A bowl from Iran, 10th or 11th century

Clay slips, which are liquid mixtures of clay and water, have been used for millennia to coat and decorate the surfaces of pottery. Depending on the type of clay used these slips can be white, brown or red. When specific mineral powders are added, other colours such as black and green can also be produced. Around the end of the 9th century, potters in Khorasan (now Iran and neighbouring countries) started using slips in a more sophisticated way to produce a wide range of decorated pottery, either in simple black and white or in a range of colours. The great silk road cities of Samarkand and Nishapur were the main centres for this flowering of ceramic innovation, no doubt stimulated by the wealth created by the silk road trade.

While the highest quality wares were produced in the big cities, there were smaller provincial potteries that produced more humble slip-decorated pottery. Among these were the makers of my bowl (19 cm wide) shown above. It may not be elegant, but I think the design is full of energy and character. This type of pottery is called Sari ware and it is believed that it was made in the region between 500 and 700 km west of Nishapur, at the southern end of the Caspian sea, in the towns of Gurgan, Sari and Amul.

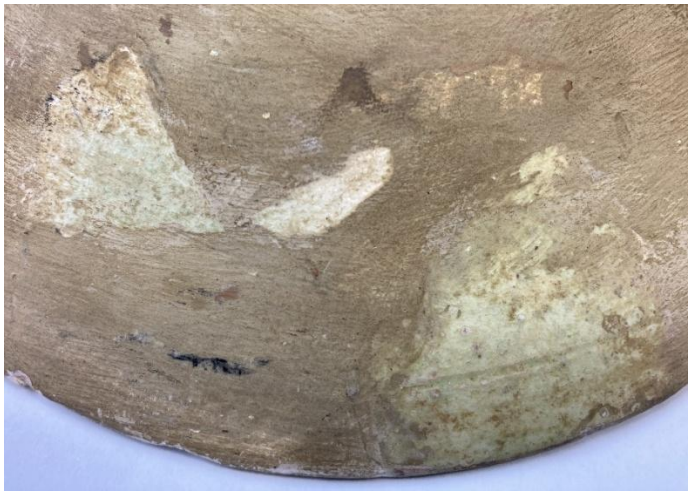
Various designs are found on Sari ware, but most of them have birds like the one on my bowl. These tend to be referred to as pigeons, and it is true that pigeons had a valued role in Iran for centuries. They were kept in special pigeon towers, with each tower holding up to 5000 nests, from which the droppings were harvested as fertiliser for the fields. However, the birds on the Sari bowls almost always have crests on their heads, which pigeons do not have. This makes me wonder whether the bird on the bowls might actually be a hoopoe, which has a big crest and was seen as a symbol of virtue in ancient Iran. Hoopoes have striped feathers whereas the designs on the Sari bowls tend to have spots, but that could just be decorative license.

The strange balls on sticks which you see on my bowl are almost always present and these have been called 'lollipop flowers'. The series of small white dots on the bird and two of the lollipops, which helps to make the design pop and avoids a flatness of tone, is a decorative technique which is also seen on more elegant wares from Nishapur.

The characteristic colours on Iranian slip-decorated pottery of that period are white, black, red and olive and all these colours are present in the design on my bowl. The whole upper surface of the bowl has been coated in a white slip to provide a ground for the decoration, which is then painted in outline in black. The outlines of the design were infilled with red and olive slip. In addition, one of the lollipops is a strong green colour, which is unusual in Iranian slipware of this period. In fact, as the bowl has clearly been 'restored' by reassembling and adding and painting missing bits, I did even wonder if the green lollipop was the result of an overenthusiastic restorer. But then I saw a picture of a Sari bowl in the Kuwait National Museum (see below), which also has one green lollipop. It seems likely that the presence of one green lollipop either has some symbolic significance or that it was a design favoured by a particular workshop.

Some Sari bowls, such as the one in the Kuwait National Museum, are covered with a thin transparent glaze, which brightens the colours and makes the bowls easier to clean. Less elegant bowls, such as mine, have no glaze over the slip decoration and you will see in the photo at the top of this note that the base white slip on my bowl has acquired a slightly grubby yellowish cast over the thousand years of its existence.

Although my bowl was not glazed there are odd patches of glaze visible (for example see photo below of underside). These can be explained by the tendency of the restorers of the early 20th century to use broken bits of other old bowls to fill the gaps. In the case of my bowl the restorers have used pieces of a glazed bowl in the repair. In principle it should be easy to identify the original and substitute pieces of this ceramic jigsaw by examining the undecorated underside of the bowl. However, as part of the restoration, the underside has been coated with a buff-coloured slip which hides the original surface, though the slip hasn't adhered well to some of the glazed replacement pieces. In general I quite like complete restorations of broken pottery, as they give a better impression of what the piece would have looked like, but I do like to be able to tell the difference between the original and replacement pieces. With this bowl I'm uncertain which bits are original. On the decorated side of the bowl there are areas where it is possible to distinguish between original and repainted areas, as the repainted decoration has smudged (see photo below), probably in the firing which the restorer gave the reassembled bowl. Most of the decoration has not smudged in this way, which gives me some confidence that most of the bowl is original.



Underside of bowl showing areas of restoration, including pale green glaze

Some areas of repainting (beak, crest, lower neck) and other areas which are presumed to be original

Kevin Akhurst. April 2025