

The Cairn Burials of Harat, Yazd, Iran

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Abstract

Throughout the history, one of the concerns of human beings has been death. The death and the rituals associated with it have created enduring traditions in human societies, with each having its own unique rite based on prevailing cultural and historical characteristics. One of the important traditions related to death is burial practices with varying rituals. Different faiths and religions recommend different commands and traditions for the disposal of a deceased body, with one being burial in the ground. Burial methods, too, differ in different religions, and throughout history, various methods of burial have been performed based on the prevalent rituals and religions of the time. In Zoroastrian, due to the reverence of the four elements (water, earth, fire, and air), any direct contact with a human corpse, which is considered impure, is forbidden. Followers of the Zoroastrian faith have adopted various methods for burying their deceased, including placing them in *astōdān* (ossuary), towers of silence, and constructing large stone graves (*dakhmas*/ cairn burials). This paper introduces the cairn burials (*khareft-khaneh*) and an *astōdān* (*sotōdān*) that were found during the archaeological survey of Harat district of Yazd province in 2021. In the archaeological survey of Harat, various cultural and historical sites from different periods were identified. Most of the identified sites in this survey belonged to the Islamic era, but some are referred to historical period, such as cairn burials and an *astōdān* (ossuary), which will be discussed in this study. Based on comparative studies and similar burial methods found in central Iran, Fars, and Kerman, these sites are dated back to the historical period (Parthian/Sasanian).

Keywords: Archaeological Survey; Yazd; Harat; Cairn Burials; *Astōdān*; Parthian-Sasanian.

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Introduction

Archaeological surveys of Khatam district, Yazd province, were conducted in April and May of 2021. The survey coincided with the peak of the COVID-19 spread in Iran, which posed several challenges to surveyers and archeologists. Khatam district is situated in the center of Iran, south of Yazd province (Fig. 1). It spans an area of 8201 square kilometers and has an elevation of 1600 meters above sea level. Khatam district is located 240 kilometers south of Yazd province and is bordered with Mehriz district in the north, Abarkoh district in the northwest, Shahrabak district of Kerman province in the east, and Bawarnat district of Fars province in the west. The district comprises two parts, Harat and Merovest, along with four villages: Chahak, Fatehabad, Isar, and Harabarjan (Statistical Yearbook of Yazd Province, 2013-29-32) (Fig. 2).

During the archaeological survey, a total of 220 cultural-historical sites were discovered, including historical monuments (71), Qanats (81), archaeological sites (34), caves and rock shelters (8), and cemeteries (25) (Fig. 2 and 3).

Chronologically, the oldest petroglyphs identified in the survey dates back to the Middle Paleolithic period (around 40-50-thousand years ago). The evidence of this culture includes several diagnostic lithics, which have been identified in front of several rock shelters and open sites which may be the oldest evidence of the Middle Paleolithic culture (Moustri) in the center of Iran. Non-prehistoric sites have been not recognized between the Middle Palaeolithic period to the his-

torical period (Partian/Sasanian), except for two prehistoric pottery shreds in the historical/Islamic sites. The catchment area of the Azam River was a place where there was a possibility of discovering such prehistoric sites. Unfortunately, after the Islamic Revolution and extensive industrial agriculture development, especially in the last decade, any possibility of prehistoric cultural evidence in this area had been out of reach. From the historical period (Parthian/ Sasanian) the region was re-inhabited and sites from this period were identified at different places, especially around the watershed of the Azam River. From the Safavid period onwards, especially the Qajar period, the region has been heavily inhabited (Azizi Kharanaghi, 2021).

In the western part of the surveyed area (the border between Fars and Yazd provinces), due to the climatic conditions (Wild pistachio/ almond forests, permanent rivers, and lots of springs), nomadic life has a long history in this area, where there are numerous historical and nomadic cemeteries as well and identified from the historical period (Khraft Khaneh) to the Safavid era.

