University of
Sistan and Baluchestan

Iranian Journal of Archaeological Studies

Print ISSN: 2251-743X Online ISSN: 2676-2919

Archaeological Sciences
Research Centre

Distribution and Diversity of Islamic Ceramic Types at Archaeological Sites of Khusf County

Hossein Sedighian

Department of Archaeology, Lorestan University, Lorestan, Iran.
E- mail: Sedighian.h@lu.ac.ir

Received: 10/ 02/ 2023; Received in Revised form: 13/ 04/ 2023; Accepted: 19/ 05/ 2023; Published: 20/ 06/ 2023

Abstract

As a less known region with respect to Islamic pottery, Khusf County was surveyed in 2014 to record its historical relics. The intervening years have seen the publication of a lot of archaeological information on the documented relics, but the corpus of Islamic pottery from the region remains virtually unpublished. Its rich diversity in motif and decoration types and attribution to several different Islamic centuries as well as the fact that there were few published studies from South Khorasan province in general regarding regional Islamic ceramics warranted an independent study. Thus, the present study has the potential to not only shed light on the archeology of Khusf but also contribute to the studies of the related Islamic pottery from the province. With these in mind, the major questions addressed here concern the chronology of the pottery corpus in question and the centers from which comparanda could be drawn. This paper embarks on a comparative analysis of the Islamic pottery assemblages from Khusf County to establish a comparative chronology. The data for this descriptive-comparative study comes from both field and library researches. The findings suggest that the Islamic pottery from the county spans at least the 10th to the 19th century AD. In types of motifs and decoration, the pottery finds parallels over a broad swathe of eastern and southern Iran, and for the most part represents potential imports from such regions or centers as Nishapur, Mashhad, and Kerman.

Keywords: Khusf, Ceramic, Islamic Era, Archaeology, South Khorasan.

Article Type: Research Article

Introduction

The survey project of Khusf County, directed by the author in 2014, identified and recorded a number of sites with surface scatters of various Islamic ceramic types. The most notable among the identified sites were the hillfort of Giv, the site at the village of Ark, the site and cemetery of the village of Khur, and the site and the historical cemetery of the city of Khusf.

During this survey program, a large corpus of unglazed and glazed ceramic pieces dating to the Islamic period was collected. Notwithstanding its high diversity in decoration and extended chronological sequence, the corpus has not yet been considered in any independent investigation, and what is more, no serious research has likewise covered other Islamic pottery assemblages from the county. Therefore, enquiry into this corpus can supply an independent source for future research. Furthermore, the present study can serve as a helpful base for comparative analysis of Islamic pottery from South Khorasan province and even from the two adjacent provinces of Kerman and Sistan and Baluchistan. These very reasons justify the present investigation into the Islamic pottery from the region. The questions considered here are as follows: To what centuries of the Islamic period does the pottery collection from Khusf County date? And, from which regions are the comparanda of motifs to be drawn? Accordingly, the main objective of the current study includes a comparative analysis of the pottery sample, which will then enable us to establish a relative chronology.

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DOI: 10.22111/IJAS.2023.46439.1278
DOR: 20.1001.1.2251743.2023.13.1.3.4
Publisher: University of Sistan and Baluchestan

Research Background

As already stated, no independent research has been devoted to the Islamic pottery from Khusf County. Only the released report on the county's survey and the recently published book on the basis of that report contain passing references to the recorded sites and present a selection of collected surface pottery (for further details see: Sedighian, 2014; Sedighian & Nikzad, 2022). Therefore, the present paper represents the first step towards the publication of the Islamic cultural material from the county. As with Khusf, not much research has covered the Islamic pottery from the entire South Khorasan province. The meager body of pertinent works includes the two papers dealing with the Seljuk pottery from Ghal'eh Kuh of Qaen, which are mainly focused on the coeval unglazed and partially glazed ceramics from this site (Anvari Moghaddam *et al,* 2021; Chamanara & Farjami, 2010). Further, a paper dedicated to the findings of the fourth season of excavations at Kahnek of Sarbisheh County gives relatively detailed descriptions on the early and mid-Islamic pottery types (Farjami & Mahmoudinasab, 2020). So, the dearth of scholarship on the Islamic cultural materials from both Khusf County and South Khorasan province is readily discernible.

Research Method

The present work adopts a descriptive-comparative approach and builds on a dataset originating from both field and library studies. Thus, the study had actually started with the general survey of Khusf County by the author in 2014, during which an assortment of Islamic pottery types was collected and documented from various sites. Now comparisons have been drawn between the collected corpus and the related material from multiple sites and museums through examining all relevant published sources at disposal. Indeed, the comparanda for the most part has been traced in the neighboring regions of South Khorasan, North Khorasan, Kerman and, to a lesser extent, Sistan and Baluchistan and Hormozgan. The obtained results underpin the present paper.

Unglazed Ceramic

The surface survey of the Islamic sites of Khusf County yielded various types of unglazed pottery in buff or reddish buff paste, sometimes embellished with incised, applied, stamped or molded motifs (Figure. 1). The pieces tend to represent closed forms thrown on a potter's wheel. Some with appliqué designs find parallels at the Seljuk sites of



Figure. 1: *Selected Islamic unglazed ceramic from Khusf with stamped, incised and applied patterns*

Ghal'eh Kuh of Qaen and Malin of Bakharz (Anvari Moghadam *et al*, 2021: 97, Table 5; Khodadoust *et al*, 2017: vol. 3, 166, Figure. 27–29). Yet, a handful of other unglazed types, probably showing excision technique, seem to remain as yet unreported from elsewhere.

