

The Preservation of Sasanian Persian Artistic Techniques in Nishapur's Islamic Era

Traditional historiography of the early Islamic period in Nishapur privileges elite Persian culture and promotes the concept of top-down change. However, the material evidence from Nishapur's artisans demonstrates that cultural preservation operated largely independent of political change. The persistence of Sasanian Persian artistic techniques in Nishapur's pottery, glasswork, metalwork, and architectural decoration after the Islamic conquest of the city indicate that Islamic rule did not erase Sasanian Persian identity. Instead, Nishapur's artisans preserved pre-Islamic traditions through their decisions about which motifs to use and which techniques to employ. This method of analysis challenges the popular history narrative that the formation of Islam happened through widespread cultural and religious conversions. By focusing on Nishapur's example of artistic continuity in the face of political change, this narrative proves false, and instead the historical evidence emphasizes how artisans like potters and glassmakers fostered continuity, preserving the pre-Islamic identity of the city even under Islamic rule.

To understand the significance of artistic continuity in Nishapur, the city's historical trajectory must first be discussed. Founded in the Sasanian period as Nev-Shahpuhr (translated as "New Shapur"), Nishapur occupied a strategic position along the Silk Road in the region of Khorasan. The city's economy was sustained by a combination of manufacture, trade, and agricultural production from the surrounding farmland, the latter made possible by an extensive network of above-ground channels and underground canals—a technology for which the region was widely renowned for.¹ When Arab forces conquered the city in 651 CE during the broader Islamic expansion across Persia, they inherited not just territory but a sophisticated urban culture

¹ Jens Kröger, *Nishapur: Glass of the Early Islamic Period* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 9.

with established artistic traditions. The conquest itself was not a clean or unified event: dynastic factionalism among pre-Islamic ruling families shaped how the city came under Arab control. One local power, the Kanarangiyan family, actively cooperated with the conquering Arab forces against rival claimants to the region, receiving the governorship of Nishapur in exchange for their assistance.² At the same time, a portion of the population under the leadership of Burzin Shah—likely a member of the rival Karinid family—resisted the Arab armies for some months before the city fully submitted.³ Unlike some conquered cities that faced destruction and wholesale population replacement, Nishapur experienced a more gradual transition. The city became the seat of a governor in early Abbasid times and then the capital of the Tahirid dynasty from 828 to 845 CE.⁴ It was during this period that Nishapur became an artistic center for Khorasan. During its height of cultural significance, Nishapur prospered greatly, especially under Samanid rule, and became an important international trading center.⁵ Writing in the tenth century, the geographer Ibn Hawqal marveled at the city's prosperity, writing

“The city of Nishapur is situated on a level ground, and extends one farsang in every direction: the buildings are of clay. There are two considerable suburbs, well inhabited with mosques...in all the province of Khorasan there is not any city larger than Nishapour...Here they make garments of silk and linen, which are in such esteem that

² Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 271–273.

³ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 274–275.

⁴ Kröger, *Nishapur: Glass*, 9–10.

⁵ Ibid.

they send them to all quarters...Nishapur is the pleasantest part of Khorasan, and the inhabitants of the most amiable and chearful disposition.”⁶

Ibn Battuta, writing in the fourteenth century, noted similar splendor in Nishapur, calling it “Little Damascus” because of “its quantities of fruits, orchards and streams, and by reason of its beauty.” He described how the city was “traversed by four canals” and boasted of its “excellent and extensive” bazaars, and praised its “exquisite” mosque surrounded by four colleges with “a great host of students studying the Qur'an and jurisprudence.”⁷ Corroborating these accounts, the tenth-century chronicler Muqaddasi named Nishapur as the chief center for textile manufacture in all of Khurasan, and recounts how the wealth generated by this industry allowed cloth merchants to achieve prominence and accumulate some of the largest fortunes in regional trade.⁸ At its peak, the city’s population may have reached between one hundred thousand and two hundred thousand inhabitants—an enormous urban center by medieval standards—comprising not only Persians but also Arab and Turkish communities, as well as smaller communities of Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians.⁹

Yet throughout this period of Islamic governance and cultural florescence, occurring nearly four centuries after the conquest, Nishapur’s artisans continued drawing on pre-Islamic Persian traditions. This persistence occurred despite the fact that by the ninth century, Islam had been established in the region for over two centuries. If cultural change followed political change

⁶ Ibn Haukal, *The Oriental Geography of Ibn Haukal, an Arabian Traveller of the Tenth Century*, trans. Sir William Ouseley (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1800), 213-214; 227.

