

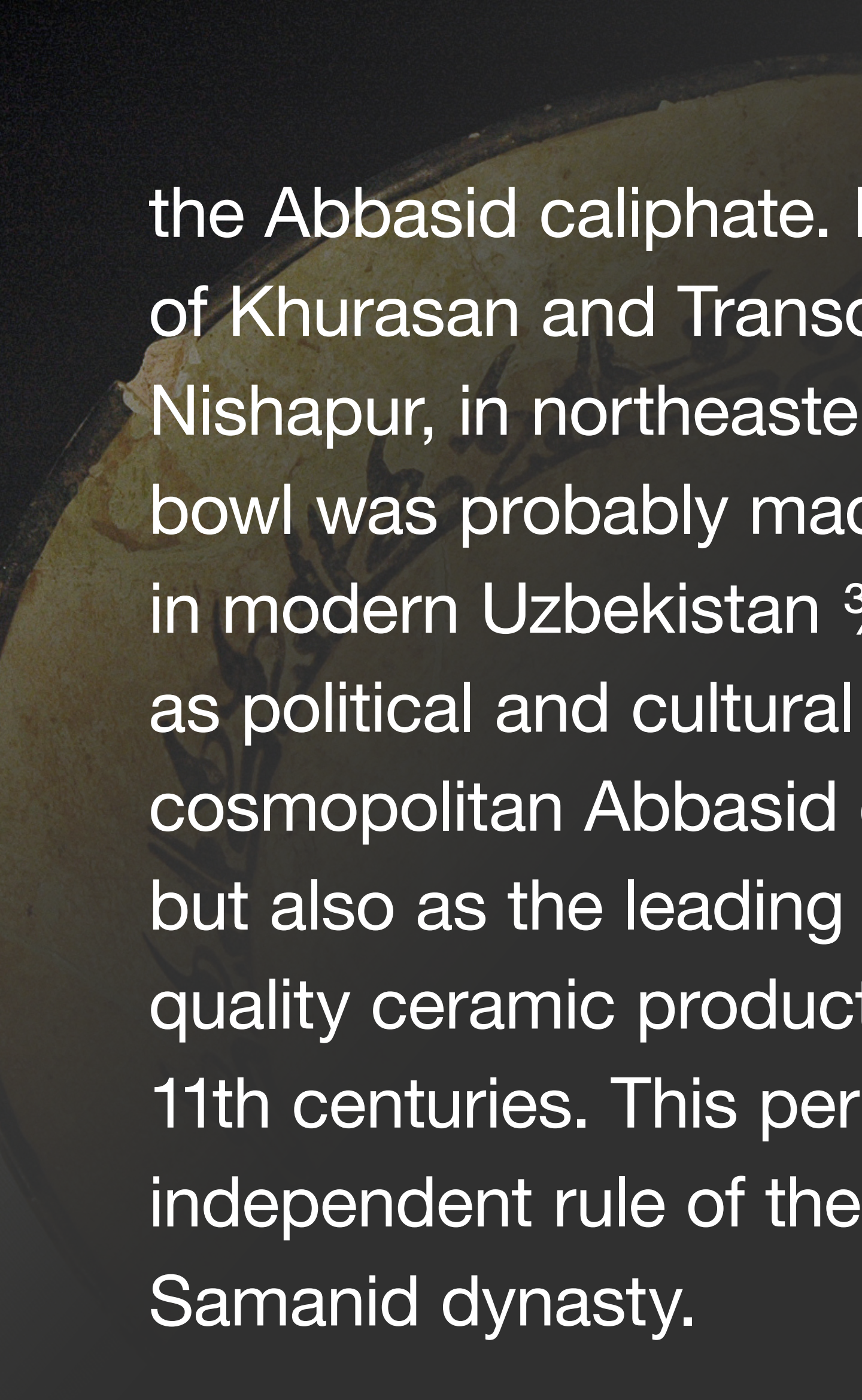
MASTERPIECE
MINUTE



The background image shows a close-up of a ceramic bowl with a dark, possibly black or dark brown, glaze. The bowl features a complex, light-colored (likely white or cream) epigraphic or inscriptional design. The design consists of several lines of text in a cursive script, characteristic of medieval Persian or Islamic calligraphy. The bowl is positioned diagonally, with the rim visible at the top left and the base extending towards the bottom right. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the ceramic and the intricate details of the inscription.