A pile of Seljuk unglazed pottery in a buff paste with molded decorations was recorded at several sites like Tappe Giv (Figure. 2). Invariably fashioned into closed forms, they bear vegetal/floral, geometric and animal motifs. Also recorded at Giv were possible indications of the local production of molded pottery. Most notable of such indications are a pottery mold and a tripod stilt (Figure. 3), which tentatively place this site among the centers of pottery production in the county. The available publications accredit the highpoint of the molded pottery to the Seljuk period, i.e., the late 11th to the 16th centuries AD, when the technique was in popular use in several centers (Dezhamkhouy, 2007: 28; Karimi & Kiani, 1985: 13). Particularly eminent among such centers in the neighboring regions were Nishapur, Jiroft, Narmashir, and Ghaleh Sang of Sirjan (Kambakhshfard, 1970: 52; Choubak, 2012: 86; Amirhajloo & Saghaee, 2018: 222; Amirhajloo & Sedighian, 2020: 175; Wilkinson, 1973: 355). Of these, Jiroft was perhaps the most prominent, as the surface collections and excavated assemblages there include significant molded pottery components as well as actual molds used for such decorations. The related fragments exhibit a great variety both in paste and motif type (Choubak, 2012: 89–90).

Another attested class of distinctive unglazed pottery consists of pseudo-prehistoric painted pottery (Figure. 4). Related material occurs both at the medieval Islamic forts like Ghal'eh Zari and the historic sites such as Giv. The pottery is of a reddish buff paste formed into closed forms. The exterior body or the rim displays decorations in the shape of very simple and crude geometric bands in reddish brown. Typifying the Seljuk period, this ubiquitous type occurs almost all across Iran, especially over a region stretching from Khuzestan province to western Fars province (Sedighian & Gholami, 2011–2012: 135). Interestingly enough, the pottery is also attested at a series of Seljuk forts within present-day Iran, among them being Ghal'eh Zari in Khusf (Sedighian, 2014), Ghal'eh Shahdezh in Nehbandan (Khaledian, 2010: 98), and Ghal'eh Manoujan in Kerman (Barsam, 2019: 41). Notable among the other neighboring areas or sites with such pottery are the old city of Qaen, Kahnek in Sarbisheh, the Narmashir plain, Kerman, South Mokran, and Jam in Afghanistan (Labbaf Khaniki,



Figure. 2: *Selected Seljuk unglazed ceramic with molded decorations from Khusf County*

