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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Genealogy of Femininity in Human Figures of Nishapur Slip-Painted Pottery

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Abstract

Nishapur slip-painted pottery (9th-10th centuries CE) features human figures traditionally classified by secondary signifiers like clothing, often overlooking anatomical indicators. Adopting a Foucauldian genealogical approach, this research addresses the methodological gap in gender identification through meticulous observation of scarce signs. By identifying visual indicators of femininity-specifically linear depictions and contours in the upper torso- this study proposes novel criteria for gender classification. To substantiate this, the inscription of femininity is traced historically: from prehistoric clay figurines to ancient Iranian traditions, the Sasanian period, early Islamic wares, and later Iranian art. This genealogical tracing reveals the contingent and discontinuous recurrence of specific linear strategies for inscribing femininity in the upper torso, a visual grammar which emerged heterogeneously rather than as a single tradition. Employing a comparative-analytical method with library and digital sources, the study examines approximately 50 figures. Findings indicate that femininity is conveyed primarily through specific linear representations and contours in the upper torso, rather than relying solely on garments. Among the examined figures, only two key specimens exhibit these recurrent linear signifiers (concentric circles and rounded contours). Consequently, the majority of other motifs, lacking these specific anatomical signifiers, are reinterpreted here as likely representing young male courtiers or adorned "ghulāms" within the Samanid visual regime. These results challenge earlier costume-based classifications and frame femininity in Iranian visual culture as a historically contingent yet recurrent discourse shaped by shifting regimes of power.

Keywords: Foucauldian Genealogy, Femininity, Nishapur slip-painted pottery, Human figures, Feminine figures

Introduction

In the visual silence of early Islamic art regarding the human body, the slip-painted wares of Nishapur emerge as a rare yet enigmatic chorus. Produced under Samanid rule, these vessels are highly regarded for their stylistic synthesis of pre-Islamic and early Islamic visual

languages. Yet, despite this rich historiography, one foundational issue remains insufficiently theorized: the visual construction and classification of gender within these figural representations.

Existing scholarship has tended to identify figures as "male" or "female" primarily through secondary markers such as costume elements and motifs. This approach, while implicitly assuming the stability of gender categories, has resulted in the misreading of a significant portion of the history of women in early Islamic art. By misidentifying a large number of figures lacking explicit feminine signifiers as female, an inaccurate impression is created that women had an active and ubiquitous presence in Samanid society. While this notion may align with certain modern feminist perspectives, it constitutes a historical anachronism; we cannot impose modern theoretical frameworks onto a specific historical period without rigorous contextualization, thereby risking the falsification of history. The recurrent ambiguity of these figures reveals a methodological tension that demands serious re-evaluation.

This ambiguity is further complicated by the socio-economic context of the wares. Historical evidence suggests that these luxury ceramics were commissioned by the Samanid elite (*Bulliet*, 1992, pp. 131-134), yet the imagery occasionally depicts scenes from popular life, creating a complex interplay between courtly patronage and popular representation. Furthermore, the distinction between rural and courtly motifs in these ceramics may elucidate visual differences. For instance, it appears that while a beard was considered a sign of masculinity among most Iranian men, such a feature could not be expected among courtiers or generally Turkic ghulāms; firstly, due to the presence of immature youths in the court, and secondly, due to the cultural and behavioral differences of the newly arrived tribes who were rapidly established in courtly positions.

Recent research has moved beyond the rigid male/female binary. By relying on historical data from the Sasanian and early Islamic periods, a historical classification has been proposed that categorizes figures into three groups: male, female, and androgynous (Khorashadi, 2021, pp. 61-85). However, while this classification is primarily based on clothing styles, it does not address the genealogical issue of feminine configuration. Whereas that previous research focused on the surface (costume), the present article penetrates to the depth of the body (linear anatomy).

This article addresses the methodological gap by reframing the problem of gender identification as a question of visual discourse rather than iconographic symbolism. Instead of asking whether particular figures "are" female, it asks how femininity becomes legible - or remains deliberately muted- within a specific historical regime of representation. To do so, the study adopts the genealogical method developed by Michel Foucault (1977, 1978). Genealogy, in Foucault's sense, does not seek a timeless essence or unbroken origin of femininity; rather, it traces the contingent processes through which certain bodily configurations come to signify "female" within historically specific power-knowledge formations.

In this sense, femininity is approached not as a natural or eternal category but as a historically produced effect inscribed on the surface of the body -a body that serves as "the

inscribed surface of events" (Foucault, 1977, p. 148)- where power writes its history through contingent and discontinuous processes.

Literature Review

Scholarly studies on Nishapur slip-painted pottery and the gender of its human figures have primarily focused on the continuity of pre-Islamic motifs and secondary visual signifiers. C. K. Wilkinson (1973), in his foundational work, established Nishapur pottery as the primary reference in the field, classifying human figures mainly based on clothing, color, and motifs, while acknowledging the ambiguity of gender in most cases (pp. 3-10). Following this, *Géza Fehérvári* (2000) attributed wings and certain elements on figures to Sasanian motifs, emphasizing the survival of pre-Islamic traditions in early Islamic visual culture (pp. 45-60). In the analysis of the first key sample, (figure 1), in this study*Fehérvári* proposes interpreting the black motif, commonly referred to as "wing" as a symbol denoting the Sasanian sovereign (the central figure), while regarding the wings on the flanking figures as likely representing attendant celestial beings.

Subsequent studies largely continued this trajectory, often relying on symbolic interpretations and iconographic continuity. *Hampartian* and *Khazaei* (2005), adopting a phenomenological approach, referred to Zoroastrian thought and pointed to the presence of the goddess Anāhīta in the key figure of this research (pp. 40-45). Similarly, *Shobeyri Dozini* (2010) focused on religious and mythological connections, attempting to identify divine to presence whithin the motifes. Although *Nouri Mojiri* (2020) did not directly study Nishapur pottery, focusing instead on prehistoric Venus figurines, his analysis of the upper torso and rounded linear contours in Elamite art provides crucial theoretical insight into the deep historical roots of feminine signifiers (pp. 46-50).\

These developments led to a turning point in recent research. In 2021, a study adopting an apophatic (negative) approach to gender markers reclassified many previously "female" figures as male or gender-indeterminate (Khorashadi, 2021, pp. 72-78). Employing a historical-comparative method and relying on historical data regarding clothing in the Sasanian and early Islamic periods, this research proposed a novel typology. It demonstrated that many ambiguous figures actually represented youthful male courtiers or adorned ghulāms within the Samanid socio-political context (ibid, pp. 73-85). By establishing a three-part classification (male, female, and perceived as female) and distinguishing between the attire of the common people and the aristocracy, this study laid the necessary groundwork. However, this classification was primarily based on the phenomenology of clothing styles and historical data; it did not address the genealogical issue of feminine configuration.

