

Bird and human-bird motifs in the glazed pottery of Raqqa

Abstract

Problem Definition: Raqqa pottery is a group of pottery belonging to the Ayyubid period in northern Syria. The examination of pottery discovered from this region indicates the creation of a mixed style in the adornments that is generally influenced by the local pottery called “ancient local pottery”. The bird motif, as one of the main ones in the Islamic art, accounts for a considerable part of the painted pottery of Raqqa in the 12th century during the reign of Ayyubids, which conform to the ideas of the Syrian artist more than other available motifs. This pattern is observed in three general forms, including a black shade on a turquoise background in combination with stylized plant motifs, volumetric and decorated on the gold-plated and enamel pottery, and individually with a basic and simple design type in the lakabi technique. Choosing the bird and human-bird motifs, the present article attempts to study the characteristics of these motifs in Raqqa glazed wares as a manifestation of the culture and art of the Ayyubid period

Objective: The present study aims to know and recognize the culture and art of the Ayyubid period, as part of the Islamic culture

Research Method: This research has been conducted on a descriptive-analytical basis. The data were analyzed on a case-by-case basis and the information were collected through the library and the Internet.

Results: Pottery artists have used three types of special looks in displaying the bird motif which include paying attention to the nature and its representation, symbolic look and combination of elements and beings with each other along with special presentation techniques, all of which have given a special meaning to Raqqa wares

Keywords: . Glazed wares, Bird motif, Bird-human motif, Raqqa

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Introduction

The city of Raqqa in the Ayyubid period is one of the important centers of pottery production in Islamic civilization. Khalili introduced the most important Ayyubid pottery centers in Syria as: In the twelfth century AD, the production of pottery in Syria changed due to the emergence of the stonepaste body and the luster overglaze painting as well. The main and initial phase is related to a group of stonepaste vessels known as "Tel Minis vessels". These vessels are older than "Raqqa vessels". Undoubtedly, the most well-known pottery of the middle Syrian period is the "Raqqa vessels" (Khalili & Group, 2006, 223-225). The method of construction, material of the body, methods of decoration and type of motifs next to each other are form the special characteristics of Raqqa pottery. There were also two types of underglaze paintings, one with black shaded motifs together with turquoise glaze and the other with pleasant and delicate designs that included human and animal figures (Ettinghausen & Graber, 1994, 529). The physical properties in Raqqa pottery have commonalities with those in pottery decorated with various types of motif. In addition to the glazing techniques, what makes the difference in various types of Raqqa pottery, is the type of patterns that are used in these artworks. However, sometimes, certain type of patterns are mostly used in certain techniques, such as shaded patterns which are widely used in paintings under turquoise and cobalt glaze. In general, vessels obtained from Raqqa, which are decorated with animal motifs, fall into three groups in terms of the type of vessel, including the plates, bowls for serving food and containers for pouring liquids, and jugs (Bloom, 1975, 28). Most plates are commonly deep with a turned flat edge. Bowls are characterized by greater depth, and are often spherical and conical. The difference in the way patterns are drawn in various types of pottery, raises the question that is there a definite relationship between the use of motif expression methods and the type of glazing technique?

Research Method

The present research has been conducted based on the documentary studies of historical books and archives of various museums of the world, including the Metropolitan Museum, Victoria Albert Museum, Louvre Museum, Fitzwilliam Museum, Smithsonian Museum (Freer Gallery), Damascus National Museum, Cincinnati Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum, Museum Britain, the David collection, and so on. Among the glazed vessels found in the Raqqa region (Ayyubid period) and kept in these archives, examples with bird and composite motifs (human-bird) have been chosen and examined. Then, the motifs have been drawn with the software (CorelDRAW Graphics Suite X7) as a linear diagram and prepared for the analytical study and visual features.

