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Some Ornamented Bricks of Bangladesh: An Art-Historical and Symbolic Study

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Abstract: Terracotta is a very significant archaeological evidence in the context of Bangladesh. The geographical and geological formation of Bengal, clay etc., the main raw material of terracotta which are widely available in this region, for that a long tradition of using terracotta has been developed here. Apart from this, the scarcity of stone also played an important role in the popularity of terracotta art. Being a humid climate region, salt can easily form in the brick structures here and the durability of the structure fades over time. To overcome this challenge, the past people used terracotta plaques on the structure which on the one hand made the structure durable as well as increased the aesthetic beauty or excellence. Due to these various reasons, the use of terracotta art became popular in the Bengal region. Recently, the law enforcement forces, especially RAB-3, seized a large number of terracotta artifacts during smuggling from various places in Bangladesh and handed these over to the Department of Archeology (henceforth DoA), Government of Bangladesh after completing the legal procedure. The Department of Archeology organized an exhibition of 40 selected terracotta objects including recovered 25 artifacts and 15 artifacts from their own collection, later publishing a reference catalog on these 40 terracotta objects. The catalog presents very short and brief information about the objects and often that information is not very clear. Out of 40 exhibits of the exhibition, there are eight terracotta objects which are related to ornamented bricks.

Keywords: Terracotta artifact, Art, Bricks, Ornamentation, Archaeology.

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Terracotta objects are unique archaeological evidence in Bangladesh, reflecting the region's history, religious beliefs, and social life. In Bengal, terracotta art has played a crucial role since the Neolithic Age, remaining a prominent art form through the historical and medieval periods. The abundance of clay in the deltaic region contributed to the expansion of terracotta art, which was used in both religious and secular buildings. Many terracotta artifacts have been discovered at archaeological sites, revealing insights into daily life, religious beliefs, and creative expressions of past societies. Despite its historical importance, terracotta has been largely neglected in research, particularly

in Bangladesh. The region's scarcity of stone and the easy availability of clay made terracotta popular for construction, and it was used extensively in both Hindu and Muslim architecture until the mid-19th century. Decorative terracotta objects were used not only to beautify buildings but also to protect them from the tropical climate.

A large number of terracotta objects have been recovered from smugglers and handed over to the Department of Archaeology in Bangladesh. A special exhibition was organized to display 40 selected terracotta objects, and a commemorative catalog was published. However, this catalog is incomplete and contains conflicting descriptions, which the current study seeks to address by providing a comprehensive and revised with specially selected eight ornamented bricks, based on historical and archaeological sources.

The present research aims (i) to provide detailed descriptions of the ornamentation on eight selected terracotta bricks, and (ii) to conduct a qualitative analysis of these objects within their artistic and cultural contexts.

The eight selected ornamented terracotta bricks invite close examination of their artistic, cultural, and historical significance. Each brick bears intricate designs that attest to the refined craftsmanship of the period. Motifs commonly draw inspiration from nature, religion, or geometry, reflecting both the aesthetic preferences and symbolic vocabulary of the society that produced them. Symmetry, relief depth, and fine detailing offer insights into artisans' technical skill and the tools at their disposal. The ornamentation also carries layered meanings. Floral and animal motifs, alongside religious symbols, embody the beliefs, values, and social structures of contemporary communities. Some patterns likely reference ritual practices, while others allude to everyday life, thus bridging sacred and secular spheres. Terracotta, fashioned from locally available clay and hardened by firing, provided a practical yet expressive medium in regions where stone was scarce. The material's adaptability enabled artisans to combine functional strength with decorative appeal. Ornamented bricks were integral to the architecture of temples, palaces, and other significant structures, where they enhanced both the stability and the prestige of the buildings they adorned. Their presence in prominent sites underscores their role in projecting status and cultural identity.

The stylistic features of these bricks can be associated with specific historical phases and regional traditions in Bangladesh. Tracing these elements reveals patterns of artistic continuity and change, shaped by religious movements, cultural exchanges, and political developments. While many of the bricks remain remarkably well-preserved due to terracotta's resilience in tropical climates, weathering has inevitably obscured some details. Conservation efforts not only safeguard these artifacts but also shed light on the environmental and historical conditions that shaped their survival. By comparing the ornamentation on these selected bricks with terracotta objects from neighboring regions, similarities and differences in artistic expression can be analyzed. This comparison can highlight cross-cultural influences or local innovations in design and construction. The study of these eight selected ornamented bricks provides valuable data for understanding broader archaeological trends. These objects not only reflect the artistic accomplishments of past civilizations but also serve as evidence of the cultural exchanges, religious practices, and technological advances of the time.