Consequently, while previous studies have taken important steps in identification and description, a gap remains in understanding how the discourse of femininity is formed at the level of the body itself. The present article addresses this gap by utilizing a genealogical approach to examine how "being a woman" in the visual regime of Samanid pottery has been redefined through the reproduction of linear signifiers. The present research, by adopting a Foucauldian genealogical approach and focusing on linear and contoured signifiers in the upper torso (rather than secondary signifiers such as clothing or symbols), offers for the first time a

systematic examination of gender as a constructed visual effect. This perspective not only explains the persistent gender ambiguity noted in prior literature but also establishes a more reliable criterion for reclassifying Nishapur figures and opens a new avenue for gender-sensitive studies in pre-modern Iranian visual culture.

Research Method

This study employs a comparative-analytical method combined with a Foucauldian genealogical approach. The primary aim is to trace the contingent and discontinuous recurrences of linear strategies for representing femininity -particularly in the upper torso region- across Iranian art history, with Nishapur slip-painted pottery selected as the central case study. The methodology is organized at two main levels.

Sample Selection and Rationale

Two key human figures from Nishapur slip-painted pottery (3rd to 5th centuries AH / 9th to 10th centuries CE) are selected as the core samples for analysis. These figures are chosen based on morphological features of the upper torso (linear lines, rounded contours, body proportions, and the presence or absence of feminine signifiers). The analysis includes precise visual description, examination of femininity signifiers in the upper torso, and direct comparison with traditional classifications (as discussed in the literature review) to determine whether these figures engage with or diverge from recurrent visual tactics of femininity. The objective here is to examine the feminine structure in the upper torso and to trace this embodied configuration of breasts across different eras, characterized by historical ruptures -manifesting as disappearances or limitations yet recurring- Consistent with Foucault's concept of genealogy. In this view, a signifying pattern is not continuous; rather, it emerges through historical ruptures to reproduce a specific concept

Data was collected from library and digital sources (museum catalogs, scholarly articles, high-quality images from reputable museum websites). The analysis relies on morphological comparison of the chest area (lines, contours, proportions, and visual emphases) to identify recurrent yet contingent patterns -or ruptures- in the representation of femininity over time.

This methodology enables the two key Nishapur figures -both from the same temporal horizon (9th-10th centuries CE)- to be examined not in isolation, but through juxtaposition with diverse and non-contemporaneous examples of female body representation across Iranian art history. In this way, it demonstrates that femininity is not a fixed essence but a visual discourse that emerges contingently, recurs discontinuously, transforms, or fades under shifting regimes of power and representation.

Primary Level: Case Study of Nishapur slip-painted Pottery

Two key human figures from slip-painted Nishapur pottery (3rd to 5th centuries AH / 9th to 10th centuries CE) are selected as the core samples for analysis. These figures are chosen based on morphological features of the upper torso (linear lines, rounded contours, body proportions, and the presence or absence of feminine signifiers). The analysis includes precise visual description, examination of femininity signifiers in the upper torso, and direct comparison with traditional classifications (as discussed in the literature review) to determine whether these

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Genealogical Level: Tracing Recurrent Linear Strategies

To demonstrate that the linear representation of femininity in the upper torso constitutes a historically contingent visual discourse, selected samples from various periods are examined:

Prehistoric Period /Neolithic and Chalcolithic: Clay Venus-type figurines with exaggerated upper torso, large breasts, and rounded/linear contours, which mark early emergences of these visual strategies.

Ancient and Sasanian Period: Female motifs are examined here. In the Bīšāpūr mosaics, courtly women are depicted, whereas the goddess Anāhīta is primarily represented in rock reliefs and silver/gold vessels. In these artifacts, the upper torso is depicted with curved lines and emphasis on bodily form, reflecting heterogeneous re-appropriations.

Seljuk Period of Kashan, 6th–7th centuries AH / 12th–13th centuries CE: Three-dimensional breastfeeding female figurines are analyzed. Despite their three-dimensionality, the breasts of these women utilize a conditional linear style. This is evident as the infant is held in the mother's arms, and the depiction bears a strong resemblance to ancient samples. These represent one of the earliest significant instances of three-dimensional human figures in Islamic ceramic history and serve as an important node in the contingent re-emergence of such visual grammars.

Qajar Period: Paintings of courtly women, dancers, and pleasure-seeking women are depicted in thin, body-revealing clothing (sheer clothing). In these works, breasts and the upper body are shown with flat and curved prominent lines (linear representation) without heavy three-dimensional shading, illustrating the recurrent emphasis on linear forms amid partial covering.

Theoretical Framework: Foucault's Genealogical Method

Michel Foucault's genealogical approach represents one of the most powerful critical tools developed in late twentieth-century thought for examining how discourses, practices, and subjectivities are historically constituted. Distinct from traditional historiography, which seeks continuous origins and linear progress, and from his earlier archaeological method, which aimed to uncover the unconscious rules governing discursive formations within a delimited epoch (Foucault 1972, pp. 37-40), genealogy is explicitly concerned with the contingent, discontinuous, and often conflictual processes through which particular ways of knowing and being emerge.

Foucault first articulated the contours of genealogy in his 1971 essay *"Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*" (Foucault 1977, pp. 139-164). Drawing explicitly on *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), he rejected the metaphysical search for an original essence

(*Ursprung*) in favor of two intertwined concepts: *Herkunft* (descent or provenance) and *Entstehung* (emergence or arising). *Herkunft* directs attention to the heterogeneous and often lowly origins of what later appears unified and noble, the accidents, injuries, and petty struggles that leave their marks on bodies, institutions, and discourses (Foucault 1977, p. 147). *Entstehung*, by contrast, designates the singular moment of emergence: not a smooth evolution but a sudden, often violent confrontation of forces that produces something new (Foucault 1977, p. 148).

