



DECORATIVE DESIGNS OF SPHEROCONICAL VESSELS: THE EXAMPLE OF THE OLD TERMIZ MONUMENT

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
<p>Among more than 50 monuments in Central Asia, more than 300 “simobko‘zacha” - spheroconical vessels - were discovered during archaeological research conducted in various years in Old Termez. Spherocones - are vessels from the Middle Ages, made mainly by potters, distinguished from other ceramic products by their sturdy, thick-walled, small rim, narrow neck, variously shaped belly, and often conical bottom. These types of finds are significant because they are widespread in the Muslim East. Debates about these findings have been ongoing among scientists and enthusiasts since the early 19th century. The main cause of the controversy is the question of what the function of the mercury jars is. Spheroconical vessels found at the ancient Termez monument are currently kept in the Medieval Fund of the Termez Archaeological Museum. They have types that differ from each other in morphological structure, capacity, and decoration. This article discusses the decorations and their types found on Old Termez spheroconical vessels.</p> <p>The ornaments were applied to the surface of the dishes before firing, using stamps or pointed tools. Each ornament has its own meaning.</p>	<p>Old Termez, epigraphic, Circular groove (pits), B.A. Litvinsky. Haytabad.</p>

Introduction

Out of 308 mercury vessels discovered at the Ancient Termez site, 210 are decorated with various patterns, while the remaining 98 have no ornamentation. The existing decorations can be classified into several types: epigraphic, geometric, vegetal, symbolic, and rare motifs.

Epigraphic decoration. Among the preserved finds, there are two vessels featuring this type of ornamentation. Artifact SVAM 135 is tentatively dated to the 11th–12th centuries. Its dimensions are 10.6 x 9.8 cm (Figure 1). This item stands out due to its high level of craftsmanship.

Epigraphic decorations based on Kufic script elements are present on the upper part of the vessel. These decorations not only enhance the aesthetic value of the object but may also convey religious or spiritual meaning. The script used in the decoration belongs to the traditional Kufic style, simplified with geometric forms and presented in an angular and stylized manner. The interconnection of the letters and the ornamental structure of the lines suggest that the script serves a primarily decorative purpose.

Although it is not possible to fully identify a word or phrase from the inscription, it is likely to contain a Qur'anic verse, a prayer, or perhaps the name of the artisan or manufacturer.

In Central Asia, spheroidal vessels featuring script-like decorations are rarely encountered. One such example is a mercury vessel bearing Arabic script discovered in Khulbuk¹.

Geometric decorations: Among potters in Ancient Termez, applying geometric decorations to spheroidal vessels was one of the most widespread practices. These decorations can be classified into the following types:

- **Belt-like (ring-shaped) ornaments**
- **Circular grooves (indentations)**
- **Triangular patterns**
- **Grooved straight lines**
- **Ornaments representing the letter “S”**

Belt-like (ring-shaped) ornaments were widely used among the spheroidal vessels of Ancient Termez, appearing on 64 of the discovered items. Examples include finds such as S.22, S.33, SVAM 4510, SVAM 4508, SVAM 4510, and SVAM 4507² (figure 2). The number and placement of these rings vary from one vessel to another. For instance, Group I spheroidal vessels of the spheroidal type are decorated with 1 to 5 horizontal rings located at the beginning of the belly section. In contrast, Group II vessels, which generally have an ellipsoidal shape, are decorated with 1–2 rows of rings on the shoulder area and 1 to 3 rows on the base. Such decorations have also been found at other archaeological sites, including Khulbuk³ (figure 3), Qanqa⁴ and Otrar⁵.

Circular grooves (indentations) This is one of the most common and simplest types of decoration found in Ancient Termez, with 75 vessels featuring this design. Mercury vessels with inventory numbers such as S.2870, S.2762, S.2793, S.2762, S.2785 and S.2786 (figure 4) are among those that bear this ornamentation.

