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THE GOLD VASE WITH THE STORY
OF LIFE,
MARLIK ROYAL CEMETERY

While our Marlik team was deeply involved in its excavation, various scholars concerned with the ancient culture and history of Iran paid visits to this outstanding but remote, archaeological site where we were working under difficult conditions of weather and under constant threat from those illegal diggers of antiquities who, until our excavation began, had been appropriating this national wealth for their own profit. For these eminent scholars to undergo the difficulties of reaching the remote highlands of Rah - matabad in those days of poor roads and limited communication was a great encouragement for our archaeological team. Any scientist who has conducted research in distant areas can well appreciate how we valued their appearance.

Among these scholars we were particularly honored to receive two distinguished and eminent visitors, H.E. Dr. Ali Akbar Siassi, then Dean of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, to whom this volume is dedicated, and H.E. Ali Naghi Vaziri, the eminent professor of Letters, Art and Music who has contributed so much to the culture of this country.
(Figs. 3-5.)

In remembrance of their much appreciated visit for the support of our expedition, I would like to contribute, for this issue of the Journal of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, dedicated to Dr. Siassi, an article on one of the gold bowls discovered in the Marlik royal cemetery.

In the autumn of 1961, during the course of an archaeological survey of Gilan, undertaken in conjunction with the preparation of an archaeological map of Iran, a mound, locally called Marlik, was discovered in the small valley of the Gohar Rud (Crystal River) near the village of Nesfi. The subsequent excavation of this mound revealed that it contained many fascinating objects of great documentary interest, belonging to a kingdom which ruled in this part of Iran during the second half of the second millennium B.C., when the mound of Marlik was used as a royal cemetery. (Figs. 1.2.)

An archaeological expedition, directed by the author and sponsored by the Institute of Archaeology of the University of Tehran and the Iranian Archaeological Service, spent fourteen continuous months at Marlik, excavating fifty-three tombs in which, following their ancient religious beliefs and traditions, the people of this kingdom had arranged around the body of their deceased, a hoard of objects ranging from simple domestic utensils to unique vessels of great artistic worth. Thus, the tombs in the royal cemetery of Marlik and its surrounding area, although varied in construction as well as content, illustrate the unique beliefs and traditions of these people, providing valuable documentary material to assist archaeologists and other scholars in the illumination of the past history and culture of Iran.¹

Among this great variety of objects is a rich collect-

tion of highly decorated gold, silver and bronze vessels. This article is devoted to one of these gold vessels, containing an interesting design in several registers, which we have called 'The gold vase with the story of life'. On this vase the artist has attempted to tell a story in several parts, thus producing one of the earliest narrative designs by an ancient artist.

The gold vase with the story of life, about 20 cm. high and 14 cm. in diameter of the rim, was found in Tomb VI B+. It is made of rather soft and very thin gold, and the rim has been reinforced by rolling. This tall, straight sided vase has been slightly flattened by earth pressure. (Fig. 6).

The body of this vase is covered by four registers of designs, done in repousse, each design repeated around the vessel (Fig. 7). Each of these rows of repeated designs contains part of a story with the total forming one of the earliest narrative compositions.

On the lowest register is a motif, repeated five times around the circumference of the vessel, of a young goat or kid, as yet without horns, suckling from the mother goat (Fig. 8). This is the first stage of the story of the life of this young goat. The mother has turned her head to touch the back of her young kid. The hair on the body of the mother and child is indicated by many parallel chevron dotted lines, aside from the shoulder, and fore and hind legs which are left blank. The corners of the shoulder triangle where the hair often twists—

contains concentric parallel semi - circular lines. On some of the repeats of this motif, the muscles on the front and hind legs are outlined.

The second stage of the goat's life is shown on the second register, where the young goat is standing on his hind legs, eating the leaves of a tree (Fig 9) Here the goat is slightly older than in the first row for his horns have two lines or intersections, indicating that he is two years old. He is vital and vigorous, shown in an active position. His horns are straight and pointed, his ears are straight and his eyes an oval. As in the first register, the hair on some parts of his body is indicated by numerous parallel chevron dotted lines. He has a long tail with a bend, from which it drops straight to the ground. The tree from which he is eating is a type of palmette with a very thick trunk, divided into three main sections, and narrowing as it goes upward. Two branches shoot off from the top of each section of the trunk above the point where the outer edge of the trunk rolls, forming a spiral.