Padma Flower Design (Fig. 1)

Four flowers are carved in the four corners of the brick. The description of the terracotta artifacts published by the Department of Archeology identifies it as a sunflower flower. But the sunflower is not the flower of our Bengal region or subcontinent. The primitive origin of the sunflower flower is in the plains of North America. Sunflowers were introduced to Europe by the Spanish in the mid-15th century. Also, looking at the structure of the sunflower, it can be seen that the head is up to 30 cm wide with yellow rays at the edge of the sunflower. Which does not match the flower carved on the mentioned ornamented brick. This ornamented brick looks like other terracotta with blooming Padma flowers. So, we can say the flower design in the center of this ornamented brick has a blooming Padma flower design.



Fig. 1: Padma Flower Design in Brick (Photo courtesy: DoA)

Pattern Design (Fig. 2)

In this ornamented brick there are 3 rows of decoration. Among them is a four-petalled floral design in the middle row, with each petal equally spaced, between each petalled flower there was probably another small floral design. Which is barely understandable but not entirely clear. All have petal designs carved on the top and bottom rows. This design indicates symmetry. The upper right corner of the ornamented brick is slightly broken. The use of this type of decorative brick is seen in abundance in Sultanate buildings, mainly to mark the border of decorations on the walls.

The use of sunflower motifs in the decoration of buildings in the Indian subcontinent has not been seen before. There is no description of the sunflower motif in any literary sources. It is questionable to call this ornamented brick a sunflower motif for associative reasons. But if you look closely, you can see that this motif is not a sunflower but more like a Padma flower. The upper right corner of the brick is slightly broken. Yet the brick is decorated in a very attractive.



Fig. 2: Pattern Design in Brick (Photo courtesy: DoA)

Padma Flower and Pattern Design (Fig. 3)

The top of the ornamented brick is carved with a design of two blooming Padma flowers. Between the two Padma flowers is a lightly designed koruka. There is a design on the bottom but it is not detectable due to erosion. It is difficult to understand from a brick designed in this way, exactly which part of the building it was used for decoration. In the absence of exact information about the spatial context of the artifact, it is not clear what part of the structure this brick was used for.



Fig. 3: Padma Flower and Pattern Design in Brick (Photo courtesy: DoA)

Padma Flower and Rope Design (Fig. 4)

This ornamented brick has a total of 6 Padma flower designs carved on it. Out of which 5 are full bloom and one is half bloom. The bottom of the brick has a rope design carved on it. We know that many temples were built by Hindu rulers before Muslim rule in Bengal. Later, a lot of ornamented bricks were collected from that temple. Which was reused for the decoration of various mosques. In the subcontinent, the Padma flower is considered a symbol of purity in every religion. It cannot be said without any confusion whether this decorated brick was constructed with religious thought or secular and artistic, socio-cultural considerations. Since the primary context of this ornamented brick is unknown, it is not possible to say for sure that the terracotta object was used in a religious or secular building. But since the *dhari* (rope) design is our native style and the Padma flower is our native flower, it can also be made for decorative purposes only.



Fig. 4: Padma Flower and Rope Design in Brick (Photo courtesy: DoA)

Flower and Pattern Design (Fig. 5)

This ornamented brick shows two large blooming flowers, surrounded by smaller floral motifs, carved in a symmetrical arrangement resembling foliated leaves. The pattern design of the brick is indicative of Muslim rule, where such geometric and floral patterns were commonly used due to Islamic prohibitions against depicting animals and human figures in art. While the design of this brick is not perfectly symmetrical, the arrangement of the elements suggests an overall pattern typical of Muslim decorative traditions. The use of these patterned bricks was widespread in Muslim settlements, reflecting the artistic preferences of the time.



