



ELENA NEVA



**ANCIENT JEWELRY
OF THE
MIDDLE EAST**



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Ancient Jewelry of the Middle East

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*In Memory of Leonid Landman—
a friend and husband*

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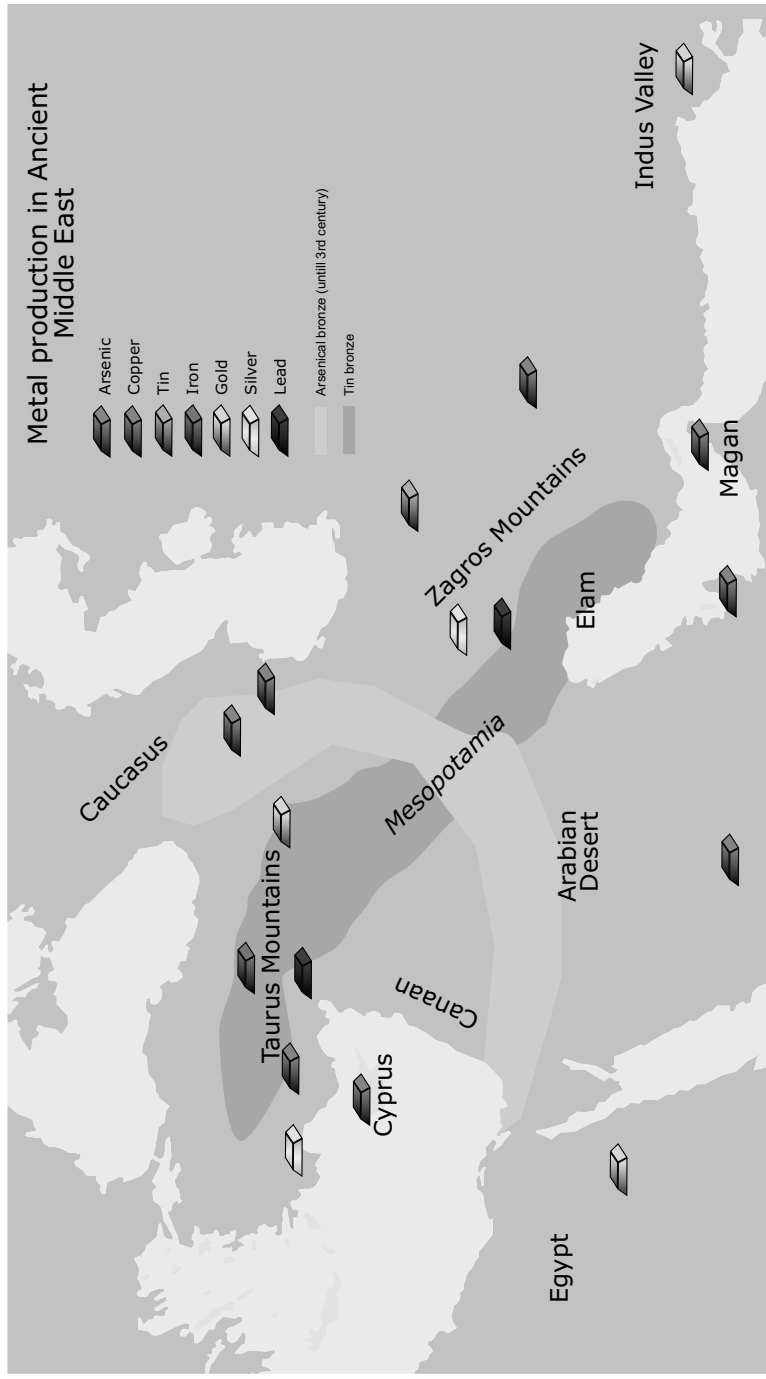
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THE ART OF JEWELRY AS A SOCIO-ARTISTIC PHENOMENON

From the sacred books of the Torah

We have therefore brought an oblation for YAHWEH, what every man has gotten, of jewels of gold, chains, and bracelets, rings, earrings, and tablets, to make an atonement for our souls before YAHWEH. And Moshe and Eleazar the Cohen took the gold of them, even all wrought jewels. And all the gold of the offering that they offered up to YAHWEH, of the captains of thousands, and of the captains of hundreds, was sixteen thousand seven hundred and fifty shekels. (For the men of war had taken spoil, every man for himself.) And Moshe and Eleazar the Cohen took the gold of the captains of thousands and of hundreds, and brought it into the tabernacle of the congregation, for a memorial for the children of Israel before YAHWEH. (BEMIDBAR—NUMBERS 31:50-31:54).

