

Roberto Dan¹ - Research Fellow at Tuscia University/ISMEO

Andrea Cesaretti² - ISMEO

Local Trajectories in the Achaemenid Empire.

Some remarks on the Ardabîl Ware pottery tradition

Abstract

The definition of what is known as Ardabîl Ware in the archaeology of North-western Iran, despite a number of studies that have been conducted, still remains an open problem with numerous aspects to be clarified. These include the forms and decorations, and above all the close relationship that this pottery tradition seems to have with that known as Triangle Ware, a pottery tradition identified on a huge territory including eastern Turkey, Armenia, and north-western Iran. Furthermore, its chronological definition remains another aspect at the centre of the debate. This article examines these aspects, taking stock of the situation and proposing some new interpretations of these pottery productions. In this contribution, we argue that the two ceramic traditions are substantially related to the same type of production and that chronologically they are to be placed in a generic Achaemenid period.

Keywords

Ardabîl Ware, Triangle Ware, Achaemenid Period, North-western Iran, Armenian Highlands. Ardabîl Ware, Triangle Ware, Période achéménide, Nord-Ouest de l'Iran, Hautes terres d'Arménie.

1 roberto_dan@hotmail.it

2 a.cesaretti12@gmail.com



Introduction

Over the years, certain pottery classes from north-western Iran have been attributed with a good degree of plausibility to the cultural horizon of the Achaemenid period³. Among these, a group of whole vases from illegal excavations characterized by what were believed to be peculiar morphologies and decorations was recognized at the end of the 1970s. This pottery was named “Ardabîl Ware” by E. Haerinck and considered to be a production typical of the areas east of Lake Orumiyeh in the late Achaemenid period, which developed up to the early Parthian period. Throughout the history of studies, this terminology has been widely accepted; some specialists have concentrated on defining the chronological limits of the diffusion of this pottery. This text aims to reanalyse the Ardabîl Ware phenomenon in relation to the other pottery group characteristic of the Achaemenid period in this region, the Triangle Ware. The latter would seem to share numerous features with Ardabîl Ware, of which the most evident is the presence of painted decoration characterised in particular by triangular bands.

General Features of Ardabîl Ware: History of Studies, Morphology, Decorations and Chronology

Ardabîl Ware is a pottery class introduced by E. Haerinck whose morphological and decorative characteristics were described to specialists in an article published in *Iranica Antiqua* in 1978⁴. Essentially, Haerinck had the opportunity to study a series of largely intact vases excavated illegally in an unknown place in the Eastern Azerbaijan region of Iran that were labelled as “Ardabîl Style Pottery”. This attribution of Haerinck was based – as recounted by the author himself – on information

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⁴ Haerinck 1978.



Fig. 1. Distribution map of the places quoted in this article (satellite picture after Google Earth).

given by R. Dyson Jr. concerning the possible existence of a pottery type similar to that studied by Haerinck, which according to Dyson was distinctive of the geographical area of Ardabîl (fig. 1). Dyson had associated this pottery presumed to be from the Ardabîl area as similar to the productions he was excavating in those years in the late levels of Hasanlu (Hasanlu III-II)⁵. From a formal point of view stand out the features of the “spouted amphora”, with a spout shaped like one of the handles, used with the function of a jug. The decorations are mostly painted with geometric motifs, very often triangles, in which is possible to distinguish the open forms, mostly bowls, which have an animal motif painted on the interior base (usually birds or caprids). The inside of the vase is further decorated with geometric motifs. In a few cases, the painted decorations also involve anthropomorphic motifs. A recurrent specific morphology, much studied, is represented by carinated bowls with flared or very flared edges (fluted bowl), which might be considered an ‘index fossil’⁶. Given the

⁵ Dyson 1999b, p. 102.

