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Does Sultān Abād Pottery Really Produced in Sultān Abād?

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, pottery is among the most important information types that can help understand societies and cultures better. Despite introducing pottery known as Sultān Abād and its classification over the last few decades, very limited information has been published so far on the origin of its type and about archeological sites containing them. The main reason for this seems to be that containers could not be found in archeological excavations, and most of these potteries were obtained through illegal excavations hence; are part of private collections and museums. Consequently, our understanding on their origin, extent and distribution is very limited. In the current study, we attempt to present a brief introduction about the technical and decorative features of this pottery type, its construction origin, historical background and the likely place or places of its production. Then, based on information from recent archaeological excavations and surveys, this pottery type is described and explained.

Keywords: Sultān Abād Pottery, Ilkhanid, Islamic Period, Archeology.

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Introduction

One of the relatively unidentified Iranian-Islamic period pottery types is known as the Sultān Abād pottery. Although many studies have been conducted in connection with this pottery type, the contents of most researchers are simply repetition of previous studies. Probably, one reason may be the limited identification of this pottery type in archeological sites of Iran along with restricted publications. It should also be noted that most of the Sultān Abād containers in museums and private collections around the world were found in illegal excavations, and wrongly but deliberately introduced as Sultān Abād (modern Arak Province) pottery by its traffickers.

Given these circumstances, the data published by archaeologists are also limited and are generally repetition of past statements based on the technical and decorative classification of the containers. Unfortunately, during the excavations of the Islamic era sites in Iran, no evidence found in connection with the production of these containers. However, various pottery pieces of different Sultān Abād types have been obtained during various archaeological excavations and surveys. The paper tries to introduce and explain these findings.

Technical and Decorative Features of Sultān Abād Pottery

These pottery types which are among the typical 1313AD pottery show white frit alkaline silica texture with a color range of white and buff including buff, whitish buff and reddish buff (Morgan,1995:19). Their adhesive material is fine and coarse sand gravels clearly visible in the clay body (Sherato and Grube, 2005: 25). These particles and the fact that the pottery surface is unpolished have caused the relatively coarse surface of the body in places without glaze. This feature is especially visible in Group III_B Sulātn Abād pottery. These containers show buff or reddish buff texture with sand as adhesive material that is clearly visible. As a result, an almost rough surface on the body, even in the glazed parts, has been created. In these containers, even the glazed surface is rough and uneven due to dilute glaze. Usually, this pottery type has a good bake except some of the group III pottery has not been adequately baked (Fehervari, 2000: 223).

The most common form of this pottery is bowls (in various large and small forms), simple round bowls, 10-sided and even 14-sided polygons. In addition, there are less frequent forms including deep dish with the back edge, Albarellow, pot (mainly in Syrian samples), crock, cylindrical and polygonal Albarellows (Ibid, 1973: 122; Fig. 1). Besides these cases, we notice tiles decorated in Sultān Abād style.

Bowls are usually flat with rounded edges, are divergent and T-form. There are also bowls

with inverted rim (Grube, 1976). Bowl bottom is usually circular (large and small in size), and yet some of them have flat floor.

This kind of pottery (except for Group III_B) is covered by a thin purple, gray or brown mud cover, and the designs are covered by a thin white glaze. The alkaline glaze used is lead and tin free. The glaze is often used like a mask on the decorations and becomes shell like (Morgan, 1995: 19). Low-quality glaze is clearly visible in all groups of this style (Lane, 1942: 46). Group III_B pottery has a thin white mud cover with a very thin coating of transparent glaze. This slip is usually deleted from the surface of pottery, and only the decorative motifs can be seen. The most important classification in conjunction with Sultān Abād pottery is related to Lane, so that all the studies performed are based on his work. This pottery is classified in three groups:

Group I: The pottery in this group is comparable to Kashan style earthenware containers with rough whitish buff, and their glaze is usually cracked. Detailed plans and designs have been decorated with blue cobalt and turquoise color (Fehervari, 1973: 121). The containers of this group are divided into three categories: large bowls with a t-shape edge, smaller bowls with divergent edge, and crock or cylinder-shaped or polygonal Albarellows. The azure or pale blue color is used to emphasize certain sections. The designs are somewhat prominent, and their decoration is radial with scattered edge-like parts, each forming a motif repeated in other parts (Sherato & Grube, 2005: 26). In the pottery of this group, grey color is absent but blue, turquoise and green colors have been frequently used (Fig. 2).

