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NIZAMI GANJAVI'S

CLASSIC VERSE ENGRAVED ON A MEDIEVAL POTTERY EPIGRAPHIC MONUMENT

VERSO CLÁSICO DE NIZAMI GANJAVI GRABADO EN UN MONUMENTO EPIGRÁFICO DE CERÁMICA MEDIEVAL

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ABSTRACT

The artistic and literary expressions of the classical Middle Ages—even more so in Azerbaijani epigraphy—play an important role in understanding the cultural and intellectual heritage of the region. This relation between literature and craftsmanship, especially in pottery, forms one more way to maintain literary traditions and reflect them in material culture. The medieval Azerbaijani ceramics, although having a quite opulent history, have little research that delves into how such pottery artifacts integrated literary epigraphy, particularly the works of prominent poets of the time, such as Nizami Ganjavi. The chances of finding such items are poorly documented and studied. Therefore, this study aims to examine and interpret pottery fragments that feature verses from Nizami Ganjavi. Thus, the paper tries to trace the relationship between the literary traditions and artistic craftsmanship within the medieval period through these artifacts. The pottery fragments, with Persian engravings, are among the finest examples of epigraphic art in the classical Middle Ages. Examples in this regard show the meeting of literary and artistic traditions in which the verse used characterizes the sophistication of both medieval Azerbaijan ceramics and the influence of Nizami's poetry on artistic expression. Thus, this piece of research not only develops our knowledge of the artistic and literary synthesis in medieval Azerbaijani culture but also opens new paths toward further research on how epigraphic examples in everyday objects can serve as a testimony to the cultural and intellectual exchanges of the time.

Keywords: Epigraphy, Middle Ages, Ceramics, Pottery, Nizami Ganjavi, Verse.

RESUMEN

Las expresiones artísticas y literarias de la Edad Media clásica, especialmente la epigrafía azerbaiyana, desempeñan un papel importante en la comprensión del patrimonio cultural e intelectual de la región. Esta relación entre la literatura y la artesanía, especialmente en la cerámica, constituye una forma más de mantener las tradiciones literarias y reflejarlas en la cultura material. La cerámica medieval azerbaiyana, aunque tiene una historia bastante opulenta, tiene poca investigación que profundice en cómo estos artefactos de cerámica integraron la epigrafía literaria, en particular las obras de poetas prominentes de la época, como Nizami Ganjavi. Las posibilidades de encontrar tales artículos están poco documentadas y estudiadas. Por lo tanto, este estudio tiene como objetivo examinar e interpretar fragmentos de cerámica que presentan versos de Nizami Ganjavi. Así, el artículo intenta rastrear la relación entre las tradiciones literarias y la artesanía artística dentro del período medieval a través de estos artefactos. Los fragmentos de cerámica, con grabados persas, se encuentran entre los mejores ejemplos de arte epigráfico en la Edad Media clásica. Los ejemplos en este sentido muestran la confluencia de las tradiciones literarias y artísticas, en las que el verso utilizado caracteriza la sofisticación de la cerámica medieval azerbaiyana y la influencia de la poesía de Nizami en la expresión artística. Por tanto, esta investigación no sólo amplía nuestro conocimiento de la síntesis artística y literaria en la cultura medieval azerbaiyana, sino que también abre nuevos caminos para una mayor investigación sobre cómo los ejemplos epigráficos en los objetos cotidianos pueden servir como testimonio de los intercambios culturales e intelectuales de la época.

Palabras clave: Epigrafía, Edad Media, Cerámica, Alfara, Nizami Ganjavi, Verso.

INTRODUCTION

Art is a fundamental expression of human creativeness and expression, from the very start of humankind up to today, in innumerable forms and media, including but not limited to visual arts, performing arts, literature, cinema, architecture, and-for the modern world-digital and multimedia arts. The relationship between art and culture is deep-rooted and many-sided. Art illustrates cultural identity and captures tradition and history for the times to come, yet it also serves to push the envelope of cultural growth further by questioning the status quo and bringing about social change (Hartman & Irwin, 2021). It speaks across cultures and is thus often untouched by barriers of language or culture. Having played an important role as a medium of expression of national identity and as a critique of aspects of social and political thought through history-from Japanese ukiyo-e to street art. The economic function of art involves driving cultural tourism, thereby bringing financial improvement to cities and nations. Art also plays an important role in fostering creativity, critical thinking, and cultural empathy in education (Slak & Mura, 2022). Moreover, art has contributed to personal well-being through art therapy and, with the help of technology, has advanced innovation. In other words, art and culture are both predominantly interlinked. Both are influencing factors in the expression of a person, communication, and transformation into society to enhance mutual understanding and celebrate human diversity within a globalizing world (Kenning, 2019; Zaidel, 2018).