⁶ The presence of more or less complex geometric and figurative decorative elements, not only on the outside but also covering the entire internal part of the open forms could suggest some aspects of the functions that these vases may have had. In fact, the presence of decorations even on the innermost part of the open forms would seem to suggest their use for the consumption of liquids rather than food. Many of the closed forms (jugs and spouted vessels) were perhaps used for the containment and conservation



nature of this material, it is very difficult to establish with certainty a precise period of production. The work of L. Khatchadourian, who analysed an important sample of both open and closed vessel forms, shows that some vases are characterized by greater regularity with regard to morphology and decoration (figs. 2-3). However, it must be emphasized that the decorative patterns (in terms of both painting and applied elements) cannot be considered features that distinguish the two different pottery types, so that the two ceramic traditions are often analysed together⁷. Initially, in 1978, Haerinck proposed to date this pottery group to a generic period between the 5th and 2nd century BC⁸. He later revised this to 6th-5th to 2nd century BC when discussing the pottery of Yanik Tepe⁹. More recently, the later boundary has been moved forward to the 1st century BC¹⁰. A last proposal was made by R. Boucharlat, who date the Ardabîl Ware to a period between the Achaemenid era and a clearly pre-Parthian post-Achaemenid period, that could be defined as Hellenistic-Seleucid. This proposal is generally accepted by the academic community¹¹.

Problems Related to the Definition of Ardabîl Ware

One of the first aspects that should be examined is the acceptability of defining material from antique contexts with a name that refers to a specific geographical area. The idea that Ardabîl Ware is a phenomenon associated with the area of eastern Iranian Azerbaijan is based on the pottery found in regular excavations performed in Yanik Tepe, which is discussed below, and on Dyson's suggestion, as he himself recounts, that the pottery was originally from the Ardabîl area.

At the present state of knowledge, as Haerinck himself admits, it is not possible to propose any hypothesis concerning the area of origin of the finds he investigated in his 1978 publication¹². Moreover, it should be noted that many more archaeological

of liquids. Future archaeometric investigations may confirm or refute these proposed interpretations.

7 Khatchadourian 2018.

8 Haerinck 1978, p. 75.

9 Haerinck 1983, p. 124.

10 Boucharlat and Haerinck 1991, p. 304-307.

11 See also Khatchadourian 2018, p. 195.

12 There are few contexts recently excavated from which it is possible to associate radiometric dating to the Triangle Ware. From the multi-layered site of Oğlanqala (fig. 4) has been identified pottery in the



Fig. 2. Examples of Triangle Ware and Triangle Style pottery in Iran (after Khatchadourian 2018, fig. 12). a-g. Hasanlu, uncomplete pots and small sherds from archaeological layers; h-j Yanik Tepe, jugs from pits; k-l, improvenicenced complete twispouted jugs said from Iranian Azerbaijan, maybe from graves.

