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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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A Parthian Shot of Potential Arsacid Date

Henry P. Colburn
(Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
and The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York)

The 'Parthian shot' is perhaps the most famous military tactic from the ancient world. As described by Plutarch (*Crassus* 24), it involves firing a bow from horseback while riding away from the enemy in a feigned retreat. The association of this tactic with the Parthians is due to Plutarch's description of its use with great success against the Romans at Carrhae in 53 BCE, but iconographic and textual evidence both suggest it was used in the Near East as early as the ninth century, mostly likely by the Urartians (Belis and Colburn 2020: 199-200).¹ There are depictions of it in a variety of media, including Assyrian reliefs, cylinder seals, Greek painted pottery and Etruscan bronzes. But all of these instances predate the establishment of the Arsacid kingdom; there are as yet no known Parthian depictions of the Parthian shot. Two lead-glazed skyphoi (Hochuli-Gysel 1977: nos. T1-2) dating to the first century BCE, now in the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum and the Yale University Art Gallery (Figure 1), both feature relief decoration of riders firing arrows at their pursuers. These vessels are contemporary with the Parthians, but this type of pottery is generally thought to come from Asia Minor or Syria, beyond the borders of their empire (Greene 2007).²

Given the absence of Parthian depictions of the Parthian shot, it is interesting that a ceramic bowl in the

1- See also Ivantchik 2008: 178-80, who suggests that it originated instead with the Scythians.

2- The distinctive green glazed pottery of the Parthian period in Mesopotamia is made using an alkaline glaze rather than lead, as with these skyphoi, resulting in a darker surface color; see Simpson 1997: 74-7.



Figure 1. Lead-glazed skyphos, c. 1st cen. CE. Terracotta; H. 5.8 cm; Diam. with handles 14.8 cm. Yale University Art Gallery 1952.52.3; Hobart and Edward Small Moore Memorial Collection, gift of Mrs. William H. Moore. Public domain image from the Yale University Art Gallery.

Metropolitan Museum of Art (66.205.2; Figure 2) featuring this very motif may in fact date to the Arsacid period. It was given to the museum in 1966 by Mehdi Mahboubian, an Iranian-American art dealer, and its place of origin is unfortunately unknown. The bowl measures 5.8 cm in height and 16.0 cm in diameter at the rim. It is made of a pinkish buff clay, slightly burnished, with a pale cream slip. It has a flat base with a slight indentation, a low carinated shoulder and a flared rim. The clay is well-levigated and free of inclusions. The interior of the bowl is decorated, sometimes carelessly, with red paint. Parallel lines run along the rim and the interior of the shoulder, with a row of diagonal lines between them.



Figure 2. Bowl, c. 4th-2nd cen. BCE. Terracotta; H. 5.8 cm; Diam. 16.0 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art 66.205.2; gift of Mehdi Mahboubian. Public domain image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 3. Example of an Ardabil Style bowl from the antiquities market, c. 4th-2nd cen. BCE. H. 5.31 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art 66.205.1; gift of Mehdi Mahboubian. Public domain image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In the center of the bowl is an image of a rider, also in red paint. The horse's legs are straight but pointed inward, suggesting the suspension phase of a gallop. The horse's head and tail are indistinct, with both running into the painted decoration at the shoulder. The rider consists of a torso and a large head, with a longer arm extending toward the rear of the horse and a shorter arm toward the front. A thin curve, representing the bow, runs from the head through the longer arm and continues faintly on the other side. The bowl was apparently handled, and perhaps even spun, while the paint was still wet, resulting in a rather blurry appearance. But the overall impression is clearly one of a rider in full gallop aiming a bow at a target behind him – the Parthian shot.

This type of pottery is generally known as the 'Ardabil Style' after its supposed origin in northwestern Iran (Haerinck 1978; Piran 2010). Almost all extant Ardabil Style pottery lacks provenance; most known examples come from the antiquities market (e.g., Figure 3). Some sherds, however, have been excavated at Yanik Tepe, about 32 km southwest of Tabriz, and these are accordingly significant for determining the date of this type of pottery. This material comes from a series of pits sealed by the plaster floors of a small fortress, which the excavators date on the basis of architectural parallels to the late Achaemenid or Parthian period (Summers and Burney 2012: 270-1). Parthian burials were also found dug into the defensive ditch surrounding the fortress. The excavators propose a date in the Achaemenid period for these pits because of the absence of parallels with the Parthian period pottery from Pasargadae (Summers and Burney 2012: 275). However, as Ernie Haerinck (1983: 239-44) has shown in his seminal work on the subject, the ceramics of Parthian Iran are characterized by regionalism rather than unity. The material from Pasargadae therefore has no intrinsic bearing on the material from Yanik Tepe, and the pottery in these pits could conceivably date from the late Iron Age to the end of the Parthian Empire.