The top of each branch has similar spirals, possibly representing bunches of flowers. The bark of the trunk is indicated by parallel straight vertical lines in sections. The branches are formed of several sections decorated internally by straight parallel and dotted lines. The top of the palmette has two flowers symmetrically on each side and three pointed branches in the middle. Both flowers and branches are decorated by parallel chevrons. Herringbone designs border the thickest part of the trunk near the ground.

The third register shows a wild boar, repeated six times around the vase, which now menaces the life of the goat (Fig. 10). The boar, well identified by his sharp, upward

curving tusks, is walking with his head lowered, ready to attack. Its body hair is indicated by horizontal herringbone bands, and the rough hair on the nape and forehead by short parallel straight lines. The ears are pointed backwards and the eye is a simple oval. The tusk and nose are outlined as are the muscles on the hind legs.

The fourth or top register contains a rather complex scene depicting the end of the goat's life (Fig. 11). In the foreground its carcass is stretched on the ground as enormous vultures eat its entrails. The wings of the vultures are divided into four rows of feathers, three smaller and one longer, each feather divided by a long pointed triangle representing the bone, and fine feather fibers branching off in chevron form from each side. The fourth row of wing feathers is longer and pointed with each feather covered by herringbone designs. The feathers on the neck and legs are formed of overlapped crescents like fish scales. The eyes, beak and claws are simply outlined. The carcass of the goat, no longer young, for his long backward curving horns have eleven intersections, indicating he was eleven years old when he was attacked and killed by the wild boar, is stretched out on its back, covered by simple dotted lines as in the first and second register.

Between this register and the one below are several small flying vultures with outspread wings. The ancient artist has employed a kind of primitive perspective by showing the flying vultures in the distance as much smaller than the standing vultures in the foreground.

Above and between the standing vultures is a small figure squatting before a small stand in the form of a young tree. The eye of this figure is a simple oval and its body

is covered by bands of elongated dots, with hands and feet left blank. The small tree is covered by overlapped crescents like fish scales with two small branches curling off from the middle of the stem.

This small figure before a small stand might be considered either an embryo or a monkey. If it is interpreted as an embryo the complete scene would represent the circle of life from birth to death and rebirth again. If, however, it is interpreted as a monkey, we can draw a connection with some of the ancient stories of the Indo-Iranians, such as 'Kalileh and Demneh' in which the author gives advice to human societies through the device of depicting the life of animals in the jungle. In this book, which was first introduced to Iran from the Indus Valley in Sassanian times, around the third century A.D., but no doubt had a much longer background, a monkey plays the role of the wise individual giving words of advice to the other animals, as here, on this vessel, he is sitting and giving words of wisdom, 'this is the end of life, do not get too closely attached to it.'

The vase is bordered at the top near the rim by a double guilloche band of four parallel lines and near the base by a similar double guilloche band of three parallel lines. The base is decorated by a pattern different from that on other decorative vessels of Marlik, a reed matting design bordered by a band of parallel connected chevrons. (Fig. 12-13.)

Some of the motifs on this vessel have histories in the ancient world. The design of the second register is a traditional scene in Near Eastern art, consisting of an antithetical group of two animals, shown in profile, climbing

symmetrically on both sides of a decorative, possibly sacred, tree of life. This antithetical group of two animals on both sides of a central decorative tree is a common one with a long span of usage' but with varying details of workmanship and composite elements during different periods. The design of mountain goats climbing both sides of the tree is more commonly found in the second and particularly in the early first millennium B.C. and a number of examples comparable to this one can be pointed out.

A plaquette discovered at Zinjirli, attributed to the second millennium B.C., with similar composition, but different details of workmanship, shows a group of two mountain goats climbing both sides of a decorative tree.²

On a gazelle-head rhyton, found in northwest Iran, and presently in a private collection in Iran, dated to the eighth to seventh century B.C., a similar antithetical group of two mountain goats climbing both sides of a tree appears³. This tree has rather stylized elaborate branches of a little later development.

Another similar example can be seen on a fragment of an Egyptian blue vessel found at Hasanlu, dated by both Crawford and Porada to the ninth century B.C.⁴ Prof. Dyson suggests for this object and its design that "a stylistic link with the Assyrians is provided by motifs on decorated objects such as this.⁵ Apparently the connection can be made much closer by a comparison with the Marlik designs. The possibility should be considered that in the course of their many military expeditions to this region the Assyrians were influenced by the Marlik art style, perhaps even carrying back Marlik artisans as captives as well as their products as booty.

