

Persian Ceramic in the Bujang Valley

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Abstract

Lembah Bujang has a long history that goes back 1,500 years ago. The rich archaeological finds have at least sealed an important part of Malaysia's history - the evidence that Malaysia and South East Asia had already entered the international arena of economics and ergonomics a long, long time ago. Bujang valley stretches all the way from Gunung Jerai in the North to Sungai Muda in the South. The area concentrated around the mouth of Sungai (River) Muda has been of economic importance to Kedah since as early as the 5th Century AD. Middle Eastern (Iran - Iraq) ceramics found in the Valley were proof that the Iranian traders were already making frequent visits to the area during these early periods. The 7th century, trade with Iran - Iraq, Indians, Arabs and Chinese merchants in the Straits of Melaka had increased tremendously and the Bujang Valley evolved into an entrepôt. The early mariners were totally reliant on the monsoon seasons, which also was dictated by the wind patterns. Therefore, it was impossible to make a voyage from China to India in one season. The traders had to wait out for the wind change in safe harbours such as at Bujang Valley. Iranian ceramics found in Bujang Valley are witness for this travelling between Malaysia from (Bujang Valley) to Iran in this period of time.

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Bujang Valley or Lembah Bujang is a sprawling historical complex and has an area of approximately 224 square km. Situated near Merbok, Kedah, between Gunung Jerai in the north and Muda River in the south, Bujang Valley stretches all the way from Gunung Jerai in the North to Sungai Muda in the South. (Nik Hassan 1990) in *Antiquities of Bujang Valley*. Museum Association of Malaysia. The area concentrated around the mouth of Sungai (River) Muda has been of economic importance to Kedah since as early as the 5th Century AD (www.journeymalaysia.com.mht) (pixel.media.asia.com). It is the richest archaeological area in Malaysia.

These archaeological remains indicate that there had been a Hindu-Buddhist polity here. The name itself is roughly translated into "Serpent Valley". The area consists of ruins that may date more than 1,500 years old. More than fifty ancient tomb temples, called *candi* (pronounce "chandi"), have also been unearthed. The most impressive and well-preserved of these are located in Pengkalan Bujang, Merbok.

The Bujang Valley Archaeological Museum is also located here. (www.journeymalaysia.com.mht). That Museum is the only museum in Malaysia which exhibits archaeological collections that serves as evidence of the existence of a trade and Hindu/Buddhism propagation center in Southeast Asia from the 5th to the 12th century AD. (www.malaysia.alloexpat.com/malaysia_departmenten...). These archaeological evidence clearly shows that Lembah Bujang was a central port which served as a trade centre for traders dominating the trading routes between the eastern and western countries especially the Chinese, Indian, Iran and Arab traders as well as Malay traders in the Malay archipelago who monopolized spice and exotic jungle goods trade for Middle East export (www.malaysia.alloexpat.com/malaysia_departmenten...).

Research also indicates that there had been a Hindu-Buddhist kingdom here possibly as early as 300 CE.. (pixel.media.asia.com). It seems that the settlements in the valley prospered. Archaeological finds which can be ascribed chronologically to eighth and ninth centuries are more abundant and varied. They included imported Chinese ceramics such as T'ang white porcellaneous ware with very thick but low base ring which was also found at Samarra in the Middle East; and Middle Eastern types: Sassana-Islamic, splashed and splashed-Sgraffiate ceramic types which can be dated from the seventh to the eleventh centuries (Nik Hassan 1990. *Antiquities of Bujang Valley*. Museum Association of Malaysia p; 87). They are evidence of travelling and trade between Malaysia with Iran and Iraq in that period and that was possible by using Silk Road during that time.

Indeed as early as fourteen hundred years ago, during China's Eastern Han Dynasty, a sea route, although not part of the formal Silk Route, led from the mouth of the Red River near modern Hanoi, through the Melaka Straits to Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka and India, and then on to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea kingdom of Axum and eventually Roman ports. From ports on the Red Sea goods, including

silks, were transported overland to the Nile and then to Alexandria from where they were shipped to Rome, Constantinople and other Mediterranean ports. (Casson, Lionel 1989. *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*. Text with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary. Princeton University Press).

