

LOST ART: Ancient Iranian Bronzes in the Union College Permanent Collection

Sarah Mottalini, Curatorial Assistant of Art Collections & Exhibitions, Union College

© 2018 Sarah Mottalini / Union College

Union College's Permanent Collection of art and artifacts includes an uncommon and exceptional collection of bronze weaponry and horse fittings from ancient Iran. Many of the items in this collection are representative of the famed but ill-fated Luristan bronzes that have intrigued and confounded museum curators, scholars, and archaeologists since the 1920s when they began to show up in the European and American art markets.

Although the collection of bronzes comes without a documented provenience or excavation record, this is a complication that Union's collection shares with presumed Luristan artifacts at some of the best institutions in the world, including the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Harvard. Once it became known that the Luristan bronze artifacts could draw impressive prices at urban bazaars, the local Lur tribesmen engaged in extensive clandestine digging in the ancient burial grounds of their remote and mountainous region of northwestern Iran.¹ The practice most likely began a few years before 1930, and reached its height in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in many thousands of objects entering the market, with fewer than fifty from controlled excavations.²

Luristan suffered a loss of cultural heritage greater than any other Near Eastern locale and attempts to piece together the protohistoric culture that was responsible for creating the canonical Luristan bronzes have not yet, and may never, result in a satisfying or sufficient reconstruction.³ Due to a lack of any found example of local writing or record, the ethnic background of the Luristan bronzesmiths remains yet another unknown.⁴ It is generally accepted that the makers were likely partially nomadic (perhaps seasonally), horse-breeding tribesmen from the Lur region.⁵ Geographically, the historical Luristan region consisted of small plains and valleys separated by the high, treeless Zagros mountains and the formidable Kabir Kuh range, which bisected its ancient boundaries and helped create a region difficult to infiltrate and capable of sustaining only small populations.⁶ The micro-climates and variable terrain of the area encourage transhumance practices, and even as recently as the 20th century, modern Lurs were following ancient patterns established during 3,000 preceding years of sheep and horse breeding.⁷ The region's borders now spill into the modern provinces of Ilam, Luristan, Hamadan, and Kermanshah.⁸

THE LURISTAN BRONZE TRADITION

From this daunting landscape emerged a rich, stylistically unparalleled metalworking industry that began as early as the 4th millennium BCE, with a main period of production from 1300/1250 to 700/650 BCE, during the Iranian Iron Age.⁹ The canonical Luristan bronzes were formed using the lost-wax casting process and include beautiful, figurative whetstone handles; "finials" and "standards" whose intended use is still obscure; fearsome, spike-butted axe blades and decorated halberds among many other weapon types; unusual, disc-headed pins; pendants designed as miniature versions of bells, model ceramic vessels, booted feet, and stamp seals; and extraordinary horse bits with elaborate cheek-pieces that have surpassed most other Near

Eastern examples in form, technique, and appearance.¹⁰ Many of these object types are indigenous to the region and incorporate the unfamiliar and bizarre iconography that distinguishes and renders the Luristan tradition so recognizable.¹¹

The zoomorphic bestiary employed by the Lurs to decorate their weapons, horse fittings, and apotropaic objects includes mouflons (wild sheep), lions, and goats most prominently, but also bulls, horses, onagers, antelopes, ducks, and roosters, among others.¹² Additionally, the Lurs' repertoire contained their own constructs, which melded human and beast in new and unnatural ways.¹³ One such character who figures significantly in the Luristan tradition is a human-headed bull, usually appearing female, with distinctive curling side locks of hair topped by a horned crown.¹⁴ This god or demon may have originated in the nearby Elamite civilization but was appropriated and reconfigured by the Lurs with such regularity of appearance and manner of portrayal that it became a key icon in their corpus.¹⁵