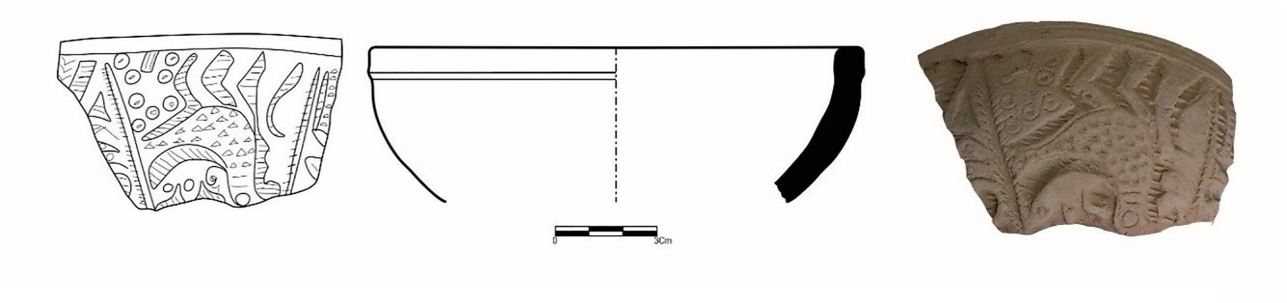


Figure. 3: *Khusf County: A clay mold from Giv*

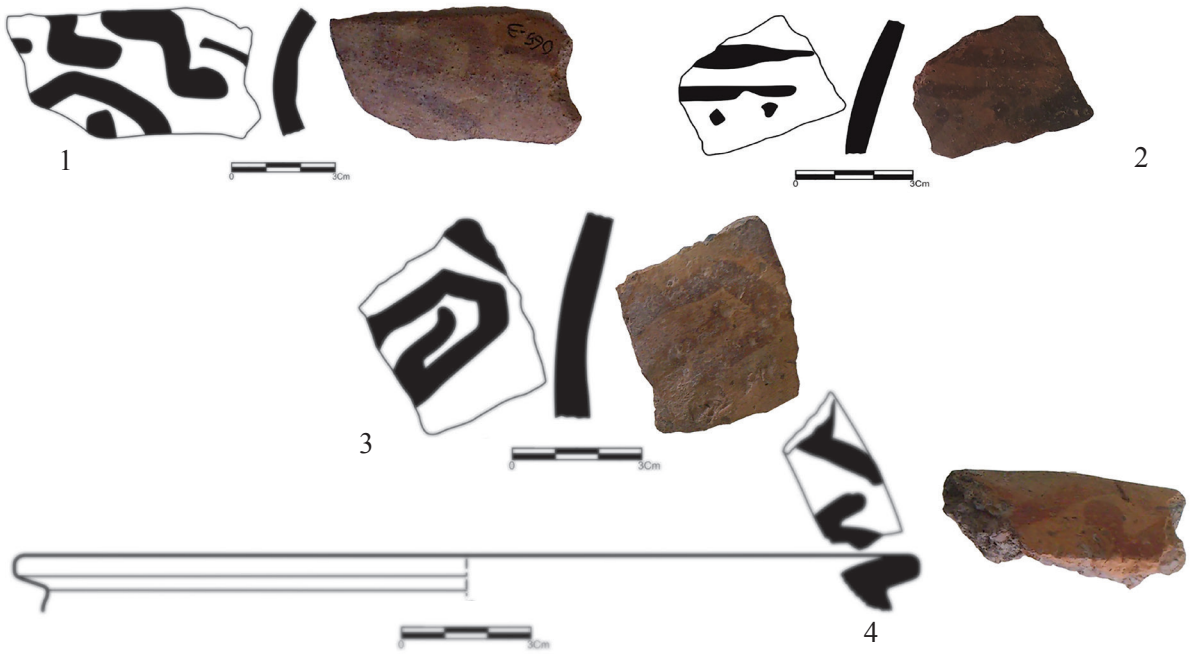


Figure. 4: *Selected Islamic unglazed painted ceramic from Khusf County*

2008; Farjami & Mahmoudinasab, 2020: 110; Amiranipour *et al*, 2018; Mousavi Haji, *et al,* 2012: 127; Gascoigne, 2010: 135). It should be indicated that no site or settlement is presently known to have produced unequivocal evidence on the production of this type. Thus, it is impossible to argue with any degree of certainty whether Khusf's unglazed painted pottery is a local product or an imported component from elsewhere.

Glazed Pottery

Apart from the unglazed class, also visible among the surface material from Khusf County are various types of glazed potteries. Despite their lower quantity, the glazed instances are characterized by higher diversity in decoration types and higher number in datable diagnostic pieces than the unglazed variety. Three paste types are distinguishable: buff or reddish buff clay paste, white or light buff fritware, and white porcelain. Vessels generally consist of different types of open forms like plate or bowls, and are wheel-made. From the perspective of comparative chronology, this class displays a higher variety than the unglazed group, and spans the early to the late Islamic centuries.

Notable, among the distinctive early Islamic types from the region are the slip-painted potteries, which is known from the key sites like Giv (Figure.5). Related wheel-made pieces are in a reddish buff clay paste and include open forms. They are typically decorated with monochrome black paint over a white or milky white slip. Motifs are restricted to various

geometric patterns later coated in a very transparent thin lead glaze. No indications supporting the local production of this type were detected, and thus the slip painted pieces from the county perhaps represents imports from other regions. An important point about this type is its ubiquitous presence virtually throughout eastern Iran in such provinces as Kerman, Sistan and Baluchistan, South and North Khorasans and even Semnan (Amirhajloo & Saghaee, 2018: 214; Zarei *et al*, 2016: 65; Ataie *et al*, 2012: 82; Khodadoust *et al,*2017: 166; Zarei & Sharifi, 2018: 93-98; Chamanara & Farjami, 2011: 15; Farjami & Mahmoudinasab, 2020: 112; Wilkinson, 1973: 90–127; Priestman, 2013: 599–600). In light of the available evidence, at least within the present-day Iran, centers like Jiroft, Sirjan, Bam and Nishapur were seemingly widely engaged in the production of this type (Choubak, 2012: 93, 105; Sajjadi Hezaveh & Ahmadi, 2019; Morgan & Leatherby, 1987; Wilkinson, 1973). The white slipped pottery from Arg-e Bam is both less frequent than the other slipped categories in the region and is mainly decorated with inscriptions or pseudo-inscriptions (Sajjadi Hezaveh & Ahmadi, 2019: 1452). Therefore, it seems quite unlikely that such material in Khusf was imported from Bam, but it is not possible to generalize this claim to other regions with any degree of certainty. In light of the comparative chronology, the slipped pottery painted in monochrome black on a white or milky white ground is generally dated between the 10th–11th centuries AD (Watson, 2004: 206; Priestman, 2013: 602).

Another group of pottery from the region consists of monochrome glazed pieces in a clay paste or fritware. Related instances mainly come in open forms and are wheel-made (Figure. 6). This group includes examples made of a reddish buff clay paste, covered with a monochrome dark green transparent lead glaze and decorated with simple linear motifs incised through the white slip. This decorative technique was mainly popular between the late 10th and the beginning of the 12th century AD (Shateri *et al*, 2019: 181; Priestman, 2005: 255–256). Comparable decorations have been reported from many regions or sites, including Nishapur, the port of Tis in Chabahar, the Neyriz plain of Fars, Sirjan, and Ghubayra of Kerman (Moradi & Karimian, 2020: 286, no. 9; Fehervari, 2000: 81–85; Sedighian *et al*, 2021: 120; Morgan & Leatherby, 1987: 134; Bivar, 2000: 138–140).



Figure. 5: *Selected slip painted ceramic from Khusf County*

Also, there are sherds in white fritware[1] with

[1]The paste is otherwise known as tile, faience, artistic paste, quartz frit, and quartz frit clay paste (Mason & Tite, 1994: 77). In light of the references in historical sources and laboratory studies, this paste is made from the combination of 10% quartz, 1% frit and 1% white clay (Cattelli, 2005: 31; Kashani, 1966). This paste type has an extremely low iron content close to zero, and is particularly robust and resilient (Velde & Druc, 1999: 133).

