

# Luristan

Note: Meanwhile a lot more Luristan pages have been generated. [Here is the link to an overview](#)

Advanced

The correct spelling for this region in Persian would be Lorestān but I'll stay with the popular Luristan. It qualifies as "sword place" because the remarkable iron [Luristan mask swords](#) are supposed to have been forged there around 1000 BC. That may not be true but presently we don't know better.

Luristan is presently a province located in western Iran, and comprises the upper valleys of the [Zagros Mountains](#). Its inhabitants 3000 years ago might have been splendid (nomadic) horsemen and outstanding metal workers but they were illiterate. So we only know about the ancient Luristanis because their mighty neighbors on occasion mention them in their writings. Those neighbors were the [Elamites](#) (capital at Susa) and the [Babylonians](#).

Luristan was never an ethnic or political entity. There were relations through warfare and trade with Sumerians, [Assyrians](#), Babylonians and Elamites in the period from 3rd millennium to 2nd millennium BC. Eventually the Scythians moved into the region from the 8th - 7th century BC

There must have been an affluent ruling elite of warrior horsemen. These guys could afford fancy stuff and, lucky for us, were buried with their weapons and horsy things like harness trappings and horse bits (the things that go into the mouth of the horse; see below). These graves are the source for the famous **Luristan bronzes**, some "[type 2" iron swords](#)" and likely and possible also the "[type 1" iron mask swords](#)" that are of special interest to us.

Here are two bronze objects:

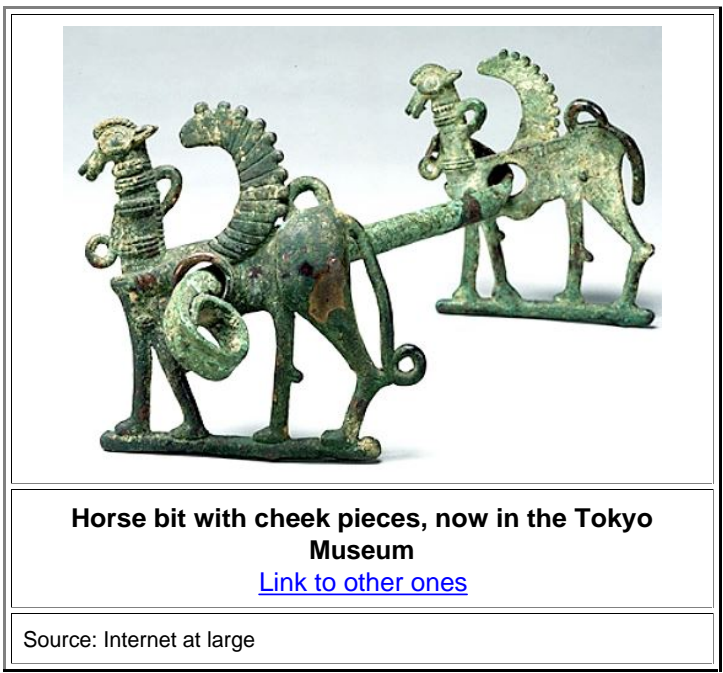


**Luristan bronze; 1000 BC - 600 BC**  
Typical "Master of Animals". Left restored to original bronze color, left with brown patina