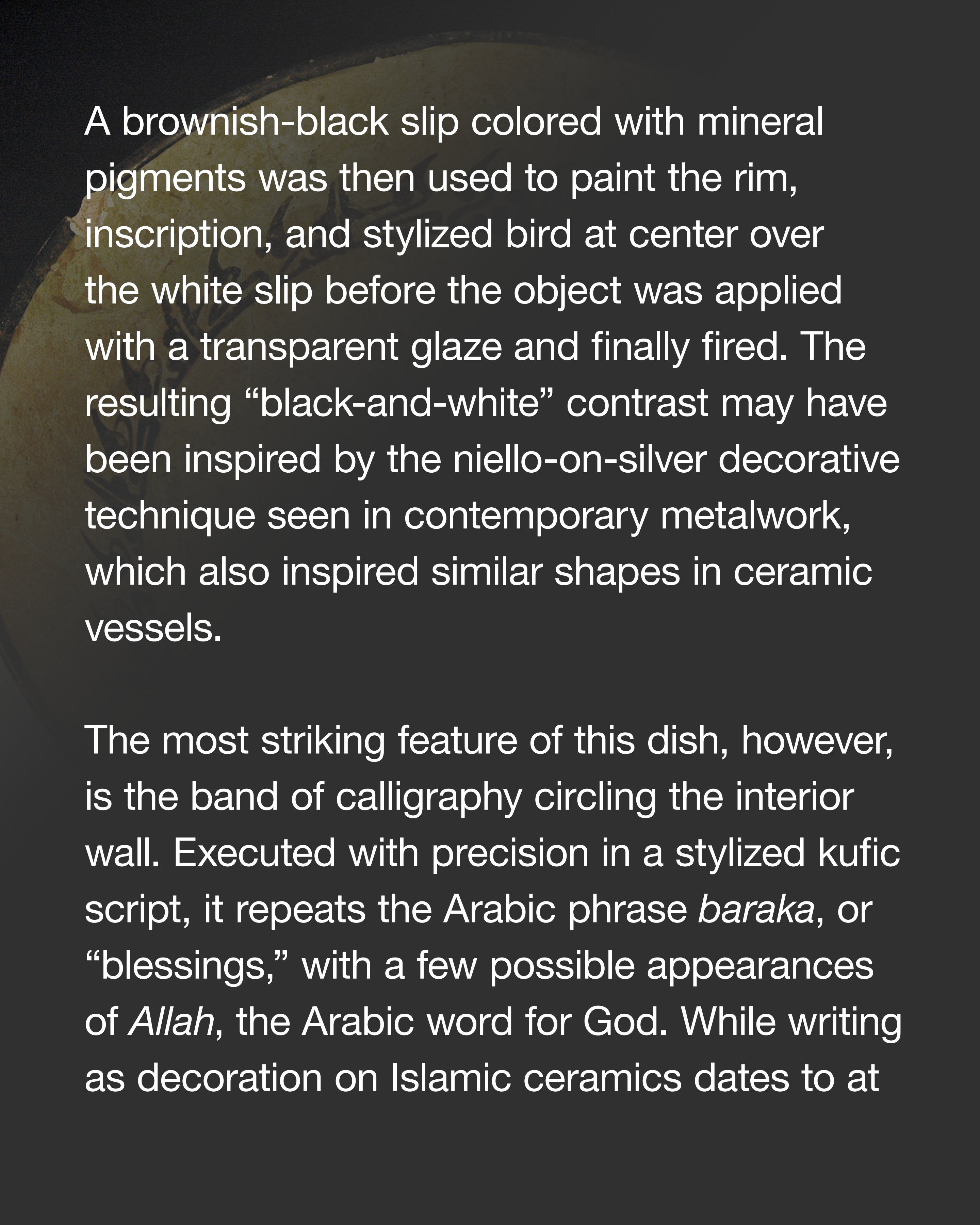
Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA. This is your host, Ladan Akbarnia, Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. In this podcast, I look at historic works produced in South Asia, Iran, and the Islamic World, as well as contemporary art from our collections here at SDMA. Drop in every Friday to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators or guests focusing on works from the Museum.