Literature Review

One of the most important archaeological reports related to burials and their various forms in the historical period of Iran is *astōdān* (Gordkhaneh), which were previously attributed to the Median period (Ghirshman, 1967: 87-89, Diakonoff, 1966: 249, Herzfeld, 1940: 200). However, recent studies showed that it was more likely belonged to the Achaemenid period and afterward (Huff, 1983, Farjamirad 2003, Von Gal,

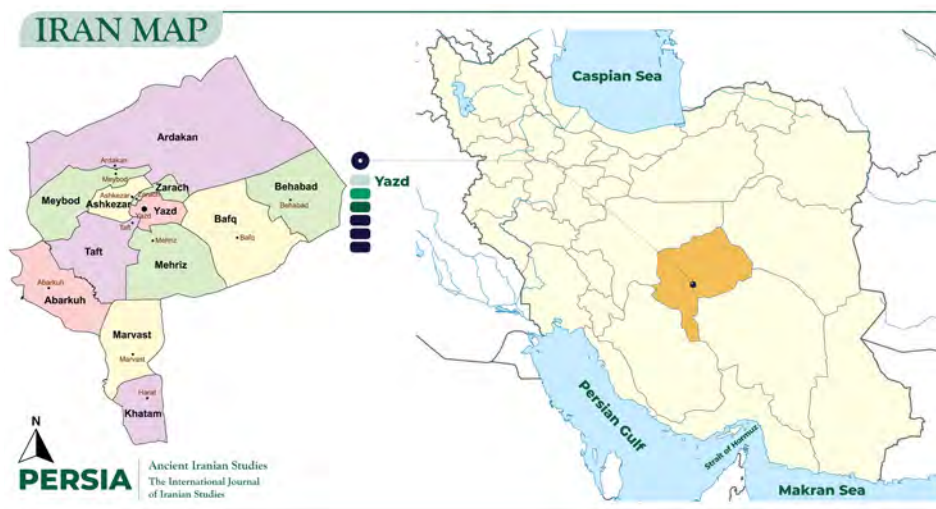


Fig. 1. Map of Iran and Geographical Location of Yazd Province

(Adapted by the Author and *Ancient Iranian Studies* from a Map from Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons Licence CC BY-SA 4.0)

1988). The royal *astōdāns* of the Achaemenid period, various burial forms of the Parthian and Sasanian periods, and the silent towers of the Sasanian period are limited in scope.

Considering that burial customs have a direct relationship with beliefs and religion in human life, the study focuses on the evolution of religious trends in the historical period of Iran. Our knowledge of the religion of Medes is limited to some extent and is based on the reports of Greek historians, which require further contemplation. There is also no complete information about the religion of the Achaemenids, and for that matter we have to refer again to Greek and Roman writings (Jafari, 2007: 16).

Herodotus mentions Magi as one of the Median tribes (Herodotus, 1: 101), but Pordavoud in the *Yasna* states that Magis were not a tribe but a group who inherited the leadership of religious rituals from their forefathers for generations (Pordavoud, 1933: 77).

Herodotus does not provide specific information about the religion of Medes except scant references about Magi, diviners, and Median priests. On the other hand, he does not consider Magi as a separate class, rather a tribe of the Medes (Diakonoff, 1966: 500).

In the Sasanian society, a Zoroastrian clergy held the highest religious authority. It was during this period that the burial culture and the construction of *astōdān* became more prevalent. It should be noted that originally, the Zoroastrians buried their dead, and the practice of leaving the dead in *astōdān* and later, in Silent Tower (which is still common) is a secondary phenomenon that gained popularity under the influence of the Magi. Strabo also reports in the 1st century AD: "The Iranians used to cover their dead with wax before burial, but the Magis do not do such a thing; instead, they leave the dead to be consumed by birds" (Kokh, 1999: 334).

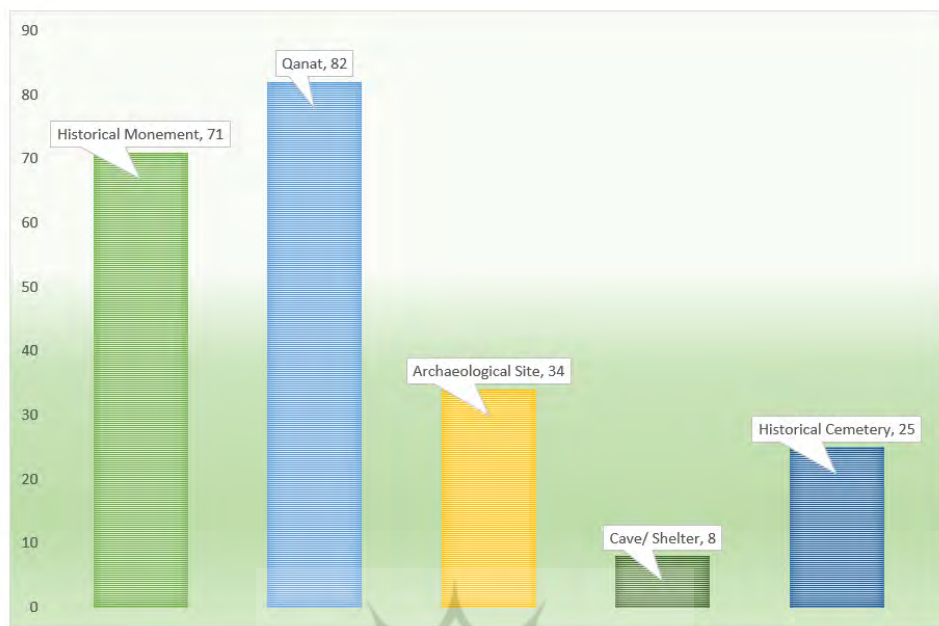


Fig. 2. A Variety of Sites Identified in the Archaeological Survey of Khatam District

