<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Early Bronze Age in northwestern Iran</td>
<td>Geoffrey D. Summers</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Bronze Age in northeastern Iran</td>
<td>Christopher P. Thornton</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Luristan and the central Zagros in the Bronze Age</td>
<td>D. T. Potts</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Khuzestan in the Bronze Age</td>
<td>Javier Álvarez-Mon</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Early writing in Iran</td>
<td>Jacob L. Dahl</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The use of Akkadian in Iran</td>
<td>Katrien De Graef</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Bronze Age Fars</td>
<td>Bernadette McCall</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Eastern Iran in the Early Bronze Age</td>
<td>Holly Pittman</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PART IV THE IRON AGE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>The Late Bronze and Early Iron Age in northwestern Iran</td>
<td>Michael D. Danti</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Luristan during the Iron Age</td>
<td>Bruno Overlaet</td>
<td>377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>The central Alborz region in the Iron Age</td>
<td>Ali Mousavi</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Linguistic groups in Iran</td>
<td>Ran Zadok</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Iranian migration</td>
<td>Michael Witzel</td>
<td>423</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From about 1300/1250 to 650/600 BC a local culture thrived in the Luristan region, that is, the mountainous part of the Zagros between the Iraqi border, the Great Khorasan Road, and the roads connecting Kermanshah, Sahneh, Nehavand, Borudjird, Dorud, and the Ab-e Dez River to the Dezful plain (modern Luristan and Ilam provinces). Although iron seems to have been absent in the first centuries, the period is conventionally referred to as the Iron Age as an indication of the distinct change in the material culture of the region vis-à-vis the preceding Bronze Age (Overlaet 2003: 6–10). Iron Age Luristan is renowned for its unique bronzes: hammered and engraved sheet-metal objects (e.g., pins with large disk-heads, vessels, quiver plaques) and *cire perdue* (lost-wax) cast objects (e.g., axheads, horse-bits with decorated cheek-pieces, whetstone handles, clothing pins, idols). These display a specific style with a mixture of animals, humans and fantastic creatures. In the later phase of the Luristan Iron Age, similar decorated objects were produced in a combination of bronze and iron or even completely in iron.

Although some of these bronzes were already known in the nineteenth century, it was only in the late 1920s that they started to appear in large numbers on the art market and their true place of origin became known: graveyards and sanctuaries in the—at that time—very inaccessible tribal area of Luristan. Since the region was controlled by nomadic tribes and the central government could exert only limited authority, systematic field research there became possible only in the second half of the twentieth century.

Luristan is dominated by three northwest–southwest trending mountain chains, the Kabir Kuh, Kuh-e Sefid and Kuh-e Garin, reaching heights of around 3000 masl.
The Kabir Kuh divides Luristan into the Pusht-e Kuh and the Pish-e Kuh ("over" and "before" the mountain, as seen from the Iranian plateau). The region is known for its rainy winters and dry summers, but its mountainous character creates local microclimates (Potts 1999: 12–15). These regional differences explain the seasonal migration of seminomadic groups. The Kuh-e Sefid divides the Pish-e Kuh in two climate zones. The northeastern high valleys—the sardsir or summer quarters—provide a cooler climate in summer while the lower southwestern valleys—garmsir or winter quarters—enjoy a milder climate in winter. Because of the presence of a nomadic populace in Luristan at the time of the bronzes' discovery, the "Luristan bronzes" were ascribed exclusively to a nomadic people (Godard 1931: 21). Sedentary and nomadic lifestyles may always have coexisted in Luristan, however, just as they do today, with changing circumstances merely favoring one or the other. Nomadism became the dominant lifestyle only following the Mongol invasion and its destruction of irrigation systems (Mortensen 1993: 39–42).

For a long time, Luristan research focused on hearsay and unprovenanced objects, including forgeries and pastiches, that is, fantasy objects assembled from authentic fragments (Overlaet 2008: 29–31; figs. 4–5). "Luristan" had become a lucrative commercial label and bronze objects from different regions or of types that were also found outside Luristan were presented as Luristan bronzes (Fig. 18.1). As early as 1963, J. H. Pottke underscored the extent of this problem by listing objects in major museums that he
considered to be forgeries (Potratz 1963: 131-45). O. W. Muscarella later introduced the term "canonical Luristan bronzes" for those items that were unambiguously in the local Iron Age style (Muscarella 1988b).