A comparative general composition of two goats climbing both sides of a tree can be seen on a relief found at Zinjirli, dated by Bossert to the ninth century B.C.⁶ Several similar examples of antithetical groups of two mountain goats climbing both sides of a decorative tree are found in the Assyrian reliefs of Assurnasirpal at Nimrud, in the borders of the royal garment⁷, and on a fragment of Pyxis found in the southeastern palace of Assurnasirpal, dated to the ninth century B.C.⁸ Three other similar examples occur on a pectoral found at Ziwiye⁹, on a cylinder in the Layard Collection¹⁰, dated by van Buren to the eighth to seventh century B.C., and on an iron axe with a wooden scabbard covered with gold from Kelermes, Kuban, now at the Hermitage Museum and dated by Rostovtzeff to the Scythian art of the sixth century B.C.¹¹

In the top register the vultures are the main element and they are shown both flying and standing. A similar bird occurs on examples from various areas. On an Assyrian relief in the palace room XXXIII of Sennachrib (705-681 B.C.), at Ninéveh, a vulture is shown on an Elamite carcass¹². Another scene in the palace of Assurbanipal, Room I, shows a vulture on the dead body of an Elamite officer, Ituni, slain by an Assyrian¹³. A vulture with open wings appears in a scene of Assyrian cavalry pursuing the Urartians in the southwest palace of Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.) at Nimrud¹⁴. A relief on the outer wall of Hilani, at Tell Halaf, contains a large bird which has been identified by Vieyra as an ostrich, but is similar to the vultures of the Marlik vase¹⁵. Vieyra suggests that the bird is a borrowing element from Assyrian art, and he has dated the relief to the ninth to eighth century B.C.¹⁶

The design of the vulture appears in another area of ancient Iran. On a bronze quiver found in Luristan seated vultures, not very similar in technique, appear. This quiver, in the collection of Jean Paul Barbier, is dated to the eighth to seventh century B.C.¹⁷ A vulture appears on a bronze belt, classified by Nagel to the Luristan culture, said to have been found in Kiklavand, Luristan, and now in the Museum für vor-und Frühgeschichte in Berlin¹⁸.

The guilloche band bordering the rim and base of the Marlik vase appears on many of the decorative vessels of Marlik, and it has been fully discussed in connection with other items. Therefore, here, I will mention only a few comparable examples. On a seal in the Ashmolean Museum, classified by Hogarth as a Hittite seal, class III, group 1, dated to the late second millennium B.C.¹⁹, on another seal classified by Frankfort as First and Second Syrian groups, dated around the middle of the second millennium B.C.²⁰ and on still another seal classified as a Syro-Hittite seal dated around the middle of the second millennium B.C.²¹, the scenes are bordered below by a similar double guilloche band of three parallel lines.

FOOTNOTES

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4. Crawford, E. Vaughn, "Hasanlu 1960". *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Nov. 1961, p.90, Fig.5.

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PICTURES

Fig. 1 Map of Marlik

Fig. 2 General view of Marlik tepe.

Fig. 3 H.E. Ali Naghi Vaziri, H.E. Dr. Ali Akbar Siassi and the author on mule back.

Fig. 4 Expedition team and honored visitors: From right, Mr. Mahmood Kordovani, Mr. Reza Mostofi, H.E. Dr. Ali Akbar Siassi, H.E. Ali Naghi Vaziri, author, Mr. Seifollah Kambakhsh, Mr. Jahangir Yassi and Mr. Iraj Moafi.

Fig. 5 From right: Mr. Iraj Moafi, Mr. Mahmood Kordovani, H.E. Dr. Ali Akbar Siassi, author, H.E. Ali Naghi Vaziri, Mr. Seifollah Kambakhsh and Mr. Reza Mostofi.

Fig. 6 The gold vase with the story of life. Photo, J. Burke.

Fig. 7 Drawing of the complete design encircling the vase.

Drawing by Miss Lili Taghipoor, Iran-Bastan Museum.

Fig. 8 The first register, showing the young goat suckling from its mother.

Fig. 9 The second register, showing the young goat eating from the tree of life.

Fig. 10 The third register, showing the wild boar which kills the goat.

Fig. 11 The fourth register, showing vultures eating the carcass of the goat.

Fig. 12 The matting design on the base of the vase.

Fig. 13 Drawing of the matting design on the base of the vase.

Drawing by Miss Lili Taghipoor, Iran-Bastan Museum.