ISSN NO: 2770-8608
November 2025

The Interpretation of The Turan Eneolitic Period in Iranian Historiography: Analysis and Prospects

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Abstract. This article provides a historiographical analysis of the role and perspectives of the modern Iranian school of archaeology in the study of the Eneolithic (Chalcolithic) period in Central Asia, particularly in the ancient territory of Turan. The article comprehensively examines the concepts of Iranian scholars regarding the periodization and chronology of the region's Eneolithic era, the interpretation of the evolution of material culture (pottery, architecture), and the processes of cultural contact and migration. The main focus is on the theories of leading Iranian researchers such as Seyed Mansour Sajjadi and Hasan Fazeli, as well as their relationship with the scientific conclusions of Soviet and Western archaeologists. The purpose of this article is to assess the contribution of Iranian historiography to the scientific debates on the Turan Eneolithic and to outline future research directions in this field.
Keywords: Eneolithic; Turan; Southern Turkmenistan; Iranian archaeology; historiography; Namazgah-Depe; Geoksyur culture; cultural contacts; migration; periodization; pottery; urbanism.

Introduction. The southern regions of Central Asia, known in historical literature as the land of Turan, are considered one of the most ancient cradles of human civilization. The Eneolithic, or Chalcolithic, period in this region, dating from the 5th to the 3rd millennia BCE, is characterized by the flourishing of settled agricultural cultures, the formation of the first urban-type settlements, and the emergence of complex social structures. For many years, this period was actively studied primarily by Soviet and later Western archaeologists, leading to the development of fundamental scientific concepts based on sites like Namazga-Tepe, Altyn-Tepe, Jeitun, and Geoksyur.

However, in recent decades, the interest of archaeologists from the neighboring Islamic Republic of Iran in this topic has grown significantly. The study of ancient connections between the geographically and historico-culturally close Iranian Plateau and the Turanian plains has become a pressing task for Iranian historiography. Iranian scholars are not only actively researching Eneolithic sites in the northeastern regions of their own country but are also putting forward their original views on the genesis, chronology, and external relations of the cultures in Southern Turkmenistan[1,2,3].

The main objective of this article is to conduct a systematic historiographical analysis of the research by representatives of the Iranian school of archaeology on the Turan Eneolithic. This analysis includes the following main tasks:

1. To study the approaches of Iranian scholars to the periodization and chronological boundaries of the Turan Eneolithic period.
2. To examine the evolution of material culture, particularly pottery and architecture, through their interpretations.
3. To analyze the most debated theories on interregional cultural contacts and migration processes and compare them with existing scientific paradigms.
4. To evaluate the specific contribution of Iranian historiography to enriching our knowledge of the Turan Eneolithic.

The primary sources for this research are the scholarly works of Iranian scientists, including Parviz Varjavand, Seyed Mansour Sajjadi, Hassan Bosafa, Hasan Fazeli, and others. Their views are comparatively analyzed with the conclusions of Soviet and Western scholars such as V.M. Masson, V.I. Sarianidi, P. Kohl, and R. Dyson.

Issues of Periodization and Chronologi of the Eneolitic Period. In the study of any archaeological period, establishing its precise chronological boundaries and identifying its internal stages is of fundamental importance. For a long time, the periodization of the Turan Eneolithic was dominated by the system developed by Soviet scholars like B.A. Kuftin, V.M. Masson, and I.N. Khlopin, which was based on the stratigraphy of the Namazgah-Depe site. While adopting this system as a basis, Iranian archaeologists have compared it with

ISSN NO: 2770-8608
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materials from the northeastern regions of Iran, thereby clarifying certain aspects.

The Issue of the Transition from the Neolithic to the Eneolithic Period. Changes in pottery technology are the primary criterion for determining the boundary between the Neolithic and the Eneolithic. Iranian scholars such as Hassan Bosafa, Muhammad Sadegh Davari, and Mahmoud Turoiy, relying on materials from the Anau I site in Turkmenistan, place this transition period between 5200–4800 BCE. In their view, the main distinguishing feature of this period is manifested in pottery[1,2,3,4]. While pottery of the Jeitun culture (Neolithic) used only plant temper (chaff), the pottery of Anau IA (Early Eneolithic) began to incorporate sand along with plant remains. This technological innovation, despite the similarity in the external appearance and decoration of the pottery, indicates the beginning of a new era. Iranian scholars also confirm this conclusion with materials from the Munjukli-Depe site in Iran.