⁷ Ibn Battuta, *Travels of Ibn Battuta*, vol. 2, trans. H. A. R. Gibb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 383-84.

⁸ Kröger, *Nishapur: Glass*, 10.

⁹ Ibid.

in a straightforward or uniform way, one could expect to see entirely Islamized art by this point, with Sasanian elements vanishing. Instead, evidence shows that at the height of Nishapur's prosperity under the Abbasid caliphate and later the Samanid dynasty, artisans produced abundant Sasanian-influenced work.

The evidence presented in this paper comes primarily from excavations conducted at Nishapur in the 1930s and 1940s by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which yielded over two thousand artifacts dated mostly to the ninth and tenth centuries.¹⁰ What makes the objects discovered in these excavations particularly significant is how they demonstrate the continuation of Sasanian Persian artistic traditions despite the city's Muslim administration and the absence of Sasanian political structures. Charles Wilkinson, an archeologist associated with the excavations, noted that "no real trace has yet been found of Sasanian Nishapur"; the lack of architectural remains from the Sasanian city makes the continued use of their artistic traditions even more consequential for the study of Persian continuity in the Islamic period.¹¹ The appearance of Sasanian traditions in works dating to the ninth and tenth century suggests that artisans learned these techniques from their predecessors and consciously chose to perpetuate their transmission to future generations.

Buff ware pottery, including ceramic vessels made from light-colored clay, was one such art form produced in abundance in the ninth and tenth centuries and recovered during the excavations. These ceramic objects were typically decorated with paint in yellow and green with

¹⁰ Mark T. Wypyski, "Chemical Analysis of Early Islamic Glass from Nishapur," *Journal of Glass Studies* 57 (2015): 121.

¹¹ *Essays on Near Eastern Art and Archeology in Honor of Charles Kyrle Wilkinson* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983), 9; Charles K. Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Some Early Islamic Buildings and Their Decorations* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987), 38.

near-black outlines, and often depicted birds, animals, or humans.¹² These decorative features referenced Sasanian age precedents in a manner that demonstrates a deliberate artistic choice rather than through habit or accident. One bowl excavated from the site depicts a “cranelike bird of a type seen often in this ware,” but the specific motif used—of a bird holding a leaf in its beak—originates from the Sasanian period, with evidence being a silver dish dated to the early 5th century featuring an identical motif.¹³ This motif held symbolic significance in Sasanian culture, where birds were seen as benevolent creatures with ties to fertility. The Sasanian royal emblem incorporated the image of the *simurgh*, a mythological bird-like being.¹⁴ In choosing to reproduce this specific iconography rather than adopt new compositions, ninth-century potters forged a connection to a cultural past that pre-dated Islam.

Another shared motif is the palmette, which appears on a warrior’s skirt on a different bowl yielded from the dig. Scholars noted that this design was also inherited from the Sasanian period and continued to appear in works until the twelfth century. The palmette, a stylized palm leaf, carried associations with royalty and paradise in Sasanian visual culture.¹⁵ Its persistence suggests that these meanings were retained among both artisans and patrons long after Sasanian political authority had collapsed. The appearance of these motifs constitutes evidence of deliberate choices artisans made about which style to employ. This persistence becomes even more significant when considering the breadth of styles and techniques artisans in Nishapur would have been aware of through the city’s position as a trading center. The excavations

¹² Charles K. Wilkinson, “The Glazed Pottery of Nishapur and Samarkand,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 20, no. 3 (1961): 106.

