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The Role of Painted Pottery from Nakhchivan Tepe in Early Azerbaijani Civilizations

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Abstract:

The article discusses the significance of the painted pottery found at Nakhchivan Tepe during the Chalcolithic period in terms of understanding symbols in early Azerbaijani civilizations. The archaeological importance of Nakhchivan Tepe is particularly evaluated by comparing its common features with the Halaf, Ubaid, and Dalma cultures. Additionally, the general characteristics of the painted pottery are examined, providing information about the forms, chronology, distribution, and usage of these artifacts. The symbolic and socio-cultural meanings of the geometric designs on the painted pottery are also discussed. Research reveals that the painted pottery provides clues about the ways in which ancient societies understood the world and contains valuable information about the daily lives of Chalcolithic period people. The pottery found at Nakhchivan Tepe has made valuable contributions to regional research, both archaeologically and culturally. This study helps us better understand the spiritual heritage of past civilizations through the comparison of such artifacts with other cultural elements.

Introduction

The Settlement of Nakhchivan Tepe, located in southern Azerbaijan, is a significant archaeological site in the South Caucasus that spans the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, offering uninterrupted evidence of the Chalcolithic period. To date, the meaning behind the decorative motifs on Nakhchivan Tepe pottery has not been studied. Research indicates that the painted pottery of Nakhchivan Tepe, as an important example of geometric decorative art on pottery, can serve as a rich resource for understanding the symbolic and cultural meanings of the Chalcolithic period.

While this study focuses on the painted pottery of Nakhchivan Tepe, comparative research is limited to a specific chronological framework encompassing the Early Chalcolithic period. The research will focus solely on the decorations from a particular period and on specific forms of pottery, making comparisons with other cultural elements. The aim of the article is to highlight the cultural significance of the decorative motifs of Nakhchivan Tepe for understanding beliefs and to reveal the place of these findings within ancient societies. We hope that the semiotic analysis of the decorative motifs and the studies conducted on these motifs will serve as an important resource for archaeologists, historians, and art historians. We believe that this study will contribute to the archaeological literature by providing new insights into the symbolic analysis of Nakhchivan Tepe's painted pottery.

The Archaeological Importance of Nakhchivan Tepe

Nakhchivan Tepe, located in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan, is a settlement of great archaeological significance (Bakshaliyev V. et al. p. 5). The mound stands out as an archaeological site offering rich data on the historical and cultural development of both Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus (Baxşəliyev V, Baxşəliyev E. 2023, pp. 27-29). The findings at Nakhchivan Tepe span a broad timeframe, reaching back to the Late Neolithic (Ə.В. Бахшалиев, В.Б. Бахшалиев. 2021, p. 187) and Chalcolithic (Бахшалиев В.Б. 2019, p. 101) periods, making it crucial for shedding light on the prehistoric period of the region. Due to its strategic location between the South Caucasus and the Near East, Nakhchivan Tepe has been a hub for various cultural interactions throughout history. The geopolitical importance of the region is further emphasized by its position along routes leading to shared resources (Bahshaliyev, V. B. 2019, p. 41), increasing the significance of the settlement.

The diverse archaeological findings from the site bear traces of interactions between South Caucasus and Near Eastern societies (Bakshaliyev V. 2019. et al. pp. 15-17). One of the most prominent aspects of Nakhchivan Tepe's archaeological significance is the prevalence of the Dalma Tepe culture. The Dalma Tepe culture (Henrickson Elizabeth F. 1987, p. 39), which emerged around the 5th millennium BCE, was predominantly seen in the southeastern South Caucasus (Baxşəliyev, V., & Baxşəliyev, E. 2023, p. 7) and northwestern Iran (Hamlin 1975, p. 111), and is known as a cultural complex that spread over a wide area. Pottery uncovered during excavations at Nakhchivan Tepe bears traces of the Dalma Tepe culture, helping us understand the cultural dynamics of the region during that period. One notable group of pottery from Nakhchivan Tepe is the painted pottery (Baxşəliyev, E. 2018, p. 92), which is distinguished by its geometric motifs. It is believed that the decorations on pottery held great social importance at the time. As previously mentioned, these decorations may also reflect religious beliefs (Baxşəliyev, E., 2021, p. 169, fig. 4, 3-5).

