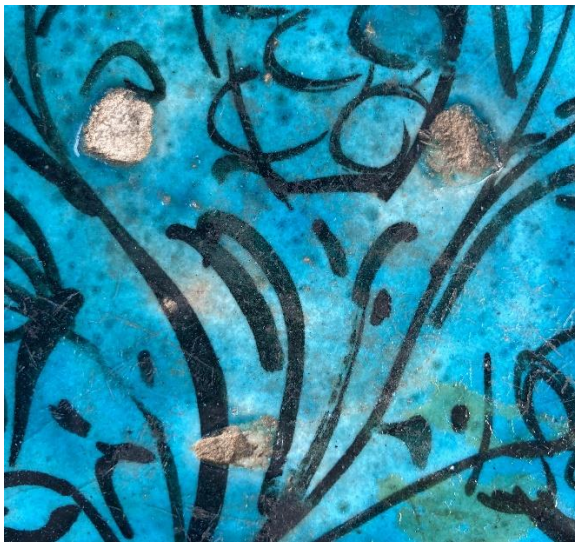
# A bowl from Iran – 13th century

A while ago I circulated a note about a 12th century Iranian 'silhouette ware' bowl (see photo below as a reminder), which had been decorated by coating the bowl in black slip, carving a design out of the slip and then covering it with a turquoise glaze. I explained how that type of pottery was the final step for Iranian potters before they developed a method of painting delicate, crisp and fluent designs under a transparent glaze. Since writing that note I have acquired the dish (26 cm wide) in the photo above, which could have been made by the same potters shortly after my silhouette ware bowl was made. On this dish a dynamic design has been painted with black pigment and then the same turquoise glaze has been used.

*Silhouette ware bowl (subject of a separate note)*

These decorating techniques were developed by potters in the city of Kashan, an oasis city about 200 km south of Tehran, said by some to be the place the three wise men in the nativity story came from. In the 13th century, Kashan was the foremost centre for pottery in Iran, producing luxury ceramics for the court and the elite, as well as pottery for ordinary people. There were other workshops in the surrounding area which produced similar styles of pottery, but it is likely that the best wares were made only in Kashan.

My dish was not made as a luxury item for the elite. The design is full of energy and fluidity and was clearly painted quickly. The glaze on the underside of the dish ends near the foot in an irregular line (see below), with no attempt at neatness. Also, there are three scars in the glaze in the centre of the dish (also below), which show that several of these dishes were fired together in a stack, with the foot-ring of one standing on three wads of clay which rest on the dish below. The high status wares made in Kashan do not show these scars and will have been fired in individual protective clay boxes (saggars). By firing my dish with others in a stack, many more dishes could be fitted into the kiln, with big savings in firing costs.



This type of underglaze-painted pottery was only made in Kashan for a very limited period. The earliest piece in this style that has been dated was made in 1204 AD, and large-scale production of this pottery in Kashan ceased in 1216 AD when it was disrupted by attacks by the Mongols. It is therefore likely that this dish was made between these dates, though it is possible it was made later in the 13th century at a pottery in another town in the area which was not so affected by the Mongol incursions.

The connection between silhouette ware and this underglaze-painted pottery was first identified by Oliver Watson early in his academic career. Watson became Professor of Islamic Art at Oxford and head of ceramics and glass at the V&A. He was regarded by many as the world's leading authority on ceramics from the Islamic world, but some of you may know of him as an expert on 20th century and contemporary ceramics, and author of a book on the V&A's collection of British studio ceramics.

Watson noticed that some examples of silhouette ware used black slip which had very little clay and was almost pure pigment, demonstrating that the Kashan potters making the silhouette ware had developed techniques for decorating with black pigment under a glaze without the decoration smudging during firing. If the pigment did not have to be carried in a thick slip, the way was open for delicate painted designs under the glaze. Around the year 1200 there was also a subtle change in the

shape of a certain type of bowl made by Kashan potters in their elite wares. Watson noticed that no silhouette ware has been found with the new bowl shape, whereas all the bowls in the underglaze-painted pottery were made in the new form, suggesting that at the same time as the new shape bowls started to be made the Kashan potters switched from silhouette ware to underglaze painting.

In 2022 I had a brief and interesting e-mail exchange with Oliver Watson, discussing an earlier (10th century) Iranian bowl in my collection. I cheekily sent him my note about that bowl and I was chuffed when he replied to say that 'it would have got a good mark from me from one of my MA students'. Sadly, Watson died in 2023, and when the bowl which is the subject of this present note came up in an auction the auctioneer said it had previously been owned by Watson, making me doubly keen to acquire it.

Kevin Akhurst. January 2025