The General Chronology and Internal Stages of the Eneolithic Period. Iranian researchers, based on the Namazgah cultural complex proposed by B.A. Kuftin in 1952 and later developed by V.M. Masson, define the general chronology of the Turan Eneolithic from 4800 to 2900 BCE[12,13]. As reflected in the research of Seyed Mansour Sajjadi and Hassan Bosafa, they divide this extensive period into three main stages and conduct a comparative analysis with sites in Iran:

First Stage: Early Eneolithic – Namazgah I (c. 4800–4000 BCE). This period is characterized by the appearance of rectangular residential rooms in architecture and locally produced pottery fired in relatively simple, open-type kilns. Approximately 30% of the pottery is decorated with black and dark brown horizontal triangles, zigzags, and wavy lines. Iranian scholars note that similar finds from this period have been discovered at several sites in Iran's Gurgan Plain (Yarim-Tepe), the Dargaz Plain, and the Atrek Valley, indicating close cultural ties between the two regions. They also endorse the division of the Namazgah I period itself into three sub-stages (early, middle, and late) by the archaeologist P. Kohl[14].

Second Stage: Middle Eneolithic – Namazgah II (c. 4000–3500 BCE). According to Mahmoud Turoiy, distinctive cultural features developed in the Kopet-Dag foothills and the Geoksyur oasis during this period. Two main styles of pottery are distinguished: a) pea-patterned, brown, and red-painted pottery characteristic of Kara-Depe and Namazgah; b) red-painted pottery with black geometric designs characteristic of the Geoksyur oasis. Seyed Sajjadi further divides this period into two sub-stages (the Yalangach-Depe and Mullali-Depe periods), based on architectural innovations (fortified temples and defense walls) and stylistic differences in pottery and figurines[5].

Third Stage: Late Eneolithic – Namazgah III (c. 3500–2900 BCE). Iranian researchers identify the beginning of the use of the slow-rotating potter's wheel as the most significant technological achievement of this period. Cultural layers and artifacts from this era have been found at numerous sites in Iran, such as Yom-Tepe, Shirvan-Tepe, Hissar-Tepe, Shah-Tepe, and Tureng-Tepe. This suggests that the integration processes between Turan and the Iranian Plateau intensified during the Late Eneolithic. Thus, while adopting the periodization system of Soviet archaeology for the study of the Turan Eneolithic, Iranian scholars have enriched it through extensive comparative analysis with sites in Iranian territory, making a significant contribution to the creation of a regional chronological scale[10].

Analysis of Material Culture : The Evolution of Architecture and Pottery. Iranian researchers consider changes in material culture, especially in architecture and pottery, as crucial criteria for assessing the socio-economic development level of Turan Eneolithic societies.

Seyed Mansour Sajjadi interprets the development of architecture in Southern Turkmenistan as an evolutionary process from the single-room, simple houses of the Neolithic to the complex, multi-room dwellings with defensive structures characteristic of the Eneolithic.

Early Eneolithic: During this period, Jeitun-era traditions continued. For example, houses at Dashliji-Depe, belonging to the Geoksyur culture, were small, with a rectangular hearth near the entrance and a short wall opposite it. These houses were still built separately and scattered.

Middle Eneolithic: Significant changes occurred in architecture during this period. At settlements like Geoksyur, Yalangach-Depe, and Mullali-Depe, dwellings became denser, and they were surrounded by defensive walls with circular towers built along them. Sajjadi notes that while the exact function of these towers (observation, storage, or religious ceremonies) is still debated, their appearance indicates the presence of social unrest and external threats. The houses of this period were mostly single-room, with rectangular hearths in the corners.

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Late Eneolithic: This period is distinguished by the beginning of urban culture. Settlements like Namazgah, Kara-Depe, Altyn-Depe, and Ilgynly-Depe transformed into large, urban-type centers. These centers featured complex architectural ensembles, including defensive walls, monumental gates, specialized craft quarters (copper smelting, pottery workshops), public buildings, and temples. Hasan Fazeli, using the example of the Hissar-Tepe site in Iran, highlights that residential areas and workshops for processing copper and lapis lazuli were separated into distinct quarters, emphasizing the specialization of production and the increasing complexity of urban life.

The temples at Ilgynly-Tepe are particularly highly regarded by Iranian scholars. Sajjadi acknowledges that their large area, the *sgraffito*-style wall paintings (incising designs onto a black-painted wall surface), the clay benches made in imitation of wooden chairs, the male figurines, and numerous metal objects are unique phenomena on the scale of the entire Near East. These findings suggest the existence of a complex religious-ideological system in Late Eneolithic society.

The Developmental Stages of the Art of Pottery. Pottery is the most important source for classifying Eneolithic cultures, determining their chronology, and identifying their cultural connections. Iranian scholars interpret the changes in this field as a reflection of technological progress and external cultural influences.

