

MARLIK AND TOUL-E TALISH: A DATING PROBLEM

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Abstract: As a result of recent activities of Iranian expeditions in Talish, to the southwest of the Caspian Sea, several graveyards with remarkable Iron Age material has been excavated. Among these, perhaps the most interesting is Toul cemetery that produced material similar to some tombs at Marlik. Based on these similarities and on the presence of a bronze bracelet with an Urartian inscription in Toul cemetery, the excavator of the site concluded that both cemeteries are contemporary, belonging entirely to the 8th-7th centuries B.C. and that they are highly influenced by Urartian art. In this article I propose that the majority of finds from Toul cemetery belong to ca. the 10th-9th centuries B.C. The presence of a few Iron III/IV depositions should be considered as a result of the occurrence of later burials in the cemetery. It is further suggested that the inscribed bracelet of Toul neither is a precise chronological indicator nor an indication of Urartian influence over the art of the Caspian region.

Keywords: Iran, Talish, Cemetery, Iron Age, Urartian inscription

In the past five decades, the southwestern shores of the Caspian Sea have been explored by several Iranian and Japanese Archaeological Expeditions. Systematic excavations by these expeditions have produced a great deal of material, mostly belonging to the Iron Age. The number of objects from clandestine diggings is even larger than the systematic ones and due to the lack of archaeological context they cannot unfortunately be used for establishing the archaeological setting and historical developments of the region (Muscarella 1977; Dyson 1985; Haerinck 1988).

Due to the special environmental situation of Gilan province with high annual precipitation average and probably also the materials used for building prevented the creation of artificial mounds like in other areas of the Near East (Kroll 1984: 126-27). So far no tepe's/tells have been recognised in this region. All material comes from graveyards and there are no

stratified settlements. This makes it difficult to establish a chronological framework for the region. Objects from each site have mostly been published in isolation and little attention was paid to inter-relations between the sites within the region. Haerinck's article (1988) is the only synthetic work in which he attempts to place Iron Age materials from different sites in Gilan and west Mazandaran within a chronological framework.

Recently, resumption of fieldwork in the region, both by Iranian and joint Iranian-Japanese expeditions, has produced new insights into the cultural sequence and historical developments of Gilan province (Khalatbari 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; Tadahiko *et al* 2003; 2004).

Since 1991, Iranian expeditions under the directorship of M.R. Khalatbari concentrate on fieldwork in the extreme west of Gilan, in Talish district. From then on they conducted excavations in several graveyards in Vaske, Mianroud (Khalatbari 2004a), Asbsara, Maryan, Tandabin, and Toul (Khalatbari 2004b). The latter graveyard produced a variety of Iron Age materials including various types of bronze, iron and bimetallic daggers/swords, arrowheads, spearheads, a fork/bident(?), an inscribed bronze bracelet, an axe, a gold vase and various gold and silver ornaments, faience and carnelian beads, cylindrical bronze bells, various pottery vessels etc.

Based on the similarity between certain jewellery from tomb 1 at Toul with Marlik jewellery on the one hand and the presence of an inscribed bracelet with the name of the Urartian king, [son of] Argishti in the same tomb at Toul, on the other hand, Khalatbari (2004b:59) concludes that the two cemeteries are contemporary, belonging entirely to 8th-7th centuries B.C and are highly influenced by Urartian art. He further concludes: "...contemporary with Marlik around seventh and eighth centuries B.C, the Toul chiefdom flourished. Eventually in the eighth century B.C, when Urartian military power subjugated a vast territory of north western Iran the Toul chiefdom was forced to accept the influence of the victorious power of Urartu and possibly went under their protection." (*Ibid*: 59). In his conclusions, however, Khalatbari considers the bracelet as a precise chronological reference while ignoring the possibility of later interments.

In this article, based on a comparative approach, we will review Khalatbari's conclusions on the chronology of Toul and Marlik cemeteries.