Another branch of these sea routes led down the East African coast called "Azania" by the Greeks and Romans in the 1st century CE as described in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (and, very probably, 澤散 Zesan in the 3rd century by the Chinese), (Wood, Francis (2002). *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. pp. 9, 13–23) at least as far as the port known to the Romans as "Rhapta," which was probably located in the delta of the Rufiji River in modern Tanzania (The Egypto-Graeco-Romans and Panchea/Azania: sailing in the Erythraean Sea." Felix A. Chami. In: *Society for Arabian Studies Monographs 2 Trade and Travel in the Red Sea Region*. Proceedings of Red Sea Project I held in the British Museum October 2002, pp. 93-104. Edited by Paul Lunde and Alexandra Porter).

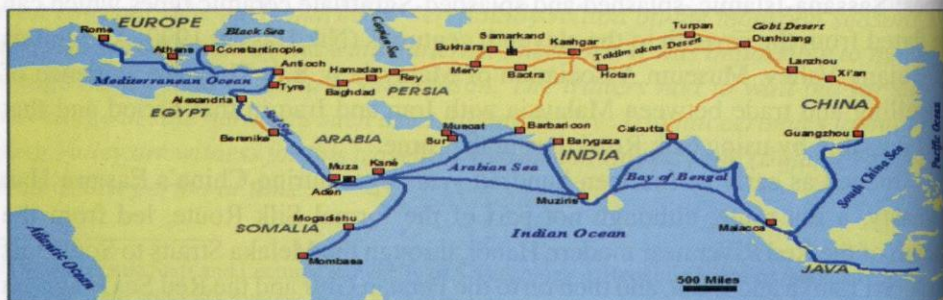
The Silk Road extends from southern China to present day Brunei, Thailand, Melaka, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Iran and Iraq, (Wood, Francis (2002). *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. pp. 9, 13–23.

And also without stopping the Silk Road had many different routes from Melaka to Iran:

From Melacca to Guangzhou in China, Xian, Lanzhou, Dunhuang, Turpan, Kashgar, Samarkand, Marv, Rey, Hamadan, Baghdad, and

From Melacca to Guangzhou in China, Xian, Lanzhou, Dunhuang, Hotan, Bactra, Marv, Rey, Hamadan, Baghdad, and

From Melacca to Musinis (India), Barbarioon, Kashgar, Bactra, Marv, Rey, Hamadan, Baghdad, and (people.hofstra.edu/.../conclen/silkroad.html)



Map 1. Silk road

The Blue glazed pottery

The history about the glazed pottery and faience indicates that it was invented and introduced in Egypt during the early fourth millennium B.C. (Fehervari, Geza, 2000 *Ceramics of the Islamic world in the Tareqrajab Museum*. I.B.Tauris publisher, London, New York p. 23. pic: s).

The turquoise blue alkaline glaze was first applied on small steatite objects and later on moulded quartz frit ware. The use of this early faience, which became known as "Egyptian faience", soon spread to neighbouring countries, amongst them Parthian Iran, as is attested by the excavations at the famous Parthian site of Dura Europos on the banks of the Tigris and at several sites of their Empire. The manufacture of these alkaline glazed vessels continued throughout the Sasanian period right up to early Islamic time. Shapes, colour of the glaze or even the decoration hardly changed for centuries thus it is difficult to date them precisely or to separate pre-Islamic vessels from early Islamic ones. To illustrate this point it is sufficient to refer to green glazed single-handled jar in the Nasser D.Khalili collection, dated to the seventh century AD or earlier and amphora, identified as Iranian of the second century AD. . (Fehervari, Geza, 2000. *Ceramics of the Islamic world in the Tareqrajab Museum*. I.B.Tauris publish, London, New York p. 23. pic: s).

