The Glazed Pottery of Nishapur and Samarkand

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The question of provenance has often been a real problem for all those interested in Mohammedan pottery, just as it has been for those interested in other ancient objects. The question, however, is usually a double one: where was the object found and, more basically, where was it made? Though the problem will undoubtedly continue to trouble all collectors and students of this material, we have the satisfaction of knowing that some of the old questions are being answered. Though certain problems still remain unsolved, progress has been made, for instance, in identifying the places of manufacture of lustreware of the ninth to the fourteenth centuries, despite the fact that much of it was exported to far-distant places. The differences between lustreware of Iraq, Egypt, and Iran, the distinctions between the lustre pottery of Kashan and Rayy, and the proper origin of that found at Gurgan, have all been more clearly defined, thanks to the work of Kühnel, Ettinghausen, Lane, and others. Since the beginning of the excavations at Nishapur by the Persian expedition of The Metropolitan Museum of Art which commenced some twenty-five years ago, a new problem has developed, namely, that of distinguishing between the ninth and tenth century glazed earthenware of Nishapur and that of Samarkand. This problem was bound to arise, for there is great resemblance between certain ceramic types found in the two places, although they are five hundred miles apart as the crow flies, and many more by road.

In ancient times, as now, pottery was indeed transported much greater distances than this. We have material evidence to prove that ninth century Chinese pottery was exported to Nishapur in Iran and to Samarra in Iraq. We must also remember that it is more than probable that all large Iranian cities produced at least some pottery. In Nishapur this activity has continued to the present day, although the city has lost its former importance as one of the greatest cities of Iran and is now but a small town. It is in the northeastern province of Iran known as Khurasan, which in olden times extended even farther to the east. Samarkand was once the capital city of the republic of Uzbekistan (the present capital being Tashkent), and the older part of the city to the north of the present-day town goes by the name of Afrasiyab. They are to all intents and purposes the same place.

Fig. 1. Bowl from the region of Sari or Gurgan. x century Rogers Fund, 59.91
how Iranian pottery is excavated is necessary for the understanding of how difficult it often is to know where it was unearthed, to say nothing of the problem of where it was made. By the old Iranian antiquities law of 1930, digging was permitted to scientifically-run expeditions from museums, universities, and other such institutions, the material results being divided between them and the Teheran museum. Commercial digging was officially allowed, during which a member of the Iranian Archaeological Service was also present, but in which the aim of the digger was to get as much profitable material for the least possible cost. Such excavators were allowed to keep half their finds, which could be sold where they chose, the other half being kept by the Teheran museum. In addition to these two categories, there has been much illicit digging, both directly for loot and indirectly by the removal of soil for irrigation and agriculture. These finds usually went into the general antiquities market and statements as to their source became vague.

A complication of our problem is that there have been excavations in several places on a commercial scale in the neighboring province of Gurgan, which lies north of the province of Khurasan. Much of this pottery, which has come from the area of the Gurgan River and also from another place to the north of Sabzwar known as Jovain, is likewise of the ninth and tenth centuries. It is technically and artistically related to that from Nishapur and Samarkand, and its frequent presence on the market under the name of “Nishapur” is a major embarrassment. An
Figs. 4 and 5. Pottery found at Afrasiyab by Stoliarov in 1914.
examination of a large number of Gurgan sherds found by an Englishman, R. D. Faudree (who kindly showed them to the author), makes it quite clear that though there are similarities to Samarkand and Nishapur pottery and the technique is the same, the Gurgan style is not usually identical with either.

Thus much now masquerades, even in museums and museum publications, as Nishapur pottery that never saw that city. There is also much of the type generally known as coming from Amul or Sari in Mazanderan that is called "Nishapur." These too are decorated in the same glazed slip-painted technique used in both Samarkand and Nishapur; characteristic of their decoration are large-plumed birds (see Figure 1) or brightly colored stiff "flowers" (see Figure 2), sometimes with added Kufic letters. From Gurgan come vessels of precisely this latter type. Since no fragments of these were found in Nishapur during the work of the Museum, there is only the slimmest possibility that Nishapur imported such ware and none that it was made there. Because the Nishapur label has been used so indiscriminately, not only for vessels found elsewhere in Iran but also for types known to have been made in Afrasiyab (by virtue of "wasters"—pieces spoiled in the kiln—found there), it is not surprising to find a tendency among certain scholars to shift the emphasis to Samarkand.

