Andirons from Tell Arbid
Archaeological and Ethnoarchaeological Study
Andirons are clay hearth stands for supporting vessels over a fire, useful in preparing meals. They take a variety of different forms. Andirons and hearths in the shape of a horseshoe are universal forms that appear across many cultures. Modern andirons from, among others, Tell Arbid, but also from many different locations in the Near East, attest to the persistence of such fire installations’ usage.

In some cultures, andirons were of special significance. In the Early Transcaucasian culture, andirons and hearths were among the most characteristic features of the material culture and they played an important role in cult connected with deities of the hearth and home. Also in modern nomadic societies (for example, among the Mongols), hearths and andirons play an essential role in both everyday life and rituals.

At Tell Arbid more than 50 andirons have been found, dating from different periods represented at the site.¹

TELL ARBID

Tell Arbid lies in northeastern Syria, in the Upper Khabour basin. The site consists of the main tell (the citadel), the so-called lower city and a few smaller mounds. The whole site covers c. 50 ha, 12 of which make up the main tell. Tell Arbid is a multicultural site. The mound, which was settled during a few millennia, conceals remnants of occupation from Ninevite 5, Early Dynastic III, Akkadian, Postakkadian as well as Khabour ware and Mitanni periods.

The earliest settlements date from the Halaf culture (sixth millennium BC). After the Mitanni period, there came a settlement gap that ended in the Neobabylonian period. The latest traces of occupation have been dated to the Hellenistic period. The peak occupation fell to the third millennium BC, when Tell Arbid grew to be a medium-sized town that functioned within a dense net of centres across the Upper Khabour basin. In the third millennium BC, the neighbours of Tell Arbid – whose ancient name remains unknown – included, among others, Nagar (modern Tell Brak), Nabada (modern Tell Beydar) and Urkish (modern Tell Mozan).

The settlement of Tell Arbid reached its greatest extent during the Ninevite 5 period (c. 2700–2550 BC). Residential districts of diverse character, dating to this period, have been discovered in different parts of the site. Apart from residential and household buildings, public or representative structures dated to the third millennium BC have also been unearthed. Unique discoveries include a Ninevite 5 temple with a hearth and a podium in its center (in sector W) and a monumental building of an official character at the top of the tell, which may have been the seat of local government and administration in the second half of the third millennium BC.

¹ Due to the frailty of andirons, only their fragments are usually recovered in archaeological material. However, all the c. 50 Tell Arbid fragments are large enough to discern their original form.
ANDIRONS

Among the andirons from Tell Arbid, two main types can be discerned: horseshoe-shaped andirons and curved props. Andirons are often fragile and a dark core can be seen in the section. They were either fired at low temperatures or simply dried and became fired while being used, due to their repeated exposure to flames. Andirons’ surface is often blackened from their function as hearth stands.

The clay of which the andirons were made, was usually tempered with chaff or a mineral admixture (i.e. of lime, gravel, or basalt), just as was the case with kitchen ware. The addition of such temper improved the andiron’s resistance to thermal shock and prevented them from cracking in contact with fire. This technology persists to this day. Clay used today for making fire installations serving as bread ovens (tannurs) is mixed with goats’ hair and salt, which serve as temper. Salt plays an important role because its addition reinforces the tannurs’ walls and keeps them from cracking.

At Tell Arbid, ancient andirons are usually found in context of other fire installations, most often tannurs and hearths. Household activities connected with food processing and preparation of meals, in which these fire installations and andirons were used, took place mainly in courtyards. Most of the andirons have been found in pieces in secondary contexts, often in layers of ashes, where they may have been thrown away when they went out of use.

A common feature for andirons of different types, both the props and the horseshoe-shaped ones, are handles and holes. They were used for taking the andiron itself off the hearth and point to the object’s portable character.

HORSESHOE-SHAPED ANDIRONS

Horseshoe-shaped andirons constitute the most numerous group, present in different periods of Tell Arbid’s occupation (Fig. 1). They range from 7 to 25 cm in height and 15 to 20 cm in width on the inside. Some are equipped with a handle or a hole at the backside.

Even though andirons rarely survive intact in archaeological material, two well preserved horseshoe-shaped andirons have been found at Tell Arbid. They were unearthed in situ in a residential quarter in Sector D, dated to the ED III/Akkadian period. One of the andirons, preserved in half, has been found next to a tannur (Fig. 2). It was c. 25 cm high and c. 30 cm wide on the inside; there was a knob on its completely preserved inner wall. The second andiron, preserved in its entirety, was 25 cm high and 20 cm wide on the inside. It has also been discovered in the direct vicinity of fire installations, namely two tannurs (Fig. 3). A basalt grinding stone found inside this andiron may have served as a heating plate for keeping vessels warm for a long time.

