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# MĀRLIK

**MĀRLIK**, an elite burial ground of the late 2nd-early 1st millennium BCE in the western Caspian basin. Mārlik (called so for the abundance of snakes in the area) or Čerāḡ-ʿAli Teppa (named after the owner of the field) is one of the five natural mounds with archaeological remains, the other four being Pila Qalʿa, Jāzem Kul, Dur-e Bijār, and Zeynab Bijār, was recorded in the fall of 1961 during a survey by an expedition from the Archaeological Service of Iran (hereinafter ASI) on the banks of the Gowharrud River, a tributary of the Sefidrud River in Rudbār area in the western Caspian basin (FIGURE 1).

The survey of the Gowharrud valley was part of a larger systematic reconnaissance project of the western and central Caspian basin in the early 1960s undertaken by the ASI to determine the archaeological context of the large collection of artifacts, including pottery vessels, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic ceramic statuettes, a wide range of arms, personal ornaments, miscellaneous objects, and some decorated gold and silver vessels sold into the antiquities markets in Iran, Europe, and the U.S. since the 1930s (Samadi). This material, which antiquities dealers, collectors, and museum curators collectively termed ‘Amlash’ after a market town on the Caspian coast, was allegedly from illicit excavations in the region. While some examples were clearly forgeries (Löw, 1993; Muscarella, 2000a, 31-42), a large number seemed to be authentic, prompting the ASI to investigate their origins (cf. Kāmbaḵš-Fard, 1995; Negahbān, 1997, 145ff.; Moghadam, 2005).

The mound of Mārlik seems to be a rocky outcrop capped by several meters of sediment. It is surrounded by olive groves and fruit gardens owned and

maintained by local villagers, overlooking rice paddies on the lower slopes of the valley (FIGURE 2). At the time of the initial visit by the archaeological team, the mound was covered with vegetation with few surface remains. Several scars on one slope, however, indicated recent illicit excavations.

Following a successful testing of the mound that yielded some artifacts and established its archaeological significance, a team began large-scale excavations at Mārlik under the supervision of ʿEzzat-Allāh Negahbān, then professor of archaeology at the Tehran University, who also served as technical advisor to the ASI. The team included members from both institutions, including Seyf-Allāh Kāmbaḵš-Fard, Reẓā Mostowfi, and Maḥmud Kordavāni from ASI and several students from the Department of Archaeology of the Tehran University. The team worked without interruption for fourteen months (from October 1961 to November 1962) under difficult conditions (Negahbān, 1997, 177-202; Ahkami, p. 58), but their laudable efforts paid off with the discovery of one of the richest graveyards dating to a dark era in Iranian history. Thanks to a steady series of publications by Negahbān (see bibliography) over the years, Mārlik is arguably the best-documented ancient cemetery in the Near East.

In total, fifty-three tombs were discovered at Mārlik (FIGURE 3). The tombs were dug into the overlaying sediments of the mound, sometimes hitting and penetrating into the underlying bedrock. The tomb constructions vary from roughly dug pits lined with stone to fairly well-constructed examples with walls made from stone slabs bound together with mud mortar. The stone used in the tombs is mostly local, but in some tombs one could see yellowish slabs brought from the headwaters of the Gowharrud, some 15 km to the south. A few, evidently more important, tombs are entirely made of this imported stone, a potential indication to the social significance of the occupant. The tombs range in size from fairly small (1.5x1x1 m [Tomb 4]) to relatively large (7×4.5×2.5 m [Tomb 52]). Most tombs yielded very little or no large skeletal remains, perhaps a result of natural deterioration of organic material and rodent activity. In the handful of tombs, where partial skeletal remains where preserved, the body seemed to have been laid on its side on a large, flattened slab, surrounded by grave goods.

The grave goods, numbering over 25,000 individual items, constitute the largest collection discovered from any cemetery of the Early Iron Age anywhere in the Near East. The collection includes gold, silver, and bronze vessels of different shapes and sizes, from plain to highly decorated examples,

mosaic glass and frit vessels, ceramic and metal figurines and statuettes of animals and humans, a wide range of personal ornaments and pottery vessels, stamp and cylinder seals, a wide assortment of tools and weaponry, as well as horse trappings and miscellaneous items (FIGURE 4). Thanks to a series of publications by Negahbān, as well as secondary publications including some in more popular venues, a series of stamps published in 1960s to commemorate the discovery, and the use of imagery from Mārlik finds on Iranian banknotes from 1960s and 1970s, Mārlik has come to occupy a prominent place in collective national patrimony of the Iranians.

