

# **“Iranian” Decorative Patterns on Enigmatic Central Asian Ceramics**

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## **Abstract**

*An almost unknown variety of ceramics, archaeologically unattested, embellished with a plethora of painted motifs, has appeared more often on the antiquities market over the last twenty years. While precise studies have not been made, many pieces have entered private collections. These ceramics include many typologies: jars, dishes, and human and animal shaped vases finely painted with dark brown decoration over a yellow ochre or red background. The so-called “pearl roundel” motif of animals in roundels surrounded by “pearls”, and continuous horizontal bands of “pearls” are favorite decorative motifs. Very similar ceramics were noted several years ago during investigations in Afghanistan but the political situation did not allow further research. Scholars continue to debate the dating of these ceramics; dates from the sixth to the thirteenth century have been suggested. The frequent use of decorative motifs such as “pearls” and “pearl roundels” suggest a more precise chronology and confirm Central Asia as the most probable place of origin. Any attribution to Sasanian or Sogdian art should be reconsidered in the light of recent investigations and findings. Moreover, “pearled roundels” with a wild boar head in profile do not necessarily point to the pre-Islamic period.*

**Keywords:** Pre-Islamic ceramic, “Fashion Ware”, Sasanian art, Afghanistan, pearl roundel decorative pattern

## **1. Introduction**

Among the effects of the war that has tormented Afghanistan for more than forty years, there is also to consider a continuous state of emergency for the endangered cultural heritage of that country. Illegal excavations abundantly practiced in most of Afghanistan have increased greatly in the last decades and many ancient artifacts will be probably never attributed a precise provenance nor chronology.

A group of unglazed wares with thick geometric, vegetal and animal slip-painted patterns in different colors should be included in the bulk of objects illegally excavated in Afghanistan that found their way to private and public collections around the world. They started to appear more and more often in recent auction catalogues and it is not difficult to find them even via a quick search on the Internet. No inscriptions were reported to appear on the wares, nor was it possible to find evidence in local written sources about their use and origin.

In this paper, I would like to focus on a few fragmentary wares belonging to the group just mentioned above. These artifacts received some attention by archaeologists several years ago to be recently reconsidered and reevaluated. Two short articles published in 1949 and 1967 focusing on archaeologically unattested ceramics sharing very similar painted decorations individuated as a place of origin the region of Quetta in Pakistan near the Afghan border and more generic central Afghan territory around Herat (Piggot 1949; Leshnik 1967). According to Lorenz Leshnik, such fragments should be attributed to the Kushano-Sasanian period that is to say third-fourth century CE.

## **2. Painted pottery from Afghanistan**

All unglazed slip-painted ceramics coming from Afghanistan and the frontier zone with Pakistan were considered for a long time as belonging to the same typology. Recent controlled excavations in northwestern Pakistan allowed to establish different groups of ceramic products such as the one called “fashion ware” which seems to point at a typical Kushano-Sasanian production. Its distribution was not limited to Gandhara and in fact, it is attested at least at Mes Aynak (south-eastern Afghanistan; Olivieri 2017; Noori, Olivieri and Iori 2019). An unexcavated “fashion ware” double handle painted vase that entered the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) along with a big number of similar pottery shards has been recently identified as a rare specimen of late Gandharan ware to be possibly dated to the fourth-fifth century CE (ibid.; Brancaccio 2010). There are many animals among the decorative elements painted on the fashion ware and they hold very often in their mouth a vegetal element. Curiously enough, also human figures are represented as in a procession while holding in their hands vegetal elements (ibid.: figs. 1-3, 6-7).

It is now clear that the fragmentary wares from Afghanistan and the Quetta region studied by Piggot and Leshnik should not be included in the Kushano-Sasanian “fashion ware” typology. These Afghan ceramics are thicker and their decorations and shapes are quite different from “real” fashion ware specimens. Such differences most likely point at two not only different typologies but different chronologies too. Ute Franke suggested that the unglazed Afghan wares embellished with geometric patterns and so-called “pearl roundels” containing various subjects should be dated to the Islamic period. She also pointed at collections of ceramics in many Afghan museums where this kind of painted ware is very common. One of the most interesting museums is the one of Herat, whose comprehensive publication is forthcoming (Franke 2007; Franke 2015: 84; Müller-Wiener 2007: 56-57). Local police confiscated most of the slip-painted ceramics to looters and illegal sellers.

