






An Iconographic and Iconologic Analysis of Chovgan Motifs on Early Islamic Pottery: Socio-Cultural Implications in the Samanid Era

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Abstract

Polychrome slip-painted ceramics attributed to Nishapur, distinguished by their unique iconography, are recognized as among the most prominent artistic achievements of the Samanid period in the Near East. Despite significant advancements in scholarly research regarding the provenance and semantics of these motifs, certain pictorial scenes remain inadequately interpreted. One such scene depicts a game of Chovgan (polo), illustrated on a polychrome ceramic vessel currently housed in the Asian Art Museum. Although previous attempts have sought to interpret this image through historical sources, its social and cultural significance during the third and fourth centuries AH remains shrouded in ambiguity. Consequently, the primary objective of this study is to re-examine and critically analyze this depiction within the broader social, cultural, and political context of the Samanid era. To achieve this, the study employs Erwin Panofsky's iconological approach as its analytical framework, interpreting the results in light of contemporary historical and literary texts from the Samanid period. Guided by this research problem and method, the study addresses two primary questions: 1) How does the depiction of Chovgan on Nishapur ceramics reflect the symbols of military and social skills characteristic of the Samanid era? 2) What symbolic and cultural meanings associated with educational, aristocratic, and political concepts of the Samanid period are embedded in the image of Chovgan on Nishapur ceramics? The research method employed is historical, utilizing an analytical-comparative approach based on library-based data collection and synthesis. The interpretation, grounded in this analytical-comparative framework, posits that the depiction of Chovgan on Nishapur ceramics is not merely a representation of leisure activity; rather, it functions as a symbol of martial and social competencies within the Samanid aristocracy. Furthermore, the image implicitly conveys concepts related to political power, bravery, and aristocratic social identity. The findings indicate that Chovgan, beyond representing physical exertion, was integral to the social and political structures of the Samanid era, as evidenced by its portrayal on Nishapur ceramics.

Keywords: Slip-painted Pottery, Nishapur, Chovgan, Iconography, Samanid Period.

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Introduction

Polychrome slip-painted ceramics produced in northeastern Iran during the third and fourth centuries AH, contemporaneous with the Samanid era, constitute some of the most prominent examples of ceramic art from this period. Despite the distinctive manufacturing technique employed in these vessels, known as the slip-painted/engobe method (Fehérvári, 2000: 50; Blair & Bloom, 2004: 122; Watson, 2004; Kiani, 1978: 15), and despite extensive research conducted on the production history and provenance of these works, most scholars still attribute their manufacture to Nishapur (Wilkinson, 1973: 3, 138–139; Fehérvári, 2000: 63; Watson, 2004: 248), Samarkand (Wilkinson, 1961: 105; Cooper, 2000: 89; Lane, 1948: 12), Sari (Cooper, 2000: 89; Lane, 1948: 12; Wilkinson, 1961: 105), and Kerman (Fehérvári, 2000: 61–63; Allen, 1988: 60). Consequently, the diversity and intricacy of the motifs executed on these slip-painted vessels, including floral, geometric, anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and narrative scenes, have attracted significant scholarly attention (Ettinghausen & Yarshater, 2000: 141). Nevertheless, a precise analysis of the implicit meanings and the relationship between these narrative scenes and the social and cultural contexts of that period remains lacking.

The scene of the Chovgan game is one of the most significant narrative images attributed to Nishapur slip-painted ceramics, depicted on a bowl currently housed in the Asian Museum of Islamic Art. Although studies have been conducted by scholars such as Askari Alamouti (2016) relying on historical texts regarding this narrative scene, a comprehensive and methodological interpretation of the meanings embedded in relation to the cultural and social context of the era still requires deeper re-examination and reflection. The present study endeavors to conduct a more profound re-examination and analysis of this narrative image -the Chovgan game- within the social, cultural, and political foundations of the Samanid era, utilizing Erwin Panofsky's iconological method¹. This method consists of three stages: pre-iconographic description (precise and scientific description of visual details), iconographic analysis (examination of the structure and relationships of visual elements), and iconological interpretation (discovery of semantic layers in connection with historical and cultural contexts) (Panofsky, 1980: 34; Mokhtarian, 2011: 7, 13). This analytical framework enables us, beyond understanding the aesthetic conventions of the image, to uncover the meaning embedded within it.

Based on what has been mentioned, the primary objective of this research is to elucidate the implicit meanings in the image of the Chovgan game on the Nishapur slip-painted vessel. These concepts, in addition to

representing a leisure activity, symbolize military skills and social agency among the aristocratic classes of the Samanid era. This article seeks to reveal the relationship of these motifs with the political, cultural, and social concepts of the period and, through iconographic analysis and the use of historical sources, uncover the meanings embedded in the Chovgan scene to achieve a deeper understanding of the social and military context of the Samanids.

Research Questions: Based on its primary hypothesis, this study addresses two main questions: 1) How does the narrative scene of the Chovgan game on the Nishapur slip-painted vessel serve as a symbolic representation of military and social skills in the Samanid era? 2) What symbolic and cultural meanings associated with educational, aristocratic, and political concepts of the Samanid era are embedded in the depiction of the Chovgan game on Nishapur slip-painted ceramics?