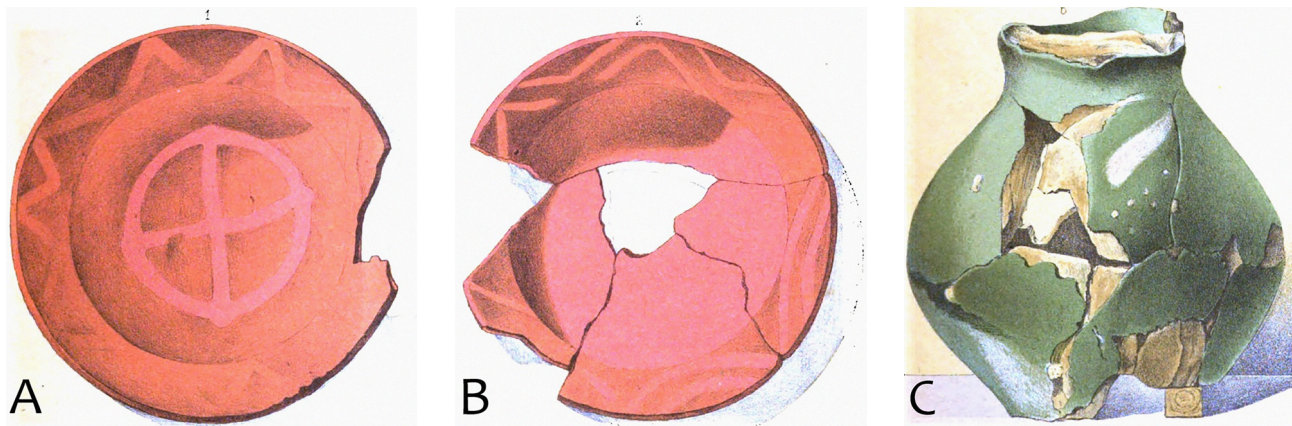


Figure 4. Vessels excavated at Coni, Azerbaijan, c. 2nd-1st cen. BCE. Dimensions not known. Images in the public domain from de Morgan (1896: pl. 5).

Some further refinement of this dating may be possible. In addition to the Ardabil Style, 'Western Triangle Ware' was also found in these pits (Summers and Burney 2012).³ This term refers to a decorative repertoire rather than a ceramic ware per se, which has been found at various sites in northwestern Iran, including Hasanlu. At one time all Triangle Ware pottery at the site was assigned to Hasanlu level III, which was dated to the Achaemenid period. Now, however, a distinction can be made between 'Classic Triangle Ware,' which occurs in Hasanlu level IIIB, and Western Triangle Ware, which occurs in the later Hasanlu level IIIA, probably dating to the fourth to third centuries BCE (Kroll 2000). This suggests that the pits at Yanik Tepe date to this same general period. Thus, the beginning of the Ardabil Style likely dates to the late Achaemenid through the early Parthian period.

A probable end date for the Ardabil Style is supplied by two bowls (Figures 4a-b) excavated at Coni (Djonu) in Lerik district in the Talysh Mountains in Azerbaijan (de Morgan 1896: 111, pl. 5.1-2). The bowls, which are painted red, have forms similar to the bowl under discussion and are decorated with zigzag patterns on the interior of the shoulder. They are thus seemingly a variant of the Ardabil Style. They were found in a grave with a green glazed jug (Figure 4c). This type of glaze is well known in later Parthian and Sasanian periods, but is not produced in northwestern Iran until c. 175-150 BCE (Haerinck 1978: 82). This indicates that the Ardabil Style persisted until the second century BCE, if not later. Indeed, the absence of any painted pottery from the Parthian pithos burials at Germe in Ardabil province (Curtis and Simpson 2000), which are dated to the first century CE and later by coins, suggests that its production ceased sometime during the first century BCE (Haerinck 1978: 89-90). Furthermore, thermoluminescence testing has been performed on samples of Ardabil Style pottery in the National Museum of Iran (Piran 2010: 950). The results, presented in an MA thesis at Tarbiat Modares University, are not readily accessible to western scholars, but they evidently indicate a date in the 'late Parthian period.' This at least lends credence to the dating proposed above and may even suggest that Ardabil Style pottery continued to be made after the second century.

3- Summers and Burney do not distinguish between Western Triangle Ware and Ardabil Style, despite Haerinck's clear articulation of their separate origins and distributions (1978: 85).

Thus the bowl featuring the Parthian shot most likely dates to the fourth through second century BCE, or slightly later. Although the Arsacid kingdom was founded in the mid third century BCE, northwestern Iran – known in this period as Media Atropatene – was probably not conquered by the Parthians until after 148 BCE (Olbrycht 2010: 239-40). For the bowl to belong to the Arsacid Empire, it must date near the end of the proposed chronological range of Ardabil Style ceramics. Unfortunately, given its lack of archaeological provenance and the limited excavated parallels, it is impossible to narrow the bowl's date any further. Indeed, as noted above, the Parthian shot is first attested as a military tactic in the neighboring region of Urartu, and its presence on this bowl could just as well result from a longstanding local artistic tradition as from a reaction to the arrival of the Parthians. So even if the bowl does date to the Parthian period, it is not necessarily a depiction of or comment on the Parthians themselves. But it does at least raise the possibility that the Parthian shot was a feature of the art of the Arsacid Empire.

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