Group II: Pottery in this group has a texture buff to reddish buff with low-quality glaze and inappropriate baking of some containers (Ibid, 2000: 219-220 & 223). The container bodies have a gray coating and their design have a white coating protruding from the original pottery level. These designs have black scheme hachured with deep blue color (Ibid, 1973: 121). The pottery in this group have decorations similar to plant motifs directly decorated and drawn on bowls in various colors ranging from black to gray. Making designs with fine points, on garments and on the body of animals are among their features (Sherato & Grubeh, 2005: 26; Fig. 3).

Group III: Lane has classified this group of pottery into two although both identical and believed that they were produced at one center. The first group which is attributed to Kāshān style is more delicate and has a white background with semi-bold designs, around which black pen design can be seen. In these containers, clear cobalt blue and turquoise blue color is used for decoration (Fehervari, 1973: 122). This pottery has the common design of radial strips. They have white texture and are

adequately baked. Shape and decoration of this pottery is closely related to drawn glazed pottery of Kāshān (Ibid, 2000: 219 & 221). Their background is colored for processing hachure. In addition, a kind of protruded pseudo-calligraphy has completed the decoration (Sherato & Grubeh, 2005: 26; Fig. 4).

The second group of pottery has reddish buff texture with sand as adhesive material with usually uneven surface and rugged glazed parts. This pottery has a thin dilute mud cover on which geometric irregular striped decorations of black, turquoise and azure colors can be seen (Lane, 1971; Fig. 5).

Pottery designs used in the first and second groups consist of plants including Chinese Lotus with trifoliate flowers and small-scale plant patterns; animal motifs including deer and gazelle (single or pair) on the move or sleeping, stag, wild boar, fox, elephant, camel, rabbit, lion, leopard or tiger and rotating fish; designs of bird, including falcons, pheasants, flying ducks and walking geese; mythical designs such as Chinese Phoenix completely natural and flying with open wings, Phoenix with a long or short tail, man with wings, winged elephant with human head, human designs including man dressed in Mongolian garment and Mongolian faces. Animal bodies and to some extent human garments are usually filled with spotted decoration (Grobe, 1976: 261, Lane, 1971: 12). Human designs such as one or two individuals sitting with Mongolian dress and persons with turbans are depicted as well (Fig. 6). Around the animal motifs, usually the lotus flower leaves are used as filler elements (Morgan, 1995:20). Clothing and animal bodies have been decorated with small dots (Lane, 1971: 11). The technical advantage of this pottery over the pottery of other centers is the use of a few colors and scrupulous design of animal figures and color distribution, so that it is difficult to distinguish the background color from the color of figures, and probably the attention paid to draw animal figures is a result of far eastern effect on these techniques and industries, so that they are not different from natural figures (Zaki, 1987: 218).

Decorations in these groups are comparable to chinaware of the Chinese Yuan period (Lane, 1971: 12), in particular, regional containers of Henan region bearing Lotus and Phoenix designs. According to Yuan Shi, some 25056 families from Henan moved to Holāku Khān Territory in 1257, of which 2519 families remained until Abu Sa'id Bahadur time. Perhaps, there have been some potters among them who worked in Iran, as some architects of Mosul and Shiraz moved to the capital of China and were employed there (Morgan, 1995 :35-36).