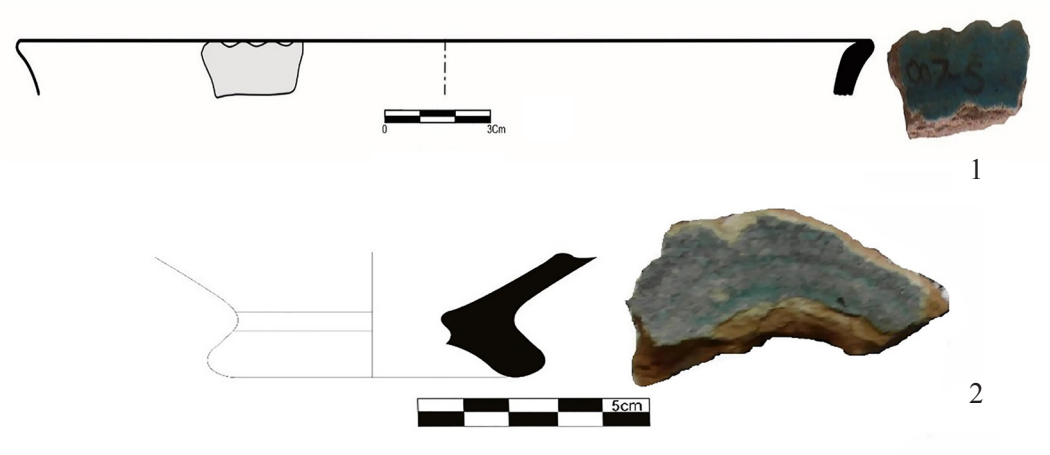


Figure. 6: *Selected monochrome glazed ceramic in fritware and clay paste from Khusf County*

invariably a simple monochrome alkaline glaze in turquoise or lajvardina. The currently available evidence dates the advent of monochrome alkaline glazed pottery in fritware in Iran to the 12th century AD, though the use of the technique culminated between the 12th–13th centuries AD (Grube, 2005: 129; Fehervari, 1973: 95; Mason, 2004: 123). Such pottery was produced in many Iranian centers, of which those almost adjacent to Khusf include Jiroft, Belqeys of Esfarayen, and Nishapur (Choubak, 2012: 86-93; Farjami, 2014–2015: 163; Wilkinson, 1973: 288). Based on these observations as well as the comparative analyses, the pertinent pieces from Khusf relate to the 12th–13th centuries AD, though their precise provenance remains unclear.

Pottery with black painting under transparent turquoise alkaline glaze in fritware forms another component in the corpus from Khusf, and is found in lower quantities at a series of Islamic sites (Figure.7). Such pieces were thrown on a potter's wheel in open forms like bowls. The interior and sometimes the upper half of the exterior body exhibit geometric motifs painted in black directly on the body, which was finally covered in a transparent turquoise glaze. According to the available publications, such decorative method was generally in use between the late 12th and the 13th centuries AD, and the primary production centers included the cities of Kashan and Rayy (Pope, 2008: 1839; Watson, 2004: 343). Similar material was recorded during the survey of the archaeological sites of Narmashir (Amirhajloo & Saghaee, 2018: 216, Figure. 5, nos. 22 and 125).

Still another class of pottery painted in black under turquoise glaze shows a relatively coarse reddish buff clay paste (Figure. 8). Being inferior in paste quality to the examples in fritware, related pieces are entirely wheel-made and exhibit a variety of open and closed forms. Assorted geometric or vegetal/floral motifs are attested. This type occurs at almost all of the Islamic sites across the county, is paralleled at the bulk of sites dating from the 14th to 16th centuries AD throughout Iran, was manufactured in scores of centers, and is therefore rather generic and undiagnostic. In particular, in southern Iran, the related material is mainly dated to the 15th–16th centuries AD (Priestman, 2005: 264). Those in the assemblages excavated at Ghubayra have been assigned to the 14th–15th centuries AD (Bivar, 2000: 151), and those driving from the historical texture of the city of Yazd and its Friday Mosque are mainly attributed to the Muzaffarid period in the 14th century AD (Zarei *et al*, 2018: 171; Jenkins, 1983: 20). Accordingly, such pottery was possibly mainly flourished in the timespan of the 14th to 16th centuries AD, though sadly neither in Khusf nor in the surrounding regions any centers specialized in manufacturing such pottery were identified.

In the course of the surveys of many Islamic sites in Khusf County, particularly the historical sites of Khusf, Khur and Ark, many fragments of blue and white pottery in fritware were recovered (Figure. 9). The original vessels were entirely thrown on a potter's wheel and represented open forms. The surface treatment generally consists of underglaze painting mainly in cobalt blue, though instances of black pigment in the outlines of the patterns are also attested. In evidence is a vast array of geometric and vegetal/floral patterns, which are so reminiscent of

