

Ceramics of ancient and medieval Kazakhstan

Clay is a substance that has always been at hand since the existence of human. It is so malleable when kneaded with water that it can be molded into any form. Drying and baking makes the mold retain its shape with a surprising amount of durability. The discovery of ceramics and the potter's wheels has remained one of the greatest achievements of human civilization.

Until the medieval period, ceramics was one of the widely used materials. From it they made statuettes of gods, stucco moldings, pottery, beautiful vases, toys, vases, toys, bowls, "clay" books, sculptures, wall panels, water pipes, roof tiles and building bricks. That explains why most of archaeological findings are mostly ceramics or precisely its fragments.

Sometimes archaeology is jokingly referred to as the "science of broken pottery". Nevertheless, how much valuable information is contained in these crocks – the history of the development of the craft and the change of artistic styles and the history of cultural contacts, ethnic traditions and religious beliefs...?

The first clay articles on the territory of Kazakhstan appeared during the Neolithic era dating as far back as the 5th millennium BC. It was during that time that people were changing over to a new way of life- farming and cattle breeding – which made them learn to make parabolic-shaped pots and decorate them with their patterns.

The Bronze Era, which was the period when Andronovo culture took roots on the endless territory of Kazakhstan, marked the start of the gradual change of the earlier similar in shape pottery into more beautiful and different forms with very complex ornamentation. These ornamentations were made by stamping or engraving. The Andronovites were Indo-Iranians and much of their mode of life could be understood by analyzing their religious hymns that carry information about ceramics, various traditions linked with their making and the significance of the decorations on the vessels.

According to Shatapatha Brakhman texts, dating back 3 thousand years, the process of making sacrificial vessels is compared to the creation of the world.

In the process of molding in article, a potter was supposed to pronounce some spell-bound words and call for help from the gods of the sun – Mitra, the sky-Varun, the fire –Agni and the wind – Vaiu. It was believed that a person who offered sacrificed in these articles would receive posterity, prosperity, kinsmen and other.

Ceramic articles made during the Early Bronze Age in Kazakhstan were decorated with stamped and drawn geometric patterns but we also find quite a few on which loops and cones had been mold-pasted. These ornaments were placed on these articles either for beauty or were thought to have some magical purposes.

Articles made during the 15th-13th centuries B.C. were characterized by their standard shapes and thin walls resulting from improved components in the clay mixture in addition to an even baking temperature which proves that great progress was made in pottery that time.

Anthromorphisation of vessels, characteristic of all mankind can still be noticed in the names of the parts – body, shoulders, mouth, crown, handle, foot.

Numerous combinations of elements on the vessels made during the Andronov cultural period proves that the craftsmen of that time perfectly knew many methods of ornamental art. The concrete significance of particular elements of the ornament was difficult to decipher. Judging from later Buddha sculptures, a square symbolizes the Earth; a circle – the Earth and the Sun; a square inside the circle – the Universe; concrete rings – the Sun.

Applied art of Andronovo culture greatly influenced the development of the art of successive epochs, including that of contemporary Kyrgyzs and Kazakhs.

The next group of ceramic articles is the pottery of the Saks, Savromats, Usuns, Kanguys and Sarmats. Perfect samples of the Saks' jugs and bowls, made on a potter's wheel and surfaced with red polish were found in the famous Issyk mound (4th – 3rd centuries BC). They were elegant pottery belonging to the noble class in

the society, whereas mass Saks pottery of the 6th-3rd century BC were handmade and comprise of spout vessels, bowls, cups, jugs and pots.

Ceramics of the Usunes (3rd-4th centuries) were more diverse. From the early centuries of our era, the majority of the pottery were made on the potter's wheel and surface finished with red angobe. Part of this pottery got to Zhetysu from Central Asia and Greek-Bactria, like the set of bowls made on the potter's wheel and found in the Betkainar mound (2nd century B.C.) in Kurdai.

The distinguishing features of Sarmat and Savromat ceramics were their rounded bottoms and ornaments were mostly drawn. The formation of Sarmat ceramics style was definitely influenced by the traditional centers of settlement of Khoresm and Syrdarya Kaunchinoid cultures.

