



# LURISTAN BRONZES III. MODERN HISTORY OF LURISTAN BRONZES

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### iii. Modern history of Luristan Bronzes.

Luristan is the mountainous area in western Iran bordered by Iraq on the west, the Susa plain on the south, the areas around Nahāvand and Ḳorramābād on the east, and the Māhīdašt and Harsīn plain on the north. The Kabīrkūh range separates the eastern zone, known as Piš-e Kūh, from the western zone, Pošt-e Kūh (lit. the “front” and “back” of the mountain respectively); this range, the highest in the region, runs northeast-southwest, as do most of the mountains and valleys of Luristan. In 1930 it was first acknowledged that an assortment of bronze artifacts of various forms and functions then circulating in quantity on the Iranian and European antiquities markets came from plundered tombs in this region (Pope, 1930a, pp. 388ff.; idem, 1930b, pp. 444f.; Godard apud Dussaud, 1930, pp. 253, 260ff.). Earlier a small number of these bronzes had surfaced sporadically in Europe but had been attributed by dealers and scholars to areas and cultures outside Iran. The first canonical Luristan bronzes to be published were two cheekpieces from a horse bit obtained in Bombay, India, from a Parsi family that claimed to have had them “from time immemorial”; supposedly these pieces had been brought from Iran by their ancestors. C. H. Read, supported by E. A. Wallis Budge of the British Museum, attributed them to ancient Armenia (pp. 1ff.). In 1922 M.



Rostovtzeff (1922, pp. 11, 40, pls. II, V) attributed a small group of Luristan bronzes (and some other material) in the Louvre and the British Museum to Cappadocia in Turkey. He claimed, without documentation, that they had been discovered there, and he considered them to fit into a Cimmerian or Scythian milieu (7th-4th centuries B.C.). In 1926 O. M. Dalton (pp. xiii f. n. 3) assigned the Bombay cheekpieces (by then in the British Museum) to the Caucasus. Other writers and dealers accepted Rostovtzeff's Cappadocian attribution for all these puzzling objects (e.g., Sauerlandt, p. 41, pl. 29; Tallgren, pp. 52, 55, pls. 6:3-5; Heeramanek, pp. 106ff; Potratz, 1966, p. 134) or proposed still other sites: Mākū in northern Iran (Przeworski, pp. 250f.), Arabia (Smith, pp. 203ff.), and Urartu Tasürek, pp. 212f.).

The British Museum had acquired the first of its Luristan bronzes in 1854, followed by others in 1885, 1900, 1914, and 1920. One of them was listed in the museum's catalogue file as from Mesopotamia, another from the Lake Van region in eastern Turkey. Until the late 1920s such objects continued to appear sporadically, but mass plundering of Luristan tombs seems to have begun in that decade. Although various years have been suggested, 1927 or 1928 seems most likely, for by 1929 and 1930 museums in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Brussels, and Hamburg had acquired multiple specimens, and others were being offered for sale in London and New York (e.g., by N. Heeramanek). The specific event that triggered this activity is unknown, but it accelerated as the result of growing demand for these exotic objects among Western museums and collectors and continued without pause up to the 1980s (see Muscarella, 1988a, pp. 33f.; 1988b, pp. 112f.).

It is impossible to estimate the number of Luristan bronzes surviving in museums, private collections, and dealers' shops all over the world (for a partial listing of collections, see Vanden Berghe, 1979, pp. 218ff.). It is known only that there are many thousands; the large quantity of material is one of the noteworthy features of this group of bronzes. A more significant problem is that only a small percentage of this corpus has been scientifically excavated and recorded; the great majority of known examples are strays, derived from local plundering and international market distribution. For that reason, it is impossible to write a meaningful archeological history of Luristan bronzes at present; perhaps such a history will never be written.



