



ICONOGRAPHY OF THE FOUR-ARMED DEITY ON EARLY MEDIEVAL KHWAREZMIAN SILVER VESSELS

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Abstract

The article examines mythological depictions on silver vessels from early medieval Khwarezm. During the 6th–8th centuries, a unique local school of artistic craftsmanship developed in Khwarezm. The imagery on silver vessels from this period contains rich historical information about the mythology, pantheon of gods, and spiritual world of pre-Islamic Khwarezm. Such motifs as the four-armed goddess, lion or leopard, as well as symbols of the sun and crescent moon, are characteristic features of the mythology and artistic style of the Afrighid era in Khwarezm. They help to understand the religious beliefs and artistic traditions of the region, as well as its interaction with other cultures.

Keywords: Khwarezm, early Middle Ages, silver vessels, four-armed goddess, deity on a throne, walking lion, mythology, applied art of the Afrighid era, Kushans, Indian-Buddhist artistic tradition, Eastern peoples, cultural connections.

Introduction

The artifacts of artistic craftsmanship and applied art from ancient and early medieval Khorezm represent one of the most significant topics for understanding not only the material achievements of our culture but also the spiritual life, religious beliefs, and mythological concepts of that period. In particular, the images and motifs depicted on early medieval silver vessels serve as valuable sources for studying the artistic traditions, mythological



worldview of the ancient Khorezmian people, and their cultural interactions with neighboring Eastern civilizations.

What makes this topic especially intriguing is that none of these early medieval silver vessels have been discovered within the territory of ancient Khorezm itself. Instead, they have primarily been found in the far northern regions — in the basins of the Kama and Ob Rivers, as well as in Dagestan and Siberia. The fact that Khorezmian silver vessels were unearthed in such distant northern territories has given rise to various scholarly debates.

In our opinion, the main reason for the export of silver vessels to the North through external trade was the high demand for the valuable furs of the northern regions, which were highly prized among the populations of the East.

It is well known that during the early Middle Ages, the export of silver ingots, coins, and crafted silver items from the East to the distant northern regions — including the Ural and Kama river basins — was well established. Precious metal objects were traded to these regions from Iran, Byzantium, and Central Asia (Sogdiana, Tokharistan, and Khorezm), and later from the Arab-Islamic states.

According to the research of T.V. Chichko, current studies have identified hoards of precious metal objects exported from the East at 115 geographical locations. Among these, 29 sites yielded artistic metal artifacts belonging to the Sasanian period; 19 sites contained Byzantine items; 14 sites produced artistic metalworks manufactured in the Eastern Iranian provinces (Khorasan) during the post-Sasanian period (from the 7th to the first half of the 9th century); and 39 sites contained vessels of Central Asian origin. Of particular note, at 9 archaeological sites, silver vessels attributed to Khorezm have been recorded, totaling 12 items (Chichko, 2016, p. 57).

Based on statistical analysis of the precious metal objects imported to the Far North from the East, approximately 15% of them originate from Byzantium, 16% from the Sasanian Empire, and the remaining 70% from Central Asia. Within this latter group, the share of Khorezmian exports exceeds 7% (Goldina, 2012, pp. 108–119).

Examining the history of the discovery of Khorezmian silver vessels, it is noteworthy that as early as 1938, S.P. Tolstov studied inscriptions on silver bowls from the Kama and Ural regions and established that their script was identical to



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the alphabet used in Khorezmian numismatics (Tolstov, 1938, pp. 120–145). S.P. Tolstov approached the problem of determining the origin of Eastern silver vessels through a distinctive methodological framework.

In his 1938 scholarly work, Tolstov focused on several silver bowls — specifically items numbered 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, and 286 — from the 1909 atlas by Ya. I. Smirnov (Smirnov, 1909), whose places of manufacture had previously been unknown (Tolstov, 1938, pp. 120–145). He determined that the inscriptions on these silver bowls corresponded to the same alphabet found on ancient Khorezmian coins.

Thus, drawing upon paleographic, numismatic, and iconographic evidence, S.P. Tolstov concluded that this group of silver artifacts belonged to the cultural milieu of Khorezm.

In his research, S.P. Tolstov substantiated that the depictions found in Smirnov's atlas — including the four-armed goddess seated on a throne (No. 42), the defeated lion (No. 43), the leopard (No. 44), the priest wearing a goat-headed mask (No. 45), and the horseman (No. 46, cup) — are associated with the cultural milieu of Khorezm (Tolstov, 1938, pp. 120–145).