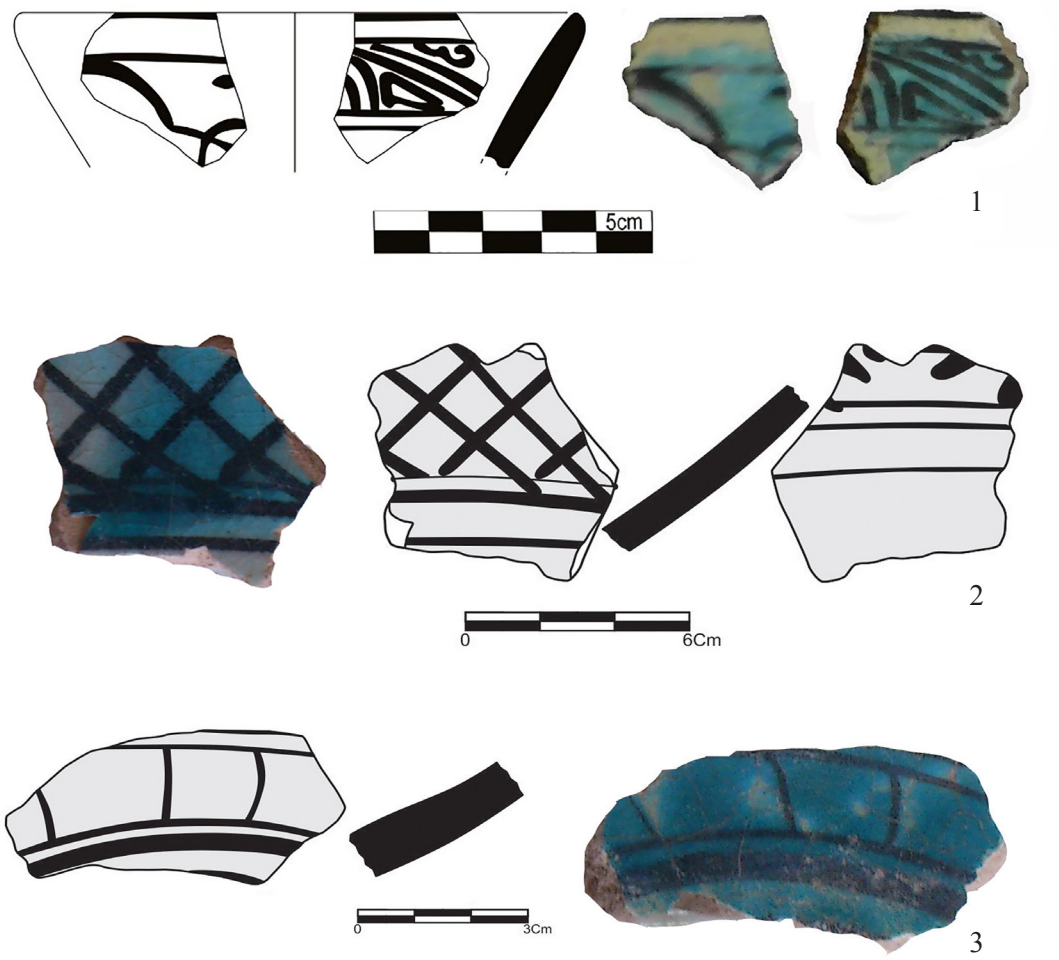


Figure. 7: *Selected ceramic with black painting under turquoise glaze in fritware*

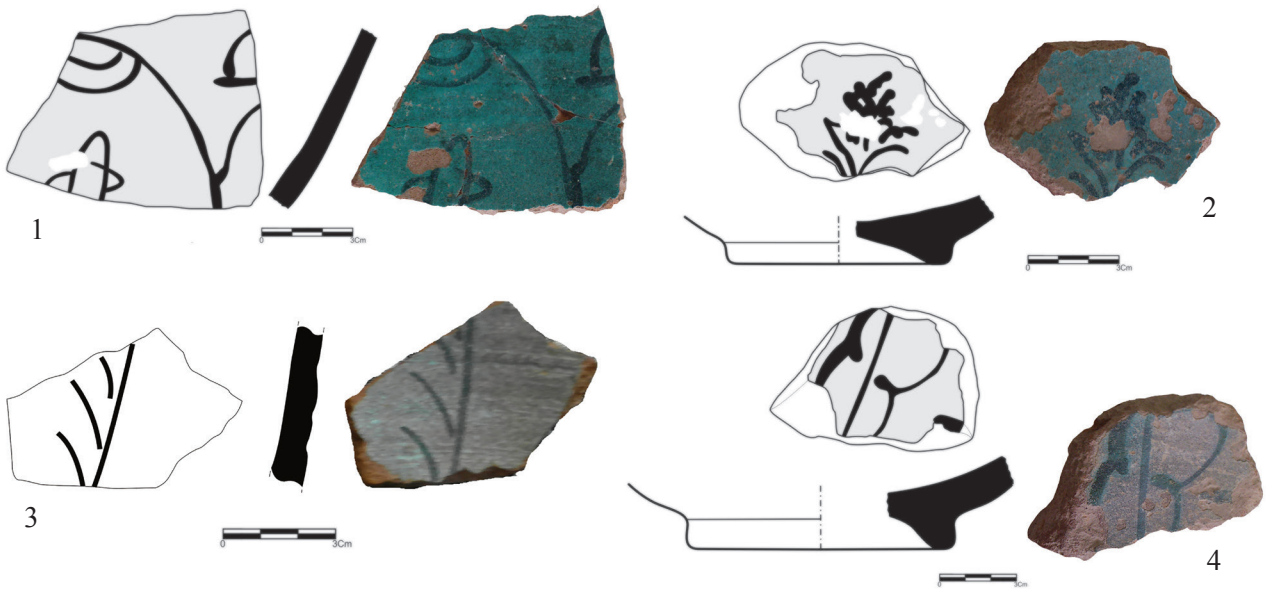


Figure. 8: *Selected ceramic painted in black under turquoise glaze in a clay paste*

examples from the 15th to 17th centuries AD found at many historical sites and museum collections. While no evidence pointing towards the local manufacture of such pottery was recorded in Khusf County, the references in historical sources and archeological publications indicate cities like Kerman and Mashhad to be among the main centers specialized in this type (Akbari & Sadeghi Taheri, 2014; Rogers, 1995: 266; Mason & Golombek, 2003: 257; Crown, 2002: 48). The use of black paint on most of the blue and white pottery from Khusf might hint at their possible production in Mashhad, where the use of such pigment was very popular (Akbari & Sadeghi Taheri, 2014: 86). Related pottery has been reported from Narmashir, Ghaleh Sang of Sirjan, Malin of Bakharz and even such sites as Zolf-Abad in Farahan (Amirhajloo & Saghaee, 2018: 216, Figure. 5, no. 82; Amirhajloo & Sedighian, 2020: Figure. 7, nos. 30-31; Khodadoust *et al*, 2017: Figure. 3, no. 69; Nemati, 2019: 37, pl. 1).