There is no question that Afrasiyab was a great ceramic center and that it exported widely, but clarification is necessary on what was made in each of the two cities. Unfortunately the area in which ninth and tenth century kilns were located has not yet been discovered in Nishapur, though wasters have come to light there. Of these more will be said later. Kurt Erdmann's publication1 of the wasters and sherd collection from Afrasiyab in the Staatlichen Museum in Berlin remains a most careful, well-balanced, and indispensable piece of work on this problem.

Because of our work at the Museum's excavations in Nishapur, much study of sherds from Samarkand and other relevant material, and a recent visit to Russia and Uzbekistan (including Bokhara, Tashkent, and Samarkand), we feel that it may be possible to throw a few gleams of further light on this problem. We shall confine ourselves mostly to the products of Samarkand and Nishapur, not forgetting that pottery was undoubtedly made in all the above-named cities and in Merv as well. The distinctions to be made between the products of the cities in Uzbekistan must remain a task for Russian excavators, and it is good to see that much interest is shown in the ceramic products of the cities there.

Samarkand and Nishapur were both flourishing cities during the ninth and tenth centuries and, despite various upheavals, were still of great importance in the two following centuries, after which disaster overtook them at the hands of the Mongols early in the thirteenth century.

They were particularly close in the tenth century when the Samanids, ruling mostly from Bokhara, were at the height of their power. This close political relationship is certainly reflected in the glazed pottery of these cities and others throughout Turkestan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Khurasan, and Gurgan, to use present-day names.

The ceramic products of Samarkand are to be seen principally in the museums of both Samarkand and Tashkent and in the Museum of Eastern Culture in Moscow. Two large collections of sherds exist in Europe, one in Berlin (referred to above) which contains many kiln wasters, and another without wasters in the Victoria Museum's collections in 1937. X century

Fig. 6. Inkwell found in Nishapur during the Museum's excavations in 1937. X century

Rogers Fund, 38.40.296

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and Albert Museum, London. There are good examples of complete bowls in a number of museums in Europe and America, including the Metropolitan Museum. Some of the Afrasiyab pieces now in the museums of Samarkand and Tashkent were found by a Russian named Stoliarov, who dug in the old quarter of Afrasiyab in 1914. We show here a few old photographs of shelf upon shelf filled with glazed pottery vessels which were unearthed at that site (Figures 3-5). These pictures alone give an excellent allover impression of the wares of Afrasiyab, and certain portions are detailed enough to illustrate its characteristics very plainly.

The material which we know beyond question to be from Nishapur is that excavated by the Persian expedition of The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Teheran museum. In accordance with the antiquities law, these ceramic finds were divided into two equal parts between the two institutions and are in the process of being published by the author.3

In studying the pottery that was truly found in Samarkand and Nishapur, we find that it falls roughly into the following groups: certain wares found in each site that were peculiar to the one site alone; others found in both cities but distinguishable by certain characteristics as coming from one and not the other; and others found in both cities that are practically undistinguishable. Needless to say, there were imports found in both cities that came from neither.

A particular type of underglaze painted pottery unquestionably made in Nishapur and not in Afrasiyab is one that is generally buff. Several examples of this ware have been published in previous reports and articles in the Bulletin of this Museum.4 Even the simplest and crudest specimens show a reluctance to leave blank spaces in the design. Made in great quantity were squat bowls with simple radial designs, either of many rays or divided into quadrants. Others were painted with interlaced strapwork often elaborated with foliations. The color scheme of all this ware is mustard yellow and transparent green, with a near-black for outlines. In a few of the best pieces some red slip is sparingly used also. The buff surface of the more elaborate vessels is often covered with so much opaque yellow that it, rather than the buff, serves as background to the major decoration, which generally consists of birds that never were, fantastic animals, and odd-looking human beings. Sprinkled between them is a minor decoration of little geometrical figures, curls, sprigs, a few Arabic letters, perhaps the word *barakeh,* and so on. An interesting feature of this pottery, and this alone of all the pottery made in Samarkand and Afrasiyab, and indeed of anywhere in the Islamic world except Egypt, is that we know some of it was made especially for the use of Christians. It is distinguishable as such by the prominent use of the cross botôné in the decoration, as seen on the object illustrated in Figure 6—an inkwell of which the domed top unfortunately is missing. This was not a unique find, for among others it was part of an assemblage of circular dishes, probably used for pistachio nuts and sweetmeats, a form of vessel made in both Samarkand and
Nishapur which is thoroughly Iranian and goes back to the Sasanian era. The appearance of the cross as a Christian symbol and not as mere indiscriminate decoration is not so strange as might be thought, if one remembers that there were still many Nestorian Christians living in Khurasan at that time. One speculates as to whether non-Muslims made this kind of pottery. Neither kilns nor wasters have so far been discovered of this glazed buff pottery in the vast ruin fields of ancient Nishapur. This lack does not contradict the fact that it was made there. The quantity found has been so great, and its absence in Transoxiana, the land across the Oxus river, as well as in the rest of Iran is so complete, that its local manufacture cannot be questioned.

