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Atıf Künyesi | Citation Info

Mammadli, S. (2025). Traces of Khorasan Culture in the Written Ceramic Samples of Azerbaijan. *Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi*, 12 (3), 85-106. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15616966>

Traces of Khorasan Culture in the Written Ceramic Samples of Azerbaijan

Abstract

The epigraphic ceramics of the Samanids are considered among the finest achievements of Islamic art. These ceramics were the products of an urban society that flourished during the Samanid period in the 9th–10th centuries, when Eastern Iran and Central Asia became a confluence of cultures. They reflect a unique synthesis of diverse cultural influences Persian, Arab, and Turkic elements, the legacy of the Sasanian Empire, Islamic motifs, and the art of Chinese ceramics. This article discusses key innovations in ceramic production during the Abbasid and Samanid periods, the overall development of Islamic ceramic art, and the role of ceramics as epigraphic material.

Keywords: Middle Ages, Azerbaijan, Khorasan Culture, Samanid Ceramics, Epigraphy

Azerbaycan'ın Yazılı Seramik Örneklerinde Horasan Kültürünün İzleri

Öz

Samanilerin epigrafi seramikleri İslam sanatının en güzel başarıları arasında sayılmaktadır. Bu seramikler, Doğu İran ve Orta Asya'nın bir kültürler buluşması haline geldiği 9.-10. yüzyıllarda Samaniler döneminde gelişen bir kent toplumunun ürünleridir. İran, Arap ve Türk unsurları, Sasani İmparatorluğu'nun mirası, İslami motifler ve Çin seramik sanatının farklı kültürel etkilerinin eşsiz bir sentezini yansıtır. Bu makalede Abbasi ve Samani dönemlerinde seramik üretimindeki önemli yenilikler, İslam seramik sanatının genel gelişimi ve epigrafi malzeme olarak seramiğin rolü tartışılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ortaçağ, Azerbaycan, Horasan Kültürü, Samani Seramikleri, Epigrafi

Indtroduction



The Samanid dynasty was situated along the famous Silk Road, at the crossroads of several trade routes that connected the Abbasid Caliphate, Byzantium, the Vikings via Russia, Turkic tribes in the northeast, and China. During that time, the inability of the ruling powers to effectively suppress uprisings by local peasants and urban dwellers suffering under feudal oppression enabled the Karakhanid and Ghaznavid forces to exploit the situation and ultimately bring an end to the Samanid state. However, with the establishment of the Seljuk Turkic state in 1038, with its capital in Nishapur, the entirety of Khorasan, Khwarezm, Byzantium, Iran, Iraq, the South Caucasus including Azerbaijan fell under their control. The Abbasid Caliphate was reduced to a vassal state, and Iraq, including Baghdad, came under Seljuk rule. These political developments also facilitated the spread of cultures. Moreover, the regional cultures that had flourished in Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Northern Khorasan during that period exerted their own influence an influence that eventually reached Azerbaijan. This is clearly evidenced by the discovery of Samanid coins and ceramic artifacts in Azerbaijan. The culture and literature that had developed in Khorasan during the 9th–10th centuries spread westward through Azerbaijan into Anatolia, following the migration of Seljuk Turks in the 11th century. Although Islam spread across the Iranian region in the 8th–9th centuries, the inheritors of Persian culture resisted the spread of Arab cultural dominance. Broadly speaking, during this period, a new cultural synthesis began to take root from the fusion of Islam and Persian traditions in Iran (Gil, 2015).

1. Main part

The Samanid state emerged in the 9th–10th centuries as a political and cultural center in Eastern Iran and Central Asia. Founded during a period of political fragmentation in the Islamic world, the Samanids played a crucial role in reviving the Persian language and culture. They promoted cultural development by disseminating Islam and translating the Qur'an into Persian. Under the Samanids, various ethnic and religious groups including Persians, Arabs, Turks, Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians coexisted and contributed to the cultural diversity of the state.

Located along major trade routes, the Samanids also made significant advancements in the production of ceramics and developed distinctive artistic styles in this field. Archaeological excavations have revealed the diversity of ceramic artifacts produced during this period. In particular, ceramic wares decorated with a pigment known as “slip” stand out. The primary production centers of Samanid ceramics included cities such as Gorgan, Merv, Sari, Samarkand, and Nishapur (Yılmaz, 2020). Thus, the Samanid state played a vital role not only politically, but also culturally in the development of Central Asia. These cities were major trade hubs along

the Silk Road. In general, the place of production of Samanid epigraphic ceramics is rarely identified, as these works were often unsigned and undated. Nonetheless, such ceramics were primarily produced and traded in Eastern Iran and Central Asia, and they were rarely found on international markets suggesting they were intended mainly for regional use.