¹³ Charles Kyrle Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery of the Early Islamic Period* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; distributed by New York Graphic Society, Greenwich, Conn., 1973), 96.

¹⁴ Boris Zhivkov, *Khazaria in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 78.

¹⁵ Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery*, 142-143.

revealed that ninth-century Chinese pottery had been imported to Nishapur, and the city's potters were known to have attempted to copy Iraqi ceramic models decorated with inscriptions, demonstrating an awareness of contemporary Islamic and foreign trends.¹⁶ Yet Nishapur's potters consistently returned to Sasanian styles in their works. The column motif which appears on one bowl, Wilkinson noted, "was not new when used in the yellow-staining black ware, since it appears on a Sasanian metal dish."¹⁷ This evidence suggests that artisans were, to an extent, conscious in their preservation of Sasanian styles, possessing the technical skills to adopt new trends but chose to maintain older ones.

The architectural decoration of Nishapur further reinforces this pattern of continuity. The stucco work found in ninth and tenth-century buildings shows consistency with pre-Islamic design principles. Geometric patterns that incorporated interlacing circles appear frequently in the stucco fragments, following "a Sasanian tradition of quadripartite design" which is found in a plaster decoration at Kish, a Sasanian-period site.¹⁸ The decorative architectural elements featured designs which were based on vasselike motifs, "part of a continuous tradition of ornamental design practiced from the Sasanian period through the early centuries of Islam."¹⁹ One specific plant motif that illustrates this continuity is the sprig which sprouts three flowers that are circular in shape; this motif appears in Nishapur decoration as well as on the arch at Taq-i Bustan, a Sasanian monument constructed in the fourth century.²⁰

¹⁶ Wilkinson, "Glazed Pottery," 107.

¹⁷ Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery*, 219-220.

¹⁸ Wilkinson, *Some Early Islamic Buildings*, 170.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 255.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 257.

Perhaps most importantly, Sasanian artistic elements persisted alongside Islamic ones rather than being replaced by them. According to scholars, latticework decoration represented “a continuation of the Sasanian tradition that immediately preceded the introduction of Islam in the seventh century,” and this same latticework appeared in buildings that also featured Arabic inscriptions and other Islamic decorative elements.²¹ This simultaneity signifies that artisans and patrons did not perceive Persian and Islamic artistic imagery as mutually exclusive. A single building thus could celebrate both the Islamic present and the Persian past.

The glassmaking at Nishapur supports a similar narrative of technical and aesthetic continuity. Chemical analysis of glass from the excavations identified compositional groups labeled “Sasanian 1” and “Sasanian 2,” with Sasanian 2 showing similarities to later Nishapur glass types.²² This evidence proves that glassmakers continued using compositional formulas developed in the Sasanian period well into Islamic times. The forms of glass vessels were also part of this continuity. One form of note was what archeologists referred to as “thick-walled hemispherical bowls” which they found were known from the Sasanian period, though they questioned whether their appearance was indicative of continuity or a revival.²³ The debate of whether artisans maintained unbroken production traditions or consciously revived older forms after a gap requires further consideration. If the forms represent revival, this implies that artisans or patrons actively sought to reconnect with pre-Islamic material culture, perhaps valuing it as prestigious or culturally authentic. If the forms represent continuity, this suggests that workshop practices persisted largely uninterrupted across the political transition from Sasanian to Islamic

²¹ Ibid, 158.

²² Wypyski, “Chemical Analysis,” 134.

²³ Kröger, *Nishapur: Glass*, 32.

rule. Regardless of whether it was a continuity or a revival, their presence proves that Nishapur, even after centuries of Islamic rule, had sustained knowledge of pre-Islamic techniques and forms.²⁴

Additional evidence appears in the shallow plates recovered from the excavation. These plates were made in different shapes, and their popularity was known to have peaked in the early Islamic period.²⁵ However, the wheel-cut glass shape which was employed for some of the objects traces its origins to Sasanian models, and was “known in examples of late Sasanian blown glass from Mesopotamia...one of the most popular shapes during the early Islamic period.”²⁶ The wheel-cutting technique required artisans to cut decorative patterns into glass vessels using a rotating wheel, and its continued use demonstrates the persistence of a specialized craft knowledge across generations and political regimes.