Plentiful in Samarkand and entirely lacking in Nishapur is earthenware with turquoise overglaze painting in patterns on a white ground. The decoration usually consists of leafy forms geometrically arranged, with outlines that are often blurred or dotted. It must definitely be considered a Transoxianian product if not one of Afrasiyab itself.

Overglaze painting nevertheless was not unknown in Nishapur, but its character is quite different from that described above. Found in large quantities were rather thick vessels glazed white in varying degrees of opaqueness, which suggests that tin was not a cheap commodity, and in the poorest examples its use was stinted. These vessels were definitely copied from the far superior models of Iraq of about the ninth century, some of which found their way to Nishapur. They were adorned with short inscriptions in blue and are sometimes enlivened by green splashes (see Figures 7, 8). Unfortunately the potters working in Nishapur seem to have been at a disadvantage, for cobalt (the metallic base used for making dark blue) seems not to have been available, so they substituted purplish black for blue, using it for short lengths of simulated Kufic writing. As copper bases were at hand, they had no difficulty in making the green splashes, which they dabbed on around the rim. As with the buffware, no kilns nor wasters have been found, but there is every other reason to state positively that this ware, too, was locally made. Also, closely related to it is another group with an opaque yellow glaze, decorated with green designs. This type with drawing in black is still made in Nishapur (see Figure 27).

Let us now consider another ninth and tenth century ware, common to both Nishapur and Samarkand but which was known in most of the

![Fig. 9. Samarkand bowl found in Nishapur. IX-X century Teheran Museum](image)

![Fig. 10. Center of Nishapur bowl. IX-X century Rogers Fund, 40.170.427](image)

Asiatic Islamic world of that time. It has rightly been recognized as having been inspired by Chinese pottery of the T'ang period of which originals have been unearthed in the excavations in both Samarra in Iraq and in Nishapur. Although so far it has not figured in the collections
of sherds from Afrasiyab, there is little doubt that in further excavations it will be found, as it is most unlikely that the Chinese ware never reached there. Nicknamed “egg and spinach,” from the colors used to decorate the white ground, it sometimes has purplish brown spots added also. In its simplest form the color is merely applied in small dabs and splashes and its very simplicity usually makes it impossible to say where the vessels were made; but when the ware was elaborated, as it often was by graffito decoration, the nature of these added scratched designs enables us to recognize the various places of origin. It is thus often possible to distinguish that made in Nishapur not only from that of Afrasiyab but also from examples of this pottery made in Gurgan, Rayy, Shiraz, the Makran (Iranian Baluchistan), and Iraq. It was a ware made in very many cities. Of this particular kind of pottery we shall confine ourselves to that found in Nishapur and Afrasiyab. Quite apart from style, we know from wasters retrieved from the two sites that it was manufactured in both cities. We also know that it was made in very con-

siderable quantities. Several bowls from Nishapur have already been published in the Museum Bulletin and one from Afrasiyab by Erdmann. Several from Samarkand are to be seen in the Stoliarov photographs illustrated here.

The exterior of vessels of this kind made in Nishapur was invariably covered with a white slip and glazed, the glaze sometimes being streaked. In Samarkand the exterior though streaked is not always coated with white and glazed. The general tendency in all Nishapur early pottery is to glaze the exterior very extensively and sometimes the base as well. Unfortunately the dark green splashes which are a characteristic feature of this ware often obscure the finely drawn graffito designs, making them hard to see in the originals and even less visible in photographs. Whereas the scratch designs of both places are divided into precise compartments, the scratch decoration within the outline is different. In Samarkand the filling often consists of a scalelike net or single-line hatching (see Figure 9), but in Nishapur neither of these space fillers was used. The potters there preferred floral forms (see Figure 10). In their simpler designs, however, they used crosshatching. It became quite possible as a result of handling many thousands of sherds in Nishapur to recognize some of this ware as coming not only from the same workshop, but even from the same hand. It is not surprising that in the important and busy city of Nishapur, with its coming and going of merchants, there should be some importations, and a few fragments of these were discovered in the excavations. Two or three
of them were from vessels made in Samarkand, others from Iraq and elsewhere, but even allowing for a few vessels of doubtful origin the great majority of this type unearthed in Nishapur was made there.