Early Eneolithic (Namazgah I): The pottery of this period was still handmade and fired in simple kilns. Although of good quality, it continued the stylistic traditions of the Jeitun period. Simple, triangular geometric decorations painted in black on a bright red background predominated. This style was widespread across large areas of Southern Turkmenistan, from the Kopet-Dag foothills to the Tedjen oasis.

Middle Eneolithic (Namazgah II): Alongside monochrome (single-color) pottery, a polychrome (multi-colored) type emerged during this period. Sajjadi attributes this new style to the influence of neighboring cultures. He cites the discovery of similar pottery at the Tal-i Iblis site in southeastern Iran as evidence of contacts between the two regions. The Geoksyur-style vessels of this period are distinguished by their complex geometric patterns.

Late Eneolithic (Namazgah III): A revolutionary change occurred in pottery during this period with the invention of the slow-rotating potter's wheel. This technology allowed for the standardization of vessel shapes and an increase in production volume. A new decorative style, known as the “Geoksyur style” featuring cross-shaped and serrated line motifs, became widespread. Sajjadi links these fundamental changes in pottery and the simultaneous appearance of new burial rites (domed brick tombs) to the migration of new ethnic groups into the region. In his opinion, these changes were not the result of the gradual development of the local population but were the product of external influence, namely migration.

Thus, in the interpretation of Iranian scholars, the material culture of the Turan Eneolithic period followed a developmental path from simple farming settlements to complex urban centers. Technological achievements (metallurgy, the potter's wheel) and external cultural contacts played a decisive role in this process.

Cultural Contacts and Migration Theories : Historiographical Debates. The role of external factors in the origin and development of the Turan Eneolithic cultures is one of the most controversial topics in historiography. Iranian archaeologists have put forward several concepts in this regard, further invigorating existing scientific debates.

Relations between Southern Turkmenistan and the Iranian Plateau

Based on materials from the Hissar IB-IIA and Sialk III-IV sites in Iran, Soviet archaeologists V.M. Masson and V.I. Sarianidi concluded that extensive contacts and migrations existed between Southern Turkmenistan and the Iranian Plateau during the Late Eneolithic[15,16]. However, Seyed Mansour Sajjadi does not fully agree with this view. He argues that a thorough analysis of Hissar and Sialk pottery does not indicate a large-scale population movement between the two regions but rather confirms only trade and cultural exchange. In his opinion, close similarities during this period are observed only in the pottery of Shahr-e Sukhteh I in Iran and Mundigak III in Afghanistan[3].

Hasan Fazeli, using the example of Hissar-Tepe, shows that the direction of these contacts changed over time. According to him, in the first half of the 4th millennium BCE, the Hissar culture was influenced by the Sialk and Arisman cultures of southwestern Iran. However, by the second half of the millennium, the vector of cultural influence shifted, and connections with the cultures of the Gurgan Plain and Southern

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Turkmenistan (Namazgah III) became dominant. This indicates the growing prominence of the Turanian civilization in the region[7].

The "Southwestern Migration" Theory and Counterarguments. One of the most controversial theories advanced by Seyed Sajjadi is the hypothesis that the Geoksyur oasis was settled during the Eneolithic by a population migrating from the southwestern part of Iran (the territory of ancient Elam). He attempts to substantiate his view with the following evidence:

1. Some patterns on Geoksyur pottery are very similar to those on the pottery of the Tal-i Bakun culture in southwestern Iran.
2. The structure of tombs in Geoksyur is similar to that of ancient Elamite-style tombs.

However, this theory has been heavily criticized by many other Iranian and Western scholars. Researchers like Hasan Fazeli and Emran Garazhian emphasize that there are significant differences between the Eneolithic cultures of northeastern Iran and southern Turan on the one hand, and the cultures of the central Iranian plateau and the southwest on the other[7,8]. As evidence, they point out that while Uruk and Susa pottery samples have been found at Kale-Kub in South Khorasan, the gray ware found at Chalow-Tepe in northeastern Iran is specifically similar to the pottery of Southern Turkmenistan. This aligns with the conclusions of Western archaeologists such as P. Kohl, R. Biscione, and R. Dyson. In their view, cultural contacts occurred mainly along an east-west axis (Turan-Northern Iran), and no major migration took place from south to north. Thus, Sajjadi's theory is currently accepted more as a hypothesis and requires further research.

The Decline of the Geoksyur Culture and the Subsequent Migration of its Population. The reasons for the cessation of life in the Geoksyur oasis at the beginning of the 3rd millennium BCE are also a focus of attention for Iranian scholars. Seyed Sajjadi attributes this event to a natural disaster – a change in the course of the Tedjen River. The river's shift disrupted the irrigation farming system of the oasis, forcing the population to abandon their settlements en masse.