The number and size of the circles or grooves vary from piece to piece, ranging from 1 cm up to 5–6 cm in diameter. The number of concentric rings within each circle also differs, with examples ranging from a single ring to patterns of 9–10 rings. In addition, intersecting circles are also present. This type of decoration was used on mercury vessels with various shapes, including spheroidal, ellipsoidal, and cylindrical forms.

S.Sh. Marifiyev and N.A. Moskalenko, during their research, attempted to trace the origins and development of the circular groove (indentation) ornament.

¹ Ходжаев Ш.Р., Филимонова Т.Г., Ахметзянов М.Р., Ходжаев А.Р. Ремесленное производство средневекового Хутталя. Душанбе, 2020. - С. 232. Рис. 239.

² Termiz Arxeologiya muzeyi O'rta asrlar fondi.

³ Симеон П.. Керамика Среднеазиатского ремесла IX–XI вв. из Хулбука (Столицы Хутталя). // Российская Археология, 2018, № 1, - С. 53. Рис. 6(7).

⁴ O'zbekiston tarixi davlat muzeyi, Arxeologiya fondi. 120 – kolleksiya, 12 – topilma.

⁵ Байпаков, К.М. Средневековая городская культура Южного Казахстана и Семиречья (VI – начала XIII вв.). Алма-Ата : Наука КазССР. – 1986. – С. 144. Рис.59.(9).

Their studies show that concentric and circular decorations have been widely used on handicraft items and vessels since the Bronze Age⁶.

Archaeologist B.A. Litvinsky believed that circular decorations were made using a kind of compass tool. According to him, this resembles a device used by Russians, which B.A. Rybakov described as a small iron instrument with two (or three) prongs — one prong was fixed in place like a point, while the other drew a circle around it.

This type of ornamentation was already present in Khwarezmian pottery as early as the 2nd millennium BCE. Notably, pottery fragments decorated with rough circular designs have been found at sites such as K kcha-16 and Qavat-3⁷. The circular patterns on bone buttons found in Khulbuk date back to the 9th–10th centuries⁸.

According to some researchers, these ornaments may have been intended to depict the “wind.” Spheroconical vessels with such decorations have been widely found in archaeological sites such as the K kcha district of Tashkent⁹, Otrar¹⁰ (figure 5) and Afrasiab¹¹. According to Z. Galiyeva, six distinct variants of this circular ornament were commonly used in decorating spheroconical vessels produced in Central Asia¹².

Triangular decorations These patterns were used to decorate mercury vessels with inventory numbers SVAM 1942, SVAM 32248/104, SV.587, and S.2774 (figure 6). In this type of decoration, small triangles were engraved onto the surface of the vessel using a sharp tool, typically bordered by one or two rows of small dots¹³. Some vessels are decorated solely with this ornament, while others feature additional designs such as circular, cosmogonic, or leaf motifs placed between the first and second rows of the main pattern. This type of ornamentation has been identified in regions such as Ishtikhan (figure 7)¹⁴, Khulbuk, Fergana¹⁵, Otrar, and Taraghaytepa.

Grooved (indented) lines Among the simplest types of ornamentation, these designs consist of long grooved lines that may run vertically down the body or shoulder of the vessel. More than 10 spheroconical vessels bearing this type of decoration have been discovered in Ancient Termez. The vessel with inventory number TAM 34646 (figure 8) serves as an example.

⁶Марифиев С.Ш., Москаленко Н.А. К вопросу о назначении симобкузача и генезисе циркульного орнамента // Материальная культура Таджикистана. Вып. 4. Душанбе: Дониш, 1987. – С. 306.

⁷Марифиев С.Ш., Москаленко Н.А. К вопросу о назначении симобкузача и генезисе циркульного орнамента // Материальная культура Таджикистана. Вып. 4. Душанбе: Дониш, 1987. – С. 306.

⁸Марифиев С.Ш., Москаленко Н.А. К вопросу о назначении симобкузача и генезисе циркульного орнамента // Материальная культура Таджикистана. Вып. 4. Душанбе: Дониш, 1987. – С. 308.