Research Background

Based on the studies and researches, it seems that no independent research has been so far conducted on the Ayyubid pottery, especially in the field of analysis of Ayyubid pottery's motifs. However, despite that Jenkins (2006) in her book entitled "Raqqa revisited", examined the reports of various archaeologists on Raqqa pottery, her focus was on introducing a collection of pottery belonging to the Ayyubid period, which is available in the Metropolitan Museum. Several articles have also been published in the field of Raqqa pottery. Arab Beigi and Akbari (2016) in the article entitled "The origin of tile patterns in Kubadabad Palace, Turkey, with a comparative look at Iranian and Syrian works", dealt with the similarities and examples of the influence of Iranian pottery on Syrian and Turkish ones. Ghasemi et al. (2015) in an article entitled "On the types of decorative arrays in Ayyubid pottery, a case study of the Raqqa pottery in the Metropolitan Museum", have introduced the Raqqa pottery available in this museum. In a comparative study of Zarrinfam pottery style in Kashan and Raqqa cities, Beikmohammadi et al. (2015) compared Raqqa and Kashan pottery. Finally, Ghasemi and Ghasemi (2017) in the article entitled "Lakabi pottery of Raqqa, motif and technique", studied the special technique of Raqqa pottery and their set of motifs. The present article in particular, investigates one of the most widely used patterns of these pottery (the bird and human-bird motifs) and analyzes them on a case-by-case basis.

Raqqa Pottery:

Among the cities of Syria in the Ayyubid period, the city of Raqqe or Raqqa was the largest center of pottery production. The similarity between some of the works obtained from Raqqa with those from Iran of the Seljuk period points out to the import of these works to Raqqa. The similarity is very obvious in the form of vessels, as in one case that is kept in the Freer Gallery, even the hole on the handle which is embedded in the Seljuk pitchers to facilitate the outflow of liquids, has been copied (Bloom, 1975, 51). However, this resemblance is so that some researchers believe that some of the pottery of that land were directly copied in Iran (Rice, 2007, 144). This issue sometimes challenges the identification of Raqqa pottery. After the destruction of Raqqa, the potters of Rousfa, Damascus and Fustat, continued the style of Raqqa and in some cases imitated the goods of this region.

Variety of bird motifs in Raqqa glazed pottery

1. Representation of birds from the nature: The bird motifs which can be seen on most animal painted vessels among the specimens in the mentioned museums, mostly include birds such as duck, peacock, duckling, pigeon, eagle, crane, parrots, and roosters. Especially, the motifs of eagle (double-headed eagle), peacock, and duck are common ones. This motif has appeared on the vessels with different attributes and of course with a significant variety, which is remarkable in terms of the design method and composition on the surface of the vessels. The potter has performed a kind of nature representation while depicting these birds. This means

that by choosing a creature from nature such as a bird and showing unique details, he has considered a certain type of bird, such as a peacock or a duck, etc. However, at the same time, he has never done copying and pure imitation. In fact, in the first stage, the abstraction of the shape of the bird form is the first step of the potter artist to avoid from pure imitation. Representation is always accompanied by a certain degree of abstraction; that is, usually one of the features or some of the original object are removed (Azhand, 2000, 32). The motif of the peacock is not only used as a symbolic array in the art works of the Islamic period, but also this bird has been regarded as a sacred one since ancient times, because it was believed that the peacock has a immortalize life, due to drinking the water of life (Khazaei, 2007, 25).

