

VARSHO IN DEZFUL

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC REPORT OF THE TRANSITION OF CULTURAL MATERIAL INTO CULTURAL HERITAGE



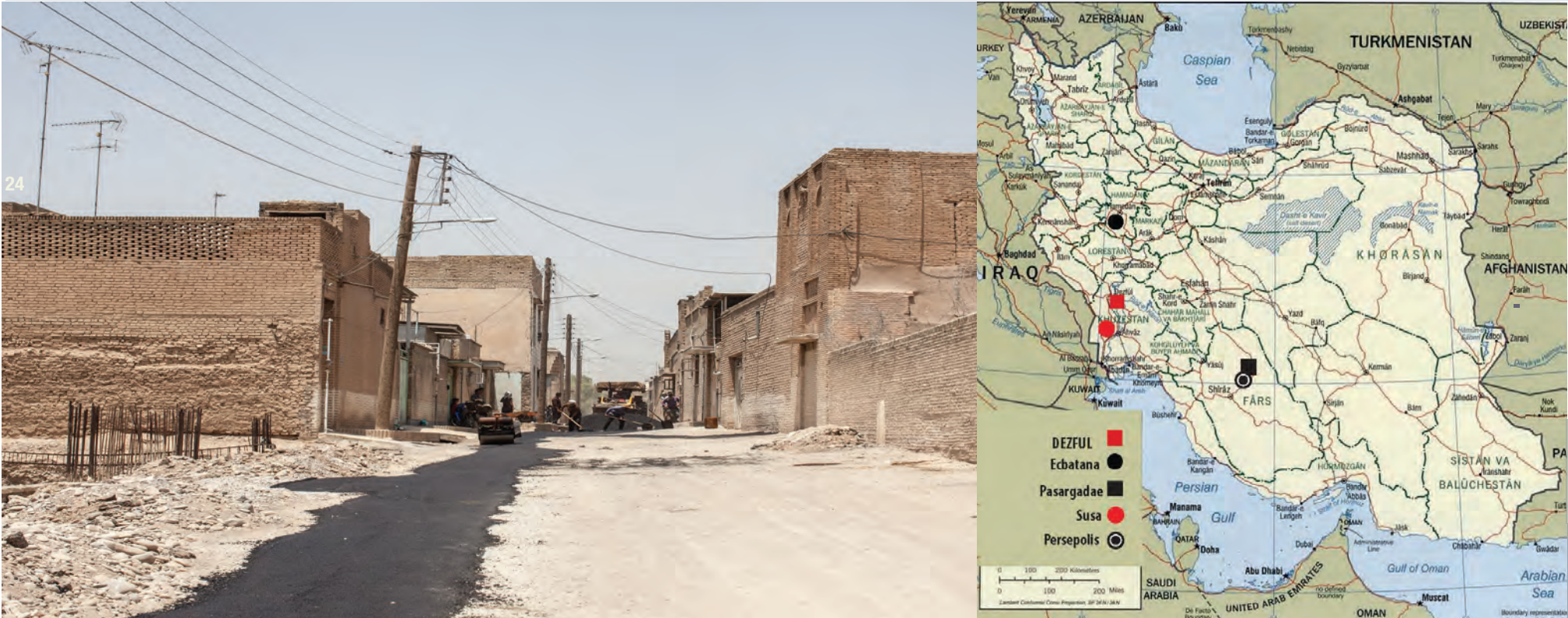
INTRODUCTION

OBJECTIVES

This research is an ethnographic study of varsho (German Silver) in the city of Dezful, Khuzestan province. From 2/Jul/2013 to 17/Jul/2013, three varsho-saz were interviewed in the old traditional bazaar of Dezful and 9 local 'collectors or owners' were interviewed in their home. Qualitative data was collected both through observation and interviews as well as photographic documentation. The aim of the research is to visualise the perceptions, meanings, feeling and values surrounding varsho in Dezful context, and depict any possible transitions of varsho from a cultural material to a cultural heritage.

