

THE SGRAFFIATO POTTERY IN THE LAHORE MUSEUM

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A bowl and a flat dish of the sgraffiato ware in the Lahore Museum, are amongst less than one dozen complete specimens found in the excavations at Banbhore carried out there during nineteen-sixtees (Khan 1976). They are also the best pieces of sgraffiato pottery so far found at any Islamic city in Pakistan including Mansura. When studied in their cultural historical contexts, the two examples deserve more than a general pottery description since they are an integral part of the Islamic ceramic art which was developed under the Abbasid Caliphs (750-850 A.D.). By that time, the Islamic world, stretching from Sind to Spain, had already been united by common religion, language and social institutions and indeed, had emerged more powerful than the Roman Empire. Under their predecessors, the Umayyads (661-750 A.D.), the union of vast territories which had been previously under the Sassanians in the east and those of the Roman Empire up to the Mediterranean Sea, had brought together the artistic traditions of older civilizations. The Islamic ceramic art emerged out of centuries old traditions but was expressed in the forms and styles which were unique in the world history of art.

Historically, the development of Islamic ceramics was intimately linked with the patronage of the Caliphs and competing local or rival dynasties in Egypt and Iran. The pottery centres of Damascus, where the Umayyads set an example by attracting craftsmen from other regions, the founding of Baghdad by the Abbasids and then shifting of capital to Samarra between 836 and 883 A.D., and the emergence of such important pottery production centres as Fostat (Egypt), Rayy (Iran) and Samarkand (southern Russia), were the products of these historical and cultural processes. Within an underlying cultural unity and similarity of techniques and styles, the ceramics of these centres show local characteristics that are so well recognized by the scholars. The surprising stylistic uniformity of the Islamic pottery was due to highly mobile community of craftsmen who were lured by the patronage of rising powers, new opportunities and resources. The craftsmen carried with them the knowledge and expertise of already developed traditions as they moved from one place to another (Lane 1965:2; Pinder-Wilson 1969:4). The craftsmen also appreciated and respected the pottery traditions of the contemporary regions. In the process of imitating them, the Islamic craftsmen invented something new and continued to experiment in response to the popular demands and changing tastes. The emergence

of sgraffiato ware is just one such example. It emerged as a result of direct influence from the highly prized Chinese stonewares. Still, it was not merely a copy but an entirely new pottery which combined multi-colours with incised decorations. Moreover, the transport of pottery vessels over long distances facilitated spread of styles and techniques rapidly. These factors account for the remarkable uniformity of ceramic art throughout the Islamic world. The specimens under study should therefore, be seen in this background of ceramic tradition and long network of communications maintained during the early Islamic Period.

Types of sgraffiato wares

The sgraffiato pottery is known by the decorative technique which combines two distinct features; a glaze with multicoloured designs, and incisions made with a sharp instrument through the white slip to the underlying clay before the glaze was applied. The incised motifs are usually scrolls, intersecting circles and blossoms with three and five petals radiating from the centre. The surface is covered with lead glaze, splashed or mottled with copper-green, manganese-purple, and iron-brown. The colour patterns are limited to simple stripes and spots, regardless of matching colour scheme. The sgraffiato pottery is variously called as lead-glazed, splashed, mottled and streaked ware. The sgraffiato ware was inspired by the Chinese mottled stoneware of the T'ang dynasty (618-906 A.D.) which reached the Middle East about 800 A.D. It is regarded as the first wave of Chinese influence on the Muslim craftsmen. The Chinese mottled ware at once caught the imagination of the Muslims and generated a new era of ceramic development. The Muslims were great innovators and therefore, their ceramics developed into a distinctly different school of art. Whereas the T'ang stoneware of the first half of the eighth century A.D. used only green, amber and blue colours, the Muslim potters added manganese-purple to them. In form and surface ornamentation, they created something new which soon spread across the Islamic world from Samarkand to Egypt. It became so popular that during the ninth and tenth centuries A.D. pseudo-Chinese mottled sgraffiato wares were made almost everywhere in the lands of the Eastern Caliphate (Lane 1965:12). The ceramics of this type are reported from numerous sites in Iran namely, Susa, Nishapur, Siraf, Tiz, Rayy, Sari and Istakar, from the sites in Mazandaran and Turkistan, and even beyond in Samarkand. In Iraq, they are found at Samarra, Basra and Kufa. In Egypt, the sites of Fostat and Fayyum have provided evidence of their use until the eleventh century A.D. On the East African coast, the sgraffiato wares reached about 1000 A.D. and remained popular until the thirteenth century. The excavations have revealed these wares in about eighth century contexts in Bahrain and in the last Abbasid levels of Banbhore, dated by the excavator to the twelfth century A.D.