⁹Агиржанов О.У. Сфероконические сосуды (симобкузача) из Ташкента: Новые данные по коллекции государственного музея истории Узбекистана. // InternationalJournalofIntellectualandCulturalHeritageVolume: 4 Issue: 04 | 2024. - P. 135-143. 142. Рис. 1. Колл. № 275/28

¹⁰Байпаков, К.М. Средневековая городская культура Южного Казахстана и Семиречья (VI – начала XIII вв.). Алма-Ата : Наука КазССР. – 1986. – 144 с. Рис.59.(12).

¹¹Соколовская Л.Ф.Неглазуванная керамика средневекового Самарканда, как фактор экономики городского ремесла (по материалам городища Афрасиаб кон. VII – нач. XII вв). Диссертации на соискание ученой степени кандидата исторических наук. Ташкент, 1995. – С. 314. Рис.5.

¹²Галиева З.С. Типология керамических сфероконусов Средней Азии // РА. 2014. № 1. - С.83. Рис. 1. (1-6).

¹³Галиева З.С. Типология керамических сфероконусов Средней Азии // РА. 2014. № 1. – С. 83. Рис. 1.(12,13).

¹⁴Пугаченкова Г.А. Иштиханские древности (некоторые итоги исследований 1979г.) // СА. 1983. № 1. - С. 266.Рис.4(1)

¹⁵Farg'ona davlat universiteti Qatag'onlik muzeyi.

In some cases, such lines are depicted between circular rings, and in other instances, the grooves appear in a broader form. This type of ornamentation is also found in areas such as Tashkent¹⁶ (figure 9), Khulbuk, and Volga Bulgaria¹⁷.

Spheroconical vessels featuring **ornaments in the shape of the letter “S”** have been found in five specimens from Ancient Termez. The vessel with inventory number SV.208 (figure 10) serves as a representative example. Its dimensions are 12 x 9.5 cm. About one-third of the belly part has been preserved, and the measurements indicate that the vessel was of large volume. The decoration is vertically oriented, and there is a single row of small circular motifs at the bottom. However, there are also examples where only the “S”-shaped ornament appears on the surface. This type of ornament has been found in Afrasiab, Otrar, and several other archaeological sites.

Plant-like decorations spheroconical vessels decorated with plant-like ornaments have been discovered in nearly all of the centers where these vessels were produced. These ornaments include representations of grains, leaves, and flowers. In some cases, the decorations appear individually, while in others, they are placed between multiple rings or belts.

A grain motif is depicted on the spheroconical vessels with inventory number SVAM 2741 (figure 11) found in Ancient Termez. Its dimensions are 15 x 9.2 cm. This type of ornamented vessel is represented by six specimens in the Termez Archaeological Museum.

The motif is widespread in Central Asia, having been found in sites such as Hayitobod¹⁸, Taraghaytepa¹⁹, Afrasiab²⁰, and the Tashkent region²¹ (figure 12). Moreover, similar specimens have been discovered outside of Central Asia, such as in the ruins of Bolgar²² (currently held at the State Historical Museum in Moscow) (figure 13). The decorations are identical in form. A distinctive feature of this ornament is that it appears on the surfaces of spheroconical vessels that are nearly identical in morphological structure.

Almond-shaped ornament. This ornament appears on the surface of the vessel with inventory number S.2806. Its dimensions are 6 x 4.6 cm. The item was found in an archaeological fragmentary state, with the belly portion preserved. The surface features a single horizontal row of this ornament placed between two rows of small circular motifs (figure 14). A mercury jar with this decoration was also found at the Hayitobod monument (figure 15). The almond-shaped ornament appears in two forms: as an **incised** and a **relief** (raised) design. The decoration was applied using a stamping technique.