The silver vessels of Khorezm dating from the 6th to the early 8th centuries have mainly been recorded in the basin of the Sylva River. Apart from the three cups from the Shakharova and Bartym hoards, one additional bowl was discovered in the Verkh-Sainsky hoard, while two vessels were found in the Kovino and Gutovo hoards belonging to the Lomovatovo culture (Goldina, 2016, p. 18). Furthermore, a Khorezmian silver vessel housed in the British Museum was unearthed from an unidentified location along the Kama River.

In recent decades, foreign scholars such as V.P. Darkevich, P.B. Lur'e, R.D. Goldina, A. Pandey, and others have also analyzed Khorezmian silver vessels within the broader context of Eastern silverware (Darkevich, 1976; Lur'e, 2020, pp. 384–397; Pandey, 2019).

Depictions of a four-armed goddess are widespread on these silver bowls. They include various iconographic types such as “The Four-Armed Goddess Seated on a Throne,” “The Four-Armed Goddess Standing on a Lion,” and “The Four-Armed Goddess Riding a Walking Lion,” each distinguished by specific and unique artistic details. All the bowls are made of thin, repoussé-worked silver



sheets. They were discovered in the Bartym and Kovino hoards, as well as in hoards from the Komi-Permyak National District and Dagestan (Chichko, 2016, pp. 55–56). Chronologically, they are dated to the period between the 6th century and the first half of the 8th century.

Type I (Figs. 2a–c). Bowl depicting a four-armed goddess seated on a throne. On the inner surface of the bowl, in repoussé technique, a four-armed goddess is represented, occupying nearly the entire circular field. One fragment of the vessel's wall and part of its base are broken. Along the inner circumference runs a smooth relief band decorated on the outer edge with engraved ornaments. To the lower right of the goddess, in her right hand, she holds a scepter — a symbol of sovereignty — while in her left hand she holds a cup. The head and upper arms of the goddess have not been preserved.

She is dressed in a long robe with short sleeves, richly ornamented with intricate patterns, which extends below the knees to the feet. The rhombic designs on the robe are complemented by coin-shaped buttons running down the center of the chest (Darkevich, 1976, p. 19, Table 25.5).

The throne on which the four-armed goddess is seated has elaborately shaped legs. On the right leg of the throne rests a rectangular object of indeterminate nature, while the front of the seat is adorned with a row of pearl-like beads. The goddess is shown frontally. She wears a long dress reaching the ground, over which lies an apron-like garment with a semicircular collar, decorated with frontal patterns and detailed trimming.

In her upper hands, the goddess holds the Sun (?) and the crescent Moon; in the lower right hand she grasps the royal scepter, and the lower left hand is slightly raised, suggesting movement. From the circular motifs held in the remaining lower hands sprout plant shoots — these may be interpreted as *false* or *symbolic* hands.

In analyzing the mythological imagery on the bowl, it can be observed that the depiction of the Moon and the Sun in the upper hands of the goddess shows similarities to the representations of the goddess Nanā (Nanaya), frequently encountered in the applied arts of Khorezm (Lur'e, 2020, pp. 384–397).



On the exterior upper rim of the silver bowl, a Khorezmian inscription is engraved in fine dotted script. Beneath the inscription, parallel striped lines are applied as decorative elements.

According to P.B. Lur'e, the inscription on the silver bowl is interpreted as follows: "Year 570, month of Tsiri (4th month), day of Veg (16th day). This vessel is for the god of fire, from Khvarak's son Vunshargik. It weighs 30 steriks. Joy!" (Lur'e, 2020, p. 384).

V.P. Darkevich also noted that the Khorezmian inscription encircling the bowl contains the date "Year 570" (Darkevich, 1976, p. 107). The silver bowl was discovered in 1840 in the village of Kovino, Senkinskaya Volost, Perm Province. The bowl from this hoard was transferred to the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg in 1922 (Smirnov, 1909, Table No. 44). The vessel measures 12.5 cm in diameter and 3.5 cm in height.

Type II (Figs. 1a–c). Bowls depicting a four-armed goddess seated on a lion. On the inner surface of the base, a relief image of a goddess seated on a lion is represented. Such bowls were discovered in the village of Bartym (Perm Province, 1957), in the Komi-Permyak hoard of the Ural region, and in Dagestan. The bowl from Bartym I village is preserved in the Perm Regional Museum (Darkevich, 1976, p. 18). The vessel has thin walls, with a broadly flared rim, and measures 12 cm in diameter. Although the bowl is heavily deformed, the circular medallion with the central depiction on the bottom is well preserved. It shows a goddess seated on a lion, surrounded by an outer band decorated with relief (wave-like) ornaments. On the outer rim of the upper part of the bowl, an inscription in the Khorezmian script records the date "Year 700." The goddess wears a crescent-shaped, toothed crown on her head, and a string of pearls is depicted around her neck.