In many developments of Iran's historical period, especially between the Medes and the late Sasanian period, religion played a significant and notable role. In the Sasanian government system, the religious leader, or commonly known as "Mobed Mobedan", had an important role in the politics of the kingdom (Jafari, 2007: 19).

Rock tombs (*astōdān*), apparently belonging to the Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid periods, provide an incomplete picture of the art and particularly the architecture of that time. In fact, these rock-cut tombs are imitations of residential houses, with most of these being built with one or more inner rooms with a porch in front (a vaulted space on columns) (Herzfeld, 2002: 226). Only a few *astōdān* were carved out into mountain walls during that period, and from the appearance of these *astōdān* or mausoleums, one can deduce to some extent the form of buildings of that time. These mausoleums, which were

carved out into the mountain rocks, have a facade that served as the entrance, and their ceiling was placed on columns that included an entrance door and one or two rooms. Sometimes these two rooms were placed on top of each other (Ghirshman, 1967: 87).

It seems that the most important concern of human throughout history, from the early societies until now, has been the people's attitude and worldview, which has been the creator of culture and civilizations in close connection with environmental and natural factors. Based on this, it can be seen that the forms of burial depend, to a large extent, on its position and location (Jafari, 2007: 19). The public opinion is that during the Sasanian period, they left the dead bodies to wild animals and birds for decomposition and then, only the remaining bones were buried in niches or depressions that were created in the rocks called *astōdān* (Trumpelman, 1993: 29).

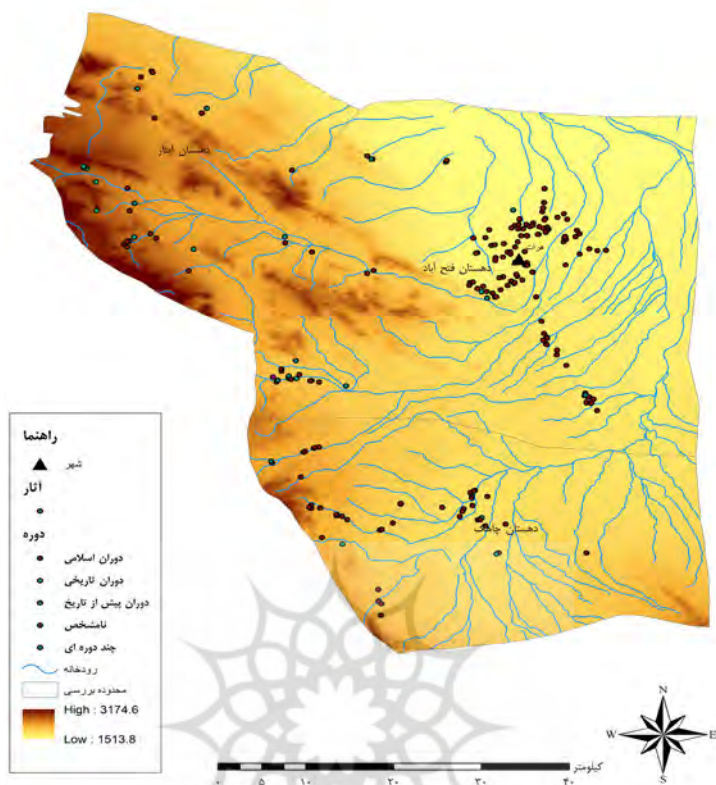


Fig. 3. Distribution Map of the Identified Sites in the Archaeological Survey of Khatam District

Astōdān or ossuary is one of the secondary forms of graves (Jafari, 2016: 76). Since the Zoroastrian religion believed in the sacredness of earth, water and fire which should not be polluted, therefore, they did not bury their dead, burn them, or throw them into the water (Razi, 1982: 735). According to this belief, the corpse should be placed in the open so that the soul leaves the body and the flesh and skin are eaten by wild animals. Then, the bones, which were cleaned after these steps, were placed inside the astōdān, which was either carved in the mountain or made in the open air (Silent Tower) (Trumpelman, 1993: 36, 37).