Bronze mirror handles found during the excavations represent “the only surviving Islamic example of a type of mirror handle known in Iran in pre-Islamic times,” providing testimony to the continuity of Sasanian mirror form in Islamic Iran.²⁷ Bronze bottles that featured ovoid or spherical forms or adornments with ovoid bosses appear to scholars to derive from the silver bottle style of Sasanian times where these were important features.²⁸ Where Sasanian silver bottles would have been owned only by the wealthy, Islamic-era bronze versions made similar forms accessible to a broader population. Even mundane objects like garment pins show

²⁴ Wilkinson, *Some Early Islamic Buildings*, 40.

²⁵ Kröger, *Nishapur: Glass*, 32.

²⁶ Ibid, 120; 31-32.

²⁷ James W. Allan, *Nishapur: Metalwork of the Early Islamic Period* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982), 36.

²⁸ Allan, *Nishapur: Metalwork*, 40.

continuity across Sasanian-Islamic transition. Conical-headed pins found at Nishapur are believed to have precursors in early bronze artifacts from the region, and when compared with early Sasanian spatulas with ornamented tops, show that “a continuing tradition in the production of such items seems highly likely.”²⁹ Such everyday objects rarely attract scholarly attention, even though their persistence may be more significant than that of elite goods precisely because they reflect the choices of ordinary people rather than upper-class trends. The metalwork evidence, while being less abundant than the ceramic remains, reinforces the broader pattern that artisans working centuries after the Islamic conquest continued drawing on technical and aesthetic traditions established under Sasanian rule, illustrating a strong continuity, through appearing across multiple media and at various social levels, from elite mirror handles to common pins.

The social structure of Nishapur helps explain how this preservation occurred. The *dihqans*—pre-Islamic Persian landed aristocracy—“retained their land and their revenues” after the Arabic conquest in the 7th century.³⁰ Though their power gradually declined over subsequent centuries, this group remained influential in Nishapur’s society. The elite class may have patronized artisans who worked in traditional styles, igniting a market demand for Sasanian-style goods. More importantly, in the early Islamic period, before Nishapur was designated as a city of political significance under the Abbasids, “the central government interfered little in the internal affairs of Nishapur...it seemed best to leave well enough alone.”³¹ The relative autonomy of the city would have given artisans freedom to maintain their pre-Islamic traditions without the

²⁹ Ibid, 32.

³⁰ Richard W. Bulliet, *The Patricians of Nishapur: A Study in Medieval Islamic Social History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 22.

³¹ Bulliet, *Patricians of Nishapur*, 26.

pressure to conform to centrally mandated artistic styles. This autonomy was a structural feature of the broader region; because dynasties like the Samanids and Ghaznavids typically maintained their courts and administrative bodies outside Khurasan itself, they were compelled to leave the province with a considerable degree of independence.³² Within cities like Nishapur, much of this authority was vested in a figure called the ra'is, a civic leader drawn from the propertied urban class, who was responsible for internal security, the patronage of scholars and literary figures, the organization of public works, and the maintenance of relations among the city's leading families.³³ This intermediary class, positioned between the distant ruling dynasty and the everyday population, would have been well-placed to sustain local cultural traditions—including the patronage of artisans working in pre-Islamic styles.

The persistence of artistic traditions must also be understood against the backdrop of Nishapur's religious life. Far from being a uniformly orthodox Islamic city, Nishapur was home to competing religious movements whose tensions shaped the city's social cohesion. The Karamiyyah sect, founded by Aba 'Abdallah Muhammad ibn Karam al-Sagazi al-Nishapiri in the ninth century, gained a powerful foothold among Nishapur's lower classes and artisans, drawing weavers and laborers into a movement that orthodox Sunnis viewed with deep suspicion.³⁴ By the early eleventh century, the sect had achieved sufficient influence that the Ghaznavid sultan appointed its leader to the prestigious office of ra'is.³⁵ Alongside this, Sufi organizations were developing their own structures of spiritual authority in Khurasan during the

³² Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The Medieval History of Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1977), 9.

