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A Group of Painted Vessels from the II Kültepe Settlement

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Abstract. Painted pottery is characteristic of the Bronze Age culture of Nakhchivan. The potters of Nakhchivan – particularly those of II Kültepe – distinguished themselves from their contemporaries in other regions of the Bronze Age by producing not only simple vessels for everyday and economic use but also finely crafted painted pottery that attracted artistic attention. The patterns and primitive drawings depicted on these vessels are genuine works of art and provide valuable scientific insights into the daily life, economic activities, religious ideology, as well as the fauna and flora of ancient peoples. According to researchers, Nakhchivan's close socio-economic and cultural ties with the Near East, particularly with Urmia and Mesopotamia, created favorable conditions for the emergence of painted pottery.

Keywords: Bronze Age, city-fortress II Kültepe, painted pottery culture, monochrome and polychrome painted pottery, pottery painting, socio-economic and cultural connections.

During the Bronze Age in Azerbaijan, various branches of handicrafts developed in accordance with the needs of the ancient population, with pottery occupying a particularly important place. It went through an independent development path and became increasingly refined. This development was also influenced by economic and cultural relations; within the framework of local progress, pottery became widespread, and ceramic products-especially painted vessels-played an important role in exchange. In the Middle Bronze Age, monochrome and polychrome painted vessels held a significant place. Geometrically decorated monochrome painted pottery, which developed based on the forms and ornaments of simple vessels, laid the foundation for the formation of a new cultural tradition – the Painted Pottery Culture [10].

Technological innovations in the production and decoration of ceramics indicate the beginning of a new stage in the development of this craft [1, p.96].

During the Bronze Age in Nakhchivan, at II Kültepe, the

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demand for clay vessels in household and economic life led to the expansion of their production. The quality of pottery improved, and its forms became considerably more sophisticated. Clay vessels of the Middle Bronze Age were divided into plain and painted types, meeting the needs of the period. Painted vessels were further subdivided into polychrome and monochrome painted ware [11, p.115].

Researcher V.H. Aliyev, studying the Painted Pottery Culture, identified four stages of its development from the Middle Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age. Based on excavations carried out between 1969 and 1980 at the multi-layered settlement of II Kültepe, he proposed these conclusions.

One of the most remarkable multi-layered settlements in Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, II Kültepe is 11 meters high and covers an area of 3 hectares. At one time, the site extended over more than 6 hectares. It is located between the Jehriçay and Nakhchivanchay rivers, between the villages of Uzunobya and Didivar. Over time, part of it was eroded and destroyed by the Jehriçay river. As a result, cultural layers belonging to different Bronze Age phases have been revealed in the exposed sections. The lowest layer of II Kültepe (6 m) is characteristic of the Early Bronze Age – specifically the Kura-Araz culture. Above it lie the Middle and Late Bronze Age layers. The uppermost layer, belonging to the Early Iron Age, has been heavily damaged.

Although painted pottery from the Eneolithic period is rare at II Kültepe, during the Middle Bronze Age, alongside plain vessels, finely crafted painted pottery decorated with various colors and high artistic taste was produced. Painted pottery is highly characteristic of the Bronze Age culture of Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus. The production of such vessels was especially well developed in Nakhchivan pottery-making traditions. Nakhchivan potters distinguished themselves from those in other regions of the Bronze Age by producing not only simple utilitarian clay vessels but also finely decorated painted ware of high artistic quality.

Most painted vessels were hand-made without the use of a potter's wheel, skillfully formed in symmetrical and delicate shapes. Their surfaces were decorated with straight, wavy, and zigzag lines, as well as geometric patterns such as triangles, rhombuses, rectangles, and angular motifs. The successful execution of such colorful designs on oval-shaped vessels, rather than flat surfaces, demonstrates the rich experience of ancient craftsmen of Nakhchivan and II Kültepe

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during the Bronze Age. Some painted vessels also feature more complex scenes depicting humans, animals, birds, and celestial bodies [3, pp.33–44].

The ornaments and primitive drawings depicted on vessels are true works of art and are connected with the everyday life and economic activities of ancient people, their religious ideology, as well as the surrounding environment – fauna and flora. Scenes consisting of human and various animal depictions on the painted pottery of Gizilburun, Shahtakhti, Nehcir, and II Kultepe were dedicated to religious rituals associated with ancient pastoralism and hunting. Worship and belief in natural forces such as fire, water, the sun, mountains, and others are reflected in geometric motifs on painted vessels. Painted pottery was used for various purposes. These vessels were produced for household use as well as for religious ceremonies [11, p.118].

