

# ANCIENT IRANIAN CERAMICS



*from the  
Arthur M. Sackler Collections*

Cover Burnished red vessel in the form of a humpbacked bull. Southwestern Caspian region, ca 1000-900 BC. Acc. no. 82.4.2



Fig. 2 Interior of black-on-red bowl with stylized goats in what may be a symbolic landscape. Late 5th-early 4th millennium BC. Acc. no. 75.7.1

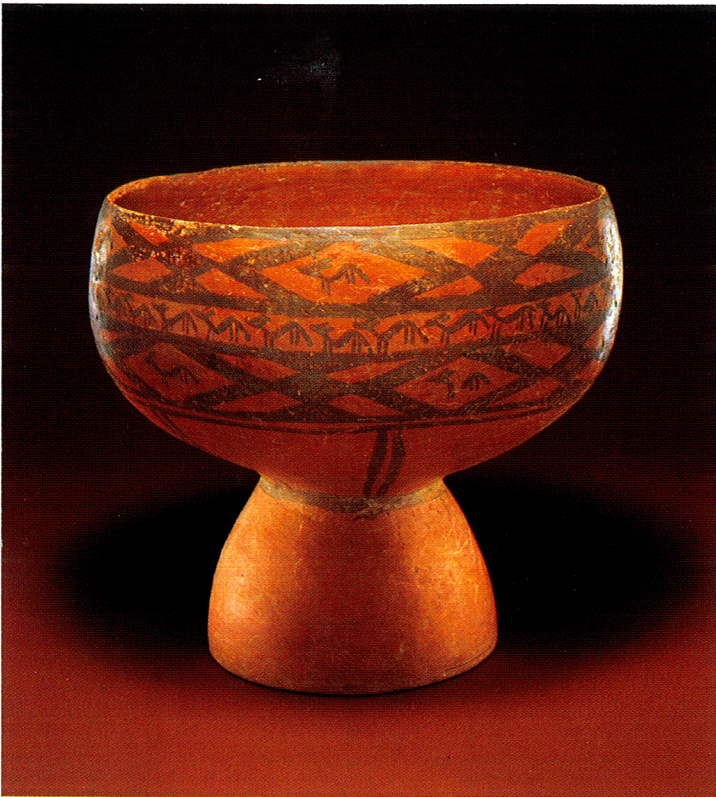


Fig. 1 Black-on-red footed bowl from north central Iran. 5th millennium BC. Acc. no. 70.2.2

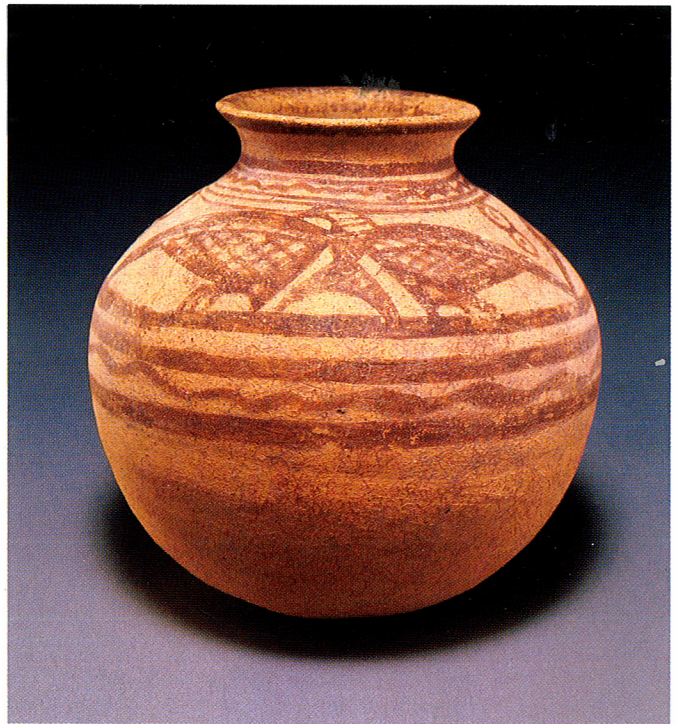


Fig. 3 Small Elamite bowl with spread-eagle motif. Mid to late 3rd millennium BC. Acc. no. 70.2.252

