Excavations at Dinkha Tepe, 1966

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In 1936 the British archaeological explorer Sir Aurel Stein traveled north from Shiraz through western Iran recording ancient mounds and monuments; occasionally he conducted a sondage, or brief excavation, at a promising site. Few mounds in Iran had at that time been recorded or excavated by archaeologists, and Stein succeeded in documenting the material remains of scores of ancient sites by sondages and surface finds.

Among the sites that Stein discovered and placed on the archaeological map for future study was Hasanlu Tepe, located in the Sol-duz valley in the province of Azerbaijan in northwestern Iran. Because of Stein’s preliminary work, excavations under the auspices of the Iranian Archaeological Service were made at Hasanlu in 1947 and 1949, and in 1957 the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania began a major campaign. Two years later The Metropolitan Museum of Art joined forces with the University Museum in an effort called the Hasanlu Project. The aim of the project was to document at Hasanlu and surrounding mounds a cultural-archaeological history from the neolithic period down to recent historic times. The mounds of Hajji Firuz, Pisdeli, and Dalma have yielded remains from at least the sixth down to the fifth and fourth millennia B.C. Hasanlu itself has also produced such remains; there is, in addition, material from the late third millennium B.C. to the fifth and perhaps fourth centuries B.C., as well as evidence of a fourteenth-century A.D. Islamic fort.

Most of the objects and architecture excavated at Hasanlu belong to a portion of the Iron Age, between 1300 and 800 B.C., although

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to the west, from north Syria to north Mesopotamia, and dating from about 1800 to about 1300 B.C. Because this pottery was first reported from the Khabur River area in north Mesopotamia and is very common there, archaeologists call it Khabur ware.

To learn more about the period VI culture and understand what relationship, if any, existed between it and the overlying Iron Age culture, we would have had to remove the massive remains of the period IV settlement. This would have entailed much expense and labor and would have destroyed important structures of archaeological interest. Moreover, our soundings indicated that the period VI levels were not well enough preserved to produce the information we wanted. Because it did not seem practical to continue excavation at Hasanlu, we began to look for another mound in the area that might produce period VI remains.

Sir Aurel Stein helped us again. A few weeks before he excavated at Hasanlu, Stein reconnoitered the Ushnu valley to the west of Soltuz and made a sondage at Dinkha Tepe lasting six days. From the published notes and photographs of the pottery and tombs he excavated, we could see that there was a major deposit of Hasanlu VI material at Dinkha. And there seemed to be very little Iron Age material on the site – in fact Stein said so himself. This implied that we would not have to dig through an overlay of Iron Age structures in order to reach the architecture and artifacts of the Khabur-ware period that we wished to investigate. We decided, therefore, to excavate at Dinkha Tepe, and in 1966 the Hasanlu Project began its first campaign at that site.

Dinkha Tepe lies about fifteen miles west of Hasanlu; it is a mound about twenty meters (66 feet) in height and roughly about four hundred meters (1,330 feet) in diameter. The Gadar River, which crosses the whole Ushnu valley, is continuously eroding away part of the north face of the mound. The massive mountain range that marks the Iran-Iraq border lies less than ten miles to the west, and the famous pass between the two countries, the Kel-i-Shin, is clearly visible to the northwest. There is no natural barrier separating the Soltuz from the Ushnu valley, and this might be
one reason for the cultural similarity between the two areas in antiquity. Dinkha is situated at a crucial position where it would experience any movement of tribes, caravans, or armies across the Kel-i-Shin pass, and at the same time would be in easy contact with areas to the south and west.

Four trenches, ten meters (33 feet) square, were laid out on the north edge of the mound (Figure 1), just south of the area where Stein originally excavated, that part having been eroded away by the river. Later, two more trenches were laid out further south in the center of the mound, and a series of test trenches were excavated at various places to test the stratigraphy and growth of the mound.