According to his concept, the population of Geoksyur migrated in two main directions:

1. **Northwestern Direction:** A portion of the population moved to other centers in the south of Central Asia – Altyn-Tepe, Ulug-Tepe, and Ilgynly-Tepe – and assimilated with the local population.
2. **Southeastern Direction:** The majority of the population migrated to more distant regions such as Afghanistan (Mundigak) and Pakistan (the Quetta Valley). He supports this long-distance migration theory with the appearance of Geoksyur-style pottery at sites in these regions (e.g., Mundigak III-IV layers)[9].

This theory is widely accepted by many researchers and complements the view regarding the participation of ethno-cultural groups from Central Asia in the formation of early civilizations in South Asia. In conclusion, Iranian historiography has made a significant contribution to the study of the complex and multi-directional connections between Turan and neighboring regions. Their research encourages viewing the processes of migration and cultural diffusion not as a one-sided phenomenon but as a complex system of mutual interactions.

Socio-Economic Structure and Spiritual Life. Iranian scholars attempt to reconstruct the economic foundations and social structure of Turan Eneolithic societies based on archaeological materials[1].

According to research, the economic basis of Eneolithic societies was irrigation farming (wheat, barley) and animal husbandry (cattle, sheep, goats). Hasan Fazeli, analyzing the diet of the Hissar-Tepe population, shows that in addition to agriculture and herding, they were also actively engaged in hunting (gazelle, deer, wild birds).

Ornaments, axes, and knives were made of copper. Although copper smelting technology was known during this period, tools made of stone, bone, and clay were still widely used. Sickles, arrowheads, and cutters were made of flint. Hasan Fazeli notes that in the 4th millennium BCE, Hissar-Tepe was a major center for processing lapis lazuli brought from the Badakhshan mines in Afghanistan and distributing it to the western regions of Iran. Additionally, stones like calcite, limestone, and chlorite were also intensively worked. Bone tool making and leather processing were widespread. Seyed Sajjadi's idea that the clay benches at Ilgynly-Tepe were copies of wooden chairs, if confirmed, would indicate that woodworking was also highly developed.

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Social Stratification and Governance. By the Late Eneolithic period, signs of social stratification in society became clearly visible. This is confirmed by the following archaeological evidence:

Stratified Burial Rites: Communal tombs for up to 12 individuals have been found at Hissar-Tepe. Some graves are distinguished by rich inventories, while others have modest furnishings[6].

The Appearance of Seals and Stamps: These items indicate the development of private property and commodity exchange, as well as the initial formation of an administrative governance system.

Monumental Architecture: The construction of large temples, defensive structures, and public buildings shows the existence of a ruling class in society capable of mobilizing resources and organizing large-scale construction projects.

Based on this evidence, Iranian scholars conclude that by the Late Eneolithic period, Turanian society had a complex, stratified structure that was approaching the stage of early statehood.

Conclusion.

The research conducted by representatives of the Iranian school of archaeology has initiated a new, important stage in the study of the Turan Eneolithic period. An analysis of their scholarly works allows for the following main conclusions:

Regional Approach: Iranian scholars have studied the Eneolithic cultures of Turan in close connection with the processes in the northeastern regions of the Iranian Plateau. This approach has revealed the multifaceted nature of the relations between the two major historical-cultural regions, allowing for their interpretation not as a one-sided influence but as a complex system of mutual interactions.

New Theories and Debates: Iranian researchers, particularly Seyed Mansour Sajjadi, have actively promoted migration theories to explain the causes of cultural changes. Although some of their hypotheses (e.g., migration from southwestern Iran to Geoksyur) remain controversial, these theories have prompted a re-examination of existing scientific views and the definition of new research directions. The concept of the post-decline migration of the Geoksyur population, however, has gained wide recognition.

Contribution to Chronological and Cultural Classification: By comparing the Namazga periodization system created by Soviet archaeologists with materials from Iran, Iranian scholars have confirmed its regional significance and clarified certain aspects. Their analyses of the evolution of pottery and architecture help to provide a deeper understanding of the early urbanization processes in Turan.

Prospects for Future Research: The debates in Iranian historiography show that the connections between Turan and Iran have not yet been fully studied. Future research, involving joint archaeological excavations in the northeastern regions of Iran and the border districts of Turkmenistan, and the study of finds using modern scientific methods (radiocarbon dating, DNA analysis, isotope analysis), may shed light on existing controversial issues.

Overall, the formation of the Iranian school of archaeology and the research conducted by its representatives are creating an environment of healthy scientific competition and pluralism in the study of the ancient history of Central Asia, enriching world historiography with new data and original concepts.

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