## Preface

This exhibition of Ancient Iranian Ceramics marks the debut showing of this portion of the Arthur M. Sackler Collections. It is being offered, despite Dr. Sackler's recent, untimely death, in celebration of the opening of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., this year. Few collectors have specialized in art from the Ancient Near East, and this is indeed one of the rare times that any museum exhibition in North America has focused exclusively on ceramics from ancient Iran. Dr. Sackler sought to educate and share with the public his passion for ancient and particularly Asian art and aesthetics, and it is as a tribute to him, and to his foresight and knowledge, that we are able to present this exhibition.

The Sackler Collections include over 400 examples of pre-Islamic Near Eastern ceramics, almost all of which come from Iran, and some 90 of which are presented here. The elegance of form that is so characteristic of these ceramics is remarkable in light of their extraordinarily early date, and serves as a testament to the creative sophistication which the earliest potters and sculptors possessed. Whether the pottery was painted with geometric patterns, sculpted, or burnished in patterns, few people will fail to be impressed by the imaginative and ornamental abstraction of natural shapes.

Well represented in the show is the Giyan type of pottery dating to the third and second millennia BC and bearing shoulder designs of decorative linear patterns and stylized animals. There are also a number of examples of typically Iranian animal-shaped vessels representing stags, bulls, and rams, which date to the first millennium BC. Rhyta in the shape of wild animal heads and amphora with double zoomorphic handles also underscore the importance of wild and domestic fauna in the economic, religious, and artistic life of ancient Iran.

We must thank Dr. Sackler for his special and continuing vision of presenting the art of many cultures to the public, for making it accessible and informative, and for showing us how, in his words, "a past civilization can relate to the present through the power of its art."

DIANA KRUMHOLZ McDONALD

# Acknowledgments

In 1985, Dr. Arthur M. Sackler and Mrs. Lois Katz, curator of the Sackler Collections, began sharing a vision: an exhibition of Ancient Iranian Ceramics of a size and breadth never before assembled in this country, which would open with an accompanying scholarly symposium and then, like other Arthur M. Sackler Foundation exhibitions, would travel throughout the United States and abroad.

On the eve of the opening of this inspiring exhibition and symposium at The Lowe Art Museum, we would like to express our appreciation to Diana Krumholz McDonald and Trudy Kawami for sharing in and facilitating the vision, to Robert and Toby Stoetzer, Conservators of the Arthur M. Sackler Collections, to Victor Trasoff, designer of the elegant art catalogues of the Sackler Collections, to Andrea Kirsh for organizing the symposium, and to Lois Katz and the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation staff.

The Board of Directors of the  
Arthur M. Sackler Foundation  
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Fig. 4 Burnished beak-spouted vessel.  
Northern Iran, 2nd millennium BC?  
Acc. no. 70.2.33



## The Ceramics of Ancient Iran

TRUDY S. KAWAMI

*"Then the Lord God formed man  
of dust from the ground"*  
Genesis 2.7

Clay was perhaps the first artistic medium, and in our culture it still functions as a symbol of creativity. The origins of the western ceramic tradition lie in the Near East and date at least as early as the seventh millennium BC, the Neolithic or New Stone Age. In this period artisans in the Levant, the rocky eastern rim of the Mediterranean, in Anatolia, the mountainous upland that is modern Turkey, and on the Iranian plateau were already transforming simple clay vessels into carefully considered forms painted with red, black or white clay slip added to the surface of the pot.

While most ancient cultures of the Near East produced attractive pottery at some point in their development, the cultures of Iran, the land bounded by the Zagros Mountains on the west, the Caspian Sea and the Kopet Dagh mountains on the north, the Persian Gulf to the south and a series of deserts and dry plains to the east, gave birth to a distinctive ceramic tradition that spanned at least five thousand years. In contrast to Mesopotamia where ceramics ceased to be a major

art form after the fourth millennium BC, Iran produced ceramic works of artistic significance as late as the second century AD. The Iranian ceramic tradition is characterized by elegant rounded shapes, often with long beak-like spouts; by decorative painting, generally dark on a light ground, featuring birds or mountain goats; by the manipulation of firing conditions to produce either red or gray-black wares; and by the use of burnishing—the careful smoothing of the pot's surface before it is completely dry to produce a shiny, almost metallic sheen after firing. These characteristics, of course, appear on the fine ceramics only. The utilitarian, common or kitchen wares rarely received such aesthetic attention.

