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## **Metal Belts in Iran between Mesopotamia and the Caucasus**

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*Abstract.* The use of metal belts has been an important means of adornment both in female and male dress. In general, belts cannot denote a specific cultural or ethnic identity; rather, they are a sign of individual social status; however, its meaning is hard to track correctly and can differ significantly among different cultures. Metal belts have been extensively used in the Iranian plateau and neighboring region since the Late Bronze Age, where they have been found especially within funerary contexts. The present work aims to offer a general survey of the use of metal belts in the Iranian world, from the Bronze Age to the Sassanian period.

*Keywords:* metal belts, Hasanlu, Marlik, Luristan, Iron Age, metalwork

## **Металлические пояса в Иране между Месопотамией и Кавказом**

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**Аннотация.** Использование металлического пояса было важным средством украшения как женского, так и мужского платья. В целом ремни не могут обозначать конкретную культурную или этническую принадлежность, а скорее являются признаком индивидуального социального статуса; однако его значение трудно отследить должным образом, и оно может сильно различаться в разных культурах. Металлические пояса широко использовались на Иранском плато и в соседнем регионе, где их находили с позднего бронзового века, чаще в погребальных сооружениях. Цель настоящей работы — предложить общий обзор на использование металлических поясов в иранском мире, от бронзового века до сасанидского периода.

**Ключевые слова:** металлические ремни, Хасанлу, Марлик, Луристан, Железный век, металлургия

Metal belts made of bronze (copper alloy) are a well-attested class of metalwork within the Iranian plateau and the neighboring regions. They are essentially thin metal sheets sewn onto a backing of leather or woven textile. The use of metal belts was an important means of adornment both in female and male dress. Three primary pieces of evidence attest its use: belts found in situ on skeletons, pictorial or sculptural representations of belts and detached fragments of sheet metal. Several studies have been devoted to them, highlighting regional and chronological features and differences. The present work will present a general review of the use of metal belts throughout the Ancient Near East, giving all necessary

references. It then will mainly focus on belts found during controlled excavations in the Iranian highlands.

Many metal belts were found in the Levant and Mesopotamia during the Bronze Ages and became the subject of a recent detailed study by Silvia Prell [Prell 2019]. The earliest archaeological evidence of the use of metal belts can be dated to the late Early Bronze Age. However, earlier representations of individuals wearing belts are known, as with the depictions of the “curly-haired hero” [Prell 2019: 321].

Belts are essentially found within the funerary context associated with the deceased. In several cases, weapons have also been found within the grave, therefore suggesting that the use of belts, yet still limited, was mainly for male individuals.

The Early Bronze Age evidence is confined mostly to Mesopotamia and Northern Syria, and it is represented by a handful of finds, both in silver and copper-alloy. They are generally elongated plain metal sheets.

During the Middle Bronze Age, belts’ use slightly increased, especially in the Levant. Along with plain items, several belts — complete and fragmentary — show a surface decoration made of embossed concentric circles.

There is no clear archaeological evidence of metal belts during the Late Bronze Age in Mesopotamia, although several artistic depictions on statues and reliefs suggest their presence.

On the contrary, toward the end of the 2nd millennium, the use of metal belts significantly increased in the Southern Caucasus. Within a couple of centuries, it became one of the most important classes within the rich Caucasian metalworking tradition. Hundreds of belts have been found in funerary

contexts, usually well published [Castelluccia 2017]. Moreover, several items bear complex geometric and figurative decorations, with rich representations of both humans and animals in the surrounding landscape. Belts thus express the rich artistic tradition of the native cultures of the Caucasus.

In the following centuries, decorated metal belts were widely produced in the Urartian kingdom, which essentially borrowed the use of belts from the Caucasian population. Hundreds of belts are also known for the Urartian period [Kellner 1991; Curtis 1996], but they are mostly of unknown origin. Only a few dozen belts come from controlled excavations, most of them from burials. Only a few items were found inside fortresses and temples.

Most belts are decorated according to the Urartian artistic tradition, which was strongly influenced by contemporary Assyrian art. This influence is visible in the realistic rendering of the figures, the use of numerous fantastic creatures, often obtained through the juxtaposition of parts of real figures, and in the widespread depiction of lions and bulls. Another feature borrowed from Neo-Assyrian models is the use of the hunting scene with a chariot or the procession of armed men, a clear reflection of the artistic tradition of Neo-Assyrian orthostats.

Another key feature of the Urartian belts is almost obsessive respect for symmetry. Humans and animals may be spread over multiple rows in horizontal development, but the figures are almost always arranged symmetrically to each other.