The pottery production techniques, materials used, and decoration methods at Nakhchivan Tepe provide insights into the craftsmanship and cultural sophistication of the region. The archaeological findings also allow us to understand the social and economic structure of Nakhchivan Tepe. It is believed that the motifs on the painted pottery provide clues about social identity and cultural continuity. Geometric motifs, which may have been used as a result of cultural interaction, contribute to our understanding of the social structure in the region. Moreover, these

decorations seem to have played an important role in social communication and strengthened social bonds within the community.

In this sense, Nakhchivan Tepe, as a region of intense cultural interaction, is significant for enabling comparative analyses with other Neolithic (Baxşəliyev, E. 2022, pp. 107-111) and Chalcolithic (Bakhshaliyev, E. 2022, pp. 152-154) settlements. These analyses provide a better understanding of the cultural dynamics in the region. As mentioned earlier, the findings at Nakhchivan Tepe, when compared with those from other archaeological sites (Iran and Mesopotamia), offer a broader perspective on the region's role and importance in the prehistoric period. The connections with both cultures, along with the artistic and social functions of the painted pottery, help us understand the cultural and social dynamics of the region during prehistoric times. The findings at Nakhchivan Tepe not only shed light on the history of the South Caucasus but also on that of the Near East (Baxşəliyev, E. 2022, pp. 111-112), making it an archaeologically important site.

The painted pottery presents a rich diversity in both production techniques and decoration styles. Understanding the general characteristics of this pottery helps us better comprehend the cultural and historical context of Nakhchivan Tepe.

General Features of Painted Pottery

The painted pottery found at Nakhchivan Tepe possesses remarkable aesthetic and technical characteristics. The pottery with geometric decorations was generally made from pure clay and fired well. These pieces were crafted using hand-made methods typical of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods. The firing of the pottery was often done in open fires or simple kilns. Most of the examples from the painted pottery group have a black stripe in their cross-section, indicating that they were usually well-fired (Baxşəliyev, V. et al. 2018, p. 19). The painted pottery of the Chalcolithic period at Nakhchivan Tepe features only geometric designs. The absence of naturalistic, anthropomorphic, and zoomorphic elements and the exclusive use of geometric forms may reflect cultural and social preferences. These vessels, polished and covered with a red slip on both the interior and exterior surfaces, were decorated with black, brown, and red paint. The geometric designs are not rhythmically repeated (Baxşəliyev, E. 2018, p. 92, fig. 1, p. 94, fig. 3; Baxşəliyev, V. et al. 2019, p. 38, fig. 11, p. 130, fig. 104; Baxşəliyev, V. 2021, pp. 84-88, fig. 56-60). These features suggest that the pottery may have been used for both aesthetic and social purposes. The painted pottery of Nakhchivan Tepe may also provide information about social structure and group differentiation. In this context, the study of pottery is of great importance for understanding the social dynamics and cultural interactions of the period.

One of the key elements of the pottery is its form and shape. Below, we will discuss the various forms and shapes of painted pottery from Nakhchivan Tepe. We believe that the use and distribution of different forms and shapes will aid in understanding this category of pottery.

Forms and Shapes

The painted pottery found at Nakhchivan Tepe, decorated with geometric patterns, generally consists of bowls (Baxşəliyev E. Nax T Painted Pottery, p. 92, fig. 1, 1, p. 93, fig. 2. 1-4) and jars

(Baxşəliyev E. Nax T Painted Pottery, p. 94, fig. 4, 1, 8). This type of pottery is important as it presents a significant example of the ceramic tradition of the Chalcolithic period in the region. The materials used in the production of the bowls and jars from Nakhchivan Tepe, as well as their shaping techniques, have been extensively examined through archaeological studies. These studies provide insights into how the pottery was made and what forms were used. Additionally, the morphological features and changes in form over time offer clues about the social and cultural structure of the region.

The bowls and jars decorated with geometric patterns from Nakhchivan Tepe not only serve as a material cultural heritage but also help us understand the lifestyle and artistic concepts of the prehistoric periods in the region. This pottery is an important source for archaeologists to conduct deeper research into the region's past and its cultural development. Some notable forms and shapes of pottery from Nakhchivan Tepe include convex-bodied jars and cylindrical conical bowls. In addition to these, biconical and swollen-bodied bowls are also frequently observed. This diversity reveals the rich cultural heritage of Nakhchivan Tepe and the technical mastery in pottery making.

