

## A New Painted Pottery Assemblage at Ismailabad; a Late Neolithic Site in the Central Plateau of Iran

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**ABSTRACT** – Recent discoveries of Middle and Late Neolithic pottery assemblage at Ismailabad have been presented. Ismailabad painted pottery was the hallmark of a distinctive culture. Ornamental patterns are representationally sophisticated and conceptual, showing inspiration from an Iranian tradition.

**IZVLEČEK** – Predstavljamo zadnja odkritja srednje- in poznoneolitske keramike iz Ismailabada. Ismailabadska slikana keramika nosi jasen pečat kulture, katere vzorci okraševanja so značilno prefinjeni in vsebinsko izdelani, in ki se navdihujejo v iranski tradiciji.

**KEY WORDS** – Iran; Neolithic; painted pottery

### INTRODUCTION

For many reasons the single-culture unit of the northern-central part of Iran presents one of the most provocative challenges for archaeologists working on Neolithic studies because (1) there are only a few sites in the area that have been excavated (Fig. 1), (2) most of the sites were excavated years ago, when stratigraphy was considered much less significant (Talai 1983a), (3) archaeological reports have mostly emphasised pottery sequences and therefore the problem of cultural sequence and its relation with other cultural zones in Iran, such as northwest, central west, southwest and northeast, are based on ceramic parallels (Dyson 1991), (4) it is still unclear when and how the Neolithic period in the area began in comparison to the Zagros region – the central north part of the Iranian plateau does not seem to have gone through a pre-pottery and early Neolithic phases. It is worth noting that there are still some problems in identifying the Iranian pre-pottery Neolithic if we do not take into account the very few sites indicating pre-pottery debris. Given all the available evidence, we can divide the Neolithic period in the central plateau into a middle and late Neolithic (6200–4300 BC). Yet the foundation for the determi-

nation of the two phases is only based on a change in pottery tradition, the appearance of the black-on-red painted pottery which is most characteristic for the late Neolithic and appears first in Zagheh level 8 (Malek Shahmirzadi 1990) and Sialk 1–5 (Ghirshman 1938). Obviously this foundation is very insecure, and the writer is quite ready to discard his in-



**Fig. 1. Site distribution: 1. Ismailabadis, 2. Tepe Hissar, 3. Sialk, 4. Zagheh.**

terpretation as soon as contradictory evidence is available. The Middle Neolithic period is represented in the lower levels of Zagheh I in the western part of the region and in Tepe Sialk level I in the eastern part, while the information from Cheshmeh Ali is scanty and inconclusive. The Late Neolithic period is represented in upper levels of Zagheh, in Sialk level II, in lower levels of Cheshmeh Ali and in a more recently excavated site at Ismailabad. However, on the bases of stratigraphy and chronology of Zahneh and Ismailabad, there seems to be a discontinuity in pottery sequence from the Middle to the late Neolithic.

### THE MIDDLE NEOLITHIC (MN) POTTERY ASSEMBLAGE

An interesting feature of the MN is painted buff pottery (Fig. 2), which from a technical point of view is obviously more developed than the Early Neolithic pottery in Iran. The place of origin of MN pottery is a matter of considerable dispute. The original period of this assemblage is difficult to determine. It may have received some stimulus from the north-west of



Fig. 2. Zagheh, MN painted pottery.

Iran, but we hesitate to adopt the popular explanation of descent from a common source. The MN pottery is almost always thick-walled, made of coarsely levigated gritty clay and badly fired. The fabric of the pottery is buff in colour, of medium coarseness and contains chopped straw. The surface was smoothed before the application of paint, which is usually brown, with the design always monochrome. The style of painting and fabric of the pottery differ from the LN pottery assemblage (Fig. 3); MN pottery is technically inferior, coarse in texture and rough surfaced, with a slip used infrequently. The motifs are predominantly geometric and show that the pain-

