



Pottery figurine from Rayy. Elephant covered with monochrome turquoise glaze

# UNIVERSITY MUSEUM BULLETIN

VOL. 6

MARCH, 1936

No. 3

## RAYY RESEARCH 1935 . . . PART I

### The Second Season Begins

THE first excavation season at any site is usually a period of sounding and learning. The excavator familiarizes himself with the stratification of the deposits, with the extent of the settlements and with the fertility of certain areas and strata. While it is wrong to attack a site with preconceived ideas, trying to prove one's point, with the progress of the excavation problems crystallize in the excavator's mind and he proceeds to solve them by verifying or rejecting his clues. In this respect, each successive working season brings more order out of the chaos of disconnected bits of information gathered in the beginning of the work.

The main results of the first season at Rayy were as follows: the determination of a sequence of prehistoric cultures identical, in part, with certain remains defined at Tepe Hissar near Damghan; further, the discovery of a Parthian temple complex with a hoard of about 500 coins of the first century B.C. and the first century A.D.; and, finally, the beginning of a fine-scale chronology of the ceramics of Islamic Rayy, based on many attractive vessels and coins of gold, silver and copper found in the Early and Middle Islamic deposits.

The tasks of the second season were clearly outlined by the results of the first. We had to determine the entire sequence of occupations by testing the deepest deposits of the site, and we had to establish more delicate chronologies of the Islamic and prehistoric remains.

### The Excavation in Islamic Rayy

The work on the Citadel Mound and on Cheshmeh Ali Tepe will determine the sequence of the pre-Islamic cultures. As to the problems of Islamic Rayy, their solution lies in the extensive plain of Shah Abdul Azim. Due to the advice of Messrs. Pope and Rabenou a fortunate



opportunity offered itself for a test, within the town, hitherto untouched by our various soundings in the widespread ruin area. "Rayy Test H" started on June twenty-ninth in the garden of Abul Fath Zadeh, and the results proved gratifying indeed.

Soon after the start of the excavation, carried through with more than 200 laborers, well-defined building remains appeared. In the largest of the closely distributed soundings a considerable part of a city block was uncovered, the entire area of more than 600 square meters being covered with remains of houses with their vaulted, semi-subterranean storerooms and innumerable refuse pits, as usual the "treasure boxes" of the excavation. The sterility of the rooms is as puzzling as the fertility of these sewage pits and wells which had been used as receptacles for broken and discarded vessels and other objects. It is a strange fact, however, that on several occasions numbers of gold coins and also rings and ear pendants of gold appeared in these refuse holes. We cannot believe that stacks of gold coins were simply thrown away with the sweepings. We can only explain their presence in these pits by assuming that they had been hidden there, protected by the very obnoxiousness of the cache.

For the solution of our present principal problem in the Islamic city, namely, the determination of a delicate ceramic chronology, it is of paramount importance to find coins associated and "locked up" with vessels, and the like, in the trash pits, storerooms, etc., since it rarely happens that one finds dated vessels or tiles.

Out of hundreds of thousands of fragments, carefully separated as to find-locations, our expert restorers assemble, in the course of the season, the delightful vessels of the Islamic era. The character of the findspots, namely the trashpits, explain that most vessels had been broken and discarded during the occupation of the site. Thus, it rarely happens that complete specimens are found. On the other hand, in many cases the restorers succeed in assembling all fragments of vessels which, at times, had been scattered in various pits and rooms.

While during the first season our collection of Early Islamic material was more important than the rest, the Middle Islamic finds of the second season exceed in importance and attractiveness the collection of earlier objects.