In today's episode, we examine a ceramic bowl with an epigraphic, or inscriptional, design from the medieval Iranian world, which at one time included parts of Central Asia. From the 9th to the mid-13 centuries, this vast geographic area was controlled by different autonomous regional authorities under the nominal reign of



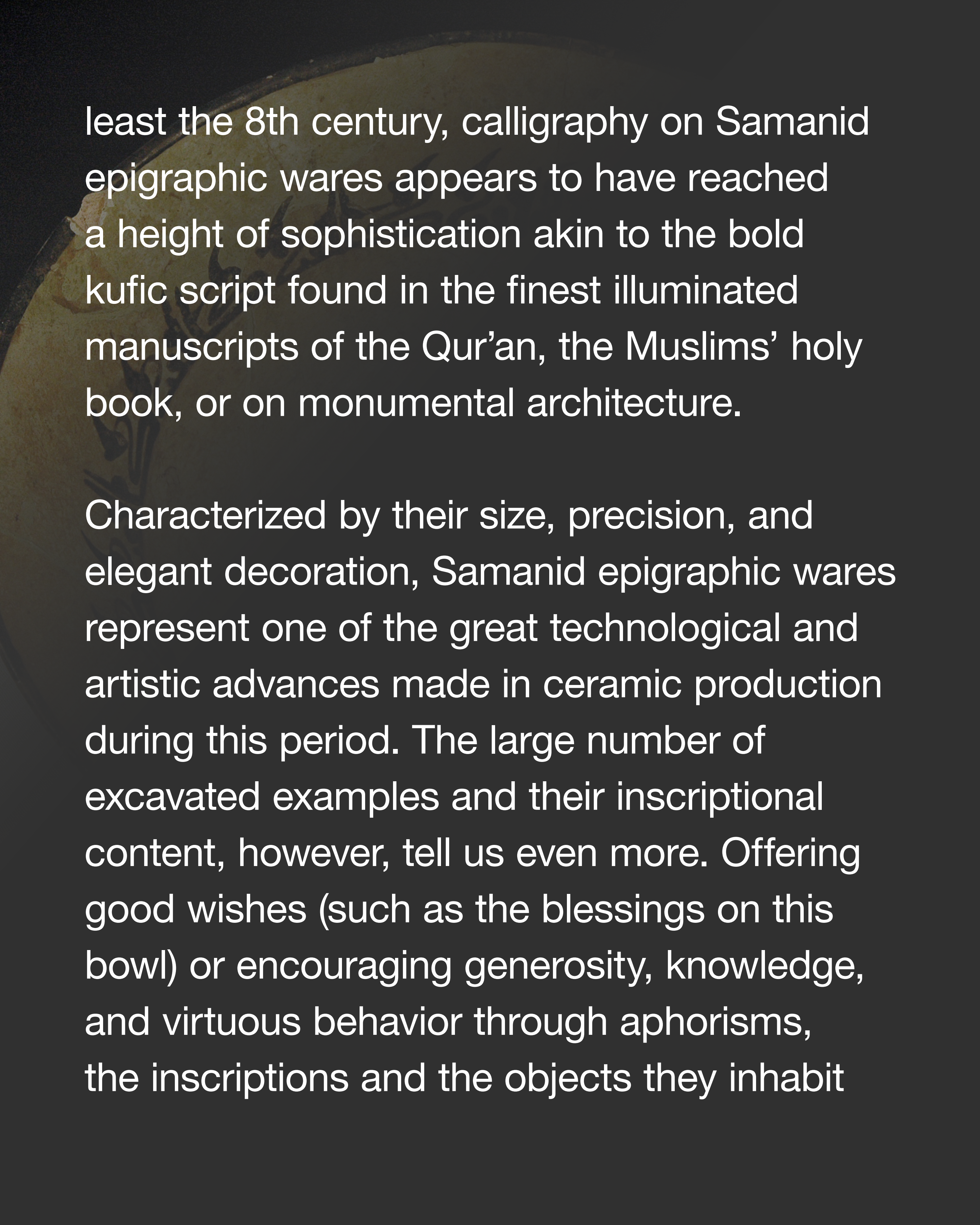
the Abbasid caliphate. In the eastern provinces of Khurasan and Transoxiana, two cities ³/₄ Nishapur, in northeastern Iran, where this bowl was probably made, and Samarqand, in modern Uzbekistan ³/₄ emerged not only as political and cultural hubs on par with the cosmopolitan Abbasid capital of Baghdad, but also as the leading centers for fine-quality ceramic production in the 10th and 11th centuries. This period coincided with the independent rule of the region by the Persian Samanid dynasty.