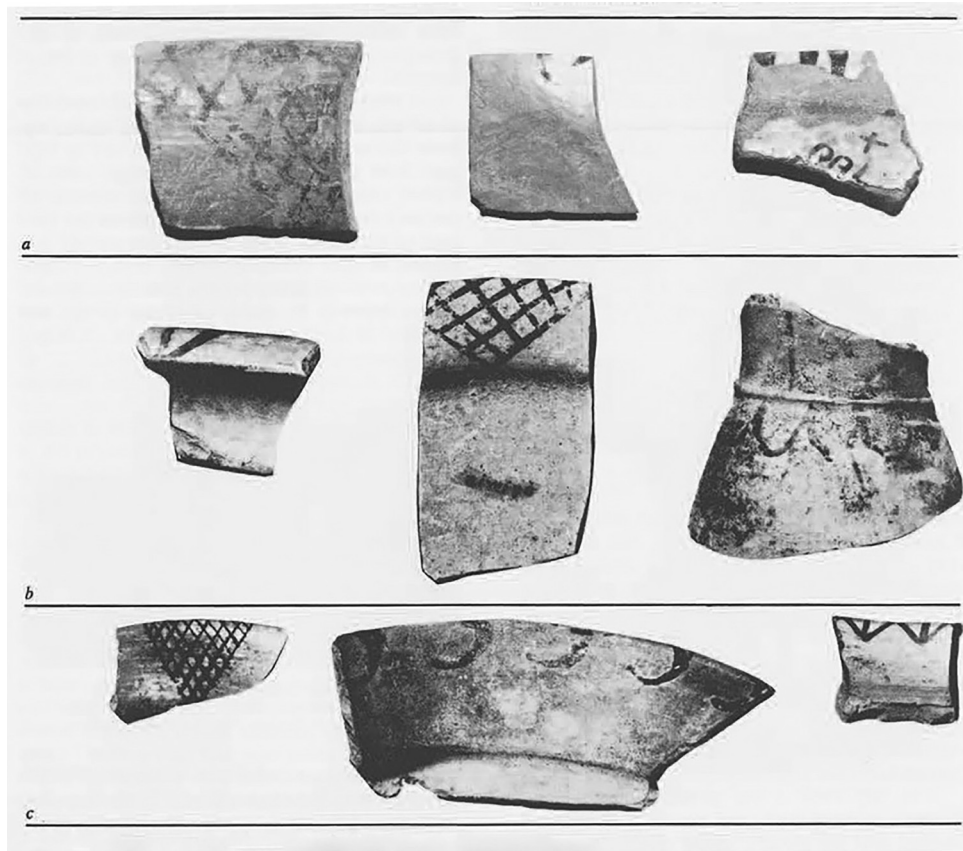


Fig. 3. Selection of Triangle Ware painted pottery from the sites of Qalatgah (a), Ziwiye (b), and Hasanlu (c) North-western Iran (after Muscarella 1971, p. 46).

investigations have been conducted in the region of Western Iranian Azerbaijan than in Eastern Iranian Azerbaijan; the latter that remains to this day a largely unknown area.

traditions of the Triangle Ware. Four radiometric datings have been performed, which testified a chronological range comprised between 508 and 203 BCE cal 2σ (Period III). However, it should be emphasized that at the current state of knowledge, ceramic fragments referable to Triangle Ware are not yet directly associated with radiometric dating (Ristvet et al. 2012, p. 321-362, Goldblum Fishman 2017). From recent excavations at the site of Kültepe (Hadishahr), Level I, where a layer subsequent to that of the Urartian age was found, with materials referable to the Triangle Ware traditions, but the results of the analyses have not yet been published (fig. 5). In stratigraphic terms, Kültepe's evidence remains very important because it testifies to the fact that the Triangle Ware cannot anticipate the Achaemenid era since it was not found in the previous layers.