A large collection of Kanguis collection was gathered from the excavations of the settlements and burials in Otrar Oasis, which date back as far as the 1st-5th centuries. Tableware meant for occasions were surface finished in red or dark brown angobe and polished to make them fit the occasion. Ceramic kitchenware of that period was mostly made round-bodied with low necks and a slightly out-turned crown. Semi-spheres or tooth lug were the shapes of the commonly used handles. Some pots with both forms of handles were also discovered.

Lids were made in different sizes with diameters ranging from 1-12 cm for the small ones to 25-30cm for the larger ones. Handles on these lids took the form of a loop fixed at the center or side or simply an oval opening at the top. The bases were styled in the form of an ox head with accentuated massive horns.

The next group of pottery, khume was mostly used for storage, carrying water and food. The shoulders of the khume bore patterns drawn baking – circles, zigzags, crosses and parallel lines. Leaks marks and drops found on the walls of the khume meant for storage of grain, flour or oil symbolized prosperity and plentiful supply. Patterns in the form of crosses, zigzags, triangles and other characters might on the one hand be the signature of the craftsman or on the other hand be signs meant to protect the contents of the vessel from an evil eye.

It seems the handles on the lids of kitchenware made in the form of animals – often a ram, dog and horse – were also meant to ward off the bad spells of an evil eye. Alongside the usual figures of the ram, some of the drawings were styled. Outstanding examples are the rams with S and V-shaped horns.

Such images were connected with the widespread Kangui beliefs that the image of the ram was the incarnation of the god of Farn, the provider of abundance and protector against evil forces.

Ceramics with ram images were characteristic of the tribes that settled in the Syrdarya including Otrar Oasis. The ram emblem was a sort of “business card” of the local pottery and probably it was due to the influence of these Syrdarya tribes that pottery with zoomorphic handles became widespread in Central Asia.

One may rightly call the part of the set of tableware with red painting against a white angobe background as an interesting artistic relic. Rows of pyramids below where a creature much like a griffin with an anthropomorphous face were drawn on the walls of these vessels. It might be a fragment of a composition illustrating some epic plot depicted by an ancient artist.

The medieval ages marked a qualitatively new stage in the development of Kazakhstan. The 6th-9th centuries marks the formation of the ancient Turkic states on the territory of Kazakhstan. Building of cities, development of culture and establishing links with neighboring states along the Great Silk Road were some of its landmarks. And it was during that period that two urban regions, namely Zhetysu and South Kazakhstan started setting up their ceramics schools. The Sogolians, who settled in the large towns of Taraz, Kulan and Mirki in Zhetysu Region, together with the indigenous population – the descendants of the Usunes and Turks – developed a specific styles in the art of ceramics. The outstanding works were articles used for cult ceremonies such as lanterns, hearth supports and lids. Richly decorated lids of the pots used in cooking cult food came with handles that took the form of a ram, bird or an anthropomorphous creature. Their surfaces were decorated with lines, zigzags, meanders and plant motifs. Rarely were images were stamped.

A large and richly decorated group of ceramic products of the period are the dastarkhans – small clay tables. A large collection in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic vessels was also gathered in the excavations. The latter was mainly made in the form of a duck.

Duck-shaped vessels were considered to symbolize the oneness of the sky, land and water and were associated with myths of the creation of the world. All these vessels were used in the ceremonies of festival Nauryz – the New Year.

Architectural ceramics form a separate group. The decorations in the cult buildings of the 9th-10th centuries of the city of Dzhamukhata in Talas Valley and the interior of Kulan Palace are some glaring examples. Artistically cut-out patterns were made in a thick layer of freshly coated wall plaster. As a rule niches and wall panels were decorated in this way. The patterns were either geometric motif – meanders, bands, lines and circles – plant motifs – vineyards, bunches of flowers and tulips- or styled letters. Human and animal images were rather rare. Very often these clay mold decorations were painted red, blue, green or white. This form of wall decoration spread to the cities of Kazakhstan situated along the Great Silk Road from the big Orient centers of Fustat, Samarra and Afrasiab.

Ceramic craftsmanship of the 10th – early 13th centuries in Zhetysu was characterized by widespread glazed pottery. Bowls, dishes and plates were decorated by pre-glaze painting and engravings and more rarely with lustre and enamels. Trade along the Great Silk Road brought in precious ceramic products from Iran, China and even Japan that greatly influenced the development of new styles, standards and manufacturing techniques of glazed, lusted pottery and china.