Chronology and Distribution

The analysis of coal samples taken from the lower layers of the Nakhchivan Tepe settlement indicates dates ranging from 5209 to 4945 BCE (Bahşaliyev V. 2020, p. 20). Researchers date the spread of the Halaf culture in the Near East between 5200 and 4500 BCE (Campbell S. 1992, p. 182). It can be inferred from the dating that the painted pottery found at Nakhchivan Tepe emerged within the Halaf culture in the Near East. In later periods, this culture is believed to have influenced the culture formed in Nakhchivan during the Chalcolithic period, as a result of shared raw material sources and economic-cultural relations.

Examples of painted decorations found at Nakhchivan Tepe are also seen at the Tell Arpachiyah settlement (Mallowan 1935, p. 149, TT6. A 751(B), p. 158, fig. 10. 58, 4. A 729 (B), p. 161, fig. 59, 6. A 120 (B), p. 65, 4. A 730 (B)). This type of decoration is also known from Tell Sabi Abyad (Nieuwenhuys 2019, p. 126 fig. 10, 5). Additionally, painted decorations found in settlements such as Umm Dabaqiyyah (Kirkbride D. 1972. Plate X, 7,10, 11) and Tell Damishliyya (Akkermans P. 1988. p. 61, plate 15. 116-117) bear close resemblance to those found at Nakhchivan Tepe.

The examples of Dalma-type painted ceramics found at Nakhchivan Tepe are dated to approximately 5200-4500 BCE. These new Chalcolithic period ceramics, found in the Nakhchivanchay Valley, show close similarity to Dalma Tepe ceramics in terms of firing techniques, shape, and painting methods. This type of pottery was first discovered between 1959 and 1961 by Charles Burney and Cuyler Young, and later found at Hasanlu and Haji-Firuz settlements (Voigt 1983, p. 20). For a long time, it was believed that Dalma-type pottery existed only in the southern and western regions of Lake Urmia. However, recent research has shown that this culture also spread to the northern regions of Lake Urmia (Abedi 2017, pp. 69-87), and excavations conducted in 2017 at Nakhchivan Tepe (Baxşəliyev, V. et al. 2019, pp. 5-12) indicate that this culture expanded towards the South Caucasus. The presence of this type of pottery has

also been confirmed by excavations at Kul Tepe in Iranian Azerbaijan, near Nakhchivan (Abedi 2010, pp. 33-167).

Research has further shown that Dalma-type pottery later emerged to the south of Lake Urmia in the Kangavar Valley and Mahidasht (Henrickson 1983, pp. 482-486). At Haji Firuz, Dalma-type ceramics are dated to 4900 BCE (Henrickson 1983, p. 481), at Dalma Tepe to 4930 BCE (Henrickson 1983, p. 530), and at Nakhchivan Tepe to 4945 BCE (Baxşəliyev et al. 2018, p. 22). Based on this data, we can say that the Dalma Tepe painted pottery culture emerged in Nakhchivan under the influence of the Halaf-Ubaid culture and spread from there towards the Lake Urmia basin.

Usage and Function

The pottery found during the excavations at Nakhchivan Tepe likely served multifunctional purposes within the community, such as the preparation, storage, and presentation of food, as well as reflecting the mythological worldview of ancient peoples through the painted decorations on them (Baxşəliyev V. 2019, p. 40, fig. 26). There is a possibility that the geometric motifs were used to indicate identity differences between groups. However, there is no evidence yet to suggest that specific motifs were associated with elite groups or social statuses. Similarly, no findings support the role of these motifs in ritualistic or ceremonial events within the community.