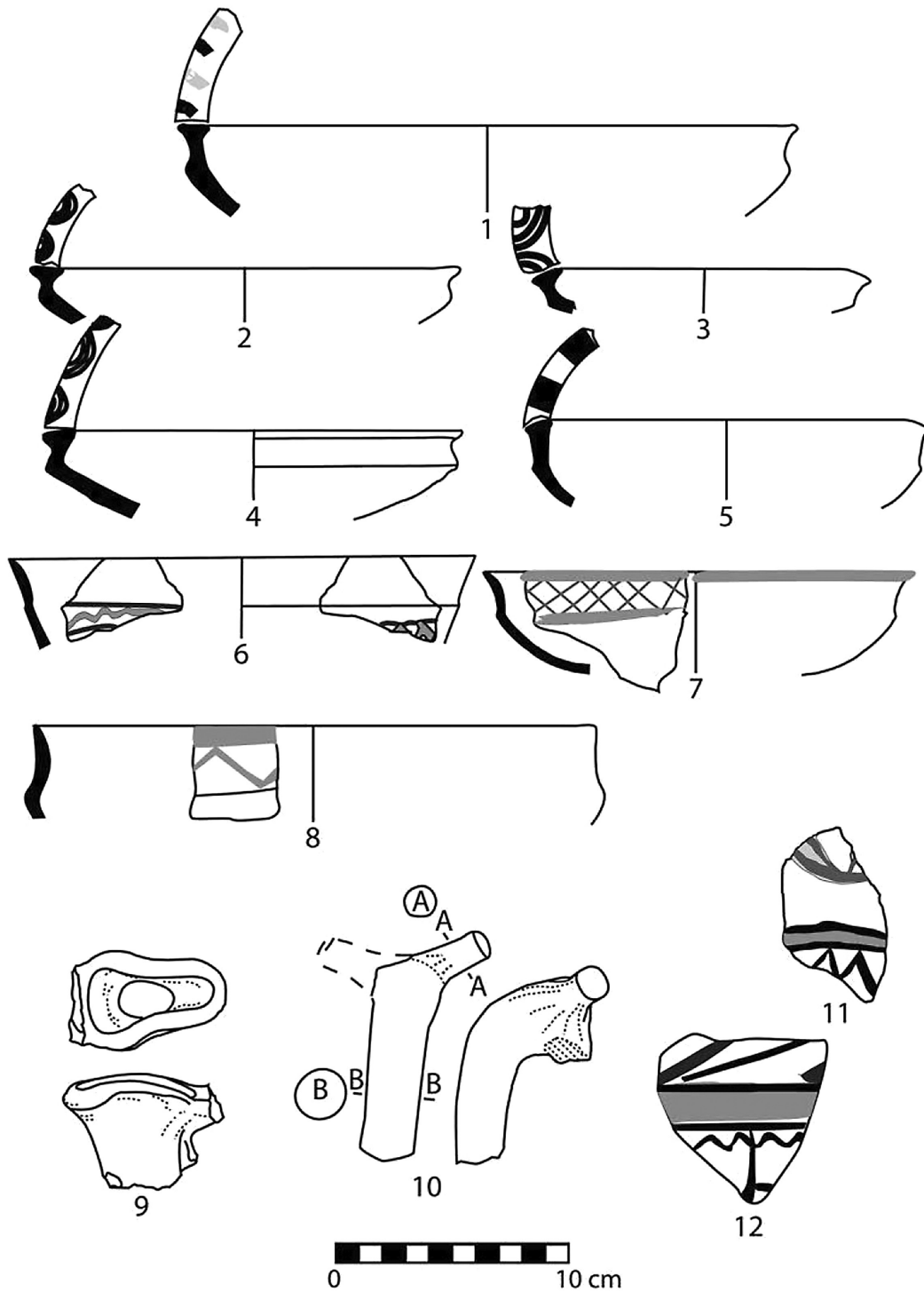


Fig. 4. Selection of Triangle Ware painted pottery from the site of Oğlan Qala, Azerbaijan (Ristvet et al. 2012, fig. 23).

