

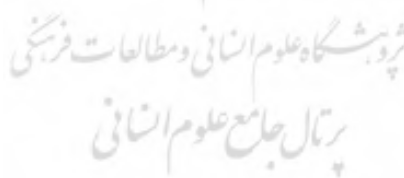
Kurgan of Fakhrabad, Meshkinshahr, Northwest Iran

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Abstract


Notwithstanding its cultural wealth, archaeologists have hitherto given little consideration to Meshkinshahr County of Iran's Ardabil Province. The region is remarkably rich in graves, as is evident from the various types of graves with simple inhumation, dolmen, rectangular stone-built, and Kurgan. In the spring of 2019, a rare example of Kurgan was investigated near the city of Fakhrabad. Unlike all other graves excavated in northwest Iran, its structure consisted of a combination of stones and mud bricks. This paper presents the preliminary results from the excavation of this Kurgan. While introducing the Kurgan, an assemblage of small artifacts and its structure were examined, and a relative chronology was then proposed. The Kurgan arguably occupies a special place in archaeology of Iran and South Caucasus given a combination of stones with mud bricks it has in its construction. Such Kurgan type still remains unreported from the region.

Keywords: Northwest Iran; Kurgan; Mudbrick; Iron Age.



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Introduction

The mesmerizing geographic location of northwest Iran was seemingly a major factor responsible for making this region a hotchpotch of cultures in antiquity. The region probably had played a more central role in Middle Eastern cultures during the Iron Age. The Kurgan culture prevailed in this region and many others beyond the present-day borders of Iran in the Bronze and Iron Age periods (Hesari and Aliyari, 2012: 130). The culture was more prevalent in the highlands of northwest Iran where the locals practiced nomadism. The systematic excavations of the Kurgans at Jafar Abad, Larijan, Tu Ali, and Zardkhaneh have provided new insights into the Iron Age (1200-550 BC) of this region.

In northwest Iran, the Kurgans are known from excavations of Sé Girdan (Muscarella, 1969), Jafar Abad (Ghadim and Beikzadeh, 2019), Tu Ali and Shahliq Kurgan (Ghahremani *et al.*, 2019) to name but a few. Their findings at these sites invariably consisted of an overlying mound sealing a burial chamber of simple pit type cut into the earth. However, excavation of a Kurgan in the spring of 2019 in Fakhrabad, a city of Meshkinshahr County exposed a unique example of Kurgan tombs. Contrasting all known examples from northwest Iran, here the burial chamber was made of mudbrick walls, girdled with river pebbles. This paper presents the results from the first excavation season of this Kurgan as a contribution to the Kurgan Culture of Northwest Iran and South Caucasus. It attempts to find answers to the following questions: Which period does it belong to? And, in which regions do the grave

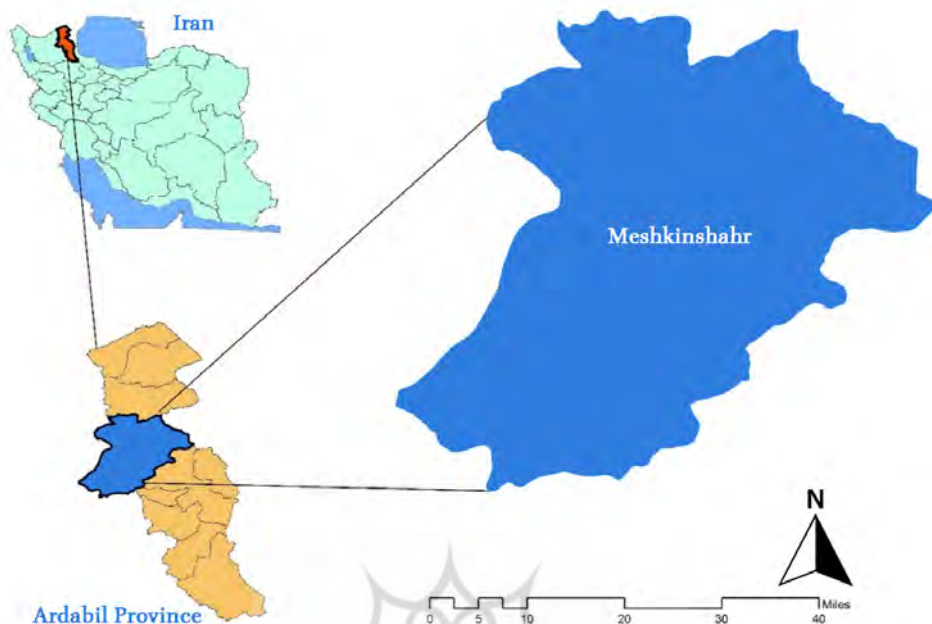
goods from it parallel? To this end, comparisons will be made between the small finds, the pottery pieces in particular, from this Kurgan and those excavated in northwest Iran and South Caucasus.