The ceramic samples discovered in Nishapur were classified by Charles Wilkinson into twelve groups, each defined by distinctive stylistic features. Among these are black-and-white glazed wares, yellowish-toned pieces, and ceramics resembling Chinese porcelain (Wilkinson, 1973). According to Wilkinson's classification, the first group in Samanid ceramic production is known as "buffware." These vessels were made from yellowish (*buff*) clay. Their surfaces were generally plain, with little to no decoration applied. In terms of ornamentation, they are among the simpler ceramic types. The second group includes black-and-white glazed ceramics. The surface of these vessels was decorated with black pigment on a white background. Their designs are simple yet elegant, and they stand out for their decorative style. These two groups reflect the technical and stylistic diversity of ceramic production during the Samanid period and are considered key phases in its artistic development. The third group is particularly noteworthy. These pieces are distinguished by inscriptions as well as geometric or floral motifs used decoratively.

A remarkable 10th-century Samanid ceramic piece, discovered in Nishapur and now housed in the Brooklyn Museum in New York (USA), is painted in brown slip on a white slip base under a transparent glaze (dimensions: 11.4 x 35.2 cm). (Fig. 5. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/>). Such ceramics would have attracted the attention of the local Persian-speaking population, as well as Arab elites and merchants who may have owned them. The inscriptions on these types of vessels represent some of the earliest recorded Arabic proverbs in the Islamic world and thus occupy a central place in the history of Arabic literature (<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/>).

The vessel features an Arabic inscription in *Kufic* script that reads:

كلام العيوب ذي بطانة يبدي إنما وصمت ما السلامة إن

Translation:

Indeed, safety lies in silence, but speech reveals the flaws of its owner.

Regarding the production process of Samanid ceramic wares, it can be stated that the clay was sourced from local deposits, then purified and shaped on the potter's wheel. The most common forms included flat plates and vessels with upright sides, though other forms such as

ewers and pen cases were also produced. Initially, the clay was brought to a semi-dry state and then reworked. After shaping, the vessel was left to dry again.

Once fully dried, the vessel would be coated with a white slip a liquid clay mixed with white pigment. This slip layer could sometimes appear in darker tones as well. Once the slip dried, the piece would be decorated using slips in different colors. The most commonly used pigments were manganese black and, occasionally, iron red. In some cases, the coloring process was reversed: white patterns would be applied over a black background. When using slips, artisans would sometimes apply the *sgraffito* technique incising through the colored slip layer with a sharp tool to create fine details or inscriptions. Finally, the piece was coated with a transparent glaze and fired at high temperatures, typically between 850–950°C.

Due to the limited number of ceramic artifacts discovered from the early Islamic period, there is little information available about the first ceramic works of the Islamic era. Most known examples from this time are green-glazed vessels and tiles used in architectural decoration, primarily produced under the Umayyads. In the 8th century, however, during the Abbasid period, ceramics rose to the level of fine art greatly influenced by Chinese porcelain. This is evidenced by finds from Fustat and Nishapur, and notably, by a historical account of Ali ibn Isa, the governor of Khorasan, gifting 200 high-quality Chinese porcelain items to the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid (786–809).

However, kaolin clay, the essential raw material for porcelain, was not available in Iraq or Iran. Consequently, Islamic artisans had to seek alternatives. Initially, Islamic ceramicists used white slip and transparent lead-based glaze, but this method was not entirely satisfactory, as the patterns would often blur during firing. To resolve this issue, Abbasid potters added tin oxide to the lead-based glaze, creating an opaque, snow-white surface an effect resembling Chinese porcelain (Watson, 2004). This innovation led to the creation of white-and-black ceramics decorated using the “ink-on-snow” technique (Grube, 1965). Decorative features included fine patterns, Arabic inscriptions, and asymmetrically placed designs.

One of the most significant innovations of the Abbasid period was the invention of *lusterware* a completely new technique that revolutionized ceramic production in the Middle East. Pigments for luster ceramics were obtained by combining sulfur with either copper or silver, producing yellowish or reddish hues, respectively. Lusterware later spread to the far reaches of the Islamic world, including Al-Andalus, Fatimid Egypt, and Iran. Initially, however, this technique was a closely guarded secret, and in the 8th–9th centuries, potters in Nishapur lacked the local resources to produce it (Grube, 1965). Nevertheless, lusterware imported from

Iraq was widely admired, and the desire to emulate it became a major driving force behind further technological innovations in ceramics. This led to a revolutionary breakthrough in Eastern Iran the invention of glazed *slipware*. Slip-painted pottery had been produced in Transoxiana (Mawarannahr) since at least the 7th century. However, these vessels lacked a glaze layer, meaning they did not benefit from the intensified colors, surface sealing, or design protection that transparent glaze offered.