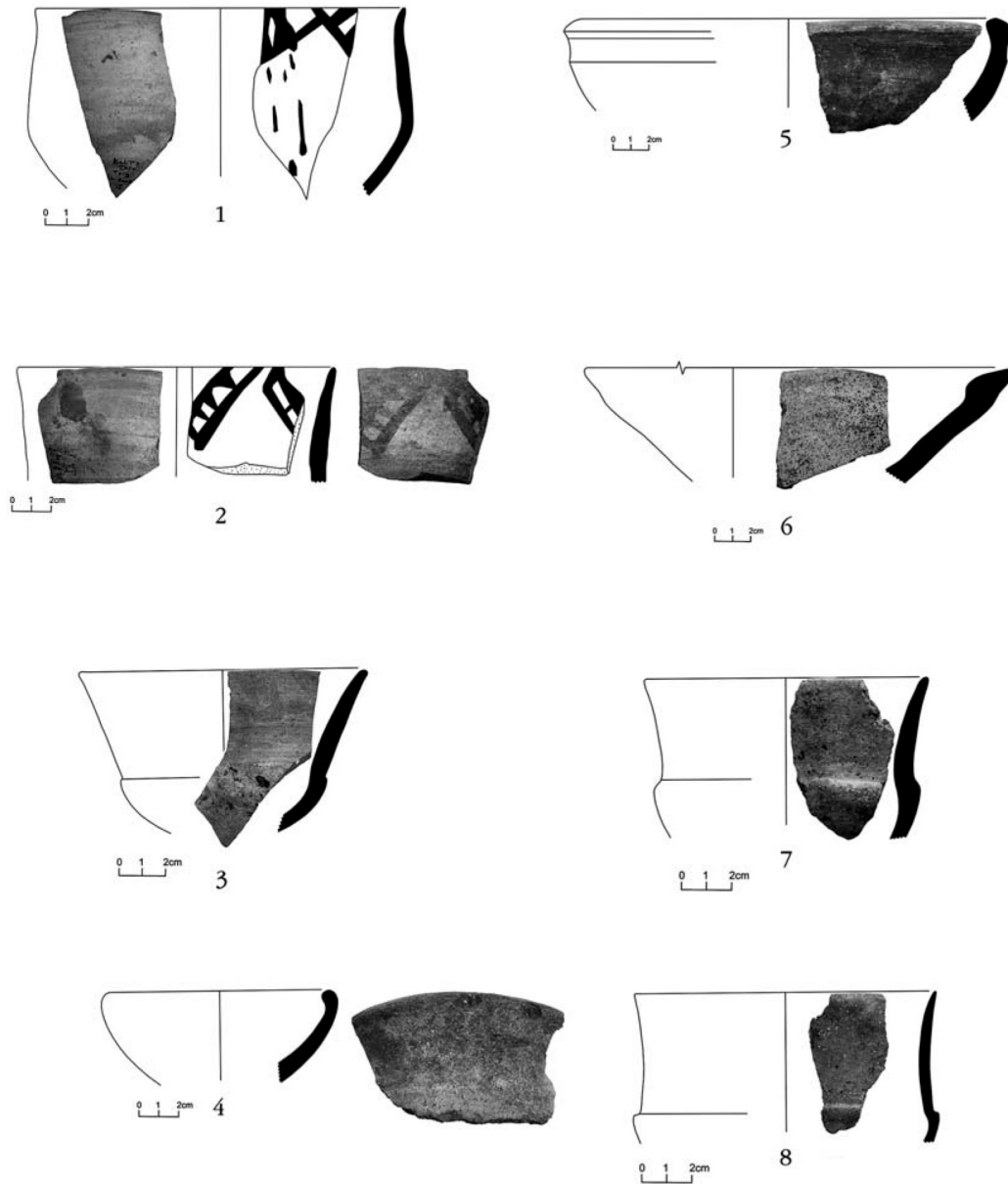


Fig. 5. Selection of Triangle Ware painted pottery from the site of Kültepe, North-western Iran (Abedi et al. 2014, fig. 60).

For these reasons, the use of a toponym for the identification of a class of pottery with absolutely uncertain chrono-typological features may lead to misunderstandings. As we have seen, Ardabil Ware is considered a pottery type the production of which has been attributed to a period ranging from the not more precisely specified Achaemenid era to some post-Achaemenid period. Taking into account the uncer-



tainties relating to the exact chronological, morphological and functional definitions of what has been called Triangle Ware, to which, as we shall see, Ardabîl Ware is somehow related, it appears evident that in the absence of archaeological excavations with clear and dated stratigraphic sequences, any attempt to frame this phenomenon exactly may be considered speculation. An aspect that has certainly exacerbated the problem of the existence of an independent pottery tradition in East Azerbaijan area was certainly that Haerinck examined largely intact vases, which probably came from funerary contexts about which nothing is known. The Triangle Ware that was (and still is today) used as a suitable comparison for Ardabîl Ware is pottery that mostly comes from archaeological excavations and surface survey work, and the specimens studied are largely small sherds. The absence of the classification of and typological studies concerning Triangle Ware means that it remains possible that the forms considered characteristic of Ardabîl Ware are not represented within Triangle Ware; on the basis of present data it is impossible to define a true pottery reference group. Apart from Ardabîl Ware's poorly defined chronological position, it is necessary to underline the fundamental aspect that these are probably local productions not connected to state or imperial trajectories; the same may be said with regard to Triangle Ware, which is Achaemenid period pottery that, however, cannot be considered as part of the "Imperial assemblage" (fig. 1).

