



Small axe head, Luristan 2nd millennium BC. £250.



Lioness? brooch, Luristan c8thC BC. £95.



Two spearheads c1200BC. c£195 each.



Master of Animals sceptre finial, c9thC BC. £395.



Macehead, 2nd millennium BC. £195.



Pins with decorative heads, Luristan c9thC BC. £30 each.



Dagger with bone inlaid grip, socketed spearhead, tanged spearhead. All 2nd millennium BC. c£200 each.



Long socketed spear. c£200. Two short swords, c1200BC. £495 each.

Ancient Iranian Bronzes by Vincent McCarthy

Iran is a country of dry plains and rugged mountains. In ancient times it was occupied by tribes of mostly illiterate horsemen and farmers so we have virtually no written history. The neighbouring states of Elam and Babylon did have a system of writing so we do have the occasional record of contacts with the Iranian people. But their relationship was often turbulent so the records are mostly only cursory and unflattering.

From archaeological evidence we know that farming and horse breeding were important, especially in the most western region of Luristan. The area of Gilan, near the Caspian Sea is more fertile and was thus more densely populated. It seems that copper working became established here around 2500BC, quickly spread westward and continued until the late Iron Age around 600BC.

The earliest use of copper and bronze was to manufacture tools and weapons such as knives and spearheads. Agricultural tools are not often found so we can assume that they were used to destruction and then ended up, literally, in the melting pot. For a thousand years the coppersmiths turned out a huge quantity of axes, swords, spearheads and daggers which indicates a wealthy warrior class as patrons. Early spear heads have slender leaf shaped blades, often with a central rib for added strength, and a tang for mounting in the wooden shaft.

Collectors will find these fairly readily at prices from £125 for an average example up to £300 for a really top notch weapon. Later we find socketed spears but these are more scarce and can fetch a little more, say £150 and up. Some early swords have separate blades, tanged to take a cast handle which was fitted later. These are very similar to spear heads and can easily be confused but prices are similar to

spears at £150 to £250. Later swords are often made in one piece, blade and handle cast together. The handle often has an open flange which is designed to take a bone or wood grip. These weapons can be of various styles depending on which area of the country they originate from and they can vary in length from a short dagger, through short sword to full length sword and prices in general reflect size, from around £200 to £400.

Later designs are more ornate and workmanship is often of a high standard. Fully rounded handles with decorative knobs and guards often of crescentic form can be very fine weapons and feel right in weight and balance in the hand. Full swords of 50cm or more in length can be very impressive. Collectors will probably have to pay around £400 to £800 for such a weapon. Shaft hole axes began to appear before 2000BC, generally cast with the cutting edge sharpened, they may best be described as tools rather than weapons. They come in a variety of forms often with curving blade and can be bought for £150 to about £300 depending on size and patination. A couple of very distinctive types of axe may be found by collectors. The 'duckbill', which has two oval shaped holes in the blade can be dated to around 1800BC. Prices are around £250. A second type has a downward curving blade with pointed projections at the butt end. A later and more attractive type, common around 1200BC, is more expensive at £300 to £400.

During the second millennium the metal workers turned out many very decorative and elaborate axes. These often depict animals around the socket, lions being a popular theme. These are sometimes depicted with humans. The axes from Gilan tend to be more ornate than those from further east which

seem to echo the plainer types from Mesopotamia. Many of these are found with unsharpened blades so may have been produced for ceremonial use or the burials of wealthy patrons. These axes can be very elaborate and decorative, almost becoming works of art in their own right. Prices tend to reflect this. Anything from £700 and upwards can be expected. Along with axes we find the more workmanlike picks or adzes. These are more scarce but lack the glamour of real weapons so can usually be bought for around £200 or possibly a little more. Mace heads and cudgels are sometimes found, the earliest types based on stone implements. Some are obviously designed for warlike purposes but others are decorative and quite flimsy so may be for ceremonial use. Prices can be as low as £120 with better pieces around £200.

An unusual item from this period is an openwork frame in the form of a master of animals which is obviously a decorative finial from a staff, possibly for ceremonial use. These are often described as depicting Gilgamesh but to be truthful we do not really know. Fairly scarce items are very popular with collectors so prices can be fairly high. £400 up to £1,000 is usual. Horses were obviously important to the tribesmen and items of harness are quite common. Decorative discs, bits and harness rings can be bought for modest sums. £75 to £250 would cover the most common types. Amongst the smaller and more personal bronze items we find bangles, pins for fixing clothes or hair, brooches, earrings, small model animals and stamp seals amongst many other domestic items. Pins can vary in length from just a few inches to about a foot or so. Most have decorative terminals in the form of animals or birds but can still be bought for £30 or a little more. Model animals often have holes drilled through them as if for wear. Goats, bulls and deer are some of the more common quadrupeds. L shaped brooches with spring pins are described as 'arm' or 'elbow' because of their shape. Sizes vary enormously as do prices but anything from £75 to £150 should buy decent examples.

Most of the things considered thus far have been made by casting in bivalve moulds but items made by beating sheet bronze into shape are also known. These are mainly vessels such as jugs or bowls for domestic use but the occasional small ritual vessel does appear from time to time. The forms of most of these vessels are similar throughout Mesopotamia and ancient Iran so it can be difficult to ascribe the place of manufacture with any certainty. Some of the hemispherical bowls with moulded floral motifs are much sought after and can cost several hundreds of pounds. Patination is important. Some bronze artefacts from the region can have a crusty overall deposit whilst others are blessed with a fine and smooth green or brown patina. Collections will pay top prices for bronzes with fine patinas and this should be taken into account when deciding whether a piece is worth adding to your collection. I have given only a brief survey of some of the most commonly found bronze artefacts from Ancient Iran but odd and unusual objects do turn up. Collectors with a keen eye and enquiring mind will always find plenty to interest them.

Chinese artefacts are probably one of the most sought after areas for the collector of antiquities. In our next edition Vincent McCarthy surveys the whole history of the region from Neolithic through to the early Ming dynasty which equates to our late medieval.



Ceremonial axe, Luristan c1000BC. c£500.



Heavy axe head, 2nd millennium BC. c£200.



Bangle with ibex terminals, c7thC BC. £75.



Decorative stag c1000BC, Elamite. £95.



Short sword with winged pommel, c1000BC. £395.



'Duckbill' axe, c1800BC. £295.



Dagger with flanged handle, c1000BC. £295.



Decorative cudgel, 2nd millennium BC. £275.



Bronze dagger with pomegranate handle, Amlash region, c2000BC. £395.