In the depiction, the upper hands of the goddess hold the symbols of the Sun and the Moon. In her lower right hand she grasps a scepter, a symbol of sovereignty, while in her lower left hand she holds a bowl. The goddess is portrayed with thick eyebrows, large eyes, a pronounced nose, full cheeks, a wide mouth, and a short neck. In the lower part of the medallion, a defeated lion is shown kneeling beneath the goddess. The lion's mane is rendered with parallel strokes, while its fur is indicated by dotted engraving.



Another bowl depicting the four-armed goddess seated on a lion was discovered in 1875 in the Komi-Permyak District of the Ural region (Fig. 1). The silver bowl was originally purchased at the Nizhny Novgorod Fair by the Moscow noblewoman Princess Gagarina (Darkevich, 1976, p. 44, Table 26.3–4) and was subsequently transferred to the British Museum in 1877.

The vessel measures 12.5 cm in diameter and 4.4 cm in height. It was made of thin silver sheet, formed by repoussé technique. The upper neck section is crafted with a broad flaring rim, and the lower part features a soldered base 8 cm in diameter. The inner surface of the bowl, including the medallion and the depiction of the goddess on the lion, is ornamented using engraving technique. Along the outer rim of the upper part, an inscription in the Khorezmian script is engraved, reading “Year 700” (Darkevich, 1976, p. 44).

The goddess wears a serrated crown with a crescent engraved at its center, while its sides are shaped like toothed plaques. In her upper hands, the goddess holds the sun and the moon; in her lower right hand, she holds a staff topped with three spheres, and in her left hand, a cup. The goddess’s neck is adorned with a necklace composed of three strands of beads. The central bead is circular, while the side strands are made of precious stones or ribbed coral segments. Suspended beneath the large central bead is a pear-shaped pendant. The bowls from the Bartym hoard and the Komi-Permyak National District hoard are identical or nearly identical in their craftsmanship, form, detailed features, inscriptions, and dates. In Central Asian mythology, the depiction of a four-armed deity seated on a lion is identified as the fertility goddess Nana (Darkevich, 1976, p. 19, pl. 25, 5).

Type III (Figs. 3a–c). Silver bowl depicting a four-armed goddess walking on a lion. This bowl was discovered in 1952 in the Bartym hoard and is currently preserved in the Perm Regional Museum, Russia (Darkevich, 1976, pls. 25.6; 26.1–2). The image is located within a circular medallion on the inner surface of the bowl. Both the central depiction and the surrounding ornaments are rendered in engraving technique. The spaces between the medallion’s borders are filled with interlaced geometric lines forming “X”-shaped patterns, decorated with dotted motifs.

The goddess walking on the lion holds the sun in her upper right hand and the crescent moon in her upper left hand; in her lower left hand she holds a small cup,



and in her lower right hand, a scepter symbolizing sovereignty. On the right side of the medallion, a second figure is depicted — a servant kneeling with arms extended forward, awaiting the ruler. The goddess wears hoop-shaped beaded earrings and a necklace of precious stones on her chest, with a pear-shaped pendant at the center. Behind the lion is a richly decorated textile or rug.

On the exterior upper rim of the bowl, the date “Year 714” is engraved in Khorezmian script. Inscriptions are also present on the base of the bowl. The vessel measures 12.4 cm in diameter, with a height of 3.4 cm without the base. It is made of thin silver sheet using repoussé technique. The base is 0.9 cm high and 7 cm in diameter.

In these silver vessels, the depiction of the four-armed goddess clearly demonstrates a synthesis of local artistic traditions and features borrowed from neighboring peoples.

It should be emphasized that all three types of Khorezmian silver bowls depicting the four-armed goddess are directly connected with religious and mythological concepts.

According to E. Herzfeld, depictions of multi-armed deities on Kushan coins served as prototypes for the representations found on Khorezmian vessels (Darkevich, 1976, p. 108). On the reverses of Kushan coins dating to the 2nd–3rd centuries CE, the goddess Nana is depicted seated on a lion, holding a scepter of sovereignty and a cup in her hands (Diakonov & Smirnov, 1967, fig. 3.3).

S.P. Tolstov noted that the image of the four-armed goddess represents the figure of Anahita from the Afrighid period, emerging under the influence of the syncretism of Indo-Buddhist art during the Kushan era (Tolstov, 1948, p. 200).

Evidently, in the 6th–7th centuries, depictions of four-armed goddesses entered the artistic traditions of Central Asia, including Khorezm, under the influence of Kushan and “Kushan-Sasanian” art. During this period, similar imagery appeared in practical art across a wide region extending from Khorezm to Sogdiana and Eastern Turkestan (Darkevich, 1976, p. 18).