This type of pottery had much impact in other Islamic countries, even those who had political problems with Mongols. Hence, their style is not only observed in pottery style of the Golden

Horde in Saray Berke (on the side of the Volga and southern Russia and capital of the Golden Horde), but also in the Syrian and Egyptian potteies (Ethinghausen, et al: 168). For example, pottery bowl sets of New Saray with black pen designs and thick white cover on a gray background with blue dots on white background can be compared with the second style of Sultān-Abād in terms of decoration and history (Lane, 1971:14). A bowl with colorful duck design has been found in Seray Berke reflecting the specific fine Sultān Abād type coupled with fine Chinese-like designs. This type of pottery has been identified in most of the sites explored in the sphere of Golden Horde including "Belgurd" on the banks of Dnieper River and from Khwarizmi to the Oxus that formed the eastern border of the Golden Horde territories (Rogers, 1995:265). Black and blue containers of Syria have a whiter and harder texture than Sultān Abād samples. This pottery type has thick deep greenish glass glazed pottery with a dark blue color. These containers are usually colored turquoise, and details of some parts have been shown with reddish brown color. Decorative leaf and medallion shapes have been designed with blue color. Some Syrian container decorations are comparable with the second style of Sultān Abād including a goose, the peacock, running animals and trefoil leaves. However, there are no human designs on Syria and Egypt samples in the 14th century AD examples (Lane, 1971: 18).

Production Origin

Sulātn Abād has been presumed as the main center of pottery in Iran after 13th century AD. This is while the Sultān Abād containers are heterogeneous, and there is no consensus on the identity of the products of that city (Rogers, 1995: 265). These containers, like many other species of glazed porcelain, have been discovered for the first time by smugglers of ancient monuments, and were introduced to museums and collections around the world as Sultān Abād pottery. Therefore, from the early twentieth century onwards, many examples of these containers found their way into private collections and museums around the world. This is while the Sultān Abād city (modern Arāk) was founded in 1844 by the Qajar monarch Fath-Ali Shah in the southwest corner of Farahan Plain near the Qaresu River (Bosworth, 1997: 859).

Lane was one of the first researchers to point out these containers and their production facility. According to him, for the first time the so-called Sultān Abād containers were produced in Sultān Abād city (Lane, 1971:10). However, after visiting and exploring this city in 1940s, Pope stated that there is no site older than Qajar period in Sultān Abād, and there is no pottery oven or facility related to 7th or 8th centuries in its suburbs (Pope, 1942: 1631). He believed that this pottery type had been produced in towns and villages around Sultān

Abād. He also named some of the villages about 30 to 40 miles away from Arak such as Shah Abad, Zolf Abād, Majd Abād, Astāneh, Borz Abād, Sesuk and Fayoum (Pope, 1942: 1631).

Some of these villages or ancient sites that are located in modern Farāhān region have no ambiguity in conjunction with settlement in Ilkhanid period like Majd Abād and Zolf Abād villages that are located within the confines of the city of Tafresh. Farāhān region also became important during the Ilkhanid period, and according to historical texts, in addition to prevailing Shiite religion in the region, the second Ilkhanid king, Abāqā khān was crowned there, and Farāhān was a favorite hunting place during that period (see: Khafi, 1962: 333, Mostofi, 1983: 69 and Al-Husseini, vol 4: 522).

Zolf Abād will be described in detail later in this article, but with respect to Majd Abād, an Islamic site related to the middle age, it should be said that the site is known as Gol-Hesar by locals. According to the topographical map (Map 1), it has a surface area of nearly 3,300 square meters and has a rectangular shape with evidences of a fort (Sedighian and Abolfazli, 2009). Apart, other information and evidence is unfortunately not available in connection with other sites mentioned by Pope, because of the lack of archaeological investigation.

