

Velem: A New-found Parthian Cemetery in Mazandaran

Rahmat Abbasnejad Seresti¹ , Rahele Koulabadi² 

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Abstract

The site of Velem is located approximately 500m from the village of Velem, about 36km from Behshahr in the east of Mazandaran province. In 2020 during the construction of a road near the village, this cemetery site was accidentally discovered. In the following year, the rescue excavations were conducted, and burials from pre-Parthian and Parthian period were uncovered. In the first season of excavations twenty-six shaft burials from Parthian period were revealed. This study focuses on the Parthian burials. Since there is limited knowledge about the historical era of northern Iran, especially Mazandaran, the results of excavation at Velem are particularly significant. Furthermore, only a few Parthian sites have been identified in Mazandaran, and the historical knowledge of northern Iran during this period is also limited. In this article, with a descriptive-analytical approach, we try to study the findings from Velem in the first season of excavations to answer the following questions: 1) What is the structure of the graves and the burial methods at Velem? 2) Considering the prevalence of shaft burials in northern Iran, what is the origin and cause of the spread of this burial practice in this region? The field study results show that the Parthian funerary type identified at this site is shaft burial including a corridor, entrance, and burial space. Additionally, a comparative analysis of the graves at this site with similar examples in northern Iran and beyond suggests that this type of burial was common among nomadic peoples. Given the geographical location of northern Iran, it is very likely that this funerary tradition was penetrated to region by north-eastern nomadic population as the movement of a group of nomadic people of Dahae, or it was appeared as a result of the close interactions between nomadic and settled peoples.

Keywords: Parthian, Mazandaran, Velem, Cemetery, Shaft Burial.

1. Associate Professor, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Art and Architecture, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran.

2. Assistant Professor, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran (Corresponding Author).

Email: r.koulabadi@umz.ac.ir

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Introduction

The Parthians played a significant role in ancient Iranian history. In spite of longest reign among pre-Islamic Persian dynasties, it is less recognized in some region including Mazandaran province. The limited archaeological expeditions in historical sites of Mazandaran, and scarcity written sources referred to this region are regarded as the major causes of this ambiguous situation.

The situation of Velem, in the east part of Mazandaran, not far from main Parthian center of Hecatompylos in Parthia proper increases its significance. Meanwhile, it seems quite probable that parts of Mazandaran, especially eastern area belonged to the Hyrcania proper. Parthia and Hyrcania were the first states conquered by Parthians. They remained as crucial centers throughout the Parthian period.

During Parthian period a new type of burial – Shaft burial- appeared in the north of Iran. First this type of burial uncovered from Rudbar, Dailaman, and Amlash districts in Gilan province. According to similar burial type and grave gifts, Japanese archaeologists related these burials to Alan populations. But recent excavations carried out in Mazandaran reveals examples of shaft burials in this district too.

The paper follows two primary purposes. First, to presents some new data on Parthian burial practice, art, and nomadic tradition in the region not so well known in northern Iran. Second, to suggest the origin of shaft burial in Mazandaran. As Velem located in the region far from Alan margins, this nomadic cultural tradition was penetrated from different place.

Research Questions: 1) What is the structure of the graves and the burial methods at Velem? 2) Considering the prevalence of shaft burials in northern Iran, what is the origin and cause of the spread of this burial practice in this region?

Research Method: This research was conducted using a descriptive-analytical approach.

Burial customs and cemeteries in Parthian period

During Parthian period, different ways of burial have been recognized in Iran (Fig. 1). In some districts more than one funerary custom was recorded.

Pit burial was one of the ancient ways of interment which was also employed throughout the Parthian period. It consisted of a simple pit, some of which lined with stones. The sites of Defensive wall of the Gurgān plain (Kiani, 1982: 75) and Bazgir (Abbasi, 2016: 131-132) in Golestan province; Nowruz mahale (Egami *et al.*, 1966), Jalaliye (Khalatbari, 1997: 97-98) and Liār-Sang-Bon (Jahani, 2020) in Gilan province; Qūmis in Semnan province (Hansman & Stronach, 1974: 14), Germe district (Kambakhsh Fard, 1998: 17-20), Khaneghah Gilvan (Rezaloo, 2012) and Qale-e Qara-Hasanlu



Fig. 1: Distribution of Parthian burials in Iran (Authors, 2025).

(Tahmasbi *et al.*, 2023) in Ardabil province; Sardasht district (Salimi *et al.*, 2018: 138) in West Azerbaijan province; Sang-e shir (Azarnoush, 1976) and Tepe Golshan (Hemati Azandaryani *et al.*, 2016) in Hamedan province; Chogha Mish (Delougaz & Kantor 1996: 8-9, 340, 345-346) in Khuzestan province, Tal-e Malyan (Balcer, 1978: 86-89) in Fars province, and Veliran (Nemati & Sadraei, 2013: 109-110) in Tehran province yielded this funerary practice.

A second type of inhumation occurred inside rectangular cist graves dug in the bedrock or soil. The walls of grave were built of stones and the roof covered with large flat stone slabs. This type of burial was found at Germe district (Kambakhsh Fard, 1998: 17-20); Kangavar (Kambakhsh Fard, 1969: 26-27) in Kermanshah province, and Sardasht district (Salimi *et al.*, 2018: 138) in the early and middle of Parthian period.

Another burial practice was interring fully articulated body (as Primary burial) or disarticulated bones (as Secondary burial) in ceramic funerary urns. The most prevalent form was a storage jar decorated with twisted bands, and rarely motifs of swastika, anchor, goat, palm tree, and leaf scrolls. A funerary urn maybe consisted of more than an urn. According to current evidence, this type of burial was common throughout Parthian era, particularly in the middle and end of Parthian period. It was discovered at Damir and Amirkola (Khalili, 2019: 677-678) in Mazandaran province; Liār-Sang-Bon (Jahani, 2020) and Ghalekuti I (Sono & Fukai, 1968: 38) in Gilan province; Germe district (Kambakhsh Fard, 1998); Sardasht district (Salimi *et al.*, 2021); Marivan district (Mohammadifar, 2008: 53; Mohammadifar & Sarraf, 2006; Masoumian *et al.*, 2022) in Kurdištan province; Kangavar, Taq-e Buštan (Kambakhsh Fard, 1998), Bisotun (Alibaigi, 2010), Salas-e Babajani district, and Paveh district (Mohammadifar & Niknami, 2013: 8) in Kermanshah province; Susa and the cemetery about 1km south of the Donjon at Susa (Mecquenem, 1943: 138-139; Mecquenem, 1943-1944: 142; Boucharlat, 2014: 131; Martinez-Sève, 2015), Būlahyā tepe (Unvala, 1929: 138-139), and Saleh Davoud (Rahbar, 2012: 294-295) in Khuzestān province, and Nakhle Ebrahimi (Khosrowzadeh, 2017: 84-86; 2021: 190) in Hormozgan province. At Veliran fragments of storage jar used to cover the burial (Nemati & Sadraei, 2013: 110). The second form of funerary urns are torpedo jars which were used as ossuary. They were found at Susa (Dieulafoy, 1892: 426-428); Shoghab (Mir Fattah, 1996; Farjamirad, 2016 b; Simpson, 2019) in Bushehr province¹. The later attributed to the late Parthian and Sasanian period.

The other burial custom throughout Parthian era was depositing articulated body/ bodies or placing disarticulated bones in a terracotta and stone coffin, some of which decorated with images of figures, columns, palm trees, vine scrolls, and wreaths. Bathub, slipper, and anthropoid coffins were used during Parthian period. Kangavar (Kambakhsh Fard, 1995: 233-236); Sang-e shir (Azarnoush, 1975), Tepe Golshan (Hemati Azandaryani *et al.*, 2016) and in the city of Hamedan (Dailar *et al.*, 2013; Mohammadifar *et al.*, 2021) in Hamedan province; Susa and the cemetery about 1km south of the Donjon at Susa (Mecquenem, 1943: 138-139; Mecquenem, 1943-1944: 142; Boucharlat, 2014: 131), Būlahyā tepe (Unvala, 1929), Saleh Davoud (Rahbar, 2012: 293), and tell Rezvan (Hoseini *et al.*, 2011) in Khuzestān province yielded this kind of burial.

