Treasure from the Mannean Land

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The discovery of ancient treasure always gives rise to much excitement. It is aroused first in the finder when he sees buried objects gleam once more in light, but this excitement is restricted neither to him nor to that moment of discovery. Human nature is such that the excitement is always shared with others. Unfortunately, the objects rarely remain the finder’s personal property and they too get shared—and sometimes lost. In fact, when finds are of precious metal it is often their fate to be mutilated and cut up. This may seem barbarous to connoisseurs, collectors, and scholars, but there are practical reasons for such regrettable treatment. The man who discovers treasure is immediately faced with a serious moral problem. He has to decide whether to keep it, or whether to part with it by sharing it with his friends and selling it, or by informing the authorities and handing it over to them trustingly for a recompense. In most countries the law of the land has something to say in this matter, and usually it is not in accordance with the phrase we all learn as children: “Finders, keepers.”

It can be taken as fact that most peasants avoid, as much as possible, contact with the representatives of both state and law. No exception was the peasant who, in 1947, came across a treasure of gold, silver, and ivory in a large bronze tub or coffin at Ziwiyeh, a village in Persian Kurdistan almost halfway between the Tigris River and the Caspian Sea. As André Godard, then director general of the Archaeological Service of Iran, wrote in his publication of 1950, Le Trésor de Ziwiyeh: “The treasure accidentally discovered in 1947 was immediately pillaged, cut up into fragments, shared among the inhabitants of the local village, and dispersed, which explains why most of the objects discovered have not reached us in their entirety.” The treasure of Ziwiyeh was scattered to such an extent that even individual pieces were (and still are, though to a lesser degree) divided amongst various owners. It is a great archaeological loss that it can never be completely assembled again. What the original position of the objects was will never be known, and, just as some items can never be
traced again, others that were not part of the treasure will be ascribed to it.

Gradually, however, more and more fragments of gold objects from the treasure have come to our knowledge. Some of them are exceedingly small, often no more than an inch long and less in width—in fact, minute is the only word for them. From the hands of the villagers these bits have passed into innumerable other hands, many being meaningless to their possessors—they were just gold. There is reason to think that certain pieces actually were melted down, and others have been unfolded from shapeless hunks into which they had been pressed for destruction by melting. Occasionally a few men, who knew they were worth more than the gold, built up such fragments into sizeable pieces, so that substantial assemblies appeared on the international market.

2. Gold plaque, from the Ziwiyeh treasure. About 700 B.C. Maximum width 10 3/8 inches. Dick Fund, 54.35 and Rogers Fund, 62.78.1

The carved ivories that formed part of the treasure also had to be reconstructed from small fragments; they had not been deliberately cut up, like the gold, but shattered because of their fragility.

The confusion that often surrounds the discovery of ancient treasure only complicates the archaeologists’ problem of trying to figure out where and by whom the objects contained in it were made. With the Ziwiyeh hoard, this task is even more difficult than usual in Near Eastern archaeology, for here we are dealing with objects that were buried in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. in a little-known country—the Mannean land. The Kurdish site on which Ziwiyeh stands was once a Mannean hill fortress, and it is one of the few places that today can be identified with complete assurance as an important Mannean settlement. The boundaries of the kingdom of the Manneans, called the Minni in the Bible, cannot be precisely delineated on a map, but their territory extended across the mountainous regions of northwestern Iran, east of Assyria and south of Azerbaijan in Iran, which, in its turn, lies to the south of Armenia. It was a country to no small extent at the mercy of greater powers, such as the Assyrians, at that time the most dominant; the Urartians (who lived in the area north of Iran around Lake Van, now Armenia), themselves heavily influenced by the Assyrians; the Scythians, nomadic invaders from the northeast; and later the Medes. We know very little about the Manneans themselves but for their ups and downs as related in the historical records of Assyria and Urartu. We are not certain who they were, what language they spoke, or what their religion was. But, in view of the invasions of the Mannean land by other peoples, we must be prepared to believe that there was diversity in population, language, and religion.