Considering Persian art, Nizami Ganjavi is recognized as one of the most outstanding poets of the 12th century in Persian, usually considered the greatest figure in romantic poetry of the Persian literary tradition. He was born in Ganja (now Azerbaijan) and lived most of his life in that city. The fame of Nizami relies largely upon his opus magnum, the *Khamsa*-a term which is also translated into English as "Quintet" or "Five Treasures"-that consists of five poems of epic proportions. Indeed, this collection is often celebrated for its complex narration, sophisticated characterization, and the multi-layered richness of philosophical introspection (Bakhshiyeva, 2024). Perhaps one of the most recognizable stories within, *Layla and Majnun*, cuts through issues of love unreturned and passion at its most fervent pitch. He succeeded in merging romanticism and mysticism into his poems, giving a new edge to Persian verse. The style and depth of Nizami's works influenced countless poets and writers throughout the ages, making him a transformative figure in Persian literature.

This author is very often called the representative of one starting point in the frames of the Eastern Renaissance because his works became part of world literature from a very early stage, far beyond the frames of Persian literature (Seyed-Gohrab, 2023). His works reflect not only artistic brilliance but also the development of philosophical and cultural thought. Today, he is regarded as a national poet in Azerbaijan and other areas because of his tangible combination of literary excellence and cultural pride; his legacy can be felt throughout various strata of cultural and intellectual circles (Shukurova, 2022).

Within the different art manifestations, ceramics is concerned with the production of objects made from nonmetallic, inorganic materials; normally, clay is the main material that undergoes molding, firing, and sometimes glazing. The history of ceramics has stretched for several thousand years serving man in functional needs for pottery, tiles, and building materials to decorative and artistic applications (Craig et al., 2013). The important reasons why the study of ceramics is important are that it forms the basis for studying historical and cultural development by way of showing evidence of ancient societies and their trade routes, as well as technological development. On the other hand, there is the use of ceramics in modern industries due to durability, resistance to heat, and versatility, such as in electronics and medicine (Colombo et al., 2010). Understanding ceramics thus bridges the disciplines of art, archaeology, chemistry, and engineering into a unit with wide application. In our opinion, it is interesting that during a certain period, examples of classical fiction created by many Azerbaijani authors were skillfully engraved by artists and calligraphers on the epigraphic monuments of the Middle Ages. Some of these samples have come down to our time in whole or broken form. Some of the mentioned epigraphic examples are represented by pottery. One of them is an inscription engraved on a clay sample, randomly found in the Masalli region. That example is preserved in the History and Local Studies Museum (HLSM) of the Masalli region.

As we know, in the Middle Ages, several line types were used in artistic and material-cultural examples. According to the calligrapher of the time, Mustagimzadeh, the *taliqu* script, which is one of these scripts, was created by Mirza Ali Tabrizi only at the end of the 14th century. This type of line was created based on *tovqi* and *riqa* scripts, and it is known as the original form of the *nastaliq* script. This type of line, widely used in the official writing rules of the Garagoyunlu and Aghgoyunlu states in the 15th century, began to spread in the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror (Berk, 2006, p. 59).

At the end of the 14th century, the nastaliq script, created by the synthesis of the naskh and taliq scripts, became widespread in the Middle East in the 15th-18th centuries. Thus, the nastaliq script was widely used in writing documents and books, in inscriptions on architectural monuments, and in household equipment for various purposes, according to the requirements of the time. The lines engraved on the piece of pottery we are talking about are written in the nastaliq script, characteristic of the 15th-16th centuries.

Considering the above, the goal of this research is to investigate and interpret several fragments of medieval pottery with the verses of Nizami Ganjavi to outline the interrelation of literary traditions and artistic handicrafts in the Azerbaijani Middle Ages. This paper will emphasize the integration of epigraphy into ceramics and the role in preserving and reflecting cultural heritage with the help of these analyzing artifacts. It equally seeks to extend our view of how quotidian objects stand as witnesses to the intellectual and artistic exchanges of the period.

