

Archaeological search for the Near Eastern Aryans and the royal cemetery of Marlik in northern Iran

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Innovatory traits in Mitanni art: their Central Asian origin and Aryan parallels

The search for archaeological monuments left by the earliest Indo-Iranians in the ancient Near East poses an intricate problem. It seems best to tackle it by choosing as starting points historical and linguistic facts that can be definitively dated and fixed on the map. Such firmly established data include the presence of Indo-Iranian terms and names in sources connected with the state of Mitanni, written in the middle of the second millennium BC.

Mitanni art includes not only motifs and stylistic elements derived from western Asiatic traditions but also some innovations (Kurochkin 1984). Among these innovatory motifs, which we propose to connect with the early Indo-Iranians, are the humped zebu bull, an archer with bent knees, a goddess with a mirror, and double-headed and winged personages including the 'mistress of animals' (found on seals together with the Indo-Aryan name *Sauššatar*). The origin of these motifs can be traced back to northeastern Iran, Afghanistan and southern Central Asia.

The recent excavations of Viktor Sarianidi in Margiana (Turkmenistan), particularly at Gonur Tepe, have brought a number of seals to light. On the basis of their typology and chronology, they seem to me to be in proto-Mitanni style.

It is significant that not only are many of the supposedly Indo-Iranian innovations in Mitanni art genetically connected with Central Asia; they also have parallels in the art of different Indo-Iranian peoples. For example, early Scythian art shows a stag with bound legs hanging from a pole. This same motif appears much earlier among the innovations of Mitanni art, and a still earlier prototype seems to be found at Tepe Hissar III in northeastern Iran. It depicts, I believe, an ancient Indo-Iranian myth.

Another example is supplied by the golden pectoral coming from the Scythian royal barrow of Tolstaya Mogila: it shows an ungulate animal tormented by griffins or birds of prey; another scene represents the birth of this hooped animal (fig. 34.1a). This combination of motifs has earlier prototypes among the supposedly Indo-Iranian innovations of Mitanni glyptics (fig. 34.1b). Its genesis can be traced to northern Iran (Marlik) (fig. 34.1c), to northeastern Iran (the treasure of Astrabad) (fig. 34.1d left) and to Afghanistan of the early second millennium BC (fig. 34.1d right).

The motif of persons looking in a mirror combined with the scene of a ritual libation is very characteristic of Scythian art (fig. 34.2a-b). Earlier we find the goddess with a mirror and a hero with a vessel presented on a silver bowl from

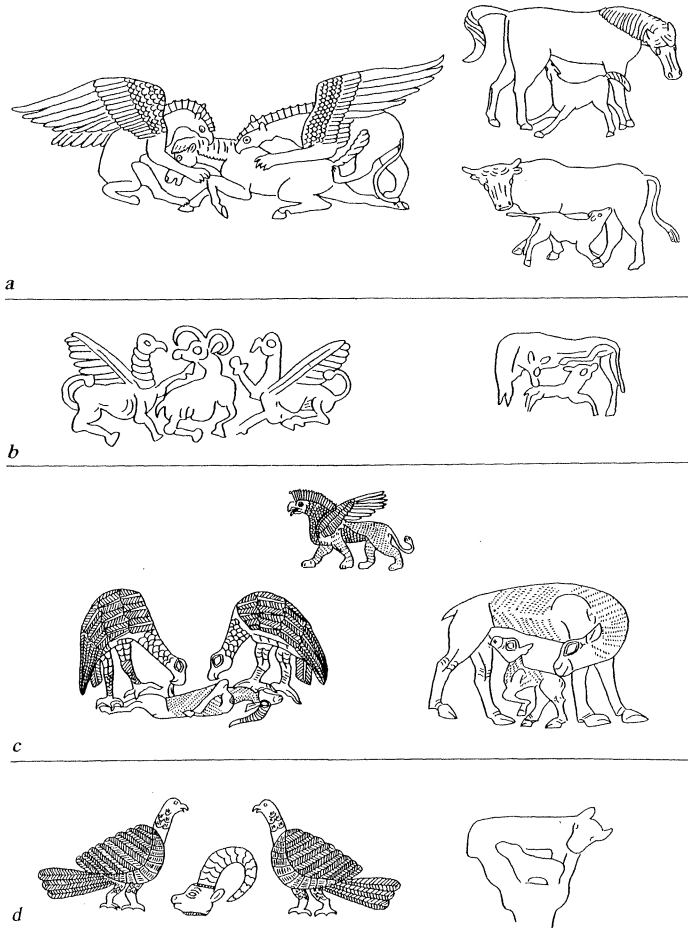


Fig. 34.1. The Indo-Iranian motif of the birth and torment of hoofed animals.

34.1a. Scythian pectoral from Tolstaya Mogila. *34.1b.* Mitanni glyptics. *34.1c.* Golden bowl from Marlik. *34.1d.* The earliest prototypes from northeastern Iran (treasure of Astrabad) and Afghanistan.