ters had a marked preference for straight lines over curves. Simple patterns, such as hatching, crosshatching and zigzags are used very effectively, those made with multiple parallel lines and vertically painted zones being especially noticeable. Almost invariably the drawing is arranged in an orderly decorative scheme, and a feeling for the shape of the vessel is clearly absent. Another interesting characteristic of MN culture are containers for grain storage, indicating a well-developed storage system. The walls of these vessels are approximately 6 cm thick, made of baked straw-tempered clay, with diameters averaging around 60 cm. These vessels were lowered into underground pits and the spaces around them filled with loose debris. Many bins still held decayed chaff and carbonised grain when excavated.

Biconical spindle whorls, usually of baked clay, and bone tools such as needles are common, but flints and obsidian blades are very rare. Tiny, drilled beads and stone pendants appear, sometimes made of agate, turquoise, limestone, hematite and unidentified stone. The presence of some objects within MN assemblages suggests the existence of long-distance trade (Talai 1999). Crude human and animal clay figurines (Negahban 1984) and plain tokens in the shape of cone disks are present in MN deposits, as are clay tokens used for counting and accounting units of goods (Schmandt-Besserat 1997). MN deposits in the region show a well-developed society of people who built permanent dwellings. Tepe Zagheh is the largest site to yield architectural remains. As a result of several seasons of excavations a considerable part of the open and defenceless MN village has been revealed in the upper levels with the best-preserved houses with open courtyards. The settle-

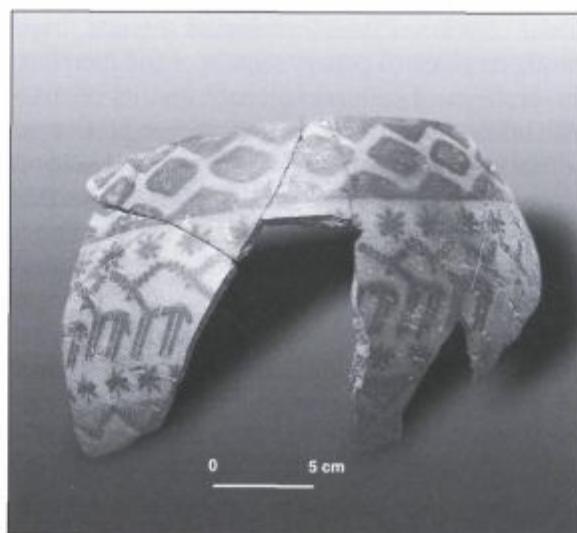


Fig. 3. Ismailabad, LN painted pottery.



