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OLD TERMIZ SPHEROCONICAL VESSELS

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Abstract:

Simobko'zacha (Sphero-conical vessel) are one of the most distinctive pottery vessels with their unique shape. This article discusses the finds and their typology from Old Termez, one of the mercury jar production centers of Central Asia.

Keywords: Central Asia, mercury vessels, Old Termez, Sh.Pidayev, M.Ye.Masson, 5th stove, silver water pot.

One of the most widespread archaeological finds from the medieval period of Central Asia is the *simobko'zacha* (Sphero-conical vessel). A sphero-conical vessel is a ceramic vessel that is thick, durable, and multifunctional, primarily featuring a spheroconic or ovoid shape with a small rim and a narrow neck.

The term *simobko'zacha* has been widely used across the Central Asian region. However, these artifacts are known by nearly ten different names. For example, they have been referred to as *spherocones*, *grenades (bombs)*, *vessels for silver water*, *beer gourds*, *unglazed vessels*, *ceramic containers with conical bases*, *spheroconic glazed vessels*, and *lamps* (oil lamps). [Temirova, 2023, p. 36].

The term *spherocone* is more commonly used, as it specifically refers to the shape of the vessel [Artikov, Bekmirzaev, 2023, pp. 344-355].

According to both material and written sources, sphero-conical vessels have been discovered in more than 50 historical and cultural regions of Central Asia [Galiyeva, 2000; Nuretdinova, 2022]. However, remnants of workshops where these vessels were produced have not been identified in all of these locations. One of the recognized production centers for sphero-conical vessel has been found in Old Termez [Fusaro, Ferrares, 2019, pp. 249-264].

Old Termez is an archaeological site from the antiquity and medieval periods, located in the Termiz district of the Surkhandarya region [Pidaev, 2001, p. 3]. Archaeological research in Old Termez expanded significantly from the 1930s onward, leading to the discovery of numerous artifacts [Zhukov, 1945, pp. 133-163; Shishkin, 1941].

Among the material finds of Old Termez, pottery holds a significant place. These ceramic artifacts serve as important evidence of the settlement's socio-economic development, craftsmanship, and cultural connections.

Several national and international studies have been conducted on the typology, production, composition, and manufacturing technology of pottery from Old Termez [Pidaev, 1997, pp. 149-162; Molera, Ferreras, 2020; Leriche, Pidaev, 2008].

Currently, more than 350 spheroconic vessels—both intact and fragmented—are preserved in the exhibition halls and collections of the Termez Archaeological Museum and the Termez State Museum-Reserve. These artifacts originate from medieval sites across the Surkhandarya region, with a significant portion discovered in Old Termez. Although excavations at the site began in the 1930s, the earliest artifacts preserved in museum collections date back to 1940. These findings have been unearthed over the years through various archaeological investigations conducted by multiple researchers.

In the 1940s, the Termez Archaeological Complex Expedition (TAKE) discovered numerous sphero-conical vessel during excavations in Old Termez. Notably, during the 1940, 1942, and 1943 excavations, archaeologists such as M. Ye. Masson, V. A. Shishkin, and V. D. Zhukov unearthed more than 100 sphero-conical vessel from the site.

V. A. Shishkin noted that the entire southeastern part of Old Termez was occupied by pottery workshops, where spheroconic vessels were predominantly produced [Shishkin, 1941, p. 144]. The excavation area was extensive, with trenches covered in pottery fragments. In addition to spheroconic vessels, deformed and defective pottery items—such as jars, plates, and other products—were found in this section. According to Shishkin, these items were made from the same clay as the mercury flasks and were fired at the same temperature [Shishkin, 1941, p. 145].

According to M. Ye. Masson, one of the most remarkable aspects of the Old Termez site is the abundance of fragments from the unusual vessels known as mercury flasks or spherocones. Since the past century, the hypothesis that these objects were used as incendiary projectiles has persisted [Masson, 1941, p. 100].

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These vessels were particularly concentrated in the southeastern part of Area II. Their sheer quantity, along with numerous defective pieces from mass production, not only provides insight into their extraordinary variety and decorative elements but also suggests that they were not solely produced for local consumption. Some of them may have been used in the chemical industry—possibly for the export of perfumery products [Masson, 1941, p. 100].

In 1980, the TAKE (Termez Archaeological Complex Expedition) resumed its research in Old Termez. Sh. Pidaev and a group of scholars discovered numerous mercury flasks in different excavation areas: in 1980-1982, from the eastern part of the *rabad*; in 1983, from excavation site *Kn-5* in Areas 1 and 2; in 1987, from the *rabad*, as well as excavation sites *KA-2* and *KA-9* in Square 4; and in 1988-1989, from various trenches, including Square 12 [Termez Archaeological Museum Collection].

After Uzbekistan gained independence, archaeology, like many other fields, saw significant progress. Several joint archaeological expeditions were established in collaboration with foreign countries, including Uzbek-Japanese, Uzbek-Czech, Uzbek-French, and Uzbek-Spanish expeditions. Through these partnerships, foreign scholars, alongside Uzbek researchers, conducted excavations at various sites across Uzbekistan, leading to the discovery of many new historical monuments and rare, unique artifacts.

International archaeological expeditions have also been actively conducted in Old Termez. Excavations continued into the 1990s, with significant discoveries in 1993 from excavation site KA-9 and in 1998 from a new layer in the eastern part of the *rabad*, where mercury flasks were unearthed.