Subterranean and semi-subterranean² tombs were attested in Elymaean district at Susa (Mecquenem, 1943: 138; Mecquenem, 1943-1944: 142; Ghirshman, 1976: 261-262; Boucharlat, 2014: 131), Saleh Davoud (Rahbar, 2012), Gelalak (Rahbar, 1997; Boucharlat & Haerinck, 2011; Boucharlat, 2019), and Kal-e Chendar (Cellerino & Foietta, 2020; Mohammadifar *et al.*, 2024: 104, 106) in Khuzestan province. The tombs were vaulted, flat or pitched roofed chambers constructing with backed bricks and undressed stones. The burial chamber accessed by stairs. Inside the chamber, platforms were constructed to place the coffins or corpses. At Gelalak the coffins were discovered not only on the platforms, but they were also found on the ground. Moreover, some corpses were interred without any coffin beneath the platform. In some cases, ossuaries were reported inside the chamber. The tombs were dating to the late Parthian period³. This funerary practice was previously attested among Elamites in the same region (see: Susa, Chogha Zanbil, Arrajan, and Jubaji in Khuzestan province).

The rectangular underground burial chamber, but without staircase and funerary platform was excavated at Cheram in Kohgiluyeh province (Roustaei & Azad 2011) and a number of graves at Kal-e Chendar (Cellerino & Foietta 2020) in Khuzestan province. The walls were constructed with undressed irregular stones and pebble, and the roof was covered with large slab stones. The former was ascribed to the middle and late Parthian era.

The tombs might be built at the surface as in Susa (Boucharlat, 2019: 55) and Gelalak (Rahbar, 1997: 185-187). At Gelalak two example of these funerary chambers were discovered without platforms. They were accessed by two stairs. The dead were buried in the ground, while evidence of broken coffin was also scattered in the chamber. As subterranean tombs at Gelalak, these were attributed to the late Parthian period. Chronologically, the former was older and dated to the first-the beginning of the second century, while the latter was ascribed to the second-third century (Rahbar, 1999: 93).

The other type of Parthian burial was rock cut chamber complexes, two of which were discovered in Kharg Island in Bushehr province (Ghirshman, 1958; Haerinck, 1975; Steve, 1999: 75-76; Potts, 2004). They were consisting of “a double-arched, colonnade-like façade, a vestibule, a main chamber, and more than twenty burial chambers attached to the main chamber” (Potts, 2004). The wall of entrance was decorated with bas reliefs of banquet scene and Nike. These funerary complexes were attributed to Palmyrene merchants and navigators. The date of tombs has been so disputed. Steve belonged tombs to the first century, while Haerinck proposed the second-third century.

Another different type of burial occurred at Samen in Hamedan province (Hemati Azandaryani *et al.*, 2015). The burial complex carved in granite bedrock and consisted of more than 50 chambers interconnected by corridors and thresholds. The remains of at

least 60 individuals were discovered as primary burial or cluster of skeletons deposited at the corner of halls and chambers.

Cairn burials are attested as pile of stones in the form of oval, circular, and quadrilateral. They were especially found in southern and northern of Persian Gulf (Stein, 1937: 70-103, 114, 116, 143, 162-163, 171, 174-175, 180, 240-241; Lamberg-Karlovsky & Humphries, 1968; Gotch, 1971: Fig. 3; Stronach, 1978: 167; Choubak, 1999; Jafari, 2008: 65; Azizi Kharanaghi *et al.*, 2010; Khosrowzadeh, 2007/2008; Khosrowzadeh *et al.*, 2012: 211-212; Sardari Zarchi *et al.*, 2013: 71-73; Boucharlat, 2014: 132-133; Khosrowzadeh, 2017: 30-31, 35, 146-149; Khanipour & Kavosh, 2022; Khanipour & Molaei Kordshouli, 2023; Mohammadifar *et al.*, 2024: 106). These burials had been current from the third millennium BCE up to the end of Sasanian period.

Shaft burials can be regarded as one of the most typical and regional types of funerary custom (Farjamirad, 2016 a: 132), which are found in north of Iran -Gilan province- at Shamam (Shahidzadeh, 1978: 69-73), Shahpir (Fukai & Matsutani, 1977: 47-52), Lameh zamin (Fukai & Matsutani, 1980: 153-160), Jalaliye (Hakemi, 2017: 50, 190), Juben (Hakemi, 2017: 212-215), Jukin, Charpe, Malegah, Sharef, and, Tine (Nokandeh & Fahimi, 2004; Tadahiko *et al.*, 2003) in Rudbar district, Nowruz mahale, Khuramrud (Egami *et al.*, 1966), Hasani mahale (Sono & Fukai, 1968), Pirkuh (Fukai & Ikeda, 1971: 5) in Dailaman district, and Liār-Sang-Bon (Jahani, 2020) in Amlash district.

The graves were dug into the natural soil. A sloping passage in the form of a circle, oval or square leading to a burial chamber constructed horizontally at the base level of the passage (shaft). The chamber was oval, circular, rectangular or triangle⁴ in plan. Because of the fall of the ceiling, its original form is not clear, but the remaining part may help us to assume that the ceiling had a domical shape. Inside the chamber no structure constructed and the corpse laid on the floor. The floor of the chamber was usually lower than the floor of the shaft in the graves excavated in Gilan. The depth of the shaft was different. It maybe shallow or it was sometimes deep and reached to 4m. Some graves yielded same measurement for the width of the side chamber and the floor of the shaft (Egami *et al.*, 1966: 6). After the inhumation, the entrance usually blocked with stone slabs, boulders, and probably wood at Nowruz mahale (Egami *et al.*, 1966: 6) and Shahpir (Fukai & Matsutani, 1977: 48), and then the shaft filled with soil. The entrance was usually circular and arch shaped. It was square with rounded corners at Hasani mahale, regular square at Nowruz mahale and rectangular or in the shape of a boat at Khuramrud (Egami *et al.*, 1966: 7). Funeral objects were found either from the chamber or floor level of the shaft. The later limited to iron edged tools at Nowruz mahale, and Khuramrud (Egami *et al.*, 1966: 8), and broken pottery or potsherds at Shahpir (Fukai & Matsutani, 1977: 47-50). This type of burial was also recorded at

Vestemin in Mazandaran province. The graves consisted of a vertical shaft connecting to the burial chamber through a vaulted entrance. The shaft measured 140cm to 180cm in length, 60cm to 80cm in width, and 80cm to 300cm in depth. The entrance was 50cm in length and height, and 20cm in width. The burial chamber was circular or ellipse measuring 1m to 3m. It was plausibly covered with vaulted ceiling with the height of 110cm to 150cm. In the center of the chamber a rectangular, square or circular pit was dug, the depth of which averaging 30cm. The function has not recognized yet (Sharifi Holaei *et al.*, 2018: 233-234), however, it is tempting to assume that it is an ossuary. In some graves ossuaries were created in the chamber or shaft. The number of deceased varied from one to five persons (Sharifi Holaei *et al.*, 2022: 127). At Veliran, a grave discovered with similar plan, but without a shaft. In the burial chamber, three funerary platforms and ossuaries were provided for multiple burials (Nemati & Sadraei, 2010: 306). Shaft burials were common in northern Iran throughout Parthian period. The graves of Shamam, Shahpir, and Juben were dated to the early Parthian period (3-1 BCE), while the graves at Nowruz mahale, Khuramrud, Hasani mahale (Haerinck, 1983: 149-173), Pirkuh (Fukai & Ikeda, 1971: 5), and Vestemin (Karamian *et al.*, 2018) were attributed to the late Parthian period (1-3 AD).