2. Bird with symbolic expression: Sometimes the motifs are not only taken from the nature, but are also a kind of sign and symbol. In an artwork, some of the elements, while defining a form in the nature, may also be a symbol. In glazed vessels of Raqqa, motifs such as eagle and double-headed eagle can have a symbolic expression. This category of motifs are considered as the natural symbols that have become a tradition in Syrian art. The motif of this bird in the region, seems strategic, as the motif of the eagle, is engraved in different periods on Syrian coins and even visible on the flag of this country. Given that the motif of the double-headed eagle is a symbol of Byzantium and considering that Syria was under Roman rule for a long time, this motif testifies to the influence of Byzantium on Syrian art in different periods and in one of the most important cities of this period, namely Raqqa. As Jenkins writes, this symbol has been widely used in Roman art and was transferred from Rome to Byzantium (Jenkins, 1983, 362,363). She also writes: the Egyptians in the Islamic period caused expansion of this motif to other Islamic lands(see Table 1). Among the decorative arrays, with a focus on the bird, one of the most exquisite examples in the images painted on the glazed vessels of Raqqa is the plant-animal (plant-bird) motif (see Figure 12). The idea of creating such a creature shows a common image of the two great natural and living powers that had influenced the human life. Both of these creatures have been an important and main source of nutrition and human life depends on the latter. On the other hand, both of these natural, mysterious and unknown beings have been clearly present in the traditional and magical beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies. The creature created with such a composition, was an aggregation of two natural forces and powers that could convey some concepts and symbols. This creature could be both a supporter and a threat. The plant-animal composition introduces one of the most practical imaginary creatures, created by connecting and blending one or more animal limbs with natural or abstract plant forms. This motif on the precious works of silver metalwork with gold plating and valuable Sassanid silk fabrics, went to different places (Taheri, 2013, 44).

Table.1 Types of bird motifs with representation and symbolic expression in glazed vessels of Raqqa. Source: Autores



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The figure	Type	Type of bird	Type of Vessel
		<p>Peacock</p>	<p>Bowl</p>
		<p>Eagle (Eagle, Double-headed Eagle) Duck</p>	<p>Bowl-jug Plate</p>






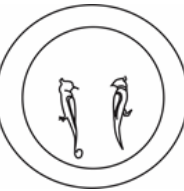




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The figure	Type	Type of bird	Type of Vessel
			
		Rooster	Bowl
		Parrot	Bowl
		Fish-eating chicken	Bowl
		?	jug





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The figure	Type	Type of bird	Type of Vessel
		Pigeon-sparrow	Bowl
		crane(bird)	jug

3. The motif of a bird with a human head (harpy): According to the definition, harpies are a combination of human heads with the bird body (Abeddoost & Kazempour, 2004, 82). Pope also writes about the appearance of these creatures on vessels: Harpies dramatically were implemented on the pottery, as soon as their proper technology was obtained (Pope & Ackerman, 2009, 1705). Khalili considers the phoenix or harpy as a common motif in the Islamic art of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Khalili & Group, 2006, 198). He also described the role of this motif in the vessels as: "In these vessels, there is a large figure painted on a simple background surrounded by motifs of flowers and bushes". In most cases, the edges of the vessels has a strip of Kufic script (common decorations in vessels painted on Raqqa liner glaze). Apart from the difference in technique, these vessels are very similar to the enamel dishes painted on Iranian glaze in terms of the iconography. The species that was first recorded in the 1180s, shows that Syrian potters were inspired by Persian pottery of that period (Khalili & Group, 2006, 229). Another point in connection with this motif is its relationship with magical concepts. According to Irwin, while painters, potters, and metalworkers used the harpy image, it was not clear whether they were doing it for fun or because they were interested in strange and imaginary objects. However, harpy was an image that



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also brings happiness. The Sphinx, which was related to the sun, tree of life, and the life of the other world, appears in the illustration of eleventh century (Irwin, 2010, 293) (See Figure1). It seems that in the illustration of this type of motifs, the female head is often combined with the body of a bird (See Table 2). Another example which can be shown in Figure 2 is a rare and interesting combination of human, bird, and plant. It seems that there are many similarities between this motif and the ones on the wares called Aqkend in Iran (See Figure 3). In the sample obtained from Tel Minis, a similar motif is observed to Figure 2, which seems to be a combination of a human-bird and a plant, but the remarkable point is that the bird has three legs, which has not been seen in any other case.

