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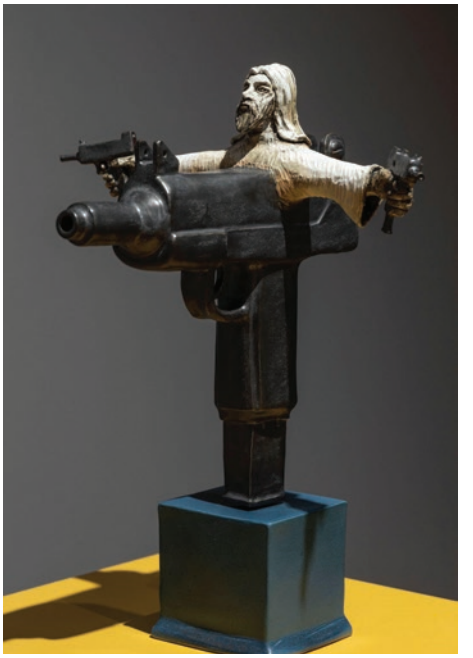
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The Ceramics of **Shäki, Azerbaijan**

Written by **Serap ÜNAL**

From the Neolithic period to the present day, Asia Minor, including Azerbaijan and Anatolia, has been an important location for ceramics, and many sites hold archaeological value. Ceramics are important for revealing the cultural, sociological and philosophical characteristics of the lives of numerous civilizations who have inhabited these lands over thousands of years. The fact that Anatolia includes the oldest ceramic production centres in the world, and that ancient methods of production are still used in numerous parts of Asia Minor, makes the region a place of special interest.

Shäki Province in Azerbaijan is typical of locations that have produced ceramics using the same methods for millennia. As in many other locations in Asia Minor, pottery continues to be made in Shäki, and as a result, the city has also become an important centre for contemporary ceramics. In May 2019, Mir Teymur Mämmädov of ABAD, an Azerbaijan state organization, coordinated an international ceramics symposium, gathering ceramicists from all around the world to Shäki, indicating the city's support for the pottery industry.

Geographically, the Shäki Region is in the north of Azerbaijan, located around 370 kilometres northwest of the capital Baku, in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountain Range. Shäki is the capital of the Shäki Region.

Preserving its history in terms of both architecture and tradition, has ensured Shäki as a tourist destination, and the city of Shäki was included in the World Historical Cities Association on the 8th of December, 2008. As anyone who has visited observes, the green foothills of the Caucasus surrounding the city centre adds a distinct mystical atmosphere to the city.

The main attractions include mosques, baths, bridges, shops and unspoiled historical buildings on the main street that date from the Khanate period. Narrow paths between houses with tiled roofs, sitting against hillsides, creates a timeless photographic image of Shaki.

According to archaeological studies, ceramic production has been prevalent in Azerbaijan for thousands of years. In excavations carried out in the capital Baku, Nakhchivan, and the Gobustan and Shäki Regions, located 90 kilometres west of Baku, the number of ceramic finds is highly concentrated.

As the history of Shäki stretches so far back, archaeological excavations remain incomplete, impacting on available data – especially in regards to pottery. Nevertheless, pots with animal figures made for religious purposes strongly resemble those of the Neolithic Period, and ceramic pots unearthed in the necropolis (cemetery) during excavations mostly date from the Bronze Age.

The predominant archaeological remains in the Shäki Region, belong to the period of Caucasian Albania, which is assumed to have been founded in the 3rd and 4th centuries BC. Architectural structures, ceramics and metal work from this period indicate a high level of civilization, yet there is no written record of the Albanian civilization, which ended with the Arab invasion in the 7th century AD. After the Albanian period (and after the Arabs) from 1064 AD onwards, the Seljuks settled Oghuz-Turkmen in the area – beginning in Georgia and extending to the shores of the Caspian Sea and Dagestan.[1]

Although pottery was developed in the 12th and early 13th centuries, the invasion of Azerbaijan by the Mongols, the demolition of its cities, and the capture of artisans, prevented advances in various areas of production, including ceramics. Afterwards, even though the art of pottery enjoyed a certain amount of development in the 15th and 16th centuries, it was difficult to attain its former glory. [2] However, ruled by various Turkish khanates, Shäki preserved its traditions int he ancient city of Azerbaijan, even under Soviet rule.

Shaki's different areas are named after branches of the crafts their inhabitants practice, such as *serraclar* (saddlemakers), *serbablar* (weavers), and *duluslar* (potters). One of the most important contributors to assisting Shäki is the, previously mentioned,

According to archaeological studies, ceramic production has been prevalent in Azerbaijan since the Neolithic Period.