When we come to the vessels with a white ground, we come to the core and most difficult part of the problem. We discover once again that there are certain groups made in great profusion in Afrasiyab of which surprisingly few individual pieces were ever found in Nishapur. There are other groups of which many examples have been discovered in both places and about which there must continue to be some uncertainty. And finally there are some which we can now say with assurance were made in Nishapur.

Of the first group the Museum possesses one example (Figure 11) from Afrasiyab itself that was not found in Iran. The predominant colors are brownish red, olive green, and off-black. Closely related to it are many other vessels in similar colors, often decorated with “open hearts” and interlaced bands, but although very common in Transoxiana, they are so far undiscovered in Nishapur.

Another group, in which the colors are red and black, was found in great quantity in Samarkand, and wasters have been found in Afrasiyab, so that we know it was manufactured there. This group, closely knit by the designs upon it, a very extensive one and well represented in the Stoliarov photos, is only one of several with the same color scheme. It is distinguished by Arabic inscriptions on the inner wall and by the base decorated with strapwork, or a wide-petaled rosette or flower, or a palmette which is either simple or with elaborations. The odd spaces are filled with dots or with single hatchings in outlined compartments. The writing on these vessels is usually rather heavy, as can be seen in the Stoliarov photographs. Despite the great numbers in which they were made, it is surprising how few of them ever reached Nishapur. When this did occur, it was usually only the better ones, and of these, two are in the Metropolitan Museum. One from the Museum’s own excavations (Figure 12) is particularly fine. The other, a purchase, is of not so fine a quality and somewhat different in style (see Cover). One in the
turning of these often large vessels is extraordinarily good, so that they are very thin indeed and any potter would be proud to have produced them. Several of the best, such as one in the British Museum (Figure 14), have a whirling painted in the center. In these the red is a full tomato red and the black purplish rather than brownish. It is possible that this ware was made in both cities, but it is a question that only the clearing of the early Nishapur kilns can settle.

A similar problem exists with underglaze painted vessels of white with inscriptions in red and black. These also are of very fine quality, but in this case wasters have been found only in Afrasiyab, so that the question posed but not answered is, were they made in both places? Related vessels of fine quality with green added to the color scheme (though some are of green and red only) have been found quite commonly in Transoxiana but for some reason almost never turned up in Nishapur, whereas others (see Figure 15) are more common there than in Samarkand. We have seen that at least one group that is not of the best quality was not imported—and that certain better ones were. Can this be merely a matter of taste? In England imported oranges and bananas are eaten by everyone, but imported mangoes, in spite of much inspired support and a lowered price, remain the choice of the minority only. So perhaps the answer is—the Nishapurians just did not like certain designs.

In Samarkand a large number of vessels were made with a green slip painted upon a white engobe; this slip stains the glaze slightly yellow. A waster with part of a bird on it is in the Berlin

*Fig. 14. Bowl found in Nishapur. x century*  
Freer Gallery in Washington, in which a rosette is encircled by five palmettes, is perhaps the finest of all.  

A whirling rosette, which sometimes figures in bowls of this ware as well as in others, is almost a trade-mark of Samarkand, and it appears in Nishapur only on vessels which seem to be imported from Samarkand. An excellent example, of gleaming white (Figure 13), is now in the Metropolitan Museum. On the exterior is a repeated simulated Arabic inscription in bright tomato red; the whirling rosette is of the same color but touched with black lines.

Another group of bowls with the red-black-white color scheme is a series decorated with foliations of palmettes or half palmettes, with graffito white lines, and sometimes embellished with dots. Many crude examples of this type have been found in Afrasiyab and are to be seen there, in Tashkent, and elsewhere. But the finest have come from Nishapur, both from our own excavations and from commercial digging. The

*Fig. 15. Bowl from the Museum’s excavations in Nishapur in 1938. x century*  
Rogers Fund, 39.40.7
collection. Erdmann very properly considers it an imitation of monochrome lustreware, of which no fragments are in the Berlin collection, but of which several examples have been found in Nishapur. Doubtless they will yet be found in Samarkand if excavations in the residential parts of Afrasiyab continue, and probably ninth century polychrome lustre also. A little of this type of imitation lustre was imported from Samarkand into Nishapur, where the potters seemed to have their own ways of making what is perhaps also an imitation lustre. They used a brownish slip and tinted certain areas with an iron-based yellow that produced a two-toned effect (see Figure 16). The most common variety, however, though rather far removed from lustreware itself, was a chrome-mixed black which tinted the glaze around it on the white ground a clear yellow (see Figure 17). This was often supplemented by a strong brownish black of manganese and iron. Very many vessels of this type were retrieved, often with “inscriptions” consisting usually of one word repeated.