Construction methods and techniques of decorating and designing the bird

The body material of Raqqa wares was mostly stonepaste and in some cases clay paste. In the east of the Islamic world, a new type of paste is recreated, known as stonepaste or glass paste (DeGeorge, 2002, 13). In general, it can be said that in this period, the products of Raqqa are containers with a stonepaste body material that is much looser than their similar examples in Egypt, Tel Minis, and their color is rarely a true white, but in most cases yellowish or greenish white (See Figure 4 & 5).



Figure3.
Bowl with bird, flower and leaf motifs, Aqkend, 6th and 7th centuries AH. Source: Kambakhshfard, 2007, 170.



Figure4.
Luster Painted, Egypt. 1200 1250. No. (C.47 1960). Source: www.vam.ac.uk.



Figure5.
Fritware painted in luster on transparent colorless glaze. Syria. Tel Minis. 1150. No. (Inv. Nr. Isl 199). Source: www.davidmus.dk.

Dimand expressed that Raqqa pottery are both painted and glazed. The glazed color is usually dark brown. The decorative design, which is painted with green glaze and sometimes blue color is added to it, includes plant shapes and inscriptions in Naskh or Kufic script, and sometimes a picture of birds. Some pieces have a special beauty in terms of the shape and design. Another type of famous pottery of Raqqa is decorated in black under a turquoise glaze. The main decorations of this group are the plant and lattice shapes, Kufic letters, and bird shapes which are drawn with dotted, spiral and curved shapes inside separate

Figure1.

Stonepaste ware underglaze painted. Syria Raqqa 12th & 13th. Source: www.memuseum.org.



Figure2.

Stonepaste ware. Lakabi. With the motif of Harpy. Diameter 41.5 cm. Syria. 12th century AD No. (ME OA 1923.2 17.1). Source: www.britishmuseum.org.

areas. This type of Raqqa pottery is often confused with Persian one having a black and blue adornment. However, the bodies of these two types of pottery are different. Persian pottery is harder, less sandy, and grayish white in color, not cream (Dimand, 2010, 185). Raqqa pottery decorations are divided into two main groups. The first group is the main motifs, which are usually human, animal, inscription or plant, and the second one is the sub-motifs, which usually have the role of filler for the empty space in the background. These motifs are reminder of the ones used in Fatimid period decorations in Egypt. These motifs themselves are effective in creating the right texture to show the main motif. According to the conducted studies, in general, the figurative motifs of the glazed vessels of the Ayyubid period can be classified thematically into three main categories: 1. animal figurative motifs, 2. combined figurative motifs (human-animal), and 3. human figurative motifs. Among the animal figurative motifs, the motif of the bird has attracted the attention of painters more than other ones, as it has been considered by Iranian artists in the borders of Iran in the Seljuk era. However, by studying other resources, it seems that a more complete classification of these decorations can be provided, which will be discussed in the following.

1. Underglaze painting: The method that became common in most areas of Islamic pottery in the 6th century AH is known as underglaze painting or black pen. The centers that have generally offered products in this way are Jorjan, Neishapur, Samarkand, Amol and Sari. The procedure was as follows: First, the formed and dried vessels are baked in the furnace. Then, the pottery were painted by the desired decorations and baked as well. A clear and colorless glaze liquid was then poured on the painted body and it was taken to the furnace. In another method, after painting, the surface of the vessel was glazed with alkali and baked at once. The motifs under this glaze were black, cobalt blue, turquoise blue, green, etc., and under the matte glazes (cyan and cobalt blue), the motifs under the glaze appeared only in black (Kambakhshfard, 2007, 469). This technique has often covered the patterns in Raqqa wares. Besides, the bird motif has a significant place among the vessels decorated with this technique. Often, the birds are painted on the surface of the vessel as a single and in some cases as an inverted symmetrical pair (See Figure 6) or a pair with reflective symmetry on both sides of the central tree (See Figure 8). As pointed out by Dimand, some of the blue and white vessels of Raqqa are among the masterpieces of Islamic pottery. One of them is a cup in the Howe Meyer collection in New York, on which the image of two peacocks is painted, the

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curves of the body and the wide lines of their tails form a circle, which has an interesting shape in terms of the decoration (Dimand, 2010, 185).