This andiron is singled out by its three round inner knobs (Fig. 4). The knobs are placed on the inner walls of the upper part of the andiron and they protrude slightly over its edge. Two of the knobs are positioned opposite each other at both ends of the andiron; the third is located at the andiron’s back wall. The knobs have holes that are up to 3 cm deep, but
do not pierce the knobs. They probably served as supports for vessels (Fig. 5). The pierced knobs may have been used for installing an additional fire grate of some kind. A similar andiron, furnished with pierced knobs, but also with additional handles, is known from the neighbouring site of Tell Beydar, where it has been dated to EJ IIIb² (Fig. 6).

The discoverers of the Tell Beydar andiron connect it with the Early Transcaucasian culture. Ascribing Transcaucasian provenance to northern Mesopotamian andirons is often unfounded, as such an interpretation precludes the possibility that fire installations of this type could have appeared independently. The usage of andirons is not limited to the Early Transcaucasian culture, although they are its characteristic feature, appearing in great numbers and in an astounding variety of forms. However, in the case of andirons discovered outside the Early Transcaucasian culture area, more than a mere presence of such

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4. A.–B. Horseshoe-shaped andiron from L2 – Sector D, 31/41
(Drawing: L. Wojnarowicz, A. Smogorzewska; Phot. A. Reiche)
objects must be confirmed to validate interpretations tying them to Transcaucasian influences. The ‘hallmark’ of the Early Transcaucasian culture is its pottery, and a ‘signature mark’ of andirons of Transcaucasian tradition is their decoration (anthropomorphic or zoomorphic) or their burnished surface. Yet typical Transcaucasian andirons and pottery vessels are very rarely found in the Upper Khabour basin. The shape of a horseshoe is a universal, and optimal, form for hearth stands and it is found independently in different cultures. At Tell Arbid, horseshoe-shaped andirons were used throughout several periods (for almost two millennia, from Ninevite 5 to the Late Bronze Age) and they seem to be a local, independent invention.

During the excavations at Tell Arbid, horseshoe-shaped andirons which functioned as permanent hearths have been also brought to light. In one of the well preserved rooms of the Late Ninevite 5 residential quarter (Sector D), two adjacent horseshoe-shaped hearths have been discovered, each c. 40 cm high and covered with white plaster (Fig. 7). On the floor of this room, mainly around the hearth, many animal bones and cups have been found in situ. Both the post-consumption bone remains and drinking vessels with pointed bases, characteristic for the Late Ninevite 5 pottery, look like debris left behind after a social gathering, during which the hearth and its embers may have been used for roasting or grilling meat (some of the bones were charred). The bones found in this room belonged to pigs – they included the skeleton of a very young piglet.
PROPS

Curved props from Tell Arbid belong to the phase of the Ninevite 5 period, characterized by pottery with incised decoration of early type. Several props of this type have been found (Fig. 8). Most of them come from the residential district (Sector W) in the southern part of the site, where a sequence of yards with large, round hearths has been unearthed.

Most of the props are c. 20 cm high and are furnished with a handle at the back (Fig. 9). A less numerous group consists of props that were c. 15 cm high and their sides had ‘dimples’ at the back, which provided a secure grip while taking the prop off the fire (Fig. 10). The andirons have truncated ends, which makes them even better holders for vessels. Their flat bottoms granted them solid support. They probably did not function as hearth stands singly, but were used in threes. An experimental arrangement of the Tell Arbid props has proven that three props firmly support a cooking vessel (Fig. 11). A parallel for the Tell Arbid props can be found among objects discovered at Tell Brak (also dated to the Ninevite 5 period), where it was described as a stand3 (Fig. 12a).