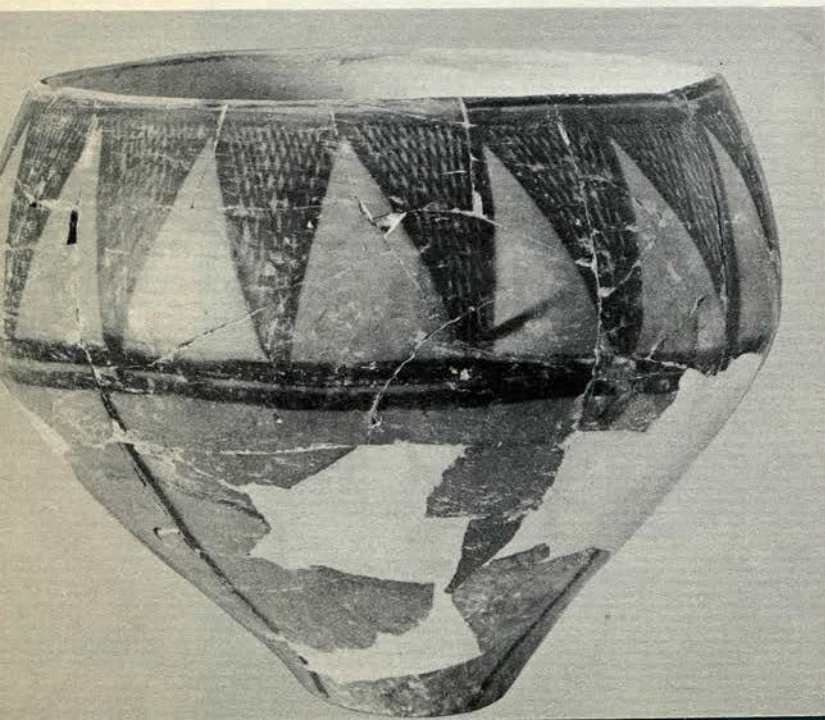
Above: The citadel of Rayy at the beginning of the season's work



Left: The excavation has crystallized work in rooms and deep refuse pits



Above: Middle Islamic monochrome  
vessels in turquoise shades



Left: Prehistoric bowl  
from Rayy. Black on  
brown-red ground



### **Finds of the Early Islamic Stratum**

One of the most important ceramic problems of this period concerns the origin of the so-called "Samarra wares" with sulphuric yellow paste, such as early gold-lustre vessels, others with cobalt blue patterns or inscriptions on cream colored, white or grayish-blue ground, white monochrome vessels, and the like. The scarcity of the vessels and even sherds of the first two categories at Rayy seems to support the theory of the importation of these wares, but not necessarily from abroad. The frequency of the less elaborate monochrome ceramics speaks for local origin. However, the origin of the yellow paste and its wide distribution over an area comprising at least Susa, Istakhr, Rayy and Samarra, is still an open problem.

At any rate, a few small gold-lustre vessels appeared in the refuse pits of Islam I. Sherds only represent the ware with cobalt patterns on cream or grayish-blue ground. But there are quite a number of jars, bowls, plates and saucers with mottled or radiating patterns in light green on white or cream, dark aubergine on yellowish brown, and monochrome white. Dark green monochrome bowls, jars, lamps and pitchers seem to occur during Early and Middle Islamic times; but they appear to be particularly frequent during the first centuries of Islam. Attractive incised bowls with geometric or bird patterns cut through the white slip were found with Early Islamic and with transitional Early-Middle Islamic remains. However, the flaming bi-chrome and tri-chrome designs over faintly incised figures, as found in the Early Islamic town of Istakhr, are almost absent at Rayy.

The Early Islamic plain ware is far more elegant and variegated than the unglazed ceramics of Middle Islam. One of the characteristic features of the earlier plain ware consists of faint indentations encircling in oblique rows the bodies of jars and pitchers. Applied and deeply incised patterns may be survivals of Sasanian decoration. Delicately incised Kufic inscriptions are frequently found on plain pitchers of Islam I.

The pits of the Early Islamic settlement of Rayy produce masses of glass sherds, and quite a few attractive chalices, bowls, cups and jars could be restored. Green or blue shades are predominant. Cloud effects are at times produced by the varying thickness of the vessel walls, while decomposition often results in an attractive iridescent surface film.