One technique in Sasani-Islamic period in Iran was to use only one glaze for covering the ceramic. This color some time was blue and some time green, in the Islamic period, reign Ilkhanid period 1256 AD (http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ilkh/hd_ilkh.htm). During the of Hulako Khan in Iran, one kind of the vessels covered with a thinner layer of glaze, blue-green or lazuli in the colour. However, the artisans centers for making the ceramics across Iran, were Sultanieh, Tabriz, Varamin, and Sary. (Tohidi, Faegh, 2003, *Pottery technique and Art*, Tehran, Samt, p. 42).

However archaeologists believed that some ceramic they found in Bujang Valley came from Middle East, Iran and Iraq about 7-10 AD .(Nik Hassan, 2007, *Lembah Bujang dari perspektif arkeologi dan pelancongan*, universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, p. 210).

This kind of ceramic was brought by Middle east traders when they were in Tioman Island and after that to Kedah and exchanged with Malaysian product. (Nik Hassan, 2007, *Lembah Bujang dari perspektif arkeologi dan pelancongan*, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, p. 210).

Those ceramics have different shapes, same like jug, bowl, vessel and blue green colours. (Nik Hassan, 2007, *Lembah Bujang dari perspektif arkeologi dan pelancongan*, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, p. 210).



Plate 1a & b. Imported Ceramic. Sherds, Splashed-Sgraffiate Wares. Sites 21/22, Pengkalan Bujang, Bujang Valley.

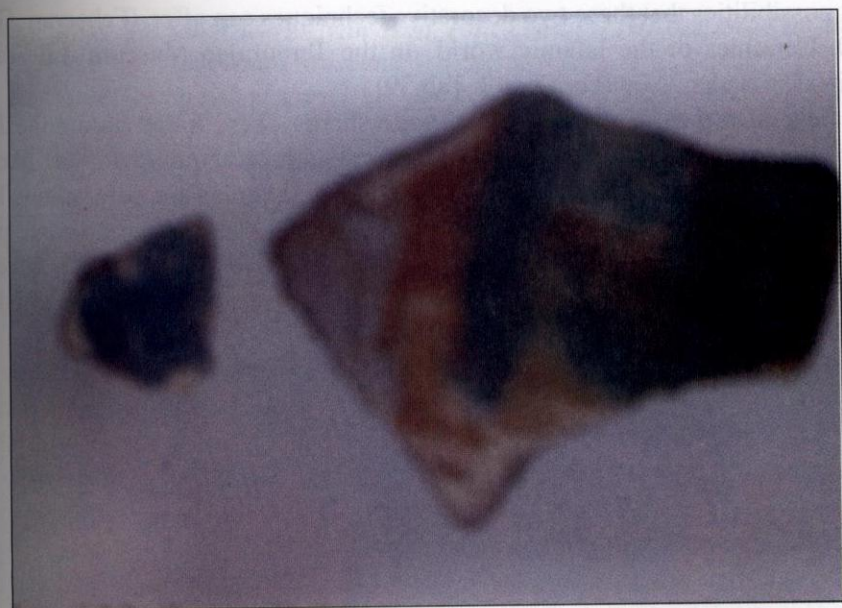


Plate c. Imported Ceramic. Sherds, Splashed-Sgraffiate Wares. Sites 21/22, three colors Timor period, Bujang Valley.

d. Imported Ceramic. Sherds, Splashed-Sgraffiate Wares. Sites 21/22, Pengkalan Bujang, Bujang Valley.

Splashed-sgraffiate ware (plate 1)