The Uzbekistan-Spain International Archaeological Expedition carried out the first phase of research in Old Termez from 2006 to 2012. Later, in 2018, the Uzbekistan-Spain IPAEB team (*International Multidisciplinary Archaeological Expedition to Bactria*) resumed excavations, reconstructing new structures and continuing research related to pottery production [Molera, Ferreras, Fusaro, 2019].

During these investigations, a significant number of sphero-conical vessel were discovered. Notably, in 2011, findings were recovered from various excavation squares: Squares 9-10, from the lower layer of the fortress; Squares 11-12, from the middle layer of the tower; Squares 13-14, from the second *karez* (underground water system); and Square 15, from the first *karez*.

Islamic-era pottery production centers were located northwest of the rabad (suburban area) and within the shahristan (lower city) [Fusaro, Gurt Esparraguera, 2022, p. 3]. According to P. Leriche and Sh. Pidaev, another pottery workshop (Workshop No. 10) was situated in the southeastern part of the rabad, specializing in the production of spheroconic vessels [Leriche, Pidaev, 2008, p. 110].

The Uzbekistan-Spain International Archaeological Expedition uncovered a new stratigraphy in the western part of Workshop No. 11, leading to the discovery of a vast collection of pottery dating back to the 9th–12th centuries. Notably, a large number of spheroconic vessels were found in the area, suggesting that these artifacts likely belong to the 10th–12th centuries. The presence of both unfired and defective pottery further supports the idea that Termez was a prominent center for the production of these unique vessels. Interestingly, among the ceramic items collected inside a tandoor (oven), no defective pieces were found, indicating high-quality production [Fusaro, Ferreras, GurtEsparraguera, 2019, p. 13].

Additionally, two mercury flasks (TS.20, TS.21) were discovered in Kiln No. 5. A. Fusaro and a team of scholars successfully determined the age of the recovered sphero-conical vessels using C14 radiocarbon dating [Fusaro, Ferreras, Gurt Esparraguera, 2019].

There is no doubt that Old Termez was one of Central Asia's major centers for sphero-conical vessels production. The research conducted by the aforementioned scholars confirms the diverse assortment of spheroconic vessels produced in this region. A key task remains the classification and typological study of these artifacts.

A typological analysis of sphero-conical vessels is crucial for gaining a deeper understanding of their purpose and significance. Moreover, such studies provide valuable insights into the aesthetic preferences, lifestyle, trade, and cultural connections of Central Asian societies during the medieval period.

Scholars from various regions of the world have studied sphero-conical vessels and classified them into different types based on their production characteristics. Forinstance:

- Savage-Smith (1997) categorized these vessels into ten types [Savage-Smith, 1997, pp. 324–333].
- Stanica and Szmoniewski (2016) identified three main types, further dividing them into four groups with numerous subtypes [Stanica, Szmoniewski, 2016, pp. 327–344].

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- A. Nuretdinova (2022) studied Volga Bulgar sphero-conical vessels, initially dividing them into two major types, then further classifying them into over ten subtypes [Nuretdinova, 2022].

Despite the abundance of sphero-conical vessels found in various contexts across Central Asia, their typological classification remains limited. Many researchers have not specifically categorized these vessels but have instead included them as part of a general study of ceramic products.

Forexample:

- B. Abdulgaziyeva studied pottery in Fergana [Abdulgaziyeva, 2004, pp. 36-42].
- K. Baipakov focused on Kazakhstan [Baipakov, 2011, pp. 12-28].
- Yu. Buryakov analyzed ceramics from Tashkent [Buryakov, 1977, pp. 70-87].
- N. Byashimova worked on Turkmenistan [Byashimova, 2011, p. 89].

Among scholars, Z. Galiyeva has conducted the most extensive research on Central Asian sphero-conical vessels, analyzing finds from Sogd, Khorezm, Tashkent, Fergana, and Kazakhstan. Her study focuses on their chronology and typology and lists more than ten historical-cultural regions where these artifacts were discovered [Galiyeva, 2000].

However, EskiTermiz, despite its high concentration of ceramic production sites, has received little attention in these studies. This gap may be due to the limited availability of written sources on the subject.

The mercury vessels produced in Old Termez have distinct characteristics in terms of raw materials, morphological structure, and color, distinguishing them from other findings in Central Asia. The mercury flasks of Old Termez can be classified as follows.

Table 1. Typology of sphero-conical vessels from Old Termez

No.	Categories	Types
1.	MorphologicalStructure	Spheroconic, fish-tail (tear-drop), round, cylindrical, conical, ellipsoidal, etc.
2.	Capacity (Volume)	Small, medium, large
3.	Decorations (Ornaments)	Geometric, arabesque, girih, calligraphic, etc.
4.	Color	Blackish, gray, yellowish-green, reddish
5.	Weight	Small, medium, large

In conclusion, it can be stated that Old Termez was one of the major centers of craftsmanship, particularly pottery, in Central Asia during the medieval period [Pidaev, 2001; Pidaev, 1997. P. 149-162]. As evidence, historical sources mention the existence of a potters' quarter and the activities of skilled artisans in the area.

Among the products manufactured by the potters of Old Termez, mercury flasks held significant importance. They differ in morphological structure, capacity, color, and several other characteristics. Therefore, further extensive research is required to study the typology and chronology of sphero-conical vessels from Old Termez.

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