

**PATTERNS AND INTERPRETATION: BEYLAGAN'S LUSTERWARE SAMPLES****Mirjavid Elshad Aghalarov**ANAS Institute of Archaeology, Ethnography, and Anthropology  
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**Abstract:** The medieval city of Beylagan is one of the best-studied urban areas of Azerbaijan. As a result of this long-term research work, done by A. Alakbarov, A. Gasharli, I. Meschaninov, and others during the 1930s-1960s, rich samples of material culture were discovered from this city. This paper is devoted to a comparative analysis of the lusterware findings from Beylagan. Back in the last century, B.A. Shelkovnikov conducted research and published an article about samples of Beylagan lusterwares, but this article mostly focused on the problem of their origin. The aim of this research is to explain the main pattern motifs of Beylagan's lusterware in detail. In addition, these pattern motifs were compared with the pattern motifs of Iranian cities, and the common aspects were brought to the fore. The material basis of the research includes artefacts from the Hermitage Museum of Russia and National History Museum of Azerbaijan.

**Keywords:** *lusterware, Beylagan, Kashan, Rey, pattern motif, floral*

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The medieval city of Beylagan is one of the best-studied cities from the archaeological point of view among the medieval cities of Azerbaijan. The archaeological site of Orangala, which is the ruin of medieval Beylagan city, was not inhabited, so the cultural layer suffered little damage. In 1926, Alasgar Alakbarov, one of the first archaeologists of Azerbaijan, together with A. Gasharli, organized an archaeological visit to the Mil plain, including Orangala and the historical site, called the Prophet's cemetery near it. In 1933, I. Meshchaninov provided small-scale archaeological excavation works for the first time. These works were only preliminary and did not produce serious results. After a break for a while, the excavations were continued in 1951 by Ishaq Jafarzade, and then followed by Alexander Jessen in 1953-1958 [Иессен (1959): 34], and Gara Ahmadov in 1959-1968 [Əhmədov (1997): 26], who conducted large-scale excavations in the Orangala archaeological site.

As a result of archaeological excavations that began in the 1930s, rich examples of material culture were discovered in the city of Beylagan. Among these examples of material culture, lusterware vessels are of special interest. B.A. Shelkovnikov wrote the first and most comprehensive article about lusterware samples of Beylagan [Шелковников (1959)]. He generally described Beylagan's lusterware products, described their forms [Шелковников (1959): 303] and tried to solve the problem of their origin [Шелковников (1959): 322]. Referring to Arthur Upham Pope's work [Pope (1939): 167], B. Shelkovnikov, based on the artistic design features of Beylagan's lusterware samples, finally came to the conclusion that, with a few exceptions,

Beylagan's lusterware samples were mostly produced in Ray, as a result of commercial relations brought to this city.

Among the stonepaste samples found in archaeological excavations in Azerbaijan, samples with defective results were also found. Such examples were found in Shamkir [Dostiyev (2017): 105], Ganja [Джафарзаде (1949): 74-75]. Although there are examples of lusterware from Beylagan with a manufacturing defect, they have not been described so far. In general, the samples of lusterware found in the medieval cities of Azerbaijan are connected with the cities of Ray and Kashan in Iran and are considered mainly as examples of commercial relations.

The issue of where and from what period lusterware -type dishes were produced is one of the important issues. Lustre was used in the artistic design of glassware in Egypt and Syria from the eighth century. According to some experts, this was the method used to imitate precious metals [Lane (1958): 14]. The use of lustre in the artistic design of clay products took place in the ninth century in the cities of Baghdad and Samara under the rule of the Abbasid dynasty [Caiger-Smith (1985): 25]. Some researchers attribute the production of lusterware in Egypt to the tenth century [Jenkins (1968): 119].

There are differences between examples of lusterware produced in Iran and Egypt. These differences are evident in both chemical, petrographic, and pattern motifs [Mason (1997a): 204]. Robert B. Mason conducted a pictographic analysis of the samples of lusterware found in Iran. He took the cities of Ray and Kashan as a base point of comparison and came to the conclusion that the pictographic tablea of most of the vases found in different areas of Iran is close to that of the city of Kashan [Mason (1997b): 103]. In addition, as a result of these petrographic analyses, he determined the specific pattern motifs of the samples of lusterware produced in the city of Kashan.

The lusterwares of Beylagan are generally the examples of Seljuk art. Both, the city of Beylagan itself, as well as the cities of Ray and Kashan, which may have been the homelands of the lusterwares brought here, were Seljuk craft centres, therefore, it would be most correct to characterize all these artefacts as the examples of Seljuk art.

Glazing styles of lusterware samples found in Beylagan are very diverse. Two types of glaze were used in glazing these samples: blue-cobalt glaze and milky-white glaze. The use of these glazes was also in different forms. In the first group, both surfaces were glazed with white milk-coloured glaze, in the second group, one surface was glazed with blue-cobalt glaze, the other surface was glazed with white milk-coloured glaze, and in the third group, both surfaces were glazed with blue cobalt glaze. Although samples of stonepaste glazed with turquoise glaze were found en masse from Beylagan, lustre painted samples are not found among these samples, whereas such samples exist in Syria.