The figured belts are pretty varied, with an abundant artistic repertoire closely following the guidelines listed above. Overall

the decoration is less “imaginative” than that found on the Caucasian belts, where the craftsmen seem to have had greater stylistic freedom. On the other hand, Urartian belts follow precise canons, probably under the influence of royal workshops.

Metal belts are almost absent in Assyrian contexts as only one site yielded two metal strips, excavated by Layard in Nimrud [Curtis 2013: pl. 94].

During the early first millennium BC, the use of belts also spread in the northern part of the Iranian plateau, an area that witnessed remarkable economic, social, and political innovations. Remarkable finds highly express the importance of metallurgy in western and northern Iran in several necropoleis. In contrast, contemporary Assyrian royal inscriptions mention the metalwork of these areas only in the Black Obelisk from Nimrud, made during the reign of Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC), which records bronze vessels amongst the tribute of the king of Gilzanu, a region located in the southern Lake Urmia basin.

The use of metal belts in the Iranian plateau was firstly presented by Moorey [Moorey 1967]. A decade after Moorey’s work, R. Ghirshman offered an overview of the use of belts from the Kingdom of Urartu until Sassanid times; however, he did not distinguish between decorated metal plates and simple bronze buckles used to fasten belts made of perishable materials [Ghirshman 1979]. Moreover, his study was primarily based on specimens preserved in museums and private collections, often without archaeological context. In the following decades, new data emerged from the excavations of

important sites, such as Hasanlu, Sialk, Marlik and several funerary fields in Luristan.

These sites include thousands of well-documented graves, usually with rich metalwork assemblage, but the use of elongated metal belts is scarcely attested. Buckles or other metal parts of belts, like those found at Tepe Sialk, are not included in this count.

Several metal plates of generally rectangular shape, which could be interpreted as parts of a quiver or belt, were found inside a temple structure on the site of Surkh Dum; they bear simple geometric, plant or animal decorations [Schmidt, van Loon, Curvers 1989: pls. 200–201]. However, none possess holes along the edges or other means of attachment to any base, so their interpretation as remnants of belts or quivers remains uncertain; they might well be considered, as suggested by Muscarella [Muscarella 1981: 334], to be simple votive plaques.

Several funerary complexes were investigated along the southern shores of the Caspian Sea. In Dailaman a Japanese team found an isolated gold belt [Egami, Fukai, Masuda 1965: pl. 32, no. 2; pl. 75, no. 36], and a further plain bronze belt of a later date [Egami, Fukai, Masuda 1965: pl. 85].

In the Talesh region, only few belts were discovered [de Morgan 1896; de Morgan 1905]. Apart from two plain items, one is decorated with horizontal lines of elongated embossed dots [Castelluccia 2017: 137, n. 70], while two other belts are formed with a series of independent rectangular plaques with embossed elements [Castelluccia 2017: 150, n. 110, 111].

Moreover, an undecorated metal strip was found at the waist of an individual buried in Tomb A6 of the so-called “Zagros Graveyard” in Kurdistan, dated to the seventh century BC [Amelirad, Overlaet, Haerinck 2012: pl. 2].

Another remarkable context is the Early Iron Age necropolis of Marlik, in which about fifteen fragmentary belts were found. Unfortunately, little remained of the skeletons in the tombs, but based on the grave goods, it is likely that they were burials of adult males. A couple of graves, nos. 26 and 52 [Negahban 1996: 19–20, 23–24], contained more than one belt along with some of the most exceptional finds, including many objects in precious metal. The standard length of the fragments did not exceed 50 cm in total. They can be divided into two main groups. The principal feature of the first group consists of terminations with two mirror-image spirals. The second group is more varied but retains the common feature of having the surface decorated with repoussé dots of various sizes.

There is some doubt about the identification of a metallic object found in the cemetery of Khurvin [Vanden Berghe 1964: 67, pl. 34, n. 277]; the piece, wholly preserved, measures 21 cm in length and 8.5 in height and would seem to be a diadem, as interpreted initially by Vanden Berghe. However, the decoration is practically identical to that of the belt from Marlik. A bracelet from Luristan also has the same form [Godard 1931: pl. 27, n. 81].