Eight tombs have been reported from Toul, mostly with unspecified contents (Khalatbari 2004b). The published materials are mixed up together

and one can hardly assign a specific object to a given tomb for certain. The juxtaposition of materials is unknown. The only way to attribute the objects to their tomb of provenance is to read the white labels in the illustrations, that do occur in some instances and to check the insufficient and brief descriptions in the text or to have a closer look in some instances at the excavation photos. Through this approach, most objects proved to come from tomb 1.

According to the excavator, located in grid j:VII the tomb was a “Dolmen” consisting of a chamber measuring 16x2x2m. oriented east-west. The cobble stone walls corbelled to support large roof slabs. Seven bodies were buried in the tomb in flexed position. Skeletal remains were in a very bad state of preservation, making recognition of orientations difficult. However, five bodies were apparently buried in a north-south orientation, lying on their left side, and one in east-west direction. The position and orientation of the seventh burial has not directly been cited by the author and had possibly a northeast-southwest orientation (Khalatbari 2004b: 31-33).

The tomb contained at least six bronze dagger/swords, eight bimetallic and one iron sword, four socketed spearheads (one in iron, three in bronze), a number of bronze arrowheads (at least 63 examples), a bronze twisted bracelet with small perforations at the ends, a bronze axe-head with shaft-hole, a large bronze fork/bident(?), a bronze hook and three chisel-like utensils, an inscribed bronze bracelet, an open-work bronze pendant, a unique gold vase with vertical grooves and punched circle decorations, two round gold pendants with six-pointed stars worked in repoussé and a central boss, several carnelian and faience necklaces some with fluted melon-shaped gold beads, eight gold earrings (four penannular plain with a single drop in one instance and four strips twisted again with a single drop in one instance), eight silver toggle-pins, eight sheet-bronze tubes, possibly ram bells, one stone hammer (?) and one whetstone, different forms of pottery vessels and possibly other objects.

In his report, Khalatbari (2004b: 59) simply refers to the close similarity between the gold objects of Toul and Marlik cemetery as a whole; while there seems to exist more than one artistic style in the cemetery (Calmeyer 1982: 341-42). Taking a closer look at the Marlik material, however, one

