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The first Hyrcanian tiger? A unique figurine from Yarim Tepe, Iran

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ABSTRACT
Tigers (*Panthera tigris* Linnaeus, 1758) are rare in ancient art outside of India and Central Asia. In the Mediterranean world they were associated with the East, and all the danger and exoticism that it entailed, especially with the region of Hyrcania (modern Gorgan), on the southeastern coast of the Caspian Sea. In Iran itself they do not appear until the Sasanian Empire (*c.* 224-651 CE), and their appearance has been attributed to influence from Central Asia. However, a ceramic figurine of a tiger was excavated at Yarim Tepe in Golestan Province, Iran (in the region of Gorgan) in 1960. It is made of a ceramic fabric known to archaeologists as "Caspian Black-on-Red Ware", and based on its occurrence at other sites in northeastern Iran such as Shah Tepe, Tureng Tepe and Tepe Hissar, this type of pottery, and the tiger itself, likely dates to *c.* 3500 to 3100 BCE. This would make it among the oldest depictions of a tiger in the ancient world and certainly the earliest in Iran. Although the exact purpose of the figurine is unknown, it must have played a role in the identities of the people living at Yarim Tepe. As such, it stands at the head of a long line of images of tigers in later Iranian art and literature.

KEY WORDS
Chalcolithic,
animal representation,
animal symbolism.

RÉSUMÉ
Le premier tigre hyrcanien ? Une figurine unique de Yarim Tepe, Iran.
Les tigres (*Panthera tigris* Linnaeus, 1758) sont rares dans l'art ancien en dehors de l'Inde et de l'Asie centrale. Dans le monde méditerranéen, ils étaient associés à l'Orient, avec tout le danger et l'exotisme que cela comportait, en particulier avec la région de l'Hyrcanie (l'actuel Gorgan), sur la côte sud-est de la mer Caspienne. En Iran même, ils n'apparaissent que sous l'Empire sassanide (environ 224-651 de notre ère), et leur apparition a été attribuée à l'influence de l'Asie centrale. Cependant, une figurine en céramique représentant un tigre a été découverte à Yarim Tepe, dans la province du Golestan, en Iran (dans la région de Gorgan) en 1960. Elle est fabriquée dans un type de céramique connu des archéologues sous le nom de « Caspian Black-on-Red Ware ». Sur la base de sa présence

sur d'autres sites du nord-est de l'Iran tels que Shah Tepe, Tureng Tepe et Tepe Hissar, nous estimons que ce type de poterie et le tigre lui-même datent probablement d'environ 3500 à 3100 avant notre ère. Cela en ferait l'une des plus anciennes représentations d'un tigre dans le monde antique et certainement la plus ancienne d'Iran. Bien que le but exact de la figurine soit inconnu, elle doit avoir joué un rôle dans l'identité des habitants de Yarim Tepe. En tant que telle, elle se situe à la tête d'une longue lignée de représentations de tigres dans l'art et la littérature iraniens ultérieurs.

MOTS CLÉS
Chalcolithique,
représentation animale,
symbolisme animal.

INTRODUCTION

> "The whole prouince is full of thicke forrests, which giue lurcking holes to infinite numbers of Tigers, celebrated in all writers for their horible feircenes; whence it grew to a common adage concerning cruell men, that they had sucked a Hircanian Tiger." (Heylyn 1621: 333)

So wrote Peter Heylyn in *Microcosmus, or a Little Description of the Great World*, first published in 1621 (Heylyn 1621). This remark was no doubt in reaction to the common practice of his contemporaries, such as William Shakespeare, of using the Hyrcanian tiger as a metaphor for cruelty (Thorley 2017: 989-991). This usage arose not, as Heylyn implies, from observations of the tiger (*Panthera tigris* Linnaeus, 1758) in its natural habitat, but from literary precedents from the time of the Roman Empire. Indeed, for the Romans, as for Shakespeare and Heylyn, the Hyrcanian tiger was emblematic of the exoticness, danger and innate savagery of the East (Schneider 2024).

In Virgil's *Aeneid* (4.365-7), for example, left unfinished at the poet's death in 19 BCE, the scorned Dido lashes out at Aeneas thus:

> "False one, no goddess was your mother, nor was Dardanus founder of your line, but rugged Caucasus on his flinty rocks begot you, and Hyrcanian tigresses suckled you."