After a few days of excavation in the north area a major cemetery was discovered—unexpectedly, I might add, for Stein had not come across any evidence of it. Unexpected also was the interesting fact that the contents of the burials in the cemetery were all exactly paralleled by the objects found at Hasanlu in periods IV and V, belonging to the Iron Age. We realized after rereading Stein’s reports that he had begun his excavations not at the top of the mound but rather at various levels on the eroded north face and, therefore, never came into contact with the upper levels that contained our cemetery!

Based on stratigraphy and the tomb contents in the cemetery, we have been able to establish the following chronological sequence, numbered from the top down: Dinkha I (Islamic remains in the northeast area of the mound); Dinkha II (Iron Age II, or Hasanlu IV, about 1000-800 b.c.); Dinkha III (Iron Age I, or Hasanlu V, about 1300-1000 b.c.); and Dinkha IV, represented by remains under the cemetery (Late Bronze Age, or Hasanlu VI, about 1800-1300 b.c.).

A total of sixty-eight Dinkha II and twenty-six Dinkha III burials were excavated in the cemetery. In the same area we found three pottery kilns, one with a Dinkha II vessel in situ, and some house walls, perhaps indicating that the cemetery was abandoned before the end of period II. The settlement in existence at the time when the cemetery was in use seems to lie to the south, and fragments of walls apparently belonging to this period were excavated in a test trench. Although a fairly extensive town existed at Hasanlu during the Iron Age III period, no remains of this period were found at Dinkha Tepe.

Three types of Dinkha II burials were encountered. The most common were tombs with walls of mud bricks that enclosed, on three sides only, the flexed body and grave goods. The tombs were built within a grave pit and consisted of three or four courses of brick with a top course of half bricks slightly overlapping the burial cavity (Figures 2-7); the tombs and their contents were covered with earth without any apparent markers. The grave goods almost always consisted of spouted vessels and other pottery familiar to us from Hasanlu (Figures 8-10, 12), often filled with food remains (Figures 5, 6); there were also bronze bracelets, anklets, pins, and an occasional knife or dagger. Terracotta tripod supports for spouted vessels were not found at Dinkha, although they were fairly common at Hasanlu. One vessel, shown in Figure 11, is apparently not a typical Iron Age type, although three examples were found at Hasanlu in 1947. It is shaped like a gourd and is of a thin red polished fabric; at the base is a slightly pointed nipple and to one side two small holes were placed for suspension. These vessels might actually be imports from some as yet unidentified area.

The second type of burial is represented by seven tombs constructed entirely of stone, each a completely closed chamber (Figures 13, 14); the floor on which the body and grave goods rested was of neatly laid flagstones. After the walls and roof of the tomb were built in the burial pit and the funeral ceremonies were completed, one of the long walls was sealed with slabs; occasionally a vessel (sometimes more than one) was placed outside as an additional offering. These tombs were usually richer in contents than were the contemporary brick tombs, although there was no great difference in the types of objects found.

One large stone tomb, B 6, in square B 10a (Figure 13) had sixteen pottery vessels placed outside its east wall, and many vessels and bronze objects, such as a star-shaped mace-head, a horse’s bit, a spearpoint, bracelets, anklets, rings, and pins, within the chamber.
3. Tomb B 6, square B 10b: plan, showing the brick construction. Dinkha period II, x-ix century b.c. An iron dagger with a bone handle overlying a small bowl may be seen next to the skeleton’s left elbow.

4. Cross section of the tomb from the rear.

5. Tomb B 6, square B 10b; Tomb B 5 may be seen at the top of the photograph.

6. Tomb B 5, square B10b. Dinkha period II, x-ix century b.c.

7. Tomb B 9, square B10b, showing the grave pit. Dinkha period II, x-ix century b.c.
13. Tomb B 6, square B10a. Dinkha period II, x-IX century B.C.  Another stone tomb from period II is in the background.

14. Tomb B 6 in the process of excavation. The body has disappeared, probably as a result of water accumulation in the chamber. The position of the feet is marked by bronze anklets, the head by a bronze ring necklace. The macehead is in the upper left corner and the horse bit is just below.