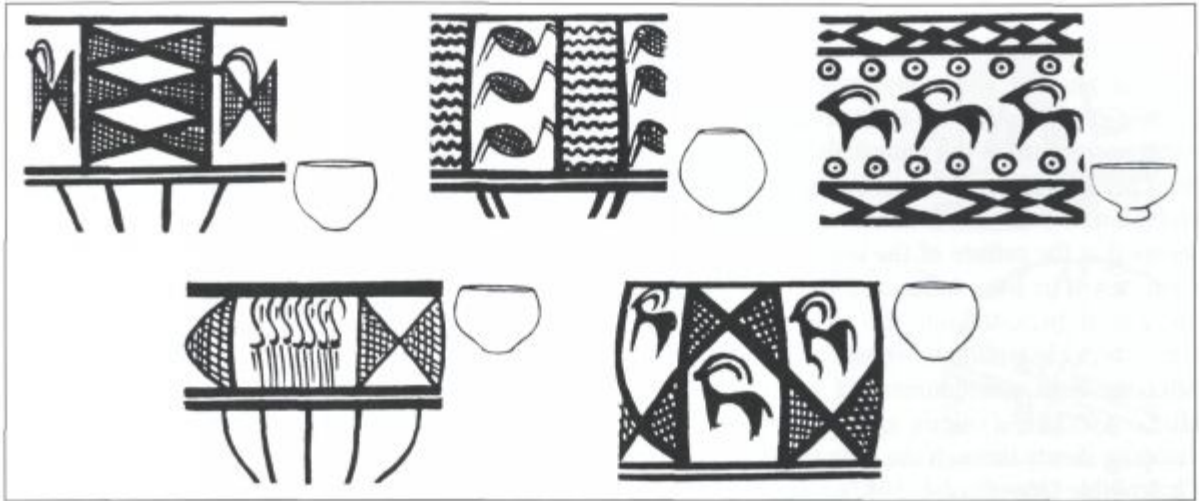


Fig. 4. Ismailabad, zoomorphic motives (after Maleki 1968).

ment was probably at all times about the same size as modern villages in the neighbourhood. The total height of the mound from virgin soil is 6.7 meters. In the early stage *pise* is used a building material. But soon technical proficiency increased and they began to use long mud brick. Structural details indicate that there must have been a long tradition in MN architecture. The point is the appearance of Zagheh painted temple, a large (117 m<sup>2</sup>) and complex structure with nine benches and a fireplace built inside. Walls were painted with simple designs. Large numbers of clay figurines were found inside the temple, which further indicates the building was a religious centre or was used for social gatherings (Negahban 1979). Domesticated plants and unidentified animal species are documented. The people of MN buried their dead with grave goods under the floors of the roofed areas of houses. In most cases the skeletal remains showed intensive use of red ochre, even in the mouth, which, if we may judge by burial practices, suggests an idea of an afterlife (Ne-

gahban 1979). As a whole, the assemblage depicts well the lifestyle and economy of MN people in this region, who reached a considerable level of technical development and created a flourishing culture.

#### THE LATE NEOLITHIC (LN) POTTERY ASSEMBLAGE AND ARCHITECTURE

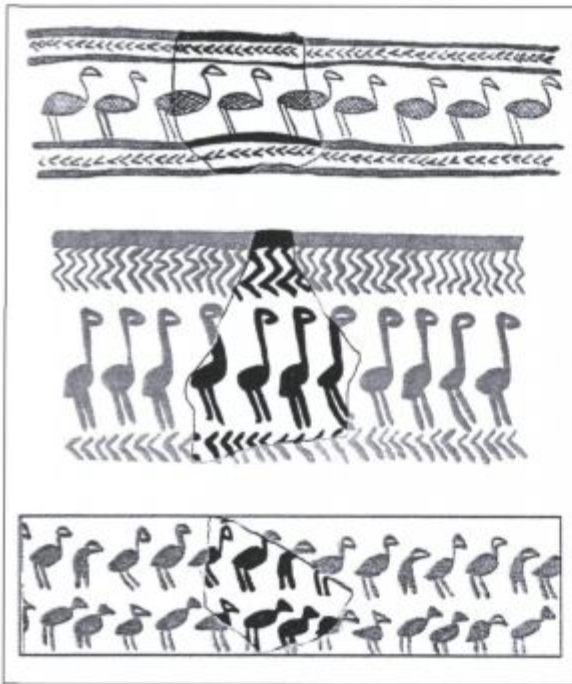
Due to its distinguished architecture and pottery, Ismailabad remains the most important site of the Late Neolithic period. The stratigraphy of almost 7 meters of deposit and ten architectural levels of LN occupation is incomparable with any other site in the region because it shows a continuous development of black-on-red painted pottery, which is the common denominator of the Late Neolithic period, from light red to dark red. This fact makes it very likely that Ismailabad began its history as a result of migration very early in the sixth millennium BC. During the sixth millennium BC Late Neolithic villages



