pipal heart-shaped leaf is omnipresent in the daily life of the people on the Subcontinent. It provides shade and allows people to rest under its branches. It is therefore not surprising, that its representation adorned also daily-life items as i.e. pottery. The motif can be monochromely

or polychromely painted and witnesses a certain variability in structure, whether in the friezes or the metopes, combined also with geometrical patterns (cat. nos. 479, 487, 490), possibly indicating the starting or ending point of the decoration.

The carinated beaker is also one of the most common shapes at the site and represented in the collection with more than 100 specimens, cat. nos. 328–464 (Fig. 9.15). Now the variability of this type has become much clearer (Fig. 9.14.b right): walls can be concave, straight and everted. Further variants of the Nal canister pots can also be distinguished: body parts showing a certain variability are the shoulders that can be flat, concave or straight and slanting towards the outside, whereas walls can be straight-sided, everted or concave (Fig. 9.14.c).

Lacking on the site are complete vessels of some large shapes as i.e. the carinated jar (Fig. 9.3). Another similar case is the conical elongated beaker (Fig. 9.16): this shape occurs on the site only in Period I tombs.⁷ Thanks to the study on the collection, we can now attest that the style comprises bichrome painted decorations and that the shape continued to be popular also later in Period II (Fig. 9.17), with larger ring bases and typical geometric and figurative Nal motifs, as for example hourglasses and horns with at least two different filling patterns.⁸

7 Franke-Vogt 2003/4, Fig. 27a.
8 A comparable Period II specimen with an intricate geometric double frieze was recorded also in the confiscated collection in the Pakistani Embassy in Rome, Cortesi 2014, 79.

6 Hargreaves 1929, Pl. XVI, 9; 10.



Fig. 9.12 Group of biconical pots, cat. nos. 533, 532, 529

Fig. 9.13 Group of biconical pots, cat. nos. 539, 522, 540

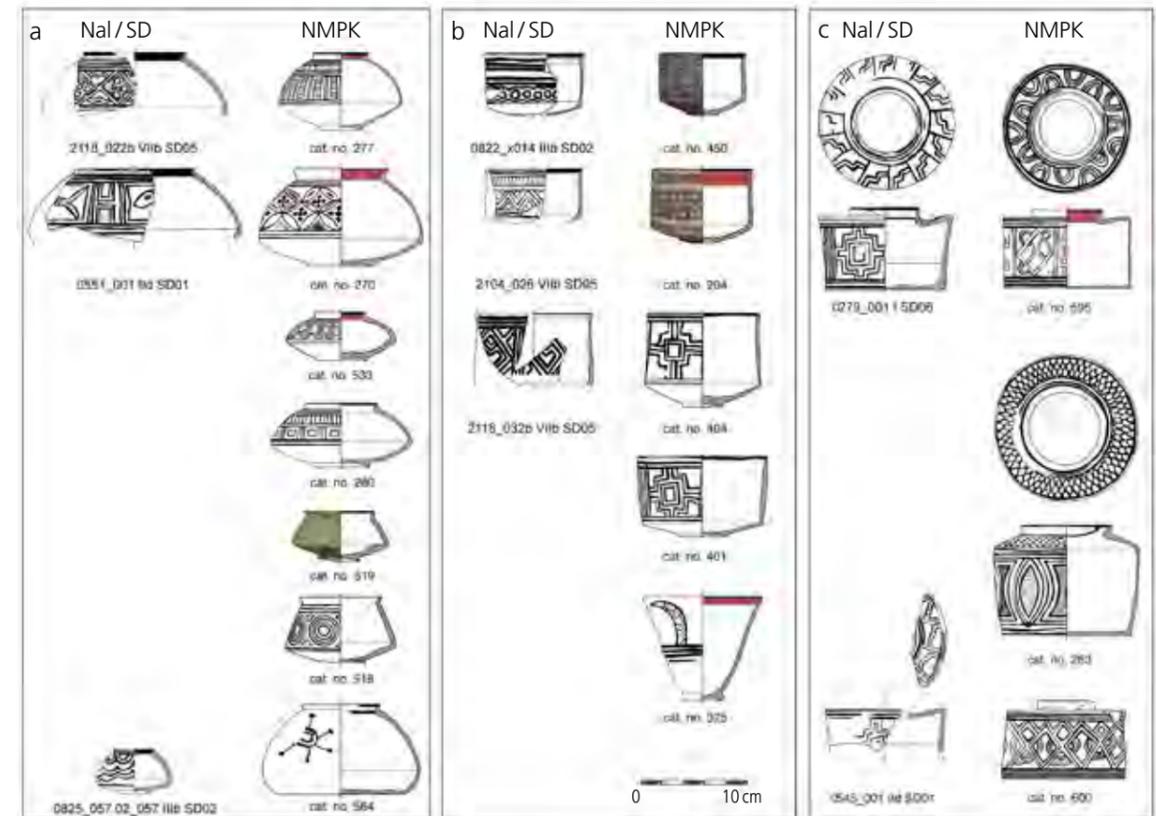


Fig. 9.14 The variability of biconical pots, beakers and canister pots at the site of Nal (SD) and at the National Museum Karachi (NMPK)