Walter Henning translated the word

“astōdān” as a repository or container for bones. Prior to him, Herzfeld believed that the ancient tradition of placing the body in open air became widespread with the rise of the ancient Magi in their land of Azarbaijan. During Herodotus’ time, this tradition was specific to the Magi, and since then, numerous small rock structures called “astodkas” were carved where bones were placed after the decomposition of the body (Trumpelman, 1993: 29).

According to the narrative in the stories of Hormozyar, astōdān was one of Jamshid’s inventions. When Jamshid fought against Ahriman to save Tahmuras and failed to rescue the unsuccessful



Fig. 4. A Sample of Cairn Burials (Sari Asiab, Kerman) (Karlovsy, Humphries, 1968: 274, Fig. 4)

king alive, he brought his dead body and placed it in an *astōdān*. This *astōdān* is known to be one of Jamshid's inventions (Un Vala, 1922: 314).

Later, during the Sasanian period, Zoroastrian priests also adopted this tradition. According to ancient Iranian beliefs, water, soil, air, and fire are the four sacred elements and should not be contaminated by dead bodies. Therefore, bodies were placed in tall towers called "Tower of Silence" so that birds could clean the bones. Once the bones were collected, they were placed in bone chambers or cavities carved out into rocks, known as *astōdāns*. This type of burial may have been a tradition among the Magi even before the Achaemenids (Curtis & Tallis, 2005: 154).

In general, *astōdāns* are created in mountainous rocky areas, and accessing some of them is not easy. The entrance of *astōdāns* are rectangular or square in shape, with varying lengths, widths, and depths. The carving style in most *astōdāns* is imprecise and lacks finesse, with visible marks of pickaxe use. It seems that individual graves existed throughout Iran, but most of them declined during the Islamic period.

In addition to *astōdāns*, another burial method prevalent in central Iran during historical periods was cairn burials. In Fars, in the Balaghi Valley (Jafari, 2007) and the Rahmat Mountain and Estakhr vicinity, numerous examples of cairn burials have been identified (Jafari, 2006). These graves consist of uncarved and stacked stones resembling small rocky mounds found in



Fig. 5. Distribution Map of Cairn Burials (Karlovsy, Humphries, 1968: 275, Fig. 3)

mountainous areas (Fig. 4). Generally, no mortar is used in their construction, and a grave is dug in the center among the rocks. After placing the deceased body and covering it with stone slabs, a large mass of stone rubble is poured over it. These mass stone graves are known as Khereft Khaneh in Harat, Yazd province, although elsewhere, especially the Bakhtiari region in Khuzestan province, they are referred to as Khereft Khaneh instead of astōdān. More samples of cairn burials have also been reported in Kerman province (Karlovsy, Humphries, 1968) and parts of Balochistan and eastern Pakistan (Stein, 1936), indicating the prevalence of this burial method during the Parthian period in various cultural regions of Iran (Fig. 5).

Cairn Burials (Khereft Khaneh) in Harat

In archaeological surveys conducted in Harat, Yazd Province, 9 cairn burials and

one astōdān were identified. These sites are all located in the western and south-western parts of Harat district, bordering Fars Province and mountainous areas. The structures of all cairn burials are similar and consist of a circular mass of large and small stone rubble, usually built on the slopes of mountains and elevated areas overlooking the plains. Due to illegal excavation at all sites, only in one site, a few pottery fragments were identified around the graves. The only identified astōdān in this survey is located exactly on the border between Yazd and Fars provinces in the village of Korkhanghan, which is directly comparable to the examples found near Estakhr city, adjacent to Mount Rahmat (Jafari, 2007: 4, Fig. 4) (Fig. 6) as can be seen in the following map:

1. Bakhtiari Cairn Burial

The Bakhtiari cairn burial (Khereft

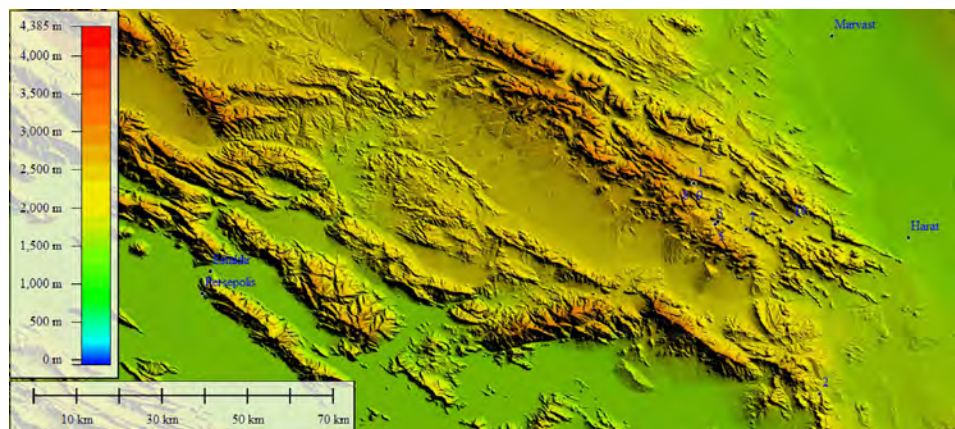


Fig. 6. Map of the Dispersal of Cairn Burials and Astudan of Harat, Yazd Province

Khaneh) is located 39 kilometers southwest of Harat district, between the wild almond forests, in a place called Dahneh Dehno. This structure has 3.5×8 meters in dimension and a height of 5.1 meters, with an approximate area of 45 square meters. The Bakhtiari cairn burial has been damaged and its stones displaced by illegal excavators. The burial site, which lacks its original shape, was likely located in the central of the structure. It can be compared with similar examples found dating back to the possibly Parthian period (Fig. 7).

2. Mir Soliymani Cairn Burial

The Mir Soleimani cairn burial (Khe-reft Khaneh) is located in the village of Boruyeh, 22 kilometers northwest of Harat district, at 1991 meters above sea level. This structure is situated on the slopes overlooking the Chenar Naz plain. It has dimensions of approximately 3.5×5 meters and a height of about half a meter, constructed from large stone rubble. Unfortunately, this site too has been destroyed by illegal excavations (Fig. 8).

3. Taval Chaman Cairn Burial

The Taval Chaman cairn burial is situated in Eeshar Rural District, 3 kilometers southeast of Chenar Naz village, on the slopes of surrounding hills. The remaining height of the structure is approximately one meter, with dimensions of about $5/3 \times 5/4$ meters. A rectangular-shaped tomb, constructed with dry-stone slabs, is located in the center. Additionally, large stone slabs can be observed on the top of the tomb. Unfortunately, this site has been subjected to illegal excavation, resulting in the scattering of large stone fragments in a circular pattern around the central grave (Fig. 9).

4. Chenar Naz 1 Cairn Burial

The Chenar Naz 1 cairn burial is located 37 kilometers northwest of Harat district and 3 kilometers southwest of Chenar Naz village. This site is situated on the highest part of a natural hill, with the stones of the structure having lost their original shape and scattered around it. The dimensions of this site are 4×2 meters, covering an area of 8 square meters. It appears as a collection of large and small stones,

