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# ARJĀN TOMB

**ARJĀN TOMB,** the late Neo-Elamite elite burial (ca. 630-550 BCE) near Behbahan in southwestern Iran (Figure 1). In 1982, a bulldozer leveling the ground for the construction of a road leading to a dam on the river Mārun cut through a stonewalled funerary chamber. Except for skeletal remains, all objects were packed and transferred to the National Museum of Iran, in Tehran. The tomb is located near the ruins of the ancient city of Arrajān (Arjān), situated in the vicinity of modern Behbahan, on the eastern boundary of Khuzestan Province, Iran. The Arjān tomb is registered in the Iranian National Registry of Historical Heritage as no. 19288.

*History of scholarship*. A summary report on the finding was published in Persian by Fāʾeq Tawḥidi and ʿAli-Moḥammad Ḵaliliān in 1982, followed by a corresponding publication in English by Abbas Alizadeh in 1985. Further publications dealing with individual materials found in the Arjān tomb have concentrated on the cotton textiles (e.g., Moʿtaqed; Álvarez-Mon, 2015), the Arjān bowl (Ṣarrāf, 1990; Majidzadeh; Stronach, 2003, 2004a, and 2004b; and Álvarez-Mon, 2004), the Arjān beaker (Ṣarrāf, 1990; Álvarez-Mon, 2008), the Arjān candelabrum (Álvarez-Mon, 2010b), and the Arjān ring (Ṣarraf, 1996; Álvarez-Mon, 2011). These publications were updated and incorporated into a doctoral research dissertation submitted in 2006 by Javier Álvarez-Mon. They all form part of a final comprehensive publication by the same author (Álvarez-Mon, 2010a). In this study the burial and related materials are dated to between 630 and 550 BCE.

*The burial.* The rectangular burial chamber was found 1.10 meters below the

surface. It was built by means of stacking together eleven courses of stone slabs of relatively regular size along a nearly east-west orientation and employing large, flat stone slabs for the construction of the rooftop. The walls inside the burial chamber were gypsum-plastered. Inside the tomb there was a U-shaped, bathtub-style, bronze coffin containing the skeletal remains of a single individual, bundles of cotton textiles, large numbers of gold bracteates, a golden "ring," a dagger, and a silver drinking-filtering tube. Outside the coffin lay a diverse assemblage of metal wares, including a candelabrum, a drinking beaker, and a large bronze bowl engraved with registers depicting narratives. Outside the burial there was a stone bowl and a clay tablet written in late Neo-Elamite language (Alvarez-Mon, 2010, pls. 4-92).

*The coffin.* The U-shaped bronze coffin measures 1.32 × 0.60 × 0.60 m. It was made by riveting together two large rectangular panes of bronze by means of narrow bands. The bottom of the coffin and its overhanging ledge were fastened to the main body in the same fashion. Each end has two ribbed pairs of handles riveted in parallel to the center, just below the rim. The bronze lid itself consists of a U-shaped sheet and a separate band riveted around its edge; it preserves three registers of incised decoration representing rows of buds and lotus flowers running parallel to the edge of the lid (Alvarez-Mon, 2010, pl. 8).

*Selected materials from inside the coffin*. (1) Textiles. A total of twelve pieces of textiles were collected. Analysis of the fabrics identified the material as cotton. This is the earliest known physical attestation of cotton-made textiles found in the ancient Near East. It is also the first time we have actual evidence of a garment decorated with fringes bearing embroideries in the shape of rosettes. The additional presence of three different styles of golden bracteates provides a distinctive characterization of the likely style composition of Neo-Elamite garment traditions (Alvarez-Mon, 2010, pl. 13).

(2) The ring. There was a gold-made artifact (Plate I) associated with the deceased's chest. For lack of a better word, it has been described as a "ring" with flaring disc-shaped finials attached to a curved tubular section. Each disc depicts the same scene: two rampant lion-headed griffins posed heraldically around a small palmette-tree atop a mountainous ground within a surrounding circular guilloche. The ring weighs 237 grams and measures an estimated height of 176.19 mm and a width of 112.26 mm.