Central to this method is the refusal of teleology and transcendence. Genealogy does not ask "what is the eternal truth of femininity?" but rather "how has this particular configuration of femininity become possible at this historical juncture?" It reveals that what we take to be natural or universal categories are in fact effects of specific historical struggles. Genealogy is "gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary" (Foucault 1977, p. 139). It operates at the level of the body, not as a biological given but as a surface upon which power writes its history: "The body is the inscribed surface of events… Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history" (Foucault 1977, p. 148).

A defining feature of Foucauldian genealogy is its intimate linkage of power and knowledge (*pouvoir-savoir*). Power is not understood as a repressive force exercised from above but as a productive network of relations that circulates through discourses, institutions, and bodies, simultaneously generating forms of knowledge and being generated by them (Foucault 1978, p. 94). In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Foucault demonstrates this through the emergence of "sexuality" itself as a modern discursive formation: what had previously been scattered acts and pleasures was reorganized into a unified "truth of sex" that could be known, spoken, and administered (Foucault 1978, p. 94).

Unlike phenomenological or hermeneutic approaches that seek hidden meanings or lived experience, genealogy is deliberately anti-interpretive in the traditional sense. It does not aim to uncover deeper significance but to map the surface of events, the tactics, strategies, and reversals through which discourses are deployed. Genealogy requires relentless erudition and patience: it demands a vast accumulation of source materials, a knowledge of details, and the avoidance of large interpretive leaps (Foucault 1977, pp. 139-140). It traces descent (*Herkunft*) in the body itself -in nervous systems, temperaments, physiognomies, and physiological weaknesses- revealing how past events inscribe themselves as stigmata on the living organism (Foucault 1977, p. 147).

For the study of visual culture and gender, Foucault's genealogy offers a particularly incisive framework. It treats visual representations not as reflections of pre-existing gender categories but as active sites where those categories are produced, contested, and stabilized through specific historical confrontations of forces. It shifts analytical focus from essential meanings to the contingent emergence of visual grammars -lines, contours, proportions, and absences- as historically produced effects.

This methodological commitment to contingency, discontinuity, the productive nature of power-knowledge relations, and meticulous documentary rigor constitutes the core of the

present study's theoretical orientation. It provides the necessary distance from essentialist or ahistorical readings of gendered imagery and opens the possibility of a genuinely historical critique of visual discourses across art history.

Transition to the Analysis of Motifs and the Genealogical Approach

Having established the theoretical framework (Foucauldian genealogy) and the research methodology (comparative-analytical method with a focus on visual morphology), we now proceed to the direct analysis of human motifs on Nishapur slip-painted pottery and supporting genealogical examples. This section initially examines the two key Nishapur figures identified through formal analysis, concentrating on linear signifiers in the upper torso, specifically concentric circles near the neckline, soft rounded contours, and an emphasis on the chest without explicit anatomical exposure. These descriptions serve as the point of departure for the genealogical discussion, wherein these signifiers are juxtaposed with heterogeneous examples drawn from Iranian art history -ranging from prehistoric Venus-type figurines to body-revealing paintings of the Qajar period- to assess whether they participate in recurrent yet contingent visual tactics of femininity. This dual approach (formal and genealogical) permits the visual appearance of the figures to be described independently of historical presuppositions, while simultaneously illuminating their position within the discontinuous discourse of femininity.

Analysis of the Key Feminine Motifs of Nishapur Slip-Painted Pottery

This image, (figure1), presents three human figures. The two flanking figures, clad in long robes and holding *Bársám*[1], appear to be bowing in a gesture of respect. The artist has utilized the concave space of the vessel to visually convey this submission and reverence. These figures appear to be attendants to the central individual. Their faces are beardless yet possess lines indicative of a bony and rugged masculine physiognomy; they feature long hair and black shawls draped over their shoulders. This same black shawl is observed on the shoulders of the central figure, indicating that it constitutes part of the official attire. Beneath their robes, tall black boots are visible; tall black boots are a recurrent feature in most human motifs on Nishapur pottery. The faces of these two flanking figures are depicted in profile, while their eyes are rendered *en face*. The central figure, who constitutes the primary subject of the present research, is seated cross-legged on the ground with hands resting on the waist, wearing the same black boots, referred to as *Moozeh*[2] It appears that this central figure is wearing a pleated skirt or loose trousers; however, given that the legs are covered by the same fabric extending into the boots, it is more probable that they are trousers, which -according to research findings on the style of attire in human motifs of Nishapur pottery-constitute a second layer of clothing. This figure is notably larger than the two smaller figures positioned on either side in a posture of respect. The posture of the central figure -seated with hands on the waist- is rare among human figures on Nishapur pottery and likely signifies a privileged or distinguished status. Furthermore, the presence of a black cloak on the shoulders of the central figure, an element

[1] sacred branches from trees such as the pomegranate or the Tree of Life, which was offered as a sign of respect to dignitaries

[2] In the history of Nishapur and studies on Samanid attire, the term "*Moozeh*" refers to a specific type of tall, leather boot worn by the Samanids. It is a distinct technical term for this footwear.

also seen in the attendants, refutes previous interpretations that identified this black cloak on the shoulders as the wings of Anāhīta (cf. Khorashadi, 2021, p. 69). While some earlier studies interpreted certain human figures on Nishapur slip-painted pottery as female based on the so-called “wing” motif, their gender remains indeterminate due to the absence of explicit gender markers (cf. Figures 2&3); In light of this ambiguity, it has been suggested these figures reinterpreted as pre-pubescent boys or young *ghulāms* within the Samanid court (ibid, p. 85).

Regarding the facial rendering, the eyes of the central figure are depicted *en face*, in a manner characteristic of the established illustrative style of Nishapur slip-painted pottery. The face is constructed through the symmetrical combination of two half-profiles, resulting in a full frontal view where the eyes appear to gaze at the bridge of the nose. This technique adheres to the conventional "composite view" found in profile figures of this period, rather than signifying a unique anatomical peculiarity.

