



CERAMICS XII. THE PARTHIAN AND SASANIAN PERIODS

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Several recent studies have provided a general picture of the ceramics of the Parthian and Sasanian periods in Persia, spanning nearly a millennium, which had previously been virtually unknown. One of the major conclusions is that the distribution pattern of pottery characterized by a wide range of different techniques and styles was quite complex, probably owing to diverse environments that have traditionally been reflected in major differences in the material culture of Persia. The general picture still suffers from limited evidence derived from excavations in the different regions and from insufficient publication of some important excavated sites. Although it is already possible to establish a chronological evolution for certain regions, the overall picture can still be described only very generally.

Parthian period.

In this period nine different regions, each with a distinctive pottery production, can be identified within the borders of modern Persia.

Southwestern Persia. Bard-i Nishandeh (Bard-a Nešānda), Masjid-i Suleiman (Masjed-e Solaymān), and Susa (Apadana east, levels 5e-d; Ville Royale-



Apadana, level 6A; Ville Royale, level VII; Ville Royale II, levels 3E-D; Chaour [Šāhūr] palace, level 3a) are the major sites furnishing information for the 3rd to the mid-2nd century b.c. (Ghirshman; Boucharlat, pp. 194-98; idem and Labrousse, pp. 71-77; Miroschedji, pp. 35-43; Haerinck, pp. 15-87). The common pottery of this phase is light yellow, buff, or orange-pink, occasionally covered by a red slip. Fine wares include thin-walled eggshell ware, which also occurs in southern and central Mesopotamia. Painted pottery, though rare, represents continuation of a local type from the preceding period (see xi, above; Haerinck, pp. 25-27); it disappeared in the 2nd century B.C.E., when glazed pottery became quite popular, sometimes imitating such “Hellenistic” shapes as the plates or shallow bowls with overhanging rims commonly known as “fish plates” (Thompson, p. 435) and carinated bowls on ring bases (for these and other comparisons, see Haerinck, p. 31). For the period from the second half of the 2nd century B.C.E. to the 2nd century C.E. the evolution of pottery shapes is better known, mainly owing to excavations at Susa (Apadana east, levels 5d-a; Ville Royale-Apadana, levels 5-3; Ville Royale A, levels VI-V; Ville Royale II, levels 3c-2B; Chaour palace, levels 2b-a2) during the 1350s Š./1970s, which provided a clearer understanding of the different categories and types. The common ware occurs in a rich variety of forms, not paralleled in other regions of Persia. Glazed pottery appears in several different colors (white, yellow, blue, and green), and the fabric is of better quality than in the Achaemenid period; some forms are close to Mesopotamian types. There was also a small local workshop making “clinky” ware at Susa, a type better known from western Persia; some of the forms imitate those of eastern sigillata ware (Haerinck, p. 42), which first appeared in the eastern Mediterranean area in the 2nd century B.C.E. (see below).

Western Persia (Haerinck, pp. 88-120). The pottery from this area is still not well known. The main source of excavated pottery is Tepe Nush-i Jan (Nūš-e Jān), but Hamadān, Bīsotūn, Kangāvar, Qal’eh-i Yazdigird (Qal’a-ye Yazdegerd; Keall and Keall), Takht-i Suleiman (Takht-e Solaymān), and Khurhah (Korha) also have furnished some evidence. Nevertheless, the chronological evolution of different wares is difficult to establish. Painted “festoon ware” occurs in the southern and central sectors, whereas “triangle ware” is more characteristic of the northern parts; both types are continuations from the Achaemenid period (see xi, above). The paint is reddish, reddish-brown, or dark brown. The festoon ware was produced until the 1st century B.C.E. Particularly diagnostic of the Parthian period in this region is “clinky” ware (sometimes also called “cinnamon” ware), a very well fired pottery, usually with a gray core, that



takes its name from the characteristic ringing sound it produces when tapped. Production probably began in the first half of the 2nd century B.C.E. and perhaps continued to the end of the Parthian period. A limited amount of glazed pottery was produced, perhaps in the 2nd century B.C.E., but there is insufficient evidence to propose a chronological evolution; several forms are similar to those found in southwestern Persia and Mesopotamia (see above).