DEVELOPMENT

The existence of writing samples on pottery and clay tablets is typical for different phases of the Middle Ages. In these writings, lines, and verses from classic literary examples of Azerbaijan can be found. One example of interest is a randomly discovered clay tablet found by Jafarov Murtaza, a resident of Yeddiyomaq village, during well digging in Gariblar village, Istisu territory of Masalli region. It was submitted to the district museum in 2021 and is currently preserved in the HLSM. The inscription, written in Persian with Arabic script, reflects several examples of Renaissance period literature. Regarding the description of the ceramic, the presented plate is not complete, but only a certain part. The pottery sample is unglazed, the color of the clay is yellow-reddish, and it contains a mixture of sand. On one side of the two-faced ceramic, there is a pattern of writing; on the other, geometric patterns are engraved. The sizes of small V-shaped protrusions on the right and left sides of the 24x24x20 cm pot are 5x2x3.5 cm. The lower part of the material is broken, making it impossible to determine the shape of that part. On the face of the ceramic, as mentioned earlier, there are lines of Persian Arabic script (Figure 1).

Fig 1. Opposite side of the pottery found in Masalli region by Jafarov Murtaza.



Source: preserved in the HLSM.

On the opposite side, diamond-shaped patterns are drawn in the same way between two parallel lines, engraved horizontally from the upper side. Parallel to this, there is a dip in the horizontal direction (Figure 2).

Fig 2. Reverse side of the pottery found in Masalli region by Jafarov Murtaza.



Source: preserved in the HLSM.

On the front side of the vase, from right to left and from top to bottom, a literary example consisting of 5 lines is written in Persian using Arabic script, with the scribbling method. These lines, which are believed to be written in verse form, are taken from the poem “Khosrov and Shirin” by the great Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi:

اهب ین غادا من ین بی کات ارت هت فرا
من ین بت تامه مری م ی ک م سرت
من ین کی بی ینت نی دچنگن روگ رد

Translation:

O forsaken one, when will I see you?
I'm afraid I'll be dead when I see you.

This body of mine won't fit in the grave.

These sentences in the form of a distich skillfully present the artistic imagination of the author, who expresses the languor of a person separated from his beloved one. Here, in the lines written by Sheikh Nizami to his beloved half Afag, the pain of her untimely loss is embodied. Although he realizes that he will not be able to see Afag again, he

does not reconcile with it. Thus, Nizami shows his loyalty to Afag by comparing himself with the hero of the work, remembering her in his works.

The next verse engraved on the clay tablet is taken from Nizami Ganjavi's poem “Khosrov and Shirin”. The verses mentioned in the “Apology for the Book” part of the poem (شخب - نیری ش و ورسوخ - هس مخ باتک - یوجنگ یمیزان عاش) talk about the relation between man and the world (باتک مزن رد ی بی گنا رذع - 13 و ورسوخ « هس مخ » یمظن « روجنگ » (ganjooor.net)).

If we pay attention to the piece of pottery, we will see that the fuzzy writing of these lines in nastaliq script was not written by any calligrapher of the time, but by the artist who prepared the clay tablet. This is more evident in the lines mentioned below:

زور ی کی رگ ام لاس دص رگا

زورفا لد خاک نی زات فردی ابب

As can be seen from the lines, there are certain technical or grammatical mistakes in the verse written by the craftsman who made the clay tablet. The original Persian version of the poem is as follows:

زور ی کی رو ینام لاس دص رگا

زورفال د خاک نی زات فردی ابب

Apparently, in the first line of the verse engraved on the clay tablet, “رگ ام” is written instead of “رو”. Here, the conditional conjunction “رو رگا” “whether or not” in Persian retains its lexical meaning as intended by the master, but it is grammatically distorted and written as “رگ ام رگا”. In both cases, the idea that the poet wants to express in his poem is the same. He points out that this world is perishable, that after reaching a certain age, all people will physically weaken and become ascetical in time. The translation of this verse on the clay tablet also clearly portrays this to us.

Translation:

Whether you live a day or a hundred years,
Be aware, you will move from this bright porch.