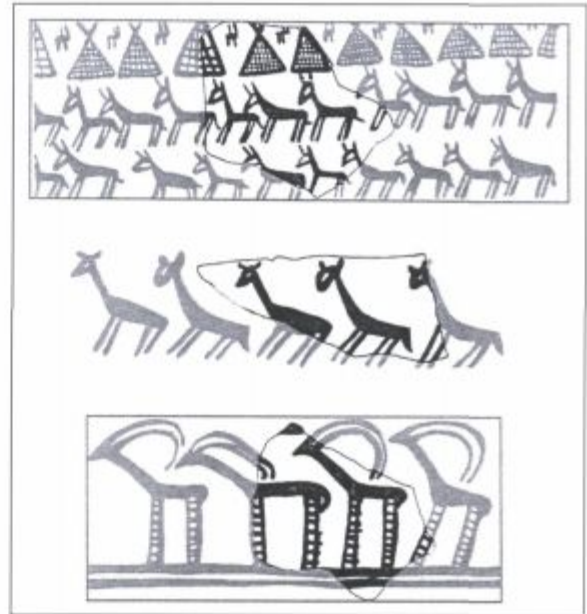
Fig. 5. Ismailabad, geometric motives (after Maleki 1968).

appear widely on the central plateau and beyond, from Qazvin plain to Kashan (Sialk), and eastwards to Turkestan. It would be premature to assert on the present evidence that the wide expansion of the LN culture originated in the central plateau. The connections between LN settlements on the central plateau and eastern Iran seem, however, indisputable. It seems that the culture of the central plateau had a character of its own, influenced by local traditions. The culture persisted into the fifth millennium BC, with a break in continuity recognized in the region. After the final abandonment of Ismailabad, soon after c. 4300 BC, a culture appeared at Sialk III, developing slowly through the long succession of late Chalcolithic (*Majidzadeh 1981*).

As stated earlier, red painted ware is the most characteristic of Late Neolithic pottery. The motifs are predominantly geometric representing stylised animals and plants (Fig. 4). Complex linear designs such as hatching, crosshatching, chevrons and zigzag are common and used effectively, those made of multiple parallel lines being especially noticeable (Fig. 5). The considerable use of various horned and unhorned animals and birds is most noteworthy. Fish, wild horse and various unidentified animals also appear, the animals being represented almost in horizontal rows. The horned animals and birds are orientated in different directions, which might indicate two different conceptions of those animals in the painter's mind (Figs. 6, 7).



*Fig. 7. Ismailabad, birds being represented in horizontal rows.*



*Fig. 6. Ismailabad, the horned animals being represented in horizontal row.*

Negative design, which means the background is filled in with paint while the design areas are left in the colour of the pot surface, is frequently used (Fig. 8). It seems that painters were quite skilled at this technique, and they embellished it by adding painted motifs within negative areas or by placing painted motifs so as to produce the effect of a negative design. The fact that this technique appears earlier in the MN painted pottery assemblage is one of the reasons for considering LN pottery as local in character.

Horizontal zones of continuous design, undoubtedly the most effective decoration for the round surface of a pot, predominate; elements in these design zones tend to be contiguous. Rarely, mostly on simple bowls and some pots, only one zone of design appears. Even on these vessels the broad zone is frequently accompanied by very narrow subsidiary zones on simple bands. The characteristic LN style of



*Fig. 8. Ismailabad, negative design and horned animals.*





Fig. 9. Ismailabad, circular surface decoration.

decoration consists of multiple zones of design, usually rather narrow, extending from the exterior rim to, or just below, the point of the largest diameter. Generally, these are separated by plain narrow bands. The spacing, filling and balancing of these design zones is excellent, as well as the feeling for dark and light areas. The drawing tends to be in thin lines, but heavy ones are not avoided, and a notable balance of the bold and the fine is achieved.