Only a few excavation projects in Luristan have so far yielded examples of these bronzes: Most significant were Erich Schmidt's single campaign at the sanctuary site of Surkh Dum (Sorḵdom) in Pīš-e Kūh in 1938 (pp. 205ff.; Muscarella, 1981, pp. 327ff.; 1988b, pp. 122ff.) and Louis Vanden Berghe's fifteen campaigns, all of them at tomb sites in Pošt-e Kūh, between 1965 and 1979 (1979, pp. 125ff.; 1981a, pp. 39f.; 1981b, pp. 21f.). From Surkh Dum twenty-five Luristan bronzes of different forms have been published and from Vanden Berghe's excavations thirteen. In addition, Iranian archeologists have excavated about a half-dozen more bronzes at the cemetery site of Kātūnbān in Pīš-e Kūh, but they remain unpublished. The only settlement site yet excavated in Luristan, Bābā Jān in Pīš-e Kūh, ca. 60 km north of Surkh Dum, yielded a Janus-headed tube and perhaps a zoomorphic pin (the provenience of the latter is not certain; Goff Meade, 1978, p. 56, fig. 14:26; 1968, p. 129, fig. 12; Muscarella, 1988b, p. 140 n. 1). In addition, two important finds have occurred outside Luristan. The upper portion of a standard with master of animals was excavated in the temple of Hera on the Aegean island of Samos, and an openwork pendant of possible Luristan workmanship was found at Fortetsa on Crete (Muscarella, 1977a, p. 33, figs. 1, 3). How and why these two objects traveled west remain intriguing questions. It is curious that so far no other site in Iran or the Near East has yielded a single example of a Luristan bronze.

The widespread failure of scholars to perceive the distinction between the canonical bronzes in this group and a variety of other Near Eastern bronzes that have been attributed to ancient Luristan without evidence has led to much confusion, particularly when the latter are cited as documents for ancient trade and other relations among Luristan, Elam, and Mesopotamia. Vanden Berghe's discovery of a number of Bronze Age tombs in Luristan dating from ca. 2600-2500 B.C. (Early Dynastic period in Mesopotamia) to the mid-2nd millennium B.C. yielded pottery and weapons with exact parallels in Elam and Mesopotamia; it is only these excavated bronzes that can legitimately be called "bronzes found in Luristan." This is a quite separate category from the later "bronzes typical of Luristan" (Vanden Berghe, 1968, pp. 149ff.), the group that comprises the canonical Luristan bronzes (Muscarella, 1988a, pp. 35f.; 1988b, pp. 114f.).

Another complication in the study of Luristan bronzes is the problem of forgery. Aside from genuine material, a number of manifestly modern



creations have surfaced in the market over the years. Some of these creations bear decorative scenes engraved on sheet metal of bronze, silver, and gold that have been accepted by unsuspecting scholars as genuine examples of ancient imagery and religious representation (e.g., Ghirshman, 1958). Other forgeries are aftercasts or adaptations of ancient pieces (Muscarella, 1977b, pp. 171ff.). Although some writers have insisted that forgeries of Luristan artifacts were rare or nonexistent before World War II (*Survey of Persian Art* XIII, p. A/3; Vanden Berghe, 1991b, p. 9; De Waele, p. 4), the evidence suggests that they began to surface on the market in the early 1930s (Pope, 1932, p. 667; Stark, p. 29; Calmeyer, pp. 138f.). It may be that, once genuine Luristan bronzes were known, the demand was too great for the plunderers to supply or perhaps only a few dealers controlled the supply and others turned to forgeries to “catch up.” In any event, it is the common pattern for forgeries to appear after a period of active sales and then to continue to be manufactured for decades (Muscarella, 1988b, p. 119 n. 2).