Typical for this kind of Afghan wares is a reddish or dark ochre background thickly painted with black motifs almost filling all the available space. Different kinds of subjects can appear repeatedly in a row all around the vase or within circular frames such as in a fragment published by Piggot (Fig. 1) and in another much more elaborated and interesting one reconstructed by Leshnik (Fig. 2). They both present a thick decoration including also a well-known pattern usually pointed at in scientific literature as “pearl roundel”. Stuart Piggot proposed to reconstruct the subject inside the pearl roundel that he published as a hippocamp or a so-called “*simurgh*”. This fantastic winged creature with a dog head and peacock tail most likely pointed to the representation of *farreh*, a Persian term that could be translated as “glory” or “fortune”. It was a typical eastern Iranian symbol that scholars have erroneously considered a Sasanian invention for a long time. The “pseudo-*simurgh*” symbolizing the “royal glory” appeared in late Sasanian art just at Taq-i Bustan to become slightly later very popular in Omayyad art (Comparsi 2019). The fact that it could be individuated in a fragmentary unglazed slip-painted ware strongly suggests that the chronology proposed by Ute Franke for this entire group of objects is probably correct.

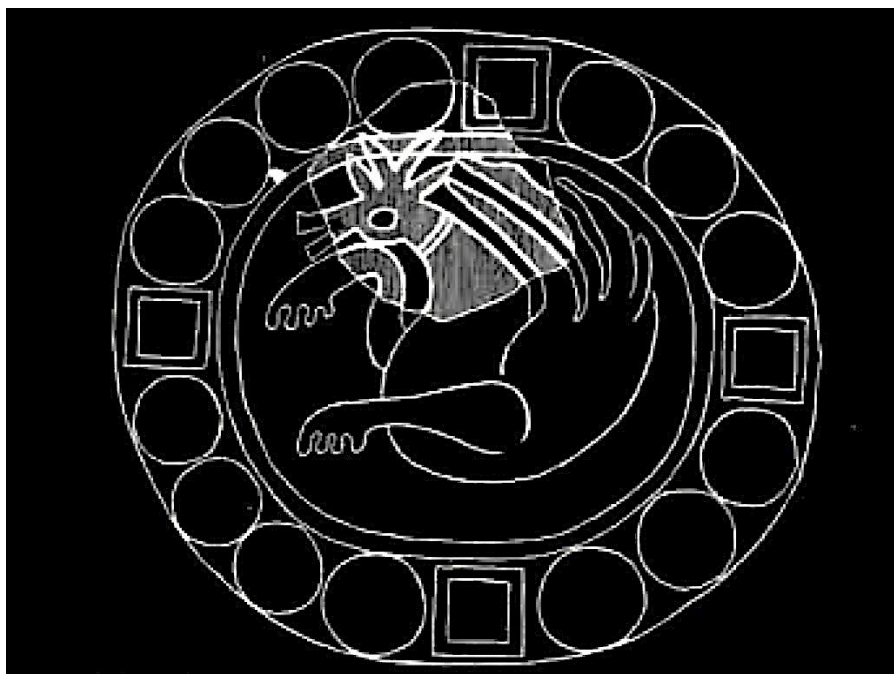


Fig.1 - Reconstruction of a fragmentary ceramic from Quetta region, Pakistan  
(After Piggot 1949: fig. 1).

A very similar decoration can be observed in the lower part of a fragmentary shard published by Leshnik (Fig. 2). The subject inside the pearl roundel could be reconstructed by the comparison with similar decorations in some other unglazed potteries. In the Hirayama collection there is one small vase with a single handle in a very good state of preservation whose main decoration is constituted by pearl roundels containing a stylized wild boar head (Fig. 3). This vase was recently presented on at least two occasions in China during official exhibitions along with a bilingual catalogue Chinese/Japanese (Dunhuang Academy 2018, 169). Another small human-shaped jar belonging to this group of objects is at present kept in the Khalili Collection. Its main decoration is constituted by horizontal geometric and vegetal bands with an isolated pearl roundel containing a stylized wild boar head in the lower part (see Fig. 4 below).

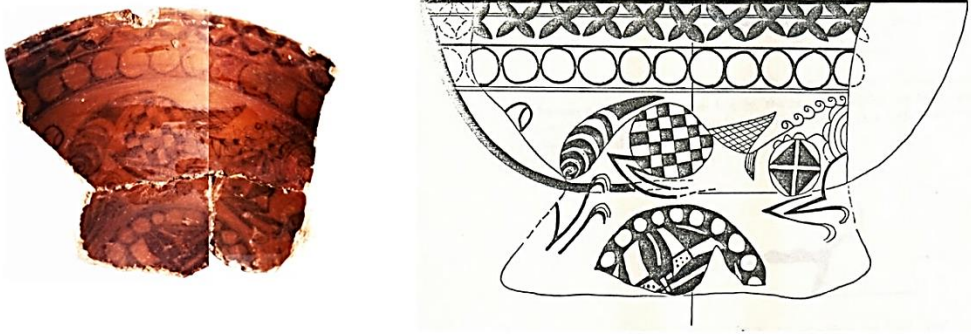


Fig. 2 - Reconstruction of a fragmentary ceramic from Qala Ahangaran, Afghanistan  
(After Leshnik 1967: fig. 19. Photo: Courtesy by L.M. Olivieri).