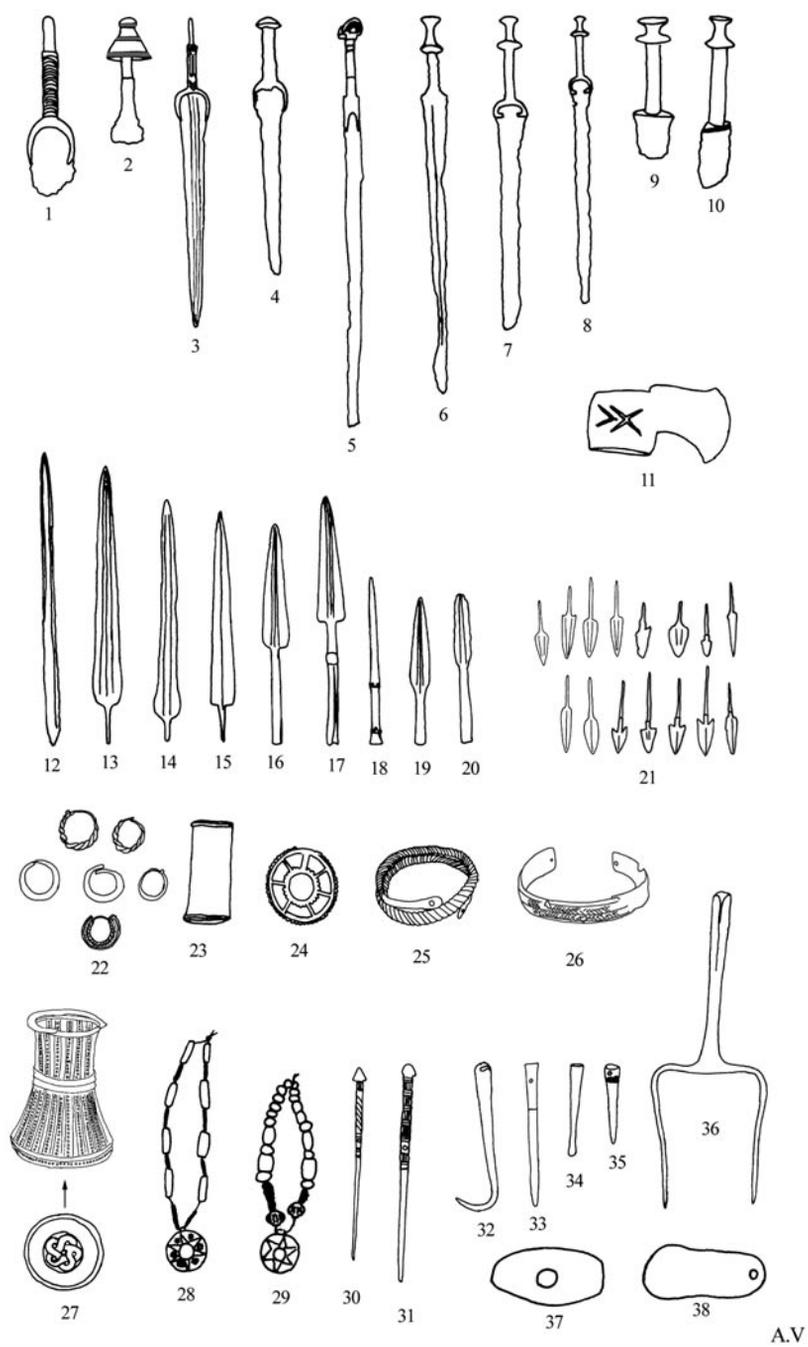


Fig.1. Burial goods of Tomb 1, Toul cemetery (Drawing by the author).

can find that the set of jewellery from tomb 1 at Toul is paralleled mainly in tombs 10, 23 and especially 50 at Marlik, the latter has incidentally been supposed to be “*eines der altesten*” in the cemetery (Calmeyer 1982: 348, n. 37).

Here below, we will attempt to present a typological analysis of the most characteristic artefacts of tomb 1 at Toul.

Pottery

Potsherds are one of the most numerous classes of artifacts to be found during archaeological fieldwork and they are very valuable for assessing chronological and cultural changes. Although numerous pottery vessels have been recovered from Toul cemetery, they unfortunately lost much of their archaeological interest, because the excavator ignores their context and mixed them up together, so that one can scarcely attribute a piece to a certain tomb. As for the pottery evidence of tomb 1, for example, all what we know is that among other objects the tomb also contained “different pottery forms” (Khalatbari 2004b: 31). On other occasions, however, the author mentions “three earthenware” (Khalatbari 2004b: 32) and “pottery jars” (Khalatbari 2004b: 33) in the same tomb without reference to related illustrations. Therefore it is impossible for the reader to imagine which type of pottery each tomb had contained. Likewise, the association of pottery types in the cemetery is almost totally unknown.

However, among the pottery assemblage of Toul there are crudely made and heavy jars and jugs with plastic decorations (Khalatbari 2004b: Colour Plate 38, 41) and double — handled jars (Khalatbari 2004b: Colour Plate 40), which Haerinck (1988: 72) categorises as Iron II types in Gilan. Moreover, bowls with an open spout and sometimes with a vertical loop handle, mostly decorated with burnished patterns (Khalatbari 2004b: Colour Plate 29-34), an un-bridged spouted vessel (Khalatbari 2004b: Colour Plate 35) and round bellied jars (Khalatbari 2004b: Colour Plate 18-21) in Toul assemblage can also be considered as Iron II types in Gilan.