DEZFUL

Khuzestan is an important province in southwestern Iran due to its unique location. Within lies **Dezful**. Built by roman captives during Sassanid dynasty to connect the new capital "Bis-hapur" to Susa town (Ganjavi 1975; Ghriisman 1954), it is located in the vicinity of the ancient towns of Susa, Ecbatana, Pasargadae and then Persepolis; continuously on the edge of the border, whether the old Babylon or the modern Iraq, throughout its history, Dezful remained politically and culturally imperative, though significantly effected by various factors such as war (e.g. with Iraq in 1980) and its oil resources (EbadiRad 2009; Kasravi 1984; Soucek 1984). Different Lur (Felli, Bakhtiari, Kuhgelu, and Mamesseni), arab and semi-arab tribes have left the mountains and occupied the plains which stretch to the west of the mountains into the districts of Shushtar, Dezful, and Behbahan (Layard 1846). Dezful has been the principal market of the area throughout history (Layard 1846). Dezful's old bazaar, located at the heart of the historic texture, used to be at the center of trade, where people would travel through Persia.



VARSHO

A century ago in Iran, most essential needs were produced locally or in close vicinity. The accelerated industrialization and modernization started in Qajar period (1785 to 1925) in Iran and had a severe effect on traditional metalworking crafts all over Iran, with some cases "rendered economically and practically obsolete by the importation of manufacture of machine-made products more suitable to modern needs" (Gluck and Gluck 1977, 113).

Varsho-sazi, a rather young technique in very long history of metalwork of Iran was an exception in this period. There is no record to indicate exactly when, from where, and for what purpose this specific alloy was imported to Iran. Varsho is actually the copper alloy known as German silver. In Farsi, varsho is actually the word "War-saw". It is commonly believed because the alloy has been imported from Poland for the first time that it was named after the capital of this country (Sahranavard 2009).

Commercially known as German Silver or Nickel Silver, it is a copper alloy, with the common formulation of 60% Copper + 20% Zinc + 20% Nickel (McCreight 1991), and was an imitation of the 'Nickel Paktong' used to cast commodities in Eastern Jin Dynasty (317 AD- 420 AD). This alloy was introduced to Europe after 18th century and was commonly known as "Chinese Silver". In 1823, both England and Germany succeeded in producing it and re-named it "German Silver" (Derui & Haiping 2011, 132). In addition to its silver color, this alloy was easy to cast and fabricate, was resistant to tarnishing, and was economical to produce" (Habashi 1998, 6).

During 19th century samovar, a sort of a tea urn came to Iran together with the habit of tea drinking and samovar (Wulff 1968). Varsho has been utilized mainly in manufacturing of samovar and other tea drinking utensils, such as cup holders, a jug to pour water in samovar, trays, sugar pot and other home ware like little cooking stoves and etc. Presumably varsho was imported to Iran about the same time. Braziers adopted this new alloy shortly after its importation and brass was replaced with varsho due its more favored properties, such as its hardness, the silver-like appearance and its durability (Sahranavard 2009).

UTILITARIAN OBJECTS MADE IN VARSHO DURING QAJAR PERIOD



FIGURES 1-12: Part of Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran, digital collection from private family holdings and participating archival institutions. Copyright © 2010 by the American and British Museum of Natural History. All rights reserved.

REDUNDANCY OF VARSHO

Sahranavard claims varsho-sazi as a technique started and developed in Dezful, Khuzestan Province, reached Borujerd in Lurestan the neighboring province and then spread out to other parts of the country in Qajar period. During World War II the importation of the alloy was temporarily stopped, and until the end of war only craftsmen in Borujerd were able to continue the production of varsho by recycling bullet shells of Russian troops stationed in this area (Sahranavard 2009). After the war the annual production of varsho reached to 30 tons in Borujerd and 12.5 tones in Dezful in the 1960s, and up until today varsho samovars manufactured in Borujerd and Dezful gained worldwide recognition.

The importation of varsho sheets was stopped permanently in 1970s (Sahranavard 2009) and due to the lack of material many workshops in both cities were forced to close down. In comparison to copper and brassware, varsho did not last long. However it gained significant popularity, which might be due to its very close similarities with sterling silver or its association with the not so old but very popular habit of tea drinking.

METHODS

An ethnographic observation method was used to provide "systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for the study" (Marshall and Rossman 1989,79) and total immersion in an unfamiliar culture (LeCompte et al. 1999), to document existing situations using the five senses, providing a "written photograph" of the varsho manufacturing processes and tools, the current status of this occupation, the typology of varsho, and the transition of varsho, from a cultural material to a cultural heritage (Allen, Erlanson, Harris,& Skipper 1993. Many Dezfuli were asked to be interviewed in their home, as one the primary goal of the research was to document varsho in local's home environment. Many refused, most of which mentioned that they are do not have time to participate. 9 accepted the participation in the study were interviewed at their home. The 3 varsho-saz who were interviewed are the only people at making and mending or exclusively mending of varsho, in the city of Dezful.

