

A Slipware Bowl from Eastern Iran – 10th century



One of the greatest explosions of decorative invention in the history of pottery took place in eastern Iran in the tenth century. This only really began to be appreciated when archaeologists from the Metropolitan Museum in New York excavated the remains of the ancient city of Nishapur in the 1930s and 1940s. They found the remains of vast quantities of high quality glazed earthenware, decorated using a wide range of techniques and styles (the archaeologists grouped their finds into ten distinct types of decoration), all being produced at about the same period. Since then, similar pottery has been found at other sites in eastern Iran and even in Samarkand and Tashkent, which at that time were on the eastern fringes of the Iranian empire.

The bowl in the picture above, which is 18 cm across at the rim, has clearly been reconstructed from ten or more broken pieces. This is the norm for early Islamic pottery. Unlike China, the Islamic world

had no tradition of interring pottery in graves, where intact vessels might be found in modern times. Nor were prized pieces of pottery handed down the generations within families – in early Iran the elite used gold, silver or imported Chinese porcelain. Glazed pottery in Iran was bought by the urban middle classes, who used it until it broke and then threw it away. 20th century archaeologists (and others) found these remains buried in ancient rubbish dumps and used in the foundations of 10th century buildings.

This bowl was made of a buff-coloured clay which was coated with a layer of white (actually cream coloured) slip, to provide a light background for the decoration. The interior of the bowl was then decorated with a very striking design of stylised birds, using black (actually very dark brown) slip, with a supporting tracery of fine lines painted in a lighter reddish brown slip. These fine lines mark out zones around the birds and the decoration on the rim, leaving what are often referred to as ‘contour panels’ which have been filled with a stippling of black dots. On top of everything there is a thin layer of clear glaze - investigations of other pieces of this type of pottery have confirmed that this is a lead glaze.

I bought this in an auction where it was described as a ‘Sari-type bowl’. This seemed unlikely to me, as Sari ware (yet another type of pottery from eastern Iran from about the same period, but not found at Nishapur) is typically brightly coloured. However, the dramatic and dynamic black and white decoration on this bowl appealed to me and I knew that pottery with black decoration on a white slip was made in Iran in the tenth century.

With early Iranian ceramics there is always a possible concern about authenticity as there is an extensive history of fakery. Once the archaeologists left Nishapur in the 1940s the site was picked clean by people looking for pieces of pottery to sell. Often they had licences from the Iranian government allowing them to do this in exchange for providing the government with a share of their finds. An archaeologist from the Met said that Nishapur had suffered ‘death by looting’. Since intact pieces of pottery achieve a much higher price on the art market than sherds, there was a strong incentive to reassemble the bits into whole pieces by any means possible. In practice these means sometimes included very skilfully putting together pieces from different pots and painting additional decoration, even to the point where there is nothing left which resembles the original pot. This reassembly of broken pots has been done at many sites, not just at Nishapur.

It is very difficult to establish the authenticity of any piece of pottery bought at auction unless you have a definite provenance trail which leads to a known trustworthy person finding it in an unambiguous archaeological setting of the right date - something I have never encountered. Scientific techniques (X-ray fluorescence) can narrow down when the pot was fired, but fake pots can be assembled from old pottery and there have even been suggestions that the scientific techniques can be fooled. For relatively inexpensive old pots like this one, the only reasonable approach is to examine how it was made, the shape of the pot and the decoration and look for any inconsistencies and deviations from other pots which are accepted by experts as being genuine.

Looking at my bowl, there is one area of the wall where there is clearly something wrong (see photo below). In the interior the black decoration has run to produce a smudgy blurred effect, and on the outside the black lines are thicker and more glossy than elsewhere. It appears that a black glaze has been used to paint the design in this area on top of the clear glaze, which is not how this type of pottery was made in 10th century Iran. It looks as if this section of the bowl is fake, with a design painted by the faker to match the rest of the bowl. It appears that the whole bowl was refired during the reassembly process, possibly because fresh clay was used to join the broken segments together,

and the refiring has melted the black glaze on the fake sections, causing it to run down the wall of the bowl.



However, the base and three quarters of the wall of the bowl have a more convincing appearance. Having examined these areas in detail I have not been able to find any features that suggest that the bowl was not made in eastern Iran in the 10th century. The shape of the bowl, the slightly concave foot, the buff-coloured clay, the white slip coating with a tendency to flake off, the dark brown, almost black, design, the fine reddish-brown lines outlining the contour panels, the black stippling in the contour panels, the scalloped (so-called 'half-moon' or 'lunette') painted design around the rim and the way the design fills the whole of the bowl – all of these are consistent features of a certain type of 10th century slipware from eastern Iran. In particular, the shape of the bowl, with a slight outward curve at the rim, the painted rim design and the black spotting in the contour panels all suggest that the potters were influenced by pottery from Iraq which shows similar features. The bowl shape is thought to have originally been inspired by Chinese pottery, which was first imported into the middle east in the 8th century.

The most striking features of the design are the five black bird forms which fill the interior of the bowl. The forms of these birds are very stylised – in particular the wings with their strange holes. Clearly decorative effect was more important than realism. In fact stylised bird forms like these were quite common on 10th century Iranian pottery. They have been variously described as cranes, geese and even pigeons. It is very unusual though to find more than one on a bowl. However, I have found a reference to (though not seen a picture of) another bowl which has six birds in the design, so my bowl isn't unique in having multiple birds.

So I am happy that about 80% of my bowl is probably authentic and I don't mind that the rest has been filled in and painted by the faker – it does help me to grasp what the bowl would have looked like when it was in use in the 10th century.

One can't help wondering what caused this sudden growth in the quantity, quality and variety of Iranian ceramics in the 10th century. It does appear that this was a time of increasing wealth in the area. The Sasanian rulers encouraged trade and industry and cities like Nishapur were a key point on the east/west trade routes. It is likely that this led to a big increase in the numbers of the middle classes, with surplus wealth and a desire to treat themselves to little luxuries like decorated ceramic bowls. Some writers have debated why there was so much variety in the pottery designs, but it seems to me that, unless there is a strong cultural reason to stick to one type of pottery, this is a natural development as inventive potters experiment to find ways of attracting their customers interest. This wonderful period of ceramics appears not to have lasted long and the range and quality of the ceramics waned in the 11th century. The Mongols put a decisive end to this period when they invaded the region early in the 13th century – Nishapur was brutally sacked by them in 1221.