Similarly, in Lucan's *Civil War* (1.327-31), composed between 61 and 65 CE, Julius Caesar compare his rival Pompey to a tiger:

> "As the fierce tiger, who has drunk deep of the blood of slain cattle when following his dam from lair to lair in the Hyrcanian jungle, never after loses his ferocity, so Magnus, once wont to lick the sword of Sulla, is thirsty still."

Three decades later, in Statius' *Thebaid* (9.12-16), Eteocles likens his enemies to tigers:

> "Does any man still have mercy or humanity for the Pelasgi? Now they are tearing limbs apart with their hooked teeth – the madness! Have we so glutted their weapons? Think you not that we war with Hyrcanian tigers, fight fierce lions of Libya?"

Finally, to give a much later example, around 395 Claudian, in *The Rape of Proserpina* (3.261-5), compares the goddess Ceres, searching for her abducted daughter, to an enraged tiger:

> "Anon she turns her head and eyes to heaven and with raging breast inveighs against its denizens; even as lofty Niphates shakes to the roaring of the Hyrcan tigress whose cubs the terrified horseman has carried off to be the playthings of Persia's king."

Although relatively rare in Roman art, depictions of tigers in visual media have similar associations as they do in literature. They appear almost exclusively in hunting scenes – either in combat with human hunters or attacking prey – or in explicit connection with Dionysus (Toynbee 1996: 69-72, 81-82; Wyler 2024). An example of the latter is a mosaic discovered in Zaragoza, Spain in 1908, now in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional in Madrid (Fig. 1). The mosaic, which dates to the late second century CE, depicts Dionysus riding in a chariot drawn by tigers. Here the association with the East is clear, as Dionysus was thought by the Greeks and Romans to have originated there. The tiger's savagery is also evident in an *opus sectile* mosaic from the Basilica of Junius Bassus on the Esquiline Hill in Rome, constructed *c.* 331 CE (Fig. 2). The tigress, whose teats are clearly depicted, attacks a calf, biting its back just below the neck and seizing it with her front legs. As with the texts mentioned above, the tigers in these mosaics may reflect the anxiety of the Romans towards their Iranian neighbors and major political rivals, the Arsacid (*c.* 250 BCE-224 CE) and Sasanian Empires (224-651 CE).

The connection between tigers and Persians is especially strong in a mosaic from Palmyra in Syria, probably made in the 260s CE, depicting a mounted archer hunting tigers (Fig. 3). The inscription on the mosaic, written in Palmyrene Aramaic, just names the artists, but it obscures an earlier one containing the word *MRN* ("lord"), a title assumed by Odaenathus and his son Herodianus during their brief tenures as the co-rulers of an independent Palmyrene kingdom. Thus, the image has been interpreted as an allusion to the victory of Odaenathus' forces over the Sasanian Persians in 260 (Gawlikowski 2005). Although Palmyra was not actually part of the Roman Empire when this mosaic was created, it was closely connected to Rome for much of its history, in ways that had a profound impact on the city (Raja 2022: 89-106). It is probable, therefore, that this use of tiger imagery reflects a Roman perspective rather than a specifically Syrian or Palmyrene one.

Fig. 1. — Mosaic from Zaragoza, Spain, 2nd century CE, depicting the triumph of Dionysus. Limestone, marble, glass, clay; 295 × 360 cm. Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid, 38309 BIS. Photograph by Mark Landon from Wikimedia Commons, reproduced under CC BY-SA 2.0 license

Fig. 2. — Mosaic from the Basilica of Junius Bassus, Rome, *c.* 331 CE, depicting a tiger attacking a calf. Marble; 124 × 184 cm. Palazzo dei Conservatori, Musei Capitolini, Rome, MC1222. Photograph by Jean-Pol Grandmont from Wikimedia Commons, reproduced under CC BY-SA 3.0 license.

Fig. 3. — Mosaic from Palmyra, Syria, *c.* 260-273 CE, depicting a mounted archer hunting tigers. Stone, mortar; 110 × 90 cm (approximate dimensions). Formerly Palmyra Museum, Tadmor, Syria. Photograph by Attar-Aram Syria from Wikimedia Commons, reproduced under CC BY-SA 2.0 license.