Research Methodology

The present study relies on the excavation at the Fakhrabad Kurgan. In general, attempts have been made to analyze and compare the recovered small finds from this Kurgan with regional and extra regional assemblages to establish a relative chronology for this site.

Literature Review

The Archaeological research in northwest Iran with a bearing on the Kurgans in particular and the Kurgan culture, in general, begins with the activities of a British expedition under Charles Burney at Shahr-e Yeri in 1978. A series of investigations followed this pioneering work, the most notable ones being: the study of architectural structure of the Iron Age megalithic tombs at Shahr-e Yeri (Ebtehaj, 2013), the survey and investigation at Qaleh Kohneh in Meshkinshahr (Abedi, 1997), the survey and excavation at Shahr-e Yeri by A. Hejabri Nobari between 2003-2004, the survey of the central and peripheral forts of Meshkinshahr (Rezaloo and Ayramloo, 2014), the excavation at the Khorramabad cemetery in Meshkinshahr (Rezaloo, 2013), the excavation of the Qizil Qaya cemetery at Ahmad Beiglu village of Meshkinshahr (Hajizadeh, 2014), the excavation at the mound burial at the village of Jabdaraq, again in Meshkinshahr (Abdollahi, 2014), the excavation at the Qizil Qala at the village of Ahmad Beiglu (Rezaloo, 2017).



Map 1. Map Showing the Location of the Fakhrabad Kurgan, Meshkinshahr

With respect to regional cemeteries dating from the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, excavations have covered a number of sites such as Sé Girdan (Muscarella, 1969), Jafar Abad (Ghadim and Beikzadeh, 2019), Tu Ali and Shahliq Kurgan (Ghahremani *et al.*, 2019), and the Khorramabad cemetery of Meshkinshahr (Navidgabaloou *et al.*, 2021). The Kurgan in Fakhrabad was subjected to excavation for the first time in 2018.

