CHAPTER THIRTEEN
NORTH-WESTERN IRAN: BRONZE AGE TO IRON AGE∗

Abstract: In a paper published in 1977 and a monograph published in 1982, I.N. Medvedskaya attempts to demonstrate that the Iron Age I period in North-western Iran was not, as has been argued by a number of archaeologists, a break in the culture of the area. Medvedskaya asserts that not only is there evidence that ceramics and burial customs of the preceding Bronze Age continued into the Iron Age, but that there is no uniform culture manifest within that Iron Age I period. Each of these assertions is confronted with the actual evidence from excavated sites in the north-west, from Hasanlu, Dinkha Tepe, Geoy Tepe, Kordlar and Hajji Firuz. The evidence easily refutes Medvedskaya’s conclusions; it demonstrates that, as previously perceived, there is a major cultural break between the Bronze and Iron Ages in the north-west, and that there is a uniformity in ceramic forms in the latter period. Further, the author separates the issues of archaeological cultures from that of linguistic theories concerning the language spoken in the north, issues not clearly articulated by Medvedskaya.

By the late-9th–early-8th centuries BC the kingdom of Urartu comprised an area extending from Eastern Anatolia to North-western Iran (Fig. 1), with a uniform culture expressed in architecture, pottery and iconography. Before the late-9th century BC, however, the two areas experienced different archaeological histories.

In Eastern Anatolia, Urartian sites have revealed no material earlier than the 9th century BC and there is little material available for study after the period of the Trans-Caucasian culture of the Third Millennium BC (Burney 1972: 86, 127; Edwards 1986: 73). This is puzzling because from the 13th century BC and continuing through to the 9th, that is to say, the time of the Iron Age in North-western Iran, Assyrian texts refer to the land of U-ru-at-ri or the Nairi lands, surely signifying that some areas of Eastern Anatolia were occupied before the 9th century.

The apparent cultural gap in the Second Millennium in the Van area eventually may be partly closed if the polychrome and painted wares attributed there could be archaeologically located with certainty. These wares are in

some cases very similar to the painted ‘Urmia’ wares from the Urmia region (Edwards 1986: 69). But when one encounters painted vessels with the very same decoration that were purchased as far apart as Adana and Van (respectively, Çilingiroğlu 1984: 130, 137, Figs. 1, 13 and 132, Figs. 5–8), one must be hesitant about assigning provenances. These vessels most probably derived from somewhere in Turkey and, as such, inform us of cultural relations, even a common ceramic tradition, with North-western Iran sometime prior to the 15th–14th centuries BC.²

In North-western Iran, excavations at Hasanlu and Dinkha Tepe in the Solduz and Ushnu valleys respectively in Azerbaijan have revealed a stratigraphic sequence from the early-Second through most of the First Millennium BC. At both sites there exists the same Bronze Age culture (Hasanlu VI, Dinkha IV) defined by painted, incised and plain buff wares that are related to the Syrian and Mesopotamian Khabur wares (Fig. 2, nos. 3, 6, 11–14 and Fig. 3). This culture terminated sometime in the 17th–16th century BC (Dyson and Muscarella 1989: 23 n. 25; Stein 1984: 29). At Dinkha polychrome ware (Pl.1.1) occurs primarily in the Bronze Age erosion levels and in the overlying basal Iron Age fill, with no firmly associated architecture. Although not yet fully studied, this ware seems to represent a post-Khabur period occurrence that briefly existed just before and at the very beginning of the new Iron Age period (see also Edwards 1986: 63). Further evidence for this brief overlap are two polychrome vessels, one each from Early Iron Age I burials at Hasanlu (Stein 1940: Fig. 110, Pls 24:3, 31:8) and Dinkha (Fig. 4.1; Muscarella 1974: 39, 48, Figs. 3, 5); these could be imports from the north or have been locally acquired.³ A similar overlap is also evident from painted vessels present with Iron Age pottery at Kordlar on the western shore of Lake Urmia (Lippert 1979: Figs. 9–11), at Sialk (Ghirshman 1939: Pls 37, 40, 41, S444, S476, S495; Young 1965: 70, 72)⁴ and, intriguingly, at Kizilvank across

¹ Modern trade has surely passed the vessels far from their plundered homes. Edwards (1986: 70) says archaeologists believe they came from north of Van.
² The ante quem date would be determined by this beginning date for the EWGW/Iron I culture. Edwards (1986: 69) seems to accept the vessels in Adana as locally acquired, a provenance which is not demonstrated. He also suggests (p. 70) that plundered painted vessels in Munich are “possibly from North-western Iran”, a conclusion without archaeological value.
³ Çilingiroğlu (1984: 130, Fig. 2) compares a vessel in Adana with the Hasanlu example. While close, it is not exact. Edwards (1986: 63 n. 61) incorrectly assigns the Dinkha vessel to a stone tomb. It actually came from an inhumation cut into the Bronze Age level. He dates the burial to the Bronze Age, with no documentation or reference to the published text.
⁴ Medvedskaya does not discuss these painted vessels, which may represent a degree of continuity. In her illustrated pottery chart they are not shown in the Sialk row.