In all taller and more closed forms the main design is on the outside. Shallow bowls and plates bear their main design in the interior; it is in the composition of these interior designs that the painter achieved his best works. The decoration of a circular surface presents a difficult aesthetic problem. The success of the painters is demonstrable by a glance at their work: they have created a wonderful effect of life and movement and a harmonic balance by dividing the circular surface into four equal parts (Fig. 9). Drawing is arranged in an orderly decorative scheme. Feeling for the shape of the vessel is present and can clearly be seen in many examples. The lower part of vessel is differentiated from the upper part in many cases, often by a heavy festoon design, while the foot usually only bears plain vertical bands of paint (Fig. 4). Finally, there was a continuous use of designs such as swastikas and the rays of the sun throughout the whole sequence of the LN period (Figs. 10, 11).

The painted ware takes many main forms (Figs. 4, 5, 9). The fabric is red in colour, of mostly fine clay, with the inclusion of chopped straw or fine sand. The

surface was usually slipped before the application of paint, which is mostly black, while the design is always monochrome.

There seems to have been a dual system of pottery production in the LN period. Everyday vessels were probably produced in small quantities in every village. The second mode of production, in which high quality ware was produced apparently by specialists for export to neighbouring settlements, is best known from Ismailabad. Studies have shown that pottery from this workshop was traded over a radius of about 200 km. If this was the case, then it is suggested that the high quality Ismailabad painted ware, which shows a uniformity of design and execution, was probably mass-produced, while other less sophisticated ware was produced locally (Maleki 1968; Vanden Berghe 1968).

The characteristic site formation of the MN and LN periods in the region is a by-product of the main building material used. Unbaked mud brick is cheap, convenient and easy to make, but unless a mud brick building is kept in good condition with a proper roof and plastered interior and exterior



Fig. 10. Ismailabad, "Sun rye" motive.

walls, it deteriorates very quickly and the bricks crumble back into a low heap of earth. This heap will often form the basis of later buildings and so, over a period of years, a small site is formed. This process, repeated on the ground scale, augmented by domestic debris, leads eventually to the formation of the sites which comprise the ancient settlements in much of the Iranian plateau.

Mud brick and *pise* are the main building materials. Chopped straw and sand are usually added to improve the consistency, and the mixture is manually shaped. The size and shape of bricks changes through time and can sometimes be used as age indicators. For example, the MN period is characterised by the use of long rectangular handmade mud brick. The LN period is characterised by the use of so-called "plano-convex" brick, rectangular in plan, with a rough flat surface, dried in the sun. This odd shape seems to have been achieved by rounding off each brick by hand. Bricks were often laid in a conventional bonding fashion. They are distinctive and are found only in the LN period. The mortar used with the brick is usually of mud. The importance of protecting exterior walls from the weather has already been mentioned, and mud or lime plaster is usually used to achieve this. Chopped straw is

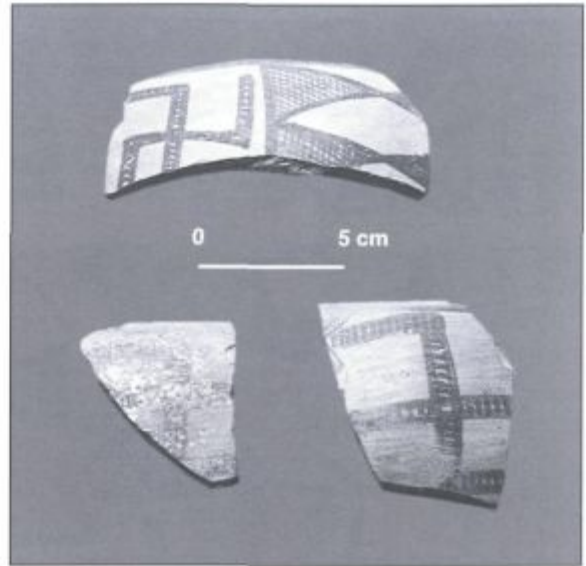


Fig. 11. Ismailabad, swastika presentation on pottery.

added to mud in order to improve the durability and consistency of the plaster. This mixture (straw and clay) is a traditional plaster in Iran, locally known as Kahgle. The lime plaster could be smoothed and polished to give a high quality finish, while the clay plaster was considerably rougher. Both clay and lime plastering is used in the LN period. Roofs were usually flat and were made much as they are today, the rafters of timbers being covered with mats layers of mud. With this limited range of material at their disposal, the LN builders mastered construction techniques (Fig. 12). We know very little about the tools and measuring equipment they used. With minimal equipment they were able to lay out relatively large buildings with accuracy and orient them to the cardinal points as tradition seemed to demand. The mathematics needed may not have been very sophisticated, but an understanding of basic engineering principles and of the properties of mud brick must have been essential.