*Chronology*. The date(s) in which the Mārlik cemetery was in use has been subject to considerable debate (for a critical survey see Vahdati, 2006). Negahbān has consistently argued that the cemetery was used for several centuries, from the 14th to the 10th centuries BCE (cf. Negahbān, 1964b, 13; Negahbān, 1996, 95-96), relying on stylistic analyses of the material, as well as on a single radiocarbon test on organic material from Tomb 15 carried out in 1968 that yielded a date of 1457-55 BCE (presumably uncalibrated; Groningen C-14 Laboratory). His range of dates have been accepted by most scholars (see Porada, 1965; Wilkinson, 1965; Calmeyer, 1982; Amiet, 1989), but some lean toward the low end of this time span by pointing out a few artifacts that seem to be more in place in the 8th-7th centuries BCE (cf. Muscarella 1984; Muscarella, 2000a; Haerinck 1988; Löw, 1998). The *prima facie* reason for an argument in favor of low chronology is the possibility of later burials in the latter centuries. The lowest chronology for Mārlik has been proposed by Akurgal (Akurgal, 1968, 76, 103-5), who dates the assemblage to somewhere between 700 to 625 BCE, but his dating has not gained much support from the rest of the scholarly community. The consensus seems to agree on Negahbān's original dates, with some room for later burials.

*Social Organization*. Very little has been done at Mārlik in terms of modern archaeological mortuary analyses (for some general attempts see Löw, 1995; Löw, 1996; Vahdati, 2005a). Even a rudimentary mortuary analysis is obviously beyond the scope of this paper, but some general remarks can be made on the social organization of the society who buried their dead at Mārlik. One should, however, bear in mind that mortuary analyses may only provide partial results, because the lack of skeletal remains would greatly hinder attribution of tombs based on the age and sex of the deceased.

The overall impression from Mārlik is that of a ranked society developing incipient forms of stratification. First and foremost is Negahbān's assertion

that the mound of Mārlik was the 'Royal Cemetery' of the society in question in which only the elites were buried, whereas the lower valley was evidently occupied by graves of people of lower status, only a handful of which have been excavated (Negahbān, 1996, p. 24), perhaps a large enough sample to show a considerable difference in both funerary installations and quality and quantity of grave goods.

Apart from the difference in tomb size and construction mentioned above (itself an indication to variation in social status) the Mārlik tombs exhibit a considerable differentiation in both the quantity and quality of the grave goods. There are tombs with as few as one pottery vessel (Tomb 11) or one gold cup (Tomb 37), but also tombs with as many as two hundred individual artifacts (Tomb 36). There are also a few tombs with no artifacts (e.g., Tombs 9, 31, 34, and 35), but this may be the result of looting and not a deliberate funerary behavior.

Two tombs (36 and 52) are particularly interesting. Tomb 52 is not only one of the largest in the cemetery (7×4.5×2.5 m), but, with nearly 180 individual artifacts, it is one of the richest, too. This tomb, roughly oval in shape, is made of local stone, but in its northwestern corner a large (2.6×0.7×0.2 m) slab from the imported yellow stone rests on a platform of two parallel stone pedestals, holding the slab some 35 cm above the tomb floor. The slab itself shows signs of being worked on to create straighter edges (Negahbān, 1996, pl. 16a). On this slab were placed two large daggers and three large spearheads, with their points oriented inwards, but not touching one another. The deceased was placed on this 'bed' of weapons on its left side, facing south. The slab seemed to have partially protected the body from natural elements, as this is one of the few tombs where some skeletal remains have been discovered (FIGURE 5). Also preserved in the immediate space around the body were the remains of a garment of which only some small pieces of fabric and over sixty gold buttons have survived. Around and under the slab were more arms, including bronze maceheads and arrowheads, remains of a bronze and leather quiver, and perhaps a bronze helmet, as well as an array of personal ornaments including pendants made from shell, gold, and carnelian beads, gold earrings, and a gold hair binder. Elsewhere in the tomb, a range of pottery and bronze vessels and figurines was discovered, including twenty-four cast bronze animal figurines. Considering the size and the construction of the tomb and the quantity and diversity of grave goods discovered within it, Negahbān (Negahbān, 1996, 24) argues that Tomb 52 belonged to a "warrior-king." To further support his

hypothesis, Negahbān points out to the adjacent Tomb 53, where a set of horse teeth and pieces of a bronze harness have been discovered, presumably the remains of the warrior-king's horse.