One method of applying colour to pottery is to add colouring oxides to the glaze itself. Coloured glazes have been widely used on earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain and have led to the development of special techniques in which patterns were incised, or outlined with clay threads (*cloisonné* technique), so that different coloured glazes could be used in the same design without intermingling; for example, in the *lakabi* (*laqadi*), also called *Kâshân Ware* wares of the Iran in Middle East. (www.britannica.com/.../Incising-sgraffito-carving-and-piercing). In Islâmîc ceramics, that style of pottery can be associated with Kâshân, Persia (Iran), from about the middle of the 11th century until the end of the 14th century. The name (*lakabi*, "painted") is a misnomer, actually referring to an incised design decorated with different coloured glazes separated by clay threads. Colours used were blue, yellow, purple, and green. Some *lakabi* wares were also made at Ar-Raqqah, on the Euphrates (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/328073/lakabi-ware>). This three colors dish the surface of the interior are dominated by a large four-petal flower. The petals have mustard colored splashes and simple incised scrolls and manganese dots among the petals. Splashes of green and brownish yellow were applied all over. The successful combination of the sgraffiato designs with splashes makes this piece very attractive and at the same time demonstrates what possibilities that these two decorative techniques can offer. (Fehervari, Geza 2000. *Ceramics of the Islamic world* in the Tareqrajab Museum. I.B. Tauris publisher, London, New York p. 49. Tab 39).

Several pieces of three coloured ware sherds were found during the 1976 excavation at Sites 21/22. They came from a depth of about 75cm, just like the green-glazed sherds. The colours are dark green, light green and pale yellow. They are not as bright as the T'ang Three coloured wares. The body has a white paste and medium soft; presumably, it was not fired at a high temperature. It is believed to have originated from the Middle East and the provenance was either Persia or Iraq. (www.britannica.com/.../Incising-sgraffito-carving-and-piercing).

Sgraffiate or sgraffito ware was loosely defined as any pottery with a design carved or engraved on the surface while the clay is biscuit hard and then covered with transparent glaze and fired. More properly, it should be confined to those made of coarse clay with a coat of white slip; the decoration is cut, through the slip and when covered with a clear lead-glaze, shows dark colour in contrast to the surrounding surface. The Romans used the technique in Middle East until the eighth to ninth centuries. (See Arthur Lane, "The Early Sgraffito ware...", 33 and "Dr. White House," *Islamic glazed pottery in Iraq and Persian Gulf; the ninth and tenth centuries*, ANNALidel Istituto Orientale de Napoli, 39 (n.s. xxix), 1979, 45 and 59, he discusses the origin of the glaze type and the beginning of that type of ware; t (Nik Hassan, 1990, *Antiquities of Bujang Valley*, p. 80, Plate 35a); (Lane 1937-1938, whitehouse 1979). The date for this type of ware is about tenth/eleventh (10th-11th) centuries. (Nik Hassan, 1990, *Antiquities of Bujang Valley*, p. 80, Plate

35a) Et. (Nik Hassan, 2007, Lembah Bujang dari perspektif arkeologi dan pelancongan, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, p: 212, tab 133).

They are the same like some Splashed ware ceramics with three colors which will be described below:



Plate 2a. Bowl Splashed ware, Iran Iran 10th century. Ht. 6.5 cm, Top diem. 16.5 cm. Tareqrajab Museum.

2b. Small jar. Splashed ware Iran 10th century. Ht. 9.5 cm, Top diem. 9.5 cm. Tareqrajab Museum.

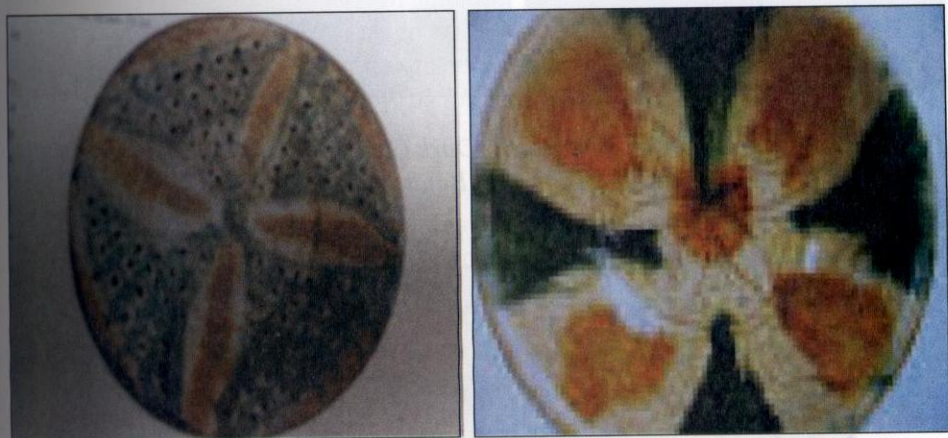


Plate 2c. Large Dish, Splashed Sgraffiato ware Iran, 10th or early 11th century Ht. 5.5 cm, top diam. 29.2 cm. Tareqrajab Museum.