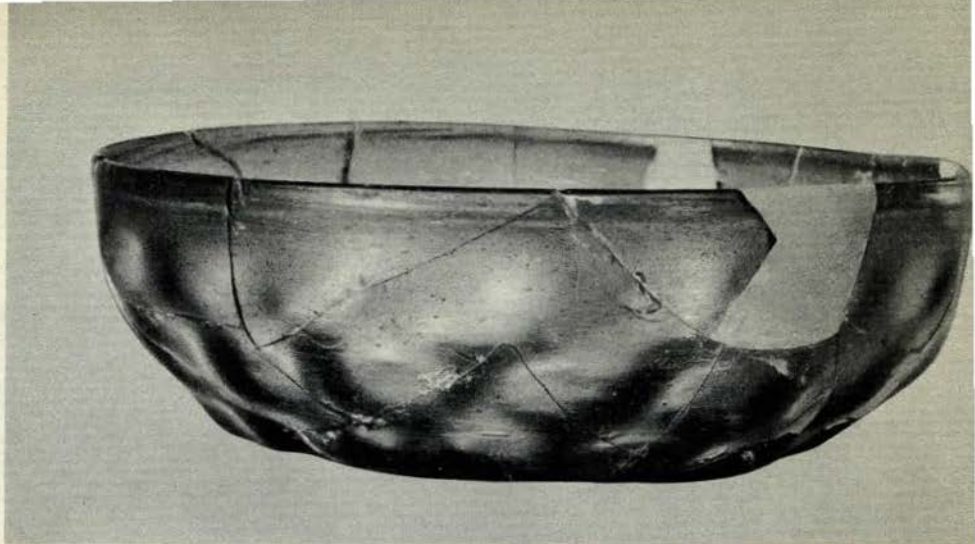
## **Finds of the Middle Islamic Stratum**

There are virtually hundreds of vessels of the most brilliant ceramic phase of historic Iran spread out on the shelves of the camp "museum" and on the boards and tables of the restorers and artists. Needless to say, not all of the Islam II vessels are top products of their time. They range from modest, unimaginative and purely utilitarian household vessels to exquisite masterpieces, such as the polychrome Minai bowls, gold-lustre vessels, deeply incised plates and bowls with filigree transparencies.

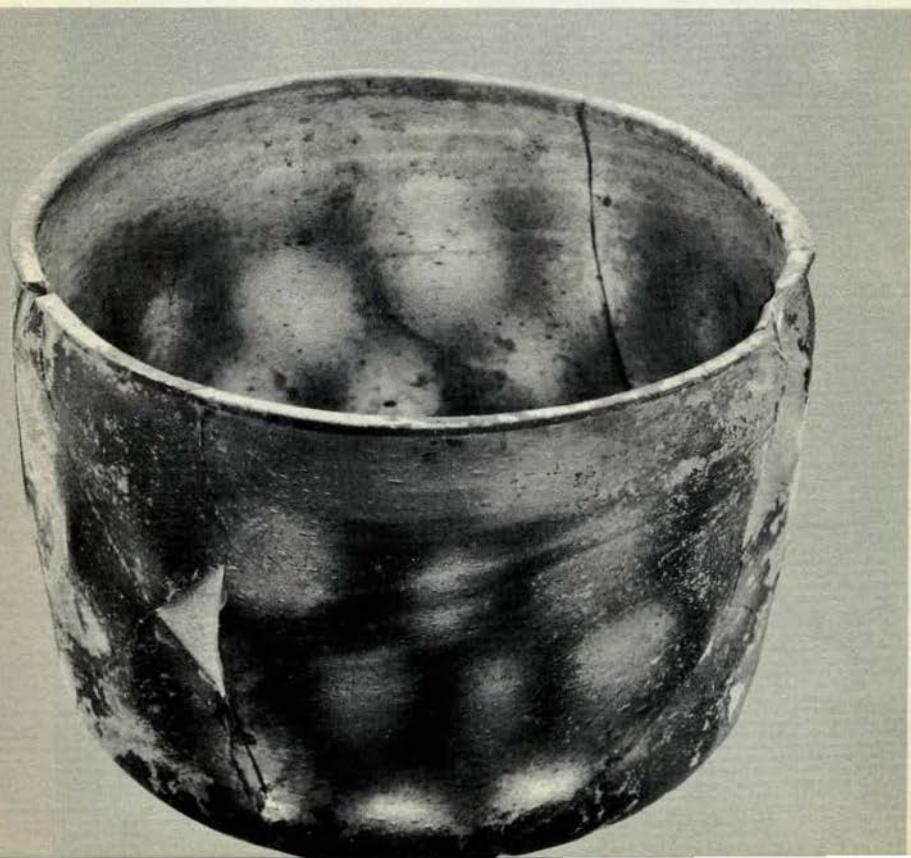
Prior to the transitional Islam I-II phase true turquoise and cobalt glazes seem to have been unknown at Rayy, except for the "Samarra" cobalt on cream or grayish-blue, a fact which speaks again for the foreign origin of this ware. In the Middle Islamic stratum, however, the bulk of the glazed ceramics consists of plain or delicately incised bowls, plates, lamps, pitchers and jars in turquoise and cobalt shades. Transparencies, produced by pierced or cut-out patterns and filled with the surface glaze, are frequent on the incised vessels and give an attractive, at times exquisitely delicate appearance to this category of Rayy ceramics. Monochrome bowls with very thick and very opaque turquoise or cobalt glaze we are inclined to attribute to the transitional Islam I-II phase.

