



CERAMICS II. THE NEOLITHIC PERIOD IN NORTHWESTERN PERSIA

CERAMICS

ii. The Neolithic Period in Northwestern Persia

The initial occupation of Persian Azarbaijan by farming groups took place in the second half of the 7th millennium B.C.E. The best known site of this period is Hajji Firuz (Ḥājī Fīrūz) Tepe, located in the Ošnū-Soldūz valley and approximately contemporary with Hasanlu X (ca. 6000-5000 B.C.E.). Although thirteen architectural phases have been distinguished, most of the excavated material comes from the latter part of the sequence, phases D-A (Voigt, 1983).

Hajji Firuz pottery is of soft, poorly fired, but relatively durable fabric. Pieces of cut grass or chaff were mixed with the clay, which also contains natural grit inclusions. Vessels were formed by means of the “sequential slab” technique, in which small flat pieces of clay are joined to form base and side walls (Vandiver, 1985; idem, 1988). Impressions found inside the walls of bowls and jars indicate that coiled baskets were used as forms in which the rounded basal sections were molded. Broad flat bases (and occasionally sides) were shaped on woven reed mats. Most vessels are thick-walled, with light brown-to-orange surfaces and thick gray cores, suggesting that they were fired



rapidly at low temperatures, with an oxidizing atmosphere during the final stage of firing and cooling (Vandiver, 1988; Stuart Fleming, personal communication). Shallow pits filled with ash found adjacent to residential buildings on the site probably represent bonfire kilns (Voigt, 1983, pp. 153-58).

Common vessel forms include large bowls with flat bases and straight sides, which were probably used for cooking; medium-to-large closed bowls for storage and serving; and medium-to-large collared jars for storage (Voigt, 1983, table 23). There are also small-to-medium open bowls, some of which have relatively elaborate ring or footed bases. Simple small jars and cups were found as grave goods in household ossuaries.

The surfaces of most vessels were coated with a thick slip, wet-smoothed, and burnished. Decorative techniques included coating with a thin, iron-rich slip that fired from red to brown; shallow incising (very rare); and painting bold designs in red, brown, or occasionally white (Voigt, 1983, figs. 92-98). The designs consist of large geometric elements arranged on vertical axes repeated around the body of the pot. Horizontal zones, or fields, of decoration correspond generally to structural units, the limits of each field defined by a sharp change in the contour of the vessel wall. For example, on a vessel without a neck there are usually two zones, divided at the point where the wall curves in toward the base (Figure 18); when the vessel has a neck it is defined as a separate zone.

Evidence for change within the Hajji Firuz ceramic industry is limited. The sample for the earliest phases (L-H) is small and highly selected, but it does suggest that the use of a red slip was very common early in the period and that painted decoration was rare in comparison with later phases. Flat trays with deep impressions on the interior (husking trays) were restricted to the early phases. Sherds recovered from the lowest excavated deposit at nearby Dalma (Dalmā) Tepe can be assigned to the Hajji Firuz period on the basis of fabric, form, and surface finish. These ceramics exhibit some unusual attributes, for example, the use of black paint, and, as they lay immediately under the Dalma-period occupation, they presumably date to the end of the Hajji Firuz period (Voigt, 1987).

Within the Urmia basin the Neolithic assemblage from Yanik Tepe to the northeast is sufficiently similar in architecture, bone tools, and ceramics to be considered part of the Hajji Firuz tradition (Burney, 1964; Voigt, 1983, p. 95). Occupation there seems generally contemporary with that at Hajji Firuz,



though it is possible that much of the excavated Yanik Neolithic sample is earlier than the best known Hajji Firuz phases (D-A). There are ceramic parallels between Yanik Late Neolithic and Sialk (Sīalk) 1:3 on the Persian plateau, as well as with Hassuna/Samarra (Ḥassūna/Sāmarrā) in northern Mesopotamia (Voigt, 1983, p. 167).

Techniques of manufacture, painted designs, and vessel forms (husking trays, carinated bowls, and collared jars with ovoid or carinated bodies) also link Hajji Firuz ceramics to such early Hassuna sites as Umm Dabaghiyah (Omm Dabbāḡīya), Telul eth-Thalathat (Tolūl al-Ṭalāṭa) XVI-XV, and Hassuna I-II. The presence of imported sherds, however, indicates that Hajji Firuz phases D-A are contemporary with the latter part of the Hassuna sequence and with succeeding “classic” Samarra (Sāmarrā; Voigt, 1983, pp. 101-02, 163-67, 178-81).

T. Cuyler Young (1962) originally suggested a close relationship between Hajji Firuz and such Zagros sites as Tepe Sarab (Sarāb), but closer examination of the ceramics shows only general technological and stylistic similarities between Hajji Firuz pottery and Sarāb linear ware (McDonald, 1979). On the other hand, there are good parallels in form and decoration between Hajji Firuz and Upper Jarmo ceramics (Voigt, 1983, pp. 161-63); parallels between other sets of artifacts provide further evidence for contact with settlements in the Zagros group, as well as with sites farther west (Voigt and Dyson, in press).

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