2d. Iran Sgraffito-ware pottery was developed by Iranian potter. About 1100 - 1150 A.D.

The plate 2b is similar with plate 1d that is a small jar splashed ware from Iran 10th century, like most of the splashed ware, this one was also made of buff earthenware which was then coated with a coloured grand slip on which the green and manganese purple splashed were applied. The vessel has straight flaring sides and rests on raised flat base. A third example is a small jar with upward tapering sides, resting on a raised flat base. Both sides of the vessel are coated with a yellow ground slip which partially continues on the base. The outside of the vessel is decorated with splashes of green and manganese purple and there are two incised parallel concentric lines below the rim. Perhaps these incised lines can be considered as the first step towards the *sgraffiato* designs which played such an important role in the second phase of these splashed wares.

The plate 2d is *sgraffiato* ware. The word “*sgraffiato*” is derived from the Italian word “*sgraffiare*” meaning “to scratch.” The vessel is covered with a white slip and a design is carved through it. Glaze is applied before firing. The Iranian *Sgraffito*-ware pottery was developed by Iranian craftsman, about 1100 - 1150 A.D. (www.vanhollowpottery.com/A%20Pottery%20Histor...).



Plate 3a & b. Imported Ceramic. sherds, Dark Green Wares (Middle Eastern), Sites 21/22, Pengkalan Bujang, Bujang Valley.



Plate 4. Imported Ceramic. Sherds, Splashed-Sgraffiato Wares. Sites 21/22, Pengkalan Bujang, Bujang Valley.

Dark-green or Blue glazed ware

This type of ware has a dark-green glaze and its body has a whitish paste. The glaze is much darker than the Chun-lu-hsien green glazed ware referred to by Nils Palmgren (Nik Hassan, 1990, *Antiquities of Bujang Valley*, p. 78, Plate 34a; (Nils Palmgren, *Sung Sherds*, 322, Plate 323; Nik Hassan, 2007, *Lembah Bujang dari perspektif arkeologi dan pelancongan*, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, p. 211).

The Sherds found at the Sites 21 and 22 and without foot-ring. Presumably, it originated from the Middle East and may be dated to period earlier than that of the splashed-sgraffiate.

The technique is produced by applying a slip coat of liquid clay over the whole of the body of the pot. When it is leather hard a design is scratched through the slip to reveal the contrasting body of the pot beneath. (www.gtj.org.uk/en/small/item/GTJ17101/) It was revived in Iran and Mesopotamia about the 9th century AD. (www.britannica.com/.../Incising-sgraffito-carving-and-piercing). Its provenance in the Middle East was either Persia or Iraq. (Nik Hassan, 1990, *Antiquities of Bujang Valley*, p. 78, Plate 34a); The sherds have been identified after consultation with Abu Ridho who is an Indonesian specialist on Chinese ceramics; Mrs. Margaret Medley; and Dr. Geza Fehervari. The latter has helped with the identification and date. The date of the splashed-sgraffiate ware is based on the assumption that the type of glaze was adopted after the Sassanian-Islamic type, after the ninth century. See Arthur Lane, "The Early sgraffiate ware of the Near East", *TOCS*, 15, 1937, 35-36).

The dark blue Shreds have a very fine white paste and rib pattern. A very thick blue shining or glossy covers the outer body of the ware and the inner part of the ware is covered with a thinner layer of glaze, less blue in colour. Alastair Lamb mentioned this type of blue glazed ware at Takuapa; he classified it as Middle Eastern and attributed a date in range of the seventh to eighth centuries. This type of ware is found in all layers of excavated trench in Sungai Mas. (Nik Hassan, 1990, *Antiquities of Bujang Valley*, p. 79, Plate 34a).