The production of painted pottery was not a simple process. It required the selection of high-quality clay, its kneading, the addition of fine sand or shiny minerals, firing at the appropriate temperature, decoration with various colors, and refiring. This process was labor-intensive and, naturally, highly valued in exchange systems. It can be assumed that such vessels were accessible only to higher social strata.

The settlement of II Kultepe is one of the earliest centers of pottery production in Nakhchivan. It differs from other pottery centers in its production characteristics.

In 2010, fragments of both monochrome and polychrome painted vessels were collected at II Kultepe. One of these fragments belonged to a goblet with a bulging body; fine sand had been added to its clay. Its surface was covered with a yellow slip and decorated with geometric motifs in black and red colors–net-like triangles, wide slanted black and red lines. The triangles were outlined with black and red lines, while their interiors were filled with red and, in some cases, black grid patterns [6].

The most interesting finds are medium-sized jars discovered intact around the kiln structure in the workshop. Two of them were brown in color, decorated with black designs; another was a black-polished vessel of the Uzarliktapa type with special zigzag ornamentation. The fourth was a plain light brown jar. Numerous kilns, paint-filled vessels, intact pots, and large quantities of plain and painted pottery fragments found in the workshop indicate that this was a

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highly developed pottery production center.

The jars discovered at II Kultepe are of great interest. They are characterized by a bulging body, long or short necks, flat bases, and no handles, with their rims folded outward. Their height ranges from 20–28 cm, body diameter from 10–22 cm, mouth diameter from 6–14 cm, and base diameter from 4–8 cm. The rims are bordered with incised lines and decorated with short strokes; the necks are divided into equal sections by paired vertical lines in three places. The spaces between these lines are filled with wavy patterns. Below the neck, the vessels are decorated with horizontal wavy and straight lines. Beneath these lines are angles, upward-facing triangles, and zigzag patterns. The interiors of geometric motifs are filled with wavy lines, and their lower ends are completed with small circles. In some vessels, small circles are also placed between triangles and zigzag patterns. Human, animal, and bird depictions are also occasionally found on the vessels [4, p.50].

Some elements of the ornamentation of painted jars are identical to incised and stamped patterns on polished vessels from the Middle Bronze Age layer of Uzarliktapa. During the Middle Bronze Age, the use of zigzag ornamentation on both plain and painted vessels was widespread in the South Caucasus [12, p.91].

Research has shown that in the second half of the 2nd millennium BC, pottery production in Azerbaijan further developed, and significant progress was made in the creation of painted pottery. As in the first stage, the painted vessels of the second stage were decorated on a light (white or yellow) background with various polychrome colors (black, red, brown, white, yellow, orange) and with relatively high artistic taste and precision. During this period, Azerbaijani potters created beautiful examples of painting and true works of art with complex compositions using multiple colors. In vessels of this stage, painted decoration covers the main part of the body. Polychrome jar fragments are most frequently found at II Kultepe settlement. These vessels, decorated with geometric motifs (net-like triangles), were predominantly painted with white color [4, pp.57, 60].

One of the most interesting aspects is the production of different colors used in ornamentation. Based on the analysis of painted ceramic materials, researchers suggest that during the Middle Bronze Age, ancient Azerbaijani potters not only created fine vessels but also invented various pigments of

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complex chemical composition. Undoubtedly, the development of local metallurgy played an important role in this process [4, p.61].

Their assumptions were confirmed in 2009 during the excavation of a workshop built adjacent to the northwestern wall of II Kultepe (its main wall was constructed along the fortress wall). In the first room of the workshop, the process of obtaining colors from minerals over a hearth was observed. A vessel containing a mixture of white, black, yellow, red, orange, gray, and brown colors was discovered on the hearth. It was determined that wood fuel and bones of large and small animals and birds were used to achieve high temperatures necessary for melting minerals and producing pigments. Inside the vessel, partially burned bird bones, white ash, and at the bottom of the jar, remains of burnt wood, charcoal, and ash were found. A shiny layer was observed at the bottom of the bone-fired section of this medium-sized vessel. Near the hearth, a grinding stone (large) and a pestle with traces of pigment were also found. A pile of orange ochre powder was discovered near the stone tools.

This unique discovery, which confirms earlier assumptions, has not been recorded in pottery workshops not only in Azerbaijan but also in the South Caucasus and even the Near East. Apart from the vessel filled with minerals found in the workshop (which consisted of four rooms), most of the collected ceramic fragments were monochrome and decorated with red paint. The ceramics were thin-walled, and circular traces of the potter's wheel were visible on them. Traces of white, red, and yellow shiny minerals were also observed on vessels from the kiln. Similar minerals were present in the composition of the substances inside the vessel. It is highly likely that potters added such crushed shiny minerals into the clay during kneading.