Northwestern Azarbaijan. Some vessels were found at [Beštām](#) (Kroll, p. 168; Haerinck, pp. 121-22).

Eastern Azarbaijan (Haerinck, pp. 128-48). Two phases are clearly distinguishable in eastern Azarbaijan. The earlier phase is characterized by “Ardabīl ware,” with geometric motifs or stylized animals like birds, goats, or stags painted in reddish orange or brown (see xi, above). Although this ware is known from many collections, it has been scientifically excavated only at Yanik Tepe, where it was probably produced between the 5th and 2nd centuries B.C.E. Several cemeteries in the neighborhood of Germī belonging to the first centuries C.E. have yielded pottery finds related to those from the “jar-burial culture” in Soviet Azarbaijan. Typical are zoomorphic vessels with cylindrical bottlenecks and long tubular spouts, each terminating in an animal head. Many vessels are burnished, but paint is uncommon.

Northern Persia (Gīlān). The pottery from northern Persia is among the best documented for the Parthian period (Haerinck, pp. 149-73). Two distinct phases are clearly apparent. The earlier phase is known mainly from Shiman (Šemān), Shah Pīr (Šāh Pīr), and Juban (Jobān) and dates from the last centuries B.C.E. All the vessels are of dark-brown or greenish-gray fabric and are nicely burnished, sometimes in patterns like spirals and cobwebs. The second phase, from the 1st to the 3rd century C.E., is attested by a rich variety of shapes. The fabric is usually dark reddish-brown, brown, or dark brown. Particularly characteristic are tripod vessels on tall legs that are trapezoidal in section. They have been found at Noruzmahaleh (Nowrūz Maḥalla), Hassani Mahaleh (Ḥasanī Maḥalla), Khoramrud (Korramrūd), and Ghalekuti Eshkevar (Qaḷ’akūtī Eškevar).

Northeastern Persia (primarily Gorgān). The pottery of this area is attested from the excavations at Yarim Tepe levels V-II, Tureng (Tūrang) Tepe (level VB), and Shahr-i Qumis (Šahr-e Qūmes), though subdivision into distinct phases is not yet possible (Haerinck, pp. 174-210). Beside numerous forms in common ware, there is also a grayish-black pottery that is diagnostic but



occurs rarely. Burnished red or orange ware, most typical for Gorgān from the Iron Age to the Islamic period, is represented by a great variety of shapes. Particularly characteristic are vessels with zoomorphic handles. The thin-walled “céramique sonore” (Besenval) is made of well-levigated clay and usually highly burnished. The fabric is orange, red, or brown, sometimes burnished with a flame pattern. The forms are limited to plates and deep bowls.

Eastern Persia (Sīstān). Parthian pottery has been excavated at Kuh-i Khwajah (Kūh-e K̄vāja), Qal’eh-i Sam (Qal’a-ye Sām), and Qal’eh-i Tepe (Qal’a-ye Tapa; Haerinck, pp. 211-23). Beside common ware there is a painted pottery, which is found in both Persia and Afghanistan. There is also “Sīstān ribbed ware,” the sherds of which are usually quite thick, with a ribbed surface. “Red fine-spiral burnished ware,” also known as “red streak-pattern burnished ware” and “ring-burnished ware,” is a rather fine luxury ware known from Persian Sīstān, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. No complete shapes have yet been recovered.

Southeastern Persia (primarily Baluchistan and the coastal area from Mīnāb and Bandar-e ‘Abbās to Būšehr). The relevant sites are Tepe Yahya (Yaḥyā) II-I and many cairns like those at Hazar Mardi (Hazār Mardī), Fanuch (Fannūj), and Dambah Koh (Dambakūh; Haerinck, pp. 232-37). The coastal region, however, has not been investigated archeologically. Painted pottery is most characteristic of the Parthian period in southeastern Persia. There is a fine monochrome- or bichrome-painted pottery, of which very little seems to have been produced. It appeared in the 3rd-2nd century b.c. and disappeared in the first. “Londo ware,” named for the site in Baluchistan where it was first found, is a rather crude pottery, often handmade, and painted in black, dark brown, and red on cream; designs include hanging spirals, birds, stylized horses’ heads, and floral and simple geometric motifs. This ware is also known in Pakistan. A third variety is “fine painted orange ware,” with motifs painted in black on an orange slip, which is probably to be dated between the 2nd and 4th centuries C.E. Imported Indian red-polished ware, an imitation of Roman terra sigillata, has been found at several coastal sites (Whitehouse and Williamson).