The painted tradition in Iranian ceramics apparently begins in the northwest with a distinctive series of rough handbuilt bowls with elaborate zigzag patterns. Ceramics of this type are known as Dalma ware after the site of Dalma Tepe where these fifth millennium BC pots were first discovered. In this same period clay figures of humans and animals also appear. While

many are simply, if not crudely formed images, others, particularly those depicting heavy female figures, are stylized into arresting, almost abstract shapes that bear comparison with 20th century sculpture.

By the Chalcolithic (Copper/Stone) Period, the fifth and fourth millennia BC, the painting repertory all over Iran also included human and animal figures. It is in this period that the Iranian and Mesopotamian ceramic traditions are closest in their fabric and painted decoration.

In the north the transition from Neolithic to Chalcolithic wares is illustrated by a series of red bowls with black paint from the site of Cheshmeh Ali near modern Tehran. These bowls have symmetrical patterns, often featuring rows of disembodied ibex or moufflon horns, a decorative motif of unknown significance found earlier at Neolithic Zaghe where sets of real horns decorated the interior of a specialized structure called by its excavators the Painted Building. Ibex horns, probably a magical or religious symbol, remain to this day a part of the Iranian decorative vocabulary. Figure 1 is a large footed bowl of the type known from Zaghe and Cheshmeh Ali. Figure 2 shows the interior of a smaller bowl painted with stylized goats and what may be symbolic mountains and a river. The black-on-red ware of northern Iran connects that region with the ceramic traditions of southern Central Asia. In later periods these eastern connections continue giving the ceramics of eastern Iran a distinctive orientation and a different course of development. As the Sackler Collections contain none of these east Iranian wares, that region is not considered in this essay.

By the end of the Chalcolithic Period, buff ware with dark paint supplants the red ware if we may judge from the painted ceramics of Tepe Hissar (level I) in the northeast and Sialk (level IV) in the north central.

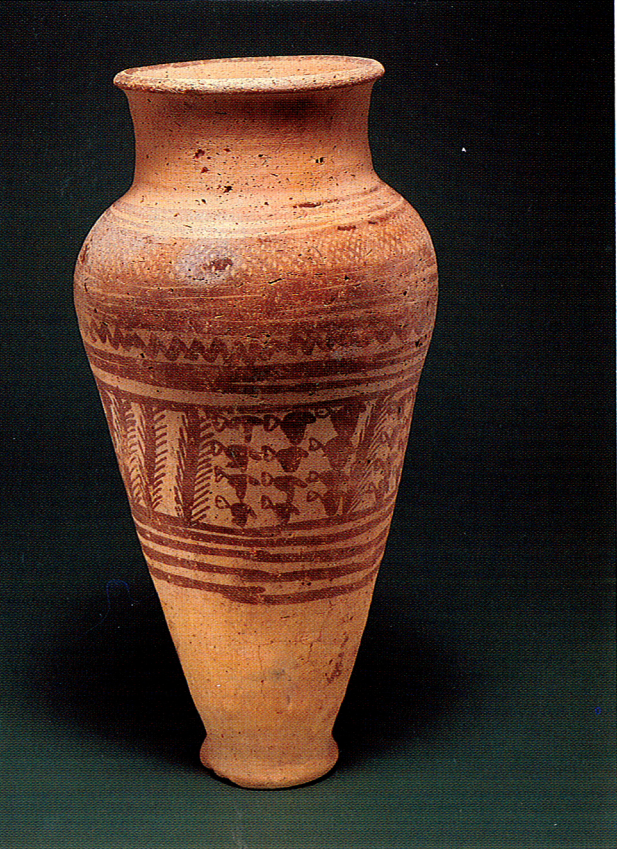
In western and southern Iran, Chalcolithic ceramics feature a fine well-fired buff ware decorated with a dark paint that can appear brown, black or even purple depending on the exact conditions of firing. Painted wares from the site of Susa and its neighbor-