The Chinese Contacts.

The occurrence of sgraffiato pottery along with the Chinese T'ang mottled stonewares at Samarra, Fostat, Samarkand, Susa and Banbhore attest to trade contacts with China by the sea and overland routes. The sgraffiato pottery in the Lahore Museum, is the product of first wave of Chinese contact with the then Islamic world. In addition to the sgraffiato wares, the innovative craftsmen were quick to introduce white surfaced glazed pottery in imitation of the Chinese white porcelain, known otherwise as the tin or opaque glazed pottery. Both these wares are reflection of technical changes generated under the Chinese influence. The second wave of Chinese contact in the twelfth century, induced further changes in the ceramic art, especially the use of white material in the body of vessels. The shapes and surface ornamentations, however, remained essentially Islamic. In decorating the vessels, there was a fundamental difference between the Islamic and Chinese pottery. As Grube (1976:88) observes, "the Chinese tried to maintain a balance between the form of vessel and its decoration while the Muslims preferred 'dramatic accent and expression, contrast rather than balance between form and design, movement rather than static effect". The third wave of contact with China took place during the Ming dynasty which led to an intensified trade with the Islamic world including Pakistan in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D. The Ming white and blue porcelain is found at the settlements on the Arabian Sea and the Gulf coasts. By that time, both the major Islamic settlements of Mansura and Banbhore had long been abandoned but the blue and white porcelain continued to be imported during the Mughal rule in South Asia. In 1972, Dr. Muhammad Sharif collected Ming ware at a number of sites near the coast of southern Sind.

Principal Centres of the sgraffiato wares.

There is a noticeable variation in the forms, incised decorations, application of colours and glaze of the sgraffiato wares produced between the ninth and twelfth centuries A.D. These variations are associated with different production centres of the Islamic world and reflect regional, and to some extent, chronological differences. The sgraffiato wares made between the early ninth and end of twelfth centuries, were superb creations of the Muslim craftsmen as they illustrate their mastery over manipulation of pottery surface by incising, application of multiple colours and perfect control over glazing and firing. Some of the regional differences in the sgraffiato wares associated with some principal production centres are pointed out for an appreciation of the wide range of styles.

RAYY

The sgraffiato pottery produced at Rayy between the tenth and eleventh centuries is distinguished by its skillful manipulation of surface with carving and incising, thought to have been inspired by the engraved metal works of an earlier period. The random application of splashing with green or brown, so characteristic of the sgraffiato wares of ninth and tenth centuries was not done on the incised surface at Rayy. Instead, green stain of glaze was applied all over the surface. This type of sgraffiato pottery was made until the thirteenth century A.D.

AMOL

Amol, located at the southern end of the Caspian Sea, was another centre contemporary with Rayy, lasting well after the thirteenth century. The principal forms produced at Amol were bowls and dishes, painted green with brown spots and stripes on white slip through which "scribbled engravings to form disintegrated and often asymmetrical design" were made (Lane 1965:26). Birds or animal designs were freely made with ease and flexibility as if to meet the popular demand.

AGHKAND

The sgraffiato ware of Aghkand, located southeast of Tabriz, reflects a successful attempt to contain the glaze running outside the incised designs of birds and other figures. A combination of green, brown and purple was used as at Rayy, though the style of surface decoration and control over the glaze was different from the contemporary ceramics produced in Iran.

KURDISTAN

In the history of sgraffiato wares, the Iranian centres of Garrus and Yaskand in Kurdistan, situated southwest of the Caspian Sea, stand out for their forceful technique of cutting out the slip to produce designs in low relief. The technique was introduced in the first half of the eleventh century and lasted until the 12th-13th centuries A.D. It is commonly known as the *champleve* ware, sometimes also referred to as 'Gabri' due to its presumed association with the Zoroastrians. The *champleve* ware repertoire includes flat-rimmed dishes, bowls of conical shape with incurved rim and straight sides, ewers with mouth shaped like animal heads, and terra-cotta glazed tiles with a central hole for fixing on the walls. The designs of coiling vine-scrolls and Kufic inscriptions on the *champleve* ware in low relief, provide a pleasing contrast against the dark-brown background of the clay produced by cutting away the white slip. The glaze is either green or generally colourless, on which splashes of green are added.

Egypt

In Egypt, as pointed out above, the sgraffiato wares, characterized by the radiating stripes painted inside the vessels and with splashed designs, were produced until the eleventh century A.D. Under the Ayyubids and the Mamluks (12th-13th centuries A.D.), the sgraffiato ware took a distinctive form and surface treatment. The shapes of basins or bowls of that period are marked by their tapering feet with flared-out sides. The designs range from the Arabic inscriptions to animal and human figures which are all covered with monochrome glaze in yellowish or green colour.