And he shall deliver their kings into your hand, and you shall destroy their name from under heaven: there shall no man be able to stand before you, until you have destroyed them. The graven images of their gods shall you burn with fire: you shall not desire the silver or gold that is on them, nor take it unto you, lest you be snared therein: for it is an abomination to YAHWEH your ABBA. Neither shall you bring an abomination into your house, lest you be a cursed thing like it: but you shall utterly detest it, and you shall utterly abhor it; for it is a cursed thing. (DEVARIM-DEUTERONOMY 7:24-7:26).

One of the most ancient forms of expression, the art of jewelry embodies a rich spiritual and applied experience of processing historical and cultural information. Modern art historians pose many questions regarding this process and its mechanics. This paper at-

tempts to solve these questions using the following conceptual scheme:

A B

1) The art of jewelry making is the product and indication of a material and socio-cultural development of society.

A: The level of material development: metal processing plus decorating (handling) with precious stones—prerequisites for the tangible basis for the art; the hierarchy of precious metals and stones; jewelry art = goods = money.

B: The development of ritual conscience in decorative-ornamental and plastic means; social hierarchy/ethnic differentiation + hierarchy of metals = the attributive side of art; protective/suggestive-symbolic = handcraft and artistic functions = the content-rich area of art.

As one can see from the above scheme, both groups, A and B, while having autonomous qualities, develop in parallel. The common ground is social hierarchy along with the hierarchy of metals. As a result, the art of jewelry symbolizes one of the most ancient examples of organic art fusion—handcraft, ritual and commerce. Art has its own language, filled with specific grammatical instances of the foundation of shape and ornament. We suggest that one of the defining factors of material culture is based on the symbiosis of the Oriental devotion to complex rituals of poetic behavior, luxury and splendor of décor, with the European figurative vision of art. The Holy Scriptures, including texts from the Torah, serve as an invaluable source for understanding of how art language matures.

The Pentateuch, or the writings of the Torah, was combined into one volume approximately in the 5th century BC. Most of the text was written in the 9th–7th centuries BC. Events described in the Torah paint a universal picture of the universe and reflect the syncretism of artistic and ritual consciousness of men in the early civilizations. Sci-

entists believe that historical events described in the books of the Torah (Bereishet, Shemot, Vayikra, Bamidbar, Devarim) happened in the second half of the second millennium BC, allegedly during the rule of the 19th dynasty in Egypt (1305–1196 BC). Archeological excavations, as well as ethnographical findings, validate the parts of the Torah where the art of jewelry is mentioned.

Literature dedicated to the history of Israeli jewelry is based mostly upon archeological research [11]; works of popular nature science, as well as challenging and debatable publications [12]. The history of jewelry is still waiting to be studied in earnest; this much-needed fundamental research is all the more needed, considering that the art of the ancient jewelers developed in a single stylistic movement with other forms of art. Thus, the artistic style of the era reflected the puzzle—the mosaic structure of the mutual influence the peoples residing in the territory of ancient Israel and bordering countries had on each other.

Historical interpretation of the sacred texts of the Torah is the main objective of this article. We believe that, based on the vast number of sources, it is possible to take a different approach to the art of jewelry as a socio-artistic phenomenon of the ancient civilizations, including the formation of early government in Israel. This resource-rich method of studying the sacred texts of the Torah does not contradict the humanistic nature of secular Judaism. This method complements the basic flow of modern historical thinking, which offers rich interpretations of the Torah (including the Old and New Testaments) from the point of view of paleographical, archeological and hermeneutic research [1, 2], as well as from the point of view of historical and chronological objectivity [4, 5]. Modern historians read the Torah as an inventive collection of information related to different forms of art, including the art of jewelry

making. This article is centered on the following aspects of the emergent art of jewelry making:

1) The material side of creation that distinguishes jewelry making as a specific form of art.

2) The craft of ancient masters within a developing network of connections and emerging types of art.

3) The cost, commodity, value and esthetic aspects of items fashioned out of metal.

4) Jewelry items as symbols and attributes of the social and ritual characteristics of human behavior.

5) Questions around the ambivalent interpretation of luxury items (jewelry) in the Torah—the difference between acceptance and taboo.

All the above mentioned aspects have a firm historical platform and are therefore connected to the historical and archeological analysis, particularly, the study of periods, chronology and attribution.