In addition to the studies of Pope, during the archaeological survey conducted by the author in Arāk and its periphery, it became clear that within 20-25 km from Arāk, no site older than Qajar period was known or identified, especially sites related to seventh and eight centuries. Based on the available information, the closest Islamic site to the city of Arāk is Ibrahim Abād located at 25km south of the city, related to the Islamic Middle Ages. In addition, during archeological excavations conducted under the Old Arāk Bazār, no finds older than this period were encountered (Fazeli, 2007).

Besides naming Sultān Abād, some researchers now believe that some pottery attributed to this style produced in Kāshān (Watson, 2004: 373). Unfortunately, due to lack of careful review and targeted explorations in the region, there is no accurate information in this regard. In the past few decades, Bahrami carried out a targeted exploration in different neighborhoods of Kāshān to identify pottery production workshops. He found part of the bottom of a tun or large bowl with typical Sultān Abād decoration with the figure of a sleeping rabbit in blue, violet and black in a white background. He believes that it has been produced in Sultān Abād region (Bahrami, 1992: 206).

However, samples he found in explorations in this city (that was clear that they have been produced in situ) have a completely different style from Sultān Abād type. In addition, low-quality glaze, polishing and even texture also

indicate that they have not been produced by potters producing golden shades pottery of Kāshān (Morgan, 1995: 35). Some researchers have also pointed to sites such as Ave, and have expressed that this city has been a pottery production center in Sultān Abād, but no sample of this type has been found in excavations of this site (Khatib Shahidi, 2006 & 2007). With these conditions, in relation to most Sultān Abād pottery types, we cannot definitively comment until further surveys and targeted excavations are carried out.

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Figure 1. Pottery Type of Sultān Abād with Cylindrical Albarellow Shape.

Figure 2. Style I Pottery of Sultān Abād.

Figure 3. Style II Pottery of Sultān Abād.

Figure 4. Style IIIA Pottery of Sultān Abād (also known as Kāshān Style).

Figure 5. IIIB Style Pottery of Sultān Abād.

Figure 6. Sultān Abād II Style Pottery Showing Mongolian Man with Turban (Watson, 2004: 383).