The most significant number comes from Hasanlu, whose rich finds exemplified how the local elite consumed the fine, locally produced metalwork. They date to Period IVb (1050–800 BC). At Hasanlu, the excavators discovered approximately

94 belts or belt fragments [Cifarelli, Castelluccia, Dan 2018]. Four items were found in burials in the Outer Town area; while in South Caucasian inhumations belts are generally found in situ at the waist, this is not the case at Hasanlu, where they are buried alongside, rather than on, the body [Cifarelli, Castelluccia, Dan 2018: 7]. Other 90 examples were recovered in the destruction of the citadel. More than 70 belt fragments were part of the rich collections in the temple treasuries adjacent to the main hall of temple BBII; others were discovered in elite residences or storerooms in the citadel. Most of the belts from Hasanlu conform to three distinct styles of decoration: simple sheets with repoussé dots and lines (Fig. 5); rows of hemispherical riveted studs (Fig. 6); and a combination of finely incised surface detail with repoussé animals in high relief (Fig. 7).

Figurative Hasanlu's belts find strong parallels with an item accidentally brought to light in fragments in 2009 at the village of Gargul in the Western Azerbaijan province of Iran [Cifarelli, Mollazadeh, Binandeh 2018]. The Gargul belt consists of nine pieces of the bronze sheet. Its reconstructed fragments add up to a length of ca. 95 cm (Fig. 8). Its body is 9.5 cm wide and has a 15 cm diameter medallion "buckle," a decorative element rather than a fastening device. Most of the surface displays a rich embossed and incised decoration.

The medallion depicts two human figures flanking a "sacred tree" motif, surmounted by a more petite figure within a winged disk. In contrast, the outer ring features scenes of humans and animals. The horizontal body of the belt is bordered at the top



and bottom with an incised guilloche pattern. The decoration is divided horizontally into two registers, and toward the right end, close to the medallion, a vertical guilloche line separates another independent register. The whole composition features scenes of hunting and animal with armed men and several creatures.

After the Urartian kingdom the use of metal belts gradually began to vanish. The use of belts in Achaemenian Iran is not easy to establish. In representations of both Medes and Persians, belts appear to be of leather or fabric without metal fittings of any kind. At Persepolis and on the Oxus gold plaques' the Medes wear a tunic belted at the waist with a girdle from which the akinakes hangs. Although the flowing robe of the Persians often conceals the belting of their undergarments, belts do not appear to be metal-plated when shown.

It was only during the Sasanian period that the use of metal plaques and strips for decorating belts became widely attested. Still, the creation and use of elongated metal plaques are mainly confined to the Iron Age of the highlands.

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## Figures

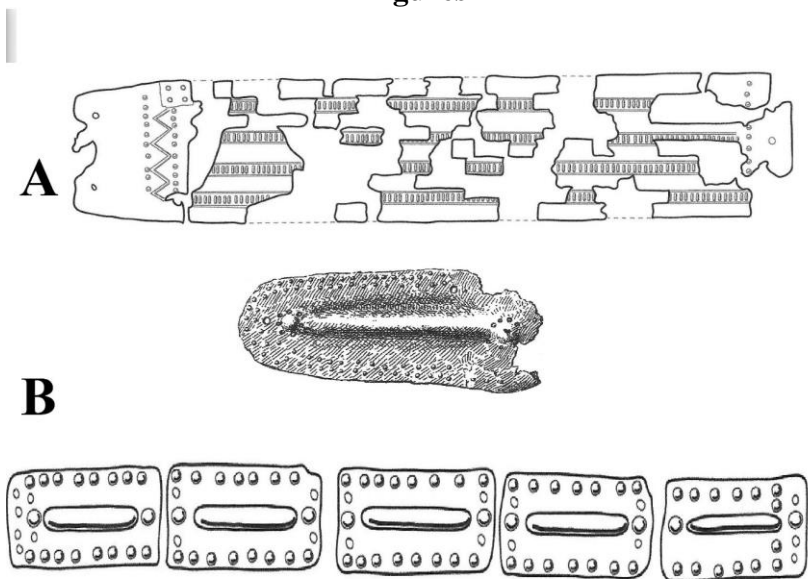


Fig. 1. Belts from Talesh. A [Castelluccia 2017: 137, n. 70]; B [Castelluccia 2017: 150, n. 110, 111].