QUESTIONS ASKED DURING INTERVIEWS

- How long they owned the object?
- How and where from they obtain these objects?
- Are there any priorities in collecting the objects?
- How do they clean and maintain these collections?
- How do they use these objects?
- Why and how these object are important to them, including any memories and stories surrounding these objects?
- Any information on the history of this metalwork
- Their comment on the current situation
- What are the reasons for redundancy of the technique in their view?
- Recording the manufacturing processes and tools, type of objects
- How did they learn the technique
- The current status of this specific occupation
- Changes in market, accessibility, demand, design or production
- Any information on the history of this technique and material (How it was introduced to Iran or to Dezful in specific?
- Reasons of the redundancy of the technique If any and how outsider support is



ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

At the entrance to bazaar, I asked a local if he could direct me to the varsho-sazan corridor. He replied, "Just follow this path pass to Ghondaghsazan Square (Gunmakers Square), and that's rasteye varsho-sazan. They're all gone though, see what you can find". So we did as he directed us and entered the bazaar-e kohne as the locals call it (meaning old). It was around 6 o'clock in the afternoon. Alongside the maze-like corridors, there were half-open, half-closed shops and workshops and as a result, we were not sure if the bazaar was opening or closing.

Judging by the name of each of the main portals and sub-corridors, each section of the bazaar is specified in one type of local production: metal smiths (ironworkers, copper-smiths, and varsho-saz), textile, wood, basketry and other products. However, the concentration of the shops and workshops is not as it used to be: When we reached the ahangaran (metal smiths) bazaar, it was impossible to work out which side was where the copper-smiths or varsho-saz were, as most stalls were selling factory produced varieties of home and industrial hardware, mostly in steel and plastic (16, 20, 23 and 25).

when I asked about the situation from one of the older blacksmiths (Figure 18), he smiled and said "my day won't be a day if I don't bang this hammer". All along the wall behind him, there were about forty Hand of Fatima (Figure 19) made with recycled metal shits sheets hanged on the wall. These are usually used as protection. They are relatively cheap (priced between one thousand to three thousands تومان), and the process of making them is very simple and does not require any sophisticated skills. He continued, while pointing to the wall behind him, "I make these, at least they solve your problem". He said there is no market for the stuff he used to make and now this just helps him to pass time. I asked him about where I can find bazaar-e varsho and he replied "there is no bazaar-e varsho anymore, ask for Abdul Rahman Gol and Varshosaz, they are the only ones left".

FIRST VARSHO-SAZ

Just behind the blacksmith bazaar, next to barout-kouban square, it was Abdul Rahman Gol's shop, a two-by-two metre workshop, a rather modest space for one of the remaining varsho masters of this city. On one corner there is a pile of various hammers (chakosh) and anvils (sendon) and Gol was sitting next to them working on a new order. He has followed this hereditary occupation since the age of 11, learning the technique from his grand father.



After explaining him the nature of my study, I asked if he can help me to document the manufacturing processes and tools he uses. He explained: "Depending on the complexity of the object, we might start with drawing and cutting out the pattern from a tin sheet, laying it on a varsho sheet, using a special scissors, then we cut through varsho sheet".