Shaft burial was a funerary custom among nomadic population including Dahae. The Dahae inhabited the area between the Caspian Sea and the Amu Darya River basin (Olbrycht, 2015: 342). They were originally come from an extensive community of different tribes inhabiting the steppe expanses stretching from the southern Urals to the area along the Syr-Darya and Transoxania (Olbrycht, 2021: 292). Parni was one of the tribes of Dahae Confederacy, who founded the later Parthian Kingdom. Interestingly, Dahae appears as a theophoric component in a Parthian name in the ostrakon discovered from Kosha tepe near Babadurmaz in Turkmenistan (Olbrycht, 2021: 270)⁵. One of significant evidences related to the presence of Dahae in some areas of Central Asia were catacomb graves (shaft burials). They were discovered in Trans-Caspian region, and Amu Darya and Syr Darya basin including Parthia proper at the foot of Kopeth Dagh mountains, on the Sumbar river in Parkhai in the region of Karakala to the south of Khodzhakala, in the Uzboi basin, Sarykamysch basin, in left-bank Chorasmia, and Soghdiana (Olbrycht, 1998: 17-22; Olbrycht, 2015: 341-344). Similar burials were appeared in the area of the Sauromatian Prokhorovka cultures in the South Urals (Olbrycht, 1998: 22-25; Olbrycht, 2015). As burial structures, customs, and artifacts of the Sarmatians and later the Alans yielded similar features with the graves in Dailaman district, it was suggested that there were close relations between the two regions (Egami *et al.*, 1966: 19-20) or some nomadic tribal groups moved into Iran's northern province of Gilan (Olbrycht, 2015: 343). In addition to shaft burial, some other aspects of the steppe

funeral practice can be seen in Parthia and Hyrcania proper. Horse burial as a nomadic tradition was recorded from Vestemin (Sharifi Holaei *et al.*, 2018, 246). The horse was buried alone in a pit or accompanied the deceased in the shaft grave. The deposition of animal remains and human skulls at Shahr-i Qūmis (ancient Hecatompylos) have also known in Scythian burials (Hansman & Stronach, 1974: 18).

Archaeological investigations at Velem

The site of Velem is situated about 500 m. NW of the village of Velem in Panjhezare region, east of Mazandaran province (Fig. 2). In the autumn 2020 during the course of bulldozing for road construction between the villages of Velem and Rudbar, the site of Velem discovered (Fig. 3). The project stopped, and the rescue excavations were conducted in the spring and summer of 2021. Following geomagnetic survey, 10 test trenches (TT. 1-10) and 11 trenches (TR. A-K) are opened. The results of the excavation are satisfactory and 26 Parthian burials are discovered in trenches E, F, G, and H (Fig. 4). Moreover, several disturbed pre-Parthian burials appeared in trenches A, D, E, and G. They were destroyed by bulldozer, illegal excavations, and modern agriculture. In trench E and G, later Parthian shaft burials were collapsed, and as a consequence, pre-Parthian burials in the upper surface were damaged. The grave structures, orientation of graves and bodies, presence/absence of mortuary goods are not often clear. There are few intact graves, which were simple pit or rarely surrounded by stones (Fig. 5). The bodies were inhumed both in flexed and extended position. Judging from the ceramic vessels, we tend to propose Iron Age III at least for some of these pre-Parthian graves. The following discussion focuses on the Parthian burials (Figs. 2, 3, 4 & 5).

Burial structure

The Parthian graves at Velem can be categorized as shaft graves. As stated above, this type of graves was reported from north of Iran. Except for dimensions, the construction features of the graves are generally the same at Velem (Table 1 & Figs. 6, 7, 8, 9 & 10). They consisted of a vertical shaft, a burial chamber, and a vaulted entrance connecting the shaft and burial chamber (Fig. 6). The exceptions are Graves no. 3, and no. 22 which lacked a pit. Shafts were dug according to the slope of the earth. Due to the road construction and illegal excavation after the appearance of the site, several shafts damaged or destroyed completely, hence the accurate dimensions can't be determined. The depth of the shafts was not similar and they varied from 40cm to 180cm. It seems that the depth did not associate with the social status of the dead and rather it depended on the sloping of the ground. Actually, the shaft needed to dig out to the extent that a burial chamber laterally provided. The bottom of the shaft sloped down slightly toward

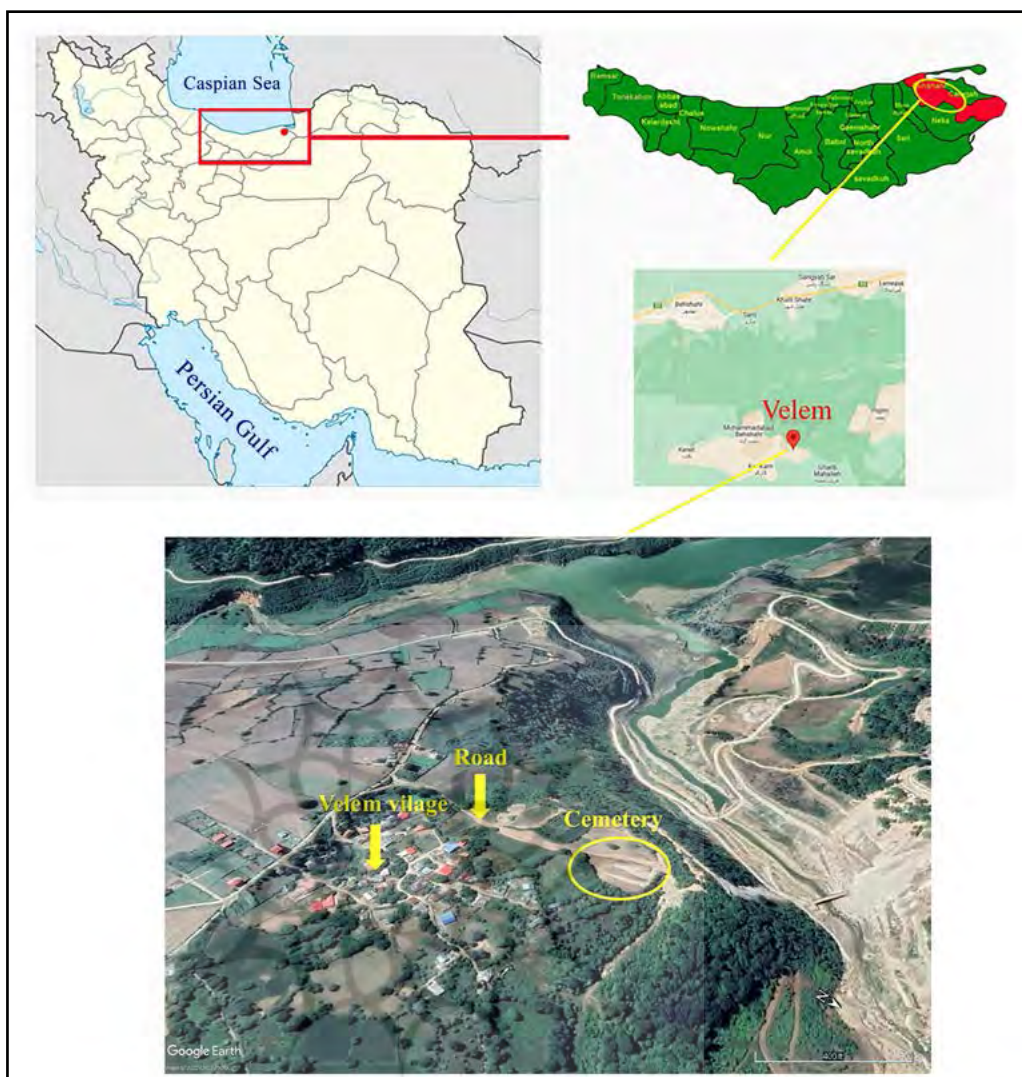


Fig. 2: Location of Velem village and ancient cemetery of Velem (Authors, 2025).



Fig. 3: Appearance of Graves in the course of road construction (before excavation), (Authors, 2021).

Table 1: Burial structure (Authors, 2025).