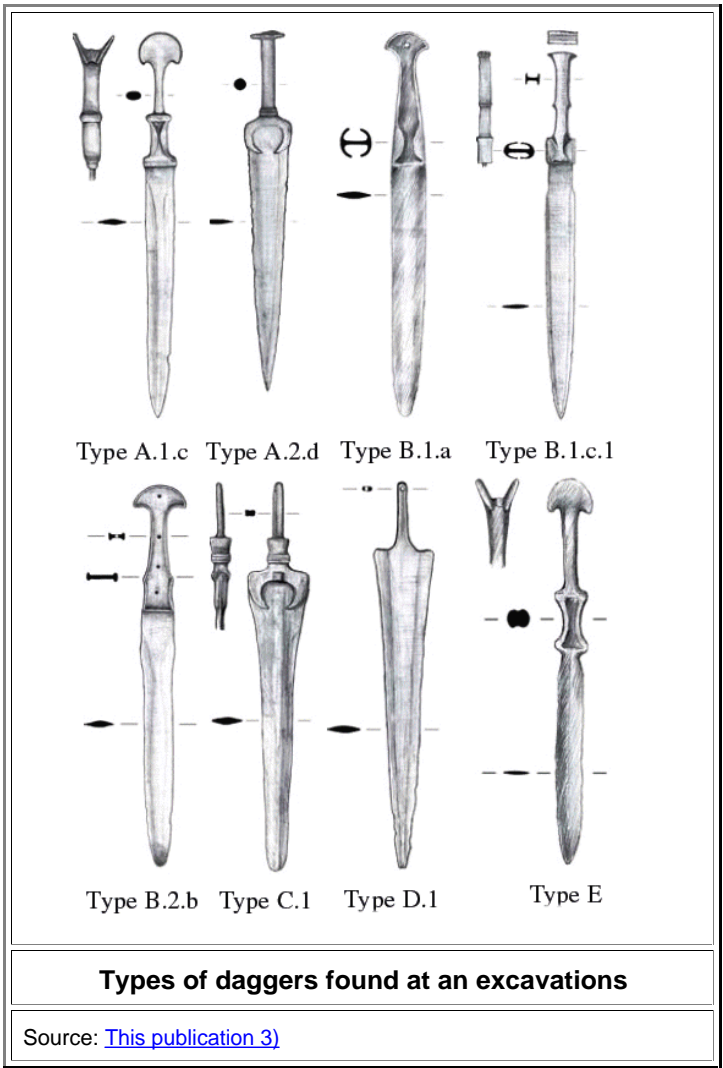
Source: Antiquity trade

- We see a "master of animals", an topic that can be found throughout antiquity. However, there must be many hundreds if not thousands of these "masters" around in the antiquity trade while not much is around from elsewhere.

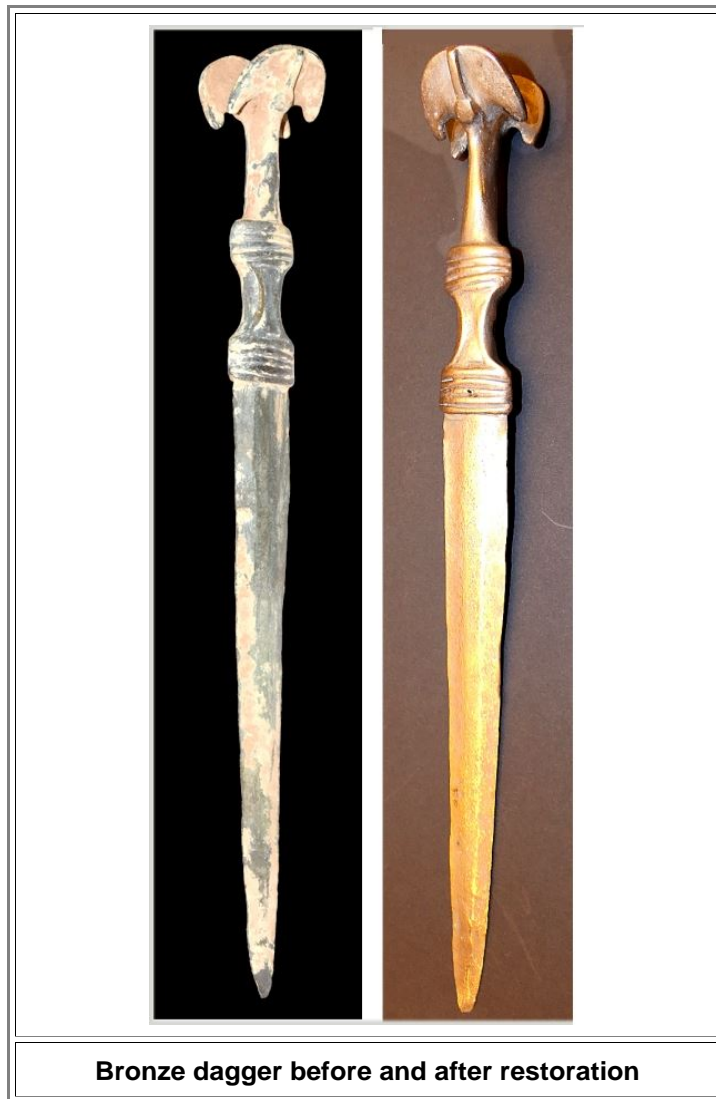
Less frequently encountered but still prominent are horse bits with cheek pieces as shown below:



Then we have thousands of bronze daggers with different but quite distinctive styles. The graphic below 'gives an overview of what was found at an excavation:



● Here are some examples including some other types as well:



● Add to this pins, jewelry, this and that, and one conclusion is now unfavorable: A huge percentage (my guess would be more than 90 %) of all metal artifacts from Mesopotamia / Mediterranean area and dating to - roughly - 1500 BC - 700 BC are from Luristan! We have far, far less from tall the big and mighty empires that were around at that time, e.g. the Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Elamites, and so on. Consult [this module](#) for more. While the vast majority of the artifact were made from bronze, the comparatively few iron artifacts from Luristan are also far ahead in numbers of everything else. And most of that wealth was unearthed without benefit of a trained archaeologist! Unfortunately that means that its scientific value is far smaller than it should be.

▶ As far as one can reconstruct what happened, local yokels discovered around 1920 that the graves of their forebears contained valuable stuff. Illicite digging started and an amazing amount of artifacts must have been recovered. The thriving if shady trade with antiquities picked up on this and thousands of objects ended up with collectors (including me and museums). Serious digging by (Belgian) archaeologists started in 1965 and what they found put a lot of things in a proper scientific perspective.

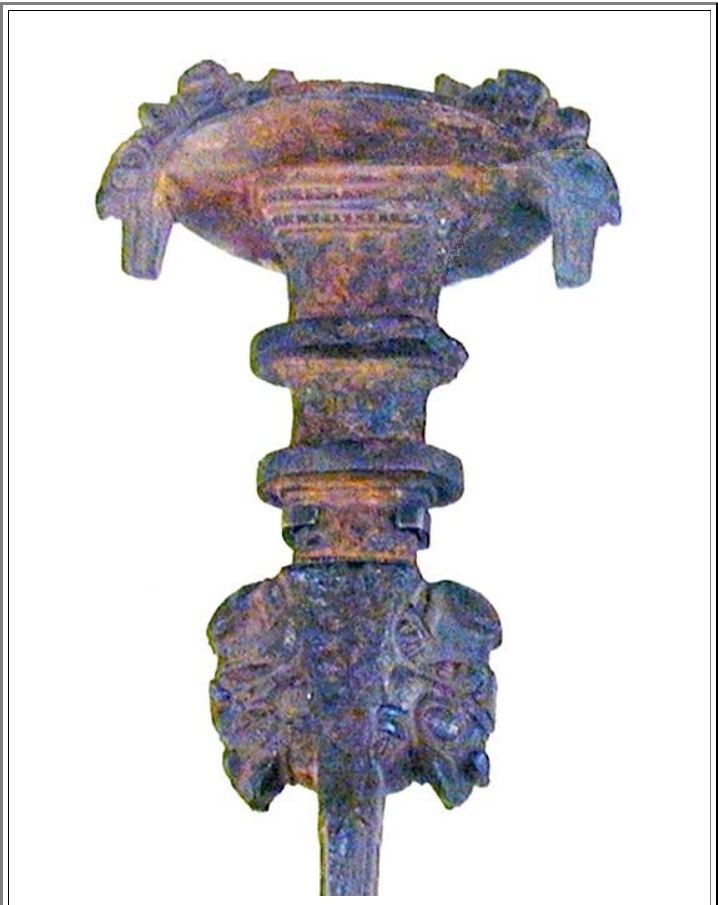
However, while plenty of bronze daggers, idols, jewelry, etc. was discovered on these excavations, plus the intriguing ["type 2" iron swords](#) already mentioned above, *no* type 1 iron mask sword has been found in-situ so far. That makes objective dating close to impossible.

Belgian archeologists, in particular **Bruno Overlaet** , continued digging and if you are interested you can consult their work [1ff](#)

● The Luristan bronzes are actually from what is called the Iron Age period or 1300 BC to 600 BC. Bronze technology was at its summit and carried over to the making of iron objects. The two were even mixed. Below is an iron sword with a cast-on bronze hilt.