Research Method: This research employs an analytical-comparative approach based on historical sources and library-based data collection, conducted in three continuous stages. In the first stage, the polychrome slip-painted vessel under study is documented. To this end, its visual details, forms, figures, ornaments, and compositional elements are represented and recorded using CorelDRAW software to provide an accurate basis for analysis and to prevent subjective or undocumented interpretations. In the second stage, an iconographic analysis of the narrative scene is performed according to Erwin Panofsky's approach. During this phase, the compositional structure, the depiction of figures, and the relationships between visual elements are examined to identify the semantic foundations and narrative structure of the scene, thereby moving beyond mere descriptive analysis. In the third stage, an iconological interpretation is provided based on historical and literary sources related to the concept of the Chovgan game during the Samanid and pre-Samanid periods. In this phase, by examining written texts in Pahlavi, Arabic, and the Shahnameh, the cultural and social themes of the Chovgan game scene are re-examined and extracted in connection with the educational, aristocratic, and political concepts of the Samanid era.

Literature Review

Following Charles Wilkinson's excavations in 1973 and the transfer of some Nishapur findings to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, studies on polychrome slip-painted ceramics gained greater coherence and breadth. Since then, researchers have examined these artifacts from multiple perspectives. In the realm of technical and technological

classification, Wilkinson, in his book *Nishapur: Pottery of the early Islamic period*, analyzed decoration techniques, coloring, and surface appearance, investigating pictorial patterns including human and animal motifs (Wilkinson, 1973). Subsequent scholars such as Watson (2004), Fehérvári (1973, 2000), and Lane (1948) continued his work, proposing new approaches to classification. Additionally, Karimi and Kiani (1985) and Morgan (2005) analyzed the types and techniques of such ceramics, while Nouri (2014) and Ziaei-Bigdeli (2017) focused on conservation and authentication, conducting comparative studies on museum collections.

In the field of content and visual studies, the scope of research is even more extensive. Notable studies include those by Firouz (1966), Zick-Nissen (1973), Fitzherbert (1983), Rogers (1995), Kiani (2001), Grube (2005), Daneshvari (2007), Mirzaei and Moradkhani (2019), Shayeganfar and Nouri (2016), Pancaroglu (2013), Samanian and Bahmani (2013), Azadbakht and Tavousi (2012), Changiz and Rezalou (2011), Khaledian (2008), Ahmad-zadeh et al. (2018), Ataei et al. (2012), Quchani (2005), Salehi-Kakhki and Nouri (2016), Changiz and Bolkhari-ghahi (2016), Akbari-shaketayi and Taghavi (2018), and Samavaki (2021). The synthesis of these studies indicates that the origins of Nishapur ceramic motifs can be traced to connections with Sassanian traditions and pre-Islamic myths, astrological symbolism, the link between anatomical decorations and local Khorasan traditions and Central Asian myths, the influence of literary and religious sources, the reflection of Mithraism rituals, the echo of shared religious festivals, the connection of symbols with native and ritual traditions, dating and epigraphic studies, and the examination of religious, numerical, animal, and religious, social, and cultural mythological themes.

In the research by Askari Alamouti (2016), in an article titled “Re-reading the Content of Nishapur Ceramic Motifs in the Fourth Century AH with a Focus on Religious Beliefs and Astronomical Predictions,” the slip-painted vessel depicting the Chovgan scene was examined. Based on the repeated presence of bird motifs, he read the narrative scene as being connected to Mahdaviṣt discourse and, more particularly, to the figure of Abu Muslim Khorasani. However, this interpretation is questionable; the connection between the bird motif and Abu Muslim Khorasani is not substantiated in his analysis, nor is its link to the narrative nature and socio-ritual function of the Chovgan game convincing. The mere presence of the bird element cannot serve as a basis for relating this scene, which has a recreational, ritual, or aristocratic nature like Chovgan, to Mahdaviṣt or messianic concepts, as Chovgan in pre-Samanid traditions was primarily associated with military exercises, the upbringing of princes, and symbols

of political power. Therefore, Askari Alamouti's analysis requires revision and a clear distinction between motifs with religious functions and scenes with independent socio-ritual functions. Generally, a review of existing literature indicates that while there is an abundance of studies on the provenance of motifs, the practical and semantic domains related to games and socio-sports activities of the Samanid era have received less attention, highlighting the necessity of this research.

Ultimately, the combination of the three stages mentioned above provides a context in which the narrative scene of the Chovgan game on the Nishapur slip-painted ceramic is re-read not only in terms of form and image but also from semantic and cultural identity perspectives prevalent in the Samanid era, clearly revealing its relationship with the social structure of that period.