Weapons

Bimetallic swords (one example is entirely cast in iron) with disc pommel, slender cylindrical grip and tapering blades are among the commonest types of daggers / swords in Toul graveyard. This type has occasionally

been referred to as “cotton reel” pommel (Moorey 1971: 79; Medvedskaya 1982: 75), because below the flat circular pommel there is a second rather wide disc and a plain or incised cylindrical grip in between. In two examples (fig. 1 nos. 9, 10) traces of incised decoration runs round the grip, but a layer of patina makes precise distinction of the patterns difficult. In one instance, however, parallel incised lines run round the square shoulders (no. 10). Other examples (nos. 7, 8) have an elliptical open guard with round shoulders which is cast in one piece with the grip and is carefully designed to secure the iron blade firmly in position. The iron blades are either totally damaged or heavily corroded so that nothing is visible on them. Very similar examples of this type have been reported from Tomadjan¹, Ghalekuti II (Fukai & Ikeda 1971: Pl. XLIV, no.1; Pl. XXVII, no. 4), and Chagoula-Derre in Talish (Medvedskaya 1982: 75, fig. 9: 29). In Talish sites, including Toul (Fig. 1, no. 5) this type is closely associated with bimetallic “ear pommel” swords (see Moorey 1971: 79). In Tomadjan (tomb 14) (Samadi 1959: 32, fig. 30d; Haerinck 1988, Pls. 72) and Toul (tomb 1) (Fig. 1, no. 24) openwork pendant of concentric circles with serrated edges were also associated with this type, which I think in both cases is a result of later burials.

Haerinck (1988: 70) is of the opinion that this type began to be produced in Iron I and was then made of bronze and continued to be produced in Iron Age II (bimetallic examples) or even III (iron examples). On the basis of association of this type with a fibula in tomb 14 at Tomadjan, however, Medvedskaya (1982: 75) dates the type to 850-800 B.C and Moorey (1971: 79) to the 9th -8th. century B.C. The association of a fibula with this type of sword/dagger in tomb 14 at Tomadjan, however, is more likely a result of the reuse of the grave in Iron Age III/IV (*cf.* Haerinck 1988: 65, 69). In my opinion, these bimetallic, “cotton-reel” pommel swords of tomb 1 at Toul can be attributed to the 10th -9th. century B.C.

Among other weapon types at Toul one can point to a bronze sword/dagger with a long and tapering blade, pronounced midribs and parallel blood channels (nos. 1, 3). In one instance, (no. 3) the dagger has a solid-cast hilt with penannular guard. The vertically ribbed hilt has encircling ridge bands at the top and herringbone pattern ridges at the base. The pommel has been lost. According to similar examples that have been reported

¹ Tomadjan produced two examples of this type, one entirely in bronze (tomb 14) another one made of iron (tomb 34) (see Samadi 1959: 40, 46, figs. 34, 36, 42).

from Northwest Iran with unknown provenance, the pommel, however, may well have been a conical, hollow-cast one, which can be seen in a bimetallic sword/dagger form the same tomb at Toul (no.2). Similar examples have been discovered at Ghalakuti I cemetery (Fukai & Ikeda 1971: Pl. LXXVI, no.92; Pl. LI, no.12). This type of daggers/swords is probably originating at the end of the 2nd millennium B.C. and was then made of bronze; it continued to be produced in the first centuries of the 1st millennium B.C. sometime with a bronze hilt and iron blade (*cf.* Moorey 1971:78, fig. 15: 57). Bimetallic examples have also been reported from the same cemetery and possibly the same tomb at Toul (no. 1-2), where — I think — they can be dated to the first centuries of the 1st millennium B.C. as well.

A third type of sword at Toul is a bimetallic sword with long, narrow, tapering iron blade which is cast-on to a bronze hilt. This hilt has an “ear” pommel with a semicircular opening in the center (no. 5). According to very similar examples from northern Iran the pommel may have had parallel ridges across the back, but this feature can not be seen in Khalatbari’s photograph (Khalatbari 2004b, fig. 53; here fig.1, no 5). The straight grip has a square section with a flat ridged band at the top. The base of the hilt extended below the square shoulder and has a double-pronged form, which secures the iron blade in place.