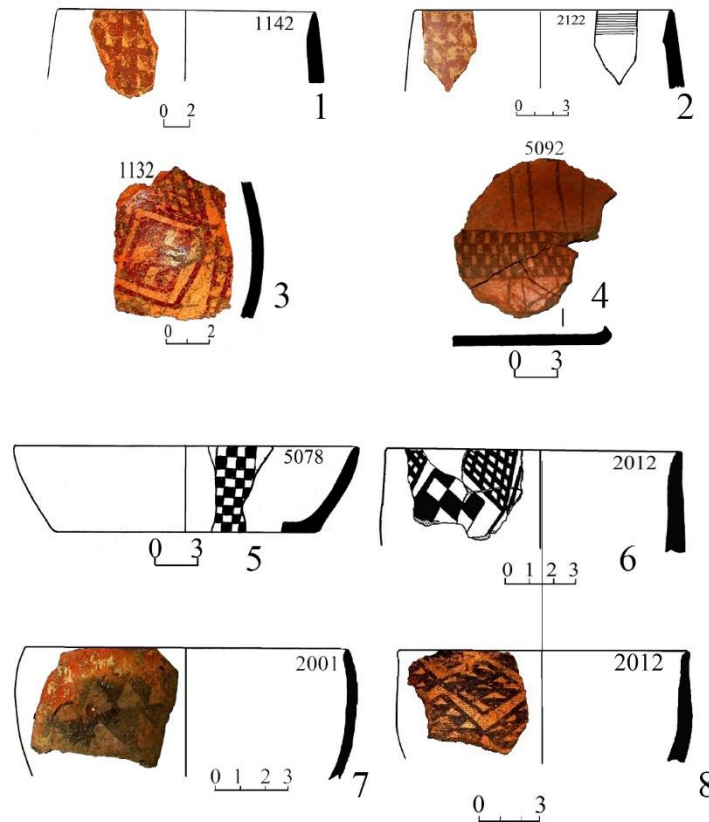
Nevertheless, we believe that ancient people reinforced social memory and cultural identity through the symbols on these pottery pieces. Previous studies have thoroughly examined the decorative analysis of pottery from Nakhchivan Tepe (Bahşəliyev V. 2021, pp. 3-4). In some other research, the potential meaning of geometric motifs has been discussed (Baxşəliyev E. 2021, p. 167), but no general theory regarding their function in social communication has been developed yet. As a result, painted pottery from Nakhchivan Tepe offers limited information in deciphering the meanings of prehistoric symbols. The absence of abstract and naturalistic decorations and the inability to trace the transition process negatively affect the research. Studies on Halaf pottery in Mesopotamia also mention the abruptness and rapid spread of the transition to geometric decoration forms (Plicht, Akkermans, Nieuwenhuyse, Kaneda, & Russell, 2011: 231). We believe a similar process occurred here. The study of these pottery pieces is seen as significant for understanding the social structure and cultural dynamics of the period.

Social and Cultural Significance

In previous research, the geometric decorations on pottery from the Halaf and Ubaid cultures have been considered as tools for reflecting social narratives and communal identity. For instance, another study noted that the geometric signs in Mesopotamian culture (Halaf) reflected the symbols that people used in their lives from ancient times (Nieuwenhuyse, Akkermans, van der Plicht, Russell, & Kaneda, 2016: 85). Campbell also stated that geometric motifs served the function of expressing social memory, mythological narratives, and group identity (Campbell S. 2010, p. 147). The possibility that the Halaf and Ubaid cultures influenced the culture that emerged in Nakhchivan during the Chalcolithic period has also been explored in some studies (Baxşəliyev V. 2023, pp. 141-144), (Бахшалиев В. 2024, p. 18). In this respect, the geometric patterns on pottery from Nakhchivan Tepe, as with its predecessors, may provide significant clues about the

social structure of the society. During the Chalcolithic period, certain motifs might have been preferred by specific groups and used to emphasize group identity. Additionally, we believe that the geometric decorations on pottery from Nakhchivan Tepe reflected the religious worldview of the ancient people living there. In our opinion, the geometric designs on pottery from Nakhchivan Tepe were not solely for decorative purposes but were also used to express societal values. For instance, triangular motifs may have symbolized fertility and cycles, while other geometric forms might have reflected generalized templates that held specific meanings for the people.

Figure 1. Examples of Painted Pottery Found at Nakhchivan Tepe



The geometric decorations at Nakhchivan Tepe can also be evaluated as reflections of the cultural interactions in the region. These motifs seem to carry traces of cultural and economic exchanges between the South Caucasus, Eastern Anatolia, and the Near East (Baxşəliyev V. 2021, p. 34), (Healey E. 2007, p. 171), (Bressy C. 2005, p. 1560). As products of both local and widespread cultural values, these decorations are important in showcasing the cultural richness and diversity of the region. Therefore, the painted pottery at Nakhchivan Tepe holds great importance not only in terms of aesthetics but also in terms of cultural and historical significance. The materials, production techniques, decorative motifs, forms, and functions of these pottery pieces offer valuable insights into the lifestyles, belief systems, and social structures of past societies.

Meanings of Geometric Patterns

The study of the geometric designs on the painted pottery from Nakhchivan Tepe can provide rich information about the mythological worldview of this ancient society. We believe that the motifs on the pottery carried meanings that reflected not only decoration but also the beliefs, values, and social structure of the society in which they were created.