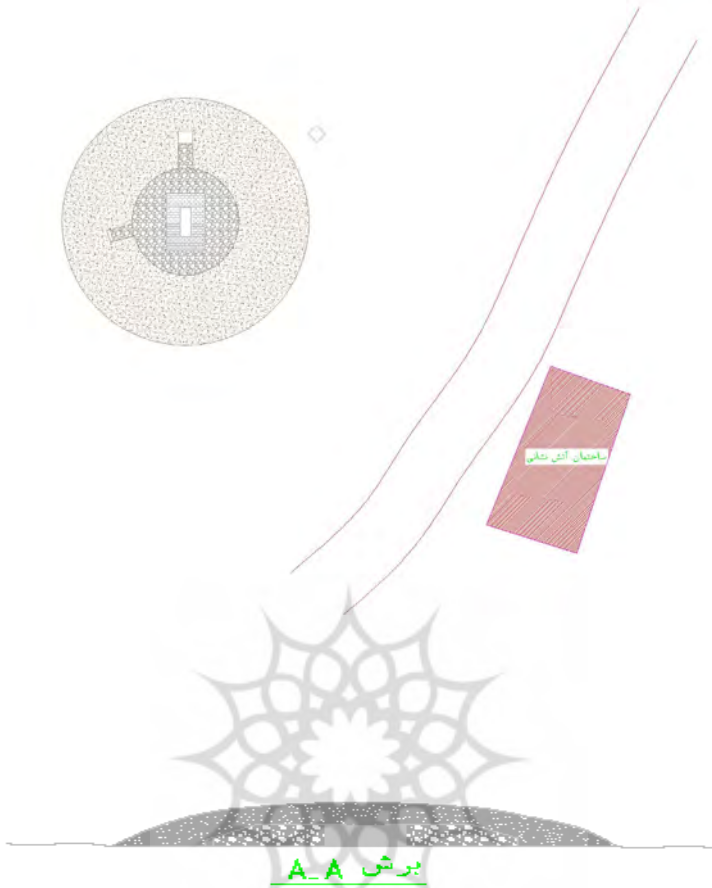
Geographic Location

Fakhrabad is a city in Meshkinshahr County, Ardabil Province, in Northwest Iran. Some 500 m to the west of the city, farmlands are interspersed by a series of Kurgans. In the spring of 2019, during the customary activities of heavy farm machineries, one of the Kurgans was partially destroyed, prompting an immediate but systematic excavation of the site. The

excavated Kurgan is located at $7279'63''\text{E}$ and $4251'37''\text{N}$ at an altitude of 1155 m above sea level on the northern flank of the Sabalan Mountains (Fig. 1). As a relatively high heap lying about 3 m west of the Fakhrabad road amid agricultural lands, this circular Kurgan is measured 20 m in diameter. The highest point, the central part, rises about 3m above the surrounding lands.

Fieldwork Report

The first season of excavation at the site began with a permit issued by the Iranian Center for Archaeological Research. Given the serious damage caused by heavy machinery and the presence of abundant surface-level artifacts around the Kurgan, two separate excavation strategies were planned: reorganizing the surface of the Kurgan, and excavating the intact parts. As part of the first strategy, a sketch plan



Map 2. General View and Plan of the Fakhrabad Kurgan, Meshkinshahr

of the mound or Kurgan was prepared through aerial imagery and topography before the surface small finds and skeletal remains were collected separately. The next step involved sieving the disturbed deposits so as to recover potential smaller fragments such as pottery sherds and metal objects. This was carried out as part of both the reorganization work and the complete recording of the data from within the deposits disturbed as a result of the activities of heavy machinery. The main reason for this was establishing the presence of any possible chronological sequence through systematic recording and careful examination of the available

evidence. The reorganization work was followed by the excavation of the Kurgan itself. Given its vast stretch, the overlying mound's surface was divided into four equal parts to be excavated sequentially. Each measuring 9x9 m, the trenches were separated with 0.5 m thick baulks. The actual work began with the excavation of Trench I once the top of the stone ring was removed.

Given time and budget constraints, it was decided to complete 3 soundings within the trenches at points that promised the most productive regarding the demarcation of the stone ring's buffer zone and the potential subsurface graves



Fig. 1. General View of the Fakhrrabad Kurgan, Meshkinshahr

and their circumstances. Thus, a 4×4 m sounding was opened within the Trench 4 taking into account the north-south direction of the main burial. This exposure furnished a number of information related to the stone ring and the mound's formation.

The Burial

As a burial mound or barrow, the grave was in a round humped shape before taking the form of an artificial mound with the addition of a heap of river pebbles (Fig. 3). There was a vault or underground burial chamber that was cut into the earth, leveled with the plain. Excavation revealed that first the surface of the plain over an area 20m in diameter was leveled and then a 20cm deep layer of rammed earth was laid on fertile sand and gravel. The north-south orientation of this floor-

ing followed that of the central grave. This rammed floor was exposed in TT 2 and TT 3, and was likewise traceable outside the burial chamber (Fig. 4). The flooring was a fairly high in consistency, with a fine texture. This rammed level was sealed by a 4-5 cm thick sturdy layer of clay and straw, meant to enhance the floor's strength and smoothness. The same material was applied as a coating inside the walls of the burial chamber. The beaten floor was framed by a "ditch" that perhaps served as a foundation trench for the pebble ring.