This type of sword had a wide distribution in north and northwest Iran and especially in Talish area where they have mainly a bronze hilt and an iron blade (see Moorey 1971: 80-83, figs. 61-63; Medvedskaya 1982: 75, fig. 9:30; Muscarella 1988: 283). Some scholars (e.g Moorey 1977: 80; Muscarella: 1988: 283) argue that the north Iranian “ear” pommel type derived from Luristan flanged-hilt daggers in the central Zagros. However, Medvedskaya (1982: 75) postulates that the Talish bimetallic examples of this type directly descended from earlier bronze examples of Mugani area in former southeast Russian Azerbaijan. However, the dating of this type is not disputed among scholars and is always attributed to the Iron Age II or more precisely to the 10th -9th century B.C. (for related bibliography see Muscarella 1988: 283; Moorey 1971: 83). It can be seen that the quantity of bimetallic artifacts in Tomb 1 at Toul is quite large and this in itself is a characteristic of the Iron Age II period in northwestern Iran and other regions of the Near East (Pigott 1977: 220).

Bronze spearheads with a long hollow socket and rivet holes at the base (no. 16, 17) are among the characteristic types of weapons in tomb 1 at Toul. In one instance (no. 17) a knob is created at the middle of the socket,

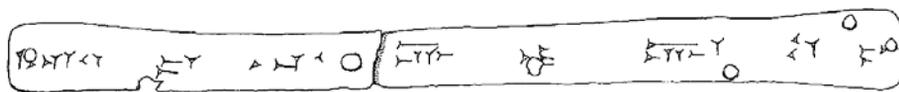


Fig.2. The interior face of the inscribed bracelet from Tomb 1, Toul cemetery.

nearer to the square shoulders of the blade. This type has a triangular blade tapering towards the point. Traces of lines can be seen running down either side of the triangular sectioned (?) midrib. This type of spearhead is considerably longer than the other types in tomb 1 at Toul. A very similar example has been reported from Ghalekuti II (Fukai & Ikeda 1971: Pl. XLIV, no. 2; Pl. XXVII, no. 5b). de Morgan has found similar examples of this type in dolmen 3 at Agha-Evlar and Moorey (1971: 90) suggests a date of the 9th or 8th century B.C. for this type.

A bronze socketed spearhead with a narrow leaf-shaped blade (no. 20) has also been found in tomb 1. The edges of the blade are heavily corroded and there are two rivet holes at the base of the socket. A similar example has been reported from Chir Chir and attributed to the Talish late Bronze Age (Moorey 1971: 88).

Ornaments

Perhaps the most interesting artifact to be found in tomb 1 at Toul is an inscribed bronze bracelet, penannular in form with several holes across the ring (fig. 1, no. 26; fig. 2). The ring is flat and two registers of clumsily incised herringbone patterns decorated its outer surface. The interior surface, however, has a rather fine, but heavily abraded Urartian inscription. The artifact has been split into two halves and then riveted together in antiquity.

Bashash Kanzaq (2004: 89) transcribes and translates the inscription of the bracelet as follows: “[¹ a] r-giš-ti-ni-še uš-tú- [ú-še]” “the gift of Argishti” and believes (*Ibid.*: 88) that the bracelet should be assigned to the reign of Argishti I, son of Menua (789-766 B.C).

Razmju (2004: 95) however, suggests a different transcription and translation for the inscription. First he considers the broken bracelet as two separate parts. The left-hand piece in fig. 2 bears a text consisting of three signs which can be read as: “ar-giš-ti”. Then he argues that since this is a personal name, the first part of the name is incomplete and a sign called

Winkelhaken is missing, broken from the left corner of the piece in the time of manufacturing the bracelet.

The text of the second, right-hand piece read as follows: “ni-še uš-tu²-ni”. Razmjju believes that there is obviously a gap between the texts of the two pieces of the bracelet. Because the latter part of the text of the second piece (uš-tu²-ni) means “he dedicated”, but its former part (ni-še) does not make sense, unless we assume that after the name of Argishti there has been another sign which is now invisible, covered under the overlapping, riveted edges of the ring. Therefore, he (Ibid.) concludes that it is highly expected that this missing sign is -hi. If it is true, the inscription as a whole read as follows: “^mar-giš-ti[-hi]-ni-še uš-tu²-ni” which Razmjju translates as “[son of] Argishti dedicated”. Hence, the inscription, he suggests, is referring to the son of Argishti I, most probably Sarduri II, who was ruling in Urartu from ca. 764-736 B.C.