After the Mongol conquest, urban life activities in Zhetysu declined. The majority of the inhabitants abandoned these big fallen cities. Consequently this had an adverse influence on the ceramics craft. South Kazakhstan ceramics of the early medieval period like ceramics of Zhetysu displayed two types of pottery. Firstly, the conservatives that still hang onto the previous tradition and secondly the advance guard who brought in new styles. The latter became popular in Sogda

Region. Researchers noted that ceramics of that period closely imitated metallic products. The jars, the forms of which were similar to those made of silver used by the Turkic tribes, now had handles in the form of a ring just like metal jars. Otrar jars, made in the imitation of metal ones, had pear-like bodies and a row of protruding elements on the vertical rib served as handles. The jars had one or two tooth-like handles. Ornamentation on the jugs and jars were made by impressing a diamond-shaped net and rows of semi-ovals and ovals on the body. The outer surfaces of the jugs were painted in red, cherry-colored or black angobe. These articles seemed to unite both the traditional style –red, cherry-colored and black angobes, handles with zoomorphous images and the new style – pear-like body and a triangular-shaped spout.

A beautiful jug was unearthed in Kuiryktobe with a long spout in which the ornament decoration on its surface was performed by engraving, stamping and mold-pasting. The female figures on it with crown-like hats and arms folded on their breasts makes us associate this find with Fravash cult-spiritual protectors. The ceramic mask and fragment of the jug-neck made in the form of the demon's head were the attributes of medieval artists.

The ceramics of that period like that of Kanguy epoch is characterized by realistic and styled ram-head figures. They were used as decorations on hearth supports.

In 11th-early 13th centuries B.C. when urban culture reached its apogee, potters quarters appeared in the cities. Ceramic production technology was greatly improved and glazed ceramics became widespread during that period. Glazed ceramics penetrated further into Southern Kazakhstan and Otrar from Middle Asia in 9th-10th centuries. The shapes of the vessels, their proportions and details changed and the decoration, which comprises one of the main features of Central Asian fine arts became richer. The craftsmen introduced new ornamental elements, new compositions and colors. Several centers and schools of medieval artistic ceramics were formed in Merv, Samarkand, Kuva, Shash and Taraz. Otrar started forming its craft school as far back as in the early medieval period. The image of a

ram with twisted horns, popular in Otrar was continuously repeated on ceramic products of this period.

The figure of the ram crowned the lids of the kitchenware and tableware that were richly decorated with mold-pasted and engraved ornaments of plant, geometric and rarely animal motifs. Separate elements were composed in the shape of a vertical rosette or a spiral. The handles of the spherical lids were made in the form of conical protrusions or in the form of real and styled ram heads, or in the form of bird heads – pheasant and rooster.

Lots of dastarkhans – round ceramic tables were found in excavations, richly decorated with plant, geometric and zoomorphic motifs. One may come across the images of birds like the peacock, pigeon and even birds with crests.

Small hearth or altar present a peculiar group of the ceramic collection. Potters employed various methods of stamping and diverse decorative elements to make these masterpieces. Among the decorative motifs are images of trees, medallions and rosettes, solar signs, Z-shape figures and epigraphic ornaments. These ornaments on the hearth undoubtedly carried a hidden meaning, most probably a coded mythical structure of the universe.

The glazed ceramics of 12th and early 13th centuries are characterized by fractional ornamentation. The surface of the articles were divided into sectors by cross-like figures and wholly ornamented. That was the period when compositions of triangles inside squares were done and often by engraving. That is also the period when South Kazakhstan ceramics found analogies in Central Asian urban pottery namely Shasha, Taraz and Fergana. This similarity testifies close economic and cultural ties and similar tastes of the urban people oriented towards the examples set by leading cultural centers. The second half of 12th to the beginning of 13th centuries was marked with the appearance of new trends. Potters tried to renovate shapes and expressive means. A considerable part of the ceramics was characterized by a darkly painted background, which made the ornament contours of the engraved lines lose its flatness. Engraved ornaments in combination with

punched background patterns imitating metal decorations became widespread. Alongside with that there was a tendency of refraining from complicated patterns.