(3) The dagger. Deposited along the side of the skeleton there was a 31-cm-long

straight dagger with iron blade, a damaged hilt perhaps made of ivory, and a quillon-guard wrapped in gold foil decorated with granulation. The crown surface of the hilt is ornamented with a round, white agate with a brown spot on the center resembling the pupil of an eye set into a gold frame made of granulation. The upper half of the hilt was ornamented with an embossed, circular gold bracteate segmented into chambers forming a pointed rosette (Alvarez-Mon, 2010, pl. 8).

*Selected materials from outside the coffin*. (1) The bowl. A bronze bowl measuring 43.5 cm in diameter and 8.5 cm in depth exhibits on its inner surface an intricate, concentric arrangement of four engraved registers placed around a central rosette (Plate II). The registers are structurally divided into a series of consecutive episodes, the sequence of which is organized along ideological grounds. Distributed among these registers lies a universe of miniature forms inhabited by 112 human figures, 66 animals of 33 species, diverse trees, and artifacts. The "biographical" aspects of these narratives unveil important notions of identity related to a royal status of an individual as well as ideological concerns of religious and cosmological proportions.

(2) The stand candelabrum. The overall structure of the 75-cm-high candelabrum (Plate II) is divided into three distinct units: a head or upper section consisting of a spool-shaped platform held by six lions; a central section in the shape of a long, stylized stem; the pedestal combines a triangular frame made of metallic rods with three distinct elements which have been welded to it: three individual, Atlas-type figures with arms upraised stand centered on the sides of the triangle; they have their hands welded to the forearms of three rampant lions standing on the back of couchant bulls occupying the angles of the triangular frame. The central bulb from which sprouts the stem of the stand is welded to the forepaws of the lions and to the rounded tip of the helmet worn by the Atlas figures.

(3) The beaker. The bronze beaker (Plate III) measures 9.4 cm in diameter (at the rim) and 13.3 cm in height. It is characterized by an upper frieze or register around the neck of the beaker, bearing an incised engraving of six identical, running ostriches, and a lower, bulbous, convex section worked by repousse into the shape of four overlapping lion heads converging on a central rosette.

(4) The inscriptions and tablet. Four objects inside the burial, the bronze bowl, candelabrum, golden "ring," and a silver vessel, were engraved with a Neo-

Elamite inscription reading: "Kidin-Hutran son of Kurluš." This inscription has been dated to around 650 to 525 BCE by François Vallat (pp. 1-17) and to about 605-539 BCE by Marie-Joseph Stève (pp. 20-21). A small clay tablet inscribed throughout was reported to have been found outside the Arjān tomb. Its script appears to be late Neo-Elamite. The inscription has not been translated.

*Historical significance*. Our knowledge of the history of the Neo-Elamite period (ca. 1000 to ca. 539 BCE; see also ELAM i. The history of Elam) has traditionally relied on the sequence of Elamite political history as documented by the Assyrian royal inscriptions and in the Babylonian Chronicles. This situation has led scholars to suggest that the problem of capturing Elamite identity and culture during the Neo-Elamite period can be comparable to that of identifying the Medes, who have been described as an "ill-defined entity, our knowledge of whom is based exclusively on classifications and attestations in other cultures" (Lanfranchi, Roaf, and Rollinger, p. 403). In striking contrast to these views, however, a recent reassessment of the textual and archeological sources dealing with the "Elamite dark ages," a presumed period of anarchy and decadence before Elam found itself absorbed by nascent Persian power and disappeared from history, has prompted alternative views of the late Neo-Elamite period and, consequently, of the genesis of the Achaemenid Persian period as well (see Álvarez-Mon, Garrison, and Stronach). The idea that Elam played a major role in the genesis of the Persian ethnos and the formation of a complex state in Fars has progressively gained the acceptance of many scholars. This idea has been straightforwardly summarized by Mario Liverani's motto (p. 10): "Persia is the heir of Elam, not of Media." Indeed, a recent emphasis on the survival of Elamite traditions suggests that the Persian empire would not have arisen without the organizational, administrative, and cultural foundations laid by Elam (Briant, pp. 92-96; Henkelman, pp. 187-88). In the words of Daniel T. Potts (pp. 306-07), "the Achaemenid empire, however 'Persian' it may have been, in one sense evolved from the Neo-Elamite social, cultural, linguistic and perhaps even political milieu." Coupled with this position is the notion that the Neo-Elamite period experienced the progressive integration of Iranian populations into Elam. This "éthnogenèse des Perses," a label coined by Pierre de Miroschedji, also presumes a process of reciprocity in which Iranian-based traditions would have impacted Elamite culture (see Álvarez-Mon and Garrison, 2011b). Hence, scholars who favor a general reassessment of the sources recommend that Elam played a fundamental role in the genesis of the Achaemenid Persian empire. Yet, because of the relative