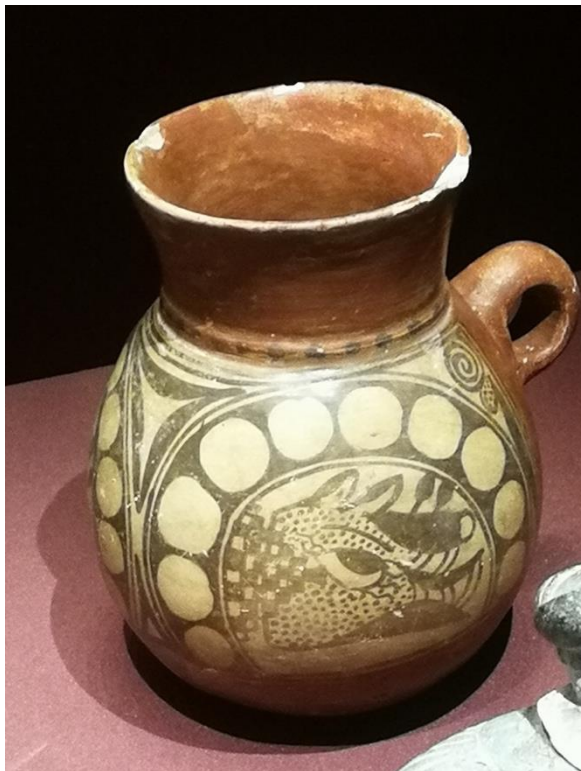


Fig. 3 - One handle jar acquired in Afghanistan, the Hirayama Collection  
(Photo by M. Compareti).

According to the catalogue entry, this jar would be a product of eighth-tenth century eastern Iran or Central Asia (Catalogue Paris 2009: cat. 23).



Fig. 4 - Human-shaped jar kept in the Khalili Collection  
(After Catalogue Paris 2009: cat. 23).

### 3. Pearl roundels

Pearl roundels started to be very popular in Central Asia around the sixth century. It is in this period that Sogdians migrated in good number at the royal courts of ephemeral and “barbaric” dynasties formed in northern China such as the Northern Qi (550-577). In the chapter about the biography of Zu Ting of the *Beiqi shu* “History of the Northern Qi” (composed in 636 CE), there is possibly the only reference to highly estimated textiles embellished with a string of pearls and other patterns such as peacocks. Despite its unclear description and provenance, this kind of pattern could actually point at something similar to the so-called “pearl roundel” pattern (Xu 2004: 393).

There is enough archaeological evidence to confirm that already during the Pingcheng period (396-494) of the Northern Wei (386-534), pearl roundel patterns were popular in northern China. At least two painted wooden coffins excavated at Datong (the Northern Wei capital, nowadays in Shanxi Province) clearly present pearl roundel decorations (see Fig. 5 below).



Fig. 5 - Northern Wei painted coffin embellished with pearl roundels dated to the Pingcheng period (396-494) ( After Shanxi Institute of Archaeology 2004: fig. 9).

Every roundel contains different subjects but no wild boar heads (The Shanxi Institute of Archaeology 2004; The Datong Municipal Institute of Archaeology 2019). Sogdian pearl roundels were more elaborated than Northern Wei ones and, at this stage of our investigations, it is not yet possible to establish any clear connection between the two styles. However, it should not be underestimated the possibility that also typical decorative elements of the Northern Wei could have affected the taste of the highly mobile Sogdian merchants who, according to Chinese chronicles, were always looking for good business in their colonies and their Central Asian motherland (de la Vaissière 2005: 147-194).



Fig. 6 - Wild boar head within pearl roundel (Bamyan/Bamiyan)  
(After Tarzi 1977: logo on the cover).



#### **4. Wild boars**

Despite some differences, it seems very probable that also the subject inside the pearl roundel published by Leshnik should be a wild boar head as suggested by the inclined lines, possibly representing the upper part of the animal head and two almost identical elements painted in black that could point at the ears. There are in fact many similarities with the jars in the Hirayama and Khalili collections. These three wares show the same treatment of the animal skin that is rendered as darker spots scattered in some parts of the head probably alluding at the hairs of the wild boar. Other geometric elements embellish the head of the animal but they are clearly visible just on the Hirayama collection vase. It should not be ruled out an identification with vegetal elements in the animals' mouth, as it is possible to observe on other specimens in the Hirayama and other collections as well.

