



CERAMICS III. THE NEOLITHIC PERIOD IN CENTRAL AND WESTERN PERSIA

CERAMICS

iii. The Neolithic Period in Central and Western Persia

Present knowledge of the development of Neolithic ceramics in Luristan and Kurdistan, covering a period from the late 8th millennium to the middle of the 6th millennium B.C.E. is based primarily on evidence from three excavated sites—Ganj Dareh (Ganj-Dara), Tepe Guran (Gūrān), and Tepe Sarab (Sarāb)—and from surveys carried out southwest of Harsīn, on the Māhīdašt plain, and in the Holaylān valley.

The use of clay for containers and small vessels is attested for the first time in the Near East during the 8th millennium b.c., at a few Early Neolithic villages in Palestine, in northern Syria along the middle Euphrates (Mière, I, pp. 44-70, II, figs. 16-17), and in the fertile plains of the central Zagros mountains (Schmandt-Besserat). At Ganj Dareh the development of two early ceramic traditions has been observed. One is based on the use of clay for figurines and small geometric pieces like cones, disks, and cylinders (Smith, 1976, pp. 15-16). The site is very rich in such objects, which were made of almost pure clay and probably fired at temperatures between 300-700° C in an open campfire. The



same procedure seems to have been followed in producing a number of tiny vessels in varied shapes, from small vases to shallow bowls or dishes 1-9 cm high (Smith, 1978, p. 539). How these miniature vessels were used is unknown, but, like the figurines, they may have had a ritual function or have been used as toys. They are of fine, untempered clay, and the colors range from grayish brown to black. The surfaces are sometimes slightly burnished, and a few sherds, like some of the figurines, are decorated with punctate or crescentic impressions, perhaps made by fingernails. In the Zagros ceramics of this kind represent an early experimental tradition. At Ganj Dareh examples occur in levels D-A (ca. 7300-6900 B.C.E.; Smith and Crépeau, pp. 56-57; Mière, II, fig. 16), and at Tepe Guran, where they are found in levels S-O (ca. 7000-6500 B.C.E.; Meldgaard et al., pp. 113-14 and fig. 14), they are the earliest pottery known. A few similar sherds were found at Tepe Sarah (ca. 6000 B.C.E.; McDonald, pp. 172-173).

The second ceramic tradition originated in the use of clay for mud-walled buildings. In Ganj Dareh D (ca. 7300 B.C.E.) walls were of long rectangular or plano-convex bricks tempered with limestone fragments and chaff. Vegetable temper was also used for large, thick-walled storage jars, sometimes 80-90 cm high, which were sealed to the plastered floors or walls. In the same level at Ganj Dareh, and occasionally in levels C-A as well (ca. 7200-6900 B.C.E.), a number of rim sherds from what may have been large trays or bowls were found (Smith, 1976, pp. 16, 22, fig. 6); they are coarsely tempered with chaff and extremely soft. Evidence of this soft-ware tradition is also found at Tepe Guran, where it occurs for the first time in level R (ca. 6900 B.C.E.) and continues for more than a millennium (Mortensen, 1964, p. 30 and fig. 3), and at Tepe Sarah (early 6th millennium B.C.E.; McDonald, pp. 162ff.). These finds are of buff ware, washed or slipped and sometimes slightly burnished; most sherds come from circular or oval bowls with curved or vertical sides.

The earliest examples of painted ceramics from Persia have been found at Tepe Guran (level R) around 6900 B.C.E. (Mortensen, 1964, p. 30 and fig. 3). Buff-ware bowls and beakers are painted in a fugitive red ocher with open linear motifs reminiscent of basketry and netting (Figure 19).

During the second half of the 7th millennium and continuing through the early 6th millennium B.C.E. a style of painted pottery particularly characteristic of the Zagros Neolithic occurred (Mortensen, 1964, pp. 3311.; Levine and McDonald, 1977, pp. 40ff.; and idem, 1979, pp. 131ff.). Its development can be followed at Tepe Guran (from level O), and it is well represented at Tepe Sarah



and at a number of sites in the Holaylān valley and the plains of Harsīn and Māhīdašt. The red-painted decoration appears on a series of buff ware bowls, which are chaff-tempered, slipped, and burnished. The decoration varies from diagonal arrangements of lines with tadpole-shaped blobs or square or polyhedral spots to a late “close pattern” style, often with small triangles or rectangles left in buff on a red painted background (cf., e.g., Mortensen, 1964, fig. 4). Horizontal bands of zigzag or rhomboid patterns are also common along the rims and carinations of the bowls (ibid., fig. 5; and idem, 1974, fig. 22 a-b, d).

The end of the Neolithic period, toward the mid-6th millennium B.C.E., is characterized by red-slipped bowls, trays, and round-bodied vessels of a fine, chaff-tempered clay. At the latest Neolithic settlement at Tepe Sarab (McDonald, 1979, pp. 173ff.) and at other sites in the Māhīdašt (Levine and McDonald, pp. 40-44) this ware occurs together with sherds of a black-slipped ware sometimes painted in white. Farther south, in the Holaylān valley (Mortensen, 1974, pp. 23ff.), the red-slipped ware was predominant around 5500 B.C.E., but at the same time the earliest sand-tempered black-on-buff sherds appeared, for example, at Sar Asiaban (Sar-e Āsiābān) and Tepe Chena (Čenā) A (Mortensen, 1974, figs. 24, 29, 35).

See also [archaeology i. pre-median. history and method of research](#).

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