



The Ladies of Veh Ardashir

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“Ravina visited the city of Mechoza to collect charity. The women of Mechoza came and placed before him golden chains and bracelets. He accepted them from them. Rabbah Tosfaah said to Ravina: ‘But we learned in a Baraisa, charity collectors may take from them something small but not something substantial’.

[Ravina] said to him: ‘These items for the wealthy inhabitants of Mechoza are considered something small’”

(Bava Qamma 119a; Schottenstein edition*)

This passage comes from the Babylonian Talmud which was compiled in what is now southern Iraq in about the fifth century AD. The scene is set in the city of Mahoza which had the official name of Veh Ardashir (“city of Ardashir”) after its royal founder Ardashir I (ca 224–240). This almost circular city was deliberately created in the third century between the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon and the old Hellenistic city of Seleucia on the Tigris. During this period, Iraq had become part of the powerful Sasanian empire which was ruled from the third to seventh centuries by an Iranian dynasty originating from the city of Istakhr, near Shiraz in present-day southern Iran. Sasanian studies have dwelt on their coins and seals, highlighted their luxury arts – particularly silverwares and woven textiles – and generally viewed their material culture from an Iranian perspective. However, much less attention has been paid to evidence for everyday life or considering the cultural connections with their Roman neighbours to the west.

Between 1964 and 1970 the Italian Archaeological Expedition to Iraq excavated a large area in the southern portion of Veh Ardashir (fig. 1). The excavations revealed houses, shops and workshops built of sundried brick with rooms arranged around central courtyards; they were connected by narrow alleys with large blocks separated by wide streets. The somewhat cramped and inter-connected nature of the dwellings and activities explains

frequent references in the Babylonian Talmud and its concerns over the possible effects on the ritual purity of local Jewish householders. This southern quarter of Veh Ardashir was occupied for over three centuries until local flooding appears to have caused the area to be abandoned in favour of higher ground. Although a wide range of objects were found most represent items of casual loss or deliberate discard. These include items of personal adornment and dress accessories, gaming pieces, small figurines and statuettes, clay sealings, fired clay property stamps, weights, tools and occasional weapons. Unsurprisingly, almost all are everyday items of no intrinsic value and some were even discarded during manufacture, proving that they were made locally. There was additional evidence for the working of bone, horn and shell, spinning and weaving, iron smithing, the casting of metal furniture, glass working and pottery production. Objects of great value rarely enter the archaeological record under such circumstances and, in any case, would have been recycled, and the Babylonian Talmud contains numerous references to the recycling of metal and glass as well as the comparative wealth of the ladies of Veh Ardashir.

So what do these excavated finds tell us about life in this city? The most common items were used for personal adornment and these include a large number of beads (fig. 2). These are mostly glass and measure as little as 1.5 mm across. Scientific analysis of glass production

* *Talmud Bavli: the Schottenstein edition*, Artscroll, Mesorah Publications, Brooklyn, N.Y. 2009.



waste and vessel fragments proves that Veh Ardashir was one of several glass working centres in southern Iraq at this period. However the composition of the beads has not yet been analysed and they may instead represent long-distance imports as analyses of similar beads found in other parts of the Sasanian empire shows that similar glass beads were imported from South or Southeast Asia where there was a long tradition of making beads like these. How they were worn or used is uncertain: some may have been used in embroidery or even threaded in the hair but most were probably strung as necklaces. Other, somewhat larger, glass beads were made by folding blobs of hot glass around a narrow iron pipe and these were probably locally made as they show the same kind of weathering as locally produced vessel glass. In addition, there were small numbers of beads made of glazed pottery, shell, coral and carnelian.

Bone pins were also common finds at Veh Ardashir (fig. 3). These measured between 8 and 16 cm. in length and were probably carved from large ungulate limb bones, a process which usually destroys any identifying characteristics and prevents closer identification to species. Some were more carefully finished on one side, implying that these were intended to be primarily viewed from one side; the extent to which they were completely finished was dictated by the raw material however and the length and curvature of the bone directly influenced the size and straightness of the finished product. A single unfinished pin was recovered and allows us to reconstruct the stages of manufacture (fig. 4). After probably soaking and scraping the bone to remove all traces of skin, flesh and cartilage, a knife was used to whittle the blank form: the first stage was to roughly shape the pin, then mark out the area of the head with a transverse incised

1. Veh Ardashir, The craftsmen's quarter (photo Centro Scavi Torino).



2. Re-strung necklace of coloured glass beads, Veh Ardashir. Torino, Palazzo Madama - Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, inv. C 2482.

line, carve the head, whittle the shank (which sometimes created a lightly fluted effect) before diagonally rasping the tip and finally giving the whole pin a light polish. A slight swelling was left midway along the shank on many examples and this minor yet deliberate detail would have enhanced the grip of the pins. The trace marks on the pins and their lack of perfect symmetry exclude the use of a lathe in either the turning or finishing of the pins. The degree of finish varies slightly and this may reflect the work of different crafts-

men. In any case, these objects were doubtless the work of professionals rather than amateurs. Probably many or all of the pins were originally highlighted with pigment and traces of black, red, yellow and even pink colour have been noted by the author on similar bone hair pins from other Sasanian sites but unfortunately no traces survive on these: as Roberta Menegazzi noted in connection with Seleucid terracottas in a previous issue of this journal, we often under-estimate the extent to which objects in antiquity were



3. Bone pins, Veh Ardashir. Torino, Palazzo Madama - Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, inv. C 183, 1233, 1293, 1623, 1659, 1677, 1681, 2396, 5704.