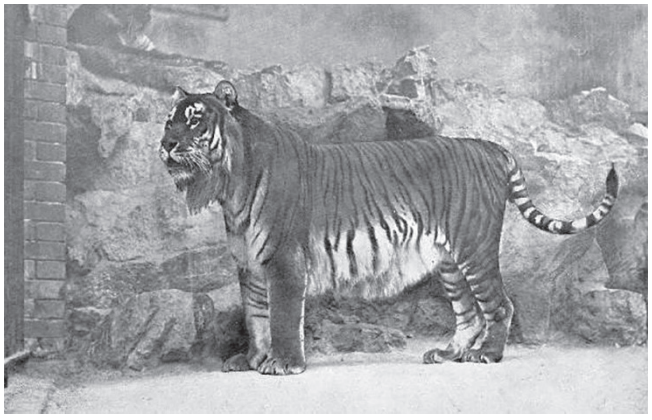

Fig. 4. — Caspian tiger (*Panthera tigris virgata* Illiger, 1815) in the Zoologischer Garten Berlin, 1899. Public domain image from Wikimedia Commons.

The link between tigers and the East more broadly, and Parthians and Persians in particular, must ensue from their origin in Hyrcania. This region, called Varkāna in Old Persian and subsequently known as Gorgan, comprised the territory between the Caspian Sea and the Alborz Mountains, extending east to the Kopet Dag. In *The Road to Oxiana*, Robert Byron (1982: 199) described it as "a dazzling open sea of green (…) Behind us rose the misty Alpine blue of the wooded Elburz. In front, the glowing verdure stretched out to the rim of the earth." Under Achaemenid rule Hyrcania was part of the satrapy of Parthia, which became part of the Seleucid kingdom in the early Hellenistic period (Olbrycht 2021: 17-21). The Aparna, who took over Parthia in the mid-third century BCE and went on to establish the Parthian (or Arsacid) Empire, came from the vicinity of Hyrcania (Strabo 11.8.2), and the region remained a core part of their empire. Thus, it is not difficult to see how it became closely linked to the Parthians in the minds of the Greeks and Romans.

In antiquity, Hyrcania was inhabited by the Caspian tiger (*Panthera tigris virgata* Illiger, 1815) (Fig. 4), a population of *Panthera tigris* (Sun *et al.* 2023) that went extinct in the second half of the 20th century CE (Joslin 1988; Azarpay 1999: 330-332; Gilbert 2002: 28, 54; Schnitzler & Herrmann 2019;

FIG. 5. — Sasanian bowl decorated with a running tiger, 6th-7th century CE. Silver, niello; 9.8 × 6.1 × 26.2 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1989.281.37. Public domain image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Sanderson *et al.* 2025); in fact, while visiting Asterabad (now the city of Gorgan) in 1934, Byron (1982: 199) was offered the opportunity to hunt tigers. This region is well suited to tigers because of the humid subtropical climate and the extensive Hyrcanian forests (a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2019) which are home to large prey animals such wild boars (*Sus scrofa* Linnaeus, 1758), red deer (*Cervus elaphus* Linnaeus, 1758), roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus* (Linnaeus, 1758)) and wild goats (*Capra aegagrus* Erxleben, 1777). The presence of tigers there was evidently common knowledge in Rome, as Pomponius Mela (3.43), Pliny the Elder (*NH* 8.66), Solinus (17.4) and Ammianus Marcellinus (28.6.50) all specify that Hyrcania was home to tigers (Schneider 2024). Indeed, the connection between tigers and Near Eastern kings was probably created by the fact that, according to Athenaeus (13.590a), the first tiger introduced into the ancient Mediterranean world was brought to Athens by Seleucus I (reigned 305-281 BCE). Athenaeus' source for this information is the comic playwright Philemon, who lived in Athens from at least 330 until his death in 262, who may have seen Seleucus' tiger for himself. Athenaeus does not say where this tiger came from, but Hyrcania was certainly the closest source; otherwise it would have had to come all the way from India (as suggested by Olson 2010: 409, n. 327). Although the Seleucids were a Greek dynasty, the Romans still regarded them as "Orientals", and by the time the Hyrcanian tiger had become a literary motif at Rome the Arsacids had replaced the Seleucids as the major power in the Near East. This connection with Iran persisted under the Sasanians. For example, according to Theophanes the Confessor (*Chronicle* 6118), when the Byzantine emperor Heraclius captured the residence of the Sasanian king Khusrau II at Dastagird (in the Diyala River valley in northeastern Iraq), he found tigers in the royal hunting park there.