ing mounds in southwestern Iran are the best known representatives of this period. The large thin-walled beakers, seemingly hand-built, and the open round bowls are expressive and elegant forms in their own right. Their painted ornament, whether patterned bands, abstractly conceived ibexes with great circular horns, or a simple snail whose round shape nicely echoes the bowl it adorns, is carefully arranged to enhance the vessel it decorates. The Susiana wares in turn are linked to the more flamboyant painted wares from Tall-e Bakun and Tall-e Nakhodi in south central Iran. The elegant play of vertical and horizontal forms noted at Susa is replaced on the ceramics from Bakun by an emphasis on spirals and diagonals, while the pots from Nakhodi feature rows of lively sway-backed animals.

Writing appears in Iran by the early third millennium BC enabling us to trace the rising power of the Elamite state centered at Susa. Thus we can finally identify an ethnic group with a particular style of ceramics. Typical of this time are large round jars with a ridge defining the shoulder and small round lugs for handles. The shoulder usually bears a band of painted ornament featuring a stylized spread-eagle motif such as that on the small bowl in Figure 3. The use of a red wash to give additional color and the inclusion of angular stick figures and animal forms may reflect contemporary ceramic painting in neighboring Mesopotamia. Since the Elamites were continually involved with the various Mesopotamian powers through trade as well as military conflicts, Mesopotamian influence in ceramics would not be surprising.

Western Iranian ceramics generally continued parallel to the Susiana tradition with more sculptural forms and somewhat varied decoration. Red is used sparingly and, except for stylized bird and horned mountain goats, figural motifs are uncommon.

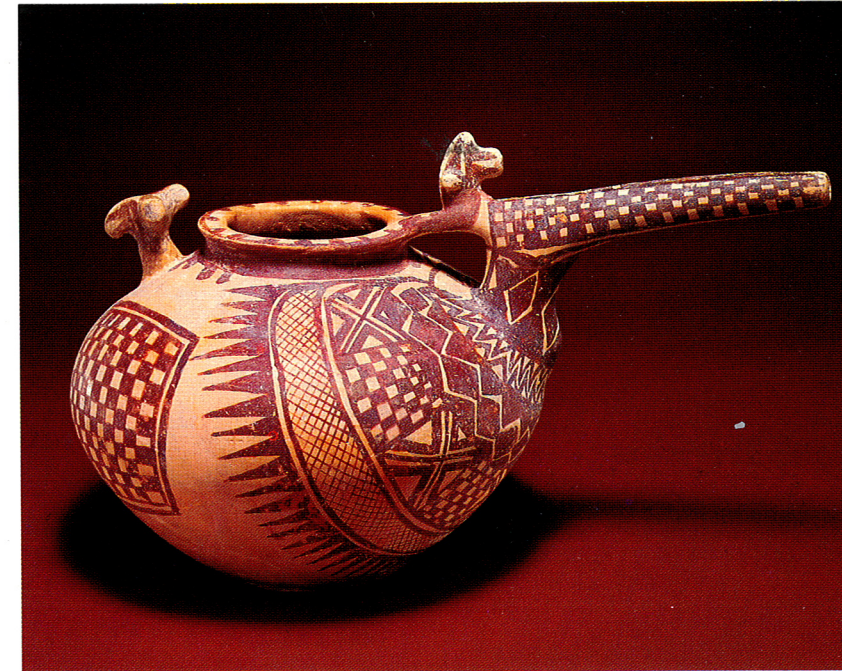
The ceramics of the northeast illustrated by the finds at Tepe Hissar (levels IIIB and C) and at Tureng Tepe show a profound shift in taste and technique that continued from the third into the second millennium BC. The very fine thin gray wares excavated at these sites have elegant mannered shapes that suggest a



*Fig. 5* Tall Kaftari ware vessel painted with water birds. Southern Iran. First half of second millennium BC. Acc. no. 70.2.175



