



# CERAMICS V. THE CHALCOLITHIC PERIOD IN SOUTHERN PERSIA

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## CERAMICS

### v. The Chalcolithic Period in Southern Persia

The evolution of ceramics in southern Persia between 5000 and 3300 B.C.E., reflects an increasingly distinct regional culture and evolving economic interaction with other parts of Persia. The start of this era was characterized by small, self-sufficient farming villages with ceramics, artifacts, and architecture similar to those of Late Neolithic and Early Chalcolithic settlements throughout Persia. By the end there were also larger communities with specialized production, some regional trade, and distinct regional ceramics.

The most fully excavated corpus of ceramics from the Chalcolithic of southern Persia comes from Tal-i Iblis (Tal-e-Eblīs; Caldwell, 1967) and Tepe Yahya (Yaḥyā; Lamberg-Karlovsky, 1970; Beale, 1986). Extensive surface collections by Sir Mark Aurel Stein in Baluchistan (Lamberg-Karlovsky and Schmandt-Besserat, 1977) and more recently (Prickett, 1986) have provided important supplementary material. For purposes of discussion, the Chalcolithic ceramics of this region can be divided into three periods, all of them characterized by handmade, rather than wheel-made, production.



5000-3900 B.C.E. (equivalent to Period VII at the type site, Tepe Yahya). Ceramics from this early period consist primarily of unpainted chaff-tempered coarse ware (Figure 19). Vessels are usually well fired and of a uniform reddish color, though it is also fairly common to find less well-oxidized gray cores. The range of shapes is quite limited, the most common being simple straight-sided jar forms, open bowls with flat or pedestal bases, and large carinated storage jars. The most distinctive form of the period is an ovoid bowl with a large loop handle attached to the base. This ware clearly shares a common ancestry with other chaff tempered coarse wares found in the same period across the Persian plateau and in the Zagros, corresponding to the early Soft Ware Horizon originally defined by Robert Dyson (p. 217). Analysis shows that the “sequential slab” construction technique used in southern Persia is also found at contemporary sites across a very broad area, from Pakistani Baluchistan to the western Zagros (Vandiver). Apparently unique to southern Persia in this period is an unpainted fine pottery known as “Soghun ware,” which is found in small quantities. Most known examples have been excavated at Tepe Yahya (Beale, pp. 47-54). These vessels were produced from finely levigated clay with very small amounts of natural micaceous inclusions; the paste is usually tan or buff, tempered with small quantities of crushed vegetal matter. The predominant shape is the open bowl form, with simple or slightly everted rim and either a flat or ring base (Figure 22).

3900-3700 B.C.E. (equivalent to Period VI-VC at Tepe Yahya). During this relatively short period influence from southwestern Persia on the ceramics of southern Persia increased. Chaff-tempered coarse ware remained the most common ceramic type but was occasionally painted with simple red geometric designs. The local Soghun ware also continued, though hole-mouth jars, which were becoming more common, were often painted with elaborate geometric designs in red on the exterior below the rim. A rare bichrome-painted version of Soghun ware also made its first appearance: The red outlines of the design were filled in with brown hatching. Toward the end of the period black-on-buff ware was introduced (Figure 22), probably initially as imports from the western perimeters of the region, for example, the Marv Dasht (Marvdašt) plain near Shiraz, where it is found in significant quantities at such sites as Bakun (Tal-e Bakūn, level B; Egami and Masuda, 1962). The most common form is the ring-based open bowl with elaborate geometric motifs in which such forms as cross-hatched lozenges and combed medallions are spread across the interior surface.



3700-3300 *b.c.e* (equivalent to Period VB-VA at Tepe Yahya). Early in this final period black-on-buff ware reached a peak of maximum use and was then superseded by a distinctive fine black-on-red ware (Figure 22), which apparently originated in southwestern Persia and is found in large quantities at sites there. Nevertheless, it was in this period that the ceramic production of southern Persia was most distinctive, with few parallels in other parts of Persia. The most common vessel form in black-on-buff ware was the beaker, with elaborate multiple-chevron designs on the exterior. Necked jars and carinated bowls were also common. These forms were continued in the black-on-red corpus. By the end of this period an extensive repertoire of “potter’s marks” had begun to appear on the bases of mass-produced black-on-red beakers.

In this third stage the chaff tempered coarse ware of the earlier periods was superseded by a plain coarse ware in a variety of vessel shapes, including hole-mouth jars, necked jars, large straight-sided beakers, and open bowls. Scrape marks, drag marks, and “chatter” marks are common on the exterior surfaces of plain coarse-ware vessels. A less common handmade fine ware known as Lapui ware also occurred throughout this period; it is distinctive for its dark-red wash and burnishing on both exterior and interior.

After 3300 B.C.E. there was a sharp break in the ceramic tradition of southern Persia, paralleled by a steep decline in settlement across the region. New settlement at the beginning of the 3rd millennium B.C.E., brought with it an entirely new repertoire of ceramic types from Proto-Elamite centers to the west.

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