The central grave was represented by a rectangular burial chamber measuring 6.9 m north-south and 4.5 m east-west. The height from the clay floor was 1.6 m. The distinctively mudbrick walls of this grave inclined at 10 degrees north-south and 8 degrees east-west. First, a course of header, made of 28×25×8 cm mudbricks



Fig. 2. Mudbricks used in the Kurgan's Structure

with clay and straw mortar, was laid to act as footing, which was further coated with mud plaster. Sitting directly on the beaten clay floor, this header course was

topped with a stretcher one. All the mudbricks contained the same straw inclusions. With a satisfactory sturdiness, they were laid out quite neatly, making regular



Fig. 3. The Shaft made in the Southwest Corner of the Grave

courses separated by a clay mortar tempered with straw and grit of about 1cm thick. While the walls virtually lacked interlocking, the builders did their best to make them flush with each other, and filled and reinforced the corners with mortar. As mentioned, the grave is in a rectangular shape with four mudbrick walls. The interior space of the chamber measured 3.5 m long and 1.3 m wide. The walls on all four sides were about 1.7 m thick, made of alternating header and stretcher technique both in the core and in the exterior face. Clay mortar was added between and over the courses.

In short, the structure of the grave consisted of mudbricks measuring 52×28×8 cm and 25×25×7 cm, and the walls covering a thin and thick clay mortar.

In the southwest corner of the wall,

there was a limit representing a shaft 0.5m wide and 1m long. This shaft or cavity indicated the looting of the grave. A gigantic stone on the top sealing the burial chamber had forced the plunderers into tunneling into the wall through cutting part of the mudbricks in the southwestern corner to enter the grave and loot all burial gifts and offerings that existed therein (Fig. 5). The shaft was filled with dirt and stones over time and was perhaps the most plausible justification for the pile of such materials the excavators encountered inside the grave, where they also found scattered human skeletal remains.

Small Finds

Pottery Sherds

In this season of excavation of Kurgan I at Fakhraabad, a total of 300 fragments of



Fig. 4. Skeletal Remains of the Horse



Fig. 5. Selected Pottery and Linear Drawings

Table 1. Selected Pottery and Details

No.	Sherd Type	Manu- facture	Tem- per	Ext. Slip	Int. Slip	Ext. Slip color	Comparanda	Relative Date
1	Rim	Wheel- made	Fine sand	Thick slip	Thick slip	Gray	Larijan of Khoda Afarin (Hejabri Nobari, 2008: 24), Hasanlu (Young, 1965), the Kurgans of Jafar Abad (Iravani Ghadim, 2010: 143-155), Arslantepe (Palumbi, 2021: 50-51)	Iron I, II
2	Rim	Wheel- made	Fine sand	Thin slip	-	Gray	Karagündüz Cemetery (Koroğlu and Konyar, 2008: 138), Dinkha II (Muscurella, 1966: 191), Goey Tepe B (Brown, 1951, Fig. 36)	Iron I, II
3	Rim	Hand- made	Fine sand	Thin slip	Thin slip	Gray	Kordlar (Lippert, 1976, abb. 13.5), Teruz Chay (Museyibi et al., 2008, 101), Arslantepe (Palumbi, 2021: 50-51), Ağrı-Bozkurt Kurgan (Çifçi, 2023)	Iron I, II
4	Rim	Wheel- made	Fine sand	Thin slip	Thin slip	Light brown	Masjid-e Kabud (Hejabri Nobari, 2005: 272), and Sarand-Dighdighan (Sattarnejad et al., 2011)	Iron I, II