8. Gray-ware teapot-shaped vessel, from Tomb B 16, square B10a. Dinkha period II, x-IX century B.C. Height 3½ inches. 67.247.4

9. Red-ware spouted vessel with a horned animal head as a handle, from Tomb B 19, square B9b. Dinkha period II, x-IX century B.C. Height 7 inches. 67.247.6

10. Gray-ware spouted vessel with a horned animal head as a handle, excavated at Hasanlu in 1964. Period IV, x-IX century B.C. Height 7½ inches. 60.20.15

11. Gourd-shaped vessel of red polished ware with a small nipple at the base, from Tomb B 15, square B10a. Dinkha period II, x-IX century B.C. Height 3½ inches. 67.247.5

In addition, the skeleton of a dismembered horse was found with the pottery outside the tomb. The cultural significance at Dinkha of the presence of a horse burial associated with a tenth- or ninth-century B.C. tomb complex is still not clear. Horse burials are usually associated with Scythians or related tribes, who moved into this area in the late eighth and early seventh centuries, and we would not ordinarily expect to find such burials in Iran before that time. A grave containing the skeletons of four horses placed alongside the dead man was excavated at Hasanlu in 1947; because this has not been published adequately, it is at present impossible to say anything about its date or to make a meaningful comparison to the Dinkha burial discussed here. In 1967 a burial of a horse alone, with its trappings, was excavated at Baba Jan in Luristan; from the excavation’s brief preliminary report, it seems almost certain that the burial occurred after the Iron Age II period and must be eighth or seventh century B.C. in date.

The third type of burial is represented by graves that contained a large vessel or urn used as a receptacle for the dead. Only earth mixed with bone splinters and some small beads were ever recovered from the urns. A large sherd or broken vessel was used to seal the urn’s mouth and sometimes a vessel or two was placed alongside. Presumably these were children’s burials.

The burials of the earlier Dinkha III period (Figures 15, 16) are simple inhumations like those at Hasanlu. In some graves, however, a single brick wall lined one long side and in rarer cases brick walls were placed at both ends of the long one to form three sides (Figure 2, B 10, B 13). This brick lining is apparently the predecessor of the later period II tomb structure and attests to a cultural continuity between the two periods. The grave goods uniformly consisted of a spouted vessel without a bridge between the mouth and spout, a one-handled goblet on a pedestal base, and a bowl with a small modeled ridge enclosing holes for suspension (Figures 15-17), the very same objects that occur at Hasanlu in period V (for instance, Figure 18).
17. Pottery from two Dinkha period III burials, about 1300-1000 B.C. Height of spouted vessel 8 inches. 67.247.11-13

18. Gray-ware pedestal-base goblet, excavated at Hasanlu in 1964. Period V, about 1300-1000 B.C. Height 7½ inches. 65.163.75
Among the finds from one of these tombs, B 24, square Bga, is a small but very delicate ram’s-head bead of glass (Figure 19). It is strongly reminiscent of the many glass, stone, and frit beads in the form of animals or animal heads found at Tell al-Rimah and at Nuzi (period II, fifteenth century B.C.) in Mesopotamia to the southwest.

It has already been stated that there is no cultural distinction in the type of goods found in the Iron Age I and II periods at Hasanlu and Dinkha. Nevertheless, a curious deviation does exist between the two sites, because no brick or stone tombs were found at Hasanlu: all Iron Age burials there were simple inhumations in shallow pits. The importance of this distinction between the two otherwise identical cultures is not understood. However, it might reflect some difference in the background of both people, or in outside stimuli – both of which are presently beyond the power of archaeologists to interpret. It may be of interest to note here that a slight preference for red as opposed to gray wares seems to be characteristic of the pottery at Dinkha II in contrast to the pottery of Hasanlu IV, although the shapes are identical (compare Figures 17 and 18). Since the difference was caused by variation in temperature at the time of firing, we could assume that the choice of gray or red might have been a matter of local preference.