Grave no.	Shaft Dimensions (cm)	Entrance of the Chamber Dimensions (cm) (height/length)	Chamber Dimensions (cm) (circular or ellipse)
1	105×101×50×31	25/25	50 (diameter)
2	140×130×100×90	50/65	145×135
3	200×180×90×60	?	150×140
4	220×220×80×50	50/50	140×160
5	55×70×95×85	60/65	75×80
6	140×95×60×60	?	preserved to CA. 155×160
7	110×110×60×60	?	?
8	?×?×95×95	?	120 (diameter)
9	150×150×80×35	50/55	120 (diameter)
10	?	?	115×180
11	Preserved to CA. ?×?×90×80	?	?
12	170×170×100×55	?	?
13	?	?	preserved to CA. 85 (diameter)
14	190×190×90×70	45/45	130×155
15	150×150×75×75	?	85 (diameter)
16	160×160×?×?	?	?
17	130×140×60×50	?/60	130×110
18	—	?/70	140 (diameter)
19	140×130×70×70	65/70	130×150
20	140×140×100×40	50/60	150×180
21	180×180×130×50	?	130×190
22	60×50×60×50	?/50	70×50
23	preserved to CA. 80×70×60×60	?/30	150 (diameter)
24	210×200×95×70	?/45	130×150
25	?	?	?
26	preserved to CA. 70×70	45/40	130×190

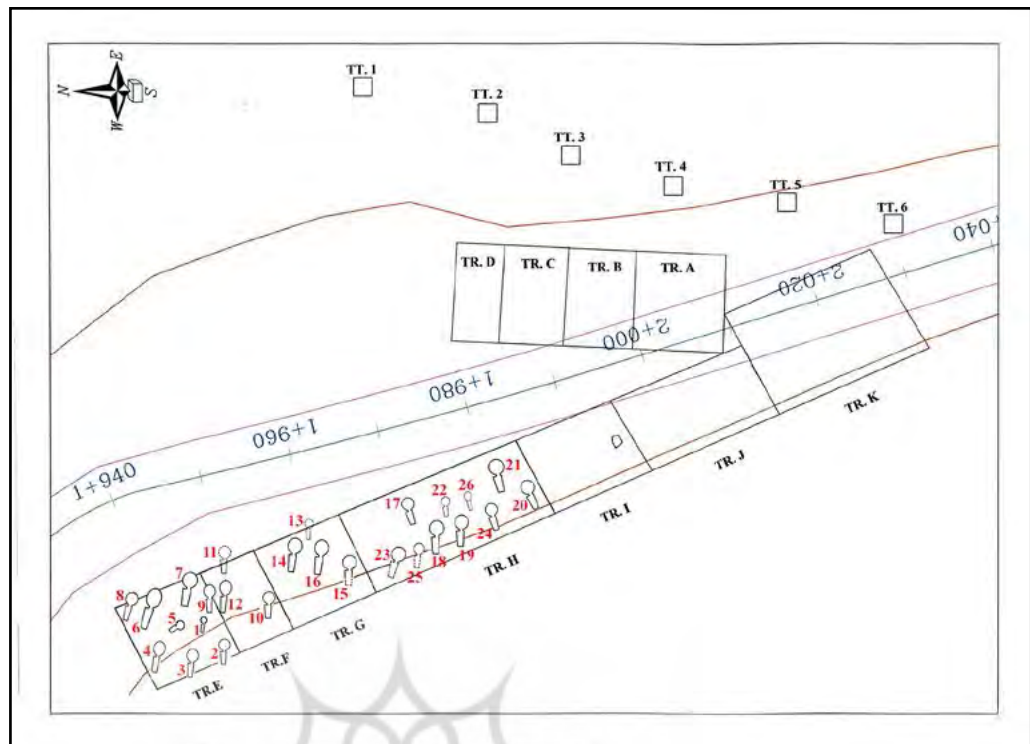


Fig. 4: Distribution of Parthian graves in Cemetery of Velem (Authors, 2021).

the chamber, where the entry side was typically about 30cm lower than that of the front side. Contrary to most of shaft burials, at Velem and Vestemin the base of the shaft and the base of the burial chamber were at the same level. Potsherds and stone tools were found only in three shafts, while most were lacking any objects. A vaulted entrance on the short east side of the shaft provided access to the burial chamber (Fig. 7), except Grave no.5 which due to quite different orientation of the grave the entrance was on the south side of the shaft. Unfortunately, the entrances of the graves were damaged especially the heights were lost, however, it is generally 50cm in length and height. The plan of burial chambers was circular or ellipse. Most of the ceiling has already been tumbled down, but as the walls slant upward, it might originally have a domed ceiling (Fig. 8). The small chambers usually accommodated the children (Fig. 9), however, in Grave no.9, despite poor preservation of skeletons, it seems that a child was buried in a large chamber. The chambers consisted of a pit, a place to accommodate the corpse, and a recess along it. Pits were dug with various size, depth, and shapes at north side of the chamber. The smallest pit was a circle measured ca. 20×20cm, and the dimension of the largest one reached to ca. 140c×80cm. On average, depth of the pits was ca. 30 to 40cm. During excavation mortuary gifts uncovered in pits. They may have been dropped in the pit but a number of them seems to in be in the situ. Few evidence leaves open major question about the real function of the pit. Since funerary platforms were recovered in Parthian graves, did the pit create a different level in the chamber and so provide a



Fig. 5: Pre-Parthian graves at Velem (Authors, 2021).

higher place as a platform to lay the deceased? Could the pit just be used as a place for deposit special mortuary goods? Or owing to the short height of the chamber, can we assume that the pit served as a place for a grave-digger to cut and accomplish a burial chamber easier? In addition, one might not neglect that the pit was probably related to unknown funerary ceremonies or practices.

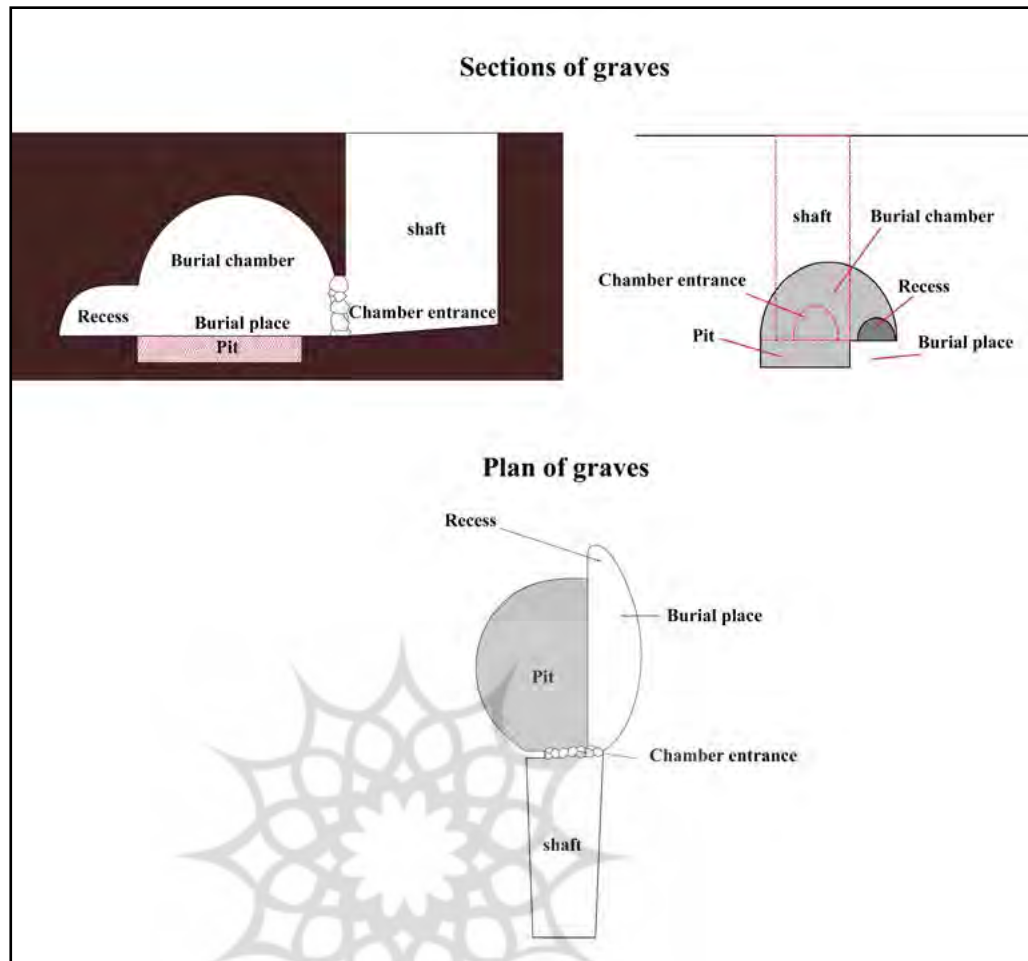


Fig. 6: Sections and plan of a Parthian grave at Velem (Authors, 2021).