The wild boar head within pearl roundels became a very popular motif in the whole Eurasia during the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods. It was definitely appreciated among Zoroastrians such as in Sasanian and (curiously enough) proto-Islamic Persia, Bactria-Tokharistan and Sogdiana although it reached also Christian Europe and Buddhist kingdoms of Central Asia (Overlaet 2018). Wild boar heads within pearl roundels can be observed in the painted ceilings at Bamyán/Bamiyán (Fig. 6) (Tarzi 1977) and they represented a very common motif on textiles excavated in the Tarim Basin (modern Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Province), especially the region of Turfan. Fragmentary textiles embellished with wild boar heads, winged horses, and birds within pearl roundels represent the main findings at Astana graveyard, few kilometers south of Turfan. Textiles from Astana tombs could be dated to the seventh century CE but it is not clear if their cultural milieu could be considered to be actually Buddhist (Compareti 2006: 153). It is worth observing that the wild boar head within pearl roundels embellished clear Buddhist monuments such as in the case of the seventh century Toyuk caves, not far from Turfan (Fig. 7). This is not the only occurrence in the Buddhist sphere since even more striking is the decoration on the garments of a painted Buddha statue in cave 420 at Dunhuang dated to the Sui Dynasty period (581-618 CE). In fact, just Bodhisattvas usually wore beautiful garments and jewels while Buddha images presented much simpler monastic tunics

(Dunhuang Academy 2011: fig. 61). On the contrary, the statue of sitting Buddha in the main niche in cave 420 definitely presents pearl roundels containing a single wild boar head in profile and other subjects scattered everywhere on his clothes (Fig. 8).



Figure 7. Seventh century paintings embellished with pearl roundels containing a wild boar head, Toyuk Buddhist monastery, Turfan. After S.O. Oldenburg, *Russkaja turkestanskaja ekspedicija 1909-1910 gg.*, (Sankt Petersburg, 1914: pl. XLIX, fig. 47).

The wild boar head could have been chosen to symbolically represent the entire animal although it is not clear why such a solution appears only in its case. In fact, other common animal subjects such as rams, winged horses, and birds are always entirely represented. Some scholars suggested that the wild boar had some role in the Zoroastrian religion. In a Zoroastrian sphere such as in pre-Islamic Persia and Sogdiana, the wild boar could be the symbolic animal of the Avestan god of victory and war Verethraghna (Middle Persian Bahram, Sogdian Washagn) because among the earthly manifestations (*avatars*) of this deity there was also the wild boar [*Bahram Yasht* 14, 2-27]. However,

this does not explain why only the head of the wild boar appears in pearl roundels. In other cases, scholars proposed to associate *Verethraghna* with the (winged) camel or the falcon in Central Asian arts because, according to the Avesta, this deity manifested himself also as these animals.



Fig. 8 - Detail of the garments of a painted statue of Buddha, main niche facing entrance, Mogao Cave 420 (Sui period) (Photo by M. Compareti).

A methodological approach to the identification of pre-Islamic Central Asian deities seems to affect all these hypotheses. As recently remarked by M. Shenkar (2014: 159-163), the image of *Verethraghna* can be undoubtedly identified only in Kushan art because of the name of that god written in Bactrian language as *Orlagno* appearing on second century CE coins of Kanishka and Huvishka. Among the attributes of this god, there is also a falcon above his head and an eagle's head embellishes the hilt of his sword. As already mentioned above, this animal too appears in the list of ten *avatars* of *Verethraghna*. However, Shenkar further observed, weapons and headgears in the

shape of animal heads were quite common in pre-Kushan Central Asia and among nomadic people in general. Some centuries later, an entire wild boar image associated to a Zoroastrian deity appeared quite often in Sogdian paintings from Penjikent as the vehicle and symbolic animal of Weshparkar who corresponded to the Avestan wind god Vayu but whose Indian (specifically Shivaite) iconography was used in Central Asia to depict also the king of demons (Marshak 2002: 109-110). One unique eighth-century painting in room 1, sector XXIV at Penjikent presents the inscription *Weshparkar* on his leg that undoubtedly identifies him as the wind god of the Sogdians. No more clear inscriptions could be useful to identify other Sogdian deities although Washaghn (Avestan Verethraghna) was represented with a severed human head in his hands. No parallels can be traced in Sasanian Persia. Just in Islamic illustrated texts, the planet Mars could be represented as a warrior riding a ram while holding a severed head in one of his hands (Marshak, Raspopova 1994). Therefore, an association with Verethraghna does not seem to be justified for the wild boar nor its head alone.