There is another interesting occurrence at Dinkha that has not appeared at Hasanlu. In a test trench dug in the western part of the mound, Area VII, we found two Dinkha III tombs, one directly below the other and therefore stratigraphically distinguished as an earlier and a later inhumation of the same period. The pottery shapes reflect the chronological record: in the earlier tomb the pedestal-base goblet is long and thin, more cylindrical in shape than the later examples (compare Figures 17 and 18) and the typical bridgeless spouted vessel has a very short spout compared to all others hitherto known at Dinkha and Hasanlu. Both vessels have parallels with examples from the Iron Age I Tomb K at Geoy Tepe, a little to the north. The spouted vessel is also very close in form to one found at a site called Kizilvank in the southern Caucasus, where it is dated between the late fifteenth and early fourteenth century B.C. We are, therefore, now able to recognize an earlier phase of the Iron Age than previously found in the area.

At two areas on the mound Bronze Age material and architectural remains have been excavated. One of these areas was at the north end, directly below trash deposits underlying the Iron Age cemetery discussed above; the second was further to the south near the center of the mound.

The earliest Bronze Age settlement was built in the central area. Here we have not been able to clear a large section, but part of a thick mud-brick fortification wall standing to a height of about four meters (13 feet), and apparently abutting a brick platform, was revealed. Whether the settlement associated with this wall was destroyed or abandoned, we do not know, but another settlement was subsequently built over its remains. We cannot yet date the fortification wall, but a carbon-14 (C-14) date for the overlying structures is 1612 ± 61 B.C., based, as are all C-14 dates in this article, on a half-life of 5,730 years. (Note, however, that recent research suggests that 100 or 150 years might have to be added to C-14 dates between 2000 and 1000 B.C.) This date suggests that the fortification wall and its settlement was built close to or even before 1800 B.C.

Shortly after the upper settlement was apparently destroyed – by whom we do not know – a third was built to the north, apparently on the outskirts of the mound as it existed at that time. Parts of two large houses were excavated; they were constructed of large square sun-dried bricks set on large foundation stones. Although there was evidence of burning, indicating some destruction, very few objects were recovered in the rooms, which implies an abandonment rather than a hasty evacuation. A C-14 date for the extreme upper stratum of this level, just below the overlying Iron Age cemetery, is 1434 ± 52 B.C., and another date for the level connected
with the lower floor of one of the structures is 1555 ± 52 B.C.

The pottery found in the north settlement is quite similar to that found in the central excavations. Both areas produced Khabur ware — buff wares decorated with painted bands, triangles, lozenges, "bow ties," and silhouetted birds; both areas also produced pottery painted in two or more colors, exactly the same as wares from Geoy Tepe, and similar to Cappadocian pottery in central Anatolia. Before we can establish chronological conclusions as to the relative popularity of the particular motifs in the various levels of period IV, much more study is required, and the rarer and less typical examples of other pottery motifs found in the same levels should also be studied.

One of the most interesting of the ceramic objects recovered from the Bronze Age levels was a fragment of a painted plaque with a human head in relief (Figure 20); it came from the uppermost settlement in the central part of the mound. The head may represent a female, unless a barely visible line around the mouth indicates a beard. The figure wears a flat-topped hat with a small peak in front, and has thick hair falling to the level of the mouth; it has a curved nose, bulging eyes, and thick lips. Although similar terracotta plaques with heads in relief (some frontal, some in profile) are known from Tepe Giyan and Assur, and terracotta plaques, many of nude females holding their breasts, are found in all parts of the Near East, the Dinkha plaque is unique in facial characteristics. If the head is indeed female, we may assume that it originally joined a nude body and that the lady’s hands held her breasts.