¹⁶Agirjanov O.Y. Сфероконические сосуды (симвокузача) изТашкента: Новые данные поколлекции государственного музея истории Узбекистана. // International Journal of Intellectual and Cultural HeritageVolume: 4Issue: 04 | 2024. - P. 135-143. 142. Рис. 1. Колл. №275/23

¹⁷Нуретдинова А.Р. Сфероконические сосуды среднего поволжья X –начала XV вв. Диссертация на соискание учёной степени кандидата исторических наук. Казань, 2022.Приложение 2. – С. 27. Рис. 5(8).

¹⁸Termiz Arxeologiya muzeyi O'rta asrlar fondiP.14. kirim raqamli simobko'zacha

¹⁹Denov tadbirkorlik va pedagogika instituti, Tarix fakultetida tashkil etilgan muzey ko'rgazmasi

²⁰Соколовская Л.Ф.Неглазуванная керамика средневекового Самарканда, как фактор экономики городского ремесла (по материалам городища Афрасиаб кон. VII – нач. XII вв). Диссертации на соискание ученой степени кандидата исторических наук. Ташкент, 1995. – С. 320. Рис.4.

²¹O'zbekiston tarixi davlat muzeyi Arxeologiya bo'limi 120 koll. 61 raqamli simobko'zacha.

²²Ленц Э. О глиняных сосудах с коническим дном, находимых в пределах мусульманского Востока // Зап. Вост. отд-ния Импер. археол. о-ва. – СПб.: Тип. Импер. Акад. наук, 1904.Т. XV. – С.0112.Табл. VII. Рис.8.

Technology of applying stamped decorations. Various tools of differing complexity were used to create stamped (imprinted) ornaments. Among the simplest tools were metal tubes of varying diameters, ranging from 0.3 to 1 cm, as well as hollow pipes with toothed edges. These were used to impress regularly repeated patterns onto the surfaces of ceramic vessels. For more complex designs, specially crafted metal or wooden **dies** (molds) were used. These molds allowed for the production of ornaments with precise symmetry and high aesthetic standards. This method was especially employed in the production of items for **palaces, nobles, or objects of religious significance**²³.

In general, among pottery decorations, this ornament has been widely used since ancient times. Z. Galiyeva emphasizes that the origin of the “almond-shaped leaf” motif is linked to Greek traditions. Another distinctive decorative form is the depiction of flowers. This decoration is found on the shoulder portion of the spheroconical vessels with inventory number S.11, applied in a horizontal arrangement²⁴. Another distinctive form of decoration is the **depiction of flowers**. This decoration appears on the shoulder portion of the mercury vessel with inventory number S.11, applied in a horizontal pattern. The vessel was found in Ancient Termez in 1983, at the second area of the Rabod. The decoration measures 1.5-2 cm in diameter (figure 16). The neck of the vessel features vertical straight grooves. This decoration was used to adorn only one vessel. The spheroconical vessel bearing this ornament is currently held in the State Museum of History of Uzbekistan, Archaeological Fund, in the collection 120, under the number 47 (figure 17).

Leaf-shaped decoration. Examples of spheroconical vessels decorated with leaf motifs include S.2797 (measuring 5.5 x 5.3 cm), found at the Rabod KA.9 excavation site in 1993, and SVAM 37118 (measuring 11.2 x 8.5 cm). SVAM 37118 is in an archaeologically complete state and is dark in color (figure 18). The decoration consists of two horizontal rows of leaf motifs surrounding the belly portion of the vessel, resembling a belt. Between the leaves, there is a single row of circular decorations. E. Lens has noted that spheroconical vessels with plant-like ornaments were found in Turkestan²⁵.

Symbolic (figurative) decorations. Among the symbolic decorations, we can include motifs representing “water” or “waves”, “wheel” or “sun”. The depiction of “water” appears in 13 finds. These decorations are found on the neck, shoulder, and belly portions of the vessels (figure 19). Water is the foundation of life, symbolizing its flow, movement, and the passage of time²⁶.