Fig. 5: Flower and Pattern Design in Brick (Photo courtesy: DoA)

Padma Flower and Floral Design (Fig. 6)

This ornamented brick has a square shape design. Outside the square is carved a floral design with petals on the right and left and a blooming Padma flower design is carved inside the square.



Fig. 6: Padma Flower and Floral Design in Brick (Photo courtesy: DoA)

Although the Department of Archaeology has described the flower mentioned in this plaque as a sunflower, the multidimensional review prefers to call the flower a Padma flower rather than a sunflower. Another thing is, it is similar to other Padma flower-carved terracotta plaques and sunflower-carved plaques are also unusual in our country so it can be considered as a Padma flower.

Floral Design (Fig. 7)

The use of terracotta in building decoration became a highly esteemed tradition during the Sultanate period (1200-1558 AD), particularly in Bengal. Two key factors contributed to its widespread popularity. First, Islamic theology's prohibition on depicting animals directed artists to focus their creativity on natural motifs, such as vines, leaves, flowers, and fruits. Second, Bengal's geographical lack of stone and the challenges of constructing durable brick structures in a humid climate led architects to adopt terracotta plaques. These plaques not only provided decorative elegance but also helped structures withstand the tropical environment.



Fig. 7: Floral Design in Brick (Photo courtesy: DoA)

The specific terracotta plaque mentioned is adorned with foliage designs, a common motif found in medieval Bengal architecture. Notable examples include the tomb of Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah at Sonargaon and the Adina Mosque in Pandua, built by Sultan Sikandar Shah. Interestingly, the Adina Mosque's decoration features both Muslim and Hindu motifs, blending cultural influences.

Other important structures exhibiting extensive terracotta ornamentation include Gore's Gumti Darwaza, Lawton Mosque, Chhota Sona Mosque, Baro Sona Mosque, Kheraul Mosque, and many others spread across Bengal and neighboring regions. Common decorative themes included foliage, Padma (lotus) flowers, roses, chains, geometric designs, and brick lattices. These

motifs became emblematic of the architectural style of the time, representing the unique fusion of artistic expression under Muslim rule in Bengal.

Arch Design (Fig. 8)

This decorated brick likely dates to the post-Muslim arrival period in the Middle Ages, as its design reflects key elements of Islamic architecture. The prominent arch design is characteristic of Muslim structures, with two floral motifs, likely representing the Padma (lotus) flower, carved on either side of the arch. Grooved arches, as seen here, became a significant feature in Islamic architectural styles.



Fig. 8: Arch Design in Brick (Photo courtesy: DoA)

Patterned bricks like this one were commonly used to decorate the upper sections of doors and windows in Islamic buildings, enhancing both their visual appeal and structural importance. Despite the slight damage to the top left part, analysis confirms that this brick was part of a Muslim structure. A comparable example is found in the Eklakhi Mausoleum, built in the early 15th century CE over the tomb of Jalaluddin Muhammad, the converted son of King Ganesa. The use of such decorative bricks in this period underscores their role in embellishing important Islamic monuments.

Preliminary Observation

When Muslims primarily of Turk-Afghan origin arrived in Bengal in the 13th century and established political authority, they introduced new cultural and religious influences that interacted with the region's existing Hindu traditions. This encounter fostered a distinctive cultural synthesis, which became evident in diverse artistic forms, including clothing, ornamentation, and especially architecture. Architectural transformations were particularly significant. Muslim rulers introduced

new building types, such as tombs and mosques, which were adapted to Bengal's environmental and material conditions. Unlike North India, where stone was abundant, Bengal's builders relied primarily on bricks. While employing local construction techniques, Muslim architects incorporated design elements from Central Asia, particularly in the treatment of façades, thereby reflecting both local adaptation and transregional influence. A hallmark of this synthesis was the use of ornamented bricks carved or molded with intricate patterns. These decorative elements enlivened otherwise flat wall surfaces, adding visual richness and complexity. The blending of indigenous craftsmanship with Central Asian aesthetics reshaped the architectural landscape of medieval Bengal, producing a hybrid style that reflected both continuity and innovation.

In sum, this study underscores how the built environment of medieval Bengal embodied broader cultural shifts. The analysis of architectural forms, materials, and decorative motifs reveals the dynamics of cultural interaction and provides valuable context for interpreting the region's archaeological and historical heritage.

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