4. Detail of the Museum’s gold plaque
The foreign intrusions into the region seem to be reflected in the artistic designs of the pieces found in the Ziwiyeh hoard. There has been much discussion about the "style" of the Ziwiyeh objects. Although the chased bronze receptacle that housed them is unmistakably and certainly Assyrian, little else can be as easily identified. Some are obviously not the same in style, and, in some, styles seem to be mingled. As we shall see, this problem of style becomes more challenging as more pieces from Ziwiyeh come to light. Some objects from the hoard now on exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum illustrate how knowledge about them develops like a jigsaw puzzle as each new bit is fitted into place. The excitement of attempting to solve these archaeological and historical puzzles is in no way diminished by the fact that material or information essential for a full solution is often missing.

Most important are two recently purchased fragments of leaf-thin gold that, fitted together, form two rows of decoration. These two registers, in turn, fit below three others bought by the Museum in 1954, forming a trapezoidal plaque (Figure 2) now complete except for the lowest register, which is still lost. Each register is decorated with a procession of fantastic winged animals who stride from left and right toward a sacred tree (a common Near Eastern motif) that stands in the center of each register. These beasts, composed of human, animal, and bird elements—griffins with bird heads, lions with horns and scorpion tails, human-headed bulls—are Mischwesen, existing only in myth and living only in art. Between each register and running around three edges of the plaque (the fourth is missing) are bands of beautifully executed guilloche.

The Metropolitan's plaque is not unique. There are fragments or assemblies of similar ones in the Archaeological Museum in Teheran (Figure 1), the Cincinnati Museum, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, the Joseph H. Hirshhorn collection (Figure 3), and others shown in the great exhibition held in Paris in 1961, Seven Thousand Years of Art in Iran. Before the Metropolitan's two newly acquired registers came to light, there had been many suggestions about possible reconstructions of the plaques that these fragments originally composed. It was suggested, for instance, that the part in Teheran—the two lowest registers (one of which is shown in Figure 1)—belonged to the same plaque as the Metropolitan's three registers, for the execution and style of drawing of both these parts is identical. Now, with the addition of two more registers to the Museum's original three, the suggested assembly of the Metropolitan and Teheran pieces has been proved impossible, since the next-to-the-last register would be in duplicate. The close relationship between the two does show, however, that there must originally have been a pair of plaques: one, almost complete, in the Metropolitan.

5. Gold epaulette, from the Ziwiyeh treasure. About 700 B.C. Height 8 3/4 inches. Lent anonymously, L63.6
tan Museum, while the fragment in Teheran belongs to a second.

The Metropolitan and Teheran fragments differ from the others in the handling of several details, as Helene Kantor was the first to point out. For example, the form of the pomegranates varies a little, and the hair on the legs of the animals in the Metropolitan and Teheran plaques is bounded by an inner line that does not appear in the Cincinnati, Toronto, and Hirshhorn fragments (compare Figures 3 and 4). Though these differences, and a few other minor ones, cannot be considered differences of style, they do indicate that the two groups of fragments must have belonged to separate assemblies. Just as we know, because of the duplication of a register, that there were two plaques of the Metropolitan–Teheran type, so we also know, for the same reason, that there were two plaques of the other type.

In the Paris exhibition were two more fragments of thin, embossed gold that, although they showed the same peculiarities of detail characteristic of the plaques in Teheran and this Museum, were so shaped that they could not be part of the trapezoidal type of plaque that we have just discussed. Since the exhibition, the rest of the piece to which the larger fragment belongs has been found, and the assembly has been lent to the Museum, where it can be seen in its entirety (Figure 5).

The same sort of mythical beings that adorn the plaques decorate the border of this piece,
with a similar guilloche running around the outer edge, but in the center is a scene (Figure 6) that occurs on no other gold fragment from Ziwiyeh. Dominant is a large flying bird, somewhat resembling an eagle but with a curious, long, rope-like crest. In the grasp of its sharp talons are two odd little creatures, perhaps infant griffins or the young of other Mischwesen. One has the head of a young bird with an open beak, and the other the head of a young bullock, though with exposed, triangular teeth; both have animal bodies and the tails of antelopes or goats. Underneath the bird’s beak and in much larger scale than the lion is a bearded human head, and the scene is completed by a small roaring lion that confronts the bird.