*Fig. 6* Large painted jar of the Tepe Giyan/ Nihavend type. Western Iran. First half of second millennium BC. Acc. no. 70.2.694



*Fig. 8* Beak-spouted pitcher with painted patterns. Sialk region of central Iran, ca 8th century BC. Acc. no. S-3135B

*Fig. 7* Red-orange vessel with two human feet. Southwest Caspian region, ca 1000 BC. Acc. no. 70.2.906

strong influence from contemporary metal vessels. Since this region has yielded evidence of early copper working and bronze production, such an interchange between the two media is to be expected. The metallic appearance of these ceramics is enhanced by their burnished surface which often has subtle patterned bands worked into it. The burnished vessels could vary in color with brown tones like that of the vessel in Figure 4 looking very much like bronze. For at least the next fifteen hundred years gray wares were made across the entire northern section of Iran, and burnishing remained an element in the Iranian potter's repertory even longer.

These burnished wares have been associated by some with the arrival of Iranian-speaking people from Central Asia. However, we don't have writing from these sites and writing is the only way of ascertaining the language spoken by the inhabitants. Furthermore, recent anthropological studies have shown that changes in pottery do not necessarily mean major changes in ethnicity.

The taste, or perhaps the demand, for burnished gray ware never extended into the central or southern areas of Iran where the buff wares with dark paint continued. The spread-eagle motif diminished, its place taken by rows of water birds shown in profile, like those in Figure 5, usually to the left. This is Kaftari ware, a diagnostic Elamite ceramic type of the second millennium BC found from Susa and Choga Zambil in the southwest to Malyan in central Iran.

In the west and northwest, painted ceramics like that shown in Figure 6 were widely produced, the best known excavated examples coming from the tombs of Tepe Giyan, excavated in the 1930s and from looted mounds in the region. In the latter part of the second millennium BC large ceramic sculptures are documented at the Elamite city of Susa and the dynastic shrine of Choga Zambil. Free-standing bulls, lions and griffins having both plain and glazed surfaces stood guard at various doors and gates. The exploitation of clay for monumental sculptures in the Susa region may have been a response to the lack of usable stone in the surrounding agricultural lands.

Our understanding of Iranian ceramics at the end of the second millennium BC was expanded in the 1960s by the astonishing discoveries at Marlik, a tomb site on the Sefid Rud (White River) in the southwestern Caspian watershed. The gold and silver vessels, the swords and daggers and the gold jewelry revealed a rich and sophisticated culture. The ceramics of the region were previously known only from clandestine digging merchandized through the local market town of Amlash. The Marlik excavations provided a much needed context for some of the varied ceramics labeled with the catch-all Amlash designation. Marlik, along with the nearby sites of Kaluraz and Kalar Dasht, remains our touchstone for assessing the Iron Age culture of the Caspian region and the rich creativity of its ceramic artisans.

The Marlik tombs, dated between 1100 and 800 BC, have yielded not only burnished gray ware but also red ware in the same shapes. These two colors are achieved by differences in the firing process rather than changes in the clay body. The sleekly stylized animal vessels of Marlik, like the bull on the cover, stand in sharp contrast to the crude yet forceful human figures from the same site. Figure 7 shows an anthropomorphic vessel of the type known from the Marlik region. We have no knowledge of the ceremonial use to which these varied pieces were put because we have no written documents of the culture. Thus we cannot yet assess the significance of these differences in style and execution.

While the elegant animal vessels seem restricted to the Caspian area, inventive and at times amusing pots with feet and sometimes hands sprouting at appropriate points appear also at Hasanlu (level IV), a site near Lake Urmiyah in northwestern Iran, that was sacked and burned about 800 BC. Here, too, one can see the influence of metal forms in the burnished gray ceramic tripods supporting "tea pots" with long beaked spouts. The ultimate dependence of these easily broken spouts on the more resilient metal examples is clear not only from their outline, but also from the occasional duplication in clay of the metal rivets used to secure the sections of the metal vessels.





