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# JIROFT IV. ICONOGRAPHY OF CHLORITE ARTIFACTS

In the region of Jiroft, a large number of stone (chlorite) vases and objects, carrying human and animal motifs inlaid with semi-precious stones, have recently been discovered. This discovery is of particular importance since little is known about the past of the region on the eve of historical times. However, the material has been collected from illegal excavations and has therefore, unfortunately, lost some of its scientific value.

In the first half of the 3rd millennium B.C.E., the Iranian plateau (Figure 1) was at the crossroads of trade with its neighboring regions. Many settlements are found along the trading routes used for the export of their productions, and this is the case for the Jiroft vases. The Iranian plateau, at that time, looked like a mosaic of cultural areas. To the north were the so-called “grey ware” area with Tureng Tepe in the Gorgān Plain leading to the present-day Turkmenistan, and Tepe Hissar (Ḥeṣār) to the south of the Alborz Range (q.v.); to the east, bordering the Helmand Basin, was Šahr-e Suḵta, through which lapis lazuli from the Afghan mountains travels; and to the west lay Malyān (now a large mound ca. 45 km north of Shiraz), then the capital city of the Fars and the zone of contact with Mesopotamia via Susiana and Luristan. In the first half of the 3rd millennium, Fars appears as the development center of the first writing, called “proto-Elamite,” which was soon used throughout Iranian plateau. In its southern part of Kerman, tablets have been identified 75 km away to the west of Jiroft at the small site of Tepe Yahya (Yaḥyā), located at

about 130 km north of the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf.

The region of Jiroft, lying far away from the large centers of civilization, had not until now attracted the attention of researchers. It is located at a distance of 1000 km from the valley of the Euphrates in the west and from the Indus River in the east. Tepe Yahya and Shahdad (Šahdād), 200 km to the north-northeast of Kerman, were occupied at the end of the 3rd millennium and hint at a culture specific to the south of Iran. It is difficult, however, to imagine the population density and the high level of civilization that have been revealed by the current surveys and excavations conducted by Youssef Madjidzadeh on the site of Konār Ṣandal, located 28 km south of Jiroft (Figure 2). The site seems to have been occupied without interruption from the beginning to the end of the 3rd millennium. The settlement spreads over several thousand acres surrounded by a powerful crude brick fortification wall. In the second half of the 3rd millennium, a “citadel” and a high terrace of gigantic proportions were towering over it. These monuments rest on remains from the first half of the millennium. They are themselves contemporary of a vast cemetery that seems to have yielded at least a part of the chlorite vases and objects in the present collection.

The exceptional development of the Jiroft culture can be accounted for by the distinctive environment of the site, which is located in a deep depression, very different from the broad basins created on the plateau by the disappearance of large salt lakes (Dašt-e Kavir and Dašt-e Lut; see DESERT). The Jiroft depression is of tectonic origin and results from the subduction of the Arabian plate under the Persian plate. It is 400 km long and, like the folds of the Zagros range, it has a northwest-southeast orientation. The bottom of the depression is at an average height of 600 m, but it seems much deeper because of the steep snow-covered mountains that surround it, reaching their highest point at 4.400 m to the north. These mountains constitute a real water tower feeding the torrential Halilrud River and, in the alluvial plain, artesian wells whose gushing waters irrigate palm groves and gardens. Water collects at the center of the depression in the Jāz Muriān swamps. According to paleo-climatologists, these conditions were the same in the past and have remained almost unchanged in the Northern Hemisphere since the 5th.millennium B.C.E. Another natural asset, also derived from tectonics, is the proximity of diversified mining resources, including copper and chlorite deposits as well as gold bearing lodes.