Despite the close association between tigers and the East in the Roman mind, they are vanishingly rare in ancient Mesopotamian and Anatolian contexts. Words for tiger appear occasionally in lexical lists (Landsberger 1934: 83-85; Collins 2002: 237) and literary texts (Foster 2002: 281, 286). They are absent altogether from Mesopotamian art; instead, lions are the major feline (Van Buren 1939: 3-10; Breniquet 2002: 161, 166, 167). This is also largely true of the art of ancient Iran, in which lions predominate (Root 2002: 198-203; Potts 2021). It is not until the Sasanian period that tigers appear, mainly on silver vessels (Azarpay 1999: 326-329). One especially spectacular example, most likely produced for the royal court at Ctesiphon, is an oblong oval silver bowl in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, dating to the sixth or seventh century CE (Fig. 5). Each of the bowl's long sides has a running tigress. Her legs are extended, her mouth is open, and she has five teats on her underside. Each of her stripes is inlaid with niello. At either end of the bowl is a grape cluster, which perhaps implies that the bowl was intended for use in a banqueting context. Other vessels depict the king hunting tigers, a common theme in Sasanian art. Such images emphasize the king's heroic qualities, prowess as a hunter of dangerous game and power over the natural world, all important elements of Sasanian royal ideology. As apex predators, tigers were well-suited to fulfill this ideological purpose.

Like most Sasanian silverware, the vessels depicting tigers generally lack archaeological provenance. However, at least two excavated examples are known from Iran. Both are oblong silver bowls with *repoussé* images of striped felines on their interiors which must be tigers. They were discovered in Quri Qaleh Cave, about 83 km northwest of Kermanshah, in 1997 (Alibaigi *et al.* 2017: 242-249). Given their relatively simple technique, these vessels are likely the products of a local workshop in the region of Kermanshah (Akbarzadeh *et al.* 2001: 73, 74). The cave has been interpreted as a Mithraeum, in which case the bowls were probably used in the cultic meals that are attested for Roman Mithraea (Griffith 2010). Thus, they were also made for banqueting, and, like much "provincial" Sasanian silverware, borrowed motifs from court vessels like the one discussed above.

Several of the Sasanian-period bowls depicting tigers have been attributed to Kushano-Sasanian or Sogdian workshops (Tanabe 2001; Skupniewicz 2020), that is, workshops employed by the Sasanian governors of former Kushan provinces in Central Asia, namely Sogdia, Bactria and Gandhara (eastern Iran to northern Pakistan). For example, a bowl in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Fig. 6), dating to the seventh century CE, depicts a *repoussé* tiger, with stripes of inlaid niello, on its interior. The tiger walks through a rugged landscape with stylized plants in the background. Unlike the Sasanian bowl mentioned above, this tiger has the general form of a canid, such as a pointed snout and ears, a large, rounded chest and narrow waist, and claws rather than paws. Its stripes are also small and randomly placed, rather than in a row.

Fig. 6. — Sogdian bowl decorated with a tiger, 7th century CE. Gilt silver, niello; diam. 25.0 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France (inv. 56.365). Public domain image from the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The reason for the attribution of tiger imagery to Kushano-Sasanian and Sogdian contexts is twofold. First, the Caspian tiger was also native to this region of Central Asia (Schnitzler & Herrmann 2019); in fact, some of the oldest skeletal remains of a tiger were excavated at Ilgynly-Depe in southeastern Turkmenistan in 2019, in a context dating to the early third millennium BCE (Kasparov & Solov'yova 2023). Second, there is a very long history of depicting tigers in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. In Central Asia tigers appear in the art of the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (*c.* 2250-1700 BCE), such as a steatite (or chlorite) plaque in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 7). The tiger's stripes are inlaid with gold foil, and it stands on disproportionately small legs atop a row of triangular elements presumably representing a mountainous landscape. Tigers appear in other media as well, including compartmented seals, bronzes axe heads and buckles, figurines, and even murals, ranging in date from the late third millennium BCE to the end of Sasanian rule (Tanabe 2001: 174-179; Winkelmann 2021: 237, 251, 274). In India, to which the Bengal tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris* Linnaeus, 1758) is native, they are depicted perhaps as early as the Mesolithic (*c.* 10 000 BCE) in paintings in the Bhimbetka rock shelters in Madhya Pradesh (Singh 2020). They also appear on Harappan stamp seals (*c.* 2300-1750 BCE) and in reliefs at Hindu temples beginning in the fourth century CE (Van der Geer 2008: 371-375).