Fig. 9 Burnished gray beak-spouted pitcher, Khurvin region of northern Iran, ca 8th century BC. Acc. no. 70.2.529

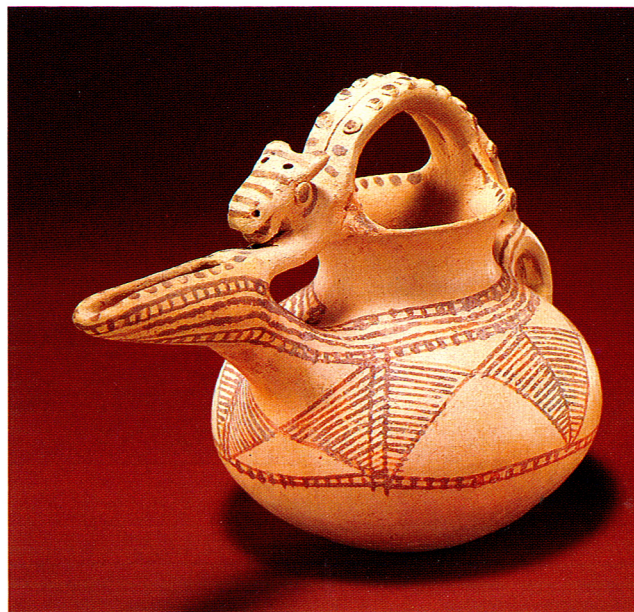


Fig. 10 Painted jug with trefoil spout. Central or western Iran, late 8th or 7th century BC. Acc. no. S-3342

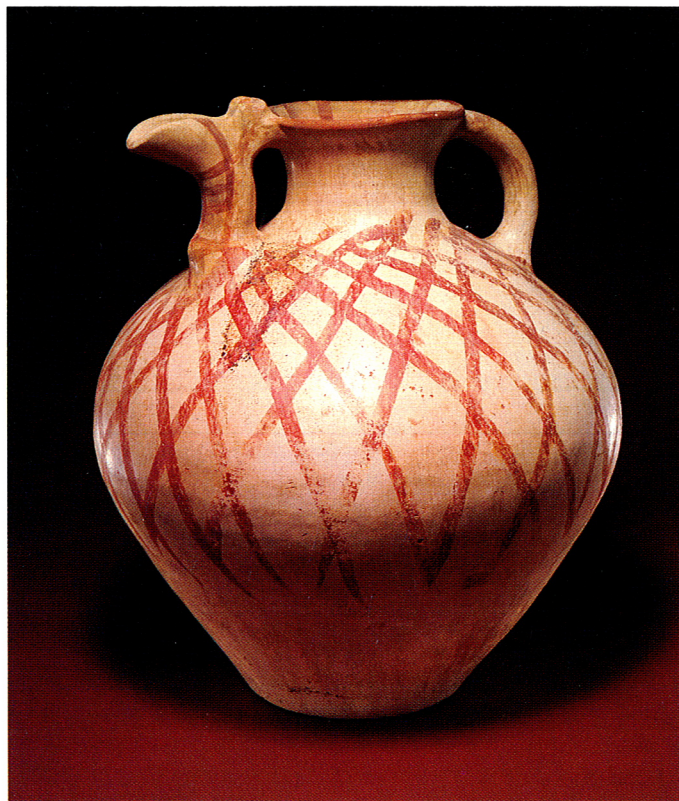


Fig. 11 Painted jug with net-like pattern. Central or western Iran, late 8th or 7th century BC. Acc. no. 70.2.563



Fig. 12 Red-burnished rhyton in the shape of a foot. Northwestern Iran, 9th or 8th century BC. Acc. no. S-2071N

Catalog by Trudy S. Kawami  
Design by Victor Trasoff  
Photography by Murray Shear

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By the late eighth century BC, taste had changed at least in western and central Iran. While pot shapes remained approximately the same, the preferred ceramic body was pale buff painted with a bewildering variety of checkerboards, rays, triangles and occasional human and animal figures. The change from a dark monochrome metallic surface that emphasized the sculptural form of the pot, to a richly patterned surface that partially negated the basic shape is striking, particularly if one compares the painted ceramics of Sialk, like the vessel in Figure 8, with the gray ware of Khurvin, Figure 9, farther north and west. These two sites have produced pots of identical form but radically different surfaces. As yet we are not able to securely correlate this change with any ethnic or political event for neither site has yielded any writing.

