

The Study of the Food Culture of the Ancient Population Based on the Ceramics of Khazarasp

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Abstract: Khazarasp, one of the oldest urban centers of the Khorezm oasis, represents a key archaeological site for understanding the cultural and economic history of ancient Central Asia. Based on archaeological research conducted from the 1930s to the present, this study explores the diachronic development of Khazarasp—from its foundation in the 4th–3rd centuries BCE through the Late Antique and Medieval periods—focusing particularly on ceramic assemblages as indicators of food culture. Analysis of pottery typology, morphology, and technology demonstrates a continuous evolution of culinary and storage practices in the region. The diversity of vessel forms—including large storage jars (khum), small jars (khumcha), bowls, pitchers, and cooking pots—reflects a complex system of food preparation, preservation, and consumption rooted in both local tradition and intercultural exchange. Parallels between Khorezmian ceramics and Achaemenid-period metalware suggest the influence of southern Iranian artistic traditions, while the persistence of vessel types into the modern period attests to the enduring continuity of Khorezm’s culinary and craft heritage. This research, grounded in the findings of multiple archaeological expeditions, contributes to the reconstruction of ancient dietary habits, household economy, and material culture in the Khorezm oasis.

Keywords: Khazarasp; Khorezm oasis; ancient ceramics; food culture; archaeology; pottery typology; Achaemenid influence; Late Antiquity; Middle Ages; Central Asia.

Introduction: Khazarasp is one of the ancient cities of the Khorezm oasis. According to one view, its name derives from the words “hazar” (meaning “thousand”) and “asp” (meaning “horse”). However, there exist several scholarly interpretations concerning the etymology of this toponym. Yu. Jumanazarov suggests that the root of the name is based on an ethnonym — “Hazara-os” (“the Os tribe”) (1). Z. Dosimov, on the other hand, interprets Khazarasp as “Hazaris (us)”, indicating that it consists of the ethnonym “Hazar” and a plural suffix (2). Ethnographic studies also support the view that the city’s name is not related to mythical horses but rather to the ancient tribes of Hazar and Os who once inhabited this region. Professor M. Iskhakov offers a different perspective, arguing that the term Khazarasp dates back to the Zoroastrian period. In his interpretation, the original form of the toponym was “Aturaspant”, meaning “the abode of the sacred fire” — a place where worship and the preservation of sacred fire were carried out (3).

Khazarasp is one of the most ancient cities of Central Asia, having preserved its name for thousands of years. Located on the southern frontier of the Khorezm oasis, the city is frequently mentioned in medieval written sources. However, in studying its archaic and antique periods, archaeological research plays a decisive role.

The first archaeological observations were carried out in the 1930s by Ya. G. Ghulomov, who established that the city was founded in the 4th–3rd centuries BCE (4). Excavations conducted between 1958 and 1960 by the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition under the direction of S. P. Tolstov revealed the city’s double-layered defensive walls, pilaster-like external structures, and arrow-shaped niches.

Pottery discovered in excavation areas No. 8 and No. 9, dated to the 5th–4th centuries BCE, indicated that urban life had already existed at the site during the late stages of the archaic period (5).

During the 1996–1997 excavations led by Sh. Matrasulov and M. Mambetullaev, three cultural layers

were identified. The lowest layer contained architectural remains and ceramic fragments belonging to the early antique period. However, the proximity of groundwater hindered the full exploration of these lower strata (6).

In 2002–2003, a team directed by S. R. Baratov continued the research in the northwestern part of the fortress, uncovering a corner tower and the remains of the earliest defensive walls. These findings, dated to the 5th–4th centuries BCE, confirm that the city already possessed a mud-brick fortification system during this period (7).

In 2024, a stratigraphic trench was excavated in the southern part of Khazarasp with the aim of obtaining information about the city's internal structure during different historical periods.

The archaeological investigations revealed a collection of artifacts consisting mainly of ceramic materials, chronologically spanning the early and late antique periods as well as the late Middle Ages.

Archaeological data indicate that the assemblage of ceramic vessels discovered in Khorezm, dated to the 4th–2nd centuries BCE, reflects not only the development of pottery traditions but also a high level of food preparation and storage culture among the population. The findings of large storage jars (khums), small jars (khumchas), tableware, and cooking vessels demonstrate the existence of a well-organized system for preparing, storing, and serving food products in ancient Khorezmian society.(8)

The large storage jars and smaller khumchas were primarily intended for the preservation of grain and other durable foodstuffs. Made from well-refined clay with thick walls and stable bases, these vessels were designed to ensure insulation from air and moisture. Their surfaces were often coated with white slip (engobe), which likely served to protect the stored goods from spoilage — an early example of practical food preservation technology.

Bowls and dishes (shokosa) were mainly used for food preparation and consumption. Their forms and decorations suggest functional diversity: some were used for liquid meals, others for dry foods or ceremonial dishes. The presence of red and reddish-brown engobe coatings on both inner and outer surfaces indicates a developed sense of aesthetics and hygiene in the culinary practices of the Khorezmians.(9)

The small date-shaped vessels (hurmachas) are of particular interest. Their fine clay, high-quality workmanship, and decorative surface design suggest that they may have been used for sauces, sweets, or condiments, possibly serving both practical and ritual

purposes.