4. Unfinished bone pin, Veh Ardashir. Torino, Palazzo Madama - Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, inv. C 1620.



painted in bright colours as these easily fade or can be removed in cleaning. These pins were originally catalogued by the excavators as awls or styli but, unlike some of their Roman counterparts, there is no evidence that the Sasanian inhabitants used such implements to write on wax pages and in any case awls are rarely decorated. Instead, they represent evidence for wearing the hair long and piling it up on top of or behind the head and fixing it in place with pins. There is evidence for identical shapes of pin from as far west as

Roman Britain and as far east as Afghanistan (then part of the Sasanian empire). Studies of Romano-British bone hair pins shows that some types have a closely defined date-range: it is too early to say the same for Sasanian pins but the fact there is a similarity is intriguing. It suggests that changes in ladies' fashion were carefully followed and that some women in both empires chose to wear their hair in a similar manner; they may have been veiled outdoors but within the house these hair-styles were clearly intended to be admired.

5. Cosmetic shell fragment, Veh Ardashir. Torino, Palazzo Madama - Museo Civico d'Arte Antica, inv. C 1614.



Moreover, it proves a form of hairstyle that is not often represented in Sasanian art which generally shows women with long plaited hair. Bone hair pins are hardly a product of luxury trade and the discovery of an unfinished example from Veh Ardashir is proof that they were made locally; moreover, as has been argued for the Roman empire, these craftsmen probably created standardised products by drawing their inspiration from copy books which were themselves traded.

A third category of object found at Veh Ardashir consisted of large oyster shells which had been modified for use as shallow open containers and decorated around the inner border with concentric dotted circles (fig. 5). The source of the shells is presumed to be the Persian Gulf which also supported a flourishing pearl industry at this period. Isolated shells have been found at different Sasanian sites in present-day Iran and Turkmenistan, and others travelled northwards as far as Georgia or into the Roman Mediterranean where they have turned up at sites as far west as Voghenza at the northern end of the Adriatic and

Aquincum in Hungary. The largest concentration of finds comes from Veh Ardashir however and it seems likely that this was one of the main centres of production. They were probably used as cosmetic palettes although there are no surviving traces of cosmetic residue.

The last category of object to be considered here also concerns make-up and personal appearance. Small metal pins were used as dress fasteners (fig. 6). Other small cast bronze rods with a rounded tip at one end were excavated in domestic contexts at Veh Ardashir. These measured between 7.9 and 10.3 cm. in length and must have been used as small applicators for eye-liner. A variety of small glass vessels are described in the archaeological literature as *unguentaria* and one type in particular was certainly used to contain eye-liner: this is in the form of a double tube and scientific analysis of the dark residue inside two Sasanian examples in the British Museum indicates this to be galena (lead sulphide). The trade of cosmetics as well as perfumes has a long history and the Babylonian Talmud refers to a dispute between “peddlers who go from



6. Metal toggle pin,
Veh Ardashir.
Torino, Palazzo
Madama - Museo
Civico d'Arte
Antica, inv. C 2442.

town to town selling cosmetics” and established merchants who saw this as unwelcome competition (Bava Basra 22a).

The small finds considered here from Veh Ardashir provide small but tangible glimpses into household life and economic activity at the heart of Iraq in Late Antiquity. They illustrate perennial concerns over personal

appearance, hint at the social importance of fashion and suggest new points of cultural connection between Sasanian Mesopotamia and the eastern Roman empire between the third and fifth centuries. They therefore offer important new information and are considerably more significant than their modest appearance might first suggest.

The full publication of the results of the excavations at Veh Ardashir is a major project of the Centro Scavi Torino and University of Torino. I am indebted to my colleagues there, especially Dr Roberta Venco, Dr Carlo Lippolis and Professor Antonio Invernizzi, for inviting me to take on the publication of the small objects and for their kind support. A proportion of these finds was officially exported with the permission of the authorities in Baghdad and was transferred from the Centro Scavi Torino to the museum in

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Le signore di Veh Ardashir

Scavi archeologici nell'Iraq centrale condotti dal Centro scavi di Torino tra il 1964 e il 1970 portarono nuove importanti scoperte sulla vita quotidiana nella città sasanide di Veh-Ardashir. Questa era situata sulla riva opposta del fiume Tigri rispetto alla capitale Ctesiphon ed è citata nel Talmud babilonese come Mahoza. Le ricerche portarono alla luce case, negozi e botteghe databili dal III al V secolo a.C. Benché non siano stati trovati oggetti di grande valore, le dettagliate analisi dei resti di beni personali gettati via e di oggetti non finiti trovati nei luoghi della produzione artigiana offrono interessanti spaccati sulla vita quotidiana e sulla moda femminile di uno dei più importanti centri urbani della tarda antichità. Essi offrono inoltre spunti intriganti su somiglianze, precedentemente insospettabili, tra acconciature femminili romane e sasanidi, sulla locale produzione di valve di ostrica decorate e utilizzate come contenitori per cosmetici e la diffusione di collane in vetro colorato.