The simpler painted wares of Sialk, like that of Figure 10, also appear at Hasanlu (level III), and at Nush-i Jan and Baba Jan in western Iran. At Baba Jan large ceramic ceiling tiles painted with the same designs as found on the pottery have been excavated. One wonders if the initial inspiration for the patterns on both the tiles and the pots came from textiles. These painted ceramics of western Iran have been identified with the Medes, a Persian-speaking people who controlled large portions of western Iran in the seventh and early sixth centuries BC. The Medes were at various times the allies and the opponents of the Assyrians of Mesopotamia and are also known from later Greek histories.

Red and black burnished ware continued in popularity in far northwestern Iran in the region controlled by the Urartians, Anatolian people who were rivals of the Assyrians. Their realm included northwestern Iran, a large portion of eastern Turkey, and part of what is now Soviet Azerbaijan. Their ceramic tradition included rhyta or drinking horns in the shape of a foot as in Figure 12, and small cosmetic vases mounted like riders on little angular horses.

The Achaemenid Persians were the political successors of both the Medes and the Urartians and by the early fifth century BC had established an empire ex-

tending from Thrace to northern India. They built a dramatic terraced capital at Persepolis in central Iran and regional administrative centers throughout their realm. Achaemenid ceramics, at least in central Iran, are fine, wheel-thrown red vessels, with carinated bowls a typical form. But in other parts of Iran, near Susa in the southwest for instance and near Ardebil in the northwest near the Caspian, animal-shaped vessels with rich painted decoration continued to be made. The regional differences noted in earlier periods continued despite the political unification of the country. Thus, it is possible that vessels such as those in Figures 13 and 14 were produced in the Achaemenid period or even later though they stand as representatives of the ceramic tradition seen earlier at Marlik. Added to these regional differences was the presence of Greek craftsmen in the employ of the Achaemenid court. A few excavated fragments plus a collection of as yet unpublished Greek and Greek-influenced ceramics in the Iran-e Bastan Museum in Tehran demonstrate the impact of Greek ceramics on Iranian potters. The ram's head rhyton shown in Figure 15 is a Greek shape typical of the fourth century BC though its buff fabric indicates Iranian rather than Greek production.

The Parthian period, circa 250 BC to AD 224, is a period of pronounced regionalism in art, politics and ceramics. Parthian ceramics vary widely from region to region, the most distinctive pieces coming from the Caspian watershed, particularly the region of Germe, where both animal-shaped vessels and exuberantly painted amphoras with animal-shaped handles like Figure 16, have been excavated. The amphoras continue the red on buff painting tradition of the eighth and seventh centuries BC and apply the technique to shapes that originated in the Achaemenid period. The animal vessels, like the camel of Figure 17, recall in a general way the Marlik works. But the choice of animals represented directly reflects the commercial interest of the Parthian period when the Silk Route from Syria to China brought the wealth of East and West into Iran. These fascinating works demonstrate the strength of the Iranian ceramic tradition and the creativity that marked its entire history.



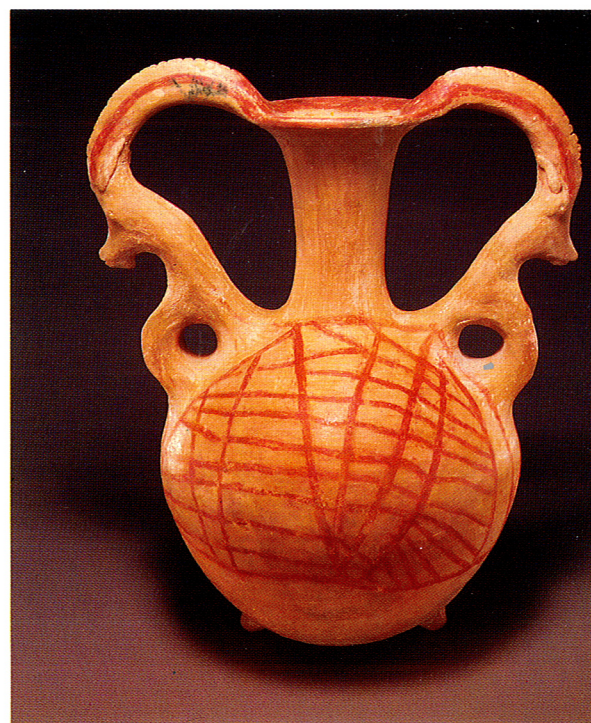
*Fig. 13* Vessel in the shape of a stag. Northern Iran. Mid-first century BC. Acc. no. 82.2.10