“Charx”(wheel) ornament. The “charx” (wheel) motif is found among the finds from Ancient Termez, including SVAM 2365 (measuring 16x13 cm) (figure 20), SVAM 3656/2 (measuring 11.2x14.8 cm) (figure 21), SVAM 32248/121, S.2774 (measuring 9.8x12.3 cm) found at the 1940 Kn.-72 excavation site, and S.2787 (measuring 5.3x7.8 cm) found at the 1998 Rabod, Zovur Kn.-9 excavation site. These decorations are primarily depicted on the belly of the vessels, surrounded by comb-like motifs on the top and bottom. Research indicates that this decoration was used to adorn large, spherical vessels (with a volume of over 1 liter) in museum collections. Although the items in the collection are not intact, their size suggests that they were large vessels.

²³Галиева З.С. Типология керамических сфероконусов Средней Азии // РА. 2014. № 1. – С. 82.

²⁴Галиева С. Сфероконические сосуды Средней Азии: к вопросу о типологии и хронологии. Москва, 2000. – С.55.

²⁵Ленц Э. О глиняных сосудах с коническим дном, находимых в пределах мусульманского Востока // Зап. Вост. отд-ния Имп. Рус. археол. о-ва. – СПб.: Тип. Имп. Акад. наук, 1904.Т. XV. – С.0112.Табл. VII. Рис.5.

²⁶[https:// symbolopedia.com](https://symbolopedia.com).

A similar decoration was found on the S.46 (measuring 4.7x9 cm) Mercury-glass vessel from Hayitobod²⁷. However, it differs from the Ancient Termez mercury-glass vessels due to its smaller size.

“Charx” (wheel). In Islamic art, the “charx” (wheel) decoration holds a profound symbolic meaning, often representing human destiny, the transience of life, and the divine order of the cosmos.

“Braided hair” style decoration. The “braided hair” style decoration appears on 11 mercury-glass vessels found in Ancient Termez. These include finds such as SVAM 3657/1 (figure 22), SVAM 3657/3, SVAM 37058, SV.42, S.212 from the 1940 Kn.72 excavation, as well as other finds identified in various years such as SVAM 21, S.36, S.1, and S.5188. The average height of these vessels is 14.5 cm, with a diameter of 9 cm. This decoration was applied before firing, using a stamp on the belly of the vessel in a vertical position, with 3 or 4 impressions. Interestingly, this ornament was mainly used on the II group of ellipsoidal-shaped vessels from Ancient Termez. A similar design is not observed in other parts of Central Asia. However, a mercury-glass vessel adorned with this decoration, dating to the 12th century, is preserved in the Philadelphia Museum of Art²⁸ (figure 23).

The mercury-glass vessels with unique decorations in the museum collections total two pieces. These are used to decorate specimens of complex structure dating from the 13th to the 15th centuries. One such vessel is from Ancient Termez, found in the 1989 excavation of the rabod section, numbered SVAM 32316/171, Inv. 49527. It is made of yellowish clay. The decorations begin at the neck of the vessel, showcasing a collection of decorative motifs, including a rhombus, circle, four-leafed flower, and straight-line grooves. This particular ornament is not found in other historical and cultural regions of Central Asia.

From the above, it is clear that geometric ornaments were often used to decorate the mercury-glass vessels from Ancient Termez. This was a relatively simpler process. Additionally, it is evident that the ornaments were distinct for different shaped finds. For example, circular grooves were more common on conical-type vessels, while the drop-shaped grain motifs were more suited for other shapes. The unique and complex decorations were used to adorn cylindrical-type vessels.

From these complex ornaments, it is evident that the potters of Ancient Termez were skilled craftsmen and masters of their trade during the Middle Ages. These findings provide clear evidence of their expertise.