Chlorite is a soft and easy-to-work rock. It has been in use locally for a long

time. Stone vessels are necessary for the long-time conservation of organic products. Given their weight, stone vases rarely exceed 25 cm in height. In smaller dimensions they might have contained aromatic plants and perfumes. They include cylindrical boxes (Figure 3b; PLATE If-h), cups (PLATE Ie, PLATE IVm-n), high open-rim vases (Figure 3d; PLATE IIa-e) and a few globular jars (PLATE IVh-k). Along these containers are found large (up to 40 cm), 3 to 4 cm thick indented plate with openwork designs (Figure 3a, c, f; PLATE IIf-k, PLATE IIIa-c). Some display a large ring-shaped handle and are reminiscent of the shape of a "handbag" (PLATE IIf-k; a name being more suitable than that of "handle-weight"; they are certainly not weights). Others are "game-boards" (often with twenty small cupules) resting on feet or vertical platelets (PLATE III); they often have the shape of an eagle with folded up wings.

*Ornamentation*. The figures come out with a slight flat or sculptured relief against a plain background. Technical variations, notably in the inlaying method of colored stones, point to the existence of several workshops. The purpose of inlays was to make the eyes expressive or render spots on the skin and on the coat of animals. Considering style, the aesthetic ratio of the whole is comparatively high; craftsmen endeavored to follow exactly models set by masters whose personality is revealed in some execution details, for instance, the drawing of hands. The ornamentation of certain pieces denotes a truly aesthetic delight. It is possible to speak of a "Jiroft style."

The motifs draw on the natural environment, including landscape, architecture, and vegetation. Plants occupy a relatively large space in the repertoire (Figure 4), and can be explained by the presence of the palm tree, the fruit and wood of which play a predominant role for food and construction. The ornamentation is mainly borrowed from the animal world, not domestic animals (ox, sheep, goat, etc.) but wild animals, among them those having horns, teeth, claws, beaks, talons, or venomous fangs. They include zebus, ibexes, lions, cheetahs, eagles, a small bird of prey, scorpions, and snakes. Man is also included (Figure 6, Figure 11, Figure 12). The body is full-frontal, the head in profile, the arms half stretched and raised. He is beardless with long curly hair falling down his back and is either standing or sitting on his heels. He wears a short kilt tightened by a belt. In the presence of a potentially dangerous animal (e.g., a cheetah or a snake), this man is adorned with bracelets, a necklace supporting a turquoise pendent and wears a headband studded with many colored stones. These presumably magic protective elements may at times be limited to the insertion of one stone only

due to shortage of space. They are, however, always shown, at least during the "classical" period of the style; their disappearance corresponds with a stage of technical, stylistic and thematic decline. Ornamentation also includes fantastic images, such as a single horned zebu (PLATE IVa-b), a two-headed eagle and, in particular, hybrid characters. There are human figures whose lower body may be that of a bovid (Figure 11f), a wild "cat" (claws only sometimes, Figure 11f), a scorpion and, in the case of a game-board (unpublished), a snake. Some geometric motifs (hatched triangles, bricks, scales, loops) are present as well. They are inspired by the vegetal world, basketry, architecture (Figure 10). In the latter case, the "gate" motif is often encountered.

Most of these elements are displayed alone or with a different motif, always derived from the same biotope. Animals of the same species are laid out in friezes, possibly designed to create a rhythm, a decorative effect, while snakes intertwine their coils. Miscellaneous elements appear in small narrative scenes like a man falling off a tree to which he has tied a raving zebu (Figure 11e). Animals of the same species are opposing or fighting each other; lionesses stand up against one another (Figure 7); two eagles with deployed wings holding two snakes in their claws (Figure 9a); a cheetah is engaged in an uncertain struggle against the reptile (Figure 8); a zebu gores a lion (the zebu seems to be then on the verge of domestication, Figure 7f). Wearing his protective attire, or as a hybrid figure, man seems to be playing with a cheetah (Figure 11f, Figure 12j), but he maintains a distance from snakes (Figure 12e, g). Over a "hand-bag" (PLATE IIg) two-horned scorpion-men are in confrontation; on a small cylindrical vase, a lion-man brings down a scorpion-man in what could be a mythological battle (Figure 12f).