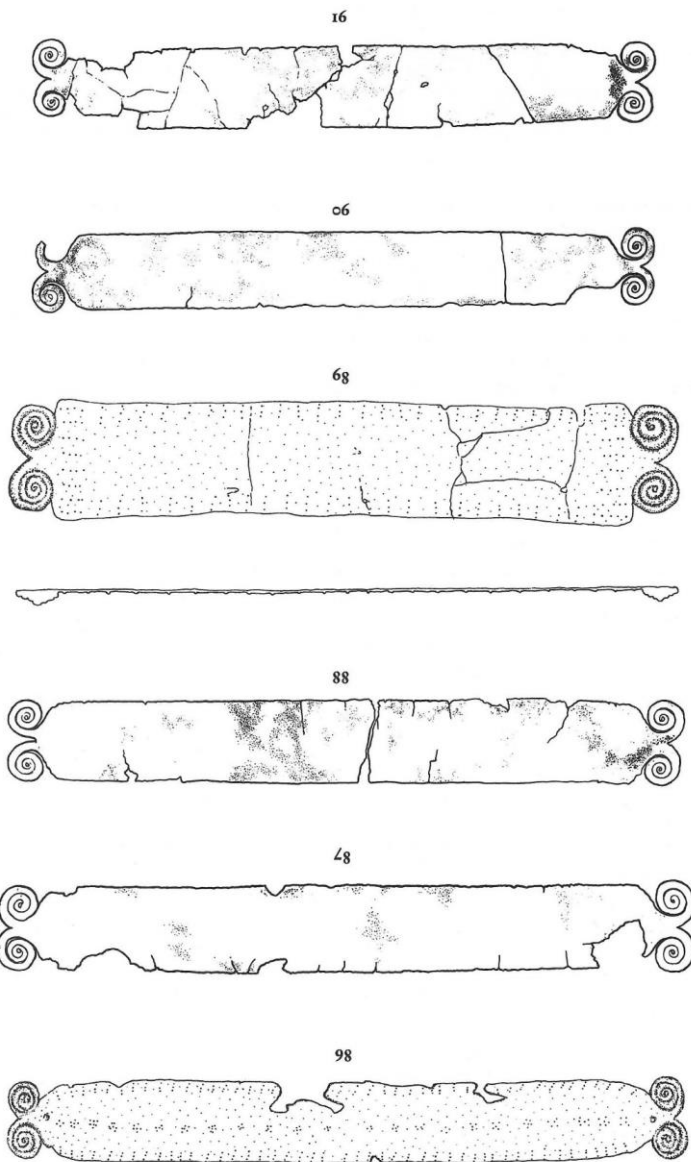


Fig. 2. Belts from Marlik [Negahban 1995: 99].

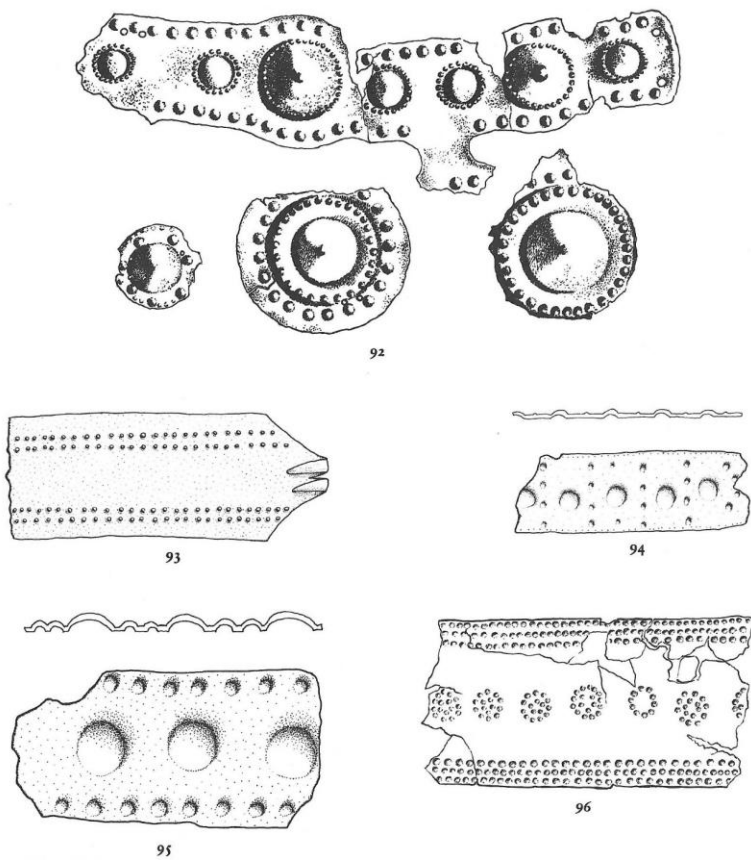


Fig. 3. Belts from Marlik [Negahban 1995: 101].



Fig. 4. Belt or Diadem from Khurvin [Vanden Berghe 1964: pl. 39, n. 277].