As can be seen from the poem, the poet was close to God for this reason and, saying always remember His presence, completes his thought with the following verse:

یراد داش اردوخ هک رت هب ن آ س پ

یراد دای ارادخ یداش ن آ رد

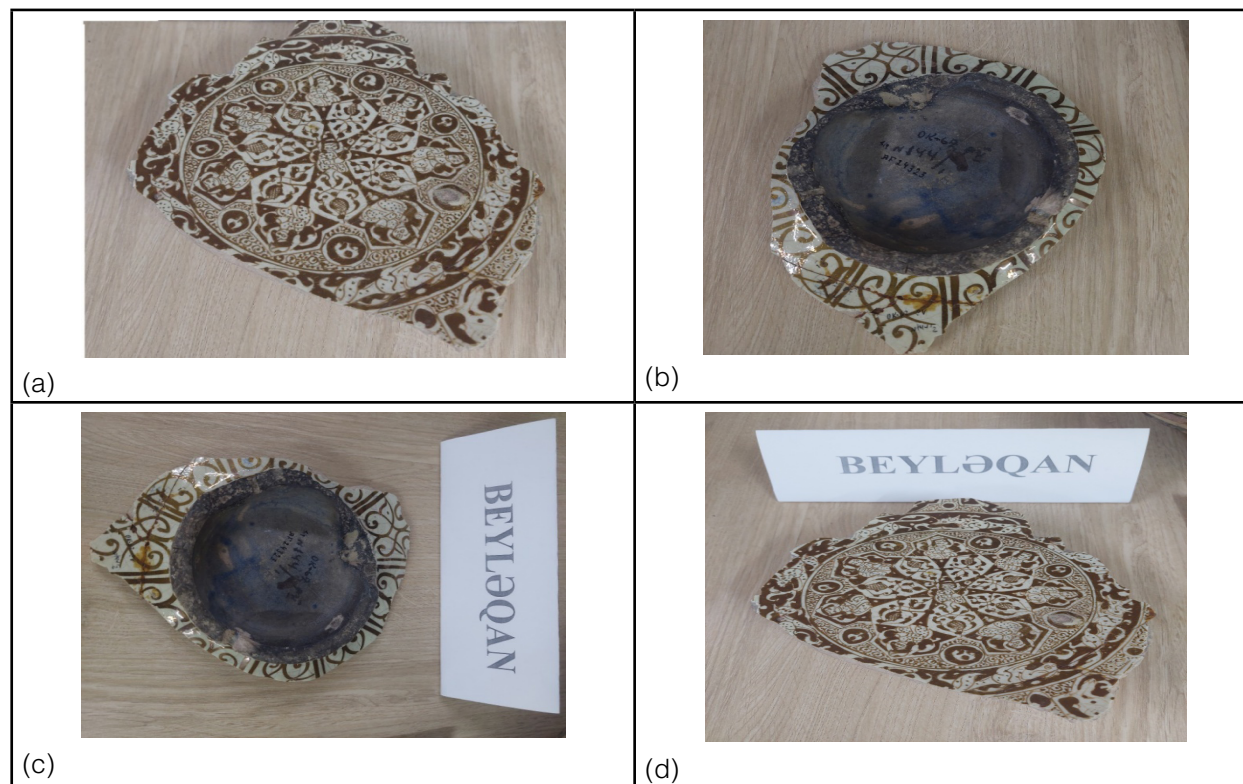
Translation:

It's better to cheer up,
Remember that great God joyfully!

In the Middle Ages, potters who turned to examples of classical literature especially used the verses of Nizami Ganjavi, who was an important figure of the influential Ahi sect of the time. This evidences that medieval artists and merchants attached great importance to Sheikh Nizami in social issues. In pottery, an important branch of craftsmanship, it was possible to find masters who kept the tradition of the classics alive in the pottery districts of the towns. As a result of reading the lines written on the piece of pottery we talked about above, it was confirmed that they are from Nizami's poem "Khosrov and Shirin", but no epigraphic part about the identity of the artist was found. In our opinion, the broken part of the pottery sample may contain the name or seal of the artist who made it.