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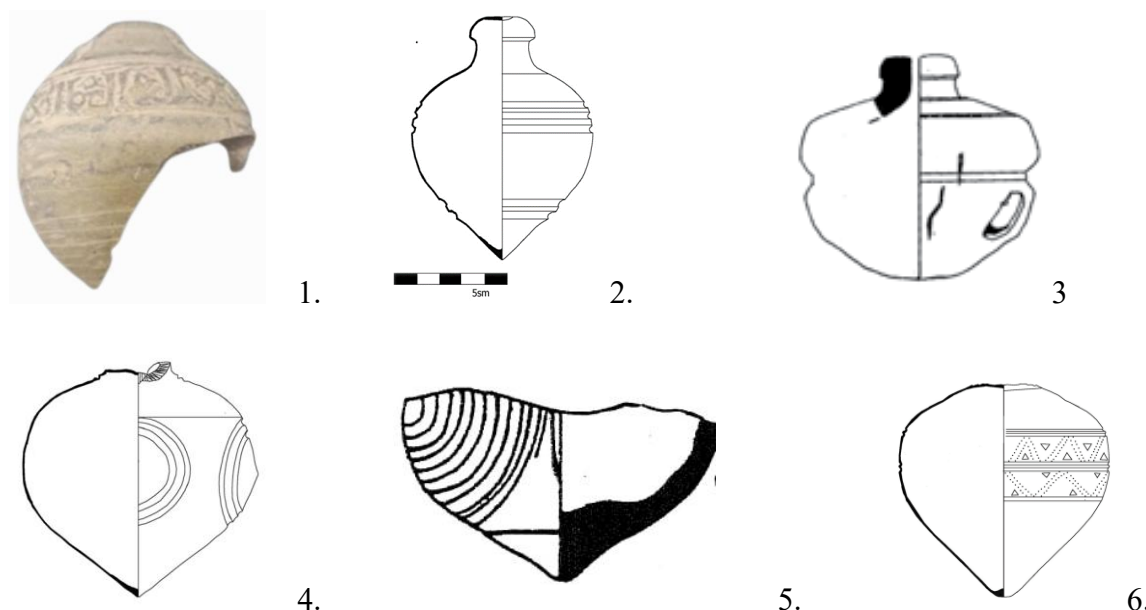
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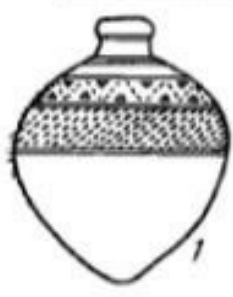
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²⁸Джанполадян Р. М. Сфероконические сосуды из Двина и Ани. Ереван: Изд-во АН АрмССР. 1982.Илл.57.

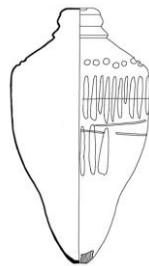
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Figures.





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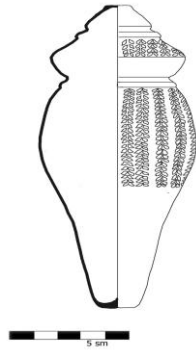
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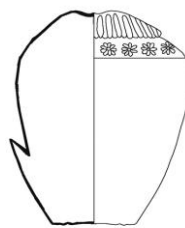
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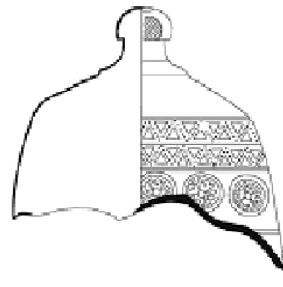
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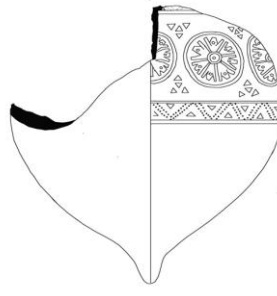
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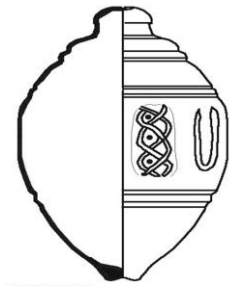
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