Ceramic Design

One of the pieces of ceramic vessels (the biggest one) is adorned with circumferential bands on the painted body, externally. (Plate 4, number I), that is the same as plate 5 number a.

This style of Islamic ceramic proved very popular in Iran and Iraq and was also reproduced in neighbouring Christian countries, such as Cyprus and Greece. (<http://cgi.ebay.com.my/wseBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&item=150347184943>).

One of the pieces, the ceramic vessel (III) is sculpted with three parts of ovals repeat with same central "U".

Another one (V) have four rows (two rows each one is dabble) of oblique lines facing in opposite directions, forming an "wave" repeated parallel pattern all over. This pattern is then framed at the top by two horizontal lines and at the bottom by three lines, they can be compared with Iranian patterns two jugs below:

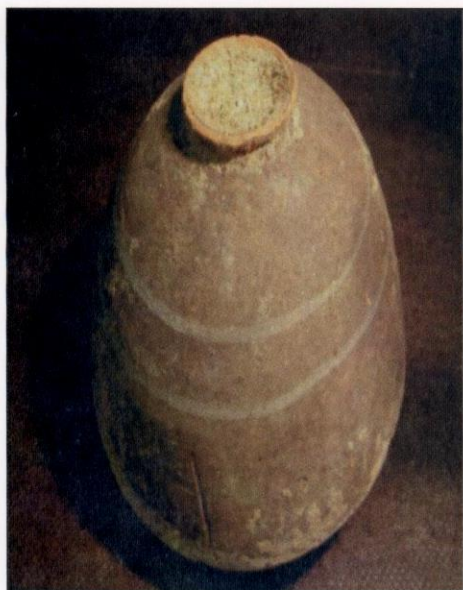


Plate 5a. Islamic ceramic brown banded bowl 1400AD.

5b. Larce Jar. Monochrome glazed with appliqué decoration. Iran or Iraq, Sasanian-Islamic, 7th-8th century A.D.

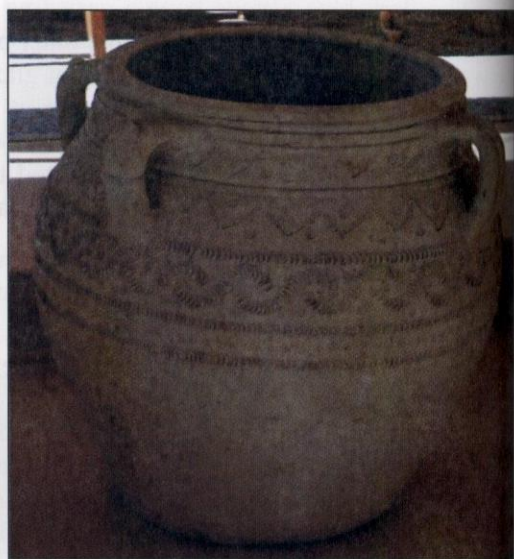
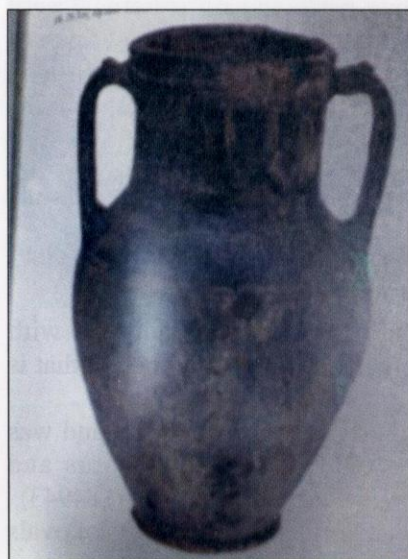


Plate 5c. Amphora, monochrome glazed. Syria or Iran. Sasanian Period, 3rd or 4th century A.D. . Ht. 26.5 cm, top diam. 13.2 cm.