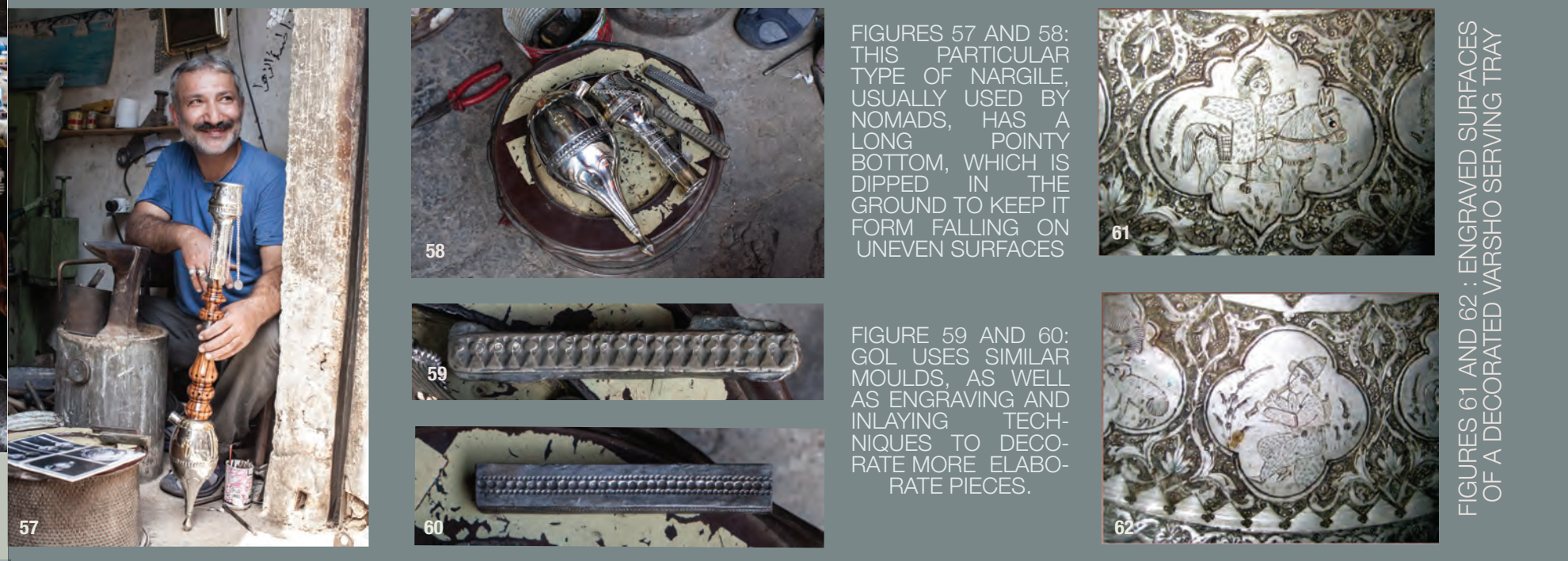
While observing him working on his new order, which was a sar qelyoun (narghile's upper part), he draws the pattern straight on the recycled varsho sheet (Figure 28, 29, 30 and 31; further steps of the process Figure 32-44). Depending on the complexity of the shape of the object, it might be beaten out (chakosh-kari) of one single sheet or alternatively made up of different parts and in latter stages joined together. After annealing the flat sheet, each piece is formed by hammering and stretching (baz-kardanand) the sheet, using a different set of hammer and anvils. Most tools and techniques used in varsho-sazi are essentially the same as the ones employed in copper-smith, except some additional sets of hammer and anvils used in varsho-sazi (figures 45-56).

The type of joint used in vasho-sazi is called darz-e dandaneh, meaning toothed seam. He cuts teeth (dandaneh-chidan) approximately 0.5 to one centimeter deep, all around the seam, on both sides. Afterwards, laying the two edges together, in a way that the teeth are fit into opposite side gaps, he wet the object and covers the seam with small pieces of brass. Brass is used because its melting point is lower than varsho. At this stage, borax, tane kar in local terms, is added as a catalyst and then heated to the soldering point by placing the object very carefully in the open furnace. Then he beats the area with his hammer to reach the perfect smooth surface and fill any gaps that are left. On some of the objects, a zigzag line can be seen due to different colour of the brass used for soldering. One important task of the varsho-saz is to modify the finish of the object at this stage using different scraping tools on a fiddle operated polishing lathe. He uses differently shaped tools to scrape different forms, some of which are as follows randeh-kaj (oblique-edged scraper), randeh-nimbor (round-edged scraper) and randeh-takht (squared-faced scraper). Products of varsho-sazi are often rather mundane and utilitarian objects, some of the standard production of this craft are samovar (tea urn), chay-dun (meaning tea jar), shir-dun (meaning milk jar), a hand-washing set called aftabeh-o-salabche (meaning ewer and hand washing pan), gahve-rizi (coffee urn) and gahve-jush (coffee pot), goldan (flower vase), zir-sigan (ashtray), galesh or gire-eshtekan (cup holder), golab-pash (rose water flask), different size trays and different kinds of charcoal stoves. Gol said when he started working in the bazaar about 40 years ago, every single varsho-saz was specified in production of one type of object. For example, while a varsho-saz produced only samovar, someone else was focused on manufacturing tongs.

