Pottery, which appeared in Iran early in the Neolithic Age, provided a cheap substitute for carefully ground stone vessels and less permanent wood and skin containers. It satisfied the need for a variety of such containers in shapes ranging from drinking cups to cooking pots and storage jars. Many of the vessels excavated from prehistoric sites are, therefore, utilitarian in nature with thick walls and little or no decoration. From the beginning, however, the Iranian potter produced some decorated wares. Soon a whole range of fine pottery developed, with local styles of decoration based on the ingenuity of the potter, who was inspired by materials and themes already established in his culture and by the natural forms of the surrounding countryside.

Chalcolithic (transition from stone to metal) painted wares developed on the Iranian plateau and in the western mountains. The deep bowl from Ismailabad with burnished red slip and geometric motifs provides an example of early painted ware. Typical of this stage are simple geometric patterns such as lozenges, hatching, zigzags, and triangles. The pottery is usually red or buff; the designs are black. In the 4th millennium, animal forms are more frequently found combined with a greater variety of geometric motifs. This pottery is now sometimes made on the wheel.

The bowl from Tepe Giyan in western Iran is an example of later pottery, dating to the second half of the 3rd millennium B.C. Here, stylized birds are incorporated into the decorative zone just below the shoulder, in combination with geometric designs. A simple geometric pattern adorns the shoulder. Pottery from a number of sites in western Iran, from the end of the 3rd millennium to ca. 1500 B.C., was generally of this type—dark brown geometric designs on a buff ground, the designs often incorporating birds. This is one of a number of distinctive pottery styles current in western Iran in this period.
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Offering Table
Western Iran?
1200-1000 B.C.
Terracotta (72.57)

This rectangular ceramic offering table bears five female figures in relief at the corners--three single and one pair. The figures are nude and hold their hands to their breasts. Two small vessels are set diagonally opposite each other. The pots are wheelmade, but the remainder of the table is handmade. The table shows no signs of use, since neither it, nor the pots, are worn or charred. Perhaps it was a grave good -- buried with the deceased for use after death. The table itself might have been intended for offerings such as grains, "fruits of the harvest," etc., and the two bowls perhaps were to hold oil and function as lamps. It is also possible that these bowls were used to hold liquid for pouring libations. No clear parallels have been found for a combination table and libation bowls in this particular form.
The ancient Lurs, a people of unknown ethnic origin and ancient name, inhabited an area of western Iran, today called Luristan. Our knowledge of their culture is derived mainly from their art, since no written records from that time exist. Unfortunately, most Luristan bronzes are without provenance having been discovered by local tribesmen and tomb robbers. This has made it difficult to date the bronzes and to understand the identity of the people who made them. The few archaeological expeditions undertaken have, however, provided some framework that enables us to place the bronzes in the period about 1000-650 B.C., and, since many of the bronzes are horse trappings, they suggest that horsemanship was an important part of the culture of this ancient people.

The bronzes shown in the case and in the drawer units are typical: daggers, axes, bow cases and quivers, shields, horse gear (particularly the cheek pieces of bridles), wagon parts, finials, and standards. Most are cast, but the quiver plaque is worked from sheet metal with engraved designs showing a man with an ostrich, two archers, and a city under attack. Animal motifs are characteristic of Luristan bronzes. The combination of two creatures in one, such as is found on the bronze cheek pieces, is also typical.
Votive Plaque: Mistress of Animals
Iran, Luristan
9th or 8th c. B.C.
Bronze (72.106)

Finial with Rampant Wild Goats
Iran, Luristan
900-700 B.C.
Bronze (77.31a and b)

Idol Standard: Two Felines Holding Male Head
Iran, Luristan
900-700 B.C.
Bronze (77.32a and b)

A female figure in the center of the votive plaque holds two lions by the hind legs, a motif known as "Mistress of Animals." This is an old theme going back to early Mesopotamian traditions. Such figures are evidence of a desire to obtain control over the animal kingdom and to nurture it. The motif, which has a Bronze Age tradition in Greek art, reoccurs in art of the 8th and 7th centuries in Greece, apparently stimulated by numerous imports of objects depicting the theme. It occurs on a tray and a perfume vase in the Early Greece display. The theme survives to a later period as is shown by one of the museum's Coptic textiles (72.104).

The function of these plaques is unknown. Similar objects have been excavated in sanctuaries in Iran. Scholars suggest that such objects may have served as icons and may also have been worn as charms and protective amulets.

The finial with wild goats or ibex is typical of Luristan finials, which usually consist of a pair of rampant animals. The animals on this finial exhibit a stylization of form that may be a development from the more naturalistic forms of the animals found...
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on earlier finials of this type. The unnaturally long necks and tails form complementary curving elements that balance the outcurving ridged horns. The idol standard, also highly decorative, shows two rampant felines holding a human head in their joined front paws, represented by a ridged oval. The human head is narrow with bulging eyes and prominent ears, or spirals of hair. The necks of the animals curve strongly outward from the center of the standard; their bodies are joined by a ridged girdle, and their tails curve downwards between the legs, which are rendered in a somewhat awkward stance.

The exact function of these two bronzes is speculative since written texts are lacking, but they probably had a religious meaning, perhaps as protectors against evil. The combination of a frontal face with beasts of prey, as on the idol standard, lends itself to this interpretation. Both finials and idol standards have been found in graves. None have been found in the two sanctuaries and settlement sites so far excavated in Luristan.
These two pottery vases represent the variety of new pottery forms that appeared at sites in northwestern Iran from about 1400 B.C. onwards. The tall gray-ware bowl imitates a metal vase. The animal head in high relief, the protome (bust) of a horned animal, perhaps a goat, would more commonly be found on a bronze, gold or silver vase. The clay pellets imitate metal rivets that would have fastened the protome to the vessel.

The spouted jar with painted decoration is a new type of pottery that appears in the Iron II period, ca. 1000-800 B.C. Its most characteristic painted decoration is in red on cream ground as here and the decoration consists of stylized animals and geometric designs. On this vase a small animal on the right looks back over its shoulder at a much larger animal. Geometric forms decorate the long spout and the area of the vase where the spout is attached.