Both geometrical and figurative motives were integrated into the continuous cataloguing process of Period II Nal pottery: sometimes it was a matter of completing previously fragmented designs, but in the majority of cases new decorative elements along with still unknown combinations and filling patterns were added to the repertoire.

The already broad variety of zig-zag lines, triangles, circles and squares typical for the Sohr Damb/Nal Period II ceramic vessels was enriched with new elements such as unknown filling patterns and

new combinations (Fig. 9.18.a, right). The motifs have gained complexity as far as their contours and the addition of other colours are concerned.

Known figurative designs like fish have appeared in the collection with new filling patterns, as for example the parallel vertical lines (Fig. 9.18.b, centre right), and in new combinations (Fig. 9.18.b, top right, cat. no. 507).

Previously unknown from excavations is also a diversified series of griffins, a distinctive decorative motif in the Period II Nal repertoire and one of the



Fig. 9.15
Group of carinated
beakers, cat. nos.
316, 337, 396, 430,
451, 428, 377, 462



Fig. 9.16
Group of carinated
beakers, cat. nos.
316, 337, 396, 430,
451, 428, 377, 462

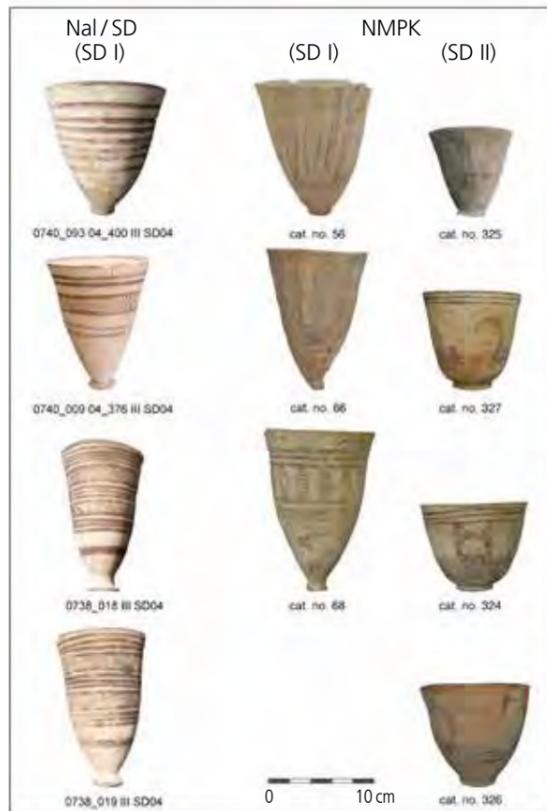


Fig. 9.17
Elongated beakers
from Sohr Damb/
Nal Period I and the
collection

animals. In the Nal repertoire the griffin motif appears with horns and the beard of an ibex, wings of an eagle and paws and the mane of a lion, although slight differences may occur. All these animals were part of the natural landscape surrounding the inhabitants at Sohr Damb/Nal. Their hybrid combination unites the best qualities of the single animals and it might have symbolised an extraordinarily powerful creature. Its function in the cultural Nal horizon remains obscure and similar representation with hybrid creatures reappear only later with the seal production of the Indus Valley Civilization. On the Nal vessels the fantastic motif can be observed walking in procession, or in a squat position (Fig. 9.18). Sometimes its representation is combined with different surrounding filling patterns, creating a sort of *horror vacui* that completely fills the decorative space; the effect is particularly intricate (cat. no. 607). Thanks to the new additions to the collection the creature can be studied in several forms or ‘stages’: complete, without the lower body or only its head (Fig. 9.19). Although the main body of the griffin is suppressed in the two later forms, the mythical creature can still be recognised and might still convey its original meaning.