1

As with any other category of art, the question of the materials used in making jewelry is ontological. In the Torah it is discussed according to the concept of binary opposites (see K. Levi-Stross): sky/earth, water/soil, heavenly waters/terrestrial waters, day/night, light/darkness, metal/rock, etc. “A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. (Genesis 2:10-15, underline mine—*E.N.*). Aside from juxtaposing the “hard and soft substances of being,” this narrative clearly states the existence of two basic elements used in the art of jewelry making. A hint of estimate—“the gold of that land is good,” along with the

general idea—“And G-d saw the light, that it was good,” serves as a proof of G-d’s benign actions, as well as the esthetic intelligence of creation.

Further in the texts of the Torah we see a differentiated approach to materials, both metal and stone. The authors of the sacred texts stress semantic and cost-related traits of onyx (judging by the many appearances of that stone in the text) and sapphire (the celestial stone). The following excerpt from Shemot is one of the examples:

“And thou shall take two onyx stones, and grave on them the names of the children of Israel: Six of their names on one stone, and the other six names of the rest on the other stone, according to their birth” (Exodus 28, Shemot, 105). Further in the text we read: “Make the ephod of gold, and of blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and of finely twisted linen—the work of a skilled craftsman.... Then mount four rows of precious stones on it. In the first row there shall be a ruby, a topaz and a beryl; in the second row a turquoise, a sapphire and an emerald; in the third row a jacinth, an agate and an amethyst; in the fourth row a chrysolite, an onyx and a jasper” (Exodus 28). Essentially, we are offered a manual, a set of directions on jewelry making, as well as the basics of the study of minerals, comparable to the contemporary scale of precious and semi-precious stones. For instance,

“A ruby, a topaz, a turquoise, a beryl, a sapphire and an emerald”—I–II group of precious stones IV classification.

“A jacinth, an agate, an amethyst, a chrysolite, an onyx and a jasper”—I group of semi-precious stones.

In Shemot, we gain not only spiritual knowledge, but also an example of instruction in jewelry making that is unique for sacred texts, even including decorating and finishing techniques. We would like to point out that color scheme played a significant role in selecting and finishing

the above-mentioned components. Color scheme served as a perfect medium for the technique of jewelry making.

2

In the Bereyshit, we see a curious cause-and-effect relationship: birth—forming generations—familial clans—birth of artistic professions. “And Ada bore Yaval... And his brother named Yuval, He was the father of all such as handle the lyre and pipe. And Tzila, she too bore Tubal Cain the forger of every sharp instrument in brass and iron” (Genesis 4: 19-22). The binary opposites are clearly seen in this passage: art and skill, spiritual and material. This principle later becomes a crucial factor in contemporary art mythology.

It is of great interest to us that, according to archeological finds, the very first types of metal used by mankind were iron and copper. The same archeological finds prove that blacksmiths and jewelers were among the very first professions in the ancient world.

Overall, the issue of artistic value and independence of art is solved in the Torah by applying the term “skillful,” which demonstrates the syncretism of skill and art.

3

The binary nature of metal as craft material that is used in making esthetically valuable objects and as an actual symbol of the value relations of commodities receives a curious treatment by the Torah: “And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold” (Genesis 13:2). In this passage it is not entirely obvious what exactly are described, raw materials or finished objects. Later we read: “And every male among you ..., a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with silver from any foreigner...”

(Genesis 17:12). In Bereyshet, the following passage describes the cost of jewelry: “the man took a gold nose-ring, half a shekel in weight, and two ornaments for her arms of ten shekels weight of gold...” (Genesis 24:22). This is an example of a pragmatic analysis of objects (rather than an estimate of quality, the actual cost is discussed); for the first time, this text differentiates between items, combining the third and fourth levels of analysis. The emotional conditions of the episode are important as well—in this narrative, Rebecca, one of the most beguiling female characters in the Torah, meets Eliazar.

This plotline is reflected in the ethnography of the people of the Far East: first gifts given to the bride usually included nose-rings and arm ornaments as mentioned in the above passage. Similar items were given to the bride’s family members as well: “And the servant brought forth jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, to Rebecca; he gave also to her brother and to her mother precious things...”

4

Aside from the Shemot’s detailed description of the technological methods and products, a thorough analysis of items can be found in the Devarim (see epigraph). The classification of criteria remains open. Authoritative sources view luxury only through the prism of redemption before the Lord; as a result, all modern classification criteria—functional, technological, ritual and symbolic—work only indirectly.

5

In the sacred texts, jewelry items are frequently mentioned as attributes of authority: “...Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring and put it on Joseph’s finger. He had

Joseph dressed in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck...” (Genesis 41:42). We find it very interesting that known sources describe Pharaoh’s ring as iron (here the material is not specified), but the chain is described as gold. (Iron of meteorite origin was valued very highly; and ring insets were usually made out of gold. Such rings were used as signets, and since he has placed Joseph over the whole land of Egypt, it is obvious that the signet probably had Pharaoh’s monogram, which allowed its wearer to act on behalf of the Pharaoh. Clothes made out of linen were a sign of the ruling class. The gold chain represents a sign of the highest legislative power.