It is believed that this technique spread as far as Nishapur and came under the control of the Samanids in the 10th century. When Samanid potters began to use transparent glaze instead of opaque glaze, they developed special pigments that could adhere to the clay body and resist dissolving under the lead-based glaze. During the Samanid period, ceramic forms also underwent a shift in design. Vessels with rounded profiles evolved into shapes with straight sides and sharply angled transitions likely inspired by the design of metalware. Arabic inscriptions on Samanid ceramics were positioned according to specific design principles: in lusterware, the writing was oriented toward the rim of the vessel, whereas in slipware, it was directed toward the center. Additionally, inscriptions on some silver vessels carried dedicatory messages, which were not typically found on slip ceramic examples.

The decoration of glazed slipware from the Samanid period was highly diverse, ranging from abstract geometric patterns to figural depictions, particularly of birds. However, the most distinctive feature in terms of both quantity and artistic quality was the use of Arabic calligraphy. While Arabic inscriptions had occasionally been used on ceramics in Abbasid Iraq, Samanid pottery became the first type of ceramic consistently adorned with calligraphic writing (Pancaroglu, 2002). The inscriptions used on Samanid slipware were primarily in the *Kufic* style a linear script widely employed in Qur'anic manuscripts and monumental architectural inscriptions. Two distinct calligraphic approaches were used on ceramics: one was angular and geometric, created by carving into the slip layer; the other resembled brushstrokes and is believed to be associated with the growing use of paper. These script variants referred to as "Eastern Kufic", "Kufic-Naskh" and "Broken Cursive" became widespread in the second half of the 10th century.

Some vessels display a radial arrangement of inscriptions, with the letters placed along the rim and directed inward. Letters such as *alif* and *lam* were often arranged in a way that produced a rhythmic aesthetic effect. On certain vessels, the word *Ahmad* appears at the center, which Charles Wilkinson interpreted as a form of blessing, meaning "perform good and praiseworthy deeds". These inscriptions were associated with the idea of *baraka* (blessing) and

did not indicate a specific workshop or artisan (Wilkinson, 1961). On epigraphic objects, diacritical dots were sometimes used to distinguish letters from one another, and various symbols such as bells, rings, or leaf-shaped motifs were employed to mark the beginning or end of phrases. The center of the vessels was sometimes marked with a simple dot, while in other cases, it featured groups of dots, braided patterns, swastikas, or symbols resembling the Chinese “Yin-Yang” motif. In addition to inscriptions, Samanid ceramics were often embellished with ornamental bands, rotating rosettes, semicircles, or border decorations. Wilkinson has suggested that some of these markings may indicate the place of production of the vessel. Lisa Golombek also observed that decorative influences affected the letterforms on Samanid ceramics in three different “degrees of transformation”. (Golombek, 1966). These include:

- *Maintaining the basic form of the letter while only altering its proportions;
- *Modifying the structure of the letter (such as adding a square form);
- *Adding decorative motifs directly onto the letter.

Leaf Kufic first emerged in Egypt in the early 9th century and evolved into a distinctive floriate style during the Fatimid period. This style was also influenced by the West and first appeared on Samanid coins. The inscriptions found on epigraphic vessels can generally be divided into three thematic groups. The first group primarily consists of blessings addressed to the owner of the vessel. These may appear as a single word (e.g., *barakah* – “blessing”) or as a chain of nouns connected by the conjunction *wa* (“and”).

One example of this type is a vessel preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (USA), dated to the late 10th–11th century. It was likely produced in present-day Uzbekistan, possibly in Samarkand, using slipware techniques, and was later found in Nishapur, Iran (height: 10.8 cm, diameter: 35.6 cm) (Fig. 3. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/> 1), (*Blessing, prosperity, well-being, happiness*). The inscription on this vessel expresses good wishes to the owner:

والسعادة والعافية والرخاء البركة

Translation:

Al-barakah, wa al-rakha, wa al-‘afiyah, wa al-sa‘adah.

The inscription, written in Arabic in the *Kufic* script, features elongated vertical strokes that enhance the overall visual harmony of the text. It is believed that the vessel originated from Samarkand, as the interlacing vegetal motifs are characteristic of metalwork from that region. The walls of the vessel are adorned with alternating red and black lines. Another feature

possibly indicating the vessel's place of origin is the forward tilt of the upper ends of the tall vertical letters in the inscription (Met Museum Reference).