UNION COLLEGE'S BRONZE COLLECTION

Union College is fortunate to possess a collection of nearly 100 objects allegedly from this unusual oeuvre of ancient Iranian archaeology. Although spike-butted axes and decorated halberds are not among Union's holdings, the College does have many of the typical Lur weapon types, including a mace, a plain halberd, tanged daggers, swords, and spearheads, as well as two examples of the later 2nd millennium BCE innovation of single cast, flanged daggers.¹⁶ Union holds several Luristan-style pins, as well as one decorated with the grotesque head of the human bull character that figured so prominently in the Luristan canon. Our collection also includes several of the rather peculiar pendant types for which Luristan is known, including a stamp seal, several miniature fruit cage bells, and possible model ceramic vessels. In terms of horse fittings, Union has a good sampling, including a double-twisted wire snaffle bit, a pair of gently curved cheek pieces, various bridle ornaments, bells, and even a striking quadruped figurine, likely a horse or a Persian onager, the native equid of Iran.

Regrettably, the well-known, lucrative nature of the Luristan bronzes resulted in numerous forgeries in the art markets and subsequently within even the best institutional collections.¹⁷ This hazard of the industry is one that Union College's collection may have avoided due to the relatively undecorated surfaces of its bronzes. Counterfeit objects are most often larger and more elaborately decorated than the originals, and the fact that most of Union's collection consists of relatively unornamented pieces increases the likelihood that they are genuine.¹⁸ Additionally, patina is difficult to simulate, and it is the opinion of the Williamstown Art Conservation Center that the presence of a distinct copper oxide layer (red-colored) underneath the layers of green corrosion on many of Union's bronzes indicates that the corrosion developed slowly, over a long period of time, making it very likely that these objects came from an archaeological site.

A LEGACY LOST

Without a written language or extant oral histories, perhaps due to small populations stifled by poor agricultural potential, geographical obstructions, and political subordination, the history of ancient Luristan has been completely, and seemingly irretrievably, lost following the eclipse of

its bronze industry in the late 7th century BCE.¹⁹ Archaeologists have diligently tried to reconstruct elements of the Lur culture and a feasible chronology for the bronzes from the small number of excavations albeit the remaining, incontrovertible artifacts are significantly diminished.²⁰ The anomaly of the scope of the industry that emerged from Luristan, coupled with the technical skill and aesthetic power of the bronzes that materialized from this terra incognita, commands respect and awe. Further inquiry will surely follow in the decades to come.

¹ P. R. S. Moorey, *Ancient Bronzes from Luristan* (London: British Museum, 1974), 9.

² Oscar White Muscarella, *Bronze and Iron: Ancient Near Eastern Artifacts in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Museum, 1988), 113-114.

³ Henrik Thrane, *Excavations at Tepe Guran in Luristan: The Bronze Age and Iron Age Periods*. (Moesgaard: Jutland Archaeology Society, 2001), 7; Moorey, *Ancient Bronzes from Luristan*, 9.

⁴ Muscarella, *Bronze and Iron*, 117.

⁵ Moorey, *Ancient Bronzes from Luristan*, 17.

⁶ Bruno Overlaet, "Luristan During the Iron Age," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, ed. D. T. Potts (New York: The Oxford University Press, 2013), 378; Thrane, *Excavations at Tepe Guran*, 17.

⁷ P. R. S. Moorey, *Catalogue of the Ancient Persian Bronzes in the Ashmolean Museum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 15-16.

⁸ Nima Nezafati, "Au-Sn-W-Cu Mineralization in the Astaneh-Sarband Area, West Central Iran," (PhD. diss., University of Tübingen, Germany, 2006), 82.

⁹ Moorey, *Ancient Bronzes from Luristan*, 18; Muscarella, *Bronze and Iron*, 118.

¹⁰ Moorey, *Ancient Bronzes from Luristan*, 18.

¹¹ Moorey, *Ashmolean Museum*, 309.

¹² *Ibid.*, 305.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 306.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁶ Bruno Overlaet, *The Early Iron Age in the Pusht-i Kuh, Luristan* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2003) 151-152.

¹⁷ Moorey, *Ashmolean Museum*, 34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁹ Thrane, *Excavations at Tepe Guran*, 7; Moorey, *Ashmolean Museum*, 289.

²⁰ D. T. Potts, "Luristan and the Central Zagros in the Bronze Age," in Potts, *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, 204-206.