Although there are no other Iranian examples of this mysterious scene as a whole, parts of it are not without precedent. The lion is associated in Mesopotamian mythology and art both with Nergal, the god of death and of war, and with Ishtar, the goddess of love (who, in several cults, has two faces: love and life on the one hand, war and death on the other). The bird can be recognized as a type of falcon, kite, or buzzard that occurs widely in the art of western Asia and eastern Europe. It is to be seen in extremely ancient representations of battles, such as the Sumerian Stele of the Vultures in the Louvre, which dates from the third millennium B.C. (Figure 7). Here the bird is probably not symbolical, but appears as the winged scavenger known to all who have lived in the Near East. The same bird also preys on animals: a falconlike bird holding horned animals in each of its feet (Figure 9) decorates part of a steatite vase, again of the third millennium, that, though found in Khafajeh in Iraq, is usually considered to have been imported there from the Elamite city of Susa. Similar birds can be seen on objects of the same date found at Susa itself, such as the almost identical bird on a jar of carved bitumen in the Louvre, although birds instead of animals are grasped in its claws. Commonly found in Sumerian art of this period is the motif of a lion-headed bird that represents the divine bird Imdugud, the symbol of the storm god, who is also the god of war and the chase. The scene on this plaque seems to be an archaistic version of these early Sumerian and proto-Elamite themes—indicating how long ar-
tistic motifs remained current in the ancient Near East—depicting, perhaps, a divinity with power of life and death over man and beast.

To turn from the interpretation of the subject to the interpretation of the object itself: what was it meant to be? Its shape suggests that it is an epaulette. It is, logically enough, one of a pair, though only a few small fragments remain of the other. There is every reason to believe that these epaulettes were once used with the pair of trapezoidal plaques of which parts are in Teheran and the Metropolitan, since the epaulettes came from the same treasure as the plaques, and since the decoration of plaques and epaulettes is very close in design and execution. But a further question arises: how were they used? It had been suggested that the plaques were meant to decorate wooden objects, since the gold fragments are pierced by small holes near the edges, four in the remaining parts of the Metropolitan plaque, five in the epaulette. This cannot have been the case, for the holes would have been punched from front to back, not back to front as they are, and the heads of the nails would have made indentations in the soft gold. There can be no doubt whatsoever that the holes allowed the plaques and the epaulettes to be sewn onto cloth, as ornaments on ceremonial garments. Who precisely wore such magnificent trappings we shall never know. Probably men of high rank wore these clothes—they may even have been buried in them. But we know that at this period in the Near East the images of gods also had golden garments. A lapis lazuli cylinder (kunuku) of the seventh century, from the temple of Esagila in Babylon, is particularly interesting in that it shows the god Marduk wearing what seems to be a plaque of this sort as a pectoral, though all but the edges are obscured by his beard.

We shall never know, either, who wore the magnificent gold bracelets that also came from the Ziwiyeh treasure, one of which is in Teheran and the other in the Metropolitan, lent by Mr. and Mrs. Alastair B. Martin (Figures 11-13). The ends of both bracelets terminate in intricately detailed lion heads, while two couchant lions decorate either side of the lozenge-shaped center part. They are certainly not of Assyrian manufacture, for, as far as present knowledge goes, the central boss of Assyrian bracelets is al-

VIII-VII century B.C. 
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. 
Alastair B. Martin, 
L54.39
ways circular and decorated with a rosette. Because the heads of the central lions come to a triangular point at the top, the bracelets have been called Urartean, for such “gabled” lion heads are seen on a bronze throne found in Toprak Kale (near Lake Van), and a pottery lion head from Karmir Blur, also a Urartean site, is similarly pointed. But no similar bracelets have been found in Urartu, and the “gabled” heads, which are also found in Syria and Anatolia, are not sufficient cause to call the bracelets Urartean.

More significant in indicating the place of manufacture is the resemblance of the terminal heads—done in a less stylized, more realistic way than those of the central lions—to a small terracotta lion head from the vicinity of Ziwiyeh, and to those on another gold bracelet, now in the Louvre, said to be from Luristan. Luristan is the area south of Kurdistan; but the term “Luristan” has come to be applied to ancient metal objects found anywhere in northwestern Iran—in antiquity the scene of a flourishing industry in metalwork, especially bronze—rather than to those discovered in Luristan proper. Another bit of evidence that the Ziwiyeh bracelets could well have been made in the area in which they were found is a “Luristan” bracelet of bronze in this Museum (Figure 10), which widens into a lozenge at the center, the fundamental shape of the Ziwiyeh ones. Its form is truly significant as there is no report of bracelets of this shape being found in Urartu, and the simple bronze bracelet, of no great artistic merit, was not the sort of thing to have been imported.