The Upper Khabour basin has yielded andirons with a central, unpierced hole serving the same purpose as the handles of the Tell Arbid specimens. Props of this type have been

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3 R. MATTHEWS (ed.), Excavations at Tell Brak, vol. 4: Exploring an Upper Mesopotamian regional centre, 1994–1996, London – Cambridge 2003 [= Tell Brak 4], Fig. 5.80:1
found at Tell Brak at a Ninevite 5 courtyard⁴ (Fig. 12b). The excavations at Tell Hazna produced several similar andirons in the shape of a truncated pyramid, 15–16 cm high, and dating to the ED period⁵ (Fig. 12c). The idea of using a few props to support a vessel over the hearth is universal. Props of different sizes and shapes that served as andirons are known from, e.g., Neolithic Çatal Höyük and Habuba Kabira, from the Uruk period.⁶ From Çatal Höyük come props with endings bent at a right angle, on which a vessel could be placed⁷ (Fig. 13). Parallels can also be found in the Early Transcaucasian culture, where, besides the most numerous horseshoe-shaped andirons, cylindrical or spool-shaped props were also represented⁸ (Fig. 14a–c). These are rather small objects, c. 10 cm high, some

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⁴ Ibid., pp. 106–107, Fig. 5.78:4.
⁷ Die ältesten Monumente der Menschheit. Vor 12.000 Jahren in Anatolien, Karlsruhe – Stuttgart 2007 [= Die ältesten Monumente], No. 317.
⁸ A. Smogorzewska, Andirons and their role in Early Transcaucasian culture, Anatolica XXX, 2004 [= Anatolica XXX], pp. 157–158, Fig. 9.
8. Curved props from Tell Arbid – Ninevite 5 period (Drawings: Ł. Wojnarowicz, A. Smogorzewska).


11. Three curved props from Tell Arbid supporting a cooking pot (Phot. A. Smogorzewska).

12. Props from the Upper Khabour area: a, b – Tell Brak (after: MATTHEWS (ed.), Tell Brak 4, Figs. 5.78:4, 5.80:1; c – Tell Hazna (after: MUNCHAEV, MERPERT, BADER, Tell Hazna I, Fig. 20:7).
with a hole in the center. Andirons with four and two horn-like projections (the latter probably functioning in pairs), being a characteristic feature of the Early Transcaucasian culture, used a similar idea for supporting vessels over the hearth\(^9\) (Fig. 14d). Also some hearths in the Early Transcaucasian culture functioned simultaneously as andirons. The site of Karaz has yielded circular hearths with three raised projections in the middle, directed inwards, which could have supported a vessel.\(^10\)

ETHNOARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

In this interpretation of the Tell Arbid fire installations, ethnoarchaeological evidence has been employed. Studying the material culture of modern societies can help us to understand, by analogy, material recovered from archaeological sources. The better we understand the processes leading to the creation of ancient objects and the usages to which the various items were put by their creators, the more effective our interpretation of these archaeological sources will be. Ethnographic evidence can be the basis of such broadening of archaeological interpretations, the proviso, however, must be made that modern practices need not strictly reflect those of the past.

At the ancient site of Tell Arbid two modern-day villages exist. The observation of their inhabitants’ daily lives and interviews with the villagers allow for drawing ethnoarchaeological comparisons. The modern inhabitants of Tell Arbid, while, e.g., processing grain or preparing food, often use techniques and practices that have not changed since antiquity. An example of such persistence of tradition in the case of fire installations is the *tannur*; the form of which has remained essentially unchanged for millennia. In the modern villages at Tell Arbid clay andirons in the shape of a horseshoe can be encountered (Fig. 15). The andirons are usually grouped with other fire installations such as *tannurs* or hearths. The same can be said of andirons found in ancient residential quarters of Tell Arbid. Household activities – both today and in the past – take place in courtyards. Horseshoe-shaped andirons, which today are no longer portable objects but have become solid installations, are erected against walls surrounding the courtyards. They are used as kitchen installations for preparing meals and in household activities, such as heating water for washing clothes. Modern horseshoe-shaped andirons are often furnished with an additional grate made of metal bars, resting on the top of the andirons or stuck into their inner walls. Similar “bars” may have been mounted on the pierced knobs, with which some of the ancient Tell Arbid andirons were equipped.

Apart from these permanent installations, modern inhabitants of Tell Arbid build portable andirons as well. They are simple make-shift structures used for temporary needs. They are built of bricks placed so as to form either a horseshoe or three props, each made up of two or three bricks. They are used seasonally, for instance to cook *burgul* in large, metal vats (Fig. 16).

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\(^9\) *Ibid.*, pp. 152–153, Fig. 1.


Andirons, or rather horseshoe-shaped hearths, are known from many regions of the Near East. In a mountain village of Foshtongh in north-eastern Iran, meals are prepared in pots (these days made of metal), which are set over hearths on horseshoe-shaped andirons made of bricks (Fig. 17).

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