gray and black ware were recovered from Trenches 1 to 4 and from the soil piled by loader. Based on their similarities in shape, thickness, color, temper, and exterior and interior coatings, these pieces are perhaps the remains of vessels or burial gifts that were deposited over the grave but were crushed during the course of the recent earthmoving process. The sherds have close affinity with those found at Larijan of Khoda Afarin (Hejabri Nobari, 2008: 24), Hasanlu (Young, 1965), the Kurgans of Jafar Abad (Iravani Ghadim, 2010: 143-155),

the cemetery of Yoncatepe (Koroğlu, 2002, Fig. 4.13), Karagündüz Cemetery (Koroğlu and Konyar, 2008: 138), Dinkha II (Muscurella, 1966: 191), Goey Tepe B (Brown, 1951, Fig. 36), Kordlar (Lippert, 1976, abb. 13.5), Teruz Chay (Museyibi et al., 2008: 101), the cemetery of Masjid-e Kabud (Hejabri Nobari 2005: 272), and Sarand-Dighdighan (Sattarnejad et al., 2011). As the cited sites all date to the Iron II (1000-800 BC), the surface pottery assemblage from Fakhrrabad must be datable to this time span.

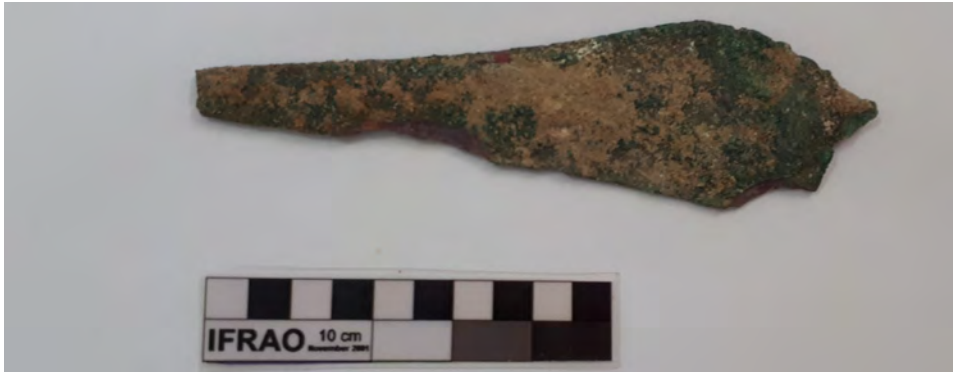


Fig. 6. Bronze Dagger

Animal Burial

To the northeast of the topping stone of the grave, there were skeletal remains of an animal, possibly a young horse, seemingly mutilated. Oriented north-south, the skeleton has the maximum length of 1.3 m and 0.5 m wide. It was merely represented by the skull, ribs, femurs, and virtually powdered lower feet, which were found within the sandy soil. The skull faced west towards the topping stone. Both jaws were present, and the teeth, especially the lower ones, are fairly sturdy. In general, the skeleton was extremely disturbed with no discernible form, and the bones were pushed towards this part of the Kurgan as a result of soil pressure. The highest point of the skeleton, the femur to the south of the topping slab, lay at a depth of 23 cm from the grave's surface. The ribs were extremely deformed and displaced, and were found lying to the east of the cranium. The latter measures a maximal length of 22 cm and a maximal width of 16 cm.

Dagger

The surface assemblage contains a bronze dagger that is covered in a green patina, and the handle and the blade tip are partially broken and missing. The ex-

tant widths are 1.3 cm, 3 cm, and 4.3 in the narrowest, middle and broadest parts, respectively. It represented a practical tool used for fighting and hunting. It finds parallels at Hasanlu IV (Muscarella, 2013: 95), Dinkha II (Muscarella, 1974: 61), Khurvin (Vanden Berghe, 1964: 89), Masjid-e Kabud (Hejabri Nobari, 2004) and Tu Ali Kurgan 3 (Ghaffari, 2014, Fig. 6.102).

