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GĪLĀN III. ARCHAEOLOGY

The archaeology of Gīlān, particularly in the pre-Islamic period, is usually studied in the wider context of the entire south Caspian region, including Mazandarān and Gorgān. Articles on three important locations, Marlik Tepe (below), Amlaš, and Deylamān (qq.v.), illustrate the perennial difficulties faced by archeological research in Persia, where illegal and therefore unrecorded excavations and forgeries have led to false attributions of provenience, resulting in serious and at times insurmountable obstacles to a better historical understanding of the region in the pre-Islamic period (see FORGERIES ii).

As shown in Table 4, archeological investigations in Gīlān began in the early 20th century when Jacques de Morgan (q.v.) visited the area, being interested both in the sites and the dialects of the region. Unofficial excavations, however, have had a longer history. Aleksander Borejko Chodźko (q.v.) describes staying in the uplands of Rūdbār in 1839 and being taken to one of many graveyards on the nearby summits by the locals and finding seals and remnants of weapons and metal objects. He also witnessed the women of the area using some of the artifacts found there as part of their bracelets and necklaces (Mūsawī, p. 520). It must also be pointed out that some potentially significant sites have suffered irreparable damage through systematic pillaging during periods of unrest and anarchy, the destruction and pillaging at Eṣṭalḵ Jān in the Rūdbār region being a recent (1978-79) poignant example (Mūsawī, p. 353).

EXCAVATIONS AT MARLIK TEPE

Marlik Tepe is an archeological site of the late 2nd and early 1st millennium B.C.E., located in the Raḥmatābād region of the Rūdbār district in Gīlān, about 50 km. from Rašt on the Caspian Sea (Figure 3).

During the 1940s and 1950s the highlands of the northern slopes of the Alborz (q.v.) mountains south of the Caspian Sea were subject to much clandestine, illegal digging that produced beautiful spouted pottery vessels, pottery and bronze animal figurines, bronze weapons, and even some objects of gold and silver, all belonging to a little-known culture apparently of the late 2nd mill. B.C.E. These beautiful artifacts were distributed throughout the world to collections and museums under the term Amlaš, the name of the market town to which they were brought to be sold to dealers. In the fall of 1961 a team from the Iranian Archeological Service began a survey in the foothills of the Alborz mountains with the aim of mapping the archeological sites of the area, eventually leading to systematic and scientific excavation to identify the people who had left these masterpieces of art and technology. When the team of archeologists entered the valley of the Gowharrūd (Figure 4), a tributary of the Safīdrūd River, they found five mounds, Pīla Qalʿa, Jāzem Kūl, Dūra Bījār, Zeynab Bījār, and Marlik (or Čerāḡ-ʿAlī Tepe after its last owner).

The mounds were surveyed one by one, and the team eventually reached Marlik, a large natural appearing mound. Its rocky crest is surrounded by olive groves and wild pomegranate bushes, overlooking the rice paddies which blanket the lower slopes of the valley (PLATE I). The surface of this mound, covered by brush, revealed few artifactual traces, although one slope bore the scars of several ditches dug by unsuccessful antiquities hunters. A test trench produced a variety of interesting objects including two small bronze animal figurines, two cylinder seals, and fourteen gold buttons. The need for immediate scientific excavation was obvious, otherwise the site would have been quickly looted and so an expedition was organized by Ezat O. Negahban under the auspices of the Iranian Archeological Service in cooperation with the Institute of Archaeology of the University of Tehran. This team worked at the site without interruption for fourteen months, from October 1961 to November 1962. As work continued, it gradually became clear that Marlik Tepe contained the royal cemetery of a long forgotten kingdom. Scattered over the crest of this apparently natural mound were fifty-three tombs filled with a fascinating variety of objects of gold, silver, bronze and pottery, testifying to the wealth and sophisticated crafts manship of this three thousand year old culture. Although the richest tombs were concentrated in

the royal cemetery of Marlik, the whole lower valley of the Gowharrūd was essentially a contemporary burial ground for persons of lesser importance, attracted perhaps by the presence of the royal tombs. These burials were in simpler graves with fewer accompanying objects.

The tombs on Marlik are formed basically of walls of broken stone and mud mortar built between the large natural rocks of the mound. Some of the tombs are very roughly constructed, while others show more care. Most often the natural stone of the surrounding area was used in construction, but some tombs contained slabs of yellowish stone brought from the headwaters of the Gowharrūd, about 15 km away. This stone may occur in a single wall or as a slab placed at the bottom of the tomb, but some of the richest tombs are built entirely of this yellowish imported stone.