*Selected types of canonical Luristan bronzes.*

1. Horse bits (see [Plate xxvii](#)). One large and clearly recognizable group within the corpus includes bronze horse bits with cheekpieces. A typical Luristan horse bit consists of a rigid mouthpiece, the ends of which are curled in opposite directions, and a pair of cheekpieces, either plain or cast in the form of horses, caprids, boars, cocks, griffins, and so on (Moorey, 1971, pls. 16-21; Potratz, 1966, pp. 139ff., pls. LVI-LXXIII; Muscarella, 1988b, pp. 158ff.). Figured cheekpieces seem originally to have developed in Iran, and there are more examples surviving from Luristan than from any other area. A single such horse bit was apparently excavated at Kātūnbān but remains unpublished. Plain examples, also unpublished, were excavated by Vanden Berghe at Var Kabūd in Pošt-e Kūh. It is unclear to some scholars whether horse bits were manufactured for use or only for funerary purposes, but, as many examples seem to show wear and as almost all have rear spikes that could have been used as goads, it seems probable that they were used in daily life. As for those claimed by dealers to have been found in tombs, there is no archeological record to indicate whether or not they were buried under the heads of deceased human beings, nor is there evidence that horses were themselves interred in human burials.



2. Animal finials (see [Plate xxviii](#)). To date, only three animal finials (two from Bard-i Bal [[Bard-e Bal](#)] in Pošt-e Kūh, one from [Ḳātūnbān](#) in Pīš-e Kūh) have been excavated; the many other examples known in the literature and elsewhere come from plundered sites. The group includes pairs of cast animals, usually goats, ibexes, or lions, rampant, with their forefeet and hind feet joined to create an upper and a lower ring through which a shaft must have passed (Moorey, 1971, pls. 30-32; Vanden Berghe, 1968, p. 52, fig. 12/1-3). The Bard-i Bal finials were recovered with bottle-shaped bronze supports, to which they had been attached, perhaps by means of rods or branches inserted into the hollow interior; no evidence was found to show how the join was actually effected (Vanden Berghe, 1973, pp. 24f., 34f., 48, figs. 11, 20, pl. XXIII, 1, 2; idem, 1971, pp. 265, 267).

3. Standards (see [art in iran i. Neolithic to Median](#), pl. xii: 26). The standards typically consist of hollow tubular male or female figures, often appearing subhuman, flanked by the heads and necks of stylized leonine creatures; in some instances only human heads are set between the animals, but usually the upper torsos are included, with arms encircling the flanking creatures, which has given rise to the designation “master of animals” (Muscarella, 1988b, pp. 136ff.). The addition of various details like cocks’ heads and masks is not uncommon. Only two standards have been excavated in Luristan, at Bard-i Bal and Tuttulban (Tottolbān) in Pošt-e Kūh, the latter with a support similar to those found with animal finials at Bard-i Bal. Such objects have been interpreted as deity standards, household cult figures, idols, totems, talismans, chariot-pole tops, and the like. But, aside from the fact that they have been found deposited in burials, there is no evidence for their meaning or whether or not they had a nonfunerary function. The more elaborate type may have evolved from the group with heads alone; as the central figure is clearly more prominent, it may represent a deity (see below; Moorey, 1971, pls. 33-36; Vanden Berghe, 1968, fig. 12/4-6).

4. Disk pins, plaques, and quivers. The imagery on disk pins, plaques, and quivers (Muscarella, 1988b, p. 192ff.) includes odd-looking demons and animals apparently involved in cultic and mythological activities (see below).

*Chronology.* The chronological range of Luristan bronzes had long been a problem when Vanden Berghe began his controlled excavations in Luristan.