If the image above is rotated 360 degrees so that the upper peacock can be easily seen, it becomes clear that the design of the two peacocks is very similar together.

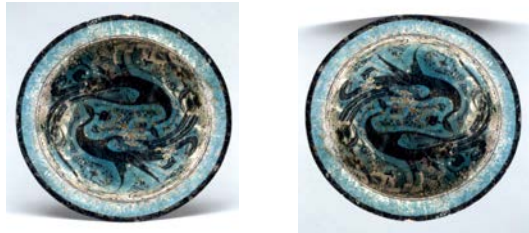


Figure6.

A: Combined body. Decoration of the motif of two inverted peacocks.

Underglaze painted. Syria, Raqqa.

B: figure A with 360 degree rotation for a better view of the upper peacock.

Source: Jenkins, 2006, 147.

This further illustrates that Raqqa potters have used a kind of pattern for drawing shady motif, especially in cases where the motif is drawn in pairs or symmetrically. It seems that the drawing of the bird in different poses has been considered by Syrian artists, such as a flying bird, a bird with open wings (See Figure 7), walking, sitting on flowers and plants, etc.

In Raqqa wares, which are decorated with the method of painting under turquoise and cobalt blue glazes, the design method of the bird is mainly in the form of shadows, which, of course, are very comprehensive in providing details. Apparently, the prototype was created through a scale and then the details of the work were added with tiny brushes. Also, in some cases, parts of the black glaze were removed by other tools to create the desired texture.

Another example of the skill and artistry of the Syrian designer which can be seen in Figure 9, is the harmonious and beautiful combination of this small patterned frame on the liner glaze. The organic relationship between motif of the bird with open wings, background and shape of the vessel in this sample, shows one of the characteristics of Raqqa vessels. The dynamic and contour lines of the bird represent the designer's power and skill in moving the brush. This skill can be further observed in the floral and plant motifs in the background. The decorations of the edge of the frame includes simple geometric patterns and eye-like shapes, which is reminder of the peacock eye pattern (See Figure 10) common in Abbasid lusterware. The implementation of the bird is simple but expressive and the movement of the wings in the form of small palm leaves and curved leaves shows the sense of space and design. The figurative compositions are common in Raqqa wares, especially in vessels with patterns on the multicolor liner glaze (Khalili & Group, 2006, 230).



Figure7.

Composite body. With the motif of a bird with open wings. Underglaze painted. Syria, Raqqa.

Source: Raqqa

Revisited, 2006: 158



Figure8.

Fritware. decoration: lotus flowers, two parrots, Arabesque, flower stem, transparent glaze painted. Syria, Raqqa, 13th century AD. No. (C.765 1925).

Source www.vam.ac.uk

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2. Luster Glaze: Luster glaze, which has been used as a metal coating on the pottery and tiles, has properties, the most important of which is its metallic luster, which has a colorful reflection (Neyestani & Rouhfar, 2010, 2). Luster, or metallic glaze, is a thin layer of shiny metal atoms that form on the surface of the base glaze, and after firing the glaze, the pottery gets a surface like a coated metal and acts like a mirror. Colors commonly found in the lusterware works include gold, glossy yellow, radiant brown, light brown, reddish brown, light amber brown, copper red, ruby, light green, olive green, and radiant azure (Nikkhah; Khazaei; Hatam & Neystani 2012, 111). In another example of drawing a bird, the unique design and display of liveliness and movement of the duck, (See Figure 11), has created a beautiful painting on the surface of this vessel, which clearly shows the artist's power and courage in controlling and managing the surface of the vessel and the ability to draw a live bird. It can be really said that this artwork fascinates the viewer. Another example seen in Figure 12 is a bird (peacock) that has a very interesting design. As it is obvious, the head of this bird is part of the plant and other plant motifs have filled the background. This unique pattern is painted with the luster technique in the center of the bowl.



Figure11.