The Archaeological Contexts of Hasanlu and Yanik Tepe

In the Hasanlu site, Triangle Ware was found in the IIIA layers referred to as Iron IV and generally believed to be of the Achaemenid period, and within level II, also an Iron IV period tentatively attributed to the Seleucid era. Triangle Ware was originally also identified in level IIIB, which is generally attributed to the Urartian period, but it was later established that this was an error due to the failure to identify intrusive material from level IIIA¹³.

In general, both Level IIIA and Level II were problematic because these layers were "badly eroded in most locations"¹⁴. Level II was particularly problematic: in fact, Dyson referred to it as the "Mystery Phase". Triangle Ware pottery found in Hasanlu has been

¹³ On the Urartian phases of Hasanlu see Kroll 2010, p. 21-35.

¹⁴ <https://www.penn.museum/sites/hasanlu/overview.html>



described and discussed numerous times by Dyson in multiple publications¹⁵. A general review of the stratigraphy and finds, also of the Hasanlu III phase, was carried out by S. Kroll. The scholar has in fact shown that Hasanlu level IIIB should be dated to the late Urartian period, around the 7th century BCE. Kroll himself underlines the presence of pottery from the Achaemenid period, Triangle Ware sherds from the later Hasanlu IIIA layer, which have however been interpreted as redeposited (fig. 2)¹⁶. To understand how unclear the situation is concerning the definition of the pottery found in Yanik Tepe, S. Kroll initially referred to the pottery with triangles as Ardabîl Ware¹⁷, but subsequently classified the triangle-painted pottery of Yanik Tepe as “Western Triangle Ware”, which he dated to the late-Achaemenid and Hellenistic-Seleucid era (4th – 3rd century BC)¹⁸. In a recent comprehensive work on the pottery of the late Iron Age presented by L. Khatchadourian¹⁹, it is emphasized that Triangle Ware should be considered a “style” rather than a ware tradition, with the aim to differentiate these two concepts.

Ardabîl Ware and Triangle Ware in North-Western Iran

Given these circumstances, and the morphological and decorative characteristics of what has been called Ardabîl Ware, we must consider the grouping of this class of pottery within the wider family of painted pottery known as Triangle Ware. It is not known whether Ardabîl Ware was a local variant of Triangle Ware, nor is it possible to establish any distribution range or chronology²⁰. The very distinction between Triangle Ware and Ardabîl Ware seem in most cases to create only confusion. An attempt to understand Ardabîl Ware inevitably involves reflections on the chrono-functional definition of Triangle Ware. The first problem worth exploring concerning this pottery is certainly linked to the definition of its production. As has

15 Dyson 1999a, Dyson 1999b

16 Kroll 2013, Boucharlat, *forthcoming*.

17 Kroll 1994.

18 Kroll 2001, p. 135.

19 Khatchadourian 2018.

20 In this regard, see the work of Khatchadourian who tends to consider the “Ardabil Style” as being part of the “Triangle Style”, together constituting the whole Triangle Ware group (Khatchadourian 2018, p. 225).



already been stated in an absolutely convincing way, at the present state of knowledge of Achaemenid material culture there is no pottery production that can be said to be typical of the “Imperial assemblage”. Boucharlat and Haerinck argue that “It is notable that anything that might be defined as luxury ware, comparable to decorated metal vessels, is absent from Achaemenid sites, even the capital cities”²¹. In particular, with regard to the presence of Triangle Ware in the centres of Achaemenid power, it should be emphasized that this pottery has not been found in the excavations of the terrace of Persepolis and adjacent areas²², while a few fragments mostly from stratigraphically uncertain contexts are known from Pasargadae²³ and Susa²⁴.