absence of archeological fieldwork of note in Iran over the past twenty-five years, most arguments regarding Elamite agency in the origins of Achaemenid Persia have, for the most part, remained working hypotheses yet to be fully substantiated. It is against this broad outline that the fortuitous discovery of the Arjān tomb emerges as one of the most significant finds of recent archeological history.

The single burial from Arjān and related funerary goods attests to a complex social network of influences combining the participation of various artistic and cultural traditions. The burial is linked to a Zagros funerary architectural tradition in its usage of stone (versus a mud-brick tradition, commonly used at Susa). At the same time, the gypsum-plastered walls and floor of the Arjān tomb, its symmetrical design, and the presence of a bathtub-style coffin, follow traditional western Elamite burial practices (attested at Susa and Rāmhormoz). The specific attributes of the bronze coffin are intimately related to Assyrian court-style coffins excavated at Nimrud, Ur, and Zinjirli (Alvarez-Mon, 2010a, pls. 23-29; Wicks, Appendix 1).

Inside the Arjān tomb, we encounter unique masterpieces of superior artistic value and rare craft. The presence of cotton textiles and bracteates considerably expands our knowledge of luxurious garments of the 7th and 6th centuries BCE. Stylistically, the Arjān "ring," the Arjān bowl, the stand candelabrum, and the beaker, came out of an artistic workshop of fundamental originality trained in elite, court-style manufacturing traditions reaching back to Assyrian and Phoenician schools of luxurious crafts that, themselves, may possibly perpetuate artistic practices manifested in the Northwestern palace of Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883-859 BCE) at Nimrud. There is such a high degree of consistency between the stylistic, iconographic, and compositional elements of this material that one could see it as the product of a single workshop, if not the same hand. The dagger from Arjān, however, stands uniquely apart, as it does not seem to follow known Neo-Assyrian or Neo-Elamite lineages, but one may be prejudiced by the nature of its preservation (Alvarez-Mon, 2010, pp. 119-20, pl. 60). The adaptation of Assyrian influences into distinctive Elamite artistic traditions reveals that this workshop is responsible for creating an original visual vocabulary and artistic identity. Hence, the term "Arjān artistic school" is used to describe the craftsmanship of an elite (court-style) workshop well versed in Assyrian artistic schooling, which integrated autochthonous Elamite manufacturing, artistic, and ideological traditions (e.g., Alvarez-Mon, 2010, p. 274). Here, to be

sure, there is continuation of the rich and exceptional metallurgical traditions and iconography expressed both in Elam and in Lorestān, as well as perpetuation of the Assyrian artistic legacy.

The material evidence from Arjān forces the reckoning of a new historical reality underlined by geopolitical and cultural avenues of inquiry that clearly point to aspects of continuity in the cultural and political Elamite record of the 7th and 6th centuries BCE. Heir to the legacy of Assyria and Elam, the "Arjān artistic school" reformulates notions of technical and aesthetic perfection, bringing additional refinement into the artistic heritage of the great metropolis. This artistic production represents an original sensibility exhibiting sophisticated intellectual notions of unity, stability, and permanence—in sum, an orderly worldview. Far from being the manifestation of abrupt change or of a dissolute culture in the midst of closure, this material exhibits the reformulation of Elamite artistic canons and the revitalization of Elamite culture, further revealing that Elamite agency and legacy played a pivotal role in the genesis of Achaemenid Persian civilization.

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