Iconographic Analysis of the Chovgan Motif

A noteworthy example among polychrome slip-painted ceramics attributed to Nishapur is a bowl that directly depicts a game, specifically Chovgan (Fig. 1). In this image, we observe a high-ranking Samanid rider wearing courtly attire, including a tunic, trousers, tall boots, and an ornate crown. He is depicted riding a galloping horse, holding a mallet in his right hand and the reins in his left. Beneath the horse's belly, a rooster is depicted, while the scene is surrounded by motif-based decorations such as leaf patterns, inscriptions, and geometric designs, whose semantic functions will be examined in the iconographic analysis section. Before entering Panofsky's three-stage process, it is necessary to provide an overview of the characteristics and manufacturing technique of this ceramic vessel to establish a basis for the systematic analysis of its imagery. The ceramic vessel under discussion in this study (Fig. 1) bears a strong resemblance in manufacturing technique and decoration style to the slip-painted ceramics excavated from Nishapur (Table 1: Figs. 1–3), which date to the third and fourth centuries AH. One of the manufacturing and decorative styles of ceramics in these centuries is the slip-painted method, which encompasses a diverse range of types (Karimi and Kiani, 1985: 16).

Wilkinson, the excavator of Nishapur, classifies slip-painted ceramics into six types based on decoration technique and motifs:

1. Slip-painted ceramics with painted decoration on a buff-colored background (polychrome type);
2. Polychrome slip-painted ceramics on a white background;
3. Black slip-painted ceramics on a white background;
4. Slip-painted ceramics on a colored background;

5. Black slip-painted ceramics that yield a yellow hue;
6. Imitation gold slip-painted ceramics (Wilkinson, 1973).

Slip-painted ceramics were produced in the kilns of Nishapur, Samarkand, Sari, Kerman, and other production centers (Wilkinson, cited in Ettinghausen et al., 1997: 64-65; Fehérvári, 2009: 11; Watson, 2004: 205). Despite the abundance of slip-painted ceramics, an appropriate sequence and dating have not yet been provided. Wilkinson proposes a timeframe for these vessels in the third and fourth centuries AH (Wilkinson, 2000: 139). Allan, based on architectural evidence and historical clues, dates the Lashkari Bazar site to the third century AH and suggests a timeframe of the third and fourth centuries AH for the ceramics from this site, emphasizing the overlap between the Lashkari Bazar ceramics and the polychrome slip-painted ceramics of Nishapur (Allan, 1988: 60-66). Bulliet also believes that polychrome slip-painted ceramics from Nishapur emerged as a subsequent stage after the common epigraphic vessels (Bulliet, cited in: Grabar, 2005: 45).

The polychrome slip-painted ceramics, which are the subject of this research, are among the types reminiscent of Nishapur slip-painted ceramics and are considered one of the most exquisite ceramics of the third and fourth centuries AH (Grube, 2005: 45). They feature motifs such as floral, geometric, anthropomorphic, and zoomorphic designs (Ettinghausen and Grabar, 2011: 308; Whitehouse, 1992: 310). Three examples of these ceramics are presented in Table 1 (Figs. 1-3), which show considerable similarity to the bowl in the Asian Art Museum (Fig. 1) in terms of manufacturing technique, glaze, motif drawing, and compositional elements.

Among the similarities between this bowl (Fig. 1) and other examples (Table 1: Figs. 1-3) are the following: The depiction of hair and its arrangement at the back of the head (Table 1: Figs. 1-3); the style of crown depiction (Table 1: Fig. 3); clothing coloration (Table 1: Figs. 1, 3); similarity in boot depiction (Table 1: Figs. 1-2); similarity in horse and its decoration depiction (Table 1: Fig. 1); the type of bird and its drawing style (Table 1: Figs. 1-2); and the type of drawing and decoration of surrounding motifs, including floral patterns, evil eye symbols, and pseudo-inscriptions. These visual similarities suggest that the bowl in Figure 1, housed in the Asian Art Museum, belongs to the third and fourth centuries AH and the Nishapur style, and can be attributed to Nishapur, falling under the study of this cultural tradition.

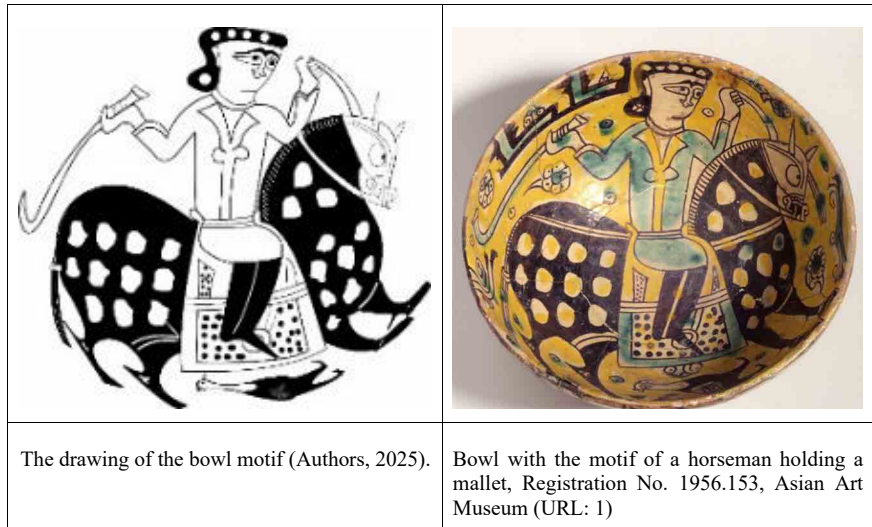








Fig. 1: Depiction of the Chovgan game, illustrated on the slip-painted ceramic vessel attributed to Nishapur (Authors, 2025). ▶