As a rule, a platform in other part of the chamber near the entrance was assigned to place the corpse accompanied by mortuary goods. Except Grave no. 5, they were laid against the south wall. Although funerary platforms have not been recorded in shaft burial types, but they are known at Veliran, and Elymaean tombs at Susa, Gelalak, Saleh Davoud, and kal-e Chendar. In some graves of Velem, immediately along the platform, a recess was remained in the wall at the end of the chamber. It is an innovative way to prevent cutting the chamber more and the feet of the deceased easily placed therein. The depth was at least 20cm and in Grave no. 26 it was exceptionally large, and reached to 80cm. Thanks to this small recess, it helps to identify the body orientation in the poor preserved burials through the feet position. After the interment, the chamber was sealed by stone slabs (Fig. 10) or stones set in clay mortar and then the shaft filled up by soil (Fig. 11).

Human skeletal remains

From a total of 26 graves of the first working season at Velem, three of them are completely absent of any skeletal evidence, but based on the small measures of the



Fig. 7: Grave no. 4. Top: vaulted entrance before and after excavation; bottom: inside the burial chamber (Authors, 2021).



Fig. 8: Inside the burial chamber of Grave no. 18 (Authors, 2021).



Fig. 9: Small Grave no. 5 belonged to a child. Top: before excavation; bottom: after excavation (Authors, 2021).



Fig. 10: The entrance of burial chamber of Grave no. 14; Left: before excavation; right: after excavation (Authors, 2021).

Table 2: Human remains (Authors, 2025).

Grave no.	Sex	Age	Orientation				Additional Notes
			Body	Head	Legs	Arms	
1							No skeleton
2	Female	25-30	Dorsal	On left side	Right leg extended, left leg bent	Right arm bent and the forearm on the stomach, left arm at side	
3	Female	24-30	?	?	?	?	
4	Male	15-18	Dorsal	On left side	Extended	?	
5	?	?	?	Skull smashed	?	?	
6	Female	18-19	Dorsal	Dorsal	Extended	Arms on the stomach	
7	?	5/5-6	?	On left side	?	?	
8	?	9-10	Dorsal	On left side	Flexed on left side		
9	?	1/5±3	?	?	?	?	
10	?	16-20	?	?	?	?	
11	-	-	-	-	-	-	
12	?	15-20	?	?	?	?	
13							No skeleton
14	Male	50	According to the position of the feet in the recess, dorsal	?	Extended	?	

15	?	?	?	?	?	?	Only skull uncovered
16	?	1/5±5	?	?	Right leg extended, left leg bent	?	Skull uncovered in the pit
17	?	20-24	?	Skull broken and distributed	Flexed on left side	?	Femur uncovered in the pit
18	Male	±50	?	Skull broken	?	?	Clavicle, ulna, and radius uncovered in the pit
19	Female?	30-35	?	?	?	?	Skull, humerus, and left scapula uncovered in the pit
20	Male?	35-38	?	?	?	?	Many fragment of skeletons uncovered in the pit
21	Male	±45	Dorsal	?	Extended	On either side, the palms on the floor	
22							No skeleton
23	Female	±20	?	?	?	?	
24	?	?	?	?	?	?	Fragment of skeletons uncovered in the pit
25	Female	±50	?	?	?	?	
26	?	-	?	Skull broken	?	?	

tombs, two graves were probably belonged to infants or children (Table 2). The graves have suffered from natural erosion and human activity, such as heavy rainfall, humidity in the region, modern plowing, bulldozing and looting. Burials lost their original posture, most of the skeletal specimens are disarticulated or commingled, and in some cases, they were dropped from the funeral platform in the pit. As a consequence, reliable identification of sex, age, orientation of interment at the time of the death, osteological study, and paleopathological diagnosis becomes problematic. Despite the difficulties encountered, five females and four males are identified. The gender of two skeletons can't be accurately determined but they are likely belonged to a male and a female, and the others are unknown. The skeletons belonging to the various age groups including infants or children, juveniles, young adults, and middle-aged persons. Among burials no elderly ones are recognized. No matter what their gender, the deceased were similarly treated. In all graves only an individual was inhumed. It is well suited with the size of platform in the chamber. However, in this type of burial in larger chambers at Juben, Jalaliye, Shamam, Hasani mahale, and Vestemin accommodated more than one person. The latter yielded up to five corpses. The direction of burials was approximately identical at Velem. They were oriented EW, with a maximum deviation of 20° from this axis to north or south in some burials. The head laid on the west and the body on the east (Fig.

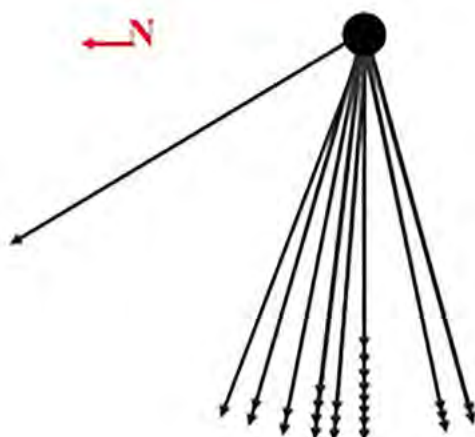


Fig. 11: Orientation of skeletons (Arrowhead marks the position of skull) (Authors, 2025).

11). The only exception is Grave no. 5 which illustrates SW-NE direction, head on the SW and the body on the NE. Skeletal remains are disturbed, however in the graves which are well enough preserved, the corpse generally buried in dorsal extended position, sometimes with the left leg slightly bent. The flexed position was rarely occurred with the body laid on the left side. To judge by surviving skeletons, there is a rigid rule for position of the head. It was placed near the entrance of the burial chamber and oriented toward the left side. As the skeletons are decomposed, the position of arms can't be determined, except of three graves. They are yielded different manners. The arms were laid on the stomach, or one arm on the stomach and the other on the side or both arms extended beside the body. While most of Parthian shaft burials yielded flexed position such as Nowruz mahale, Khuramrud, Hasani mahale, and Liār-Sang-Bon, the extended position was recorded at Shahpir. At Lameh zamin and Veštemin both positions were taken place, but flexed form was more common at Veštemin.

Evidence reveals that there is no continuity in burial tradition over a long span time at Velem. Although the deceased were buried either in an extended or flexed position during pre-Parthian and Parthian period, but the structure of graves and the orientation of the body is completely different.

Burial gifts

In almost every grave, except the ones which were largely disturb, the deceased were supplied with burial gifts (Table 3). Since many graves were damaged, the objects were not always in situ. As a tradition, burial gifts were placed on the funerary platform along with the deceased. While a number of objects were moved into the pit, it seems also possible that some were originally placed in the pit. The main burial gifts included pottery vessels (Fig. 12), personal ornaments (Fig. 13), and weapons (Fig. 14). Personal

Table 3: Burial gifts (Authors, 2025).