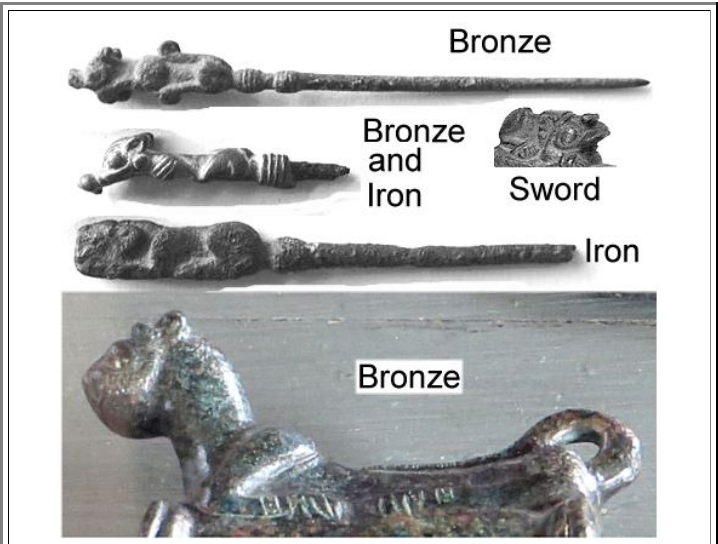
▶ Zoomorphic (animal) decorations on Luristan weapons are relatively common but usually as engravings and nothing like on the mask swords. The "lions" on this one (and on other ones) look rather like frogs but that is artistic freedom, I guess:



Luristan mask sword in he Louvre; very similar to [another sword](#)

Source: Internet / Louvre

As far as Luristan "lions" on other objects go, the best I can come up with are pins and an axe:



Top:Luristan lion pins; Sword lion from above inserted  
Bottom "lion" on the axe [shown here](#)

Source: Royal Museum of Art and History, Brussels; Belgium

Not all that convincing as far as the likeness to real lions goes. And very little similarity to the "lions" on the swords. Nevertheless, the [big question](#) raised in the backbone also applies to the iron above. How was it made considering that it could not be cast?  
Now look at these two iron bracelets:



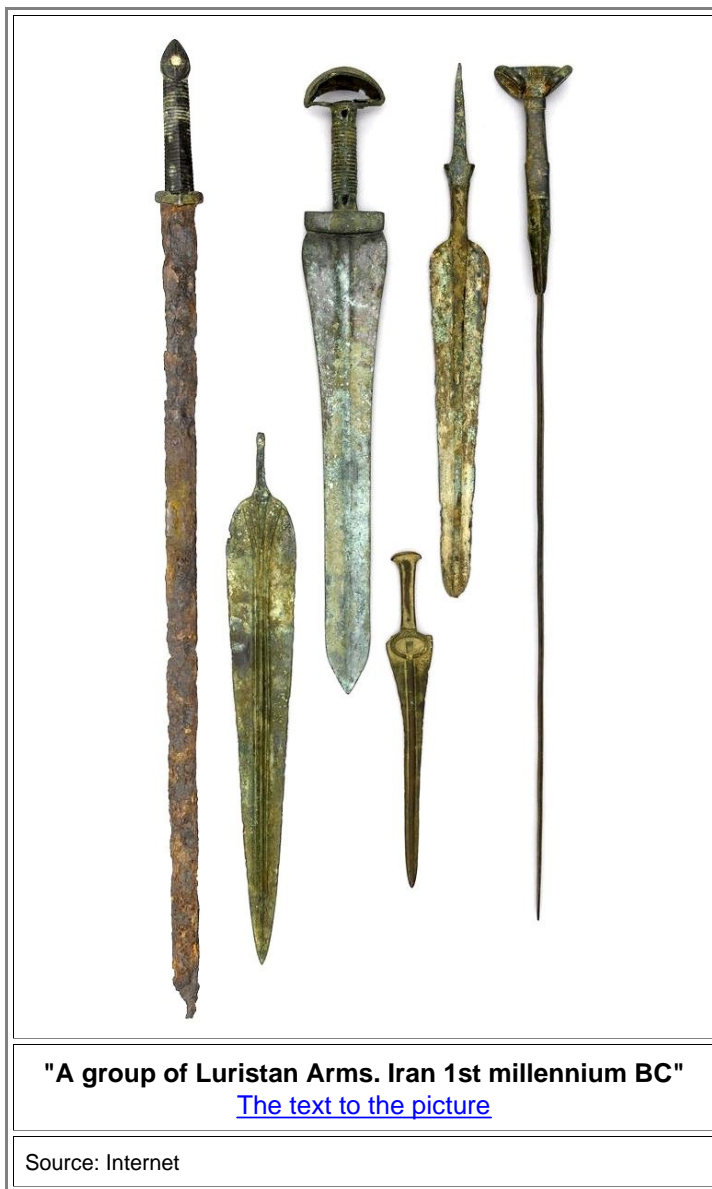
#### Luristan iron bracelets

Source: Gisela Zahlhaas: "Luristan. Antike Bonzen aus dem Iran" The book to the special exhibition 2002 in the Archäologische Staatssammlung München, Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte.

● The top one could possibly have been made by forging with only a hammer - but never the second one. My guess would be that it has been "cut" or carved like a sculpture. But the mystery remains.

▀ Anyway, the Luri's did produce a lot of good stuff and [Khorasani](#) believes that this could be due to a relaxed time after the oppressive Elamites were defeated by Babylonians so badly that they let the Luristanis in peace for quite some time after 1200 BC. "A culture of innovation and experimentation flourished, and the repertoire of the Luristan smiths expanded in the period between 1150–1050 BC" writes Khorasani.

Well - here are some of their products, the kind you find in the catalogues of firms dealing with antiques.



- The sword on the left seems to be iron. It is [rather atypical](#) for swords from around 1000 BC but I'm not sure if it is "proper" Luristan. I'm also less than sure about the dating. Here are a few more examples of what you can buy.

Christie; around \$ 16.000

**Luristan bronze swords for sale**

Source: Internet; various auction places

- I included the price Christie's is asking for the one on the right. You can get genuine Luristan bronzes considerably cheaper, too. However, those 100 \$ bargains are probably too good to be true. The next example is from the Louvre and shows the rare case of a complete hilt with non-metallic parts:





● The hilt on the right definitely looks like the precursor to the much later [yatagan](#) design.

▀ Where does all that leave us with regard to swords from the Luristan region or from the greater Iran region if we want to be a bit more general? What we see quite definitely is that the iron sword started in a variety of shapes and styles but always straight, double-edged and relatively short. Not all iron swords were meant for fighting. The ones made for warfare coexisted for quite some time with the old-fashioned but time proven bronze sword, and there were even crossovers with iron blades and a bronze hilt. That is understandable because iron as a material was not yet understood. While not many metallographic studies have been made, it is almost sure that these swords consist of inhomogeneous material with varying carbon concentration and slag inclusion. They could no have been much better than their bronze counterparts.

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- 1) Bruno Overlaet, "LURISTAN BRONZES - THE FIELD RESEARCH" Encyclopædia Iranica, online edition, 2016, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/luristan-bronzes-i-the-field-research> or via [this link](#)
  - 2) A. Hasanpur, Z. Hashemi, B. Overlaet; "The Bar Jilan Graveyard Near Nurabad, Pish-I Kuh, Luristan - A Preliminary Report. *Iranica Antiqua*, Vol. 1 (2015) pp. 171 - 213  
Contains the only mask sword found during an excavatin albeit in the debris of robbed tombs. Use [this links](#)
  - 3) M. Malekzadeh, A. Hasanpur, Z. Hashemi: "Fouilles (2005 - 2006) à Sangtarashan, Luristan, Iran", *Iranica Antiqua*, Vol. LII, (2017), pp 61 - 185. The paper reports on a large number of objects found "hidden" in the floor of a kind of temple / sanctuary
  - 4) B. Overlaet: "Luristan excavation documents, Vol. IV; The Early Iron Age in the Pusht-i Kuh, Luristan", *Acta Iranica*, Vol. XXVL, 2003; several 100 pages, not succesively numbered. See also this link.