

# Varsho - sazi, a fascinating handicraft of Borujerd



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Varsho or nickel silver is an alloy that consists of copper, nickel and zinc. Some of its unique characteristics are high luster, hardness, good ductility and easy malleability. This alloy, which entered Iran from Germany and Poland many years ago, turned into a fascinating material in the hands of craftsmen and artists of Borujerd, western province of Lorestan, visitiran.ir reported. The craft of varsho-sazi was formed and Borujerd eventually became registered as the National City of Varsho as its prac-

tioners created artistic, beautiful and delicate products. Very little is known about the history of varsho-sazi; the findings of this matter are greatly ambiguous and do not provide a clear answer regarding the beginning of this craft in Iran. However, there are some indications about the art of varsho in Seljuk Dynasty and later. But what can be certainly said is that the art of varsho flourished in Borujerd during the Qajar Dynasty. Artists of this city gave special shapes

to the alloy plates by hammering and bending them and created both applicable and decorative products. Some of the products that can be listed were tea serving sets, coal samovar, teapots, sugar cube holders, teacups, and small utensils such as forks and spoons, kohl holders, plates, trays, bowls, braziers, water jars, rose water splinters, etc. Samovars are the most special among them; so much so that there is another craft known as samovar-sazi, or mak-

ing samovars. In fact, it can be said that Borujerd's artists have successfully mixed chasing and hammer working and added an aesthetic aspect to these products. The craft of varsho also has a close connection with other handicrafts such as copper repoussage and metal working. Ali Minagar, late master Rauf, late master Gharib, Reza Golduz, Mohammad Badavar, Alireza Shaddel, Masha'llah Farokhi are some of the great masters of Varsho craft.

Today, in addition to decorative crafts, new products have begun to be made. Usually some varsho products can be found in the homes of each Borujerd family, and they are considered a valuable part of the dowries of young girls of this city. Lorestan is one of the lesser-known travel destinations in Iran and mainly acts as a gateway to neighboring Khuzestan Province, which hosts the UNESCO sites of Susa, Tchogha Zanbil, and Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System.



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## Holagu and the Mongol Empire

In 1227 Changiz Khan, the founder and first khagan of the Mongol Empire, had died. In 1251 his grandson, Mangu, became the Great Khan and two major expeditions were planned. The first was to China, led by the renowned Qubilai (Kublai) Khan, who later became the Great Khan. The second was to Persia, led by Holagu, who later became the Ilkhan. Both were brothers of Mangu and grandsons of Changiz. Holagu led his forces into Iran with the aim of overthrowing the two centres of Islamic faith, the Ismailis in Iran and the Abbasids in Iraq, although his motive was military rather than religious. Ismaili castles fell in 1256 and the head of the community was killed despite his surrender and cooperation. Nasir al-Din Tusi, the great Persian scientist and scholar resident at Alamut castle, accompanied Holagu to Baghdad, which was sacked in 1258, the caliph being beaten to death. Holagu's later invasion of Syria did not succeed. His troops were defeated by the Egyptian ruler: This was the first check to the advance

of the Mongols since the beginning of their campaigns. Yet, as the Ilkhan, he was in possession of a vast empire consisting of Persia, Iraq and parts of Anatolia, centred in Azerbaijan, with Maragheh as the capital, though this was later moved to Tabriz by his son Abaqa. The Ilkhans ruled Iran for about eighty years, from 1260 to about 1340. Both Sa'di and Rumi were contemporaries of Holagu, in their fifties, though this is not evident from Rumi's works. Rumi in fact lived in Anatolia, in the safety of Seljuk Rum. Sa'di left his native Shiraz in the wake of the first Mongol invasion. When he returned thirty years later, in about 1255, he celebrated the peace - 'the leopards had given up leopard-like behaviour' - little knowing that Holagu's troops were on their way. He wrote two poignant elegies, one in Persian and one in Arabic, on receiving the news of the sack of Baghdad: 'The sky would rightly weep blood on the earth full / For the kingdom of Musta'sim, Commander of the Faithful.' He was a friend and admirer of the brothers Shams al-Din and Ata

Malek Joveini, both of them Ilkhan viziers and great men of letters. The mystic poet Fakhr al-Din Araqi also flourished in the thirteenth century, while Hafez in the fourteenth century was a contemporary of the late Ilkhans. There were many other notable poets and writers during the Mongol era, for example Obeid Zakani, Khaju-ye Kermani and Salman Savaji. The later Ilkhans undertook building projects, even a town, of which by far the greatest surviving example is the Oljaitu Mausoleum in Soltaniyeh near the city of Zanjan. In addition, calligraphy, miniature painting and the arts of the book continued to develop, though reaching a pinnacle of perfection only in the fifteenth century. The administration of the realm was, as usual, in the hands of Persian viziers and ministers, who, also as usual, were constantly in danger of losing their lives and possessions. Of the nine grand viziers of the Ilkhans only one died a natural death; others, including great figures such as the Jovieinis and

Rashid al-Din Fazlollah, were killed and expropriated, often together with their families, friends and relations. Military affairs, by contrast, were in the hands of Mongols. The viziers' most important function was to raise finance through taxation. The early Ilkhans, being foreign as well as nomadic, hardly cared about the welfare of the sedentary population, and least of all the peasantry. Their attitude towards their Iranian subjects resembled that of an occupying force rather than an imperial power - they tried to milk their subjects as much as possible. The Iranian peasant was used to a heavy tax burden, but the early Ilkhans' taxation policies were so exploitative that they left little or no motivation for the people. With government policy being to kill the goose that lays the golden egg, frequent financial crises arose. The peasants fled and hid on seeing taxmen, envoys and other officers whom they were obliged to look after and who would often confiscate what little they had left.

