

Conical Bowl with Kufic Inscription

9th-10th Century, Nishapur, Iran

Ceramic

Diameter: 21 cm

A glazed white ceramic bowl which rises from a thin circular foot and broadens evenly to the rim. An inscription is painted around the rim in bold but elegant serif kufic calligraphy, reading: ‘Knowledge and forbearing are both the essence of generosity, a man is an ornament if the twain do meet’.

This bowl exemplifies the ‘black-and-white’ ceramic wares discovered at Nishapur in the 1930s and 1940s. These bowls are inscribed with the first extant examples of Arabic proverbs in the Islamic world, making them a key piece of Arabic literary history. The medieval city of Nishapur had been a central trading town since it was established in the third century. By the ninth through twelfth centuries, Nishapur had become an important cultural and political centre for the Samanid empire (819-1005). During this time it, the city was home to a mix of different cultural groups, including the native Persian-speaking population and a new influx of Arab elites and merchants. It is likely that bowls such as this one were produced for this emerging Arabic-speaking market.