Made of a reddish-brown clay fabric known as earthenware, the dish was covered in a white slip made of diluted clay solution, a trace of earlier efforts by Iraqi potters to emulate the hard-white kaolin surface of Chinese porcelain.

A close-up photograph of a ceramic dish, likely a bowl or plate, showing a stylized bird design in the center and a band of calligraphy around the rim. The background is dark, and the text is overlaid on the image.

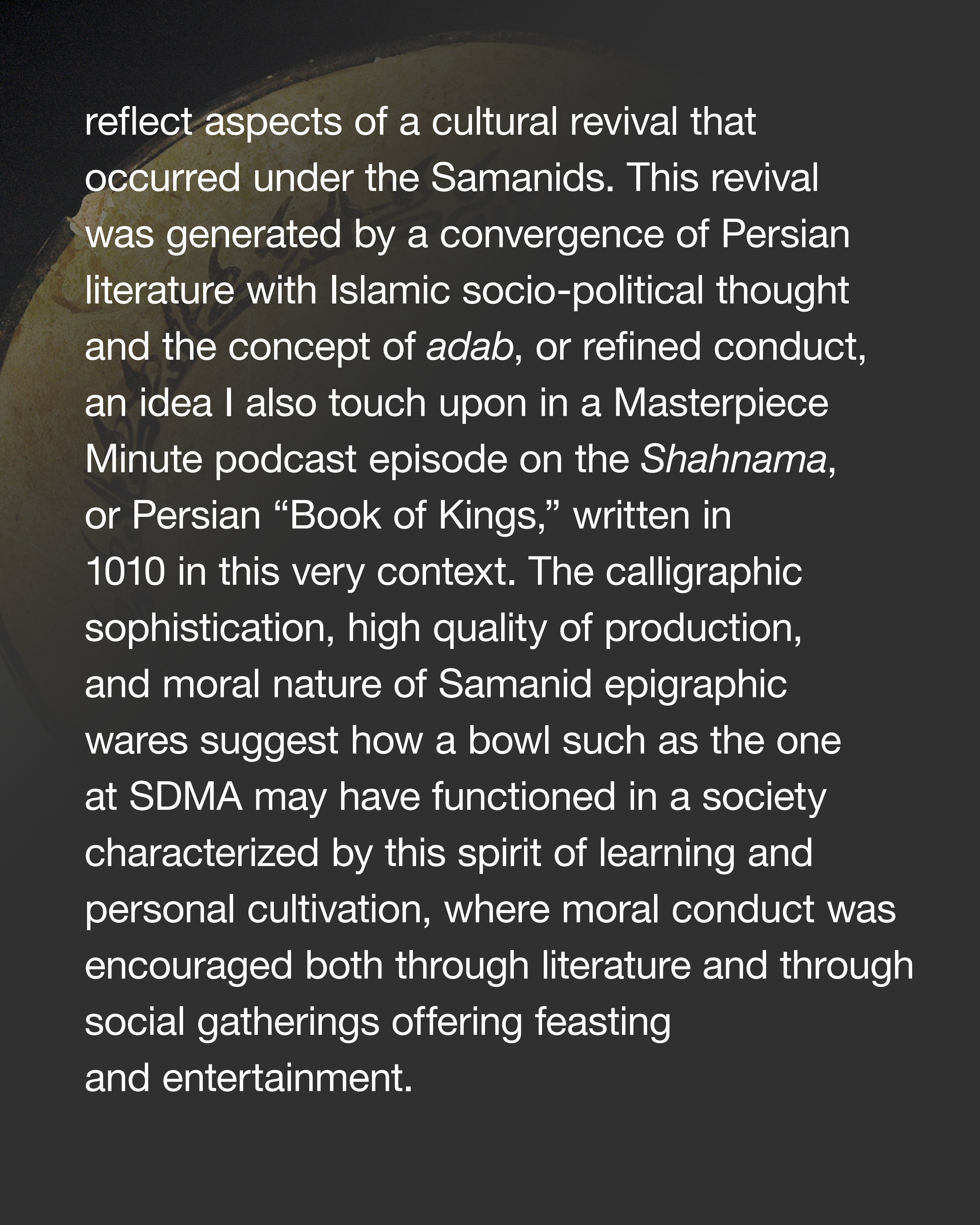
A brownish-black slip colored with mineral pigments was then used to paint the rim, inscription, and stylized bird at center over the white slip before the object was applied with a transparent glaze and finally fired. The resulting “black-and-white” contrast may have been inspired by the niello-on-silver decorative technique seen in contemporary metalwork, which also inspired similar shapes in ceramic vessels.