MANUFACTURING / DIFFERENT TYPES OF ANVILS AND HAMMERS



He showed us a photo album of his recent works and a piece that he had just finished. It was a ghehyan (hubble-bubble, narghile). He told us this specific one is called ghehyan-e jouzi (Figure 57 and 58), which is a specific design of Lur nomads. He invited us to his place to see his grand father, his great grand father and his own recent works.



ABDUL RAHMAN GOL'S

In Gol's simple and rather small house, a wood shelve with a glass door filled with about 20 pieces of varsho was the first thing that caught your eye in that room (Figure 71). He spoke of varsho, saying, "During Naser Al-din Shah, Amir Kabir sent some of the excellent Iranian crafts- men to Russia to learn new techniques and the importation of this alloy started from Poland for the first time; that is why we call it varsho (meaning Warsaw). Once every piece of household was produced in kohne bazaar and Dezfuli people used nothing but home wares made in varsho and copper. Now everyone is selling cheap factory steels. The importation of this alloy has been stopped nearly 30 years ago; there is no material to work with; even if it was not the case, people can not afford it anymore". Gol also has an apprentice in his early 30's, which is learning the technique from him. He explained: "The raw material is becoming too expensive and rare, changes in demand and importing cheaper tableware have destroyed the market; which make these young people loose interest, because they do not see any value in developing these skills". Comparing objects produced recently to the ones produced by Gol's great grandfather and grandfather, there is a different feel into in. The ones that are older are made with thicker varsho sheets therefore much heavier. I asked if it is related to the shortage of the material, he agreed and explained how this has effected the quality of the more recently made varshos.



SECOND VARSHO-SAZ

We had a few hours before the bazaar closed and before our visit to Gol's house. During this time, we continued the search for the other two varsho-saz in Kohne Bazaar. In the south side of the bazaar there was Mr. Ghondeghsaz (meaning gunmaker which shows a long family history of working with metal) in his 70's seating in his shop, which looked rather different from Gol's shop/workshop (Figure 63). All around the shop, on the shelves there were all sorts of factory produced steel home wares such as flasks, kettles, sugar pots, bowls and jars (Figure 64); most of which presumably use to be made in varsho. He said he only does repairs. He has a small workshop at home, though does simple repairs here. There were some basic tools in one corner. He said the material is not at hand, so we cannot work. On the wall between the home wares, there was the same picture as the one hanged in Gol's shop (Figure 66); only this one was cut in half (Figure 65). He saw me looking at the picture and he explained, "That's my great grandfather, he was a great varsho-saz". Part of his family name was "ghondaghsaz", which in Farsi means the person who makes part of gun which is called stock. This in a way shows how people who have the skills to work on a material have been able to adopt themselves with changes in demand, material and lifestyle through time.



THIRD VARSHO-SAZ

Further ahead, the third varsho-saz was busy cleaning a steel kettle (Figure 67). There are about 15 pieces of varsho, mostly ghehyan parts, in his shop, which is full of all sorts of metal objects on plastic bags with nametags on them (Figure 68). He said he only repairs varsho now, along with other things. He explains that he learned the technique from his dad and it has been a couple of years since the last time he made a varsho piece from scratch. His sur- name is actually Varshosaz. He said he had to close the shop so we could not pursue him for any more questions.



HOUSE #1: Dezfuli driver in his 60's and his 21 year old daughter OBJECTS: 16 pieces of varsho

Three pieces of varsho come from his grand mother's dowry and are the most valuable ones to him. "The rest, I have collected in the past 20 years, of course this is just as much as I can afford. I used to have a lot more. In the year 1970, when both my parents died, we sold them to give the money to the mosque. I regret it so much that since then whenever any extra money came in, I bought some more" he explained. His daughter added, "even if you see them in the shop, they don't sell it to you". He continued, "it was about the same time, people used to come from Tehran and Hamadan to Dezful, driving around the town with their van, shouting with loudspeakers that they'll buy any type of varsho. Now I am sure none of those masterpieces are left in this city". He talked about how he remembers the



Kohne Bazaar in his early age; and how none of it is left. He pointed to his assemblage, "that kilim (flat tapestry-woven carpet), the tarazou (balance), mesghene (copper pitcher), and those varshos, they all have been produced in our Dezful, what do you see now? There is no support, nothing. This regime has taken away our Iranian identity. It has stolen our industrial national identity".