*Significance*. The interpretation of images is a risky enterprise. Decorative themes are transmitted, but they sometimes end up expressing an ideology that is different from the one that was initially symbolized. Images have a life of their own, and when they travel in space and time, their meaning may undergo a change. Our interpretations are a function of our culture and of our myths. Moreover, when dealing with the Middle East and its ancient spirituality, we tend to be content with notions found in late Mesopotamian literature, but such notions are anachronistic. Whatever the case, the iconography of the Iranian plateau should not be viewed through the prism of the Mesopotamian civilization.

In the same fashion as there is a certain logic between the containing and the contained in the ornamentation of vases, there may be another between that

of an object and its end-use. Since the vases and objects of Jiroft are known to have come from tombs, their ornamentation may relate to funerary rites. This is what the bucolic scenes decorating the high cups suggest, where ibexes of all ages are harmoniously mixing with “blooming bushes” (Figure 5). Such scenes seem intended to alleviate the anguish of the passage leading to the world of the ancestors, especially when, as we may think, the representation of the ibex is loaded with totemic memories and when the plant regularly associated with it is the source of some psychotropic substance possessing the power to facilitate the crossing of the border of the sensorial world. Against a background of this sort, “hand-bags” and “game-boards” also occupy a place of their own. Some motifs of the repertoire, with a specific frequency regarding the motif of the “gate” probably associated with passage rites, are found on both sides of the “bags.” The “game-boards” are instruments providing access to destiny, that of the dead as well as that of the living. Whether it relates to a funerary ritual or simply belongs to the deceased, the whole material conveys a way of thinking and an already very sophisticated cosmogony. Where a rite aims at obtaining an advantage, whether visible or invisible, we are nearing magic. When the fantastic, the imaginary are included in the ornamentation, we enter into the domain of the sacred, a blurred concept that will become clear in later historic ages.

The striking thing in the Jiroft iconography and cosmogony is the total absence of a reference to a concept of the divine. Hybrid figures mastering animals exist in the ancient Neolithic tradition, and are still evidenced at the turn of the 5th to the 4th millennium in Susiana, Iran. This heroic image of man stems from a profoundly human urge to dominate and transcend. The “master of animals” has never been worshipped and cannot be considered as a god. Whereas Mesopotamian glyptic art swarms with “deities” and characters engaged in cult-related hunting or war scenes, similar scenes are unknown at Jiroft. Whereas Mesopotamian, Sumerian, or Semitic cosmogony separates reality from a mysterious world inhabited by supernatural transcendent powers whose favor must be gained, Iranian cosmogony is sober and differently oriented. Two opposing principles arise from the Jiroft imagery: one is negative, with the scorpion and the snake, symbols of suffering and death; the other is positive, with the cheetah and the eagle engaged on the side of man against the reptile. It is clearly not be feasible to propose an interpretation of the Jiroft iconography before one can integrate it in the culture it stems from. It, however, seems possible to suggest the idea of a dualistic mode of thinking geared to human pursuits. This particular

orientation bears the mark of the strongly contrasted natural environment of the Iranian-Indian plateau. Without falling into geographic determinism, account has to be taken of the extremely particular conditions that prevail in this vast region set against the Zagros Mountain range and turned toward the East and Central Asia. The landscapes may have left their mark on the life of the population, its language, writing, culture, and religion since the dawn of history.

Figure 1. Map of Iran, with Jiroft, Konār Ṣandal, and sites of the 3rd millenium BCE with chlorite vessels.

Figure 2. Konār Ṣandal North (105) and South (106), 28 km south of Jiroft.

Figure 3. Relative scale of the types of vessels and artifacts. a and f: “gameboards”; b: small cylindrical vessels; c: “handbags”; d: high tronconical vessels; e: cups.

Figure 4. Typical landscape of the Jiroft area and ornamentation of a chlorite vessel.

Figure 5. Ibexes and bushes.

Figure 6. Zebus.

Figure 7. Lions.

Figure 8. Cheetahs fighting snakes.

Figure 9. Eagles and snakes.

Figure 10. Architectural motives with gates and windows, on cylindrical vessels.

Figure 11. Motives with humans.

Figure 12. Motives with humans.

Plate 1. Cups; boxes.

Plate 2. High tronconical vessels; “handbags”

Plate 3. “Gameboards.”

Plate 4. Various objects.

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