5d. Persian jug about 9th-10th century with horizontal bands and wave in hold the body.

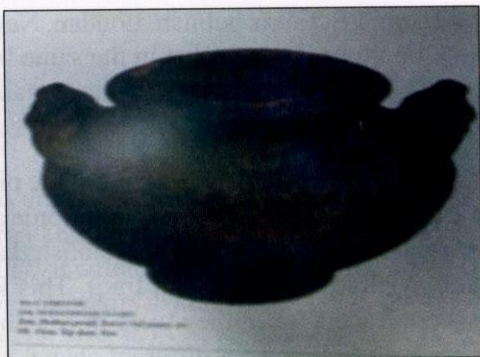


Plate 6a. Imported Ceramic. herds, Dark Green Wares (Middle Eastern), Sites 21/22, Pengkalan Bujang, Bujang Valley.

6b. Jug, Monochrome Glazed. Iran, Partian period, 2nd-3rd century AD. Ht. 16cm, top diam. 9 cm.

5b: vessel is closely related in shape and even in decoration. The latter piece, the amphora, is almost identical to another which was illustrated by Fukai who also considered it to be of the second century AD, but of Syrian origin. (Fehervari, Geza, 2000. *Ceramics of the Islamic world in the Tareqrajab Museum*. I.B.Tauris publish, London, New York p. 23. pic:s).

5c: The design of amphora in the collection is coated with a very dark green glaze. In fact it may have been burnt one time, either during firing in the kiln, or at a later date, since the green glaze in places has turned almost completely black. The decoration of this vessel is some what unusual; the shoulder is furnished with several incised concentric lines all around, either below or above the points where the handles are attached. The cylindrical neck, instead of buttons reveals a series of combed wavy lines placed one above the other, resembling a curtain. In spite of these major differences as compared to the familiar amphorae decoration, this vessel probably date from the third or fourth centuries, that is from late Partian or early Sasanian period and its provenance could be either Syria, Mesopotamia or Iran. (Fehervari, Geza, 2000. *Ceramics of the Islamic world in the Tareqrajab Museum*. I.B. Tauris publish, London, New York p. 49. Tab 39).

5d. A jug about 9th-10th century, a very tall crème slip storage vessel with 2 small loop handles at top. Five horizontal bands adorn vessels with small incised band beneath opening (13.5"). Five small ram's head shaped figures around top of vessel with the sixth resembling a seahorse. A great decorator piece. Height of vessel is 36.5". (Ancient Persian Art Auction Sunday, April 7th Featuring The Jay Gluck Collection of Ancient Persian Art. Catalogue texts for past Malter Galleries auctions (www.maltergalleries.com/archives/auction02/04..)) The design of plate 6a is the same like a jar found in Iran during of Partian period (6b), in 2nd or 3rd century A.D and now displayed in the Tareqrajab Museum in Kuwait. (Fehervari, Geza, 2000. *Ceramics of the Islamic world in the Tareqrajab*

Museum. I.B.Tauris publish, London, New York p. 24. pic 1). This design is coated with one row of cross that in the same band (tressed) in decoration.

Conclusion

By studying and comparing some pieces of ceramics found in Bujang Valley in Malaysia between 7-10 AD with some artifacts from Iran displayed at the 'Tareq Rajad Museum will help to establish that Ceramics found in Bujang Valley came from Middle East (Iran and Iraq). This kind of ceramic was brought by Middle eastern traders when they were in Kedah and exchange with Malaysian products. Those ceramics have different shape, some like jugs, bowls, vessels and other types, they were made by technique just like making dark-green colours or blue glazed, and some ceramics Lakabi and others are three colours.

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www.malaysia.alloexpat.com/malaysia_departmen...
(UK Islamic Ceramic Brown Banded Bowl 1400 AD. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ilkh/hd_ilkh.htm)
www.britannica.com/.../Incising-sgraffito-carving-and-piercing
Map.people.hofstra.edu/.../conclen/silkroad.html
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