ABAD project. ABAD has supported family businesses and traditional handicrafts on the verge of disappearance, including contemporary ceramics. The International Ceramic Symposium ABAD organized in Shäki is a good example of the organisation's work. By supporting regional handicrafts in various ways, ABAD has made a great contribution to making Shäki a modern centre for ceramics in the South Caucasus. It is gratifying that the craft of making pottery in Shäki, that has been transferred from father to son, will be maintained as a local handicraft thanks to family ties, along with the support and protection of the State.

There is no doubt that the important pottery masters who kept traditional pottery alive in Shäki have made a significant contribution to this process. Among them are Şöyüf Mämmädov; Ehed Mämmädov, Himmet Mämmädov (sons of Şöyüf Mämmädov), Mämmädov Yaşar, Saleh Mämmädov and Zahit Alekperov.

Şöyüf Mämmädov, a famous potter who devoted his life to his craft, was honoured with membership of the Union of Soviet Painters, and thus mentioned in many written sources. He died in 1997, but had already raised his sons as potters and they continue his craft.



Associate Professor Dr. Serap Ünal visited the pottery atelier of Himmet Mämmädov, son of Şöyüf Mämmädov, and she examined the characteristics of traditional pottery in Shäki. Here are some of her findings:

Soil structure: Raw soil used in pottery in the ateliers in the centre of Shäki come from the slopes in the ridges to the city's northwest, 4-5 kilometres from the centre. This is transported to the ateliers by pack animals, such as horses and donkeys, or by motor vehicles. The clay obtained from the soil of the region has a structure that is categorized as smectite (montmorillonite) with high plastic properties, suitable for ceramics. The chemical composition of Shäki clay is: 52.0% SiO_2, 16.27% Al_2O_3, 5.65% Fe_2O_3, 7.28% CaO, 2.03% MgO, 12.21% loss on ignition. (Prof. Dr. M. İsmailova) [3]

Ateliers: The pottery ateliers are located inside the city, often in living spaces such as the courtyards of houses. The drying area, wheel, kiln and the exhibition space are located in suitable parts of the garden and courtyards along with the living areas of houses.

Clay preparation: Soil brought to the ateliers is first dried by being exposed to the sun, while stones and foreign substances are removed. The soil is stored in sacks after the drying process. Then, six sacks of soil are placed into a pool called *güleli* [hand of rose], which is 2 metres wide, 1 metre tall and 80 centimetres deep. Water is poured slowly in until the pool is filled. The mixture in the pool sits for an average of one week (at least three days). After checking with wooden sticks if the consistency of the mud is suitable for clay to be prepared, and whether there are lumps or soil masses, people enter the pool and the treading process starts. After this, the homogeneous mud is removed from the pool with shovels and laid in a suitable place and kept until it is the right consistency. Sandy flood soil is dried, sifted and sprinkled on the place where the clay will be kneaded by hand in order to prevent it from sticking.

Wheel, pulling tools and production techniques: The origins of the Shäki potter's wheels are the workbenches of the fifth type, as often observed in the Asia Minor pottery, which consist of a short-shaft, seat, ball wheels and wheels turned by feet or hands, according to Güngör Güner's categorization.

These mechanisms are made from a cart and cart wheels and remind us of the question, ‘Did humankind invent the wheel or the potter’s wheel first?’

These mechanisms are made from a cart and cart wheels and remind us of the question, ‘Did humankind invent the wheel or the potter’s wheel first?’ As Gunner notes, in terms of form, the stationary cart wheel, stuck to the ground, fixed on a short shaft, is used as a wheel. In order to increase the weight of the edges, the wheel trim is covered with mud and wrapped in cloth. After accelerating the wheel with his hands, the potter moves on to the process of pulling the pots”.[4]

After this period, the wheel system used in Shäki changed so that the sixth type of workbenches began to be preferred. This type of wheel, using a ong shaft, may be turned with a foot. The potter shapes the clay while sitting on the wheel’s right side or facing its centre. Today, the rotation of similar long-shaft wheels is generated by a motor instead of feet. The upper disc of the current potter’s wheel used in Shäki is metal, while the part that is turned by foot is made of wood. Wooden tools made from walnut wood are used for pulling.

A well-kneaded, ready-to-shape clay block of the appropriate size for the form to be made is placed on the wheel’s upper disc. Sandy soil is sprinkled. The clay is then placed in the centre. After opening the clay block from the top and raising it by hand, the forming process starts with the help of the pulling boards. After being shaped and decorated, forms are taken off the wheel and left to dry in a place that is not directly exposed to sunlight. For forms with handles, the fitting of the handle is done in a day’s time.