Production and Chronology: Considerations on so-called Ardabîl Ware

To conclude, it is difficult in the present state of knowledge to accept the existence of a pottery production that may be defined as Ardabîl Ware. The absolute geographical, and more generally contextual, uncertainty attributable to the specimens published by Haerinck, and the impossibility of providing a chronological framework for these productions, suggest that this term should be used with great caution. At present, our proposal would rather be that Ardabîl Ware should be considered to belong within the wider Triangle Ware group, whose internal variants deserve a brief study. It is recorded that during the excavation of the layers of Hasanlu III and II were found in association with both fragments of what is called “Classic Triangle Ware”, generally considered a higher quality production, and what was called “Western Triangle Ware”, which is believed to be a lower quality variant of the same pottery. This circumstance would suggest that the substantial absence of chronological differences between these two traditions and the fact that they were found together in

21 Boucharlat and Haerinck 1991, p. 304-307.

22 See for example Persepolis West (Askari, Chaverdi and Callieri 2017).

23 Stronach attributes the pottery pertaining to the so-called Triangle Ware to a generic horizon of Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid pottery excavated in the Tall-i Takht of Pasargadae, see Stronach 1978, p. 252-253, fig. 111.

24 Ghirshman identified painted potsherds attributed by Dyson (Dyson 1999, p. 115-116, 118) to the Triangle Ware pottery horizon especially in the Village perse-achéménide, Level I (Ghirshman 1954, pls. XXXIII, XXXV) while a single fragment of this pottery was identified in the Village perse-achéménide, Level II (Ghirshman 1954, pl. XXXIV.3) and the Village perse-achéménide, Level III (Ghirshman 1954, pl. XXXIV.12).



the same strata indicate that they are part of the same cultural phenomenon but with different manufacturing qualities. At the present state of research, in the absence of a serious morpho-typological and decoration classification, it is difficult to distinguish between these productions given their substantial similarity and the very wide distribution area that also involves Central Asia²⁵.

The main issue in the overall assessment of the Triangle Ware, at least in North-Western Iran, concerns the problems related to the excavation and interpretation of the late-phase layers of the Hasanlu site. Most of the attributions of so-called Achaemenid phases, for example at Yanik Tepe, are based on comparison with the problematic excavations of Hasanlu. In general, the dating of this pottery to the Achaemenid period is accepted, with a tendency to attribute it to a mature, if not late, phase of the Achaemenid period, and possibly with continuity also in the post-Achaemenid era. It should be said that the criteria according to which this pottery is subdivided in such a specific way are still not particularly clear. Some of the characteristic forms of Triangle Ware certainly belong to the pottery horizon generally believed to date to the Achaemenid period. It is worth remembering that the important study in which Haerinck identified a new ceramic tradition was essentially based on the study of a quantitatively limited sample of almost intact pottery vessels with no archaeological context. The fact that Triangle Ware has almost always been found in a fragmented state during archaeological excavations (in some cases problematically so, as at Hasanlu) has meant that no association has been perceived between these two ceramic traditions (Ardabîl and Triangle Ware).

We believe that the productions of Triangle Ware and Ardabîl Ware were part of the same system, as is suggested by morphological and decorative similarities. With regard to the chronology of the temporal limits of development of this pottery tradition, the absence of truly reliable contexts makes these difficult to establish, especially as regards the end of this tradition. What can certainly be said is that this pottery basically belongs to the Achaemenid era. It is probable though, as proposed in the past, that the tradition did not disappear immediately with the fall of the Achaemenid Empire but that, as often happened in other moments of transition, these productions