The architectural remains at Ismailabad belong to the LN period (our evidence relates mainly to the domestic buildings which are preserved well enough to allow us to discuss them). The private houses tell us relatively little about the everyday life of the people who lived in them. They have few distinctive features and, generally speaking, are poor in small finds. The plans of the houses suggests they were for self-contained and their importance as the basic unit in society. The positions of the houses at the centre of family life is emphasised by the presence of graves under the floors. Throughout the MN and LN periods, custom seems to have dictated that the dead were

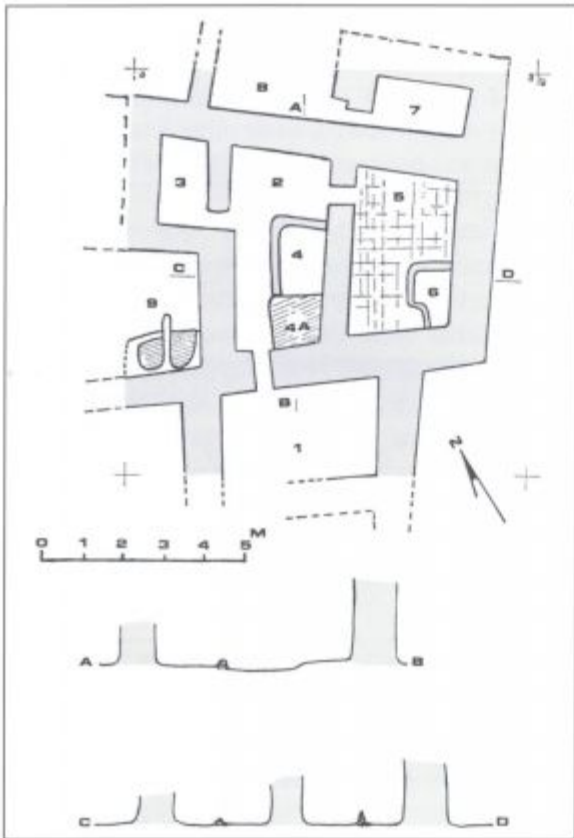


Fig. 12. Ismailabad, level 5, architectural remains.



buried with grave goods which were apparently intended to make life in the other world as comfortable as possible.

Whatever the relationship between the central plateau cultures finally proves to be, it appears fairly clear that at least the cultural B sequence, during the sixth and mid-fifth millennium BC has been clarified, and indeed, in some degree modified by excavations at Ismailabad. It is no longer enough to rely on the well-known discoveries at Tepe Sialk. During the sixth millennium BC the first beginnings of a new and distinctive culture can be detected – that is, the Late Neolithic culture. The radiocarbon dates may be used tentatively to suggest a maximum time-span for

the culture from c. 5000 until 4300 BC. Ismailabad painted pottery was the hallmark of a distinctive culture. Another criterion of this culture, on the evidence of Ismailabad, must be the architectural pattern, which was utterly alien to the Middle Neolithic Zagheh culture. Precisely who the first inhabitants of Ismailabad were, or when, whence or how they arrived are questions which may never be answered to the satisfaction of every specialist. The pottery shows an improvement in quality of clay, firing and decoration throughout the LN period. Patterns are representationally sophisticated and conceptual, showing inspiration from an Iranian tradition. The eastward expansion of the LN culture extended as far as Turkestan (*Malek Shahmirzadi 1977*).

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