Southern Persia (Fārs). Parthian pottery is not well attested from this region (Haerinck, pp. 232-37). The main sites are Pasargadae, Qasr-i Abu-Nasr (Qaṣr-e Abū Naṣr), and Tall-i Malyan (Tal-e Malīān). There is some common ware and, particularly in the 3rd-2nd centuries B.C.E., a red-slipped pottery. Painted ware



similar to that in southwestern and western Persia also occurs, but there is very little glazed pottery.

It is clear from the archeological evidence that there was little uniformity in the Parthian pottery of Persia (Haerinck, pp. 238-57; Hannestad, pp. 107-20). In terms of technique the country can be divided into two large zones, the southern and central regions characterized by painted pottery, the northern ones by burnished wares. Glazed ceramics occur mainly in southwestern and western Persia. As for shapes, only a few, especially carinated bowls, were continued from the Achaemenid period. Others, like the fish plates, reflect “Hellenistic influence” (see above) and are mainly attested in glazed ware. The vast majority of the pottery, however, clearly belongs to local traditions.

Sasanian period.

The corpus of Sasanian pottery is even more restricted than that of the Parthian period, despite the fact that major Sasanian sites have been excavated, for example, Bishapur (Bišāpūr), Firuzabad (Fīrūzābād), Istakhr (Eṣṭakr), Kuh-i Khwaja, Naqsh-i Rostam (Naqš-e Rostam), Susa, and Takht-i Sulaiman. Most of these excavations were conducted several decades ago, and the Sasanian levels were found to be covered by thick strata of Islamic material; it is possible that the Sasanian levels were heavily damaged by the succeeding Islamic settlements. The first attempt at a synthesis of the finds, published by Richard Ettinghausen in 1938 (*Survey of Persian Art*, pp. 646-80), is now out of date; it was based primarily on the finest objects, often from Mesopotamian sites or from uncontrolled sources.

Southwestern Persia. Susa is the only site from which a significant assemblage of Sasanian pottery has been excavated; other sites or districts in this region have only been surveyed (Ivan-i Karkhah [Ayvān-e Karḳa], the Iza [Īda] plain, the Ahvāz area) or tested (Gundeshapur [Gondīšāpūr, Jondaysābūr]). On the whole, Sasanian pottery in this region is closely linked with that of Mesopotamia, and there is a complete absence of painted ware. At Susa two distinct periods have been identified; they are separated by a chronological gap (Boucharlat). The earliest phase, in the 3rd-4th centuries C.E., is mainly a continuation of the middle-to-late Parthian phase (*phase récente*; Haerinck, pp. 47-56). The common buff ware is usually plain, very rarely incised. The ratio of glazed ware does not change, remaining about one third of the total. The second phase seems to date from the 6th-7th centuries. The pottery is clearly different from that of the first, but the fabric is of the same colors: buff, cream,



or greenish. The rims of the open shapes have been elaborated, and a new type of ovoid hole-mouthed storage jar has replaced the Parthian cylindrical jar. Incised and combed decoration has increased significantly; in addition the ribs are marked at the bases with finger impressions, and the surfaces are partly covered with “honeycomb” barbotine work. These features continued into the early Islamic period. The glazes are thicker and brighter and are sometimes turquoise or dark blue in color.

Western and northwestern Persia. Information on pottery from western and northwestern Persia is very scarce; for instance, no pottery was found at the Sasanian fort of Haftavan (Haftavān) Tepe in Azerbaijan and little at Kangāvar or in the Sasanian areas of Qal’eh-i Yazdigird in Kurdistan. At the last site there are examples of various decorative techniques, including incising, grooving, combing, scratching, impressing, and ribbing, from both the very late Parthian and the Sasanian periods (Keall and Keall). On the contrary, at Takht-i Suleiman, in stone buildings of the late Sasanian period (Schnyder), the red or reddish-brown common or coarse pottery is undecorated; it consists of bowls, low-necked jars, and hole-mouthed storage jars. In western Persia glazed ware remained rare, and painted ware had completely disappeared.