The second group of inscriptions includes phrases related to food and drink. For example, a vessel preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Jerusalem bears the inscription:

“kul hanniya marriyyan” (“*Eat with pleasure and appetite*”). (Fig. 6). (Gil, 2015).

The third group, most commonly found on epigraphic vessels from the Samanid period, contains moral advice and aphorisms about virtues such as kindness, patience, humility, thoughtfulness, and the pursuit of knowledge. Unlike the first two groups, these inscriptions are not associated with the cobalt-blue ceramics used during the Abbasid period. These types of aphorisms are found almost exclusively on ceramics from the Samanid era.

An exemplary artifact in this group is a 10th-century ceramic bowl from Nishapur, painted in purplish-black slip under a colorless glaze, featuring fine inscriptions (7.2 cm x 25.1 cm) (Fig.1. <https://www.Khalilicollections.Org/>). The writing consists of a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad or Ali. The inscription is written in a circular format toward the interior of the vessel. The visual effect is simple yet remarkably beautiful. Potters likely worked from templates and used spatulas or sharp knives to apply the script.

The bowl features the following inscription in Arabic, written in *Kufic* script:
أَخْلَقَ مِنَ الْجُودِ الْجَنَّةَ أَهْلُ، قَالَ

Translation:

He said: Generosity is among the traits of the people of Paradise - a quote attributed to either Ali or the Prophet Muhammad (Khalili Collection – Islamic Art).

A notable ceramic vessel preserved at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto (Canada) offers further insight into the craftsmanship of the Samanid period (819–1005 CE) (Fig.1a. <https://taimur.wordpress.com/>). This polychrome slip-coated earthenware, produced in the 10th–11th centuries, stands out for its exceptional quality and design. Iranian artisans, while using the simplest materials in pottery production, achieved an unprecedented level of refinement in the color and texture of the slip that coated the surface of these vessels.

This remarkable bowl is related to other epigraphic pieces produced in Samanid Iran and Central Asia, yet it distinguishes itself through its vibrant polychrome decoration. The austere elegance typical of many epigraphic ceramics is here replaced by a structured, multicolored ornamental design. Colorful abstract motifs are engraved between the tall vertical strokes of a broad-brushed *Kufic* inscription. The inscription, written in Arabic in the *Kufic* script, is a hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad identical to the one seen on the previously discussed bowl:

أَخْلَاقُ مِنَ الْجُودِ الْجَنَّةِ أَهْلُ

Translation:

Generosity is a disposition of the dwellers of Paradise.

An unusual, grid-like band design based on a four-pointed star completes the decoration and enhances the visual impact of the composition (Aga Khan Museum / Taimur blog.)

In another modest ceramic example, the artisan appears to draw particular attention to the Prophet's saying and sends blessings upon him (Fig. 1b. <https://medieval-islamic->). The inscription reads:

أَخْلَاقُ مِنَ الْجُودِ الْجَنَّةِ أَهْلُ، السَّلَامُ

Translation:

Generosity is a disposition of the dwellers of Paradise. Peace be upon Muhammad. (Medieval Islamic History – Ceramics and Glass).

Another noteworthy example is a 9th–10th-century bowl preserved at the Aga Khan Museum, decorated using the black slip technique under a transparent glaze, with white slip inscriptions (diameter: 33.5 cm) (Fig. 4. <https://www.alaintruong.com/archives/2>). This bowl represents the refined craftsmanship of Khurasan and Transoxiana workshops during the period of economic and cultural prosperity under the Persian Samanid rulers of Samarkand, Nishapur, and Bukhara (819–1005 CE) (Makariou, 2007). At the time, the Samanids oversaw a wide range of ceramic production. Epigraphic bowls were attributed to manufacturing centers like Nishapur and Afrasiyab (Old Samarkand) and were intended primarily for local consumption. Consequently, such vessels are not typically found in excavations west of central Iran, such as Rayy. While most ceramics from this region and period feature white slip inscriptions painted in dark brown calligraphy, this particular bowl is the opposite: it displays a white inscription painted over a dark slip background (Makariou, 2007). Calligraphy, traditionally regarded as the highest form of Islamic art due to its power to convey the word of God, serves as the bowl's sole decoration (Alain Truong Blog). The inscription, written in Arabic *Kufic* script, reads:

بِالْبَرَكَةِ تُجَاوِرُهُ لَا الْمُعْجَبُ وَالْتَّائِبُ تُعَاشِرُهُ لَا وَالْأَحْمَقُ يَأْكُ

Translation:

Beware of the fool; do not befriend him. Do not associate with the deluded self-admirer. With blessings.