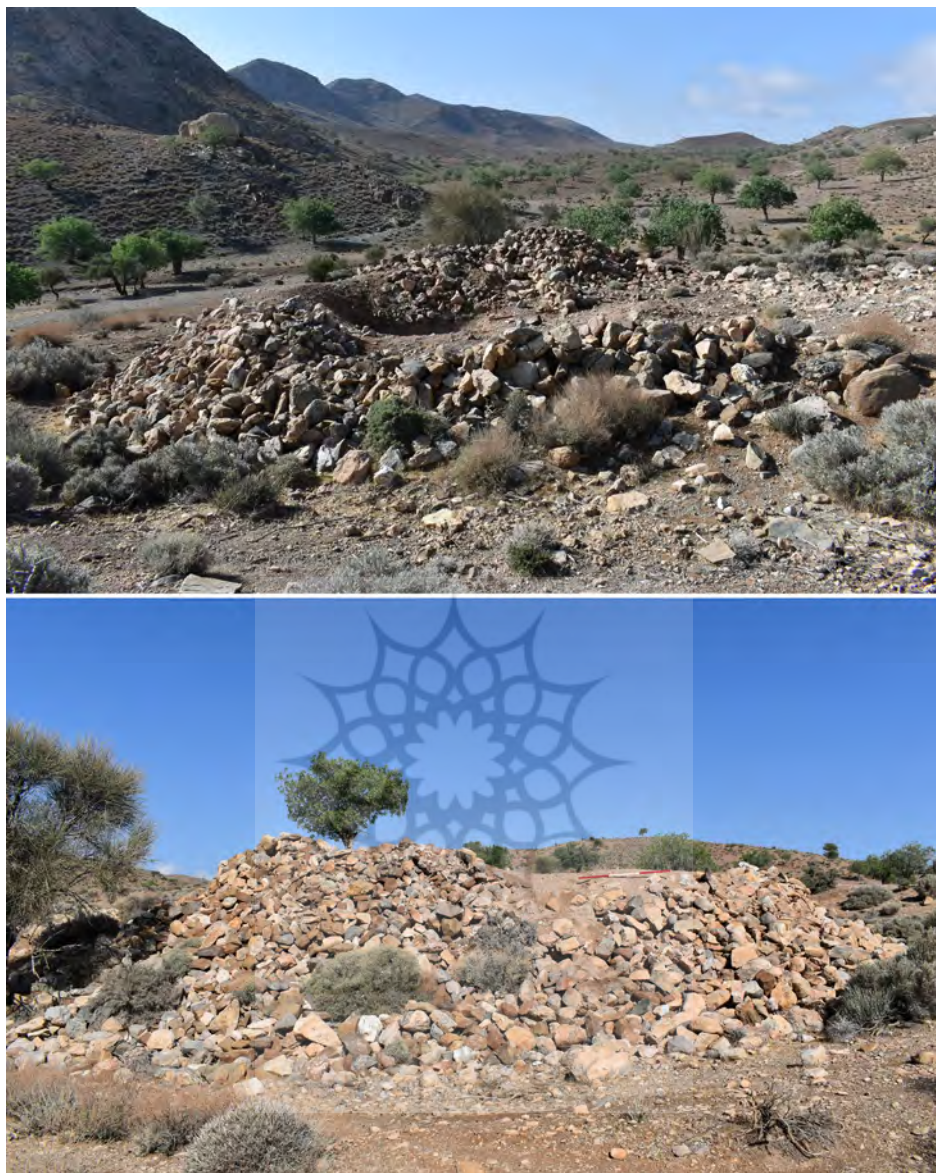


Fig. 7. East (Top) and South (Bottom) View of Bakhtiari Cairn Burials

and compared to other mentioned stone graves, it has suffered less damage (Fig. 10). This site stands out as the only cairn burial that is surrounded by several pottery pieces, potentially dating back to the Parthian period (Fig. 11). By analyzing these pottery types and comparing them

with samples from the surrounding areas, these sites can be attributed to the Parthian period. Chenar Naz 2, 3, and 4 cairn burials are located in the northeast direction, with Chenar Naz 4 being situated at a short distance. In fact, all of these cairn burials are positioned within a 193 square



Fig. 8. Overview of Mir Soliymani Cairn Burial

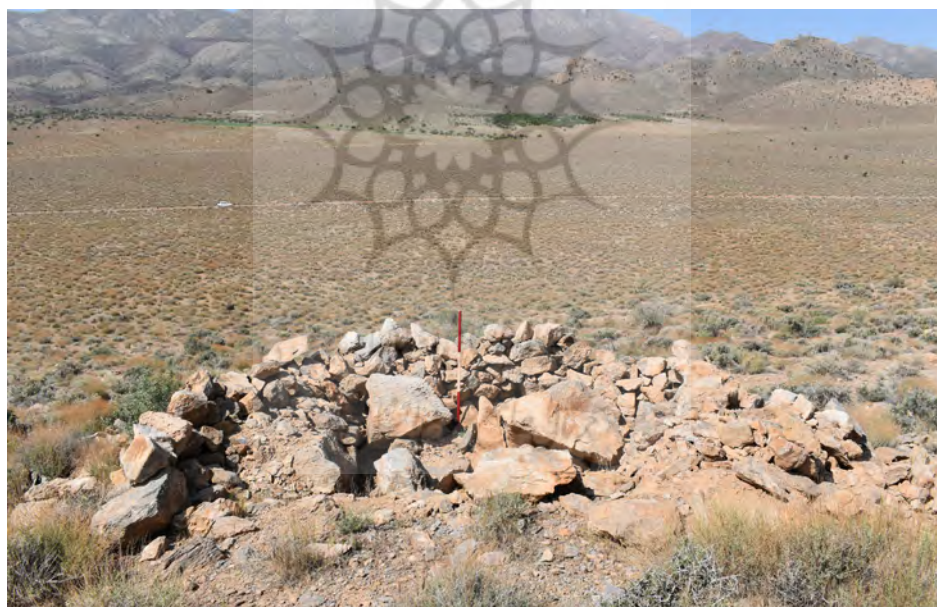


Fig. 9. Overview of Tavil Chaman Cairn Burial

meter area in a mountainous region, with a small distance from each other.