Among the houses in the northern settlement, and contemporary with them, were discovered two stone tombs, each containing multiple burials. In contrast to the customs of the later Iron Age, when cemeteries were outside the walls, the Bronze Age people buried their dead within the city itself. The tombs were constructed of rough stones and sealed with flat slabs of great size. Much pottery (curiously enough without any trace of painted designs), a sword, knives, bronze and silver toggle pins (Figure 21), and gold earrings and pendants were found in the tombs. Some of the pottery from one of the tombs, B 28, square B 10a, may be seen in Figure 22. The pots are all plain buff ware with flaring necks and ring bases; except for the absence of painted bands they seem to be related to the Khabur wares found elsewhere in the excavations and also at Hasanlu period VI. One of the pots with a flange on the shoulder has a parallel at contemporary Geoy Tepe (period D) and also reminds us of the flanges common at Tepe Giyan in the south. The vessel in the center of Figure 22 consists of three bowls joined together and resting on three short legs, with two small pierced lugs for the handles.

Other Bronze Age graves, simple inhumations rather than stone tombs, found in various parts of the mound as a result of our test trenches, also contained pottery of the Khabur type. One of these graves from Test Area IV, B 7, had several buff vessels with painted designs of hatched lozenges enclosed in plain triangles (Figure 23). Another grave from the same Area IV, B 9, had istakhans, a type of vessel common in Iran and Iraq in the second millennium B.C. (Figure 24); (a recent publication stating that istakhans occur in Hasanlu period V is in error; the examples cited are in fact from a period VI burial).

Excavations do not always produce what archaeologists expect, and Dinkha Tepe is no exception. We did not anticipate any Iron Age
material and yet much was forthcoming. But we also found what we sought – architecture, tombs, and artifacts of the Bronze Age. The material recovered has shed light on several problems of second-millennium archaeology and has added to our limited knowledge of early Iranian history. We are now able to state that the culture of the Solduz and Ushnu valleys, from the southern shores of Lake Rezaiyeh to the Iraq border, was generally uniform in the late Bronze Age; and that the area’s cultural relationship with the west, with central Anatolia, north Syria, and northern Mesopotamia, was very close. The fact that the preponderance of the pottery and other finds from the Dinkha Tepe and Hasanlu region in the Bronze Age is the same as that to the west cannot, I think, be explained as merely a result of casual or even vigorous merchant ventures. In fact, it is possible that we are dealing with one or perhaps one political unit that shared the same culture. There are also indications, derived mainly from designs on pottery and the occurrence of Khabur wares, that some form of relationship existed with Tepes Giyan and Godin in Luristan to the south.

We know that the newcomers who entered the region in the late second millennium changed the cultural pattern of the area drastically, and introduced a gray ware that characterizes the Iron Age in western Iran. And it now appears from the Dinkha excavations that the Iron Age people (or peoples!) may have entered northwest Iran one hundred or more years earlier than hitherto thought; we would at this time cautiously suggest the date 1300 B.C. for the event, with the realization that it may actually have been earlier. Evidence for the existence of the Iron Age gray-ware culture is not only found in western Azerbaijan in the Ushnu, Solduz, and Lake Rezaiyeh regions, but also in the north at Yanik Tepe and in the south and east at the excavated sites of Tepes Sialk, Giyan, Godin, and Khorvin. As far as we know, these newcomers did not penetrate across the mountains into Mesopotamia and Anatolia, where no gray ware of this type has been found. Although influenced from the west, especially during the Iron Age II period, they seem to have been an indigenous Iranian culture with apparent ties further east in the Gurgan region, by the southeast shore of the Caspian.

Needless to say, many questions remain to be answered: did the Khabur-ware culture originate in Iran and move west, or does it represent an eastern extension of a western culture? Did this culture succumb to the invading gray-ware people or did the Khabur-ware people abandon the area before the arrival of the latter? Can the people of the gray-ware culture be equated with any of the nations historically documented in the ninth century B.C. by the Assyrians and Urartians? These and other questions remain most interesting for future research, and the results of another campaign, completed this past summer, will no doubt produce some answers and, indeed, raise new questions.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

The archaeological staff at Dinkha Tepe was directed by Professor Robert H. Dyson, Jr.; Oscar White Muscarella was Assistant Director. The excavators included Christopher Hamlin, Edward Keall, Regnar Kearton, Louis Levine, and Mary Voigt. Maude de Schauensee served as registrar and Zabihollah Rahmatian was the Iranian Inspector.


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