In my opinion, there is no reason to attribute to the wild boar head just a religious meaning. This animal has been a very common prey of royal hunters at least since the Achaemenid period (Garrison 2011) to become later a trophy of Sasanian kings as well. It was very popular in Kushano-Sasanian art, especially in metalwork (Fig. 9) and seals production (Ghirshman 1962: fig. 259; Harper 1990). Some scholars observed that images of a royal banquet possibly celebrated in heaven in the presence of the Daena (“soul”) of the Zoroastrian believers can be observed sometimes in Sasanian seals and sealings. As argued by P. Callieri, at least one sixth century Sasanian seal kept in the British Museum shows also an animal head under the couch of the main character in the scene possibly to point not just at simple food but a trophy presented to that person as an allusion to a successful hunt (Callieri 2008: 117). In addition, wild boar heads could be considered very appropriate symbols of the royal banquet with no immediate connections to the religious sphere. Moreover, it would not be a very respectful act to hunt a holy animal that was considered the symbol of a deity and even serve it during a banquet.



Fig. 9 - Kushano-Sasanian silver dish, Walters Art Gallery (Baltimore)  
(After Ghirshman 1962: fig. 259).

Only with the coming of the Arabs in Central Asia the depiction of wild boars became problematic the same as that of other “impure” animals such as pigs. Pearl roundels containing wild boar heads continued to be produced for some time in early Omayyad Iran as the chronology of Chal Tarkhan-Eshkhabad (few kilometers south of Tehran) proved to be very likely (Fig. 10) (Thompson 1976). It is, however, worth observing that the Muslims adopted other symbolic creatures from the Zoroastrians such as the so-called *simurgh* (Middle Persian *senmurv*)

exactly as the Christians did. As already mentioned above, this composite winged creature with a dog face and paws, and a peacock tail should be actually identified with the manifestation of the very important Iranian concept of “glory” (Farsi *farr/farreh*, Middle Persian *xwarrah*). Its origins too should be possibly individuated in greater Khorasan and Sistan, in the territory partly covered also by modern Afghanistan (Compareti 2019).

Strangely enough, Central Asian Buddhists who appreciated the wild boar head motif did not adopt the so-called *simurgh* or, better, pseudo-*simurgh*. Not one single textile nor painting embellished with the pseudo-*simurgh* was found during scientific (nor illegal) excavations in Bactria-Tokharistan, Bamiyan, the Tarim Basin, and the rest of Buddhist Central and East Asia. Even though the reason for the Buddhist repulsion for such a decorative motif is completely unknown, this attitude could be considered instrumental to suggest better chronologies for many Central Asian artifacts, especially unexcavated ones that always constituted a great problem for experts and curators of public and private collections (Compareti 2020). One pottery shred from Afghanistan was proposed to be reconstructed as including a pseudo-*simurgh* within a pearl roundel by Piggot (fig. 1). This is not a surprise since pseudo-*simurghs* were very common in early Islamic art and copper coins (Compareti 2019).



Fig. 10 - Left: stucco decoration from the palace of Tepe Hisar, Damghan (Iran Bastan, Tehran). Right: Chal Tarkhan/Eshkhabad (British Museum, London) (Photos: Courtesy by Daniel Waugh).

## **5. Conclusions**

In conclusion, the origin of the wild boar head motif and the pearl roundel pattern itself could have originated in fifth-sixth century Central Asia to become very fashionable in the sixth-seventh century and continue beyond the time of the Arab invasion. Despite some enigmatic points such as regarding its meaning, it does not seem that the wild boar head should point exclusively at the religious sphere. It was probably associated with the royal banquet and hunt, that is to say, an auspicious symbol alluding at the abundance and joyful feasts of local elites.

If the unglazed slip-painted Afghan wares embellished very often with the wild boar head within pearl roundels should be considered early or even proto-Islamic, such a presumed association with a Zoroastrian deity seems to be then extremely improbable. The wild boar head was a very popular decorative motif on ceramics from Afghanistan that unfortunately have not yet been documented in controlled excavations. As already suggested above, they could be most likely dated to the early Islamic period that corresponds to eighth-tenth centuries or even later. It should not be ruled out the hypothesis that this kind of highly refined wares was originally produced somewhere in Central Asia but not in a pure Zoroastrian cultural sphere since also Buddhism was common in the territory of ancient Bactria-Tokharistan and other regions of modern Afghanistan such as Bamyān before the conversion of the population to Islam.

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