The artistic designs of Beylagan lusterware are also attracting interest. They are mainly decorated with anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, botanic and epigraphic patterns. It is also common to use these patterns at the same time. The most widespread among these patterns are floral and epigraphic patterns. These are the division of patterns according to the line of composition; besides, they divide the samples of lusterware into three styles according to their artistic design: "Monumental", "Miniature" and "Kashan type" [Dostiyev (2018): 122]. "Monumental" style is characterized by the large images. In most of the cases, the area of the pattern was decorated with lustre, and the image remained white. In the "miniature" style, on the contrary, the images are small in size, and the

decorative elements are free and superficial [Dostiyev (2018): 122-123]. Oliver Watson links early Iranian lusterwares with the Fatimid lusterwares and notes that the Monumental style is based on the Fatimid lusterware traditions. Following this, he notes that the Miniature style is a continuation of classical Iranian ceramic traditions. For him, the biggest innovation in the lusterware production of Iran is the creation of Kashan style [Watson (1985): 88].

Archaeologist Farhad Ibrahimov, who conducted the archaeological excavations of Orangala in 1959-1969, in his article, dedicated to the Beylagan lusterwares, divided these samples into 3 groups. Calling the first group pink clay samples, he indicates that they were of Ray origin. Then calling the second group white clay, he suggested that they were from Kashan. Analysing the last group in terms of artistic design and clay, he notes that they are locally produced [Ibrahimov F. Ə. (1965): 212]. Whether the stonepastes, especially the lusterwares, can be locally produced is a controversial topic and requires comprehensive analysis, therefore, this issue will not be considered in this research work.

Images of horsemen are often found on the envelopes found in Beylagan (Fig. 1.; Fig. 2; Fig. 3). There is an interesting regularity in these equestrian depictions, as all examples also feature tree depictions (inv. 2159). The specific feature of these trees is that they are bush-shaped and the interior is arranged in the shape of a chessboard. Robert Mason gives this motif among the special patterns of Kashan [Mason (1997b): 110]. In another fragmentary example, the image of a horseman is clearly visible, and next to it, there is a representation of a plant (inv.25042). This floral image is a branch image decorated with dots, and R. Mason attributed this motif to the city of Kashan [Mason (1997b): 110]. All these equestrian images are made in "Miniature" style.

Another pattern motif is the fox motif depicted in a belt-shaped pattern (Fig. 2). Although we do not find this motif among R. Mason's Kashan motifs, A. Pope considers this pattern traditional for the city of Kashan. One of the above-mentioned horse-drawn envelopes also has such a fox image (inv.2012). Images of a fox running along the belt from the mouth to the body are given, and below this belt, the images of cavalry are drawn with lustre. The point that attracts attention is that only one of the three equestrian examples we described earlier has a belt with a fox image.

Another example of a zoomorphic image found in Beylagan attracts attention. On the seat of this material, which differs from other samples, an elephant is depicted with dark brown dice (Figu. 4). With the fury in the elephant's eyes and the saddle-like thing depicted on it, it can be assumed that it is a war elephant. There are Arabic inscriptions on the elephant's saddle that cannot be read. Along with the image of an elephant, spirals were also widely used in the artistic design of this example.

Among the lusterware products of Beylagan, three small archaeological whole bowls are particularly interesting (Fig. 5-8). The materials were found very close to each other in the same area in 1953 (inv. 23663, inv. 23664, inv. 23662). Both the inner and outer surfaces of all three examples are decorated with lustre over a milk-coloured glaze. The artistic decoration of all three has the same style, so that the outer surfaces are decorated with the same pattern motif (Fig. 6; Fig. 8), and the inner surfaces have the same compositional subject (Fig. 5; Fig. 7): 0.7-1 cm from the mouth part on the outer surfaces. there is a thick lustre pattern, and 1.4-1.6 cm below it, there is a wavy lustre pattern. Let's also note that this pattern is the same on the outer surface of all three

samples. As for the inner surface, there are small differences. Firstly, 2.2-2.4 cm from the mouth of the inner surface of all three samples. There is a thick lustre patterned belt. There are Arabic inscriptions inside this belt. Secondly, the image in the centre is different in all three materials. The similarity of all three artefacts to this extent suggests that they are the product of the same workshop. Although the inscriptions on these examples are not yet legible, their artistic design belongs to the Kashan style, which suggests that they were produced in the city of Kashan in the early 13th century.