A small bronze bucket with chased and repoussé decoration (Figures 14-15), reputedly
found in the Ziwiyeh area and recently acquired by the Museum, shows striking similarities with objects found in the treasure. It may have been employed in religious ceremonies, like those shown on contemporary Assyrian reliefs depicting rituals performed by mythological beings. Appearing twice, on both front and back, is a scene of combat between a lion and a man wearing Assyrian garments, who spears the animal with one hand and holds up its head with the other. The paw of the lion has been greatly exaggerated in size. Although in nature a lion’s paw, when it is about to strike, is literally outstretched, in this representation it has been enlarged beyond the bounds of realism to emphasize the power of the beast. This sort of exaggeration, justifiable on artistic grounds, is not customary in Assyrian sculptural art (where, in fact, animals in such combats are usually represented in smaller scale than their human adversaries). It is, however, a distinct feature of several of the ivories found in the Ziwiyeh treasure. One, in this Museum, shows a lion striking with an even more exaggerated paw (Figure 16). The scene on another Ziwiyeh ivory (Figure 17), in the Archaeological Museum in Teheran, is even closer, for it is of precisely the same subject as that on the bucket. There are slight differences between the two in the man’s costume, but a man wearing

17. Ivory, from the Ziwiyeh treasure. About 700 B.C. Archaeological Museum, Teheran. Figure 82 in Le Trésor de Ziwiye (Haarlem, 1950) by André Godard

18. Ivory, from the Ziwiyeh treasure. About 700 B.C. 2¼ x 6½ inches. Fletcher Fund, 51.131.5
exactly the same kind of clothes as on the bucket is shown on a third Ziwiyeh ivory (Figure 18), also in the Metropolitan.

In two details the decoration on the bucket differs from standard Assyrian practice. The "braids" that appear above and below the combat scenes are not the usual guilloches: but a combination of curves and zigzag lines: Again, the knot in the horizontal branches of the sacred trees that appear on either side of the combat scenes has been inverted, so that instead of appearing in the usual way: it is drawn: .

The connection between the bucket and the ivories is difficult to classify in terms of a homogeneous style. The probability that the bronze bucket was made in the land of the metal-working Manneans is very great indeed, but where were the ivories made? A few could have been imported, already carved, directly from Syria, the long-established center of the craft of ivory carving. Many of them, however, such as the ones resembling the bronze bucket, depict scenes of hunting and combat unlike those found anywhere else. In some hunting scenes (Figure 19) the men are wearing caps like the ones worn by people who obviously represent foreigners engraved on the Assyrian tub in which the treasure was found, suggesting that these ivories were not carved for Assyrians. There is nothing to indicate that they came from Urartu, for they have no close stylistic connection with ivories found there. From the point of view of style, indeed, they can be considered provincial Assyrian, and one can-not but think that many were made in the Mannean land itself, though that the craftsmen were Syrians or of Syrian descent is very possible.

To suggest that everything found in the land of the Minni is Mannean would be absurd, but the gold plaques, the epaulettes, the bracelets, the bronze bucket, and some of the ivories must be considered no mean examples of art made in the land of the Manneans. But we ought not to classify them as Mannean in style: the Manneans were not powerful enough to impose any crystallized artistic style on their own people, let alone on others in the area. What could be more natural than that the objects they made should blend artistic influences that we have come to think of as characteristic of other peoples of the time? There is danger in dividing ancient art into neat little watertight compartments of style. It is especially dangerous to ascribe objects to the art of one people or locality on the strength of a particular mannerism that has been associated, in a few known examples, with a definite area—for even mannerisms in art travel from place to place. During the interchange of peoples in the Mannean land, in war and in peace, indigenous craftsmen must have learned new styles from skilled workers from other lands whose art, in turn, was changed by their new environment. That there is more to be learned about the precise identification of these ancient objects is a plain fact, and an intriguing challenge. The time has gone by for the belief that the past was simpler than the present. It only appears so until it is closely examined.