Grave no.	Ceramic Vessel	Personal ornaments				Weapon	Additional Notes
		Necklace	Earrings	Bracelet	Finger-ring		
1	1	4					
2	6	2	1	4	24		Hair ornament (2 pieces), glass bottle, textile, bronze and bone disks (5), conical bone bead
3		3	1 (single)				
4					1	1	
5	2						
6	3	2		1	3	1	Bronze buckles (2), unidentified iron objects (2)
7	3	1					Iron object, probably a pin (3 pieces)
8	2	1					Beads for personal ornaments
9	1	1					
10	1 (fragmentary)						
11							No findings
12	1				1		Beads for personal ornaments
13							No findings
14	2				1		
15	1	1	1		7		Bronze & shell disks (4), beads for personal ornaments (According to their locations, it is tentative to assume they were belonged to a bracelet and anklet, however, this grave was disturb by the collapse of an iron-age burial)
16							Beads for personal ornaments
17					1		A bead for personal ornaments
18	3 (one vessel is fragmentary)				1	9	Unidentified bone objects
19	2 (one vessel is fragmentary)				1	12	Bronze clasp, beads for personal ornaments, unidentified bone and iron objects

20	1(potsherd)					4	Bronze buckle, unidentified object consists of bone and iron (3 pieces), unidentified bone objects, a bead for personal ornaments
21	2				2	19	Bronze buckles (3), unidentified bone objects (3), unidentified iron object (3 pieces)
22	1 (only a handle)	1					
23			1 (single)				Beads for personal ornaments
24	2			1	1	1	Beads for personal ornaments, unidentified iron object, textile
25							No findings
26	1 (fragmentary)	1					

stuff such as glass perfume or oil bottle (*unguentarium*)⁶, hair and dress adornments including disks and buckles (Fig. 15) are also discovered. Buckles were found only in the male graves. In two cases traces of textiles are remained. Other objects have been broken or corroded, and so hampers identification. Out of 26 graves, 35 ceramic vessels and potsherds are found. Several of these vessels were miniatures. Orange wares were common, however, buff, red, brown, and grey wares are identified as well. The majority of shapes consisted of bowls, jugs, and jars with one or two handles. Rarely the vessels found with a handle and spout. The potteries were generally plain, but three vessels were decorated with painting on the interior surface and incised designs on the neck. Among ceramics, burnished, and (green) glazed wares are also observed. One unique vessel comes from Grave no. 21. It has double handles, while one handle places near the neck and the other is near the base. Another interesting one is a vessel, which a base of other ware used as its lid. According to published catalogues of northern and east-northern Iran, similar ceramics were found at Nareshan (Schmidt, 1937: Fig. 14), Qumis (Hansman & Stronach, 1970: Fig. 15.6; Stronach *et al.*, 2019, Figs. 15.4, 15.7, 16.11-12, 24.15-16, 25.9, 27. 4, 27.14, 34.22), Turang tepe (Haerinck, 1983: Pl. 13.7), Shahpir (Haerinck, 1983: Fig. 1), Hasani mahale (Sono & Fukai, 1968: Pls. LXVI.3, LXVI.6), and Bazgir (Abbasi, 2016: Figs. 85.1-3, 94.10).

Personal ornaments were the most frequently occurring mortuary gifts including necklaces, bracelets, finger-rings, and earrings. They are discovered in female graves, except finger-rings which yielded in both male and female graves. Numerically beads

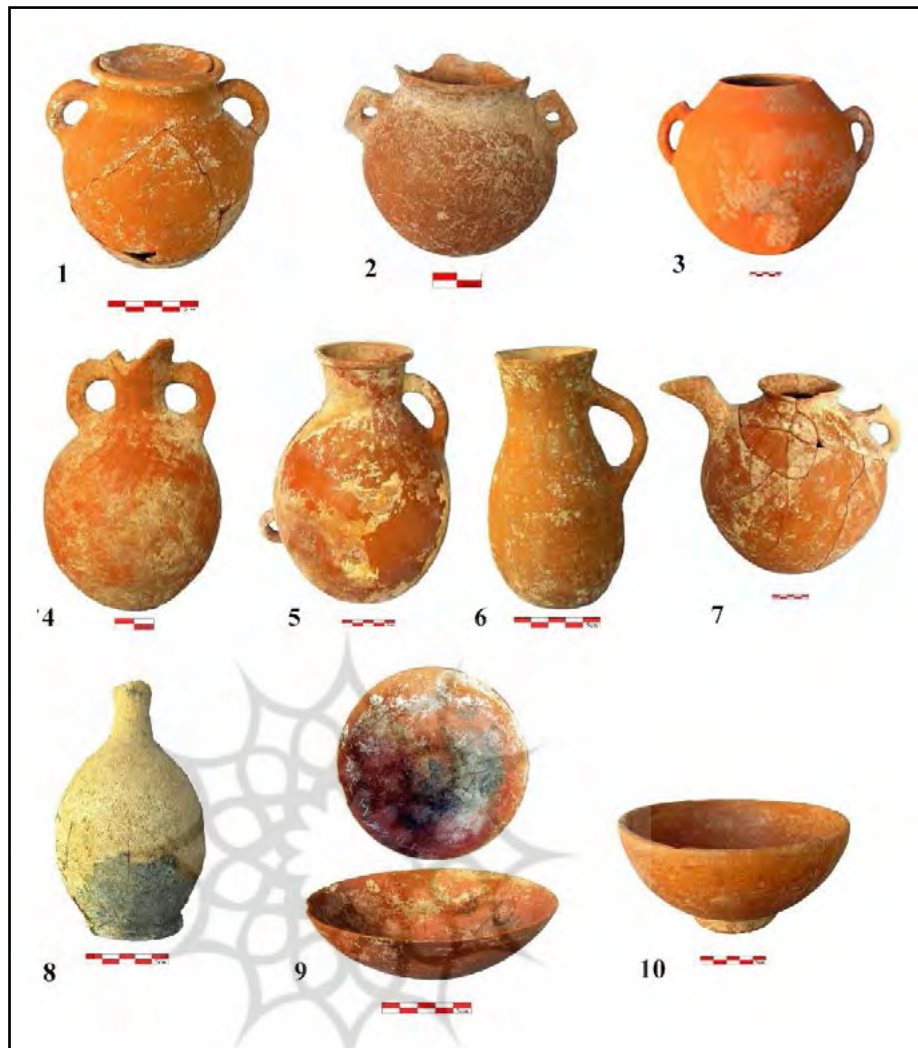


Fig. 12: Pottery vessels from Parthian graves (Authors, 2021).



Fig. 13: Personal ornaments from Parthian graves (Authors, 2021).