The most striking feature of this dish, however, is the band of calligraphy circling the interior wall. Executed with precision in a stylized kufic script, it repeats the Arabic phrase *baraka*, or “blessings,” with a few possible appearances of *Allah*, the Arabic word for God. While writing as decoration on Islamic ceramics dates to at

The background image shows a fragment of a ceramic bowl, likely a Samanid epigraphic ware. It features intricate black calligraphic inscriptions in Kufic script on a light-colored, possibly glazed, surface. The fragment is set against a dark, textured background.

least the 8th century, calligraphy on Samanid epigraphic wares appears to have reached a height of sophistication akin to the bold kufic script found in the finest illuminated manuscripts of the Qur'an, the Muslims' holy book, or on monumental architecture.

Characterized by their size, precision, and elegant decoration, Samanid epigraphic wares represent one of the great technological and artistic advances made in ceramic production during this period. The large number of excavated examples and their inscriptional content, however, tell us even more. Offering good wishes (such as the blessings on this bowl) or encouraging generosity, knowledge, and virtuous behavior through aphorisms, the inscriptions and the objects they inhabit

The background of the image is a dark, textured surface. On the left side, there is a vertical strip showing a portion of a manuscript page. The page is aged and yellowed, with intricate Persian calligraphy in dark ink. The text on the page is written in a cursive style, typical of the Samanid era. The calligraphy is dense and fills most of the page. The background of the entire image is a dark, almost black, textured surface that provides a high contrast for the white text of the main paragraph.

reflect aspects of a cultural revival that occurred under the Samanids. This revival was generated by a convergence of Persian literature with Islamic socio-political thought and the concept of *adab*, or refined conduct, an idea I also touch upon in a Masterpiece Minute podcast episode on the *Shahnama*, or Persian “Book of Kings,” written in 1010 in this very context. The calligraphic sophistication, high quality of production, and moral nature of Samanid epigraphic wares suggest how a bowl such as the one at SDMA may have functioned in a society characterized by this spirit of learning and personal cultivation, where moral conduct was encouraged both through literature and through social gatherings offering feasting and entertainment.

Thank you for listening. This has been Ladan
on Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA!

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