The relative lack of tigers in ancient Mesopotamian and Iranian art is probably due simply to their limited range. As noted above, the Caspian tiger was not native to Mesopotamia or the Iranian plateau south of the Alborz. So the iconographic repertoires of these regions incorporated fauna, such as lions or leopards, that were familiar and intelligible to the people living there. Tigers were certainly known in Mesopotamia and Anatolia, but mainly on an intellectual level, hence their appearance in scholarly and literary texts. This obscurity made them somewhat less effective at communicating ideology or identity, and therefore less meaningful as an artistic motif. Tigers were more widespread in Central Asia and on the Indian subcontinent, and accordingly played a larger role in the artistic traditions there. The appearance of tigers in Sasanian art would thus be a result of the extensive Sasanian interactions with this part of the world, rather than an engagement with the fauna of Iran itself.

Yet there is now good reason to doubt this premise. Not only was the Caspian tiger native to Iran until the mid-twentieth century, making eastern influence unnecessary as the source for tiger imagery (Azarpay 1999: 330-332), but there is now evidence for an independent tradition of depicting tigers in Iran itself. This hitherto unrecognized (and unpublished) evidence is a ceramic figurine excavated at Yarim Tepe in northeastern Iran, the region of ancient Hyrcania. It dates to *c.* 3500-3100 BCE, making it the oldest known depiction of a tiger anywhere in the Near East or Central Asia outside of India.

THE YARIM TEPE TIGER

The site of Yarim Tepe (not to be confused with the eponymous sites in northern Iraq and in the Kopet Dag near Dargaz in far northeastern Iran) was excavated by David Stronach on behalf of the British Institute of Persian Studies for one season in 1960, and in collaboration with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for a second season in 1962 (Crawford 1963; Stronach 1972; Rakic 2010: 32). Located approximately 10 km south of the modern city of Gonbad-e Kavus in Golestan Province, Iran (Fig. 8), the site is a small mound, about 180 m in diameter. The Qarasu River has eroded the northern slope of the mound (hence the name of the site, which means "half hill" in Turkish), so the excavators dug a stepped trench on this side to elucidate the stratigraphy of the site. The results of this excavation have been published only cursorily, so the chronology of the site is preliminary, and should be revised in light of recent work on other sites in the region. The earliest levels are Neolithic, dating to the fifth millennium BCE. After a long period of abandonment, the site was reoccupied in the Late Chalcolithic, perhaps as early as *c.* 3500, until *c.* 2000, after which it was uninhabited once more. A third and final phase of habitation began in the Iron Age, *c.* 1000 BCE, and continued until the end of the Parthian period *c.* 224 CE.

Under the partage agreement with the Iranian government, the British Institute received a share of the finds, a small number of which were subsequently allocated to the Metropolitan Museum in 1963 as a result of its financial contribution to the second season of excavation. One of these finds, discovered during the first season in 1960, is a

Fig. 7. — Plaque in the form of a tiger, late 3rd-early 2nd millennium BCE. Steatite or chlorite, gold; 1.46 × 1.46 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1989.281.43. Public domain image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