Table 1. Examples of polychrome slip-painted ceramics attributed to Nishapur in other museums (Authors, 2025). ▶

		
<p>Fig. 1: Bowl with the motif of a horseman holding a goatling; Registration No. 1967.93, Denver Art Museum (URL: 2)</p>	<p>Fig. 2: Bowl with the motif of a horseman holding a weapon, Registration No. 3909 (National Museum of Iran)</p>	<p>Fig. 3: Bowl with the motif of a winged human, Registration No. 40.38.290, Metropolitan Museum of Art (URL: 3)</p>
		
<p>The drawing of the motif (Authors, 2025).</p>	<p>The drawing of the motif (Authors, 2025).</p>	<p>The drawing of the motif (Authors, 2025).</p>

1) Pre-iconographic Description

The central portion of the image, set against a background completely covered in light mustard pigment, depicts a rider mounted on a robust horse. The face of this high-ranking rider is rendered in a three-quarter profile, while his body is shown frontally and his legs in a lateral view. He possesses large, triangular eyes, continuous eyebrows that meet in the middle, a broad nose, and small lips. The rider's straight black hair

is decorated with a four-petaled flower in a mustard color, gathered at the back of his head. On his head rests an oval-shaped headband in mustard color, symbolizing a royal crown. His neck is buff-colored and broad. The rider wears a light green tunic with long sleeves and a round, V-neck collar. The mid-section of the V-neck collar down to his waist is covered in a yellow-colored glaze. His torso, from the mid-section to the lower body, is clad in a yellow belt, simple and unadorned trousers, and a light green background. He also wears a black, pointed-toe boot decorated with a vertical buff-colored line and a rich yellow glaze. The rider's foot is placed inside the horse's stirrup. His hands are raised; simultaneously, his left hand holds the horse's reins, and his right hand holds the polo mallet. The long handle of the mallet and the horse's reins are also covered in a light green glaze.



The horse, depicted with a robust and sturdy physique and relatively short legs, is shown in a semi-profile view. Its fixed forward gaze, furrowed eyebrows, pointed ears, and short muzzle, combined with its head held low, lend it an aggressive appearance. The horse's mane is decorated with horizontal black lines on a buff-colored background. The horse has a long, apparently braided tail in buff color, in which vertical and horizontal black lines with green glaze are visible. Its black body is adorned with narrow buff-colored bands and irregular circles in rich yellow and light green glazes. The saddle features two sections, upper and lower, in buff and rich yellow colors, separated from each other by black horizontal lines on a yellow background. On the rich yellow background, non-geometric decorations with small black dots are visible, while the yellow-buff background features solid black dots with green and yellow glazes, along with a light green border. Beneath the horse's belly and legs, a rooster is depicted in a semi-profile view with spread wings. The bird's head is buff-colored, with wide, staring eyes, a small, pointed beak, and a triangular comb. Its body and legs are black. The rooster's wings are buff-colored and feature a combination of vertical and curved black lines, covered with decorative green and yellow glazes. Due to the improper angle of the photograph, the rooster's tail is not visible in the image. Surrounding the central main image are multi-petaled and spiral flowers, evil eye symbols, large Kufic lines, and geometric motifs in the shape of two nested triangles, covered with green and yellow glazes. On the sides of the outer triangle, curved lines are present, with an evil eye symbol at its apex.

2) Iconographic Analysis:

Based on the pre-iconographic descriptions provided, the motif on the slip-

painted ceramic under study (Fig. 1) depicts a non-military activity, showing significant differences from similar examples related to battle and hunting (Table 2: Figs. 1–3). In this bowl, the rider is depicted wearing courtly attire, including a tunic, trousers, tall boots, and a crown. Furthermore, the size of the figure and its central placement within the image frame indicate the rider’s importance and social status. Unlike the warrior and hunter examples (Table 2: Figs. 1–3), no combat instruments or hunting equipment—such as swords, spears, axes, shields, bows, or slings—are observed on the vessel in Figure 1. The absence of these elements suggests a departure from war-centric and hunting-centric traditions, pointing instead to a non-military and recreational activity. Another noteworthy aspect is the posture and movement of the rider, which is a significant feature. In the bowl shown in Figure 1, the rider is depicted in motion, galloping in a festive-like setting, and clearly carrying a stick with a curved head resembling a polo mallet. The considerable visual similarity between this rider’s action and the game of Chovgan, a sport common in ancient Iran, reinforces this interpretation, without directly engaging in cultural or historical analyses.