Bactria (fig. 34.2c) and on the well-known golden bowl (to be further discussed below) from Hasanlu V in northwestern Iran (fig. 34.2d). There are similar scenes on cylinder seals in the Mitanni style (fig. 34.2g–h); in one found at Nuzi, the personage holds a mirror of a peculiar shape (fig. 34.2g). Actual bronze mirrors of the same type, with a handle shaped like a female figure, have been found



Fig. 34.2. The motif of looking at a mirror in the art of various Indo-Iranian tribes. 34.2a–b. Golden ornaments from Scythia. 34.2c. Silver bowl from Bactria. 34.2d. Golden bowl from Hasanlu. 34.2e–f. Mirrors from Masjid-i Sulaimān. 34.2g–h. Mitanni glyptics. 34.2i. Mirror from Khurvin. 34.2j–L. Mirrors from Afghanistan and northeastern Iran.

in Iran (fig. 34.2e, f, i), and their origin goes back to northeastern Iran and Afghanistan (fig. 34.2j–L).

Thus, the art of the different Indo-Iranian peoples should not be considered as isolated phenomena, but rather as branches of a single genealogical tree whose trunk can be located in northeastern Iran, Afghanistan and southern Central Asia.

Aryans and the North Iranian Grey Ware Culture of the Bronze Age

The linguist Thomas Burrow supposed that the arrival of the early Iranians in the Iranian Plateau was preceded in the second millennium BC by an earlier wave of Indo-Iranian or more precisely proto-Indo-Aryan tribes, who came to Iran from Central Asia (Burrow 1973). This historical reconstruction based on linguistic criteria coincides with the archaeological distribution of the Grey Ware Culture, which spread from east to west in northern Iran (Kurochkin 1979; 1988; 1990).

A characteristic trait of the early Indo-Iranian religion was the cult of the sacred plant and drink *soma/haoma*. It is therefore significant that the spread of the Grey Ware Culture in northern Iran was accompanied by scenes of ritual libation in art as well as by special types of vessels and instruments (fig. 34.3).

Aryan affinity of the cemetery of Marlik

The written sources of the ancient East and their Indo-Iranian vocabulary provide the following clues for the archaeological identification of the Near Eastern Aryans (Kurochkin 1979).

1. The Near Eastern Aryans used horse-drawn war chariots.
2. The Mitanni ruling élite had wide-ranging international contacts including Egypt, and these should be reflected in the archaeological monuments supposed to be connected with Aryans in the form of numerous imports from the respective regions.
3. Ornaments commonly used in the wide-spread Hurrian world would have to be included in the hypothetically reconstructed material culture of the Near Eastern Aryans.
4. The archaeological sites supposed to be connected with the Near Eastern Aryans should exhibit cultural elements characteristic of Indo-Iranian religious ideology or distinctive material indicators of Indo-Iranian affiliation.

The famous 'royal' cemetery of Marlik in northern Iran (Negahban 1964a; 1964b) meets all these criteria, allowing us to suppose that it belonged to proto-Indo-Aryan aristocracy. Thus it has produced a great amount of weapons, models of battle-chariots and horse burials. Its fabulous riches include many prestige objects imported from the western parts of the Near East including Palestine, among them ornaments dated to the middle of the second millennium BC (fig. 34.4). Also found at Marlik were a number of seals carved in typical Mitanni style.

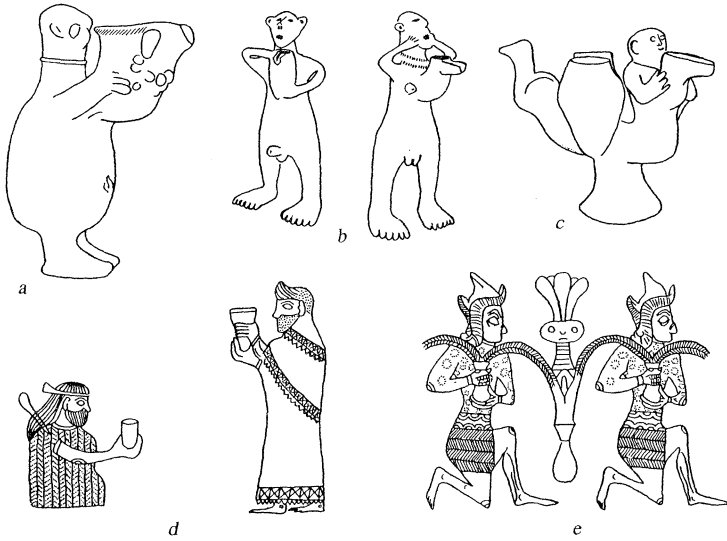


Fig. 34.3. Scenes of ritual libation in the art of northern Iran.
34.3a. Luristan. 34.3b. Marlik. 34.3c-d. Hasanlu. 34.3e. Gilan.