At the beginning of 13th century, the progressing development of Asians and Eastern Europeans were halted by the Mongol conquest. Syrdarya cities including Otrar were demolished and the people were killed or enslaved. The renaissance of Otrar after the tragic events of 1219-1220 began only in the middle of 13th century. Archaeological excavations done in Otrar uncovered a large area believed to have been inhabited by potters. Among the finds there were twelve workshops that housed eighteen potter's kilns. These workshops specialized in production of glazed and non-glazed, voluminous and small table pottery. That period heralded in the new style in ceramic art. Angobe surfacing, especially reddish-brown angobe under the painting was most significant. New vistas were opened in glazed ceramics with the use of red angobe. The glazed dark background became deeper and light-colored patterns covered with colored glazes- green, yellow, blue and creamy acquired the color of glazing and looked more expressive. Colorless glazes were also used.

The patterns on the red angobe ceramics of the second half of 13-14th centuries were mono-colored, large patterned and a bit rough. Patterns were made on the interior surfaces of open bowls, phials and deep plates. Typical patterns were geometric net-like patterns of the vertical rosette motif and clustered dots. Patterns on these ceramics may be compared to the application on felt carpets. There may be coincidences and differences in ornamentation by they represent the same style proving the steppe cultural influence on the formation of the new ceramics style. An unmistakable attribute of 13-14th century ceramics is the pattern in the form of an endless chain of arches on the outer surface. By the end of 14-15th centuries, yellow glazed pottery with multicolored patterns against the light angobe background became regular produce of Otrar pottery. Two colors were mainly used-brown (of different shades, sometimes contrasting on the vessel) and green. The patterns were basically geometric. A little later colorless and navy-blue glazing were also used.

Otrar's glazed ceramics of 16th-18th century was known as early 1904, when the first excavations of that town was made by A.Klare and A.A.Cherkasov. Even the few materials obtained at that time made G.A.Pugacheva, an outstanding archaeologist, note the complexity of the ornamental compositions of Otrar ceramics in the late medieval period.

During the late medieval era the scope of glazed items considerably widened. Alongside with bowls, cups and small jugs glazing was done to larger vessels like pots, basins and dishes.

The pattern distribution on the surface of the vessels looked different. Here we find compositions of circular ornamental bands, covering the whole of the surface. Sometimes the background is almost free and it is only the bottom that is emphasized by the ornament. And finally the ornament totally covered the surface of the vessel. The decoration on the inner surface of a vessel was often minimal, while dense patterns much like those on carpets covered the whole of the outer surface, especially on cups whose relatively vertical walls provided enough space for that.

Stylized plant patterns that prevailed in 16th-17th centuries mostly consisted of natural motifs such as flowers, branches and pomegranate fruit. They also designed familiar motifs, like the "Koshkar muiz" – curled horn patterns. This element was famous with the Turkic people and was designed on clothes, rugs, wall carpets, wooden surfaces and metal. The "vertical rosette" motive was used at times, but in a more sophisticated form.

The town of Yassy in Turkestan began to grow impetuously from 16th century and undoubtedly attracted the best craftsmen and potters. That explains why famous Turkestan ceramic article was made to the highest standards. This was the remarkable vase with the dragon, aidakhar depicted on it. This fabulous beast was a frequent character in the products of medieval applied arts and folklore. However, such images, including zoomorphic motifs in general were rather rare in 16th-17th centuries.

South Kazakhstan ceramics.

Ceramics of 16th-18th centuries was a rule layered with colorless, light-green or dark-green glaze. The designs were mainly dark mono-colors that contrasted well against the white background. The most expressive designs were the thick bright blue cobalt patterns.

Another group of ceramic products comprised of statuettes of birds and animals – often a horse or a ram. They were covered with green, white or turquoise glaze and sometimes patterned with cobalt. The ceramic figures of birds and animals were not only decorative, but also symbols of local beliefs and cults of local people.

Ancient archaic beliefs, of course, did not survive till the late medieval period in their initial form and this has led to the loss of symbolic meaning of the items with time. But reminiscences of this phenomenon were retained. It was not accidental that worshipping of the ram was practiced among the rural population of the Syrdarya region up till the beginning of the 20th century. The urban population also preserved the inborn customs and beliefs related to the Kanguy farn-ram in “Koshkar ata” ritual festival which was celebrated solely in the yurta and the outskirts of towns.