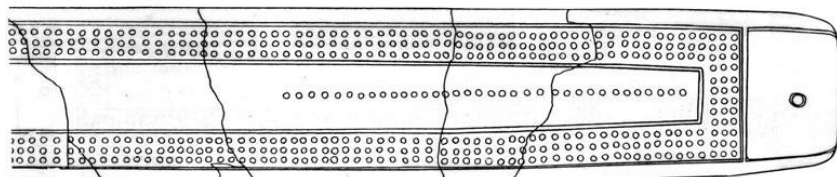
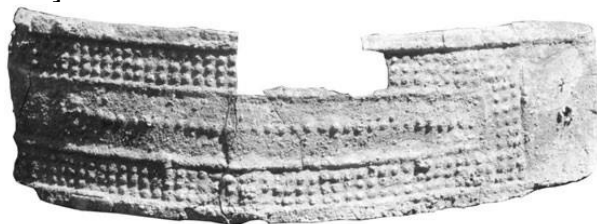


Fig. 5. Embossed belt from Hasanlu [Cifarelli, Castelluccia, Dan 2018: fig. 5]. Courtesy of the Penn Museum.

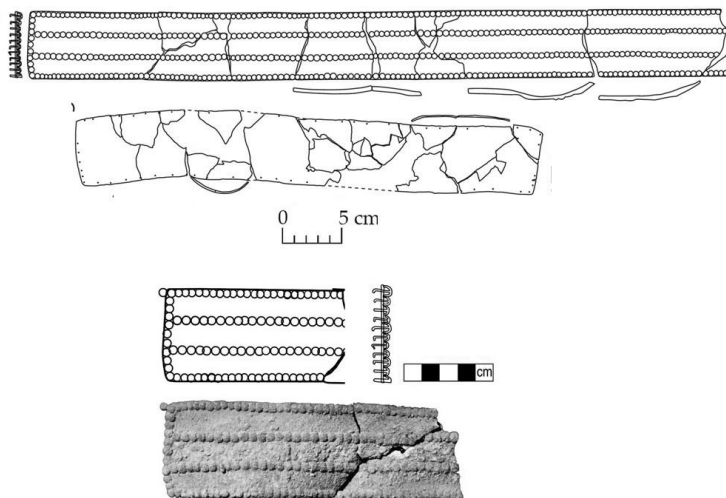


Fig. 6. Riveted belt from Hasanlu [Cifarelli, Castelluccia, Dan 2018: figs. 8a, 9]. Courtesy of the Penn Museum.



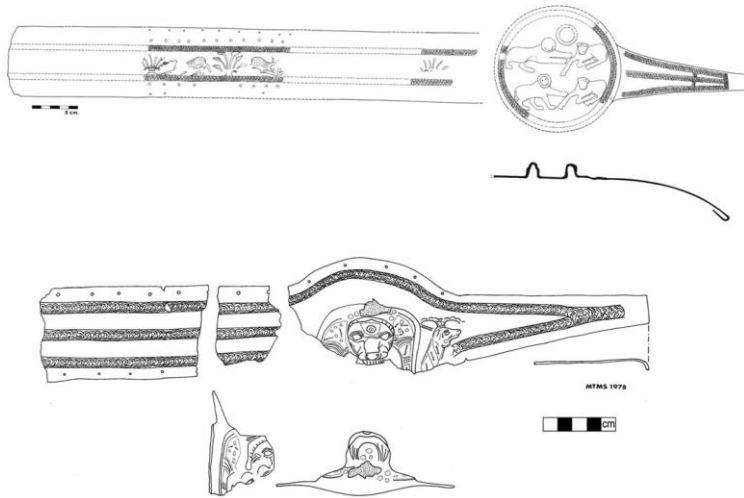


Fig. 7. Figurative belt from Hasanlu [Cifarelli, Castelluccia, Dan 2018: figs. 13, 17]. Courtesy of the Penn Museum.

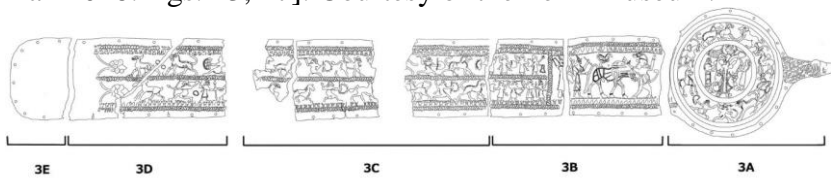


Fig. 8. Belt from Gargul [Cifarelli, Mollazadeh, Binandeh 2018: fig. 3].