In the blue and white assemblages from the region are present a few fragments in fritware with polychrome blue and white decorations as floral patterns (Figure.10, no.1). Apart from the cobalt blue, they use a brick red pigment to mark the outlines of a number of motifs. This decorative method exclusively occurs on some pottery vessels originated in Kerman in the second half of the 17th century AD (Rohani *et al*, 2021: 51). Also identified was a piece of blue and white pottery painted in silhouette style from the historical site of Khusf (Figure. 10; no. 2). Unlike those from the medieval

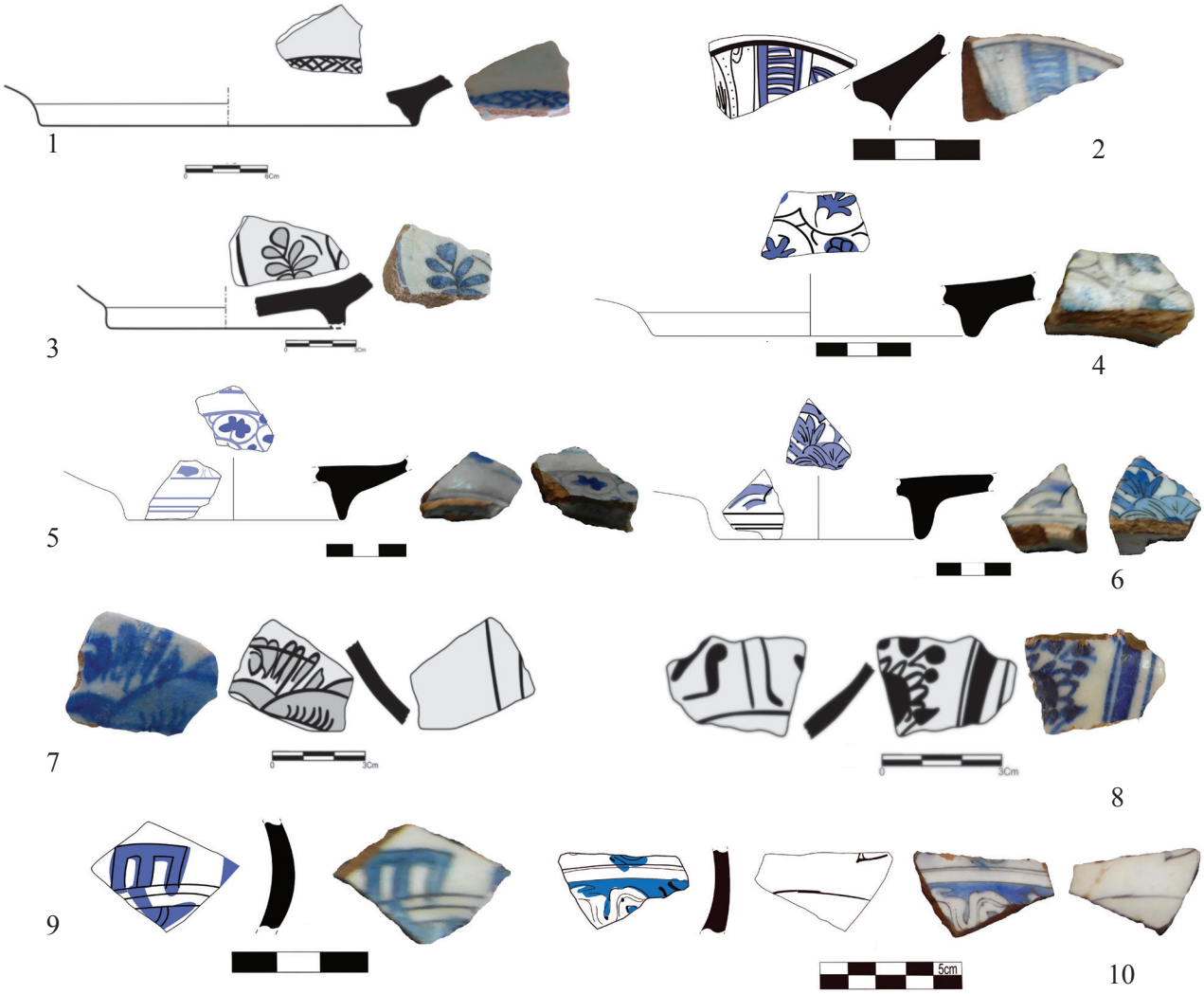


Figure. 9: *Selected blue and white ceramics in fritware*

Islamic world[1], this fragment shows a blue cobalt glaze on which the motifs were excised. Therefore, the resultant patterns are somewhat reminiscent of those of the blue and white pottery. Examples with this decoration style in fritware are also known from the Safavid period, the foremost production center of which was Kerman (Akbari & Sadeghi Taheri, 2014: 83).

From the historical site of Khusf comes a fragment of blue and white pottery in white porcelain (Figure.10, no.3). This open vessel shows patterns akin to Chinese clouds. Parallels occur among the material produced in China during the Ming Dynasty, coinciding with the Safavid Iran, probably in the Jingdezhen region. Further comparanda occur for example at Julfar, the UAE (Zhao *et al*, 2015: 152, Figure. 23).