This color scheme seems to have been employed in Afrasiyab as well. In Nishapur this technique was employed for bowls decorated with crudely drawn animals (see Figure 18). Although none complete were found by the Museum’s expedition in Nishapur, sherds were unearthed in areas that would suggest a date not before the end of the tenth century. Commercial diggers were more successful, and a number of vessels of this type have found their way into museums and private collections.

Running animals are a feature of a number of bowls wrongly ascribed to Nishapur. They are often rather attractive, with the decoration in olive green, brick red, and off-black. Some have been discovered in Afrasiyab, and one is in the Stolarov Collection. The background is usually filled with outlined dotted areas or with peacock eyes. Related to such bowls is one in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 19), given by the late Khalil Rabenou, but in this case the animal is surrounded with foliation. It is perhaps not without significance that no fragments of such vessels were found while the Museum’s expedition was at work. It would seem, then, that those reputed to come from Nishapur either were importations made in Transoxiana or came...
from sites in the Gurgan region or other places northwest of Nishapur.

Through the discovery of a waster we have learned that white slip painting on a dark ground under a green glaze was practiced in Nishapur, but as this is a common type we shall pass on to the simplest of all color schemes, black on white. These vessels are remarkable for the economy and effectiveness of their decoration. They have been found in large numbers in both cities. A small jug of this ware, very probably from Afrasiyab and found in Nishapur, is shown on the cover of this Bulletin. There is no doubt whatsoever that this type, often so at-
tractive to our present-day eye, was manufactured in Nishapur also. We know that many of this type were found in Gurgan too. They can be distinguished from those of Nishapur in that the outside of the vessels is not glazed. The fortunate discovery of a waster (Figure 21) and another spoiled base (Figure 20) in the area of some kilns that were operated in the twelfth century gives us additional evidence, though it is unfortunate that the ninth and tenth century kilns themselves have not yet been revealed. Figure 22 shows what the waster probably looked like in a more complete form. The small, bird-like device in the center of the base was a fashion common to Samarkand and Nishapur. In Samarkand it was quite customary to have an Arabic word written in black across the base of the bowl. Sometimes there were Arabic inscriptions on the inner wall also. The same was true of Nishapur, but in Samarkand the favored word for inscribing in the base was barakeh, "blessing," whereas in Nishapur it was most commonly Ahmad. No single type of writing was adhered to, but that shown in Figures 23 and 25 was by far the most usual. These bowls are quite common in Nishapur, and many come from the same workshop. A feature of a number of them is a bell-like motif which indicates where the inscription begins and ends. We can be certain of local manufacture in Nishapur of this particular group which has its counterpart in Samarkand. A typical Afrasiyab piece in the Museum of Eastern Culture in Moscow is shown in Figure 24.

A variety of problems remain which cannot be discussed in this article. Some of these can only be solved by the finding of the early Nishapur kilns. Though the difficulties of true ascription have accumulated with the flood of vessels from Nishapur and from other sites but said to be from Nishapur, we at least have very strong evidence that much fine glazed earthenware was made there in the ninth and tenth centuries, and that there was very considerable variety. We also know that her potters were extremely able in the following Saljuk period, and of this period kilns have been discovered, but that is another story which has previously been merely touched on and of which more remains to be told.
Fig. 25 (opposite page). Bowl from Nishapur
Anonymous Loan, L61.58

NOTES

1. *Iranian Institute Bulletin*, 1946, pp. 102-10; Erdmann had previously published an excellent illustrated summary of this collection (*Faenza* XXV [1937]:25-37), but the later article contains more facts and suggestions useful to us here.


3. Some of the Nishapur-dug wares now in the Teheran museum storeroom had recently been ascribed—over the Metropolitan Museum expedition’s old field markings—to Gurgan, but this was corrected as much as possible by the author in 1960.

4. The Metropolitan Museum of Art *Bulletin*, XXXII, October 1937, Sec. II; XXXIII, November 1938, Sec. II; n.s. VI, November 1947.


Fig. 23. Incomplete bowl found during the Museum’s excavations in Nishapur in 1939. Late X century Teheran Museum

Fig. 24. Afrasiyab bowl
Museum of Eastern Culture, Moscow

Fig. 26 (above). Incomplete bowl found during the Museum’s excavations in Nishapur in 1939. Late X century Teheran Museum

Fig. 27 (opposite page). Modern Nishapur plate with yellow, green, and black decoration