Among the finds of the season there is a beautiful large cobalt-blue plate with a bold incised pattern of floral scrolls. Great numbers of small bowls with ivory colored ground are decorated with a spider pattern in cobalt-blue. At times they are ornamented in addition with faint incisions and transparencies. White monochrome bowls are quite frequent, while plain or incised vessels with monochrome aubergine or light green glaze are somewhat scarcer.

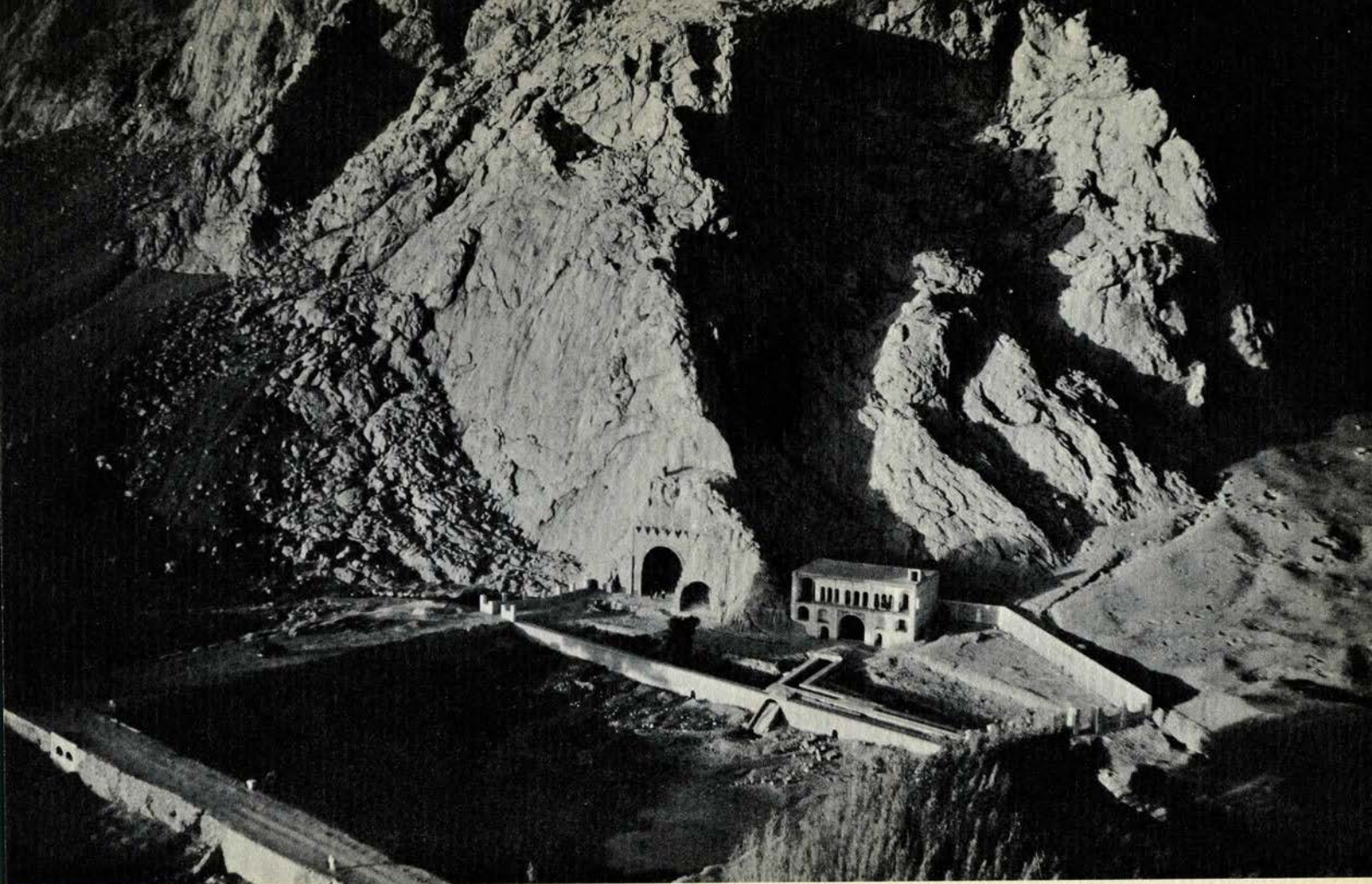
Several incised pitchers in turquoise or cobalt have interesting, deeply-cut patterns. Others show floral designs or animals in low relief. Two pitcher-like vessels in monochrome turquoise have three blossom-shaped lateral spouts. A strange oil lamp has about a dozen wick spouts while numbers of small bird-shaped figures are perched on the rim of the open bowl. There are also several albarellos or apothecary's jars in turquoise and many small lamps in turquoise and cobalt.