A handful of historical sites in Khusf County contained surface scatters of reddish buff or red glazed pottery in clay paste, embellished with polychrome patterns over a white slip (Figure. 11). Attested motifs are in yellow, turquoise, black, and dark brown and include various geometric and vegetal/floral designs reflecting a completely local, primitive style. They are invariably in open forms and wheel-made. Sadly, the comparative analyses failed to identify any comparanda in other regions. In the style of polychrome painting over white slip, these fragments somewhat resemble the Nishapur polychrome slip-painted pottery of the 9th–11th centuries AD, found in the excavated assemblages from Nishapur and even Esfarayen (Zarei *et al,*2018: 66; Wilkinson, 1973: 15). Yet, several factors such as the manufacturing technique, form of the ring bases, underglaze painted decorations, highly local but naturalistic motifs, and relative comparison to some regional examples of clay paste painted in black under turquoise glaze dating between

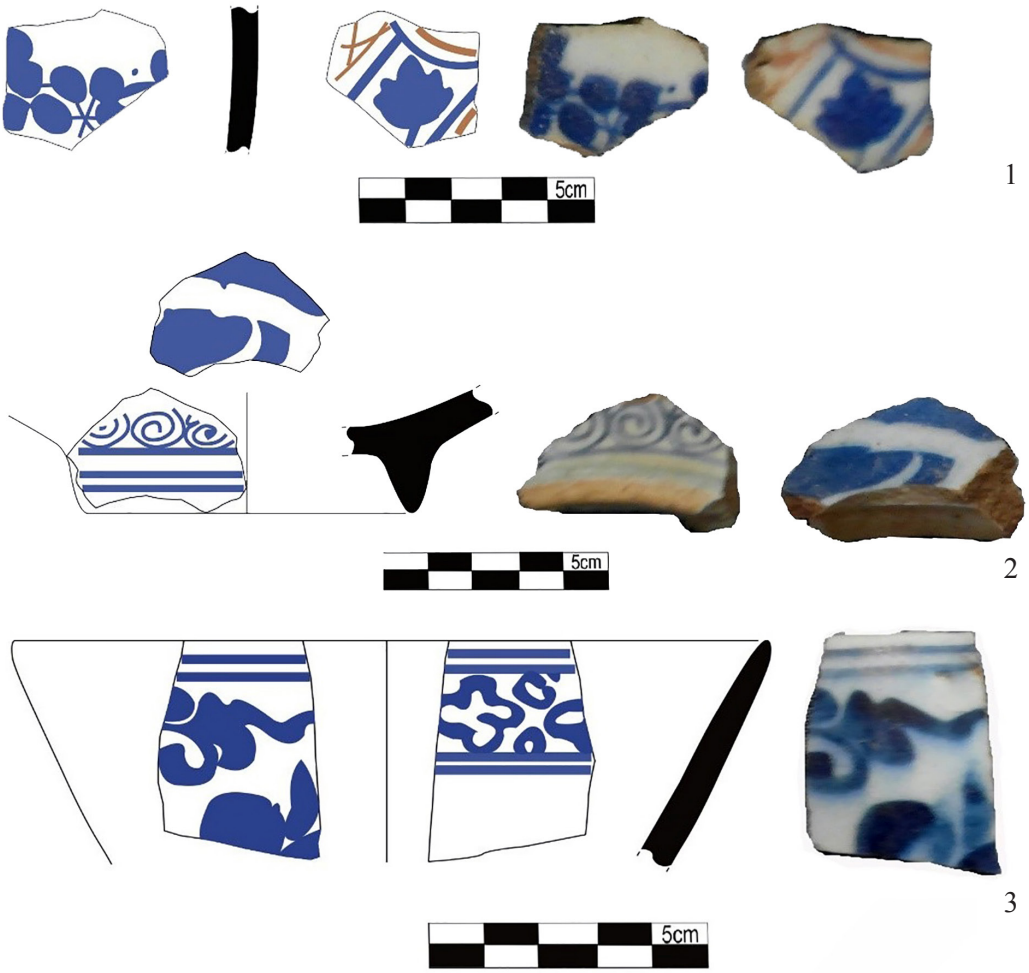


Figure. 10: *Two examples of polychrome blue and white, silhouette blue and white ceramic, and blue and white ceramic in Ming porcelain from Khusf*

[1]For more details on the Seljuk silhouette ware, see Mahjoubi & Tondi 2016.