6

In the Torah, the art of jewelry is reflected in many conflicting estimates of the purpose of the jewelry items described in the sacred books. We suggest that jewelry is not only allowed but is considered mandatory in religious rituals and services. Original items, made in accordance with the canonical texts, such as the Shemot, carry the same weight as works of other origin—bought, looted, exchanged, etc (see the epigraph). Individual items of luxury are almost always treated with disdain. At the same time, one cannot ignore the fact that the extensive information on wearing and using jewelry in ancient societies is represented by negation in the Torah. Thus, in a well-known episode from Isaiah, we read: “Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet... In that day the Lord will take away the bravery of their tinkling ornaments about their feet, and their cauls, and their round tires like the moon. The chains, and the bracelets, and the mufflers, the bonnets, and the ornaments of the legs, and the headbands,

and the tablets, and the earrings, The rings, and nose jewels...” (Isaiah 3:16–26). The taboo against jewelry and other forms of art (specifically, creative art in Judaism) is a truly fascinating subject and deserves a separate study.

The scope of this paper does not allow for an extensive analysis of this topic. However, even a brief study adds a missing link to the art history of Israel, the one dedicated to one of the ancient arts and its role in art culture of the given region.

Aside from the socio-economic and political characteristics that influenced the art of jewelry making in ancient Israel, we must consider the following factors:

- Fundamental creative-functional systems of arts of the ancient world: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Iran, Greece, Rome;
- Typology of jewelry demonstrates a wide network of secular and religious areas in the spiritual life in Israel;
- Analysis of texts that mention jewelry demonstrates the existing hierarchy of materials used in jewelry making;
- Given the immensely complicated historical fate of Israel, one can define a specific system of influences on the stylistic norm used in jewelry making, in connection with periods of different political dependency of the country on its various enemies and conquerors.
- The above examples prove that the art of jewelry making in ancient Israel was quite advanced, both in technology and creativity.

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ANCIENT JEWELRY OF THE MIDDLE EAST

The art of jewelry has influenced many cultures. Traditionally, jewelry displays distinctive character, presents intense artistic images, and carries rich cultural assets through plasticity and expression. The language of jewelry is fairly complex and hard to interpret. Just like popular ancient languages that dominated in certain historic periods, such as Aramaic, Hebrew, Persian, Greek and Latin, the language of jewelry and the jewelry items themselves have changed and developed in time, according to laws and customs of historical development. Stylistic evolution from the Early Oriental to the Hellenistic-Romanian trends served as a basis for the stylistic changes in the art of jewelry making. Aside from its external beauty properties, every jewelry object has a second, internal life triggered by its semantic significance and perceived through one's mind, intuition or aesthetic sense.

Every artifact serves as a symbol of information. Apotropaic emblems, borrowed from everyday life, epos, or myths, and used in the art of jewelry making, carried a certain magical connotation. The popularity of a particular mythological plot line was connected to the very zeitgeist of the given time period, since the jewelry maker lived through it and tended to be deeply involved in contemporary events. The art reflected the master's interests in what was currently happening within society.

Through the evolution of jewelry items it is possible to trace not only the historical and cultural situation, but also the economical, political and social sides of ancient civilizations, as well as the symbolism and semantics of the art produced.

The ancient masters employed various techniques, including casting, granulation, filigree, and inlay, among others. Certain items of jewelry serve as a testament to the advanced artistic skills of the jewelers. Among precious and semi-precious stones used by jewelers in the ancient world the most popular were garnets, rubies, cornelian stones, pearls and emeralds.

DIADEMS

It is known that diadems were a special sign of a god or royalty. Gold garlands were kept in temples as parts of gold funds and were given as rewards for special achievements. Fragments of diadems were found among the finds of Oxus (see *Treasure of Oxus*, Dalton, London, 1964), and Tillya-tepe (Bactrian gold, Leningrad, 1985).

Characters crowned by similar head jewelry can be found on coins, intaglios, pottery, paintings, frescos and reliefs, which allow us to recognize them as royalty or god-like creatures. Most of diadems were gold. Sometimes they are made by the stamping method. Details and fragments of diadems are made in the shape of leaves, trefoils or rosettes.

Diadems were fastened onto a headdress, or sometimes were placed directly on the head:

“And on the turban, on its front, he set the golden plate, the holy crown, as the Lord had commanded Moses” (Leviticus, 8:9). Daughters of Israel wore gold headbands (Isaiah, 3.18-19).