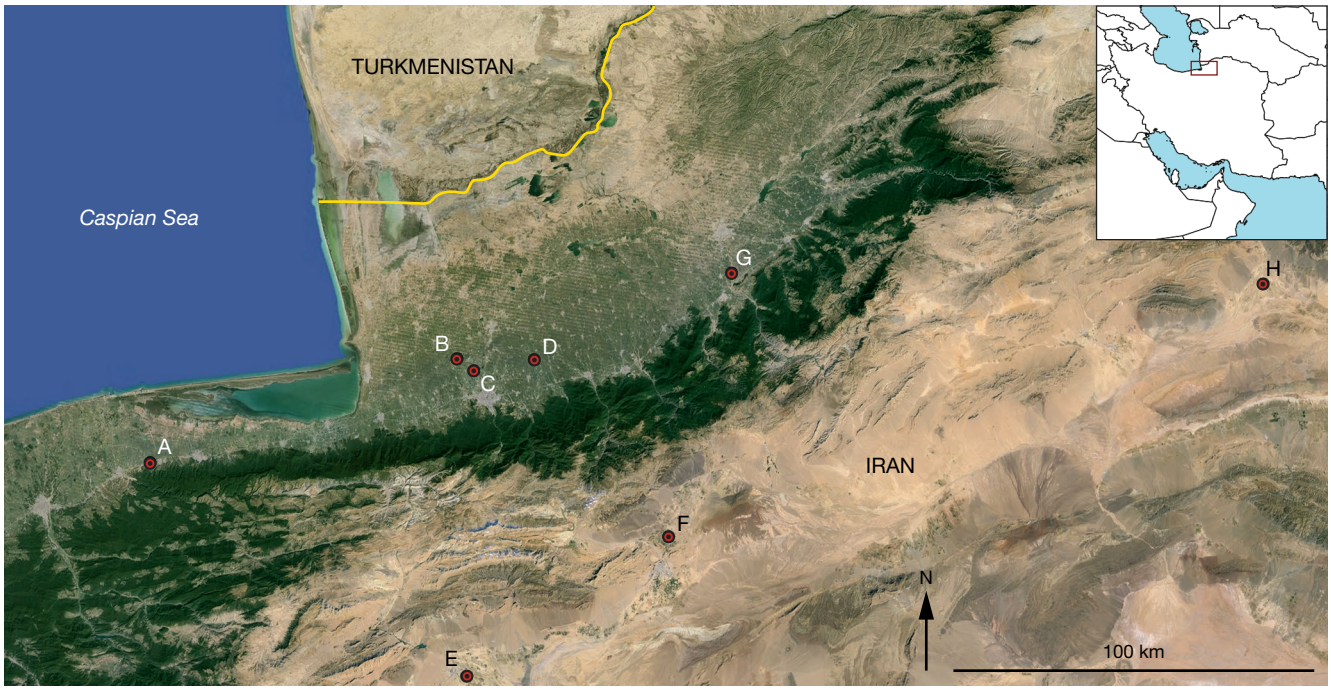

Fig. 8. — Satellite image of northeastern Iran and southwestern Turkmenistan indicating the location of sites under discussion: **A**, Gohar Tepe; **B**, Shah Tepe; **C**, Narges Tepe; **D**, Tureng Tepe; **E**, Tepe Hissar; **F**, Tepe Sang-e Chakhmaq; **G**, Yarim Tepe; **H**, Tepe Chalow.

Fig. 9. — Figurine of a tiger, *c.* 3500-3100 BCE, excavated at Yarim Tepe, Iran. Ceramic; 5.08 × 8.26 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 63.102.20. Public domain photographs from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

ceramic figurine in the form of a tiger (Fig. 9). The figurine is incomplete; only the chest, neck and head remain. It is handmade of brick-red clay, which is well levigated and free of inclusions. The stripes are painted on in a dark brown slip; two encircle the body, one the chest and one on the neck. A partial stripe is also visible on the proper left side of the head. The eyes, ears and snout of the tiger are not preserved, though a corner of the mouth is discernible on the proper left side of the head. Given the limited scope of the excavations, there is no clear architectural context for the figurine's findspot. However, it was probably found in a house, as most of the Chalcolithic material excavated at the site is consistent with a residential setting.

