



## The use of epigraphic inscriptions in pottery

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### ABSTRACT

This article provides detailed information on the importance and application of epigraphic inscriptions in Central Asian pottery

### Keywords:

calligraphy, ceramics, epigraphy, monograph, quality and style

Between the ninth and eleventh centuries, ceramics made in Eastern Iran and Central Asia formed a well-known type (the duration of the Samanid dynasty is approximately the same) and the first important group of pottery decorated with consistent calligraphic inscriptions, commonly referred to as "Samanid epigraphic pottery." These delicate pottery, mined in Nishapur, Samarkand, as well as in Khorasan and other parts of Transoxia, are the main form of decoration with inscriptions of Arabic proverbs and good wishes, as well as pre-Otrar finds in southern Kazakhstan. The inscriptions are written on a brown or purple black slip, sometimes with the addition of tomato red, on a white slip background. There is a wide range of quality and style, but all are distinguished by the rhythm and effect achieved by the Kufic calligraphy varieties used for writing.

Many examples of Samanid epigraphic pottery are written with expressions of good wishes that bless the owner or quantity of the general feeling of "bon appetit". While the former type of desire corresponds to a general phrase used

in all regions and periods of Islamic culture, the latter refers to the potential function of these vessels as vessels for food. However, most of the writings can easily be classified as wise words or proverbs rather than expressions of good wishes. An attempt by an Iranian scholar, Abdullah Gouchani, to trace the source of the writings he collected in the monograph showed that at least a small portion was derived from hadith literature and words related to the caliph kali. This inquiry line is indeed crucial to fully contextualizing this artistic phenomenon; however, for the purposes of this essay, the term "proverb" is used in the most general sense of the word wise, not in relation to the sources but to the subject of the writings.

An initial study of published examples of Samanid epigraphic pottery is a good starting point for identifying the topics of the articles selected for writing on these objects. A long list of forty-one entries (see appendix) compiled in consultation with the primary secondary sources (see bibliography) is representative of such articles - albeit incomplete - to present a collection. The main focus of the topics covered

by the proverbs is to exhort virtuous behavior and to denounce immorality accordingly. A closer look and classification reveals that the largest and relatively discrete group, especially, consists of words that revolve around the topic of generosity. While some of these proverbs praise the act of giving and encourage the reader to do so, others warn of the danger of materialistic greed. Others glorify generous and generous people and condemn greed and cruelty. Other themes found in the proverbs define the qualities of various other forms of right behavior. These include proverbs that suggest qualities such as humility, patience, devotion, study, and discussion before action; some warn of conversationalism, self-satisfaction, and lack of seriousness.

This early study of the subject of inscriptions in Samanid epigraphic pottery pays special attention to social and personal codes of conduct. Many of them define behaviors that regulate and reinforce communal norms. The abundance of proverbs praising generosity, as well as the abundance of veins ending with those proverbs, is significant. They emphasize the idea that the function of such ceramic vessels in offering and receiving food has enabled them to have a "voice" that guides them in determining the ethical parameters of the basic form of human exchange. We still don't have a sense of chronology where all of these articles are included as entries in utilitarian veins. But the abundance of articles on the subject of generosity may indicate that the function of these writings is primary or initially related to the behavioral instruction in offering and consuming food. Perhaps it was only in secondary development, or by naturally expanding from this type of moral education to a broad field of general moral behavior, that there were proverbs about various other aspects of virtuous behavior introduced as records.

We can also contextualize these guidance vessels through medieval texts that discuss various aspects of personal behavior, social etiquette, and moral obligations. For example, for the famous modern mirror princes, *The Nightmare* dedicates one chapter to the etiquette of eating, the other to drinking wine,

followed by a chapter on hospitality and host duties. The eating ethics chapter states that this is an "Islamic rule" that a company should take time to talk to other eaters during meals, especially if they are ordered for lunch. The author then emphasizes the importance of generosity by the host and moderation by the guest.

More systematic information about the expected eating behaviors can be found in the philosopher-theologian Ghazali's guide to religious and daily life in the late eleventh century, in the "Restoration of the Religious Sciences." In the section entitled "Book of Food Conventions," Ghazali discusses eating etiquette alone and with company. She explains seven ideas about eating with her partners. The first point focuses on the title, and the second talk is about the importance of conversation during a meal. Here Ghazali emphasizes that it is the custom of the *kajam* (non-Arabs) not to remain silent during the meal, but to talk about morally commendable topics such as stories about prominent pious men.

Both of these reports, produced by individuals in the regions and whose general cultural orientation is similar to that of the Samanids, make it clear that a proper conversation is a necessary part of eating in a company. This is followed in both cases with a clear prescription for the correct behavior towards one's fellow diners, emphasized generosity documents, measured consumption, and polite and conscious interactions with others. Given the content of the inscriptions, it also opens up the possibility that Samanid epigraphic pottery originated from the cultural recognition of a particular social environment in which a physical object was involved and from an attempt to verbally describe that association.

Although the production of samanid epigraphic pottery seems to be a separate phenomenon, the idea of writing objects taking into account their function and participation in social experience and interaction was not limited to these ceramics in Eastern Iran and Central Asia. In the early tenth century, Baghdad, the belles-lettrist Muhammad Al-vashsha "book al-zarf wal-zurafa" (also known as the "book of elegance and graceful people", also known as

the book *al-muwashsha*), The last twenty chapters are devoted to books, clothing, and other items for daily use, such as cups, bowls, bottles, and even various verses that are considered suitable for writing on mosquito nets and mosquito nets. It is part of the exposition of required behavior, appearance, and objects. It is also similar to a catalog of literary epigraphs, probably intended to encourage a significant consumption of poetic expression and personal luxury items. The difference between the tenor and the form *Al-vashsha*'s writings is not poetic and spiritual prescriptive, but in the writings on Samanid pottery, the objects were generally commissioned when cases are quite indulgently descriptive. On the other hand, they stem from a similar interest in verbally decorating and expressing the social environment in which the object and its owner or user participate.

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