Islamic glass bowls from the garden of Abul Fath Zadeh.  
Blue and blue-green with cloud effects







The sculptures caves of Tak-i-Bostan from the air. Photograph by Lewin Barringer



One of the most interesting ceramic masterpieces is a large effigy vessel, or, rather, pottery sculpture. It is an elephant coated with a turquoise glaze. With infinite patience our head restorer succeeded in fitting the pieces of this beautiful specimen which were scattered in many different pits and in the refuse of several rooms. Finally, about four-fifths of the unique specimen was assembled while the rest will be restored in gypsum.

The most outstanding wares of the Middle Islamic pottery makers, namely, the types called "Minai" and "gold lustre" are represented in the collection of the second season by a number of beautiful vessels. However, compared with the frequency of the glazed monochrome ware and even the pierced and incised turquoise and cobalt vessels, we must admit that the gold lustre ware and, to a still greater extent, the Minai type are rare indeed. It is possible that most of the so-called Rayy Minai had actually been manufactured in some other town. In Saveh, situated about a hundred kilometers to the southwest, many Minai vessels were found during commercial diggings.

The Minai vessels and fragments which were uncovered in the garden of Abul Fath Zadeh show delightful patterns of human beings in miniature style. There is one fragmentary bowl the interior of which is decorated with various designs in relief painted with polychrome enamels and patches of gold leaf. Birds form the principal units. Another bowl fragment shows an attractive pattern of black and red birds in pairs.

The gold lustre ware received its name from the glossy metallic film in gold-brown, at times yellowish or greenish, forming patterns on vessels with ivory-colored or cobalt ground. The second season in Islamic Rayy was quite productive as to well-preserved vessels of this type. There are bowls and pitchers with floral patterns. In other cases rows of animals are pictured, while the typical Rayy pattern of this ware shows individual persons seated in stereotype fashion. Conventionalized inscriptions often encircle the vessels.

The garden of Abul Fath Zadeh was exhausted for our purposes. We considered the Islamic excavation of the season successfully completed.

E. S.

**Part II will appear in the May issue of the Bulletin.**