The resemblance of Khorezmian ceramic forms to Achaemenid-period metal vessels suggests that the food culture of ancient Khorezm was not isolated but was influenced by the broader cultural and artistic traditions of the southern regions, particularly Iran. This connection demonstrates that the Khorezmians adopted and localized external culinary and aesthetic elements within their own material culture.(10)

The variety of vessel forms and sizes further indicates a specialized system of food use. Large khums were used for communal or long-term grain storage, medium-sized jars for daily household needs, and small decorative vessels for table service or ritual offerings.

Overall, the ceramic assemblage from ancient Khorezm reflects an advanced and diversified food culture that was closely linked to the agricultural economy, animal husbandry, and trade networks of the region. Through these vessels — as tangible material evidence — one can reconstruct the dietary habits, storage techniques, and social practices associated with food in ancient Khorezmian life.

The ceramic materials of the Late Antique period provide valuable insights into the dietary habits and domestic life of the population inhabiting the Khorezm region. During this period, a wide range of pottery types — including large storage jars (khum), small jars (khumcha), pitchers, cooking pots, and bowls — were in common use. Their shapes, sizes, and surface treatments reflect both the practical needs of daily life and the social aspects of household culture.(9,10,11)

Pitchers were among the most widespread types of vessels in the Late Antique period. They were primarily used for storing and transporting liquids such as water, fermented dairy products, or wine. The outward-curving rims of these vessels indicate an ergonomic design intended to facilitate pouring and handling. The surfaces of many pitchers were entirely coated with a red slip, serving not only a functional purpose—protecting the clay from absorption—but also an aesthetic one, reflecting the household's concern for cleanliness and visual refinement.(9,10)

Bowls, on the other hand, were mainly used in daily meals. They were carefully crafted from well-levigated clay and fully covered with a thick red slip, indicating a concern for both quality and appearance. Their semi-spherical forms, sometimes with disk-shaped bases, suggest that they were used for serving liquid or semi-liquid foods such as soups, dairy dishes, or bread soaked in broth.

The absence of mineral inclusions in the clay and the uniform firing process point to the use of locally

available raw materials. This suggests that pottery production was an integral part of local craftsmanship, and that most households likely produced or acquired vessels from nearby workshops to meet their own domestic needs.

The dining culture of the Late Antique period remained relatively stable, showing continuity with earlier traditions of the Early Antique period. This persistence indicates that culinary practices, kitchenware usage, and food preparation techniques were deeply rooted and passed down through generations. However, the diversification of pottery forms also reflects a gradual expansion of food varieties and an increase in the material standard of living.

The identified ceramic types—especially pitchers and bowls—confirm that the dining culture of Late Antique Khorezm was well-developed and that food preparation and storage had reached a certain level of systematization. The finds from Koykirilgan-kala and Elharos, dated to the 2nd–4th centuries CE, demonstrate the presence of standardized vessel forms and aesthetic tendencies, revealing a sophisticated domestic and culinary culture characteristic of this historical stage.

During the Late Medieval period (18th–19th centuries), the food culture of the Khorezm oasis population, particularly in relation to culinary traditions and pottery production, demonstrates a high level of development. The ceramic vessels discovered during excavations indicate that, in this period, daily life and food practices combined long-standing traditions with certain technological innovations.

Among the archaeological materials, both unglazed and glazed pottery occupy a central place. Unglazed vessels were typically used for everyday domestic needs — including jars, pots, and bowls intended for cooking and storing food. These vessels were made from well-kneaded clay on the potter's wheel, fired evenly, and characterized by grayish-green or reddish-brick hues. They were mainly used for storing water, milk, grains, oil, and other food products.

Glazed ceramics, by contrast, were especially widespread among the urban population and include thick-walled storage jars, basins, cooking pots, pitchers, and bowls. These were coated with glazes of dark green, turquoise, blue-green, and brownish-green colors. The glazing process served not only aesthetic purposes but also had a hygienic function — preventing food from reacting with the clay surface and extending the shelf life of stored products.

Among the essential household pottery of the period were large storage jars (khum), butter-making vessels (kupi), milk jars, ablution pitchers (ibriq), kneading

basins, water jars, cradle pots, and flowerpots. These vessels played significant roles not only in food preparation and storage but also in religious, ritual, and sanitary practices.(9,10,11,12)

This tradition persisted into the mid-20th century. Khorezm potters continued to produce traditional pottery in response to public demand, indicating that pottery retained not only its economic value but also its cultural and social significance as a craft. The continuity of vessel forms used for national dishes demonstrates the persistence of culinary tradition, with designs and functions passed down from generation to generation.

Even today, traditional Khorezm pottery such as bowls (bodiya), cups (kosa), and teacups (piyola) continue to be produced. They are widely used in households, agricultural activities, and festive dining settings. This continuity attests to the enduring character of Khorezm's food culture and the survival of traditional pottery-making practices into the present day.

Conclusion

The archaeological study of Khazarasp provides substantial evidence of the long-term development of urban culture and domestic life in ancient Khorezm. Excavations have revealed that, as early as the 5th–4th centuries BCE, the settlement possessed a sophisticated system of food storage and preparation, supported by advanced pottery production. The typological and technological characteristics of Khorezmian ceramics demonstrate both local innovation and interaction with external cultural traditions, particularly those of the Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid worlds. Over time, this material culture evolved yet preserved its essential functional and aesthetic principles, reflecting the resilience and adaptability of the Khorezmian population. The continuation of traditional pottery production and culinary vessel types into the modern era underscores the cultural continuity linking ancient Khorezm to the living heritage of the region today.

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