5. Chenar Naz 2 Cairn Burial

The Chenar Naz 2 cairn burial is situ-

ated 37 kilometers southwest of Harat and 3 kilometers southwest of Chenar Naz village. This cairn burial is located on the highest part of a natural hill and appears as a circular mass of stones,



Fig. 10. Overview of Chenar Naz 1 Cairn Burial

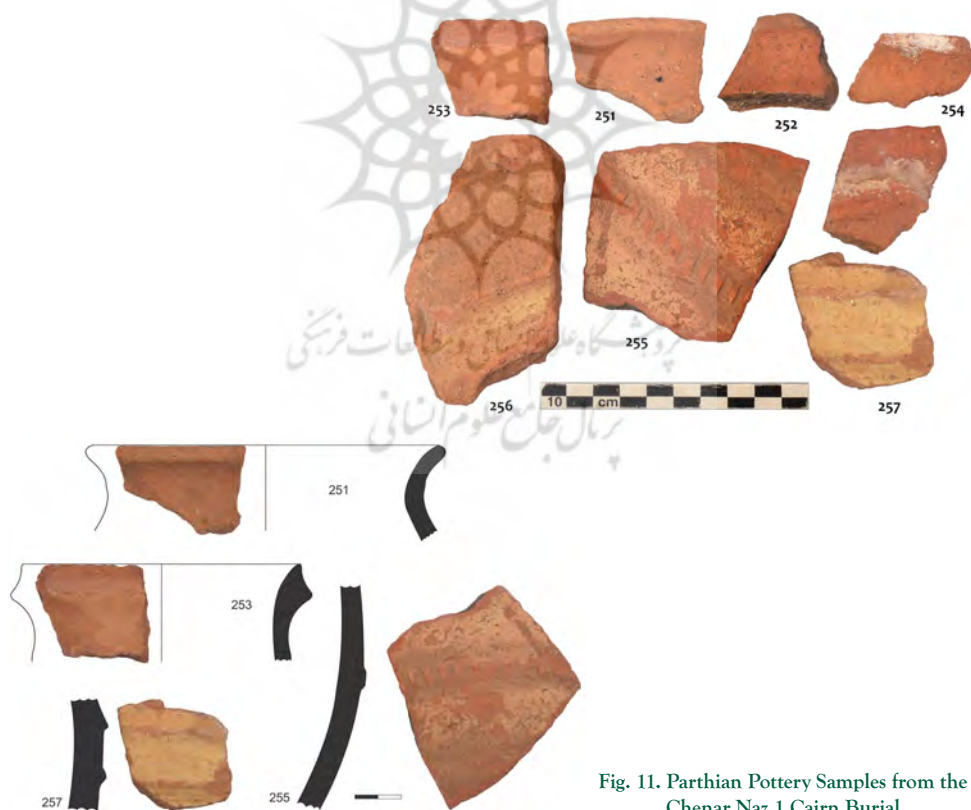


Fig. 11. Parthian Pottery Samples from the Chenar Naz 1 Cairn Burial



Fig. 12. Overview of Chenar Naz 2 Cairn Burial

approximately one meter in height and with dimensions of 3×4 meters. Unfortunately, the center of the stone mass has been destroyed due to illegal excavation,

resulting in the scattering of its stones in the surrounding area. Chenar Naz 1 and 3 cairn burials are positioned one and three kilometers southwest of Kharvat Khaneh



Fig. 13. Overview of Chenar Naz 3 Cairn Burial

Chenar Naz 4, respectively, at a distance of 600 meters northeast from this cairn burial. All of these cairn burials belong to the Parthian period (Fig. 12).

6. Chenar Naz 3 Cairn Burial

The Chenar Naz 3 cairn burial is located 37 kilometers southwest of Harat district and 3 kilometers southwest of the Chenar Naz village in Khatam district. This cairn burial is also situated on the highest part of a natural hill, and today its stones have almost lost their turtle-like shape, with only a few round stones with a diameter of approximately 2 meters remaining. The stones are scattered up to a distance of approximately five meters and spread on the hill, leaving some traces behind. Chenar Naz 1 cairn burial is located in the southwest direction, Chenar Naz 2 in the northeast part, and Chenar Naz 4 cairn

burial is located 600 meters northeast of this cairn burial (Fig. 13). The Chenar Naz 3 cairn burial also dates back to the Parthian period.

7. Chenar Naz 4 Cairn Burial

The Chenar Naz 4 cairn burial is located 36 kilometers southwest of Harat, 3 kilometers southwest of the Chenar Naz village in Khatam district. This cairn burial is too situated on the highest part of a low natural hill, and today its stones have almost lost their turtle-like shape. The stones of the cairn burial are scattered up to a distance of approximately five meters and spread on the hill, leaving some traces behind. Chenar Naz 1, 2, and 3 cairn burials are located in the southwest direction of this cairn burial (Fig. 14). These cairn burials belong to the Parthian period.