Table 2. Warrior and hunter motifs illustrated on polychrome slip-painted ceramics attributed to Nishapur (Authors, 2025). ►

		
Fig. 3: Bowl with the motif of a horseman hunting, Registration No. 1344 (Reza Abbasi Museum).	Fig. 2: Bowl with the motif of a horseman holding a weapon, Registration No. 325 (Reza Abbasi Museum).	Fig. 1: Bowl with the motif of a horseman holding a weapon, Registration No. 38824 (Bonyad Museum).
		
The drawing of the motif (Authors, 2025).	The drawing of the motif (Authors, 2025).	The drawing of the motif (Authors, 2025).

A) Etymology of Chovgan

The term Chovgan (Cogan) in Persian has its roots in the Pahlavi language.

It appears in various forms, such as Cwpgn or Copagan, in different sources. This word is likely cognate with Cop, meaning wood, and refers to the initial tool used for striking the ball (Azarnoush, 2013: 13). In Pahlavi texts, this word appears in forms such as Copagan or Cowagan in the treatise of Khusrow and Ridag (paragraph 12) and Copigan in the Karnamag-i Ardashir-i Papagan (Part 1, paragraph 29) (Jamasp-Asana, 1992: 73; Anonymous, 1950: 5, 101). In these texts, Chovgan referred to the stick used to drive the ball, and the name of the tool was subsequently generalized to refer to the game itself (Azarnoush, 2013: 13).

In addition to its Pahlavi roots, the game of Chovgan was known in Arabic texts by the term Sulajan (mace/staff). From the second century AH, this term appears in Arabic poetry and literature. It was used in various forms, such as al-lu'ab al-suljan (the game of the mace), al-darb bi'l-sulajan (striking with the mace), or darb al-kura bi'l-sulajan (striking the ball with the mace). Gradually, the word kura (ball) replaced sulajan, and the expression al-darb (or al-lu'ab) bi'l-kura (striking/playing the ball) became common. In the sixth century AH, this term underwent a further Arabization that made it more Persian-like, and the Ayyubids used it in the form Gukan or Gawakan. This word replaced sulajan and gradually became prevalent throughout the Arab world. Additionally, the title Jukandar, derived from the Persian pattern Chovgandar (Chovgan player), was used at the same time as an aristocratic governmental title (Ibid: 15–16).

B) The Origin of Chovgan as a Sport

The Pahlavi text Khusrow and Ridag mentions the game of Chovgan alongside equestrian skills and archery from horseback, emphasizing that proficiency in Chovgan was an indicator of the military and educational training of the nobility (Jamasp-Asana, 1992: 72–73). The Karnamag-i Ardashir-i Papagan also states that Ardashir learned skills such as horsemanship and Chovgan from his father in childhood and later from Ardavan, the Parthian king. This indicates that Chovgan was valued in aristocratic and royal courts, particularly among the Parthians and Sassanians, prior to Islam (Anonymous, 1950: 5–6).

In pre-Islamic historical sources, there is no direct visual or textual evidence of Chovgan from the Achaemenid period. Only indirect references by al-Tabari, as reflected in Tarikh-i Bal'ami, suggest an awareness and application of Chovgan during this era (al-Tabari, 1996, Vol. 2: 489–490; Tarikh-i Bal'ami, 1974, Vol. 2: 694–695). This scarcity of evidence suggests that while Chovgan likely existed, it was not prominent in the

official records of that period, and its status was primarily transmitted through later narratives (Azarnoush, 2013: 44–45).

In the Sassanian period, more documented and reliable evidence exists in Pahlavi and historical texts, indicating that Chovgan held special importance within the aristocratic and educational structures. The *Karnamag-i Ardashir-i Papagan* explicitly states that proficiency in Chovgan and horsemanship was part of the necessary education for princes and nobles. This game was not merely a pastime but served as a means for practicing martial skills and strengthening physical and mental abilities (Anonymous, 1950: 5–6). Cultural and literary reflections are also clearly observed in Persian epic texts, particularly in the *Shahnameh*, spanning the period from the legendary Kianian dynasty to the Sassanians (Ebrahimipour, 1974: 2). Ferdowsi refers to the game of Chovgan in verses concerning Goshtasp (verses 613–635) (Ferdowsi, 1996, Vol. 5: 47–49), Siyavash (verses 1321–1377, 1770–1773) (Ferdowsi, 1990, Vol. 2: 289–292, 322), and Rostam (verses 8–16) (Ibid: 104). In these contexts, the game is depicted alongside concepts such as knighthood, martial skill, and royal status (Azarnoush, 2013: 37–44). Furthermore, *Shahnameh* mentions the playing of Chovgan during the reigns of Sassanian kings such as Ardashir and Hormizd (verses 253–259) (Ferdowsi, 2005, Vol. 6: 210–211), Shapur II (verse 21) (Ibid: 292), Bahram (verses 113–114, 165, 118, 2022–2026) (Ferdowsi, 2005, Vol. 6: 369, 373, 424, 568), and Khusrow Parviz (verses 912–924) (Ferdowsi, 2007, Vol. 8: 70–71). This indicates the continuity of its importance in the cultural and social memory of Iranians.