Sgraffiato Pottery of Pakistan and the Coast.

Closer to our Pakistani specimens of the sgraffiato ware in the Lahore Museum which came from Banbhore, comparable evidence comes also from the southern coast of Iran which is dotted with the Islamic settlements (Stein 1937 : 202 - 244), among which Tiz and Siraf were the major trading ports. Siraf, founded in early ninth century, was destroyed by an earthquake in 977 A.D., but the wealthy families continued to live there until twelfth century (Whitehouse 1969:58). The sgraffiato ware as found at Siraf in the eleventh century contexts, compares well with that found at Banbhore, to which category the specimens in the Lahore Museum belong. The Islamic glazed pottery of Banbhore has not yet been studied properly ever since the close of the excavation in 1965. A pioneer attempt has very recently been made by Ali Muhammad Khan Lundkhwar which illustrates the richness of Islamic ceramic art of Pakistan. It seems that the sgraffiato pottery was imported at Banbhore. It is quantitatively less than other glazed wares found in the last Abbasid levels where it first appeared. Moreover, quite a few examples have circular holes made in antiquity along the broken lines, indicating that they were mended in ancient times. Most of the complete sgraffiato vessels from Banbhore are now in the Banbhore Museum. The two specimens under discussion, like others, are assigned to the Late Abbasid period (10th-12th centuries A.D.), although their early date cannot be ruled out when considered together with the numismatic evidence at Banbhore and comparable ceramic from the adjoining territories of the then Islamic world¹. The following is the description of the specimens in the Lahore Museum:

- Pl. I. A plate of light-red, fine clay, well fired and slightly flaring rim. It has uneven sagger base on which white slip is applied which does not extend to the central part. There is no glaze on the external surface. On the inner side, incised decorations are done in three zones. In the middle, half-petalled designs are incised within two half-circles divided by the double lines, all within a circle. Between the rim and central circle, is another zone of incised band consisting of zigzag and leaf design with incisions in the empty space. The rim on the

inner side makes the third zone of incised decoration. Splashes of dark and light-green, brown and yellow colours are applied all over the inner surface over the white slip and incisions which are covered over by the lead-glaze. These colours have run over the incised designs. The overall effect is overcrowding of multi-colours. This dish has seven pairs of holes made in antiquity across the body. It was apparently broken into two parts and was repaired most probably with metal hooks (restored).

From Banbhore, Trench FXIII/16, Layer (2). Field Register No. 3396.

Maximum dia, 34 cms. Height 3.5 to 5.5 cms.

- Pl. II. A bowl of light-red, fine clay, with flaring sides and disc base with groove cut at the bottom near the edge. Incised designs are made through the white slip on the inner side just below the obliquely cut rim in 3.5 cm wide band showing Arabic letters in Kufic style. At the bottom, an incised triangle with splashes of golden-yellow, green and blobs of dark-brown on the incised and the plain surface. The external surface is treated with white slip which ends near the base. Splashes of yellow, green and one cross line are painted under the lead-glaze. (restored)

From Banbhore, Trench FXII/19, Layer (2), Field Register No. 650.

Maximum dia. 22.5 cms., Height 8 cms.



NOTES

- The chronological sequence of Banbhore as proposed by the principal excavator for the Islamic occupation (Khan 1976 : 17), is divided into three periods:

Late Abbasid (top levels)	10th-12th centuries A.D.
Early Abbasid (middle levels)	750-892.D.
Umayyad (early levels)	711-750 A.D.

There are two levels below the Islamic remains: Hindu-Sassanian Period, dated from the third to the seventh century A.D.; and Scytho-Parthian Period, from the first century B.C. to second century A.D.

The sgraffiato pottery starts appearing in the "Late Abbasid" levels at Banbhore which are bracketed by Dr. Khan between 10th and 12th centuries. However, the evidence from numerous sites in the adjacent region of Iran, would place the sgraffiato ware of the type under discussion, not later than 10th century. If we give a margin of some more years for the lingering occupation, the presence of sgraffiato pottery at Banbhore may extend to the 11th century, even though there is no conclusive evidence for it. The present author had been associated with the excavations at Banbhore for six field seasons during 1958-59, 1959-60, 1960-61, 1961-1962, 1964 and 1965. From his personal knowledge, it may be pointed out that the flat dish of sgraffiato ware now in the Lahore Museum was found in the last habitation layer of the site. There is also no coin so far found at Banbhore which belongs to the 12th and 13th centuries. The gold coin of Abu Jaffar Harun-al-Wasiq Billah,

dated A.H. 229/843 A.D., was found at the floor of a house belonging to the late, if not last, occupation of the site. The numismatic and ceramic evidence would suggest that Banbhore had virtually ceased to be a major trading/sea port near about the end of the tenth century A.D. The occupation might have continued for some time but not too long to stretch to the end of 12th century A.D. at Banbhore.*