Upon the head of this figure rests a crown of the Indo-Scythian style, featuring a pomegranate motif at the center of a horn-like frame. Based on Pope’s analysis of a Sasanian motif, "This woman wears a two-horned crown, a custom common among Indo-Scythian kings. A pomegranate is seen between the horns, and this, along with the flower depicted on the woman's garment near the thigh, signifies her association with the goddess of fertility..." (Hampartian & Khazaei, 2005, p. 45). Furthermore, this specific type of Indo-Scythian crown (a crown shaped like a pomegranate between two horns) is also attested on Queen *Sepinoud,* the wife of BahramV, also known as Bahram Gur, (Pourbahman, 2007, p. 180). Consequently, it can be stated that the aforementioned crown is not exclusive to the goddess Anāhīta, but noblewomen and queens could also utilize it. As a result, the woman in Figure 1 could be a noblewoman and, as some other research has suggested, is not necessarily the goddess Anāhīta; however, the feminine function of this crown is indisputable.

Figure 1. A noble woman with her attendants (9-10th CE, Nishapur).
Source: Fehérvári, G. (2000). *Ceramics of the Islamic World in the Tareq Rajab Museum*. I.B. Tauris.
red arrows indicate the location of the breasts (linear markers/two circles)

This crown serves as a primary indicator suggesting that this figure should be read as female and appears to engage with Sasanian visual strategies. Similar crowns are seen in images of the goddess *Anāhīta* at *Taq-e Bostan* and Queen *Sepinoud* in Sasanian Iran (cf. Khorashadi, 2021, pp. 69-71).

As observed in the details of the image, two similar motifs in the form of two concentric circles appear on the upper torso, near the neckline. If we disregard ancient prehistoric examples of the representation of female breasts, these two motifs have been considered purely decorative in studies concerning Nishapur slip-painted pottery. At first glance, the decorative nature of these markers may seem evident; however, two fundamental points in this regard demand attention: namely, the rarity of such a design and the neglect of the historical context that has led to a purely formal reading. These points, emphasized in the core hypotheses of this research, indicate the necessity of revisiting previous studies. To reinforce this initial reading, supplementary evidence and indicators are required. If the two concentric circles placed on the

chest of this figure are interpreted in the same manner as breasts in prehistoric clay statues, they could serve as a criterion for evaluating other figures of Nishapur pottery. In summary, while this figure is not necessarily a goddess, she is undoubtedly a woman; thus, she provides a standard for examining the gender of other figures in the pottery.

Figure 2. A frontal human figure with a profile face and indeterminate gender (9-10th centuries CE, Nishapur). Holding a cup and displaying the "Wing" motif.
From: *Islamic Art Collection*, National Museum of Iran; URL2

Figure 3. A three faced human figure with indeterminate gender (9-10th centuries CE, Nishapur). Holding a cup and displaying the "Wing" motif.
From: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art.* URL3

Analysis of the second Key Figure in Nishapur Slip-Painted Pottery

This slip-painted vessel whit a stringed design, (figure 4), ware characterized by a yellow ground and green glaze, stands as one of the exemplary specimens bearing human imagery within this corpus. While the perimeter of the vessel is adorned with decorative calligraphy, the space surrounding the two central figures is saturated with a profusion of motifs, ranging from birds and musical instruments to fish and carpets. The two figures are seated opposite one another, cross-legged. The bearded figure on the right, clad in a two-layered tunic and dark

trousers featuring dense patterns, stands in stark visual contrast to the figure on the left, who wears a lighter garment with a prominent design and holds a stringed musical instrument in the right hand. This visual contrast transcends mere sartorial difference alluding instead to the more nuanced semantic implications of the scene compared to the adjacent figure. A critical point in this composition is the recurrent emergence of "linear signifiers of femininity" on the upper body of the figure on the left. Just as observed in the first figure, two concentric circles adjacent to the neckline, alongside a delicate earring and headband, function as representations of female breasts. These linear signifiers, which are often effaced or obscured within the Samanid aristocratic visual discourse, appear here with explicit clarity.

Figure 4. Plate with Two Seated Figures (10th century CE, Eastern Iran, Nishapur). Earthenware painted in black slip and yellow/green pigments under transparent glaze. Source: The Art Institute of Chicago. Harvey B. *depicting two seated figures as motifs.* medieval Islamic ceramic art. Plotnick Collection. **red arrows indicate the location of the breasts (linear markers/two circles);** URL4

This phenomenon presents a fundamental challenge regarding the nature of the scene: can gender be determined based solely on attire and braided hair in the absence of these anatomical signifiers?

The answer to this inquiry lies in understanding the distinction between the "regimes of representation" governing two social strata: the aristocratic elite and the popular masses. As noted by Bulliet and Morgan, aristocratic wares often reflect the Samanid court and the elite without strict religious adherence (Bulliet, 1992, pp. 131-134; Morgan, 1994, p. 58). Within this aristocratic discourse, gender is a fluid category, often ambiguous, making identification difficult without explicit markers. In contrast, *Kiyani* and *Grube*, by pointing to the indigenous and rural roots of these motifs (Kiyani, 1978, p. 15; Grube, 2005, p. 46), open a window onto the discourse of the common populace.

In the traditional and popular visual discourse, the body and the face serve as the site for the display of "rigid" gender principles. In this cultural context, the contrast between the "bearded male" and the "beardless, adorned female" constitutes a definitive and indisputable visual convention. Consequently, in this specific motif, we are confronted with an intersection of two layers of signification: the first layer comprises the explicit linear signifiers of the upper torso (the concentric circles of the breasts), rooted in the historical discourse of femininity; the second layer consists of secondary facial and physical markers (beardlessness, facial delicacy) which, within the rural and local context of this work, acquire validity and semantic weight. This convergence of signifiers not only identifies the figure on the left as female but also establishes her as an instance of the conditional and discontinuous reproduction of femininity in the history of Iranian art.

It is essential to conclude this analysis by noting that, at first glance, these circles may appear far removed from the modern viewer's visual perception of female breasts. Therefore, a genealogical framework was employed to re-examine these two Nishapur pottery figures, in order to harness that linear visual regime -repeated through rupture and emergence from prehistoric times to the contemporary era- which has shaped part of the identity constitution of feminine artistic constructs.