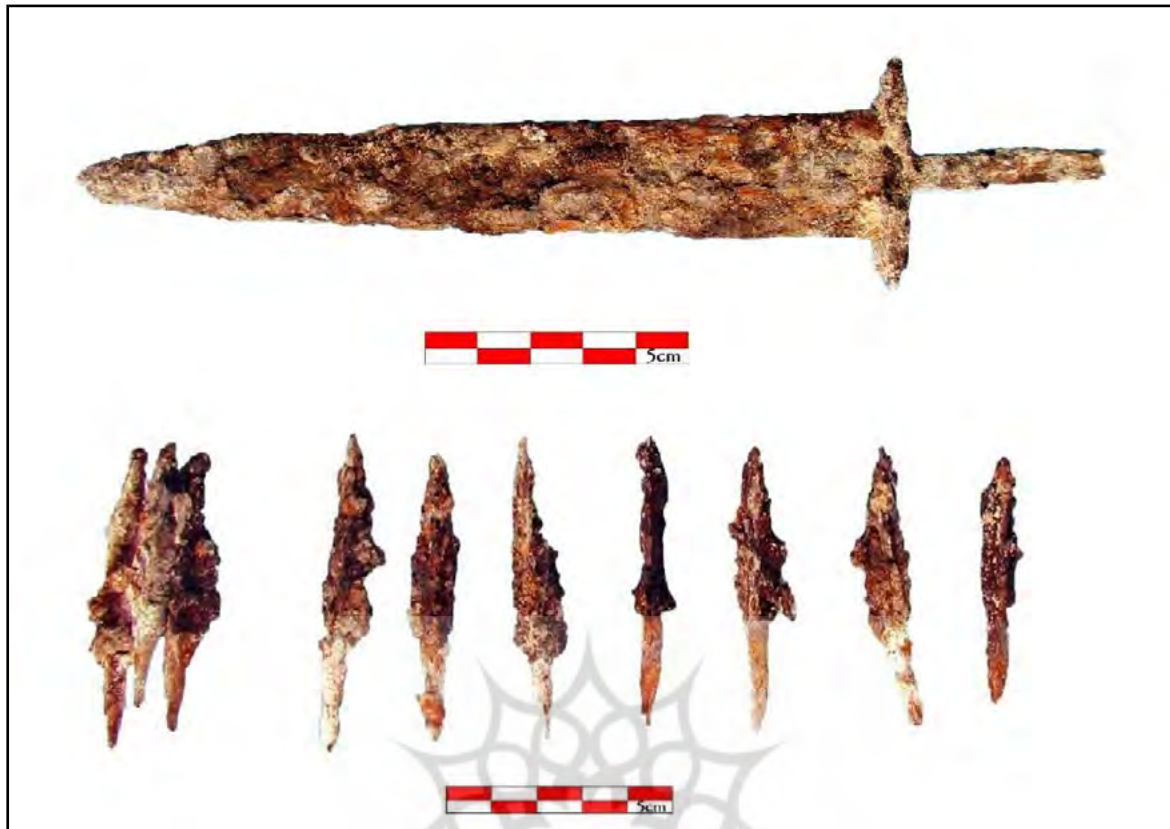


Fig. 14: Weapons from Parthian graves (Authors, 2021).



Fig. 15: Buckles from Parthian graves (Authors, 2021).

are the most finding ornament. They were made of stone, glass, bone, clay, and coral materials. A large number of beads were strung into necklaces, however, many of them are scattered in graves and it is not clear whether they were belonging to necklaces or other adornments. Pendants of necklaces are rarely found in graves. A total of 43 finger-rings are discovered, some of which were simple thin wire, and the others were rings with bezel sometimes inlaid with glass, stone, and metal. The interesting ones were stamp-seal bezels decorated with animal or dash motifs. Bracelets were plain or terminated to snake-heads. Of six bracelets, no less than four are found in Grave no. 2. Similar bracelets were discovered in the Parthian graves of Germe district ([Kambakhsh Fard, 1995: 64-65](#)). Amongst personal ornaments are two pair of earrings and two single earrings. Metal is quite common among personal ornaments. Finger-rings, bracelets, and earrings were mainly made of bronze, however, silver and iron were rarely used. Iron was predominantly used for weapons, but they are found in a fragmentary and corroded state. Most of iron objects are small arrow-heads. The largest one is a dagger, which was originally inserting its tang into a wooden haft. Similar to Vestemin -the weapons including a sword, daggers, arrow-heads, and spear-heads ([Sharifi Holaei et al., 2023](#))-, the weapons were also discovered in the graves of both men and women at Velem. But in Dailaman region, neither the graves of females nor the infants had weapons. They were occurred only in male burials ([Egami et al., 1966, 8](#)). The stamp-seal bezels, weapons, and buckles of Velem is very similar to the ones found at Vestemin. Other objects were made of bone and shell, but they are in poor condition, and their function is unclear.

The burial gifts show vividly that women and men were equally supplied with funerary gifts. Moreover, the position of women was not inferior to that of men, and findings from Grave no. 2 named “Lady of Velem” recorded the richest one among burials. This grave is selected as a good example which explained in detail below.

Grave no. 2: “Lady of Velem”

“Lady of Velem” is a name given to a grave in the SW corner of trench E (Fig. 16). It is the richest grave which belonged to a young female about 25-30 years old (Fig. 17). The shaft of grave suffers destructions in the west side by road construction, however the resting dimension is ca. 140×130×100×90cm. A vaulted entrance on the short east side of the shaft led to the burial chamber. It measured ca. 65cm in length, and 50cm in height. The burial chamber was circular, the roof of which had collapsed however it probably had a vaulted covering estimating about 160cm in height. The chamber measured ca. 135cm (EW) by 145cm (NS). There is a pit on the north of the chamber within which four ceramic vessels are discovered. It was measured ca. 80×110×60×60cm. The corpse laid along the southern wall of the chamber in WE axis, with her head near the entrance



Fig. 16: Burial structure of Grave no. 2: “Lady of Velem” (Authors, 2021).



Fig. 17: Grave no. 2: “Lady of Velem” (Authors, 2021).

on the west facing the north. The feet were laid in the niche-shaped recess on the NE corner of grave with 75cm length, 50cm height, and 40cm depth. Her body discovered in dorsal position, while right leg extended, and the left leg bent. The right arm bent and resting on the stomach, with the left arm extended at side. The lady accompanied by totally 45 funerary gifts found in the pit and especially beside her (Figs. 18-19). She was adorned lavishly with earrings, necklace, bracelets, and rings. After disposal of the dead, the chamber was sealed with stones set in clay mortar and the shaft was covered with earthen deposits.



Fig. 18: Burial gifts from Grave no. 2 (Authors, 2021).