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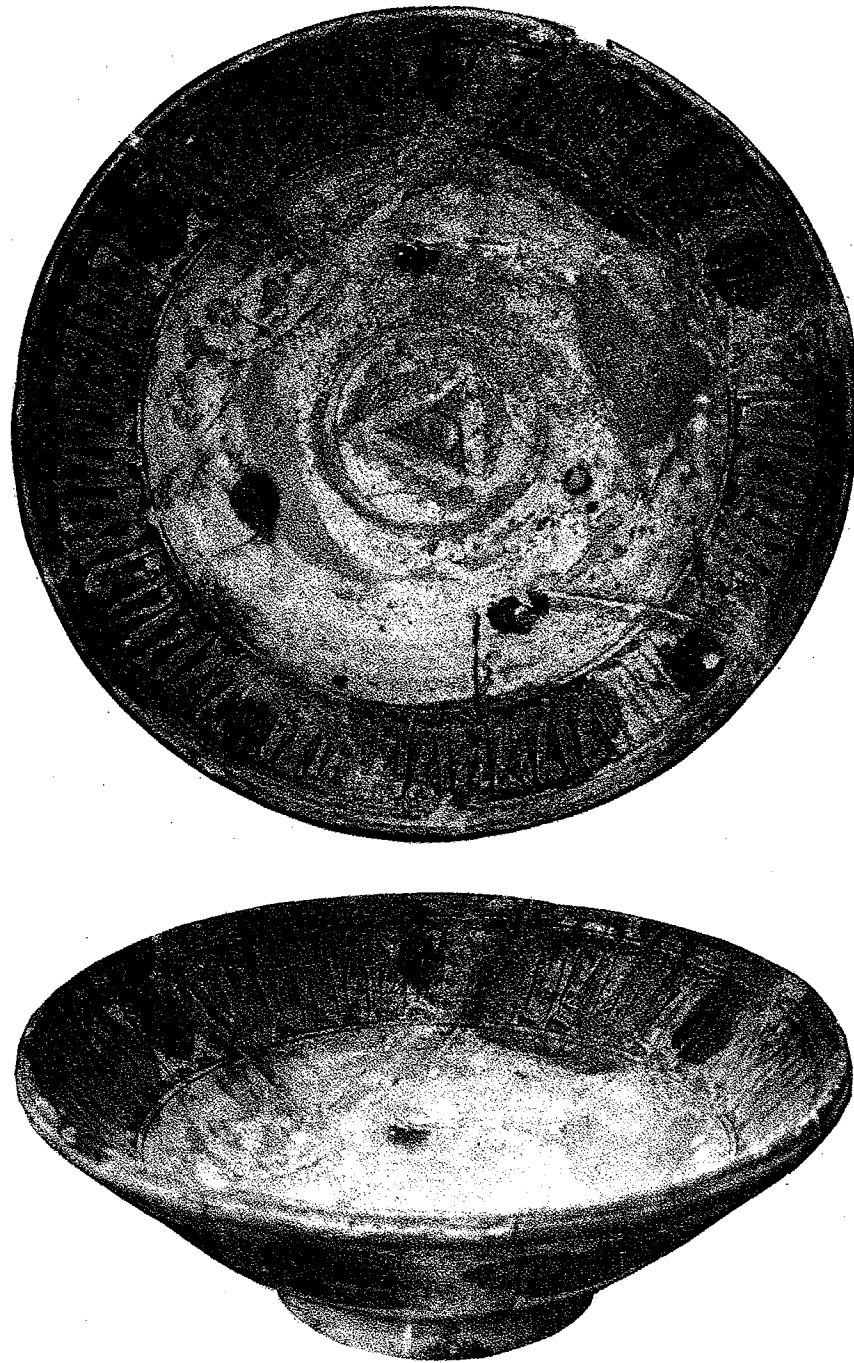
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* It is however pointed out that rare piece of sgraffiato were found at Tulamba near Multan in those stratigraphical contexts which also revealed Chinese white porcelain and opaque glazed pottery from above the layer which contained a "bull and horseman" type coin of Shahab-ud-din Muhammad Gauri (Mughal 1967 : 26, Fig 32, 12, Pl. XXIII,9). At Tulamba, the Sgraffiato pottery is assigned to 12th century A.D.



Plate or dish of the sgraffiato ware from Banbhore characteristic of the tenth century A.D. (Pairs of holes in front indicate its repair in the past).



Bowl of sgraffiato ware from the Abbasid levels of Banbhore showing a band of Kufic letters incised near the rim.