HOUSE #2: A Dezfuli woman in her 60's OBJECTS: 5 pieces of varsho

In this rather empty room, on the niche, there were 5 pieces of varsho. She said "all important families use to have several sets of these. Not everyone could afford it in the in my grand mother's time. This is all that has left for us and this crumbling house". She explained due to durability of varsho and because it is not as fragile as other pieces of dowry like china and glassware they usually stay in the family for many generations. She added "in the old days if you wanted to know someone is rich you'd have to count how many varsho and copper ware they have". Her grandfather was a successful tradesman. She continued, "These pieces of varsho use to look so polished, almost like mirror. Looking at them take me places; in the old days, in our rozekhani (rozeh-khani meaning religious festival)". I told her that she should take these to bazaar and repair them if she wants. She replied that there is no one in Dezful who can work on varsho and that is why the production of it has stopped. When I explained to her one of the reasons may be the lack of imports of this alloy, she disagreed saying, "varsho-sazi is ours, started in Dezful and then used in other part of the country, we did not import it".



HOUSE #3: An old Dezfuli architect in his 80's. OBJECTS: 6 pieces of varsho

He gathered his varshos in front of us and explained the production of varsho in very precise detail. Using his objects he showed me the execution of the technique. He explained to us, how kohne bazaar in Dezful used to provide every single needs of not only Dezfuli people but also nomads traveling through this city. Farmers, attar (spices sellers), bazaz (selling local textiles), geevedoz (who produce traditional hand-made shoes), namadmal (felt producer), varshosaz, mesgar (coppersmith), foundries and kharat (carpenter), among many others, were selling their products in this old bazaar. He explained to me how many occupations and skills have been redundant due to "hasty" modernizations, as he put it; adding "they killed varsho-sazi and mesgari (coppersmith) by introducing cheap factory steel, and Dezful's traditional architecture by providing no support, no plan or education for these technique to live on. No one knows how to do all those variety of brickworks we have in Dezful anymore".



HOUSE #4: A Dezfuli mechanic in his 50's OBJECTS: Unknown number of varsho



He told his wife that he is going to show us one last thing, so we realised after seeing this object we have to leave. He left the room, and came back with a plastic bag in his hand. There were two pieces of baked brick bearing inscriptions, which he claimed to be from COGA ZANBIL ziggurat, not a varsho piece. He said, "I am hoping one day I can open a museum in Dezful and show off our history and culture. Unfortunately we can not expect much from this regime, everything is disappearing". I asked his opinion about the fact that him and others like him, taking these irreplaceable pieces from very important sites result in loss of part of the information that can not be retrieved. His excuse was the neglect of people in charge, continuing to say, "they have ruined everything, let us ruin some of our own".

HOUSE #5: A Dezfuli electrician in his 40's, wife and toddler OBJECTS: 15 pieces of varsho

About half of his collection is coming from his and his wife's family; and the rest, he himself has collected these pieces over the past years in Dezful, Hamadan and Tehran's markets. He continued, "I was in Tehran couple of years ago, and I recognised this varsho samovar in an antique shop. Instantly the shop owner said that I must be either from Dezful or Borujerd. His selling price was just unbelievable". He added, "People here did not know the value of these things, and worst, we use to throw these away, it reminded you the village life (pointing to the ewer and hand washing pan or funerals and rozeh (religious festival). But these are works of art produced by Dezfuli masters, not Lur, not Kurd, nor Arab". He added, "people form Tehran new the value of it, they would go to dumpsters to find varsho in between dead people's stuff dump around dezful".



HOUSE #6: A Dezfuli couple in their 60's, retired librarian. OBJECTS: 6 pieces of varsho

Some pieces belonged to her family and two of them belong to her husband's grandmother. She explained to me the owning these objects is very important to her because they connect them to their family, to Dezful, and shows deep and rich culture of Dezful". She said, very recently she has given most of her varshos to her daughter on her wedding. She added "traditionally the grand mother in the family divided these varsho pieces between her spouse and grandchildren, starting from the oldest daughter specially when they wanted to get married, and prepare their dowry". Her husband added, "the technique of these crafts is used to pass on from father to son, these are hereditary occupations; nowadays youngsters do not have the passion to spend so much time to produce such masterpieces that can be passed on to so many generations in the family". I asked about the Christmas tree next to their varsho ghehyan, she replied it is just a decorative tree. They do not use the ghehyan anymore, and often clean it with wet cloth.