Technological Aspects of the Nal Pottery

Along with the typological features, this collection offers a good opportunity for documenting technological characteristics of the ceramic operational sequence. The choice of the raw material used to build these containers, which would make them resist the heat and not rot, is usually very important, as it is directly connected with the function of the item. At least six different clay groups were used to produce the pottery found at Sohr Damb/Nal.⁹ In one case, it was possible to correlate the use of a specific sort of clay to a coarse fabric, indicating that craftsmen intentionally

9 Cortesi et al. in press.

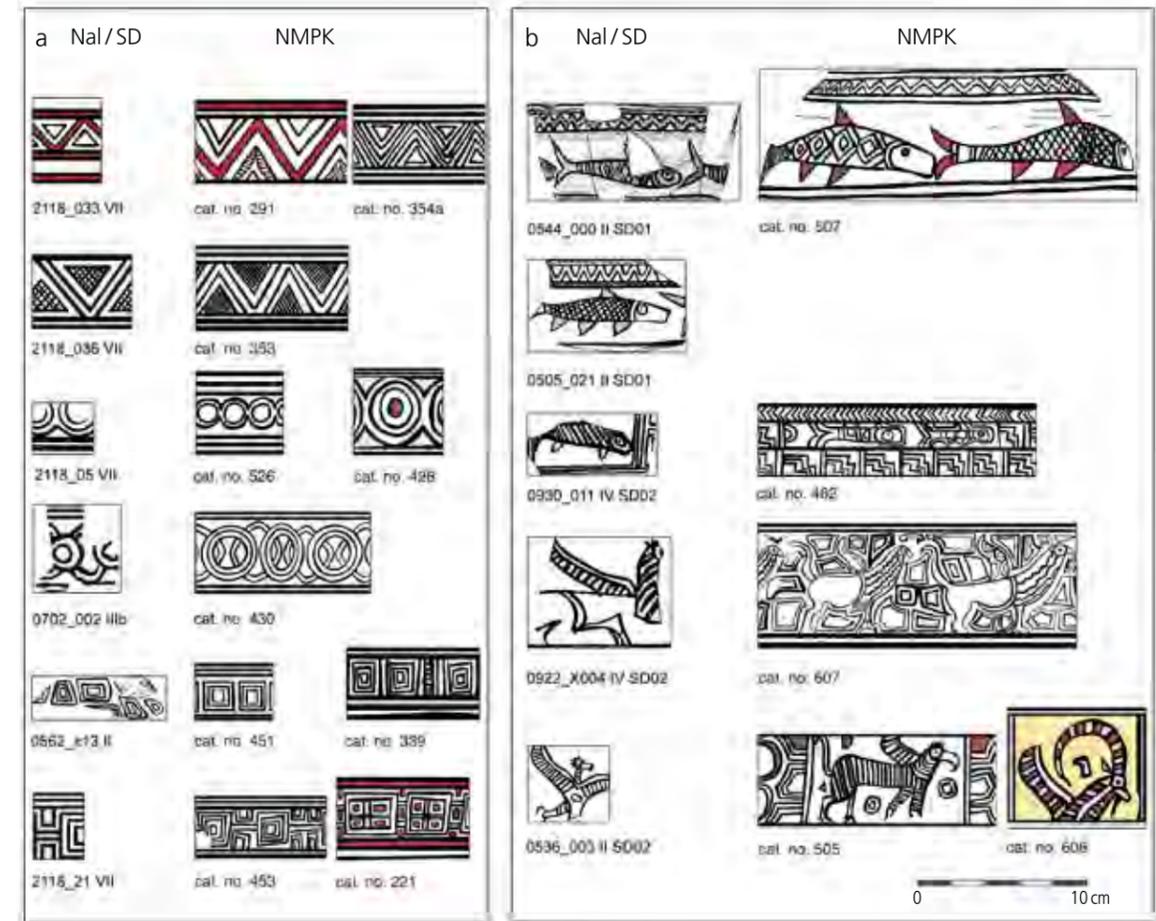


Fig. 9.18
The variability of
decorative patterns
at the site of
Nal (SD) and at the
National Museum
Karachi (NMPK)



Fig. 9.19
The griffin motif in
different variants

most ancient representations of this mythological creature. The griffin is a fantastic hybrid creature, whose body is composed of parts of different

selected this particular raw material to build coarse pottery¹⁰, probably due to particular qualities that would enhance its properties in storage or cooking activities. The results of the archaeometric analysis indicate that the potters added temper material such

10 Cortesi et al. in press.

as crushed shells or ground pottery¹¹ to the clays to reach the same goal.

Usually, once the clay arrives at the area of preparation and processing, it is finely crushed and sieved to obtain a homogeneous consistency. The

11 Cortesi et al. in press.