In general, during certain periods, artists in different regions of Azerbaijan attached special importance to the creativity of the genius Nizami (Jabiyev, 2003, p. 123). They wrote fragments of the poet's works and engraved miniatures on the ceramic samples, metal, and stone objects they prepared. Currently, these examples are preserved in the National Azerbaijan History Museum (NAHM) and Azerbaijan National Art Museum. One of the ceramic samples portraying a miniature of Nizami's poem is preserved in the NAHM. Bahram Gur is in the central part of the ceramics, surrounded by 7 beauties, and this example of pottery was found by Ahmadov from the medieval city of Orangala (Jacobson, 1959, p. 229). The specimen is an exquisitely made polychrome glazed pottery. In turn, the drawings of wild animals, which are products of imagination, in the ring on the edges of the image of the surviving part of the polychrome pottery sample, are also noteworthy. These animal paintings, following each other in a special order, remind us of the connection of Bahram Gur, the hero of Nizami's "Seven Beauties", with a kind of hunting (Ahmadov, 1979, p. 182). Additionally, it is especially eye-catching that a 7-pointed composition, each supposed to be a painting of beauty, is surrounded by mysterious floral patterns on a background with a different floral pattern. Bahram Gur is thought to be in the center of the lower part of each of these 7 star-shaped corners, followed by 7 diamond-shaped images with a floral pattern (Figure 3 a-d).

Fig 3. Examples of floral patterns from the Seven Beauties in ceramics.



Source: preserved in the HLSM.

In Figure 4 it is shown another example is a pottery sample found in the medieval city of Sultaniya in South Azerbaijan, with the image of Khosrov, Shirin, and Farhad on it.

Fig 4. Pottery with Khosrov, Shirin, and Farhad.



Source: preserved in the HLSM.

It is believed that this pottery was made in the city of Sultaniya at the beginning of the 14th century. It is currently preserved in the Keir Collection of Islamic Art at the Dallas Museum of Art. As can be seen from the image, the figures of Khosrov, Shirin, and Farhad on the bowl are painted on an eye-catching, rich floral background in white and blue colors. Branched plants, leaf designs, and scattered flowers form the basis of the background. The composition depicted in the central part of the bowl sample, surrounded by a ring, is quite interesting (Efendi, 2007, pp. 69–70). On the left, Khosrov is dressed in a gold-embroidered dress, and on the right, Shirin, surrounded by Farhad, tries to explain the essence of the composition to us. This composition, originating from the poem "Khosrov and Shirin" by the prominent Nizami, stands out for its high skill. The color palette of the scene depicted in the bosom of nature is composed of dark blue, blue, and white paints, suggesting a static compositional effect. The selection of the plot with high mastery and the richness of the floral ornaments are manifestations of the literacy and skill of the medieval Azerbaijani craftsmen (Bretanitsky & Weimarn, 1976, p. 272).

CONCLUSIONS

Nizami Ganjavi, a renowned 12th-century Persian poet, significantly impacted various art forms, including medieval ceramics. Nizami's works, particularly his famous collection "Khamsa", often explore universal themes such as love, heroism, and mythology which resonated with ceramic artists, who incorporated scenes from his poetry to embellish plates, vases, and other decorative objects. Medieval ceramics from regions influenced by Nizami's poetry, such as Persia and the Caucasus, frequently feature intricate patterns and vibrant colors. These decorative

elements are inspired by the vivid imagery and symbolism present in his literary works. That way, Nizami's poetry extended beyond literature, influencing the visual culture of his time. His enduring legacy suggests that his poetic themes left an imprint on the production of ceramics and other decorative arts from the medieval period.

To support these statements, we show in this research an example of writing found on a pottery fragment in the Masalli region is a verse from the poem "Khosrov and Shirin" from Nizami's Khamsa, titled "Apology for the Book." It is believed that the other lines are a dedication by the poet to Afag. This piece has been identified as part of classical medieval unglazed pottery, with the inscription thought to have been engraved directly by the master himself. We believe that the craftsman who made the pottery inscribed it in the nastaliq script using a scribbling method, and the sample dates back to the 15th century. A philosophical analysis of the lines reveals a spiritual exhortation and an ideological aspect characteristic of the Renaissance period. The discovery of similar materials in different medieval urban areas of Azerbaijan highlights the ongoing influence of Renaissance culture in later stages and its manifestation in various fields of craftsmanship. This tradition in pottery is evidenced by the artistic processing and incorporation of Renaissance patterns through various styles of writing on the ceramics.

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