



CERAMICS IX. THE BRONZE AGE IN NORTHEASTERN PERSIA

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ix. The Bronze Age in Northeastern Persia

Archeologists have traditionally linked the appearance of burnished gray wares at Tepe Hissar (Ḥeṣār) and Tureng (Tūrang) Tepe in Gorgān during the second half of the 4th millennium b.c., and their possible diffusion westward in the first half of the 2nd millennium, with the arrival of Iranian tribes and their advance onto the Persian plateau. Although Erich F. Schmidt's excavations in 1931-32 established Tepe Hissar, on the southern piedmont of the Alborz range, as the type site for the gray-ware sequence, it lies outside the probable main area of production on the plain north of the mountains, where such sites as Tureng Tepe (Wulsin; Deshayes, 1970; Cleuziou), Shah Tepe (Arne), and Yarim Tepe (Crawford) have been investigated.

The pottery sequence. At Tepe Hissar burnished gray wares first appeared in period IIA, in association with painted wares characteristic of the earlier period I, and constituted the entire assemblage from periods IIB (late 4th millennium) and IIIA-IIIC (3rd millennium). These periods correspond generally to periods II and III at Tureng and Yarim Tepes, though Tureng



period IIIC is divided into phases 1 and 2, the latter not represented at Hissar. At Shah Tepe period III corresponds to Hissar II and period II to Hissar III; Shah Tepe IIa1 may be contemporary with Tureng IIIC2. The few disparities that can be observed in the evolution of gray wares at these sites may represent some local differences, but they also reflect a methodological bias. The sequence at Tepe Hissar was constructed exclusively on the basis of a large quantity of complete vessels found in more than 1,000 graves, that is, of a selection from a much wider array of finds. Jean Deshayes established a more detailed sequence for Tureng Tepe, including pottery from twenty-six settlement levels on mound C, which yielded material related to that from early Hissar IIA-IIIC.

Burnished gray ware is generally of good fabric, made without the potter's wheel, and fired at high temperature (around 900° C) in a reducing atmosphere. A few wheel-made vessels began to appear in Hissar IIIC. There is no distinction between the vessels of IIA and IIB from Hissar; all are simply smoothed, burnished, and sometimes rather crudely polished. Most common are carinated or hemispherical chalices on tall cylindrical feet and hemispherical cups on short everted stands. A few small globular jars and pots with flat bottoms also occur. The decoration consists of a few incised lines, horizontal ribbing on cylindrical vessel feet, and clusters of repoussé knobs. Rather different types appear at Tureng Tepe, notably very large jars with vertical ribbing and clusters of repoussé knobs (found in settlement contexts) and small cylindrical bottles with narrow necks and wide everted rims. The decorative elements match those from Hissar but are more common, especially in period IIB. Typical of this period, though no examples have been published from Tepe Hissar, were small, squat jars with low carinations and all-over incised decoration of oblique or parallel wavy lines in groups.

Period III was characterized by new shapes and a new type of decoration. At Hissar burnished decoration, in which simple geometric patterns were traced with a burnishing tool on broad bands of unburnished surface, occurred only occasionally in IIIA but was quite frequent in IIIB and continued through IIIC. At Tureng Tepe, however, patterned burnishing gradually disappeared during period IIIC1. This difference may reflect the fact that the Tureng sequence is based mainly on settlement pottery. The patterns include horizontal lines, bands of oblique lines in alternating directions, zigzags, cross-hatching, and vertical bands of zigzag.

Vessel shapes in IIIA differed markedly from those of period II; they remained



unchanged through IIIB, though Deshayes noted a tendency to sharper outlines, with heavily marked carination and plastic elements forming “collars” between bodies and necks. These types continued to evolve in IIIC, and some new ones also appeared; by that time, too, the wheel had come into use. Beginning in IIIA, small globular jars with everted necks became common, as did globular or depressed ovoid bottles with cylindrical necks of varying lengths and “collars” where bodies and necks are joined. Two types were most characteristic, however: tall ovoid bottles with short, collared necks and everted rims and wide-mouthed jars with everted rims, concave lower walls below sharp carinations, and narrow bases.

The latter type is not recorded from Tepe Hissar, however. Bowls and beakers of various shapes, sometimes spouted, were abundant in all phases. Composite vessels found at Tureng Tepe and Shah Tepe attest the potters’ skill: Zoomorphic and very schematic anthropomorphic vessels were also found in burials at Tepe Hissar and Shah Tepe.

In period IIIB cylindrical spouts, applied at oblique angles to the bodies of globular bottles or jars, become common; in IIIC1 the upper section of the spout might be horizontal and open along the top, forming a kind of trough. It might also have an extension toward the vessel rim, which has given rise to the term “bridge-spouted.” Such spouts are a distinctive feature of later pottery from western Persia. Jugs with vertical handles linking bodies and rims were rare in IIIB though more abundant in IIIC1; cylindrical dippers with either vertical loop handles rising above the rims or shaft handles followed a similar pattern. The latter occurred frequently in the settlement assemblage from Tureng but never in the burials at Hissar.

The most distinctive new shape in period IIIC at Hissar was a canteen with an oval or oblong body, narrow neck, and two pierced lugs for suspension. The body is often completely or partly covered with a burnished herringbone pattern. Such canteens were funerary vessels and are absent from the settlement assemblage from Tureng IIIC1; they were also found in Shah Tepe IIa1. Curvilinear burnished decoration, though rare, occurred at all three sites but not before IIIC. The final period at Tureng Tepe, IIIC2, was relatively impoverished. Burnished decoration had disappeared, except for a few irregular horizontal lines and some curvilinear patterns. A coarse ware was found together with the gray ware (Deshayes, 1969).