Funeral diadem like one from the Tomb near Jerusalem, 1st BC. Plate cut from a sheet of gold, is not decorated, ends

are tapered, and have holes for fastenings. Cut trefoils are pasted onto a thin embossed ribbon, forming a diadem. A rosette is formed in its center, symbolizing the sun, with two sets of trefoils framing it on both sides. The entire composition is inscribed within a triangle, analogous to a triangular gable crowning a portico or facade. The pediment was the crowning feature of the Greek temple front. In this case, it is not a simple coincidence, but rather the idea of crowning the human body by a diadem, completing the entire jewelry ensemble. Similar elements may be found among examples of the head jewelry of Minor Asia (see *L'dossiers de l'archeologie* #40, 1980 p.73, and p.22).

EARRINGS

Earrings represent one of the most popular types of adornments of all times. There are many types and kinds of earrings. Mostly earrings were made of gold, sometimes of bronze, and also of electrum, a naturally occurring alloy of gold and silver.

An example of earrings (as a popular item of jewelry) can be seen on an ancient sculpture. In one example, the ears of a small head are decorated with simple rings (no lock), which were made separately and especially for the head (like Sumerian woman, white marble, Mari, 3 mill.)

One of the widely-spread types is a circle-base ring shape. The decorative element is represented by zoomorphic ends, anthropomorphic images, plant elements, figure images, and the actual ring shape with thickening ends. Jewelers used casting, forging and later granulation. A steatite mold for casting, attributed to 13th–12th BC, is an eloquent testimony to that (Tell Abu Haban, discovered during an archeological excavation). Among other stones, garnet was frequently used both as inserts and as separate pendants.

The earrings of the ancient Middle East demonstrate different stylistic trends: ancient Eastern, Hellenistic, Egyptian, and Hellenistic-Roman, which is typical for the ancient culture and art in this region, because it was an integral part of the overall context of the history of ancient civilizations. The adornments in question demonstrate certain stages of the art of jewelry developing in the ancient world.

Just as any other kind of adornments, earrings specified religious-magical functions, gender specification, prosperity evaluation, and territorial signs. When used as amulets, the jewelry had two main functions, protection and “proliferation,” the latter implying fertility.

We must note that any image used in the jewelry was supposed to carry magical properties; a certain inner meaning was placed into each object. The very shape of the earrings was a circle, which signified protection. Gold was a solar metal, energy-giving; pomegranate carried similar connotations. In the art of Israel, pomegranates play a significant role (see Romanoff P., *Jewish Symbols on Ancient Jewish Coins*. Philadelphia, 1944, p.51–54). The ancient earrings are intended for both ears, and nose rings are mentioned in the Book of Isaiah (see the Old Testament, 3:18-20, p. 682):

“In that day the Lord will take away... their tinkling ornaments about; the rings and nose jewelry” (Isaiah, 3:18, 20).

Earrings were worn by men and women. In Tanah we read:

“...Aaron said to them, ‘Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’ Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron” (Exodus: 31, 32:2, 3; 33:4–6).

Ancient Eastern Style

The simplest circular earrings with thickened ends are attributed to 13th–12th BC. These earrings are made in the ancient eastern style; they were very popular and kept their popularity up to the present times.

Like earring from Dir-El-Balach. (Similar items: Beth-Shamash, #18. *Jewelry from the Ancient World*, Jerusalem, 1969; Higgins R. *Greek and Roman Jewelry*, London, 1961)

Based on weight and diameter, we can identify some as nose rings. This type was used as a good luck charm. (Similar items: #18, *Catalogue*, Jerusalem, 1969)

The simple-style ring shaped earring can be dated precisely by using radioisotope analysis, especially considering the items' popularity. Earrings of that type are well-known from the images of the Achaemenian era (the guards of Persepolis wore a single earring similar to the one in our collection; today youths and young men prefer this type as well). Earrings of this type were produced by the casting method followed by polishing.

It is necessary to note that the even earrings intended as pairs can differ by weight because of the degree of preservation. The weight is a very important issue of our items because some of them were used as an equivalent of money. A unified weight scale may have existed, and some jewelry items were specifically produced as a money equivalent. This tradition was widespread in the ancient world. A detailed description can be found in Tanah.

Egyptian style earrings may be attributed to the same era, i.e., 13th–12th centuries BC. These types of earrings have vessel-shaped pendants. It is possible that these earrings are made by adding the pendant to the traditional ring-shaped earring (which could be worn on its own). The vessel-shaped pendant is similar to the necklace pendants. So, the earrings could be a part of an ensemble.



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