The ceramic fabric and decoration of the figurine belong to a type known as "Caspian Black-on-Red Ware" (Dyson 1991), the prevalent pottery in Yarim period II levels (Fig. 10). It has also been found at several other sites in the region: Tureng Tepe (Deshayes 1967; Olson & Thornton 2021: 21), Narges Tepe (Abbasi 2011: 69), Shah Tepe (Arne 1945: 165-171), Tepe Hoseynabad and Tepe Anjirab (Ohtsu *et al.* 2010: 135, 136; Ohtsu *et al.* 2012: 74, 85), all in the vicinity of Gorgan; Tepe Hissar (Thornton *et al.* 2013: 137), near Damghan in Semnan Province; Gohar Tepe (Mahfroozi & Piller 2009: 177 178, 203), in eastern Mazandaran Province near the southern coast of the Caspian Sea; and Tepe Chalow (Vahdati & Biscione 2021: 197) in North Khorasan Province.

The chronology of this pottery remains uncertain, but it is possible nevertheless to suggest an approximate date. Caspian Black-on-Red Ware appears in Shah Tepe III and III-IIb, Tureng IIA and the Hissar E-D Transitional phase. These phases are largely contemporary with one another (Dittmann 2021: 152-154). The recent reassessment of the chronology of Tepe Hissar dates the E-D Transitional phase *c.* 3400 BCE (Thornton *et al.* 2013: 137). There are no radiocarbon dates for Tureng IIA, but the dates for Tureng IIB place the beginning of this period around 3400 (Olson & Thornton 2021: 31), so Tureng IIA must be earlier than this. There are no radiocarbon dates for Tureng IIA. Thus, Caspian Black-on-Red Ware was being made by 3400. Since it also continues to appear in Phase D at Tepe Hissar, a date range of *c.* 3500 to 3100 BCE for the Yarim Tepe tiger seems reasonable. This dating is also generally consistent with the chronology of Shah Tepe (Orsaria 1995: 488), which dates III and III-IIb to the first and second halves of the fourth millennium respectively.

The identification of the figurine as a tiger is admittedly hampered by both its poor state of preservation and the absence of comparable examples. Ceramic animal figurines have a long history in Iran, going back to the Neolithic, but there are no other clear instances of tigers. This is probably due to their limited habitat north of the Alborz, a region which has seen less excavation than other parts of Iran. A figurine found at Shah Tepe (Arne 1945: 255, 256, fig. 529, pls. 67, 90) might be one. According to the excavation report, it is covered in a red slip, and based on the published color image it has a dark brown line encircling the belly, another running down the front leg and one more along its back. It is not obvious that these are meant to be tiger stripes; they may be decorative or have a meaning that is obscure in the present. Moreover, the head and legs of the figurine are missing, and, in the excavator's view, "as a rule, these animals probably represent sheep." Two further possible tigers, in this case alabaster figurines, were discovered in a grave at Tepe Hissar (Schmidt 1937: 188, pl. 33). One of the figurines (H 758) has a clearly feline shape, but its body is marked with dots enclosed by circles, making it a leopard rather than a tiger. Indeed, wild leopards (specifically *Panthera pardus tulliana* Valenciennes, 1856) still live in Iran today (Gilbert 2002: 28, 54). The other (H 748) has brown vertical stripes on its shoulder and hindquarter, as

well as one on its tail and the tops of its head, which resemble the markings of a tiger, but its elongated cylindrical snout suggests an equid, and the excavation report even calls it a horse. The majority of the animal figurines recovered from sites in northeastern Iran, mainly Shah Tepe, Narges Tepe, Tepe Hissar and Tepe Sang-e Chakhmaq, are herbivores, including horses, bulls, sheep, goats, onagers and birds, though there are also a few leopards, dogs and bears (Schmidt 1937: 117, 118, 186-188; Arne 1945: 255, 256; Abbasi 2011: 68; Masuda *et al.* 2013: 231, 232; Gürsan-Salzmann 2016: 244, 245, 264, 270, 271, 284, 285).

The question, then, is whether the stripes on the Yarim Tepe figurine are indeed tiger stripes or are simply decorative. The figurines from Shah Tepe and Tepe Hissar have lines that do not clearly correspond to the animal they represent. Yet the leopard figurines, also from Hissar, have dots that do seem to indicate the type of animal. Furthermore, the lines on the Yarim Tepe tiger are not geometric; rather, they adhere to the contours of the figurine's body, in the same way that tiger stripes do. Finally, the stripes do not obviously resemble the decorative patterns that appear on Caspian Black-on-Red pottery vessels. It is therefore most likely that the stripes on the Yarim Tepe figurine are meant to identify the animal as a tiger.