Stonepaste body. Underglaze and luster-painted . with the motif of a dotted duck. Late 12th century, early 13th century AD. Syria, Raqqa. Source: Jenkins, 2006, 143.



Figure12.

Underglazed and luster-painted decoration, Syria, Raqqa, 1200 1230. Issue (78.81) Source: www.brooklynmuseum.org.



Figure13.

Fritware , decorated with carvings and painted in black, turquoise, and manganese (purple) under a clear glaze. Lakabi type (laghabi). Syria, Raqqa in the second half of the 12th century. Source: www.davidmus.dk.



Figure9.

The body of the stonepaste with black, dark red and azure decorations on a transparent greenish liner glaze. Syria. 12th and 13th centuries AD.

Source: Khalili & Group, 2005, 230



Figure10.

Lustreware jar, known as peacock eye. 13th century Syria. No. (ME OA G 1983.248)

Source: www.britishmuseum.org.

Lakabi Technique

In the 6th century AH, vessels were made with lines engraved on the body of pottery, A variety of topics such as flowers and plants and the motif of animals, birds and arabesques motifs, eagle, deer and other motifs in the form of carvings with light shadow and full pattern and figure and the limbs of the animals and also the leaves and flowers were painted alive. Some of these vessels were decorated with a turquoise and one-color blue glaze, and in that case all the lines and dots

were engraved, receiving the glaze in the indentations in a dense form, and offered perfectly alive and natural lines. Others were adorned with several glazes and offered the impression of inlaid vessels. These types of vessels both got the name of sgraffito and also have become famous as Lakabi (blue stain) (Kambakhshfard, 2007, 461). The lakabi technique is seen in abundance in glazed vessels of Raqqa, where the animal and bird motifs has been mostly considered by the potters. The motif of the bird in Raqqa pottery in cases where the pottery is decorated with the Lakabi technique, are drawn very simple and elementary and sometimes are designed in more detail. This is mainly due to the usage type of the vessels. The ordinary vessels that have wider application in everyday life or were made for ordinary people, were decorated in a simpler way (See Figure 13).

Conclusion

Among the animal motifs painted on the surface of the vessels of the Ayyubid period, and in particular the vessels of Raqqa, the bird motif is a dominant one and is a popular subject of Ayyubid potters, especially in Raqqa. The diversity of birds is very impressive. Peacocks, cranes (bird), parrots, ducks, eagles and some legendary birds are in this range of diversity. The motif of the bird in this period is sometimes depicted quite realistic and is a representation of nature, and these representations are sometimes very simple and stylized, sometimes abstract and sometimes is associated with symbolic expression. In bowls and plates, the bird often is the central motif and is depicted in combination with some plant-filling and decorative motifs. This motif often covers the entire surface of the vessel. However, in some vessels, it is seen individually and the background is very simple which causes centralization of attention on the motif. Sometimes the bird motif is seen symmetrically and sometimes in inverted pairs. In others, the pattern is enclosed with multiple circles or with stylized plant motifs such as the shape of palm leaves or a Kufic inscription strip. The features of the bird motif in this period is very prominent which includes the vitality, various and rich colors, variety of drawn modes, dynamism, etc. In the composite motifs of a bird with a human head, we mostly see the influence of Iranian enamel and Aqkend vessels. These effects are particularly highlighted in the case of face making and positioning of the harpy. In addition, as mentioned before, the connection between these motifs and magical and imaginative concepts is also clear. In general, what is obvious about the vessels decorated with animal motifs in the Ayyubid period, and especially in the Raqqa region, is the desire for naturalism in the Syrian artist, in addition to the ability to decorate these vessels in an admirable manner. On the other hand, although at different levels, the comprehensive effects of different cultures and civilizations including Egypt, Greece, and Iran are observable on these vessels, it seems that the Syrian artist has been able to use the facilities of these influences, to serve his native art and leave a lasting work with unique features. Therefore, it

seems that despite all the influences, the Syrian artist has been able to create an independent style with outstanding features.

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