Meanwhile, fieldwork and documented chance finds have somewhat clarified the situation, making it possible to establish the general chronology and to define the main characteristics of the "Luristan bronzes." But even now, the number of excavated canonical bronzes is very limited and constitutes only a fraction of the objects held in museums and private collections. Our knowledge of the Iron Age Luristan cultures, particularly about the Pish-e Kuh, remains deficient. In the following pages, a short survey of the general chronology is provided, followed by a discussion of the main corpus of canonical bronzes.

**Chronology and Lifestyle**

The chronology of the Luristan Iron Age is mainly based upon the investigation of cemeteries (Fig. 18.2) in the Pusht-e Kuh (Overlaet 2005), the chronological framework from which has been extended tentatively to the Pish-e Kuh. Important regional variations are known to have existed, however, and in particular it is clear that, because of its location, the Pusht-e Kuh was more prone to Mesopotamian influence.

The transition from Bronze to Iron Age is marked by the desertion of settlements in the Pish-e Kuh valleys. This phenomenon was observed at sites such as Tepe Baba Jan, Tepe Djamshidi, and Girairan and confirmed by surveys (Goff 1968: 127; 1971: 150-51; Schmidt et al. 1989: 486-7). Nevertheless, some sites remained settled, albeit

![Figure 18.2](image-url) View of the Chavar plain with the excavations at War Kabud amidst the numerous pits of looted tombs (photo: BAMI 1966/© BAMI).
Around 950/900 BC another cool period with slightly more precipitation began (Neumann and Parpola 1987: 175). Some of the larger Bronze Age tepes in the Pish-e Kuh were resettled, and new, small habitation centers were founded (Goff 1968: 127–8), indicating that these changes had a positive effect on agriculture, enabling the sustenance of a larger (settled) population. Although we do not have information on settlements in the Pusht-e Kuh, other changes can be noticed in later Iron Age II or “Iron Age IIIB” (c. 900–800/750 BC). Small, individual tombs replaced the tradition of reusing existing tombs. Iron became more common amongst the grave goods. Although still used for jewelry, weaponry (daggers, knives) was also made of it. Bronze was still used for expendable weapons such as arrowheads, however, indicating that the value of iron remained high.

In the Pish-e Kuh a major settlement was excavated at Baba Jan, where a manor house was identified on one mound and a fort and temple with a ceiling decorated with painted
tiles stood on another mound. The site’s heyday was in the following Iron Age III, however (eighth century BC with only a limited occupation in the seventh century). This culture was characterized by a painted ware with pendant triangles and crosses, referred to as “Baba Jan III” or “genre Luristan” ware (Henrickson 1988; Overlaet 2003: 38–41, figs. 25–7). The settled population of Baba Jan cannot be linked to the mainstream users of Luristan bronzes and may have been newcomers to the area. No canonical bronzes were found in the Baba Jan III settlement or in tombs with Baba Jan III ceramics.

In addition to graveyards, important sanctuaries also existed. One was located at Surkh Dum-e Luri in the Kuh-e Dasht plain, while another probably existed at Sangtarashan, some 50 km from Khorramabad. Both sites were largely plundered before rescue excavations took place and the information available is incomplete, but both are characterized by stone architecture and favissae (Overlaet 2012). Probably dedicated to a female deity, the Surkh Dum-e Luri shrine (Schmidt et al. 1989; Overlaet 2003: 34–7; 2012: fig. 6, pls. 11–21) may have been founded in the ninth century but it certainly underwent several alterations in Iron Age III. It was built on the location of a Late Bronze Age building with stone foundations up to 1.5 m thick and a no-longer-preserved mudbrick superstructure. Although this must have been an important building, its function is unknown and a sterile layer separated it from the Iron Age shrine. Nevertheless, many votive objects in the Iron Age shrine were considerably older than its date of construction, raising the question whether an older shrine existed in the vicinity. In the walls and under the successive floors of the Iron Age sanctuary were deposits of objects, mostly seals and jewelry, many of which were ancient heirlooms dating to the Chalcolithic or Bronze Age. Pins, some very simple, others with lavish cast or hammered decorative pinheads, constituted an important group of objects. Although a number can be dated to the Early Iron Age, those with large sheet-bronze heads were found in the latest favissae, which suggests an Iron Age II or more probably Iron Age III date. The latest building phase of the Surkh Dum-e Luri sanctuary seems to belong to the early seventh century. During this phase, a room in a building opposite the sanctuary may have been used as some sort of chapel. It contained Neo-Elamite faience pottery, possibly reflecting increasing Elamite influence in the region at that time. The end of the temple as a religious center may be placed around 650 BC. The limited excavations conducted at the site were unable to establish the construction date and function of the architecture around the shrine (settlement or subsidiary buildings of the sanctuary?).