Stone Bead

There found an almost conical bead in the northern part of the grave. This is made with a cutting technique out of a sort of orangish and creamy stone. It lay 40 cm from the northern wall and 50 cm from the western wall of the grave, at a depth of 40 cm from the top of the burial chamber. It is 2.8 cm in diameter and 2 cm high and has a hole of 3 mm in diameter.

Relative Chronology

The Kurgan excavated at Fakhrabad, Meshkinshahr, Ardabil province, represents a rare example of such burials in terms of its architecture. In particular, standing in marked contrast with all the examples recovered in the region, it is completely made of mud-brick. Yet, given the complete plundering of the grave goods and even the



Fig. 7. Stone Object

skeleton, no information is available about the pertaining burial custom. The only preserved burial belonged to a young horse recorded on the surface of the Kurgan. However, a comparative study of the recovered cultural materials, especially the pottery sherds found on the Kurgan's surface, reveal affinities with the materials found at Larijan of Khoda Afarin (Hejabri Nobari, 2008: 24), Hasanlu (Young, 1965), the Kurgans of Jafar Abad (Irvani Ghadim, 2010: 143–155), the cemetery of Yoncatepe (Köroğlu, 2002, Fig. 4.13), Karagündüz Cemetery (Köroğlu and Konyar, 2008: 138), Dinkha II (Muscurella, 1966: 191), Goeý Tepe B (Brown, 1951, fig. 36), Kordlar (Lippert, 1976, abb. 13.5), Teruz Chay (Museum *et al.*, 2008: 101), the cemetery of Masjid-e Kabud (Hejabri Nobari, 2005: 272), the cemetery of Sarand-Dighdighan (Sattarnejad *et al.*, 2011), Arslantepe (Palumbi, 2021: 50–51), and Ağrı-Bozkurt Kurgan (Çifçi, 2023).

Therefore, a relative date in the Iron

I-II appears the most plausible. Also, the similarity between the pottery forms is indicative of interactions in the Iron Age between Northwest Iran, on the one hand, and South Caucasus and Eastern Anatolia, on the other. During this period, the settlement pattern of the regional societies was partially consisted of nomadic lifestyles associated with no settlement sites and with graves representing their sole architectural legacy. Therefore, the Kurgan identified in Fakhrabad, Meshkinshahr perhaps relates to such communities. Generally, the pastures of Sabalan slopes furnished a desirable setting for the emergence and residence of nomadic communities, as is still the case today.

Conclusion

The topography, location, and extent of a Kurgan or burial mound reflect the social or political status of the deceased. Accordingly, a series of smaller Kurgans are sometimes found encircling the central



Fig. 8. Bead

one. Its geographic and environmental settings characterized by lush pastures, abundance of water resources, and conducive climate, to name a few, made northwest Iran an alluring region for nomadic groups. In the late Bronze and Iron periods, the region was thus home to nomadic pastoralists whose principal architectural inheritance was Kurgans. As Kurgans were formed detached from settlement centers, artefactual assemblages from such contexts have the potential to shed a profound light on the contemporary nomadic groups living in northwest Iran, thereby providing a general picture of their life. The recent excavation at Fakhrabad revealed a Kurgan unique in its kind. In particular, the example from the site contrasts all other published

Kurgans from across the broader region of northwest Iran from an architectural perspective. It is characterized by a burial chamber of mudbrick walls, clay flooring, a stone ring around the burial chamber, and placement of burial gifts both inside and outside the chamber, with the latter deemed post-mortuary burial gifts, a horse burial, and an assemblage of pottery vessels. As stated, the major factor distinguishing this from all other excavated instances throughout the region is its structural peculiarity. Unlike the archetypal stone-built structure, the burial chamber at Fakhrabad was made of mudbricks. The pottery assemblage from the site suggests a relative date in the Iron II, i.e., 1000–800 BC.

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