There are several reasons which show that the production of the bracelet was an afterthought and that the piece has not originally been designed as such by a metal smith. Rather it has possibly been part of an inscribed plaque for mounting on a temple wall or an inscription around a dedicated vessel, possibly for the chief Urartian god Khaldi. The first reason: the inscription does not fit round the ring and a small part of the beginning of the text is absent. Another reason: small part of the middle of the text seems to be covered by the overlapping, riveted edges of the bracelet.

Secondly, there seems to have been used different techniques in rendering the clumsily incised patterns on the outer face and the rather fine inscription chased on the inner side of the ring. Moreover, several holes on the bracelet have partially damaged some cuneiform characters (fig. 2) which in turn shows that the holes have been made later than the inscription.

Third, it would not be reasonable to argue that a scribe chased the inscription inside the ring of the bracelet, because it would not be visible when wearing. Above all, in contrast to Urartian bronze artifacts with royal inscription, which always show a high craftsmanship and artistic quality, the inscribed bracelet of Toul is rather grotesque.

We do not know exactly how and when the piece arrived into the Toul region, through military invasions and as a looted object or as a trade good. However, the fact that the inscription of the piece has highly been abraded suggests that even after reaching into the Toul region and re-shaping as a bracelet, the piece must have been used for a relatively long time.

Eventually it was deposited as a burial good long after primary production. Therefore, the piece must have reached the region long after the reign of Sarduri II or even possibly later, sometimes after the collapse of the Urartian kingdom. Also, because other objects of the Toul cemetery do not show Urartian influence at all. Accordingly, the presence of this bracelet in tomb 1 at Toul is neither an indication of Urartian influence over the art of the region nor can it be considered as *Leitfossil* for dating the Toul and Marlik complexes.

Tomb 1 has also produced a number of remarkable jewellery and gold-works. Among them one can point to eight silver toggle pins². They can be divided into two general groups: one group consisting of 3 pins has mushroom-shaped heads and ‘bead and reel’ incised patterns on the shank (fig. 1, no. 31). There is a small hole about one-third of the way down the shank of this group. Very similar gold pins with the same design have been discovered from tomb 50 and 10 at Marlik (Negahban 1996: 187) and many other similar examples are attributed to the Amlash region as well. Maxwell-Hyslop (1971: 191, Pls. 138-9) proposes a date between the 13th -12th century B.C. for this type of dress pins. The second group has conical heads and twisted design around the shanks. Like the former group there is a hole on the shank, above which incised decorations are placed. Both groups of pins have been found in association and are more likely contemporary.

Amongst the most striking pieces in tomb 1 we can cite: carnelian beads together with rock crystal, silver (?) coiled or spiral wire and fluted melon-shaped gold beads, as well as round pendants in sheet gold with the design of a six-pointed star and a central boss, sometimes with smaller bosses between each ray of the star and central curved-over loop at the top for suspension (fig. 1, nos. 28-29). In Marlik similar ‘star pendants’ can be seen in the inventory of tombs 12, 15, 23, and 50, where they possibly served as amuletic pieces (Vahdati 2005: 166-168). Melon-shaped gold beads, however, has only been reported in tomb 50 and gold beads of coiled wire in tombs 10, 45 and 50. In the Caspian area this type of spiral and melon-shaped gold beads have been found at Ghalekuti I, tomb A-V (Egami *et al.* 1965: Pl. LVII, no. 81; Fukai & Ikeda 1971: Pl. XXXIV,

² The excavator of the cemetery, however, describes them as “hair-binder” (*Mouband*) (2004: 32).

no. 2a-c, 3a-b), where they can be dated to Iron I period (see Haerinck 1988: 74). Similar beads in silver have also been reported at Vadjalik in Talish region and in Maxwell-Hyslop opinion indicating 'some kind of direct contact' between Mesopotamian and northwestern Iranian jewellers³.