Fig. 14. Overview of Chenar Naz 4 Cairn Burial

8. Korkhengan Cairn Burial

The Korkhengan cairn burial is located 41 kilometers southwest of Marvast and 4 kilometers northwest of Korakhengan village. Situated at 2437 meters above sea level, this cairn burial is known as a type of simple stone tomb found in the Fars region. These tombs consist of piled stones

and belong to various historical periods. Unfortunately, many of these structures have been damaged over time due to illegal excavation and easy identification by locals. The Korkhengan cairn burial, like others of its kind, has also been destroyed. Currently, the piled stone structure of this monument is about half a me-



Fig. 15. Overview of Korkhengan cairn burial

ter high with approximate dimensions of 2×2 meters. It has been disturbed and no longer retains its original shape (Fig. 15). Based on the dating of similar cairn burials in the surrounding areas of Fars, it is believed that this cairn burial belongs to the Parthian period.

9. Korkhengan 2 Cairn Burial

The Korkhengan 2 cairn burial is located 41 kilometers southwest of Marvast and 4 kilometers northwest of Korakhengan village, at an elevation of 2455 meters above sea level. The stone structure of the cairn burial and its surrounding areas has a height of approximately half a meter with dimensions of 2×1.5 meters. Unfortunately, this cairn burial has been severely disturbed by human factors and lost its original shape and structure.

10. Korkhengan Astōdān

Korkhengan Astōdān is located in the Eisar rural district, northwest of Korkhen-

gan village, amidst a smooth rocky mountain. The tradition of burial in astōdāns dates back to the Sasanian era and due to Zoroastrian beliefs of the non-pollution of the four elements. There are many examples of such astōdāns in the Rahmat Mountain, overlooking the ancient city of Estakhr in the Fars region. However, only one example of such astōdān has been identified in the area under study in the Khatam district archaeological survey project and Yazd province.

As mentioned before, this area is geographically considered an extension of the Fars regional-cultural zone, and it is only politically located within the Yazd province in terms of administrative divisions. This astōdān has a small rectangular opening facing south, measuring 65×85 centimeters, and is surrounded by a square frame measuring 120×120 centimeters. It is almost rectangular in shape, with a depth of 110 centimeters, carved out into the rock. At the end, it transitions



Fig. 16. Overview of Korkhengan 2 Cairn Burial

from a quadrilateral shape to a circle one. No human bone remains were found inside it (Fig. 17). Korkhengan Astōdān is located 100 kilometers from the ancient city of Estakhr. Given the existence of similar astōdāns in Estakhr, this is also dated back to the Sasanian period.

Conclusion

Yazd Province is a significant hub of cultural and historical transformation in Iran. The unique climatic and environmental conditions have shaped this region, allowing native inhabitants to establish distinct cities with remarkable architectural, urban



Fig. 17. Overview of Korkhengan Astudan

planning, and cultural characteristics. The province is rich in living historical structures and buildings due to its use of local materials and arid environment. However, the southern parts of Yazd Province, particularly the Khatem district (Harat and Marvast), have a contrasting climate. This region, located in the easternmost part of the Zagros mountain range, boasts a different vegetation covering and can be compared to the climate of Fars province. The presence of forests, such as almond and wild pistachio, and permanent rivers (although they have become seasonal due to droughts) have fostered a nomadic lifestyle and animal husbandry. This way of life dates back to prehistoric times and did

not give rise to major cities until the Safavid/Qajar period. The development of the qanat system, water transfer capabilities, and establishment of landlord-villages during the Islamic era led to the formation of cities and large villages in the region. Unfortunately, archaeological studies in Yazd Province have been limited, despite its rich traditional architecture and the need for their preservation. Only a few archaeological projects have been conducted, resulting in scarce publications. However, a recent survey in 2020 focused on the Khatem district, identifying various sites including historical cairn burials from the Parthian period. The close connection between these burials and central

regions of Fars suggests similar cultural trends during the Parthian and Sasanian periods in this area. The identification of 9 Parthian cairn burials and one Sasanian astōdān highlights the historical significance of Harat n and its link to Fars. So far, only a few historical sites have been iden-

tified in Yazd province, emphasizing the need for further research and attention from cultural heritage officials to uncover more evidence of human life's evolution in this part of Iran, from prehistoric to the present day.

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