Aside from the lack of excavated data, one complication was the inclusion of bronzes, mainly weapons, from the 3rd and 2nd millennia B.C. with the canonical Luristan types. In 1931 Rostovtzeff (pp. 46, 53ff.) had essayed one of the earliest studies of the materials, suggesting that canonical examples should be dated between the 7th and 4th centuries B.C.; this date was accepted by a number of scholars during the 1930s. Others considered them to have originated and flourished entirely in the 2nd millennium B.C. (Herzfeld, pp. 108, 124ff., 168; Schaeffer, 1948, pp. 486ff.), and still others dated them to the 1st millennium B.C. before the Achaemenid period (Potratz, 1968, pp. 75ff.; Moorey, 1971, pp. 41f., 289ff.; Porada, 1964). In arguing for this last dating, Edith Porada presented a skillful analysis of the style of the finials and standards, proposing stages of development from naturalistic to more stylized and elaborated forms, a progression originally outlined by J. A. H. Potratz (1955a, pp. 208ff.; 1955b, pp. 20ff.; 1968, pp. 40ff.). Porada dated the inception of the earliest stage, to which she assigned the finials (pl. III, 1), to about 1000 B.C.; for the final stage (pl. IV), by which time she believed the animal finial had evolved into the standard with master of animals, she proposed the 8th-early 7th centuries. According to Porada, figured cheekpieces also first appeared in the 8th century B.C.

Vanden Berghe's excavations made it possible for the first time to arrange the material in a chronological sequence that, though fragmented, is anchored to independent fixed dates. As his material came only from burials, there is no stratigraphic evidence; nevertheless, he was able, on the basis of style and the relative distribution and use of bronze and iron, to define three phases of what archeologists call the Iron Age of Luristan (distinct from the three so-called Iron Age periods in northwestern Iran): I, II, and III. Canonical Luristan bronzes were found in tombs from periods I and III, so that their relative chronological positions are secure. The earliest came from Luristan Iron I burials at Bard-i Bal; they include animal finials, animal-headed whetstones, and spike-butted axes (1973, pp. 16, 24, 31, 35; figs. 5, 11, 17, 20). The finials are fairly naturalistic, except for spiral embellishments on the sides, but, as no other figural pieces were excavated, it is not possible to be certain whether they do in fact represent the earliest phase of development. The fact that no standards or horse cheekpieces have yet been found in Iron I may support Porada's hypothesis that they developed at a later phase. Luristan Iron II is the most poorly documented and therefore the least understood. Nevertheless, it has been established that iron was first used in that phase and had become



common by Luristan Iron III. In more than 600 Iron III burials excavated by Vanden Berghe (1987, p. 204) at a number of sites standards, vessels, weapons, and plain horse bits were recovered.

The internal stylistic development has thus not been fully clarified. Until further archeological evidence is available, for example, it is impossible to be certain of a consistent evolution from natural to stylized forms, particularly germane is whether or not the masters of animals occurred in Luristan Iron II. Absolute dates for the three Luristan periods remain fluid, a problem that will occupy scholars for some time. It is possible to suggest that the material from Luristan Iron I was manufactured in the years around 1000 B.C., that of Iron II about 900/800-750, and that of Iron III about 750/725-650. Independent evidence confirms the Iron III dating for two groups of bronzes. Naturalistic cheekpieces in the form of horses are worn by royal chariot horses represented on Assyrian stone reliefs from the time of Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.; Porada, 1965, pl. 21). They differ from the Luristan model in that the horses on the cheekpieces are shown galloping, rather than walking, and there is no ground line. There is no doubt, however, that they are adaptations of Luristan cheekpieces. The simple, unembellished standard from Samos mentioned above is also dated by its context to the late 8th or 7th century B.C.

The “Luristan bronze” (and iron) industry was thus a phenomenon of the 1st millennium B.C., with a terminus sometime before the beginning of the Achaemenid period. The reason why it ceased to function and whether it did so abruptly or gradually are unknown.

*Cultural context and interpretation.* It has long been accepted on the basis of hearsay evidence that the great majority of stray bronzes have been plundered from burials, and Vanden Berghe’s excavations generally support this conclusion. As no settlement site has yielded any quantity of bronzes and only one sanctuary site is available for study, comprehensive location analysis of and conclusions about functionally specific groups of artifacts are not yet possible. The following deposition record is based on the very limited archeological evidence. In the sanctuary site of Surkh Dum disk-headed pins and plaques decorated with scenes that may be mythological or cultic, figured pins, figurines of men and animals, bracelets, and rings occurred; there was no horse equipment, and finials and standards were also absent. On the other hand, the much richer array of burials yielded weapons, whetstones, finials, standards, horse equipment, vessels, and fibulae. It might be expected that



objects deposited in burials and a sanctuary would generally reflect different functions, and the very limited evidence available suggests that was indeed so in Luristan.