Transition to the Analytical Discussion of Selected Supporting Motifs

The following analysis focuses on a deliberately dispersed selection of motifs spanning from prehistory to the Qajar period. This selection highlights temporal ruptures, absences, and sporadic reappearances of specific visual characteristics in the iconography of the female body in Iran. Situated within Foucault’s genealogical framework, this approach serves to re-examine gender in the motifs of Nishapur slip-painted pottery by revealing femininity not as a continuous or essential tradition, but as a contingent visual discourse that emerges discontinuously, recurs heterogeneously, transforms, or recedes amid shifting regimes of power and representation.

Analysis of the Venus of the *Sarab Tepe*

The Venus of Sarab Tepe, (figure 5), is a clay figurine symbolizing a fertility goddess, discovered at Kilometer 18 on the *Kermanshah-Sarpol-e Zahab* road. Dating to the Neolithic period (ca. 6000 BCE), it is housed in the National Museum of Iran. The breasts are depicted

as two large, pear-shaped forms projecting prominently forward, clearly and softly delineated by curved lines that separate them from the shoulders and waist. These forms appear almost independent of the rest of the body, powerfully conveying the female form even from a distance. The proportion of the breasts to the entire body is extremely high, and the continuous rounded contours powerfully express femininity. The head and arms are omitted or minimized, and the surface of the figurine is smooth and undecorated. This emphasis indicates that the artist devoted primary attention to the chest area and fertility signifiers, minimizing other anatomical details. *Malekzadeh Bayani* interprets this small figurine as representing the worship of a mother goddess of fertility and agriculture around 6000 BCE (Malekzadeh Bayani, 1984, p. 100).

Figure 5. The Venus figurine of Sarab Tepe. General artifacts from ancient Iran (including Neolithic items, ca. 7000-6100 BCE, a clay fertility goddess figure). Source: National Museum of *Iran. The Venus of Sarab Tepe figurine.* Collections; URL5

Analysis of the Venus of *Tureng Tepe*

The Venus of Tureng Tepe, (figure 6), is an artifact dating to the third millennium BCE (ca. 2300-2100 BCE), unearthed at the ancient site of Tureng Tepe in Gorgan. Despite its three-dimensional volume, the representation of the upper torso evokes two-dimensional imagery through chiaroscuro effects and linework. Of particular interest are the tattoo-like pearl motifs scattered across the figure, which enhance the linear quality. The prominent and proportionate breasts, along with strong thighs, emphasize femininity. Notably, the breasts feature clearly separating curved lines despite the volumetric rendering. Each of these protrusions is modeled in the form of an incomplete sphere with a circle incised at its center, created to generate shading and an illusion of reality. In the transition from volume to surface, these forms are represented as two concentric circles; the same "linear grammar" that appears as a sign of femininity in Nishapur slip-painted pottery.

Figure 6. The Venus of Tureng Tepe. (ca. 2300–2100 BCE, Bronze Age, Tureng Tepe, Golestan Province, Iran). Terracotta standing female figure with headdress, jewelry, prominent breasts, and fertility symbols (e.g., pubic triangle and abdominal motifs). Source: Soshians: visual Museum of Iranian History. *Venus of Tureng Tepe*. by Sh. Vakili. URL6

Formal Analysis of the Ancient and Sasanian Periods: Female Motifs (Especially *Anāhīta*)
Female motifs in the Bīšāpūr mosaics, seals, silver vessels, and rock reliefs depict the upper torso with curved lines, prominent contours, and emphasis on bodily form. These examples illustrate the recurrent re-appropriation of prehistoric visual strategies within a religious and courtly context. In this period, three-dimensional rendering appears within two-dimensional frameworks, and two-dimensional rendering emerges within volumetric forms.

Analysis of the Sasanian Figures; Women's Dress in the *Bīšāpūr* Ivan Mosaics
Sasanian women wore a uniform long, pleated dress, (figure7), the aristocratic variant of which is exemplified in the floor mosaics of the Bīšāpūr Ivan (Ghirshman, 1991, pp.142, 147). The depictions of women in the Bīšāpūr Ivan mosaics consistently display a long, pleated garment featuring short or long sleeves, occasionally with a low neckline, and a shawl or veil draped over the shoulders.

Turning to specific examples within this corpus, Figure 7 depicts a woman holding a bouquet of flowers in her left hand and a pendant in her right. She is clad in a long shirt featuring numerous folds and pleats at the hem of the skirt, with a closed round neckline, and has a blue shawl draped over her shoulder and around her body. The luster and pleated nature of the

garment are clearly evident. The woman's face is portrayed in a three-quarter view, and her hair tied at the back of the head imparts a groomed appearance. On the right side of the upper torso, the breast protrusion is represented, while the volume of the breast on the left side is concealed beneath the shawl.

Similarly, (figure 8) portrays a woman wearing a blue sleeveless top with an open neckline (a décolleté style). She is seated on a cushion, leaning against a backrest, and holds a fan in her left hand. Red wristbands and armbands are visible on her arms. Her face is in a three-quarter view, and her wavy hair is swept back behind her shoulders. One leg is tucked beneath the body, while the other is planted on the ground. Part of a hanging curtain is visible behind her head. The tassel of a belt fastened at the waist hangs down from beneath her breasts. The protrusion of both breasts is visible in this image. Notably, a large darker blue circle encompasses a lighter one, a motif that evokes the same two concentric circles discussed previously.

Figure 7. A Sassanian lady with a flower in her hand. 3rd century AD. Mosaics of Bīšāpūr's Ivan. Source: Ghirshman, R. (1991). *Persian Art: The Parthian and Sasanian Dynasties* (2nd ed., p. 142).

