Studying ceramic artefacts from Hulbuk (Mā warā’al nahr-Khuttal),
from the Islamic conquest till middle of the XIth century (90/712-441/1050).
Contribution to the research on Islamic ceramics from central Asia in the Middle Ages.

This study sets forth a typological classification of hitherto undocumented ceramic artefacts from the Hulbuk excavation site (south east of Tadjikistan, Kuliob district). This material from the ninth to the mid-eleventh century, collected from 1953 to 1978 by the Russian-Tadjik campaigns, mainly comes from the citadel, some wells located in the lower part of the city and from one or two kilns; and was collected by Erkinoj Guliamova and Vladimir Bažoutin.

Concentrating on this site – the capital of Khuttal – allowed me to focus on the material culture of the Turkish-Iranian dynasty. (The Bānidjūrids then Abū Dawūdīds reigned in Khuttal and Ṭūkhāristān, in the regions of Balkh, Ṭālaqān, Andarāb and Pandjīh.) Previous research in this area has not been on the same scale as that undertaken in mediaeval Central Asia (West to East Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirghizstan and South Kazakhstan). The chronological period in question is rich in technical innovations and decorative creations. The ninth century saw the beginning of the development of glazed pottery. Under the Abbāsids, considerable advances were made in science, in particular chemistry, and this led to the emergence of techniques, such as glaze, which modified the ceramic craft.

In Part 1, I examine specific aspects of the geography and history of Central Asia at the beginning of medieval period (the eighth to the eleventh century) to shed light on the extent to which this vast central-Asian area was physically and ideologically conquered. Regarding the Arabo-Islamic conquest of this area, I show as far as is possible how a new culture and religion penetrated these countries. I also present the influence of Near-East dynasties and the gradual lack of control of the caliph on local dynasties. Contacts and political tensions with China and tribal Turks are also taken into consideration.

For the ceramologic study (Part 2), I put in place a typology according to: fabric and shape for glazed and unglazed pottery; the nature of the glaze and decoration; and additives in the glaze-ware. This was to establish an ‘open’ typology not based exclusively on decorations of the glazed-ware, as is all too commonly found in the study of Islamic ceramics. Technical
characteristics, chronology and distribution are discussed through the presentation of each type of pottery (20 unglazed types and 14 glazed-ware types). I engage with an extensive Soviet literature on the excavations of sites by local and Russian archaeologists during the last two decades of the nineteenth century in more than sixty-five mediaeval cities in Central Asia and northern Iran and Afghanistan. Advances in our understanding of these ceramics from the Eastern regions facilitate a preliminary comparison with ceramics from the Near and Middle East.

This research offers an important ceramics corpus in a new typo-morphology, of interest to historians and archaeologists working on central-Asian Islamic pottery. I demonstrated, for example, that some Hulbuk ceramics were made locally, and others came from Mā warā’al nahr and Khūrāsān region; a few types were also imported from China (Yuē) and Iraq (Baṣra).

Part 3 deals with the technical particularities of this geographical area. I presented a typology of ceramics produced in Hulbuk, and highlighted specific elements required for the manufacture of pottery (moulds), including placing and firing the pottery in the kiln. I presented also the formation of fabrics through mixing clay with loess and adding non-plastic material (temper, mineral or vegetal inclusions). In addition, I summarised various surface decoration techniques (décor, slip and glaze), and gave an in-depth survey of the glaze’s constitution (lead, alkaline or potash glaze) and coloring metallic oxides. Further study is called for on information regarding the deposits of clay, loess and metallic oxides, and their relation to the technique of ceramic manufacturing, furnaces and firing.

In Part 4 I briefly present the distribution of glazed and unglazed types of mains ceramics and commercial paths according to the historical sources.

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