At Sangtarashan, the favissae contained objects of a very different nature than those found at Surkh Dum-e Luri. These included bronze vessels; bronze, iron, and bimetallic weaponry, including miniature spike-butted axheads; and canonical Luristan bronzes such as idols and whetstone sockets, most of which can be dated to Iron Age I and II. These favissae were spread over a large area but although traces of boulder architecture were found, a shrine or religious building has not yet been identified (Azarnoush and Helwing 2005: 222–3, figs. 49–51; Oudbashi et al. forthcoming).

Iron Age III (c.800/750–650 BC) was generally a very prosperous period in the Near East and this is also reflected in the finds from Luristan. Imports among the grave goods indicate regular contacts with both Mesopotamia and Susiana. The large number of
graveyards in the Pusht-e Kuh (Vanden Berghe 1987; Haerinck and Overlaet 1998, 1999, 2004) also suggests an increase in population density. Burial goods were more diverse, reflecting increased wealth. Tombs were mostly individual and among the burial goods were bronze vessels, iron weaponry, and new shapes and types of ceramics (Fig. 18.5). A group of fine gray and fine buff ware, often decorated with incised geometric patterns, is related to contemporary painted Baba Jan III ware in the Pish-e Kuh. Iron was no longer preferred for jewelry but was the material of choice for weaponry, including arrowheads. Bronze continued to be used for decorative elements on arms, for jewelry, and occasionally also for more complex weapons such as maceheads and ax-adzes. The presence of Assyrian imports, such as polychrome glazed vases, indicates that the area was again in regular contact with Mesopotamia. Assyrian rock reliefs at Shikaft-e Gulgul (Reade 1977) and Heydarabad-e Mishkhhas (Alibaigi et al. 2012) reflect the occasional military incursions of Neo-Assyrian armies into Luristan. The people of the Pusht-e Kuh can probably be identified with the Parnakians, a group mentioned by the Assyrians as fierce enemies (Zadok 1981–2: 135). A Neo-Assyrian outpost may have existed at Tepe Giyan in a region known to the Assyrians as Bit-Barua. This was part of the Ellipi confederacy that once included most of the Pish-e Kuh (Medvedskaya 1999: 63–4).

We have little or no information about the transitional phase from Iron Age III to the Persian Achaemenid Empire. An exceptional treasure with silver and gold vessels and human masks, accidentally discovered in a cave at Kalmakarra, is now widely dispersed (Motamadi 1992). It must have been hidden in the late seventh or early sixth century BC. Several vessels bear Elamite cuneiform inscriptions mentioning private individuals and rulers of a local "kingdom of Samati," probably situated somewhere in southern Luristan (Henkelman 2003: 214–27, pls. 9–15; Overlaet 2012: fig. 4, pls. 6–10).

THE CANONICAL LURISTAN STYLE

Although thousands of bronzes in museums and private collections are claimed to come from Luristan, only a limited number are "canonical" Luristan objects, items that were exclusively produced in Luristan during the Iron Age (Figs. 18.1 and 18.6–10). These display a distinctive decorative style with stylized humans, felines, birds, bovids, horses, and several species of goats as the main components, often combined into fantastic creatures. Vegetal elements are either combined into a "tree of life" or used as border or filler motif between the principal iconography. Particularly on the engraved sheet-metal work there is a strong tendency toward horror vacui. Although the number of canonical bronzes from controlled excavations is still limited, there are clear indications of a chronological evolution from simple, naturalistic to more complicated and fantastic creations.

Technically, a distinction can be made between cast bronzes (mainly in the cire perdue or lost-wax technique) and hammered sheet bronze. Decorated iron objects comprise 4
Figure 18.6 Left: Luristan horsebit discovered at Khatumban B (Iran Bastan Museum, Tehran, after Haerinck, Overlaet and Jaffar-Mohammadi 2004: pl. 5); right: cheekpiece of a horsebit in the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels (inv. LR.750 © KMKG-MRAH).

separate category. Decorated bone pins and plaques from the Surkh Dum-e Luri shrine testify to the existence of the same style and type of object in perishable materials.