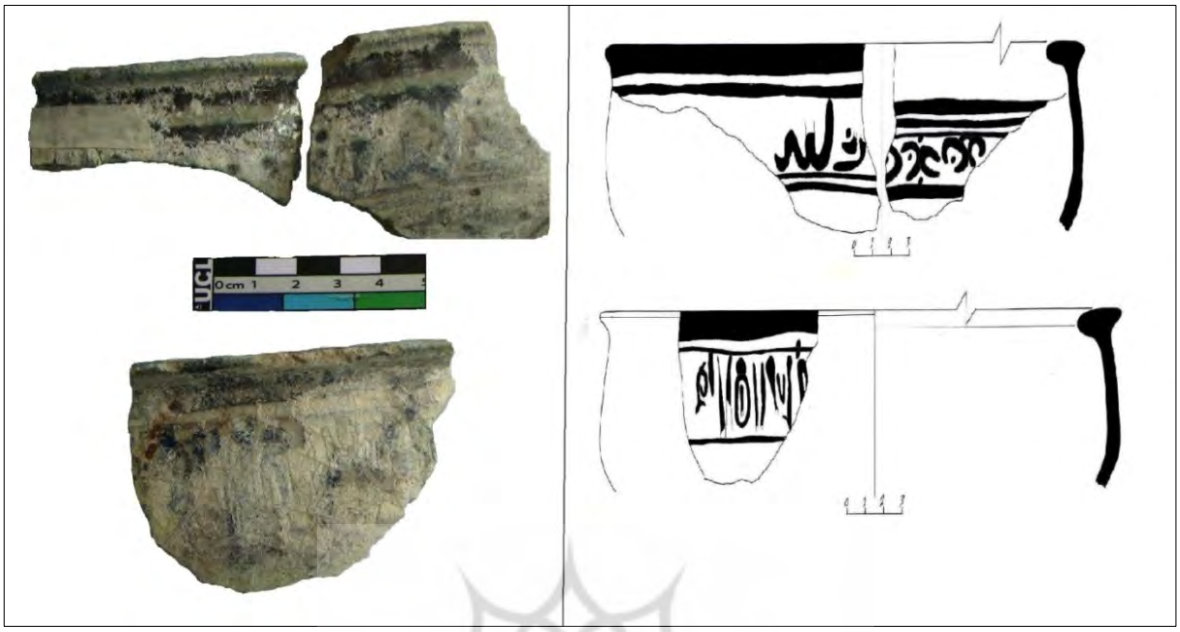


Figure 7. Typical Pottery of Sultān Abād Group I, Discovered at Zolf Abād in Farahan.

Figure 8. Typical IIIB Pottery of Sultān Abād, Discovered at Zolf Abād in Farahan.

Figure 9. Typical Pottery of IIIB Group of Sultān Abād (b), Discovered at Zolf Abād of Farahan.

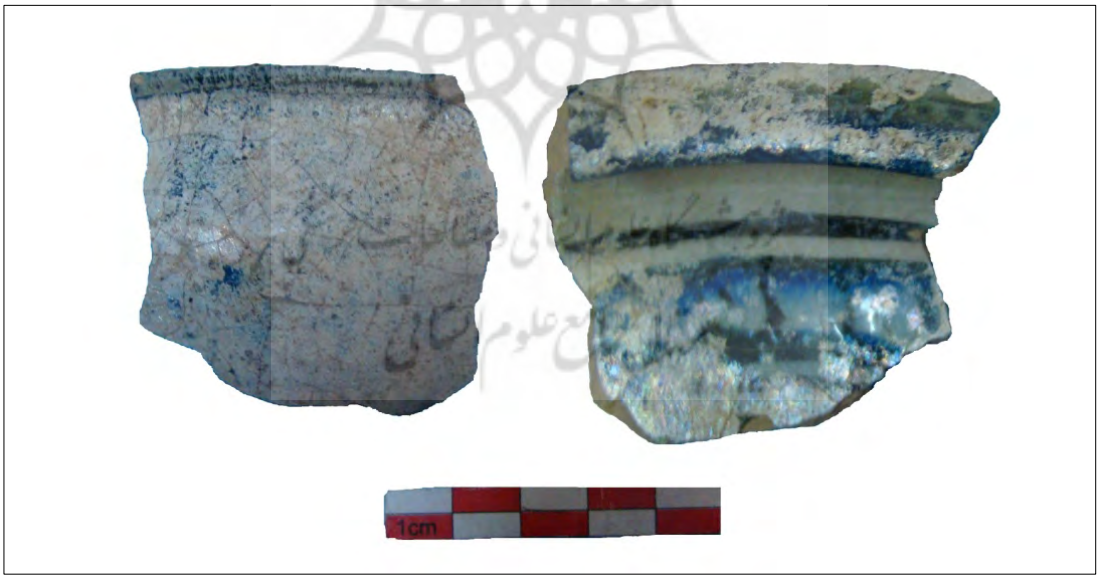
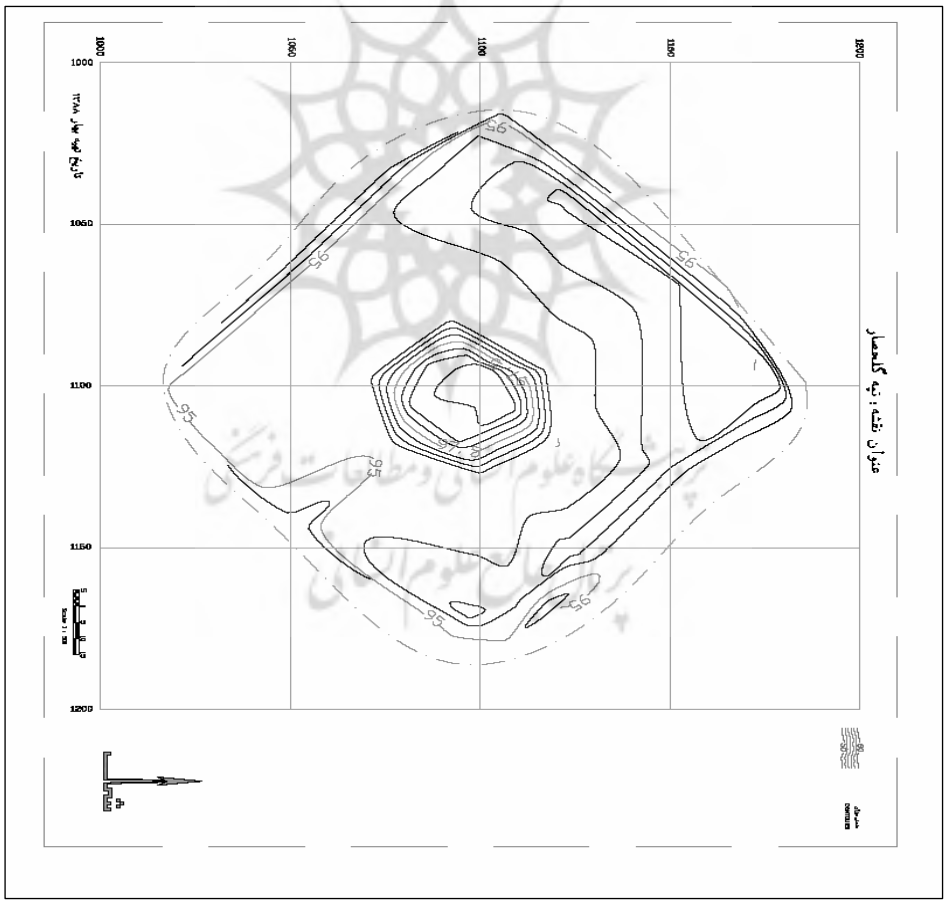