The inventory of the tomb also included eight penannular plain and strip twisted gold earrings and a small gold vase (fig. 1, no. 22, 27). This strange gold vase has a cylindrical form broadening at the base with crude punched circle decorations around the body and a design like twisted snakes at the base. In contrast to other gold pieces of the tomb, this gold vase shows a low and primitive craftsmanship and except for a very faint similarity in form with a tall bronze cup with concave sides from tomb A-V at Ghalekuti I (Fukai & Ikeda 1971: Pl. LII, No.13), to my knowledge not paralleled in the art of ancient Iran. Penannular plain and strip twisted earrings, however, have their parallels in Marlik⁴ and at Tell Ajjul in Palestine and in both cases they have been dated to around the middle of the second millennium B.C. (Maxwell-Hyslop 1971; Negahban 1996: 172-3, colour plate XXVIII B).

Therefore, according to the above typological analysis, most of weapon types in Tomb 1 at Toul are datable to around 10th-9th century B.C., while jewellery types are more likely belonging to the last centuries of the second millennium B.C. However, as regard to the jewellery and beads, it is important to keep in mind that the use of these items for dating purposes is dangerous and can produce extremely misleading results (Maxwell-Hyslop 1971: 34). Gold objects with intrinsic value and sometimes amuletic significance can become treasured and handed over through generations. They may eventually be deposited much later than the time of their production. For the same reason, hoards of jewellery often contain beads of different periods and so can only give us a *terminus ante quem* for the find (*Ibid.*).

³ It would be interesting to note that some pieces in tomb 50 at Marlik (e.g fluted melon-shaped beads, silver beads of coiled wire, star pendants and a winged monster with two lion's head holding a sphinx in each hand, featured on a silver vessel with gold spout and inlay) have their prototypes in Mesopotamia and may reflect cultural contacts between Mesopotamia and the Caspian area (see Calmeyer 1982: 341-42; 1987/90: 428; Maxwell-Hyslop 1971: 20, 191).

⁴ In Marlik plain examples have been excavated in tombs 10 and 16 and strip twisted ones in tombs 23 and 50.

An openwork bronze pendant, which consisted of two concentric circles, comes also from tomb 1 (no. 24). The small central circle joins to the outer by seven spokes; one is thicker than the others. The outer edge of each circle is serrated, except for where the thickest spoke joins to the outer circle.

This type of pendant is abundant in Gilan and has been reported from late Iron Age contexts in Ghalekuti I (Egami *et al* 1965: Pl. LXXIV, no. 20), Vaske (Khalatbari 2004a: Pl.6:3; Color Plate 41:3) and tomb 14 at Tomadjan (Samadi 1959, fig.30; Haerinck 1988, pl. 72). Moorey (1971: 236) suggests a date between the 6th and 4th century B.C. for this type of pendants. In tomb 1 at Toul, this type of pendant is probably belonging to the late Iron III or early Iron Age IV period and has been deposited with the inscribed bracelet.

Conclusion

Typological analysis of the burial goods of tomb 1 at Toul shows that this is a heterogeneous assemblage with materials belonging to a rather long span of time ranging from Iron Age II to IV. This discrepancy in the inventory of the tomb on the one hand and the very poorly preserved skeletal remains of seven bodies with different orientation on the other hand is evidently indicating to a secondary interment in the tomb. The occurrence of secondary burial(s) in tomb 1 at Toul finds support in Khalatbari's description of the finds of the tomb (2004: 31) that "...there were masses of objects scattered all over the surface of the tomb". Typological analysis of the finds of the tomb shows that the bulk of burial goods are belonging to Iron Age II, sometime around the 10th-9th century B.C. Some items, including the inscribed bracelet and openwork bronze pendant, however, must have been placed in the tomb several centuries later, when the tomb was re-used sometime around the 6th-5th century B.C. Therefore, contrary to Khalatbari's conclusion, the inscribed bracelet at Toul cemetery neither is a precise chronological indicator nor an indication of Urartian influence over art of the region. The latter is also corroborated by the pottery finds of the site, because the characteristic Urartian ceramic forms are absent in the Toul cemetery.

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