²⁵ These are reliable data, see Dittmann 1984, p. 155-193. In two sites in the northern Pakistan area, Charsada and Shaikhan found pottery fragments clearly belonging to the Triangle Ware family that led Dyson to theorize an “Eastern Triangle Ware” (Dyson 1999a, p. 127). Given these clearly identifiable finds, it is also difficult to define a third subclass of Triangle Ware, especially given the substantial homogeneity in production seen in this case.



continued, with varying degrees of alteration, at the local level for several centuries, in Seleucid and at least early Parthian times. As luxury productions of local élites that substantially followed internal development trajectories, Triangle Ware and also Ardabil Ware were produced locally even after the fall of the Achaemenid empire. The continuity of production suggests quite clearly that this pottery should in no way be considered as one of the markers of Achaemenid royalty, as has rightly been pointed out on several occasions. Had its production been part of the Achaemenid Imperial Assemblage, it would probably have ceased more abruptly. Considerable problems remain unresolved regarding the interpretation of the role played by this material. An analysis of archaeological dynamics and processes can help to provide a possible key to this ceramic horizon. As Kroll has shown, in fact, the sites in where Triangle Ware has been identified are in the Lake of Orumiyeh region, and most were also among the more important active centres during the earlier Urartian period²⁶. This circumstance testifies to a remarkable continuity in the modalities of territorial management and control, also in the epoch in which these lands became involved in dynamics of an imperial nature. The fact that Triangle Ware is found in important settlements could be an indicator that this pottery was used by a local élite subordinate to Achaemenid power and could be considered as a marker of the relationship between the imperial power and local realities; apart from small amounts of evidence related to material culture, the latter followed internal development trajectories.

Taking into account Triangle Ware's distribution range, which goes from North-Western Iran to Eastern Turkey and the South Caucasus area, it is possible to propose a new interpretation key of this pottery class. Excluding the other distant areas such as Fars, the area of Kerman, and Pakistan where this pottery was found overall in rather small amounts, the last cases (Pakistan) grouped under the "Eastern Triangle Ware" label, the distribution range of the main discovery contexts lies in the territories corresponding to the modern-day eastern Turkey, Armenia and north-western Iran and immediately adjacent areas. At this point, it is possible that Triangle Ware – which has in large part forms attributable to those characteristic of the Achaemenid era (like the typical bowls), and painted decorations²⁷ that does not closely resemble those of other Achaemenid productions – was a local production attributable to local dynas-

26 See the sites of Khezerlu Qal'eh, Kafir Qal'eh, Qal'eh Ismail Agha, Qalatgah and Hasanlu (Kroll 1994).

27 Pottery decorated with rows of horizontal triangles such as that found in Agrab Tepe, Argištiḫinili and Erebuni are a feature of the state of Urartu in pre-Achaemenid times (Muscarella 1971, p. 46-74, Dittmann 1984, fig. 9).



ties, in particular that of the Orontids, which grew up in those territories after the fall of the state of Urartu. This pottery would therefore be the expression of a process of assimilation of elements of Achaemenid culture, the pottery forms, for example, being the result of interaction between the empire and the local élite, which involved the reworking of the original model through the application of painted decorations. However, although there are signs of a possible Achaemenid influence with regard to some vessel forms, it remains impossible to establish the extent of the empire's influence on the birth and development of these ceramic traditions, especially regarding decorative elements. If we accept this proposal of a totally local production, with elements of imperial influence, it is plausible that the Triangle and Ardabîl Ware tradition might have developed independently of contact with the Achaemenid world. If this suggestion were confirmed by future archaeological investigations, it could be hypothesized that the discovery of this pottery in areas outside the Armenian Highlands constitutes a reflection of interregional relations that were facilitated by the influence of imperial dynamics on these areas. Ardabîl Ware, despite the attempts made, remains a class of pottery, like the entire Triangle Ware group, not datable with absolute certainty although it is linked to a cultural horizon of the Achaemenid period.

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Arta

Directeur de la publication : Pierre Briant

arta@cnrs.fr

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