THE FIRST HYRCANIAN TIGER

It is exceedingly difficult to determine the purpose of any given ancient figurine. This is especially true of animal figurines, which have generally received less attention than their anthropomorphic counterparts. In the past ancient figurines have been considered mainly in terms of typologies of form and function, often with a focus on ritual use (Olson 2020: 123-125). Such approaches, however, are too reductive, as they presume that categories discernible to modern scholars were also meaningful in the past. More recent scholarship emphasizes identity, intimacy and even wonder as interpretive frameworks. When dealing with a single figurine, no one approach can offer a probative interpretative, but together they do illustrate a range of ways in which this tiger could have been significant.

First of all, the tiger figurine was not made in isolation; rather, it was made instead of a different animal, such as lion, horse or sheep. It is impossible to know exactly why the figurine's maker chose to make a tiger in this specific instance. However, in respect to the Neolithic animal figurines from Çatalhöyük, Lynn Meskell (2015: 11) suggests that they "materially embody the inhabitants' preconceptions and concerns." The same could be said of the Yarim Tepe tiger: it reflects an aspect of life at Yarim Tepe, which in turn contributed to the decision to create it. Elsewhere in Chalcolithic Iran tigers were not a preoccupation, since they were rarely if ever encountered south of the Alborz. Thus it reflects a kind of regional identity, since it would have been meaningful primarily for people living in what came to be known as Hyrcania.

Second, the small scale of figurines is an invitation to intimacy (Langin-Hooper 2015). It encourages the user to handle and manipulate them, and to examine them closely in order to discern details. Intimacy facilitates interaction that is otherwise impossible because of the scale of or danger inherent in the animal in question. This is certainly true of tigers, which were likely encountered only fleetingly by most people living at Yarim Tepe. The figurine, however, offers the opportunity to encounter a tiger safely and for a sustained period of time. This may have had didactic value as a visual aid or mnemonic device that facilitated the intergenerational transmission of information, such as practical information about the appearance and behavior of tigers or myths and legends involving them. Intimacy creates familiarity, which perhaps in this case made the tiger seem less threatening, if only in a hypothetical sense.

Finally, Stephanie Langin-Hooper (2024) has recently demonstrated the potential importance of wonder as a lens for interpreting how people may have experienced ancient figurines and other miniatures. She argues that the clearly artificial nature of miniatures can disrupt the intimacy they

Fig. 10. — Stem of a Caspian Black-on-Red Ware pedestal vase, *c.* 3500-3100 BCE, excavated at Yarim Tepe, Iran. Ceramic; H. 21.01 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 63.102.19. Public domain image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

FIG. 11. — Illustration from a Shahnameh folio showing Rustam killing the White Div, *c.* 1300-1330 CE. Watercolor on paper; 5.2 × 11.9 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 69.74.7. Public domain image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

otherwise encourage, which in turn can inspire wonder at the feat of miniaturization – in the same way one might be awestruck at a ship in a bottle. In the case of the Yarim Tepe tiger, the artifice is most evident in the ceramic fabric used to make it. Caspian Black-on-Red Ware gives the tiger its distinctive coloring, but at the same time it makes the figurine's ceramic materiality obvious, as these same colors appear on many pottery vessels from the site and elsewhere in the region. That the same clay could be used to make something so mundane as pottery and something so fearsome as a tiger, albeit in miniature, could well have contributed to a sense of wonder on the part of those who interacted with the figurine.

CONCLUSION

Whatever its exact meaning for the people of Yarim Tepe, the tiger later became a significant part of Iranian identity. Thus Rustam, the greatest hero of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh (written between 977 and 1010 CE), even wears a tiger skin mantle called the *babr-e bayān* (Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988) (Fig. 11). As Dick Davis (2012: 39) notes, "it does not seem too exaggerated a claim, to say that the *Shahnameh* is popularly seen as the repository of a quintessential 'Iranian-ness,' or 'Persian-ness,' which cannot be found elsewhere." The Yarim Tepe tiger raises the important possibility that in Gorgan, the home of the Hyrcanian tiger that was to make such an impression on the Romans and their early modern European admirers, this significance may have begun as far back as the late Chalcolithic period. At the very least, it proves that tigers have played a role in ancient Iranian art and culture for a very long time.

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