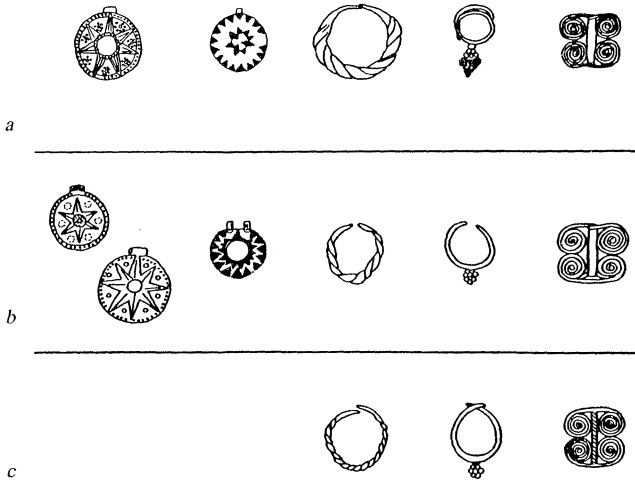


Fig. 34.4. Ornaments from the cemetery of Marlik (a) and dated parallels from western parts of the ancient Near East (b) and the Mediterranean (c).

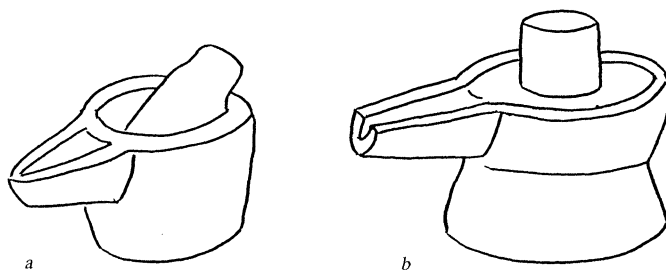


Fig. 34.5. Ritual mortars with spouts from Marlik (a) and modern Hindu shrines (b).

The Indo-Iranian religion characteristically combines a fire cult with the ritual drinking of *soma*. A fire altar and a 'teapot' for ritual libations were found in the funeral shrine at Marlik (Negahban 1964a). The rich tombs of Marlik contained mortars with an open spout and pestles, apparently used for pressing out juice from plants, as well as models of battle-chariots. This combination of rather unusual grave goods is in striking agreement with Vedic funerary texts. These namely prescribe a mortar (*ulūkhala*) and a pestle (*musala*) as well as a (model) wagon (*śakaṭa*) to be placed at the legs of a deceased Indo-Aryan man who had established sacred fires (Caland 1896: 51).

The spouted stone mortars and pestles found at Marlik have a characteristic shape (fig. 34.5a). In India, Hindu temples even today have a sacred object with a very similar shape, which represents the union of the male and female genitals (*liṅga* and *yonī*) and symbolizes the great god Śiva and his spouse Bhavānī (fig. 34.5b). Undoubtedly it represents a survival of the ancient Indo-Iranian cult object (Kurochkin 1993).

The main elements of the Marlik material culture go back to the Bronze Age of northeastern Iran (Kurochkin 1979; 1988). Particularly noteworthy in this connection are the ritual 'teapots' with spouts, which are characteristic of Bactria as well. The battle axes in turn may be compared to those mentioned in the Avesta as weapons of the Indo-Iranian god Mitra: 'Mitra's chariot has a thousand axes made of the best metal, two-bladed and sharp' (*Yašt* 10.130).

The golden bowl of Hasanlu V

After the Bronze Age, in the second half of the second millennium BC, the bearers of the Grey Ware Culture moved into northwestern Iran, to the region of Lake Urmia. Here, in the ruins of one of the temples at Hasanlu (Period V), a golden vessel with pictorial scenes was found. The illustrations on this Hasanlu bowl conform to integral passages of the Avesta, found in the 21st chapter of *Vendīdāt* and the 5th *Yašt* devoted to Anāhitā.

For example, a hero dressed in a peculiar skirt is shown on the bowl twice: once associated with a bird of prey and once with a three-headed monster. In the Avestan hymn, the hero Thraētaona is also mentioned twice: for the first time in connection with his battle with the three-headed Aži-Dahāka (*Yašt* 5.33–34) and a second time when he helps the hero Pāurva by making him fly up to heaven in the form of a bird of prey (*Yašt* 5.61). After three days and nights, Pāurva asks the goddess Anāhitā to return him to the earth, which she does in the shape of a beautiful girl (*Yašt* 5.62–65). Pāurva then performs a sacrifice with the sacred Haoma drink (*Yašt* 5.66) (the Hasanlu bowl shows a man with a vessel) (Kurochkin 1974).

Some of the scenes on the Hasanlu bowl reappear later in Sasanian toreutics.

The Gandhāra Grave Culture of Swat in Pakistan, dating to the second half of the second millennium BC, has been identified by some researchers with the Vedic Aryans. It is significant that also the material culture of Swat offers many parallels to the finds of Tepe Hissar III, Marlik and Hasanlu V.

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