The discovery of well-formed, finely made plain and painted vessels in a single pottery workshop, together with numerous kilns, provides valuable scientific evidence that local production processes existed in ancient Nakhchivan at II Kultepe. The abundance of vessels of different shapes and sizes suggests that this local production enabled the ancient inhabitants of Kultepe to develop independently and produce more advanced, symmetrical, thin-walled pottery using the potter's wheel for exchange purposes [9].

In the second phase, the motifs characteristic of the painted vessels of the first phase (downward-oriented angles

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and triangles with ends finished by circles and filled with wavy lines, paired zigzag lines, and bird depictions with bodies divided by nets) disappeared and were replaced by more perfected geometric designs (rhombuses, triangles with upward and downward bases, with net-filled and adjoining interiors, and rectangles). While human, animal, and bird figures on monochrome painted vessels were rendered in a stylized form, in polychrome painted vessels these motifs were depicted in a highly realistic and creative manner, as if drawn by a skilled artist [4, p.63]. Polychrome painted vessels found at the ancient settlement of II Kultepe are rare and original examples of Azerbaijan's ancient pottery art due to the richness of their colors. These vessels are decorated with black, red, and brown colors in more complex compositions, featuring geometric patterns, swans, cranes, storks, oxen, deer, horsemen, and human figures. On one fragment, two human figures are depicted in black, along with a checkered pattern (consisting of 34–36 squares), and a swan painted in red. The human figures are shown in motion; one is a woman and the other a man. In the depiction, the leading figure has his left arm bent at the elbow and raised, with the hand open, seemingly signaling caution to the person following behind. The man's shoulders are relatively broad, and he wears a feathered crown on his head. It is clearly a scene of people engaged in some activity. The man holds a tool or weapon on his right shoulder. As seen from the painted pottery and rock engravings, animal, bird, and human depictions were frequently used as key motifs in the visual art of the Bronze Age in Nakhchivan, including II Kultepe. During this period, the depiction of snakes was newly introduced in visual art. On both plain and painted vessels, as well as in rock art, the snake was likely represented as a symbolic force—a totem [2, pp.62–63].

Based on research, it is concluded that the territory of Nakhchivan (including I and II Kultepe) had cultural and economic connections with the southern regions through its painted pottery, as well as with northern regions and other parts of the South Caucasus through its plain ceramics [7, pp.96, 98].

Archaeological investigations clearly show that II Kultepe played a key role in economic and cultural relations. The discovery of monochrome painted vessels in pottery workshops in the northern regions of Azerbaijan, such as Mil-Karabakh and the Ganja River area, as well as the presence of

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Uzarliktapa-type black-polished vessels at II Kultapa, confirms these connections.

During the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age, significant changes occurred in ceramic production. Innovations are noticeable in their form and manufacturing techniques. Most jars have short necks, bulging bodies, and flat bases. They were carefully made on a potter's wheel, with well-smoothed surfaces covered by slip. The interior and rim were painted red. The rims are often outward-curved, many with a raised band-like edge. Some jars have cylindrical and short necks, with bulging shoulders. In some cylindrical-necked jars, dark red paint was applied to the body, and brown paint to the inner rim. Some vessels have symbolic stamped "S"-shaped decorations on the shoulder [6, pp.119-121].

From this, it can be concluded that craftsmanship and its various branches had a distinctive place and high level of development in the territory of Azerbaijan. Pottery, in particular, stood out in this field. During the Bronze Age, Azerbaijan had several independent pottery production centers. The homeland of painted pottery was Nakhchivan, and only later, as a result of intertribal economic and cultural relations, did it spread along the Araz Valley to the Ghuruchay-Kondalanchay basin. Grey and black polished vessels with special ornamentation from the Middle Bronze Age settlements of the Mil-Karabakh plain were also brought to Nakhchivan in this way [8].

While in other regions of Azerbaijan during the Bronze Age grey and black vessels of various forms were produced, in Nakhchivan - especially at II Kultepe - priority was given to painted pottery. One of the main reasons for this was Nakhchivan's strong economic and cultural ties with the Near East, particularly Urmia and Mesopotamia. Nevertheless, archaeological research in Nakhchivan, Mil-Karabakh, the Ganja River region, and other areas shows that these regions were interconnected. This allows us to conclude that the ancient history of present-day Azerbaijan, its territory, and its culture were formed during the Bronze Age through the unity of tribes sharing the same roots and cultural traditions (Kura-Araxes, Nakhchivan Painted Pottery, Khojaly-Gadabay, Talysh-Mugan, etc.).

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