Northern Persia. A few graves, like those at Noruz-mahaleh in the Deylamān area of Gīlān, can be dated to the late Parthian or early Sasanian period. The Sasanian pottery did not change much from that of the Parthian period; it includes wide-mouthed jars on round bases or three legs, bowls on three legs, and bottles. The fabric is dark brown and rather coarse, unslipped, with a smoothed or burnished surface and sometimes simple incised decoration as well.

Northeastern Persia. Of the three relevant excavated sites, the “palace of Damgān” at Tepe Hissar (Ḥeṣār), Yarim Tepe, and Tureng Tepe, a substantial amount of pottery has been published only from the last. It falls into three phases. The pottery from the first two, found in levels VIA (3rd-5th centuries) and VIB (6th-7th centuries) respectively, is very similar, consisting mainly of red or red-brown common ware that has sometimes been burnished. The open shapes are fairly simple, though the jugs may have trefoil necks; there are also hole-mouthed storage jars. Decoration is rare and consists of rather perfunctory incised lines. The pottery of the third phase comes from level VIIA-B (7th-8th centuries), which contains the excavated *čahārṭāq* (Lecomte). It is of better quality; incised meanders or crosshatched designs and combed decoration are the most frequent. This pottery is clearly related to the Central



Asian tradition.

Eastern Persia. The only excavated site is Kuh-i Khwaja, and the only pottery known from the Sasanian period is the “Sīstān ribbed ware,” which was already being produced in the Parthian period (Gullini, pp. 231-39; cf. Haerinck, p. 212). There seems to be no painted ware from this period.

Southeastern Persia and the coastal area. The pottery so far recovered from Tepe Yahya IA-I and from several cairns in Kermān is partly dated to the beginning of the Sasanian period. It consists of common buff ware with incised decoration and two painted wares originating in the Parthian period (see above). Both the fine orange painted ware and the red polished ware continued into a.d. the 4th century. The latter was widely distributed along the Gulf as far west as Būšeher. Apart from Šīrāf, all the information on pottery from the coastal area comes from surveys (Whitehouse and Williamson, pp. 38-39; Williamson).

Southern Persia. The most important sites for pottery are Qasr-i Abu Nasr (Whitcomb) and Fīrūzābād (Huff and Gignoux); almost no pottery was found at Istakhr, Naqsh-i Rūstam, or Bīshapur. A small corpus was also excavated at Malyan (Balcer); period IV at Pasargadae belongs mainly to the early Islamic period (Stronach, pp. 157-59). Three Sasanian phases are attested at Qasr-i Abu Nasr: 1b-c (3rd-5th centuries), 2a (6th century), and 2b (7th-8th centuries), but the pottery of each level is difficult to define because of the imprecise method of excavation, with insufficient attention to stratigraphy. The overall corpus falls into three groups: greenish-cream ware with combed decoration, dark-gray or buff wares with incised decoration on the shoulders, and buff or black ware with barbotine decoration. The first two groups are widespread in Fārs and are found especially at Fīrūzābād, as well as outside the region, in Kūzestān and Mesopotamia. A small group of pithoi from Fīrūzābād bear Pahlavi inscriptions on the necks. There is no significant percentage of glazed ware at any of the sites.

The regional differences observed in the Parthian period seem less clear-cut in the Sasanian period, perhaps because material is scarce. It should be noted that glazed ware is well represented only in Kūzestān; not until several centuries later, in the Islamic period, did the technique of glazing spread over the Persian plateau. Furthermore, contrary to Ettinghausen’s report (*Survey of Persian Art*, p. 666), it was only slightly decorated, with simple incisions. Painted ware occurred only in southern and southeastern Persia in the early



Sasanian period. On the other hand, incised and combed decoration on common ware had been diffused through western, southwestern, and southern Persia. Some shapes, especially undecorated late Sasanian bottles and jugs, seem to be simplified imitations of the shapes of metal vessels, usually decorated, from chance discoveries in southern Russia (Harper, pp. 21-22, 24 fig. 13).

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