Figure 10. Sample Sultān Abād Pottery, Discovered at Tehran Plain.

Figure 11. The Sultān Abād Pottery Type Dated 617AH (Fehervari, 2000).



Map 1. Topography of Gol-Hesar Hill.

آیا سفال‌های سلطان‌آباد تولید سلطان‌آباد است؟

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بی‌شک سفال یکی از مهم‌ترین داده‌هایی است که می‌تواند به شناخت هرچه بهتر جوامع و فرهنگ‌ها کمک شایانی کند. به رغم معرفی سفال‌های معروف به سلطان‌آباد و طبقه‌بندی آنها از چند دهه قبل تاکنون، اطلاعات بسیار محدودی دربارهٔ منشأ ساخت این گونه‌های سفالین و نیز محوطه‌های باستانی که دارای این گونه‌های سفالی‌اند، منتشر شده است. به نظر می‌رسد از دلایل اصلی این امر یافت نشدن این ظروف از کاوش‌های علمی باستان‌شناسی است، زیرا اغلب این سفالها از حفاری غیرمجاز به دست آمده و وارد موزه‌ها و مجموعه‌های خصوصی مختلف شده است. ازاین‌رو، اطلاعات ما در رابطه با شناخت منشأ، وسعت و درصد پراکندگی این گونه‌های سفالی بسیار محدود است.

در پژوهش حاضر برآنیم به شرح مختصری دربارهٔ معرفی ویژگی‌های فنی و تزیینی این سفال، منشأ ساخت، پیشینهٔ تاریخی و مکان یا مکان‌های احتمالی تولید آنها بپردازیم. سپس بر پایهٔ اطلاعات حاصل از کاوش‌ها و بررسی‌های باستان‌شناسی اخیر به شرح و توضیح این گونه‌های سفالین بپردازیم.

واژگان کلیدی: سفال سلطان‌آباد، ایلخانی، دوران اسلامی، باستان‌شناسی.

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