Another interesting example is Tomb 35. Fairly irregular and small in size (2.0×1.5×1.25 m), the entire tomb is made of the imported yellow stone. Lying on the floor were three slabs of the same stone. No skeletal remains were found, but the tomb was filled with a wide range of grave goods grouped in distinct clusters. The abundance of personal ornaments, including many delicate examples in gold and some objects interpreted as gaming pieces, prompted Negahbān to argue that this tomb belonged to a "young princess or queen of such importance that her tomb was filled with more than 200 valuable objects" (Negahbān, 1996, p. 21). Be that as it may, the small size of the tomb and the complete absence of skeletal remains posit another possibility that this may have been a hoard where offering to the dead or to some supernatural entities may have been performed.

*Political Organization*. Assessing the political structure of the Mārlik society is difficult in the absence of textual and non-mortuary remains, but the presence of emblems of authority – such as seals and objects that this author believes to be pommels of some sort of staff or scepter, for example, "no. 82, the gold bust" (Negahbān, 1996, 114, color pl. XXIIe-f [FIGURE 6a and FIGURE 6b]), "nos. 153-4: two gold tiger heads" (Negahbān, 1996, color pl. XXVIa) – suggests the trappings of an incipient political authority.

Perhaps a better location to explore the political organization of the Mārlik society is not at the Mārlik cemetery, but at the nearby site of Pila Qalʿa. Brief test excavations at Pila Qalʿa (FIGURE 7) revealed a sequence of occupation dating from the 2nd millennium BCE to medieval Islamic times, including some constructions that may have been associated with the Mārlik tombs (Negahbān, 1964a). Unfortunately, our knowledge of Pila Qalʿa is limited, as a change in the Ministry of Education (in which the ASI was based at that time) led to withdrawal of the team's excavation permit and the shutdown of work at Pila Qalʿa.

*Ethnicity*. Reconstructing ancient ethnicity in the absence of textual evidence and solely based on archaeological material is a thorny subject (Jones). The 'Mārlik culture'—as the society responsible for producing the material discovered at Mārlik and kindred but less extravagant cemeteries in the western Caspian basin such as Kaluraz, Tomājān, Kelārdašt, Deylamān and

others came to be called (Negahbān, 1964; Porada, p. 16; Wilkinson)—is generally assumed to have belonged to a group people who spoke an Iranian language and who migrated into Iran from Central Asia in early to mid-2nd millennium BCE. The abundance of arms, horse-trappings (as well as horse burials), and spouted vessels among the grave goods has been cited as distinct Iranian signatures (Kurochkin). The exact attribution of these people, however, remains largely a conjecture. Negahbān believes that they belonged to Mardoi or Amardoi tribe mentioned by Classical authors as occupying this region during the Achaemenid times (Negahbān, 1998; see also Hakemi). Building on a proposition initially put forward by Diakonoff (p. 65), Malekzadeh (1994) argues that Mārlik was part of the ancient petty kingdom of "Andia" mentioned in Neo-Assyrian sources.

*External relations*. Regardless of their ethnic affiliation, the people buried at Mārlik were certainly not isolated from the outside world. Extensive stylistic analysis of the material discovered at Mārlik (Negahbān, 1996; Porada; Vahdati, 2005a; Idem, 2005b) indicates that these people participated in a far-reaching cultural network that extended from Anatolia (Akurgal) to Assyria (Muscarella, 1984), Babylonia (Calmeyer, 1982; Calmeyer, 1995, 40-42), and Elam (Amiet, 1990), as well as ; to the Iranian Plateau and points east (Kurochkin). Apart from designs and motifs that show Mārlik people's awareness of stylistic repertoire of the neighboring regions, underlining their contact with the outside world are some imported items, including fourteen cylinder seals from Mesopotamia, Syria, and Anatolia (Negahbān, 1977; Negahbān, 1996, 205-13). Calmeyer's contention that the decorated gold and silver vessels are also imports from Mesopotamia (Calmeyer, 1982; Calmeyer, 1995) has met with little enthusiasm.

Despite a comprehensive excavation report (Negahbān, 1996) and a large array of technical and stylistic analyses (see works by Negahbān in bibliography), Mārlik is far from being exhausted as a source of archaeological knowledge and information on the early history of Persia. Two main avenues of research that can shed more light on Mārlik culture would be: (1) a systematic and thorough mortuary analysis using Negahbān's detailed and comprehensive excavation report and the actual artifacts stored in the National Museum of Iran (*Muza-ye melli-e Irān* or *Muza-ye Irān-e bāstān*, see ARCHEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF IRAN) to gain a better understanding of the social organization and belief system of Mārlik society as reflected in their funerary tradition; (2) large-scale, horizontal excavations at Pila Qalʿa,

especially in the layers contemporary with Mārlik tombs, in order to gain insight into domestic life of the deceased, and, hopefully, to uncover remains that would shed light on the political organization and interregional contacts of the Mārlik people.

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