Figures decorated with lustre are one of the characteristic features of Seljuk art. Such figures were found throughout the Islamic geography during this period. Although stonepaste figures were found in Beylagan, they were not decorated with lustre. This is of a particular interest. Although these figures are structurally similar to the figures produced in Iran, they differ in terms of artistic design, as all the examples found in Beylagan are glazed with turquoise glaze [Ibrahimov (1967): 120], which is absent in Iran. From here, it can be suggested that they are products of local workshop, and with that, another feature comes to the fore. It can be said that the reason why the figures are not decorated with lustre can be explained by the fact that the method of decorating with lustre does not exist in the city of Beylagan.

As for floral patterns, they were used both in combination with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic images (inv. 4330) and as independent pattern motifs (s\q 96). One of the examples where the floral pattern is used independently is attracting interest. In this example, a complex floral pattern with a lustre pattern is depicted on the seat. This pattern is complexly drawn with lustre and spiral-shaped ornamentation. The floral style was used in Monumental, Miniature and Kashan styles. Although it is rarely found in the monumental style, floral images become a part of the main composition in the miniature style. Floral patterns were an indispensable part of Kashan style. In this style, floral patterns were the main subject line of artistic design.

Epigraphic patterns were generally not used independently in the decoration of vases; they were given separately around or inside the floral, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic patterns. Epigraphic patterns were often engraved in a belt on the inner or outer rim of the vessel. Cobalt stains were sometimes present on epigraphic patterns. The mouth fragment of the vase with such a motif comes into notice. The upper part of the mouth is outlined with blue, cobalt, and below it, an epigraphic inscription is written with a *naskh* line with a lustre pattern (s\q 254). The characteristic feature of epigraphic examples is that their artistic arrangement creates an artistic composition in the form of a unity and is in harmony. The use of calligraphic images, often floral, and sometimes geometric patterns is a visual indicator of this [Достиев (2020): 234].

In one of the samples found from Beylagan, the epigraphic pattern was used in an independent form (A3-1340). Unlike other examples, in this material, radial pattern technique was used instead of concentric. In the belts going towards the centre, alternate epigraphic patterns are engraved with reserve and brush work.

The technique of processing the patterns on the lusterware samples is also one of the points that catches eye. Two important techniques will be considered here: *reserve* and *sgraffito*. The *sgraffito* method is the engraving of a pattern with a fine scratch. Although the use of this method is not very widespread, it is found in examples of patterned tiles. Basically, in the bowls, a die was drawn over the sweet in the form of a belt, and the die

was slowly scratched up to the glaze. In the Beylagan samples, this method was used only for drawing epigraphic patterns (Fig. 6; Fig. 7). As for the reserve method, it was intended to use the lustre as a background in the artistic arrangement of the earthenware vessel (Fig. 4).

As for the chronological determination of the samples of lusterware found in Beylagan, it would be more correct to attribute them to the second half of the 12th century and the beginning of the 13th century. B. Shelkovnikov also connected their period belonging to those centuries. In addition, they can be attributed to the mentioned date by matching the pattern motif of the materials described above [Mason (1997b): 110]. Interestingly, most of the vases found in the city of Samosdel, located on the bank of Volga River, in a far distance and north of Beylagan, belong to this period [Болдырева (2014): 90].

If we summarize the ideas about the decorations of the medieval Beylagan, we can conclude that this rich collection includes unique examples as well as classic examples. In order to clarify the origin of some samples, the information provided by the studies so far has been widely used. So, contrary to what B. Shelkovnikov wrote in the 1950s, it would be more correct to say that most of the samples of lusterware found in Beylagan were produced in the city of Kashan, Iran, as the chart of pattern motifs drawn up by Robert Mason is taken as the basis here. However the pattern motifs on a separate group of lusterware samples do not coincide with the pattern motifs of Kashan. It would not yet be entirely correct to attribute specimens of this type to local manufacture, as it would be rash to give a definite opinion as to their origin until their chemical and petrographic analysis has been carried out.

All these ornaments depicted on the vessels are not only the imagination of the masters who made them, but also the basic indicator of the artistic and aesthetic worldview of their buyers. This illustrated envelope was mainly an item that could be used by the upper classes living in the city. The existence of images of animals, prohibited in Islam, on lusterwares is an indicator of the freedom of the aesthetic tastes of Beylagan nobles from religion.

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Figures



Figure 1. Lusterware vessel with horseman pattern.  
Photo by Musa Nasirov



Figure 2. Lusterware vessel with horseman pattern. Photo by Musa Nasirov



Figure 3. Lusterware vessel with horseman pattern  
Photo by Musa Nasirov



Figure 4. Lusterware vessel fragment with elephant image.  
Photo by Mirjavid Aghalarov



Figure 5. Lusterware bowl (inside)



Figure 6. Lusterware bowl (profile)

Photo by Mirjavid Aghalarov



Figure 7. Lustreware bowl (inside)  
Photo by Mirjavid Aghalarov

Photo by Mirjavid Aghalarov



Figure 8. Lustreware bowl (profile)  
Photo by Mirjavid Aghalarov