*Fig. 14* Burnished red stag head rhyton. Northwestern Iran? Mid-first millennium BC. Acc. no. 70.7.1



*Fig. 15* Ram's head rhyton. Iran, 4th century BC. Acc. no. 85.2.1



*Fig. 16* Double-spouted amphora with a cream-colored slip and red paint. Gerni region, 3rd–2nd century BC. Acc. no. 70.2.269

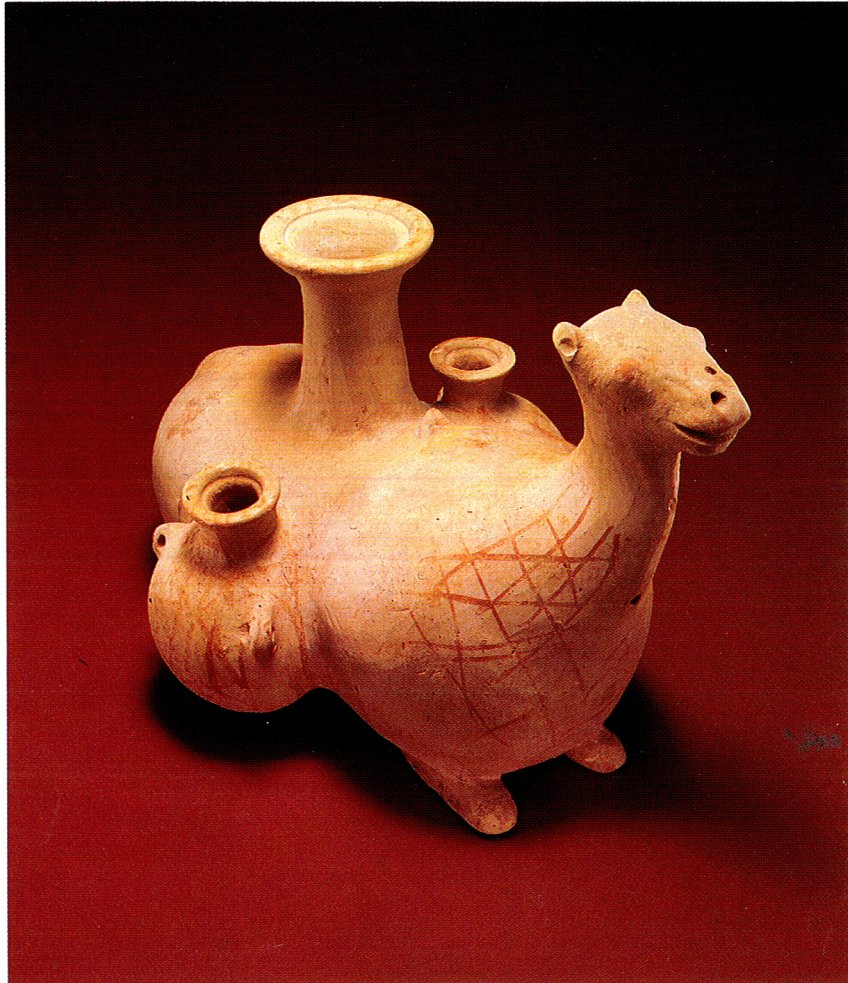


Fig. 17 Vessel in the shape of a recumbent pack camel. Southern Iran, 2nd century BC–AD 2nd century. Acc. no. 70.2.266

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