Kilns and firing characteristics:

The pottery kilns in Shäki are generally of the same type and the firing is done using similar techniques. The fourth-type of kiln in Güner’s classification is used. This type of kiln is common in Anatolia as well, with Güner describing it thus, “the fourth type of firing is made in kilns seated on arches and fired from the bottom, the most advanced type of pottery kilns found in Anatolia”.[5]

Such kilns are the most advanced kilns used in traditional pottery-making centres in Anatolia. The kilns in Shäki, similar to those in Anatolia, allow for three types of filling – 500, 750 and 1000 – depending on the size of the forms to be fired. The kilns can accommodate about 550-600 medium-sized pieces. The kiln is composed of two basic parts; the stall, and the chamber where the pieces of work are fired. On the surface, separating these two parts, heat is transferred through round holes about 15-20cm in diameter. The internal dimensions of the cylindrical kiln are 2.20m wide and 3m high. The mouth is arched and the stall height is 0.75-1m.

The duration of firing lasts approximately 40 hours, deliberately extended by slow burning. In the first several hours, brushwood is used for smoking. In the first 15 hours, the fire is stoked every two hours so that the firing proceeds slowly. The kiln’s temperature reaches up to 600-700°C. Master potters can usually determine the kiln’s temperature based on experience. After the firing process is finished, the kiln is cooled for 1.5 days.





Opposite:
Ruins of Gobustan, Chalcolithic Period.

Above:
Raku Festival at the Closing of the Ceramic Symposium.

Endnotes

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About the Author
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Forms: The forms in Shäki pottery are functional, mainly designed to meet daily food and beverage needs, and similar in size to Anatolian pottery. Double-handled vessels called 'piti vessels' are produced for 'kebab in pot', a delicious dish, and sized according to the number of people eating. Beverage vessels, by contrast, are single-handled and have lids. They come in different sizes. In Shäki, dinner plates are made from terracotta. These vessels look like a flat, round tray and are wider than a regular dinner plate. Shäki pottery differs from Anatolian pottery in that the handles are quite thick. Cubes for storing large quantities of dry foodstuffs are also produced by master ceramicists. However, these cubes are specially made in certain ateliers. Another form unique to Shäki, called the 'bullion pot', is an engraved-patterned ceramic made to give a beautiful shape to the pastry that will be cooked in it. Shäki pots are generally produced without glaze and unpolished, on the grounds that this is more sanitary than polishing them.

Marketing of products: Today, a considerable portion of kitchenware used in Shäki to cook special dishes consists of ceramic pots and tools made in local ateliers. In addition, Shäki pots appeal to tourists. For this reason, there are many pottery shops in the streets and neighbourhoods that form the city's main shopping district. Furthermore, Shäki pottery is also sold at regional markets. The pots thrown in ateliers are transported to retailers via middlemen, or purchased directly from the ateliers.

Shäki Pottery Today: The International Ceramic Symposium held at the ABAD Ceramics and Applied Art Centre from 20 May to 2 June 2019 (https://ceramicsymposium.org/az/) under the motto 'From nature to history' had 50 ceramists from 22 countries apply to the ceramic symposium and workshop, with 25 ceramists and academics from 15 countries selected to participate. In assessing the success of the conference, the curator of the symposium, Mir Teymur Mämmädov's contribution must be underlined, who served as curator.

Born in 1947, Mämmädov is a doyen of art and ceramics who has studied at almost all the art faculties in Azerbaijan and Russia, including during the Soviet era. In 1978, he graduated from St. Petersburg Higher School of Art (studied 1968-1978). Later, he concentrated on ceramics. This great master, who has devoted 60 years of his life to ceramics, conveyed technical and other kinds of information to everyone thanks to his experience. Also, he was a source of joy and motivation to all the participants during the symposium.

In conclusion, ABAD must be applauded for helping to make Shäki a modern centre for ceramics in the South Caucasus by organizing this important international event, along as well as supporting regional handicraft. ■

Glossary of Regional Terms:
Dulus: pot
Dulusculuk: pottery
Dulus çarkı: potter's wheel
Zivil: foreign substances in soil
Lil: sandy flood soil
Fırlatan: bottom disc of the potter's wheel, turned by feet
Künde: block of clay
Kündeyi vurmak: placing the clay on the top disc of the wheel
Elnahtin: rolling out clay from the top
Hurt: masses of soil left in mud
Ayakla taftalamak: treading mud
Tova gelmek: mud reaching the right consistency
Goz: pulling board made from walnut tree
Kürebet: round holes that transfer heat between the two parts of the kiln
Hacandal: brushwood used to ignite the kiln
Nafarlama: smoking