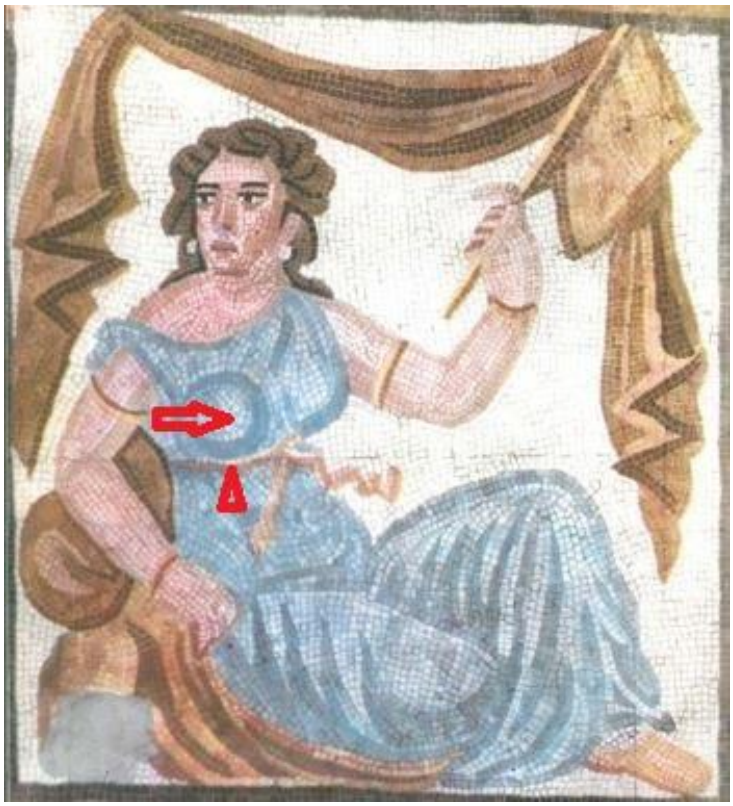

Figure 8. A Sassanian lady reclining with Hand fan. 3rd century AD. Mosaics of Bīšāpūr's Ivan. **red arrows indicate the location of the breast protrusion**. Source: Ghirshman, R. (1991). *Persian Art: The Parthian and Sasanian Dynasties* (2nd ed., p. 147).

Analysis of Goddess *Anāhīta* Figure

This Sasanian silver vessel, (figure 9), executed in high relief using casting, raising, repoussé, chasing, and gilding techniques, features four female figures in dynamic poses, often interpreted as dancers or divine personifications. The central or primary figure (in many scholarly discussions) is shown wearing a crown adorned with pomegranates. Her upper body is clad in a tight-fitting, patterned garment, while her lower body is enveloped in a thin, undulating skirt whose flowing forms evoke associations with running waters, a motif linked to the Zoroastrian goddess Anāhīta (Boyce 1989). The figure's right hand is extended downward in a gesture of offering or blessing, while the left holds a basket of fruit. A long shawl or scarf, attached at the shoulders and connected to the skirt, drapes freely behind her. Two braided tresses descend from beneath the crown onto her shoulders. The crown incorporates horn-like elements framing a large, peeled pomegranate, a form compared by Arthur Upham Pope to Indo-Scythian royal headdresses (Pope 1938, vol. 1; cf. Olson 2009, pp. 102-103). Ribbons or fillets tied into the hair flutter behind the head, a recurrent motif in Sasanian royal and divine iconography (Harper 1981, pp. 24-30, 150-155).

A noteworthy stylistic feature is the rendering of the breasts: despite three-dimensional modeling via repoussé, they retain echoes of earlier Iranian contour-line traditions from pre-Achaemenid figural art (Shepherd 1964, pp. 84-85). Dorothy G. Shepherd, in her foundational study of Sasanian objects in Cleveland, identified the primary figure as the goddess Anāhīta and interpreted the four females as her incarnations or aspects representing water, vegetation, agriculture, and fertility, supported by attributes like the pomegranate, fruit basket, and watery skirt (Shepherd 1964, pp. 83-86, figs. 22-23). This interpretation aligns with Zoroastrian

traditions associating Anāhīta with fertility, waters, and pomegranates. However, the Cleveland Museum of Art's current catalogue entry titles the object " Anāhīta Vessel" but describes the figures as "dancers" and notes interpretive ambiguity: they "may be sacred images of the Zoroastrian religion of the Sasanians or [...] bacchantes, followers of a cult of the Roman wine god, Bacchus, who was popular in the Near East." This reflects broader scholarly debates on syncretism (e.g., Dionysian influences via fruit motifs and dynamic poses) and cautions against a priori religious attributions (Olson 2009, pp. 102–103; cf. Grabar 1967, pp. 60–65). As observed here, the same form evident in the upper body of the Venus of Tureng Tepe reappears as a relief on the Anāhīta vessel, naturally with less volumetric rendering. In all anatomical aspects, and particularly in the breasts, the volumetric rendering is less pronounced than in the Venus, yet the underlying pattern remains identical.

Figure 9. Sasanian Silver Vessel Depicting the Goddess *Anāhīta* (ca. 300–500 CE)
Dimensions: height 18.5 cm, maximum diameter 11.5 cm; weight 722.5 g;
Source: Cleveland Museum of Art. *Anāhīta vessel*. acc. no. 1962.294; URL9

It is pertinent to note that these concentric circles are visually contiguous with the neckline and neck of the figure. This specific configuration finds confirmation in the Anāhīta silver vessel, where the depiction of a woman is unambiguous; there too, the rounded volume of the breasts is depicted as contiguous with the neckline. This observation validates the presence of

similar concentric circles attached to the neckline in the Nishapur pottery figures, reinforcing the interpretation of these markings as a consistent visual signifier in Iranian art. This is a rooted visual regime that, emerging in Nishapur slip-painted pottery after a rupture of several centuries, gains greater clarity in Kashan pottery, and preserves itself through discontinuous yet recurrent ebbs and flows into the contemporary era.

Analysis of Seljuk Kashan Breastfeeding Figurine

The three-dimensional figurine of a breastfeeding woman, (figure 10), does not depict the breast in a nude or overtly prominent manner. Rather, as in the human figures on Nishapur pottery, the body is fully covered, yet the woman's breast is represented through rounded, closed curves and subtle shaded lines that suggest its form beneath the garment. These figurines represent one of the earliest and most significant instances of three-dimensional human figures with detailed female anatomy in Islamic ceramic history.