These literary sources, alongside historical texts and social reports such as *Tarikh-i Qom*, *Waqa'î-i 'Abbasi*, and local narratives, demonstrate that the game of Chovgan was not limited to royal courts but was prevalent among the nobility and even broad segments of society, provided that horses and equipment were available (Azarnoush, 2013: 60). In *Tarikh-i Qom*, the game is referred to as *Goybazi* (ball game). Its definition states that a ball is a round sphere used in Chovgan, played in groups between two teams of riders, with the objective of driving the ball into a goal. Each player held a mallet, passed the ball to one another, and threw it into a goal. This game contributed to the training of horsemanship skills as well as leisure and social interaction (Qomi, 2006: 694).

Additional historical and literary sources provide substantial evidence of the importance of Chovgan among Iranians and the elite. Beyhaqqi reports that Chovgan was not merely a pastime for the aristocracy but also a component of political and social relations within the court and local

spheres. The way the game was played and the orderliness of the playing fields reflected the power and status of the individuals involved (Beyhaqqi, 2001: 152). Similarly, Hamawi highlights the role of Chovgan in the power structure and court ceremonies, emphasizing that nobles participated in the game regularly to maintain their physical fitness and martial skills (Hamawi, 2002, Vol. 2: 848–849). Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi narrates that observing Chovgan matches in the fields of Khorasan and other regions, accompanied by technical skills, social order, and the presence of servants, had an educational aspect and demonstrated social authority (al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, 1997, Vol. 9: 359). Ibn al-Esfandiar also records fatal incidents during Chovgan games in Tabaristan and Gorgan; despite the physical risks, these incidents highlight the mobility and skill required for this sport, underscoring its importance in martial training and the empowerment of the aristocracy (Ibn al-Esfandiar, 1987: 288–295). Azarnoush further emphasizes that Chovgan in these regions was regarded as a serious and dynamic activity, not limited to leisure (Azarnoush, 2013: 62).

Alongside horsemanship and chess, Chovgan has always held a special place as part of the acceptable customs and techniques in the educational and training system of the Iranian nobility. The account of Hasan ibn-Sahl indicates that the education and practice of Chovgan and other aristocratic sports were considered not only for entertainment but also as an inseparable part of etiquette, art, physical education, and martial skills, thereby enhancing the importance of this sport in the social and cultural structure (Hasri, 1998, Vol. 1: 150; Azarnoush, 2013: 60). In these narratives, the connection between Chovgan and horsemanship, as well as horse control, transformed it into a symbol of skill, physical ability, social status, and political position. Mastery of this sport indicated an individual's command over their physical capabilities and their social standing.

This perspective is further reinforced by Ibn al-Nadim, who reports that during the second and third centuries AH, field games and equestrian and archery competitions, including Sulajan (Chovgan), were of interest in legal and literary sources and were considered part of the martial skills and sports of the Iranian nobility (Ibn al-Nadim, 2002, Vol. 2: 362). He also identifies Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Yahya ibn Abbas al-Suli as a skilled literary figure and chess player who, in the presence of al-Mutawakkil and other nobles, was engaged in teaching literary and sports competitions (Ibid: 248, 256). This evidence indicates that Chovgan and other field games were recognized, from the early Islamic periods, as part of military education, physical training, and the cultural status of the aristocracy.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that Chovgan was continuously prevalent in various regions of Iran, including Khorasan, Tabaristan, Transoxiana, Guilan, and Gorgan, and was occasionally used as part of martial and educational skills during wars and local conflicts (Azarnoush, 2013: 62). For example, in 312 AH, incidents resulting from Chovgan games in Tabaristan were reported in the presence of the king and local ministers, indicating that even in tense situations, Chovgan was maintained as a symbol of authority, skill, and military training (Ibn al-Esfandiar, 1987: 288–289). Similarly, in 323 AH, it was reported that Chovgan games were held by emirs and local forces, and dangerous incidents occurred during them, again highlighting the importance of skill and physical training in this sport (Ibid: 295).

Given all these historical, literary, and social evidence, it can be concluded that the game of Chovgan in Iran, both pre-Islamic and during the Islamic period, was more than a simple pastime or entertainment. It held a special place in society and among the nobility and princes as a symbol of skill, physical ability, social status, and cultural and educational dimensions. This deep-rooted and rich tradition provides the background for analyzing the reflective role of Chovgan on the Nishapur slip-painted ceramic in the subsequent iconological analysis stage, within the framework of the culture, educational, and political system of the Samanid era; a context where skill, status, and aristocratic identity are simultaneously reflected. In the slip-painted bowl in question (Fig. 1), an image of the Chovgan game is likely visible, in which an aristocratic horseman, based on his attire, crown, and depiction style, clearly belongs to the Samanid nobility. This figure is playing Chovgan and holding a polo mallet; an act for which no direct and comparable visual example has been reported in pre-Islamic visual sources up to the date of this research.