It is not yet possible to speak of regional or cultural boundaries within Luristan. For example, it cannot at present be determined whether the bronze types from Surkh Dum in Pīš-e Kūh were peculiar to that area or more generally distributed in the region; conversely, the fact that a relatively large number of burials has been excavated in Pošt-e Kūh compared with few to the east may distort the chart of artifact distribution for the whole region. And, of course, there is no information on provenience—east or west Luristan—for the countless plundered artifacts.

Since the early 1930s scholars have sought to identify the ethnic affiliation, language, and settlement patterns of the people who produced the bronzes. They have been labeled Kassites, Cimmerians, or Medes, without archeological evidence to support any of these claims (see Potratz, 1960, p. 34; Moorey, 1971, pp. 9ff.; Muscarella, 1988b, pp. 116f.). The chronology established by Vanden Berghe has ruled out a Cimmerian attribution; nor can any object in the corpus be identified as Median or Kassite.

The language of the Bronze and Iron Age populations remains unknown because evidence of writing has yet to be excavated in Luristan. Nor does any canonical Luristan bronze bear an inscription of any kind. Unfortunately, a considerable number of stray artifacts, mostly weapons, that bear Mesopotamian royal or dedicatory inscriptions in cuneiform dating from the 3rd to the 1st millennium B.C. have been improperly accepted as from Luristan and western Iran (Calmeyer, pp. 161ff.; Moorey, 1971, pp. 29ff.). Not one of these pieces was excavated in Luristan (or elsewhere); all surfaced in dealers' shops. They cannot therefore serve as evidence for contacts between Mesopotamia and Luristan, movements of peoples or mercenaries, or the languages spoken or read in Luristan (Muscarella, 1988a, p. 39; 1988b, p. 120 n. 6).

Even the settlement patterns in Bronze and Iron Age Luristan, whether sedentary or wholly or partially nomadic, are unknown. Presumably the complex economic and technical structures embodied in the flourishing Iron Age bronze industry would argue for a partly sedentary population (Frye, pp. 59f.), but without texts scholars are not in a position to explore the dynamics of manufacturing: how copper and tin were obtained and how payments,



transport, design, and production were organized. Furthermore, without excavated settlements there is no evidence bearing on distribution and administrative centers, so that no focused perception of a political system or systems is possible. If gold and silver were used in the economy, they do not seem to have been crafted into artifacts. It does seem certain, however, that the horse (and perhaps the chariot) played an important role; the quantity of horse bits probably indicates an organized cavalry (or chariot) force. Furthermore, the many weapons suggest that war was important in the history of Luristan, but whether for defense, conquest, or both is not known. Nevertheless, the mere existence of so large a body of material in itself suggests local wealth, power, and some form of political organization.

The frequency and variety of apparent cult objects deposited in burials and found in the sanctuary at Surkh Dum seem to reflect a vigorous spiritual life. Especially the strange demons and animals depicted on plaques and quivers, creatures that seem to be involved in cultic activities, have been assumed to be related to Iranian religious belief and practice. Some scholars have claimed to recognize Indo-European (Dussaud, 1949, pp. 213ff.), Vedic (Dumézil, pp. 18ff.), or Zoroastrian (Ghirshman, 1964, pp. 70f.) elements in such imagery. Without any knowledge of the theology, mythology, or religious hierarchy of the culture that produced these objects, however, all interpretations remain speculative (see Moorey, 1975, pp. 23ff.).

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- Plate xxvii. Luristan bronze cheekpiece. The Metropolitan Museum of Art 32.161.28
- Plate xxviii. Luristan bronze animal finial. The Metropolitan Museum of Art



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