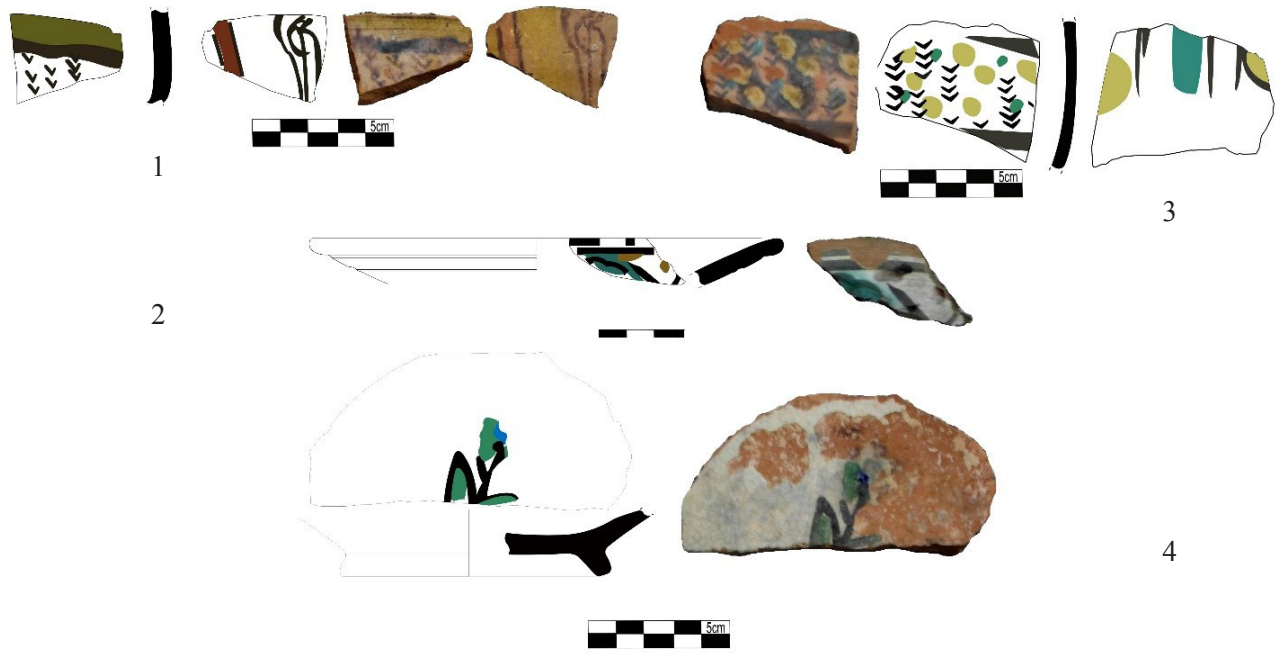


Figure. 11: *Selected ceramics with polychrome painting through white slip in reddish buff clay paste*

the 14th–16th centuries AD appear to preclude the possibility that they belonged to the early or medieval Islamic period. Rather, a date in 14th–18th centuries AD and even later appears to be the most plausible. Yet, given their rather local and primitive painting style, there still remains the possibility that they were produced in Khusf or a nearby region.

Conclusions

A large number of archaeological sites were identified and recorded in the archaeological survey of Khusf County. These sites contained various types of ceramic from the Islamic period. The lack of adequate and precise knowledge on these ceramics called for an independent inquiry. Comparisons with related material from other regions suggested a tentative relative date between the 10th and the 19th centuries AD.

Unglazed pottery from Khusf County is generally undiagnostic and manufactured using a rather rudimentary and unrefined technique. On this very basis, many of such pieces might be assumed as having been produced locally, as is today the case with the county where some local pottery workshops at villages like Shah Zileh produce different types of unglazed pottery. However, the unglazed pottery from Khusf includes instances of a Seljuk date with molded decorations, which in light of available evidence were most likely produced at the hillfort of Giv. At the moment, these pieces furnish the only evidence on pottery production during the early Islamic to the late Safavid period in the county. In addition to the molded variety, examples of unglazed painted or pseudo-prehistoric pottery were recorded at some localities in Khusf County, all representing the 11th to the 13th centuries AD. While comparable material is known for example from Narmashir and Qaen, no specific production center has been identified. Since such pottery was also used in many Isma'ili forts, it is not unlikely that the pottery from Khusf had some connections with the disciples of this Shiite sub-sect, though the claim still remains a simple conjecture.

Khusf's glazed pottery forms another group of finds from the regional Islamic sites, and in the type of motifs and decoration is more strongly related to the material produced in Nishapur than other regions like Bam or Jiroft. The monochrome glazed pottery from Khusf occurs in both clay paste and fritware. Those of clay paste are dark green in color and find parallels in many regions across Iran, mainly dating between the 10th–12th centuries AD. But the fritware variety, spanning in date the 12th to the 13th centuries AD, seems to compare more

closely to the examples produced in Nishapur and Jiroft. Also identified in Khusf, albeit in very limited quantity, are examples in fritware with underglaze painting, all of which are datable to the 12th–13th centuries AD. Sadly, however, no production center in eastern Iran is currently known to be definitely described as the provenance of the Khusf examples. The underglaze painted material from Khusf in clay paste, possibly from the 14th to 19th centuries AD, has no known production centers in South Khorasan province, although such pottery was manufactured in the old city of Esfarayen, i.e., Belqeys, in the 14th–15th centuries AD.

A remarkable pottery component from Khusf consists of various types of blue and white vessels from the 15th to 17th centuries AD, which presumably were imports from centers like Mashhad as suggested by the comparative studies. At the same time, a number of less frequent types identified in the county, among them being the silhouette blue and white and the polychrome blue and white styles, reveal closer affinities with the material produced in Kerman. Of these, only a single piece of blue and white type seems to represent an import from the Ming China. The corpus from the county also contains limited numbers of polychrome slip painted pieces, which are presently unreported from elsewhere. Yet, they were seemingly produced in the region sometimes after the 14th century AD.

Based on the above observations, the pottery from Khusf shows a high variety in decorative patterns. Certain types, like molded pottery, were produced locally, but most of them made their way into the area as imported items from other regions like Nishapur, Mashhad, Jiroft, and Kerman. This observation suggests that throughout the Islamic period the local residents maintained broader trade relations with the regions forming the present-day provinces of Khorasan Razavi and Kerman, but no regular trade contacts seemingly took place with such regions as Sistan and Baluchistan province. The foremost reason for this state of play is the dearth of publications on the Islamic potteries from these regions.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank all scholars who helped to maintain the quality of this article by acting as reviewers.

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