Several groups of cast Luristan bronzes exist. Horse gear includes horse-harness trappings and horse-bits with decorative cheek-pieces (Fig. 18.6). Arms and equipment include spiked axheads and adzes, halberds, daggers or swords, and whetstone handles (Figs. 18.1 and 18.8). Another important series are the so-called “idols,” also known as “finials” or “standards,” that were placed on tubular or bottle-shaped stands (Fig. 18.1.7). Jewelry, including bracelets, various types of pins with decorated heads, finger rings, and pendants, was also cast. Some of the “Luristan bronzes” are completely made of bronze, while others are bimetallic, consisting of iron with cast-on bronze decorations. Some exceptional objects made entirely of iron copy counterparts cast in bronze. Since these display the same style, they should be included under the rubric “Luristan bronzes” (Moorey 1991).

The horse-bits vary from naturalistic images of animals to complicated creations that can combine characteristics of various animal species and humans. Of all known Luristan horse-bits, only one with decorative cheek-pieces has a known provenience. This was a chance find made at Khatumban (Pish-e Kuh) that was seized by the local authorities (Haerinck et al. 2004: 105–9, pl. 5). It shows a winged gazelle treading on a defeated one (Fig. 18.6 left). Fig. 18.6 (right) illustrates a more complex animal: a fantastic creature that stands on two hares combines a bovid’s body (horns, hoofs) with a human face, the long curled tail of a feline (Fig. 18.7 left) and a curved wing ending in an animal’s head. Iron Age horse-bits with decorative cheek-pieces are also known outside Luristan. At Marlik Tepe (southwest of the Caspian Sea) a pair was discovered in an early Iron Age tomb (Negahban 1996: 305–6, pl. 135), and similar examples were depicted on Assyrian reliefs of the seventh century BC. These examples do not display the fantastic creatures that are typical of Luristan, however, but display more naturalistic depictions of horses. Some of the Luristan cheek-pieces can be extremely large and
heavy, suggesting that they were not meant for daily use. Traces of wear are often visible, however, indicating they were used, either intensively or over a long period of time.

Finials or idols are amongst the most enigmatic items from Luristan (Moorey 1971: 140–68, pls. 30–39; Muscarella 1988a: 136–54, nos. 215–49; Overlaet 2003: 185–93, figs. 153–9). The earliest examples, discovered in Iron Age IA tombs in the Push-T-e Kuh and at Sangtarashan, consist of a pair of rampant predators or goats with more or less naturalistic proportions, placed on a hollow tubular or bottle-shaped support (Fig. 18.1.5). They are either arranged around a sheet-metal tube or hold rings between their paws or hoofs. It may be that a branch was once inserted in the middle to create the image of a tree of life flanked by animals, a widespread theme in the Ancient Near East. There seems to be a chronological evolution from more or less naturalistic animals to more stylized ones, with the predators or goats displaying long, curved necks (Fig. 18.7.1). Sometimes these predators hold a Janus-type head between their front paws. This is a transition to another group, often called the “master-of-animals standards” (Figs. 18.1.7, 18.7.2–3). These combine two predators with a human figure, occasionally with additional human heads, bird heads or complete birds added on. The fronts and backs of these idols are always identical, indicating that the image was designed to be seen from both sides. Whereas the two felines and the human torso are easily recognized on the earlier types, it becomes more difficult when parts become fused and human heads and birds are added to the image. The latest variant is a complex one: the lower part shows the opposing hips and hind legs of the predator, above which is a tube with two or three human heads and the arms of a human who grasps the long, curving necks of the predators. Small birds or bird heads were sometimes added to the felines’ hips or at the base of the necks. Only once such master-of-animals finial has ever been discovered in controlled excavations, in an early Iron Age III tomb of a warrior at Tattulban in the Push-T-e Kuh (Overlaet 2003: 188–9, figs. 155–6) (Fig. 18.1.7). As this was the only finial ever discovered in an Iron Age III tomb and represents the very end of their stylistic evolution, it seems that the heyday of these complex finials should be dated to Iron Age II.

A third group of mostly small idols is related to the master-of-animal type because they often mix predator and human elements (Fig. 18.7.4–6). This affiliation suggests that they date from to Iron Age II, possibly extending into Iron Age III. These are small, mostly female figurines, often with a no longer identical front and back. The lower part may consist of the hind parts of the predators (Fig. 18.7.5) or predators may be flanking their legs (Fig. 18.7.4). The simplest of these idols is merely a bronze tube crowned with a human head.