The combination of this sports scene with symbolic motifs such as the rooster and protective elements like evil eye symbols indicates that the image is not merely a representation of a recreational activity but is situated within a symbolic framework. Therefore, this imagery can be analyzed within the social and cultural context of the third and fourth centuries AH, a period during which the game of Chovgan had a prominent place in the culture of the Samanid elites as a symbol of skill, social status, aristocratic education, and political identity. In this framework, the image on the bowl is a visual reflection of the educational, martial, and aristocratic concepts reported in the historical and literary texts of this period. The following section presents the iconological interpretation of this bowl.

C) Iconological Interpretation

During the Samanid era, Chovgan was recognized as one of the prominent and common sports among the aristocracy and princes. Its importance was such that books and manuals were compiled to instruct on its proper execution. Ibn Qutayba, in his work *Oyun al-Akhbar*, citing a Pahlavi code of conduct (whose original text is no longer extant), refers to instructions regarding the handling and swinging of the mallet and striking the ball. Although the original text is lost, the game was intuitively understandable, and it involved technical nuances for correct execution (Ibn Qutayba, 2000, Vol. 1: 217). Onsur al-Ma'ali Keykavus Ziyari also mentions safety limits and principles of the game in the *Qabusnameh*, emphasizing that even occasional Chovgan activities must be conducted with caution, and that the number of players and their arrangement in the field should be such as to minimize the risk of fatal injury (Onsur al-Ma'ali, 1956: 82–83). These points indicate that Chovgan in this period was not merely a pastime but an integral part of the military training and physical education of the nobility.

Multiple historical evidence also reveal the social and political significance of Chovgan. Narratives from Samanid emirs, including Nasr II and Ahmad ibn Isma'il, indicate that Chovgan was held in important centers such as Bukhara and Herat. In Bukhara, fields such as Rigestan were recognized as the official venues for this sport, and competitions were held in the presence of nobles and emirs. These competitions, in addition to their recreational aspect, demonstrated the ability, skill, and status of the players before authorities and spectators (Tha'alibi, 2001, Vol. 4: 85; Anonymous, 1987: 329; Hamawi, 2002, Vol. 1: 317). The potential lethality of the game, evidenced by the death of one Samanid emir, highlights its dual role as a dangerous pursuit and a key marker of aristocratic identity and social prominence (al-Narshakhi, 2008: 134; al-Gardizi, 1984: 354; Ibn al-Athir, 2005, Vol. 12: 5078). These points underscore the importance of Chovgan as an activity transcending mere entertainment, serving instead as a symbol of skill, status, and social power.

From an iconological perspective, the peripheral elements of the Chovgan motif (Fig. 1), such as the rooster and protective symbols, carry specific symbolic meanings. The rooster in these motifs symbolizes victory and courage (Yahaqqi, 1990: 179–180), while protective symbols like the evil eye emphasize the safety of the players and the ritualistic aspect of the game (Shakur-zadeh, 1984: 176–274). Consequently, the depiction of Chovgan on the Nishapur slip-painted ceramic is not merely a representation

of physical activity; rather, it signifies the connection between skill, social status, military education, and the culture of the Samanid elites.

Historical narratives indicate that the prestige and reputation of players were directly linked to the observations and assessments of emirs and nobles. For instance, Ahmad ibn Isma'il and other Samanid emirs not only attended the matches but also followed them with precision, paying close attention to the players' skills and courage. Based on these performances, the status and credibility of individuals within the court and society were established (Hamawi, 2002: Vol. 1: 317). Mastery in Chovgan served as a symbol of capability, horsemanship, and ball control, reflecting the player's social status and bravery. Its role extended far beyond that of a mere sport.

Based on this evidence, it can be concluded that the Chovgan motifs on the Nishapur slip-painted ceramic (Fig. 1) reflect the culture, education, skill, and aristocratic identity of the Samanids. These motifs simultaneously present the sport, social status, military education, and symbolic elements such as the rooster and the evil eye within a coherent visual framework, highlighting the importance of this sport in Samanid society as a symbol of power, courage, and social credibility. This analysis completes the third stage of Panofsky's method, establishing the image of Chovgan, alongside the previous two stages (formal description and primary iconography), as a semantic and cultural representation of a recreational activity among the elites of the Samanid era.

Conclusion

This study, through the iconographic and iconological analysis of slip-painted ceramic, has for the first time formulated the connection between the visual components of a sporting activity and the semantic system of the Samanid court. The fundamental contribution of this research extends beyond the identification of the motif's subject (the Chovgan game) to the discovery of the image's dual function as an "instrument for legitimizing aristocratic identity" and a "representation of martial skills framed as entertainment". The findings indicate that the depicted scene is not merely an imitative representation of reality; rather, it is a sophisticated combination of courtly elements (such as attire and crown) with protective symbols (such as the rooster and evil eye signs). This combination emphasizes the symbolic aspects of the game, highlighting concepts such as courage, victory, and safety. These symbols reinforce the role of the Chovgan game as an emblem of victory, social power, and political authority, offering an interpretation presented here for the first time. This reveals a new pattern

of “authority figuration” in Samanid ceramics. From a social perspective, the innovation of this research lies in demonstrating that Chovgan in this period served as an “internal educational and training system” for the ruling class, which, through this ceramic vessel, was transferred from the physical space of the Chovgan field to the symbolic space of functional vessels.