In most of the tombs the skeleton had completely disintegrated, but a few tombs still contained skeletons that revealed an elaborate burial ritual in which the body was carefully laid out on a long stone slab and surrounded by precious and useful objects which their owner would need in his life hereafter. Whether or not the skeleton was extant the tombs were filled with a wide variety of objects including ritual vessels, human and animal figurines, jewelry, weapons and tools, domestic utensils and sometimes models and toys. Metal vessels of gold, silver, and bronze were found in a variety of shapes and sizes, including cups, bowls, beakers, vases and, most typically, pots with long spouts (PLATE II). They range from plain unadorned forms to vessels with highly elaborate, sometimes narrative, designs done in a variety of techniques including dotted linear engraving, low and high relief repoussé and on one silver pot, inlaid gold designs. Some designs are crude and simple while others are highly elaborate naturalistic or stylized portraits of real and mythical animals and humans (PLATE III, PLATE IV, PLATE V). Other beautiful ritual vessels are made of mosaic glass and frit.

Striking human and animal figurines are made of pottery or metal, including bronze, silver, and gold. The pottery human figurines, most of them hollow, are highly stylized (PLATE VI), as are several solid bronze human figurines and a hollow gold bust (PLATE VII). Some of the animal figurines are also highly stylized, such as the beautiful pottery figurine of a humped bull (PLATE VIII), while others are more naturalistic. In addition to the humped bull, which is the most characteristic figurine of Marlik, figurines were found of stags, mountain goats, mules, horses, rams, bears, leopards, dogs, and wild boars together with models of oxen with yoke (PLATE IX), tiger heads and birds. The

large number and high quality of the bronze figurines of Marlik present a vivid picture of the flourishing state of the bronze industry in the Alborz highlands during the late and the early 1st millennium B.C.E.

The extremely rich collection of jewelry found in the tombs includes necklaces, pendants, buttons, bracelets, earrings, rings, forehead bands, leaves, hair binders, pins, and a single fibula. Much of this jewelry came from tombs that may have belonged to women, although some items of ornament were also found in tombs attributed to warriors because of the large numbers of weapons they contained.

The greater part of the jewelry is made of gold, sometimes combined with red carnelian, agate, or other materials. Smaller amounts of jewelry are made of shell, bone, frit, glass, lime gypsum, and bronze. Some of these ornaments are masterpieces of great delicacy and beauty, including finely granulated pendants (PLATE X) and earrings, pomegranate (PLATE XI), quadruple spiral and animal head beads, and embossed rosette buttons, all of which demonstrate the well-developed technology of the Marlik craftsmen.

The tombs also contained both cylinder and stamp seals. Fourteen definite and several possible cylinder seals are made of frit, gypsum, various stones, and one is even made of gold. However, most of these cylinder seals are made of frit, with a surface now so badly damaged that in some cases the original design has entirely disappeared. Two cylinder seals contain inscriptions, the only evidence of writing found at Marlik, with the writing legible on only one seal in lines that are broken and fragmented. The five stamp seals found at Marlik are made of cast bronze with simple geometric designs.

The pottery of Marlik seems for the most part to have a specifically funerary purpose and, although it does not differ too widely from ordinary domestic pottery, tends to be more elaborate and ornamental in nature. The pottery is red, brown and gray, made of very fine clay tempered with fine grit. The firing was very well controlled and the surface treatment is of high quality. Especially notable among the many stylized forms are the beautiful spouted vessels, finished with a polished and burnished surface, sometimes with the addition of pattern burnished decoration. Bottles, jars, pitchers, chalices, mugs, cups, pots, bowls, basins, plated, vases, sieves, and lamps were all found in the tombs.

Of almost a thousand fairly complete weapons, less than forty were made of

some material other than bronze, including about twenty-five weapons of stone and a lesser number of iron. By the beginning of the Marlik period the use of stone for weapons was already outdated and by the termination of the Marlik occupation iron was employed, although it was still far from common. The large number of weapons, in some tombs seems to reflect the role of the deceased as a formidable warrior. Other items such as the many bronze arrowheads could have been used for hunting and their inclusion in the tomb along with pottery and bronze figurines of wild game seems to suggest that the occupant was also a great hunter. Maceheads, swords, daggers, spearheads, and arrowheads were all found in the tombs along with such military equipment as shields, helmets, cymbals, quivers, belts, and wristbands, almost all made of bronze.

The large collection of artifacts found at Marlik has been assigned typologically to a date between the 14th and 8th-7th centuries B.C.E, a date supported by a carbon-14 date of 1457 B.C.E. (+/- 55 years). Marlik apparently represents the royal cemetery of a culture that first settled in the highlands of the northern slopes of the Alborz mountains in the mid-2nd millenium B.C.E. and flourished there for several centuries. This highly developed culture, especially notable for its bronze industry, covered the southern zone of the Caspian Sea and the northern slopes of the Alborz mountains, and exerted a strong influence that spread throughout the ancient world. Thus the Marlik excavation provides information for a dark period of people living in northern Persia and illustrates the daily life, the craftsmanship, and the religious beliefs and traditions of this previously little known culture.

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