Contemporaneous burnished gray wares in other areas. East of the Gorgān



plain (Dašt-e Gorgān) burnished gray wares have been found in Soviet Turkmenistan, at Parkhai II in the valley of the Sumbar, a tributary of the Atrak river, and at Ak Depe, near Ashkhabad. The former site, an isolated graveyard, yielded carinated beakers and chalices, which the excavator dated to the period of Hissar IIB (Khlopin, 1981); Philip Kohl, however, prefers a later date (p. 108). Approximately 50 percent of the pottery from Ak Depe consists of gray wares from twelve levels ranging in date from late Namazga II to Namazga IV. They are somewhat similar to incised gray wares from Tureng IIB (Kohl, fig. 7b), but comparisons between the pattern-burnished gray wares and those from Tureng IIB-C are closer (Sarianidi). In Namazga III contexts at Kara Depe, east of Ashkhabad, there are excellent parallels with Tureng IIB (5-10 percent of the assemblage; Kohl, p. 100). Carinated gray wares found in small quantities in Namazga IV are considered by Soviet scholars to be forerunners of Namazga V unpainted wares with similar shapes, reflecting a possible eastward migration of the “burnished gray-ware people.” Isolated burnished gray-ware vessels occur sporadically still farther east, for instance at [Dashly I](#) and Gonur Depe in the area around Mary (old Margiana) and even at Sarazm, east of Samarkand (Besenval and Isakov).

Hissar is considered an isolated extension of the Gorgān gray-ware culture on the Persian plateau. Farther west several surveys in the area of Tehran have failed to produce classical burnished gray wares, and at Barlekin only a few fragments were found (Burton-Brown, pls. I, VIII).

Burnished gray wares in the 2nd millennium. The occupation of Tepe Hissar ended abruptly at the end of IIC, and a similar break occurred slightly later on the Gorgān plain, at the end of Tureng IIC2. Of the various dates proposed most are in the first half of the 2nd millennium, but available radiocarbon-14 dates (e.g., LY 1147 for period IIC2: 3580 + 130 bp, i.e., 2138-1740 B.C.E.), combined with a recent general revision of Iranian chronology, suggest a date closer to 2000 B.C.E.

There has been much speculation about why the “burnished gray-ware people” left Gorgān and where they went. Soviet scholars have argued for a migration to the east, on the basis of Namazga V unpainted gray wares with carinated shapes similar to those of gray ware (see above). It is now clear, however, that Namazga V wares were contemporary with Hissar IIC (and Tureng IIC1); if there was movement eastward, it did not result from abandonment of the Gorgān plain. Soviet excavations in the Sumbar valley have revealed an excellent assemblage of 2nd-millennium pottery from the



cemetery of Sumbar II (Khlopin, 1983). Burnished decoration is absent, but the shapes of gray (40 percent of the assemblage), red, and coarse wares are reminiscent of late IIIC wares, in particular globular hole-mouthed vessels with long open spouts, deep bowls with open spouts, and pedestal bowls, for which there are parallels from Shah Tepe IIa1 (possibly contemporary with Tureng IIIC2). New shapes also appear, including jugs with small handles at the junctions of shoulders and necks, jugs with cylindrical spouts, jugs with pouring handles, and beakers with carination of the lower bodies. This assemblage can thus be considered intermediate between late IIIC wares and the Iron Age wares known as Archaic Dehistan (Dehestān), which appeared in about the 13th century b.c.; it thus probably spanned several centuries in the first half of the 2nd millennium and was partly contemporary with Namazga VI. Copper items found in the graves tend to confirm such a dating.

Since the 1960s the hypothesis of a westward movement of the “burnished gray-ware people” has dominated study of the 2nd millennium on the Persian plateau. According to T. Cuyler Young, the appearance of burnished gray wares in western Persia at the beginning of Iron Age I may reflect migration from the Hissar area; Deshayes tentatively connected burnished gray wares with the Medes. Assessment of possible later diffusion of gray wares to the west is complicated by the fact that only funerary materials have been considered, though support for the migration hypothesis can be found in the similarity of shapes from Hissar IIIC and the cemetery at Khorvin (Kūrvīn) near Tehran (ca. 1500 B.C.E.; Vanden Berghe), on one hand, and Iron Age I assemblages from the cemetery in Sialk (Sīalk) A near Kāšān and Hasanlu (Ḥasanlū) V west of Lake Urmia, on the other. A cemetery at Gheyтарыeh (Qayṭariya; Kambakhsh-Fard) in the northern suburbs of Tehran has also yielded material later than Hissar IIIC and contemporary with Sumbar II (notably spouted vessels, jugs with small handles at the neck junctions, and jugs with pouring handles). Pottery types from the 2nd millennium assemblages found in the Gīlān cemeteries, particularly at Amlash (Amlaš) and Marlik (Mārlik), also resemble earlier burnished gray wares. These supposed links have given rise to an abundant literature (e.g., Ghirshman; Medvedskaya), but the archeological record seems to support different conclusions, depending on which criteria are emphasized. In general, attempts to explain the transition from Bronze to Iron Age on the Persian plateau on the basis of supposed population movements extrapolated from the pottery evidence are tenuous and perhaps even irrelevant.



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