Therefore, the analysis of this motif demonstrates that, contrary to previous approaches, the Nishapur-related ceramic was not merely a decorative object, but a visual document of the connection between physical skills, political status, and the military structure of Samanid society; an aspect that had been overlooked in prior studies of Nishapur ceramics. Relying on historical and literary evidence, this study proves that the Chovgan motif on this vessel is the essence of the Samanid worldview in relation to power and skill. Its primary innovation lies in providing a structured analysis of the transmission of the ruling ideology’s concepts to the ceramic art of the third and fourth centuries AH.

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Author Contributions

All authors have had equal participation.

Conflict of Interest

The Authors, while observing publication ethics in referencing, declare the absence of conflict of interest.

Endnote

1. Until the mid-twentieth century, iconography and iconology were often used interchangeably, but Panofsky established a clear distinction between them (Panofsky, 1955: 26). Iconography deals with the identification and explanation of obvious elements, themes, and motifs in a work of art; that is, what is directly visible in the image. In contrast, iconology is built upon iconographic findings and, with a deeper perspective, interprets hidden meanings, beliefs, values, and the worldview of the culture in which the work of art was created (Taheri, 2017: 25; Panofsky, 1955: 26). In Panofsky’s words, where iconography stops, iconology continues its work (Zeimaran, 2013: 214), striving to reveal fundamental principles that constitute the intellectual infrastructure of a nation, a historical period, an artistic school, or a religious and philosophical system (Taheri, 2017: 25).

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تحلیل آیکنوگرافیک و آیکنولوژیک نقش بازی چوگان در سفال‌های نخستین سده‌های دوران اسلامی: بازتاب فرهنگی و اجتماعی در دوره سامانی

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چکیده

سفالینه‌های گلابه‌ای رنگارنگ منسوب به نیشابور با نقوش منحصر به فرد خود، به عنوان یکی از برجسته‌ترین آثار هنری دوره سامانی شناخته می‌شوند. با وجود پیشرفت‌های قابل توجه در مطالعات مربوط به منشأ و معنای این نقوش، برخی از صحنه‌های تصویری هنوز به طور کامل و درست تفسیر نشده‌اند. یکی از این صحنه‌ها، تصویری از بازی چوگان است که بر یک سفالینه رنگارنگ به تصویر کشیده شده و در موزه هنر آسیا نگه‌داری می‌شود. این صحنه، با وجود تلاش‌های پیشین برای تفسیر آن براساس منابع تاریخی، هنوز در زمینه‌های اجتماعی و فرهنگی سده‌های سوم و چهارم هجری قمری در هاله‌ای از ابهام قرار دارد؛ بنابراین، هدف اصلی این پژوهش، بازخوانی و تحلیل دقیق‌تر این تصویر در بستر اجتماعی، فرهنگی و سیاسی دوره سامانی است. برای این منظور، از رویکرد آیکنوگرافی اروپین پانوفسکی به عنوان چارچوب تحلیلی استفاده شده و نتایج برپایه متون تاریخی و ادبی و منابع مکتوب هم‌دوره با سامانیان تفسیر می‌گردد. با توجه به مسئله و روش پژوهشی، پرسش‌های اصلی این پژوهش بدین شرح است: (۱) چگونه تصویرسازی بازی چوگان بر سفالینه نیشابور، نمادهای مهارت‌های نظامی و اجتماعی دوره سامانی را بازتاب می‌دهد؟ و (دیگر ۲) کدام معانی نمادین و فرهنگی در تصویر بازی چوگان بر سفالینه نیشابور در پیوند با مفاهیم آموزشی، اشرافی و سیاسی دوره سامانی مطرح است؟ روش این پژوهش تاریخی با رویکرد تحلیلی-تطبیقی و مبتنی بر مطالعات و گردآوری داده‌ها به شیوه کتابخانه‌ای است. تفسیر این پژوهش مبتنی بر رویکرد تحلیلی-تطبیقی انجام گرفته است که تصویر بازی چوگان بر سفالینه نیشابور، نه تنها بازنمایی یک فعالیت تفریحی است؛ بلکه به عنوان نمادی از مهارت‌های رزمی و اجتماعی در طبقات اشرافی دوره سامانی عمل می‌کند؛ هم‌چنین، این تصویر به طور ضمنی مفاهیم مرتبط با قدرت سیاسی، شجاعت و هویت اجتماعی اشرافی را بازتاب می‌دهد. برآیند این پژوهش نشان می‌دهد که بازی چوگان، علاوه بر نمایاندن یک فعالیت جسمانی، به عنوان بخشی از ساختار اجتماعی و سیاسی دوره سامانی در سفالینه‌های نیشابور مطرح می‌شود.

کلیدواژگان: سفال گلابه‌ای، نیشابور، بازی چوگان، آیکنوگرافی، سامانیان.

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