The discovery of bottle-shaped supports without any idols in tombs at Khatunban (Schmidt et al. 1989: 63, pls. 64, 175) and Gul Kahan Murdah (Haerinck and Overlaet 1999: 169–70, pls. 107, 125–6) suggests that “idols” may also have been made of perishable materials such as ivory or bone. The discovery of decorative pinheads, boxes, and other utensils in such materials at Surkh Dum-e Luri underscores their use in Luristan. The significance of these finials, however, remains enigmatic. Those from tombs were associated with weaponry, suggesting they specifically belonged to male burials.
Weaponry, principally spike-butted axheads, halberds, whetstones handles, and swords and daggers, forms another group of canonical bronzes. Many axheads, adzes, and halberds have three or more spikes on the butt. The axes have a downward curving blade with an oblique cutting edge or, in extreme cases, a cutting edge at right angles to the ax handle (Fig. 18.1.1–3). A wide variety of shapes and decorations is known. The blade sometimes springs from a predator’s jaws. Spikes may take the shape of animals, and small animals are added to the top edge of the blade or the spikes. Figurative and/or decorative designs are sometimes present on the blade. Specimens have been discovered in Iron Age I and II tombs and in the Sangtarashan javisae, where miniature examples were also found. There seems to be an evolution from axes with modest-sized spikes and slightly curved blades toward specimens with long spikes and extremely curved blades. On these, the blade is often not sharpened, which suggests the spikes and the pointed tip of the blade were more important than the actual “cutting edge” of the weapon. This type of axhead was absent in Iron Age III tombs when a simple type of iron ax became the standard weapon (Fig. 18.5 upper left).

Spikes can also be found on adzes and halberds, often with blades springing from lion’s jaws. Most halberds, however, have a reclining lion on the butt (Fig. 18.8) instead of spikes. Some of these weapons are bimetallic with an iron blade, illustrating the gradual introduction of iron in Iron Age II, after which bronze was used only rarely for weaponry with cutting edges. Only a few ax-adzes, sparingly decorated with human faces, are known from Iron Age III tombs (Fig. 18.8). Bronze continued to be used for blunt, impact weapons in Iron Age III, such as mace heads, but these lack the characteristic figurative decoration.

The presence of bronze cutting edges on axes, knives, and daggers in Iron Age I and II necessitated regular sharpening, for which stick-shaped whetstones were used, often with a decorative cast bronze handle (Fig. 18.1.4). Here, too, one can follow a stylistic

When iron was introduced in Luristan during Iron Age I, its rarity and novelty appeal gave it great value as a status symbol. Local craftsmen in Luristan had little knowledge of iron technology, however, and used it primarily for simple jewelry. Iron pins, anklets, and bracelets demonstrated personal wealth. Early, relatively low-carbon, wrought iron was hardly suitable for weaponry but in Iron Age II it began to be used for the blades of daggers, halberds, and adzes. The bronze decorated shaft in canonical Luristan style was simply cast on to the iron blade, a technique widely attested in western Iran (Pigott 1989).

A unique group of complete iron weapons comprises ninety or so short swords with decorated hilts that were assembled from a series of separately manufactured parts (Fig. 18.9). These may have been one of the first attempts to produce complex iron
objects. Two bearded human heads with the back of the head in the shape of a lion protome are placed on the rim of a flat pommel while two more lions lay outstretched on the hilt. None of these swords was found during controlled excavations, but the technology and style suggest they date from Iron Age II (tenth to ninth century BC) although much earlier (eleventh century BC: Moorey 1991; Rehder 1991) and later dates (c.750–650 BC: Muscarella 1989: 354–5) have also been suggested.

Cast bronze was also used for jewelry, mostly pins and bracelets but also pendants and small rattle bells that may have been worn as apotropaic items. Clothing pins (fibulae) often had decorative bronze heads cast on to an iron body. A large number of pins were found in the sanctuary at Surkh Dum-e Luri and although some were heirlooms, most date to the Iron Age. Among these are a number of pins with large, elaborately decorated heads, some cast, others made of hammered sheet bronze (Fig. 18.10). Some of these have geometric or floral motifs; others display scenes with humans, animals and fantastic creatures. A comparable iconography is present on other sheet-metal objects with repoussé and engraved decoration, such as vessels, shields, and quiver plaques, illustrating the importance of sheet-metal work in Luristan (Moorey 1999).

**FURTHER READING**

There is a vast literature on Luristan bronzes, but many of the older studies on examples held in museum collections are out of date. For a more recent catalog with current literature, see Engel (2008). For general orientation on their background, see Muscarella (1988). Overviews of fieldwork in Luristan and the chronology of the bronzes are provided in Overlaet (2006a, 2006b). Recent excavations of Iron Age assemblages of relevance include Haerinck et al. (2004) and Overlaet (2003).
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