In this figure, which is heavily influenced by Mongolian and Chinese traditions, a woman is depicted seated, characterized entirely in the blue hue typical of Kashan pottery - encompassing her body, garments, and face- while the contours, hair, and motifs are rendered in black. She wears a garment richly adorned with patterns, featuring loose and hanging sleeves (kimono style), as well as a traditional Mongolian hat featuring a chin strap and jewelry. The facial tattoos, the form of the joined eyebrows, and the slanted blackened eyes are clearly visible in the image. She holds a child in her arms who is nursing and has grasped one of the breasts. This motif is one of the most significant supporting figures for proving the hypothesis that the circles on the upper torso represent female breasts. Here too, the same concentric circles can be seen representing the breasts, with minor variations in the details.

The similarity in breast shape between this Seljuk figurine and certain Elamite breastfeeding figures (figure 11) -where a woman is shown breastfeeding her child- is particularly striking. This blue-green clay figurine, accented with black side lines, combines volumetric modeling with elements that evoke the recurrent two-dimensional pictorial tradition: the breast is delineated by soft, curved contours and linear emphases, even within its three-dimensional structure. It also captures details of women's clothing in the Seljuk era, including hats and headscarves, illustrating how linear signifiers of femininity persist discontinuously across heterogeneous historical conjunctures.

As is evident in the image, the breast size in the Seljuk nursing women is remarkably close to that in the Nishapur slip-painted pottery figures. Although one might expect the breasts to be larger in Seljuk nursing women, the imagery technique and style adhere to schematic and pre-defined rules. These rules indicate a stronger correlation due to the proximity of the Samanid and Seljuk eras and the continuity of the pottery painting style. It is as if, following a long hiatus from the Sasanian to the Samanid period, these concentric circles have uninterruptedly established themselves on the pottery figures for two centuries. The only difference lies in the fact that in the Samanid pottery, both circles are hollow, whereas in the Seljuk pottery of Kashan, the inner circle is darkened to appear more realistic.

Figure 10. Vessel in the form of a seated woman breastfeeding a child (mid-12th to early 13th century CE, Seljuk Kashan). Stone paste painted with black under transparent turquoise glaze (height 26.8 cm, width 14 cm), symbolizing motherhood and healing in medieval Islamic ceramic art.
Source: Gibson, M. (2003). *Vessel in the form of a seated woman breastfeeding a child*. Research Gate, Various collections. **Red arrows indicate the location of the breasts (linear markers);** URL10

Figure 11. Protective Figurine from Ur (circa 700–500 BCE, Southern Mesopotamia, Iraq). Clay plaque depicting a seated woman nursing her child, symbolizing maternal protection; relevant as an ancient Near Eastern precursor to later motifs of women in art. Source: British Museum. *Protective figurine from Ur*. World History Encyclopedia. URL11

Analysis of the Scene "Khusrow Discovers Shirin Bathing"

In the scene "*Khusrow Discovers Shirin Bathing*", (figure 12), an illustration from the narrative poem *Khusrow and Shirin* painted in the Qajar period (mid-18th century CE), a romantic scene with naturalistic elements is depicted. This Zand-Qajar painting features five figures: two mounted men, Shirin semi-nude while bathing, a male servant, and a female servant holding a curtain to shield her from Khusrow's gaze. The focus of this study is the semi- nude figure of Shirin and her representation of the female body.

Figure 12. Khusrow discovers Shirin bathing (mid-18th century, Zand-Qajar period, Shiraz, Iran). Oil on canvas (36 × 35 in.), from a pictorial cycle of poetic subjects, depicting the legendary romantic encounter rooted in Nizami's Khamsa. Source: Brooklyn Museum. *Khusraw Discovers Shirin Bathing*. object no. 1997.108.7; URL12

The chest area is bare, rendered in a luminous, moonlight-pale tone, with the face similarly illuminated and framed by black hair, eyes, and eyebrows. The abdomen is slightly rounded and prominent, the arms and limbs proportionate, and the breasts round, prominent, and positioned higher than usual. This representation, achieved through shading and light effects influenced by European painting, is volumetric. Nevertheless, the painting maintains a distance from full Western realism, and echoes of concentric circle motifs from earlier periods can be observed in the rendering of the breasts. This painting is preserved in the Brooklyn Museum, whose description notes: “This image captures the culminating moment in the passionate love affair between Iran’s legendary King Khusraw II (Sasanian dynasty, r. 590–628) and Shirin, an Armenian princess...” (Brooklyn Museum, n.d.).

Analysis of a Qajar Painting of Two Girls

According to the Brooklyn Museum's collection records and related documentation (Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, n.d.; ARTuk Collections, n.d.), this Qajar-period Persian painting depicts two elaborately dressed women. One holds a fruit in one hand and a glass in the other, while the other plays a stringed instrument. During the Qajar era, paintings of this type were often displayed in wall niches, typically featuring a single figure per panel. However, this particular composition was likely divided in half to create two separate paintings, as evidenced by the visible dividing line. The painting is believed to have been acquired by *Sir Gore Ouseley* between 1811 and 1814 during his tenure as Ambassador Extraordinary to the Persian court.

The focus of this study is the representation of the female body, particularly the round and prominent breasts of the bodice. Despite the volumetric modeling of the figures, the rendering of the breasts recalls earlier two-dimensional motifs through subtle light and shadow effects that suggest contours rather than deep volume. This style is characteristic of many erotic and semi-erotic Qajar paintings.

Apart from limited examples from the Seljuk to early Qajar periods, the female body is rarely depicted realistically; pictorial rendering was largely flat and found little expression outside of rare ceramic cases. In Qajar paintings -especially those depicting courtly women, dancers, and scenes of courtship- women are portrayed in thin, body-revealing clothing (sheer clothing). In these works, breasts and the upper torso are rendered with flat, curved, and prominent lines (linear representation) without heavy shading, appearing in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional effects. This illustrates the recurrent emphasis on linear forms in the upper body even amid partial covering, (Figure 13).

Following the Formal identification of linear signifiers of femininity in the upper torso (through the pure visual description of the figures' appearance), these signifiers are now juxtaposed with diverse historical examples across Iranian art history to assess their contingent and discontinuous participation in visual discourses of femininity. This genealogical examination discloses that linear rendering and rounded contours of the upper body recur discontinuously emerging, fading, and reappearing- across varied historical conjunctures. They manifest, for instance, in Nishapur pottery in a limited and historically specific form.