Comparable depictions are also found on 8th-century seals discovered at the Khorezmian site of Teshik-qal’a (Tolstov, 1948, pp. 200–201). S.P. Tolstov suggested that “Khorezm, like Bactria in the upper reaches of the Oxus — and probably to an even greater extent — was a major center of the cult of water



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deities (Ardvisura Anahita), and in particular, of the water cult along the Amu Darya” (Tolstov, 1948, p. 200).

According to S.P. Tolstov, the silver vessels numbered 42 and 45 in Smirnov’s *Atlas*, as well as the seal from Teshik-Qal’a depicting a four-armed goddess, represent the Khorezmian Anahita of the early Middle Ages, synchronized with the iconography of Indo-Buddhist art from the Kushan period.

N.V. Diakonov, in his analysis of four-armed goddess depictions, emphasizes the close iconographic relationship between Central Asian goddesses and the Hindu deity Durga, tracing their prototypes to Central Asian mythology (Diakonov, 1961, p. 34).

Art historian Elmira Gül suggests that the depiction of the four-armed goddess in Khorezmian art emerged under the influence of the Hindu warrior goddess Durga, one of the great mother-goddess figures (Gül, 2005, pp. 81–82). The Durga motif, originating from outside cultures, is associated with Devi, a deity within the Shiva pantheon, reflecting the adaptation of Hindu religious imagery within various local cultures. As a symbol of the Great Mother-goddess, Durga’s iconography required local populations to understand and integrate Hindu visual and cultic elements within their own religious practices.

The depictions of four-armed goddesses in Khorezmian applied arts exhibit distinctive features compared to the Hindu goddess Durga. In Khorezm silver vessels, the goddess holds symbols of the Moon and the Sun in her hands, thereby invoking the cult of celestial bodies.

Yu.A. Rapoport, who studied the pre-Islamic religious concepts and mythology of Khorezm, examined the image of the four-armed deity on silver vessels from the Kama region. He recognized it as a representation of the Great Goddess of Central Asia and noted that its four hands carry cosmic symbols (Rapoport, 1971, p. 24). Furthermore, Rapoport associated the cosmic symbols depicted on Khorezmian vessels with the Anahita-Ardvisura goddess (Nerazik, 2013, p. 119). Astral symbols characteristic of Khorezmian silver vessels are also found on the Toq-Qal’a altars. These attest to the existence of pre-Islamic celestial cult practices among the Khorezmian population. The depiction of the Sun and Moon on silver vessels and altars is closely connected with religious cultic practices,



symbolizing the unity of the cosmos and indicating that these celestial entities were considered sacred gifts granted by Ahura Mazda.

It should be emphasized that, in the early Middle Ages, the cult of the four-armed goddess was widespread across Central Asia, and the dissemination of the Hindu goddess image among many peoples had been established since the Kushan period. This goddess is reflected in Khorezmian silver vessels, glyptic art (seals), the wall paintings of Panjikent and Kahkah, as well as in Sogdian altars.

Regarding the influence of India on Khorezmian applied arts, it can be noted that, as a result of various cultural interactions, the use of iconography from other peoples allowed Khorezmian artists to convey both the universality of religious ideas (the Great Mother-goddess) and their own indigenous religious concepts (Gül, 2005, p. 82).

In conclusion, the depictions of four-armed goddesses entered Khorezm under the influence of the synchronization of Indo-Buddhist artistic traditions initiated during the Kushan period and continued in applied arts up to the pre-Islamic era. In Khorezm, representations of the four-armed goddess—often accompanied by a lion or leopard, and symbols of the Sun and Moon—reflect stylistic features characteristic of Afrighid art. The inscriptions engraved around the upper rims of bowls depicting the four-armed goddess are important indicators confirming their connection to the Khorezmian cultural milieu.

Thus, the religious and mythological imagery on silver vessels from the 6th–8th centuries fully confirms the existence in Khorezm of a local school of artistic metalwork. During this period, Khorezmian art maintained cultural contacts with Sogdiana, Tokharistan, India, Eastern Turkestan, and neighboring nomadic peoples across various artistic fields, including applied metalwork.

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1,a



2,a



1,b



2,b



1, c



2, c



Figure 1. Khorezm, 6th–8th centuries. Silver bowls. 1a – Four-armed deity seated on a reclining lion; 1b – schematic drawing; 1c – exterior view. Bartim Treasure, 1957.

Figure 2. 2a – Deity seated on a lion; 2b – schematic drawing; 2c – exterior view. Bartim Treasure, 1952.



1, a



1, b



1, c

Figure 3. Khorezm, 6th–8th centuries. Silver bowl. 1a – Four-armed deity seated on a throne; 1b – schematic drawing; 1c – exterior view. Kovina Treasure (Smirnov, 1909).