Although the decorations on the pottery are generally geometric, it is unclear whether similar motifs held the same meaning for different communities. However, it appears that they emphasized a shared cultural exchange (Gabrieli, E. (2018) p. 119). Upon examining the geometric decorations from Nakhchivan Tepe, one of the most prominent features we observe is the use of repetitive patterns. We believe that the triangle-shaped motifs stacked on top of each other (Figure 1. 7,8) symbolize cycles and continuity. In many ancient cultures, such repetitive designs are associated with the concept of endless cycles, representing the cyclical nature of death and rebirth. While triangular forms and their derivatives on the pottery are thought to represent women, square forms might symbolize the stylized form of men. Moreover, we can suggest that ancient peoples used these symbols to represent both life and death, as well as men and women, in a symbolic sense. These designs emphasize the continuous and uninterrupted flow, suggesting that everything is interconnected—an essential belief in many ancient philosophies. It seems that the early settlers of this site also adopted such an idea.

The presence of these types of decorations, typically seen on pottery used for service, as in Mesopotamia (Nieuwenhuys, 2013, p. 141), (Nieuwenhuys, Akkermans, van der Plicht, Russell, & Kaneda, 2016, p. 85), suggests that they might have been used to invoke divine favor or to ensure abundance and fertility. The stylization of these motifs hints at a simplified symbolic language, where geometric abstraction conveyed certain concepts. For example, when we examine the unpainted portions of stacked triangles on the pottery, we can see that they form an opposing triangle compared to the painted sections (Figure 1. 1, 2). This could have represented a cycle in the minds of these ancient people. We believe that the early inhabitants of this site utilized primitive forms of animation in their pottery painting art. Furthermore, the diamond-shaped motifs, asymmetrically filled with red paint inside a diamond-shaped frame, might represent a deity (Figure 1. 3, 6). We think this is directly related to one of the earliest functions of gods in the minds of ancient people, perhaps the first—encompassing or surrounding.

This stylization on the pottery from Nakhchivan Tepe may reflect this belief. While previous studies have argued that geometric and abstract motifs held symbolic meanings and played a crucial role in social communication in Mesopotamian cultures, there is no direct information regarding the specific meaning of this motif (Campbell S. 2010, p. 148), (Watson, P.J. 1973, p. 108, fig. 23, 13, 20). In Egyptian hieroglyphs, which had frequent contact with Mesopotamia, the checkered motif was used to write the words "mdnet" ("the one who remains") and words derived from the root "moun." The symbol functioned as a phonetic symbol representing the letters M and N, and over time, the male and female vocalization became irrelevant (Gardiner, A.H. (1915), p. 68). We believe that the checkered motifs found at Nakhchivan Tepe (Figure 1. 4, 5) may also represent the stylized form of a deity (though we are not certain whether it is male or female, it is most likely male). Additionally, in Egyptian

hieroglyphs, the letter "K" corresponds to a basket form and is identified as a god symbol (Alan Gardiner (1957), p. 476). Examples of this hieroglyph adorned with checkered motifs exist. We think the association of the motif with baskets or pottery reflects one of the primary functions of gods (preserver/protector) in both ancient Egypt and the early inhabitants of Nakhchivan Tepe.

These and other symbolic representations could have been easily recognizable by the people of Nakhchivan Tepe and provided a common understanding of their spiritual and cultural narratives. Understanding these designs requires an analysis that takes into account a broader historical and cultural context, revealing the complex interactions between art, society, and belief systems at Nakhchivan Tepe. Lastly, we can say that while the geometric decorations on painted pottery from Nakhchivan Tepe predominantly reflect the goddess cult, stylized forms of the male (father) god figure are also present. In some examples, we believe that both were presented together, attempting to adapt a cyclical theme. Since we aim to address such information in future and more comprehensive research, we are not delving into these details here.

Conclusion

The geometric painted pottery found at Nakhchivan Tepe contributes to the understanding of the symbolic and cultural meaning of the civilization that inhabited this region during the Chalcolithic period. The decorations on the pottery not only reflect the worldviews of ancient societies but also provide insights into how they expressed their thoughts in these practical objects used in daily life. Ongoing research, emphasizing the archaeological and cultural importance of Nakhchivan Tepe, also contributes to archaeology by offering new information about the ritualistic and social lives of its ancient inhabitants. Nakhchivan Tepe stands out as a valuable research site both regionally and culturally. We hope that the symbolic analysis of the painted pottery in our study, along with comparisons with other cultures, will help us understand the spiritual heritage of ancient societies in a historical context.

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