One of the primary audiences for epigraphic ceramics during the Samanid period was likely the Alids (families descended from Hazrat Ali). The Alids held a high status in society and were known for their scholarly knowledge (Lane, 1958). This gave them the ability to

purchase and appreciate high-quality decorative items. At the same time, the inscriptions on ceramics frequently included phrases associated with Ali or referencing him, such as expressions referring to the *Zulfiqar* sword. The inscriptions on these vessels emphasized Ali's unique qualities and the high prestige associated with him, rather than merely promoting Shiism (Blair, 2014). Additionally, wise sayings attributed to Ali often appeared on these types of ceramic vessels. Therefore, the Alids were a key consumer group for Samanid ceramics.

An example of this can be found in a ceramic vessel produced in the Greater Khorasan region during the 10th century, discovered in northeastern Iran. This vessel, painted with brown slip on a white slip base under a transparent glaze (diameter: 42.5 cm), is currently housed in the Brooklyn Museum in New York, USA. (Fig. 2. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/ru-RU/>) The Arabic inscription in *Kufic* script reads:

الفرج مفتاح الصبر الندم، من يؤمنك العمل قبل التدبير

Translate:

Planning before work protects you from regret; patience is the key to relief.

Both of these wise sayings inscribed on the vessel are attributed to Imam Ali (Brooklyn Museum Source).

In another vessel, almost identical to the one described above in both appearance and inscription, a slight difference catches our attention (Fig. 2a. <https://medieval-islamic-history.com>) In this version, the second part of the inscription reads:

الندم؛ من يحميك العمل قبل التخطيط والسلام، الرخاء

Translation:

Planning before work protects you from regret; prosperity and peace (Source: Medieval Islamic History – Ceramics and Glass)

The influence of the Samanids on Azerbaijani culture can be seen in a 10th–11th-century ceramic vessel currently preserved at the National Museum of Azerbaijani Art (inventory number: Ç-158, diameter: 29 cm, height: 12 cm). (Fig. 7) This vessel, believed to have been found in Southern Azerbaijan and associated with Alid culture, is painted with brown slip over a white slip base under a transparent glaze. The Arabic inscription on the vessel, written in *Kufic* script, (“Al fagir, al yumin, ahl sahn”) contains a proverb about poverty. Based on the study of similar ceramic pieces, it can be concluded that this saying is attributed to Hazrat Ali.

Conclusion

During the 9th–10th centuries, the Samanid state developed as a political and cultural center in Eastern Iran and Central Asia. The Samanid period saw the coexistence of various

ethnic and religious groups, including Persians, Arabs, Turks, Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians, who all contributed to the cultural diversity of the state. Situated along major trade routes, the Samanids also achieved significant advancements in the production of ceramics and porcelain, creating unique styles in these fields. Research into the cultural, technical, and stylistic development of these ceramic examples highlights key issues such as how minimalist style evolved, the use of Arabic inscriptions during the Persian cultural revival, the meaning of the content of these inscriptions, and the identification of production sites. The emergence of these art forms and their influence on consumer groups, along with the general impact of Khorasan culture on Samanid ceramics, is evident in similar pieces found in Azerbaijan. However, it remains uncertain whether these vessels were imported or locally produced. The similarity in both subject and appearance of these pieces demonstrates their finely crafted nature and exceptional detail.

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<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/c>

<https://www.alaintruong.com/archives>

<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/ru->

Ekler

Figure 1. Bowl, Samanid / Source (<https://www.khalilicollections.org/collections/islamic->).



Figure 1a. Bowl, Samanid / Source: (<https://taimur.wordpress.com/2011/05/12/gef/>)



Figure 1b. Bowl, Samanid / Source: (<https://medieval-islamic-history.com/cera>)



Figure 2. Bowl, Samanid / Source: (<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/ru-RU/> 1)



Figure 2a. Bowl, Samanid / Source: (<https://medieval-islamic-history.com/ceram>)



Figure 3. Bowl, Samanid / Source: (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collectio>)



Figure 3 (side view). Bowl, Samanid / Source: (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collectio>)



Figure 4. Bowl, Samanid / Source: (<https://www.alaintruong.com/archives/2>)



Figure 5. Bowl, Samanid / Source: (<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org>)



Figure 6. Bowl, Samanid / (Gil Erlich. Samanid Epigraphic Slipware. Tel Aviv University. 2015.)



Figure 7. Epigraphic bowl / (National Museum of Azerbaijani Art. Inventory number).