³³ Bosworth, *Medieval History of Iran*, 9–10.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 5–6.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 9.

tenth and eleventh centuries, cultivating practices and hierarchies largely independent of state control.³⁶ This religious pluralism encompassed Sunnis, Shi'as, Karamis, Sufis, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, and suggests that Nishapur was a city in which no single cultural or doctrinal framework held total dominion. It is within this context of diversity and contested authority that the survival of Sasanian artistic traditions makes additional sense. The city's cultural landscape was too varied and locally determined for any single imperial or religious aesthetic to fully displace pre-Islamic traditions.

An argument could be made that using Sasanian motifs doesn't necessarily indicate that Persian identity was consciously preserved. Evidently, these forms and styles could have become part of a general Islamic artistic repository, with no connection to their original cultural meaning. Indeed, some scholars have noted that Sasanian plant motifs appeared throughout the Islamic world, not just in Nishapur.³⁷ This geographic spread may suggest that artisans valued these forms for more than their pre-Islamic associations, finding them aesthetically pleasing or versatile, rather than for their Sasanian origins. Another alternative interpretation comes from economic implications. Perhaps artisans continued using Sasanian techniques not out of cultural solidarity but because these methods were efficient and well-suited to available materials. If patrons didn't specifically request contemporary Islamic-style decoration, artisans may have continued producing what they knew how to make, continuing Sasanian styles unconsciously.

Yet these counterarguments overlook the specific context of Nishapur and Khorasan. The buff ware pottery, with its thorough incorporation of Sasanian animal and human figures,

³⁶ Margaret Malamud, "Sufi Organizations and Structures of Authority in Medieval Nishapur," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 3 (1994): 427–428, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/163697>.

³⁷ Guzel Zagirova, "The Lotus in Central Asia: A Sassanian Motif in the Islamic Stucco Decoration," *Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art* 12 (2022): 609.

“originated in Khurasan and owed nothing, at least in its initial stages, to Iraq or to the other Islamic countries of the west—or to any ceramic centers of China.”³⁸ That artisans in this region developed distinctive ceramic types using Sasanian styles, rather than copying Iraqi or Chinese models, suggests conscious conservation of Sasanian cultural identity. If artisans were focused on choosing the most efficient or aesthetically pleasing options from a general repertoire, it’s expected that more influence from Iraqi or Chinese models would be present, as they were routinely observable through Nishapur’s trade networks. Instead, the archaeological evidence shows a distinctive regional style rooted in local, pre-Islamic traditions.

The persistence of Sasanian styles also suggests that artisans didn’t view Persian and Islamic identities as mutually exclusive. The same workshops that produced buff ware with Sasanian animal motifs also made pottery decorated with Arabic inscriptions and Islamic imagery, and some objects were even made to serve the Christian community of Nishapur, evident from the prominent crosses in the decoration..³⁹ Nishapur’s artisan community appears to have served a religiously diverse population and maintained multiple artistic traditions simultaneously. The continued use of Sasanian techniques wasn’t indicative of resistance to Islam so much as it illustrated that people of the early Islamic period believed that being Muslim didn’t require abandoning their Persian heritage. The material and historical evidence from Nishapur suggests a reality in which religious identity and cultural heritage operated on different registers.

The story of Nishapur’s artisans ultimately illustrates how cultural identity in the early Islamic period was more negotiable and locally determined than traditional narratives suggest. In

³⁸ Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery*, 3.

³⁹ Wilkinson, “Glazed Pottery,” 106.

identifying the persistence of Sasanian artistic styles and techniques, it becomes clear that Nishapur's artisans upheld pre-Islamic traditions, acting independently of the ruling elites' political and religious agendas. This continuity was found in everyday objects produced by artisans—bowls for serving food, drinking glasses, handheld mirrors, and pins for fastening clothes—revealing how elements of Nishapur's Persian identity were successfully preserved and integrated into Islamic culture at even the most quotidian level.

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