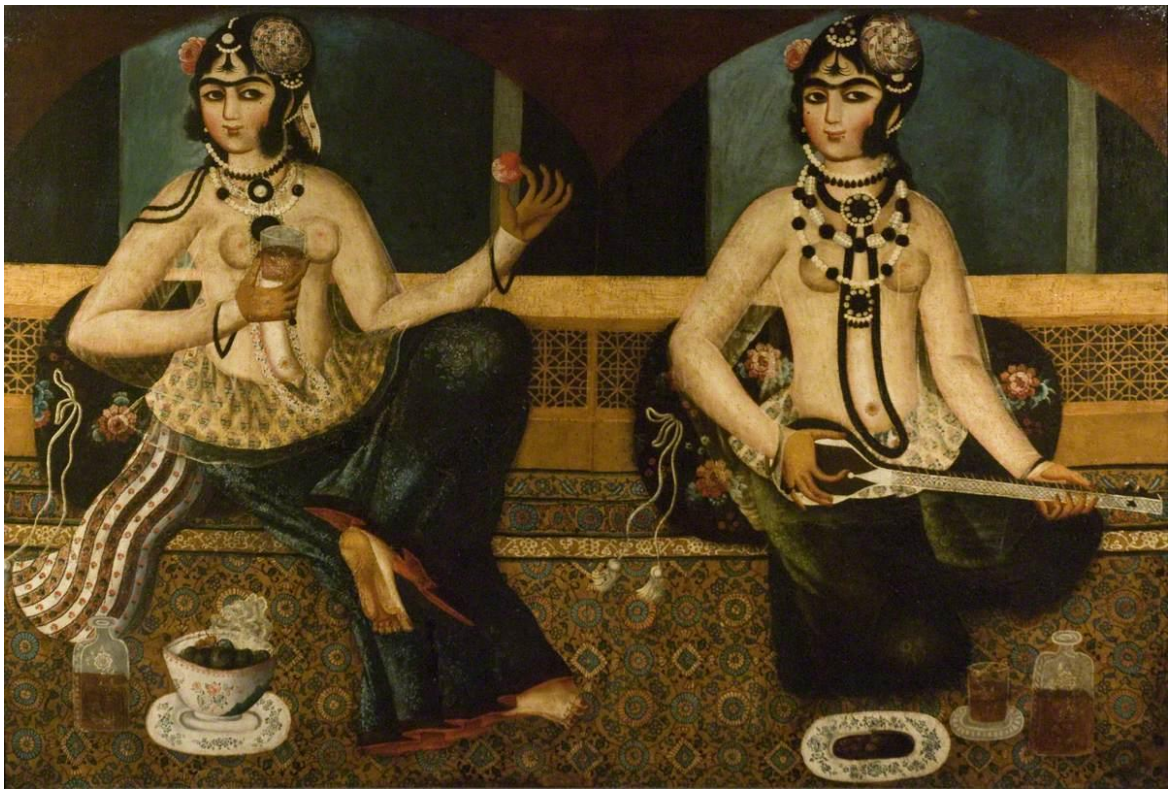

Figure 13. A Qajar Portrait of Two Girls (c. 1811–1814, Qajar period, Iran). Oil on canvas (118 × 174 cm) by unknown artist, showing two elaborately dressed girls in a domestic scene, one holding fruit and glass, the other playing a stringed instrument. Source: Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland. *A Qajar portrait of two girls*. ARTuk Collections. URL13

Genealogical Discussion and Final Conclusion

This study sought to establish a reliable criterion for identifying female gender in the human figures of Nishapur slip-painted pottery by tracing the visual signifiers of femininity in the upper torso through a Foucauldian genealogical approach. The Formal findings demonstrated that, among approximately 50 human-figured vessels examined, only two key figures (Figures 1 and 4) consistently display recurrent linear signifiers of femininity in the chest area: two concentric circles near the neckline, gentle rounded contours, and emphasis on the chest area without necessitating explicit body exposure. These signifiers serve as the primary criterion for gender identification, remaining effective even when the body is fully clothed.

The genealogical examination of these signifiers reveals not a linear or unbroken trajectory, but their discontinuous and contingent recurrence across heterogeneous historical conjunctures. These visual tactics emerge in prehistory through Venus-type figurines with exaggerated upper torsos, prominent breasts, rounded and linear contours, and fertility emphases; they subsequently reappear in diverse and non-uniform forms across Elamite art, the Sasanian period, Seljuk Kashan pottery, and Qajar paintings featuring sheer, body-revealing clothing. At certain moments, these signifiers fade or become muted, such as during the early

Islamic periods when figural restrictions curtailed direct representations of the female body. However, at others they are pursued with greater clarity and intensity, as evident in Qajar works where artists accentuated the upper body even beneath thin layers of covering. In some historical conjunctures (e.g., early Islam or the Seljuk era), feminine signifiers manifest more symbolically or through clothing, while in others (prehistory, Elam, and Qajar) they are expressed more directly and boldly.

The central aim of this research was to facilitate a more precise identification of female motifs in Nishapur pottery and to propose a novel model for gender classification. Unlike prior studies that relied predominantly on secondary signifiers such as clothing, color, beards, or vegetal motifs, this investigation shifted the primary criterion to the upper torso and its genealogically situated linear signifiers. This shift discloses that many figures previously interpreted as female more plausibly represent youthful male courtiers or adorned ghulām attendants within the Samanid visual regime, a regime that highly valued androgynous youthful male beauty. Consequently, the two principal figures analyzed here stand out as among the few that align with the recurrent linear motifs of femininity (specifically concentric circles and curved contours), rendering it highly probable that the majority of other human motifs in Nishapur pottery depict male subjects.

Ultimately, this research affirms that femininity in Iranian art is not a fixed, natural essence but a historically contingent visual discourse, shaped, sustained, or suppressed under shifting regimes of power-knowledge. By privileging the chest area as the principal site of feminine inscription, the study not only elucidates the recurrent gender ambiguity documented in earlier scholarship but also furnishes a robust and reliable framework for reinterpreting gender across other pre-modern Iranian artworks. It is hoped that this approach will pave the way for more rigorous interdisciplinary investigations into gender, art history, and archaeology in Iran, and encourage scholars to revisit and refine traditional classifications with greater precision and theoretical depth.

Statement of Conflicting Interests

The Authors state that there is no conflict of interest.

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