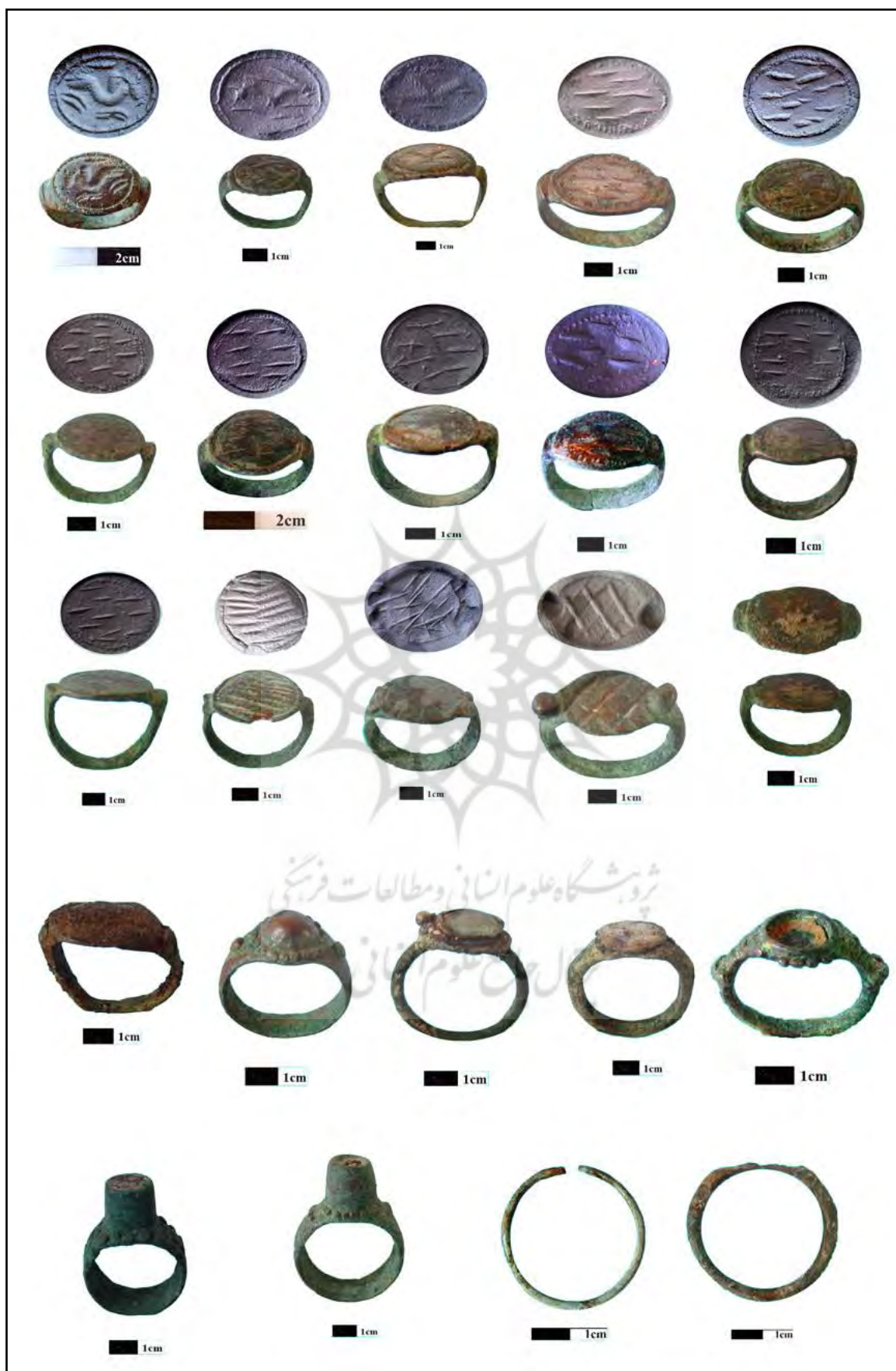


Fig. 19: Burial gifts from Grave no. 2 (Authors, 2021).

- Burial finds in Grave no. 2 are as follows:

1. Miniature ceramic vessel (not complete), buff ware, green glazed, decorated with incised horizontal lines in the body, height 6/5cm, maximum diameter 8/1cm, base diameter 5/2cm, discovered from 15cm above the skull.
2. Miniature ceramic vessel, buff ware, height 6/1cm, maximum diameter 5/2cm, rim diameter 2cm, base diameter 2/3cm, discovered from 10cm above the skull.
3. Elliptical bowl with flat base, fine orange ware, height 5/5cm, rim diameter 18/5cm, discovered in the pit.
4. Elliptical bowl with flat base, fine orange ware, height 5/5cm, diameter of rim 19cm, discovered in the pit.
5. Ceramic vessel with two handles, fine orange ware, height 17/5cm, maximum diameter 14/5cm, rim diameter 6/1cm, base diameter 11/2cm, discovered in the pit.
6. Ceramic vessel with two handles, coarse orange ware, height 18cm, maximum diameter 16cm, rim diameter 11cm, base diameter 10/6cm, discovered in the pit.
7. Glass perfume or oil bottle, cylindrical neck with rim folded outward then inward, height 9/2cm, maximum diameter 2/3cm, rim diameter 2/4cm, base diameter 1/6cm, discovered between the arms.
8. Remnants of textile attached to an iron object, discovered on the chest.
9. Bronze hair ornament consists of a right-angled plaque with curved sides measured 4/7cm in length, 9mm in width, and a heart-shaped plaque with small inward curved in maximum diameter measured 3/7cm in length, 2/2cm in width. A perforation and a jump ring in these detached plaques connecting probably through a string (?), discovered on the skull.
10. Pair of silver pendant earrings consisting of a loop, a pendant inlaid with quartz joint to a cluster of granules, and a globules at the base decorated with the same tiny granules some of which survives, all the elements soldered together, height 3/5cm, discovered near the ears.
11. Bronze bracelet with a fluted incised hoop and detachable, schematic snake-headed terminals, exterior maximum diameter 7/2cm, discovered ca. 10cm from the skull.
12. Bronze bracelet with a fluted incised hoop and detachable, schematic snake-headed terminals, exterior maximum diameter 7/2cm, discovered ca. 12cm from the skull.
13. Bronze bracelet with a fluted incised hoop and detachable, schematic snake-headed terminals, exterior maximum diameter 7/1cm, worn on the lower left forearm.
14. Bronze bracelet with a fluted incised hoop and detachable, schematic snake-headed terminals, exterior maximum diameter 7/1cm, encircle the right wrist.

15. Shell disk ($4/2 \times 3/7$ cm) with a small, central perforation and ring-and-dot ornaments, discovered about 18cm from the left elbow.
16. Shell disk ($4/5 \times 4/2$ cm) with a small, central perforation and dotted ornaments, discovered ca. 11cm from the left elbow.
17. Shell disk (4cm in diameter) with a small, central perforation and dotted ornaments, discovered ca. 10cm from the left leg.
18. Bronze disk ($5/6$ cm in diameter) with a small, central perforation and dotted lines ornaments, discovered between the thighs.
19. Bronze disk ($5/9$ cm in diameter) with a small, central perforation and rounded ornaments, discovered beside the left forearm.
20. Bone bead with a perforation in the center, height $1/6$ cm, discovered ca. 8cm, from the left thigh.
21. Beads strung on two necklaces (consists of 79 and 26 beads) made of stone, glass, and clay materials such as lapis lazuli, carnelian, glass, and frit.
22. Bronze finger-ring, bezel ($1/7 \times 1/2$ cm) has relief of stylized humped quadruped (probably zebu), discovered beside the left wrist.
23. Bronze finger-ring, bezel ($1/6 \times 1/3$ cm) has relief of stylized horned quadruped (probably antelope), worn on the left hand.
24. Bronze finger-ring, bezel ($1/9 \times 1/1$ cm) has relief of stylized bird (unidentified type), discovered beside the left forearm.
25. Bronze finger-ring, bezel ($1/6 \times 1/3$ cm) has relief of regular dashes, discovered ca. 5cm from the left forearm.
26. Bronze finger-ring, bezel ($1/8 \times 1/5$ cm) has relief of regular dashes, discovered ca. 6cm from the left forearm.
27. Bronze finger-ring, bezel ($1/6 \times 1/4$ cm) has relief of regular dashes, discovered ca. 7cm from the left forearm.
28. Bronze finger-ring, bezel ($1/8 \times 1/5$ cm) has relief of regular dashes, discovered ca. 8cm from the left forearm.
29. Bronze finger-ring, bezel ($1/8 \times 1/5$ cm) has relief of regular dashes, discovered ca. 9cm from the left forearm.
30. Bronze finger-ring, bezel ($1/7 \times 1/3$ cm) has relief of regular dashes, discovered ca. 11cm from the left arm.
31. Bronze finger-ring, bezel ($1/6 \times 1/4$ cm) has relief of regular dashes, discovered ca. 13cm from the left forearm.
32. Bronze finger-ring, bezel ($1/8 \times 1/4$ cm) has relief of regular dashes, discovered ca. 15cm from the left forearm.
33. Bronze finger-ring, bezel ($1/8 \times 1/5$ cm) has relief of regular dashes, worn on the left hand.

34. Bronze finger-ring, bezel (2/1×1/5cm) has relief of irregular dashes and a border with two pair of rounded bosses at either side, worn on the left hand.
35. Bronze finger-ring, bezel (2/2×1/2cm) has relief of crossed lines with two rounded bosses on either side, discovered ca. 6cm from the left forearm.
36. Bronze finger-ring, bezel (1/8×1/2cm) has reliefs (now missing), discovered ca. 17cm from the left forearm.
37. Iron finger-ring bezel (1/8×1/3cm) with stirrup-shaped hoop, worn on the right hand.
38. Bronze finger-ring, bezel setting measured 9×8mm in diameter contained hemispherical bronze, surrounded by a border with small rounded bosses and two larger ones at the shoulder, worn on the right hand.
39. Bronze finger-ring, bezel setting (1/3cm×8mm) contained elliptical glass, surrounded by a silver wire, and bordered with small rounded bosses and two larger ones at either side, worn on the left hand.
40. Bronze finger-ring, bezel setting (1/6cm×9mm) contained elliptical glass (repaired), worn on the right hand.
41. Bronze finger-ring contains an oval depression (1/4×1/1cm) designed for a stone or glass inset (now missing), part of the bezel surrounded by a border with small rounded bosses, the hoop decorated with vertical incised lines and two protuberances on either side, worn on the right hand.
42. Bronze finger-ring contains a circular depression designed for a stone or glass inset (now missing), the shoulder decorated with small rounded bosses, discovered ca. 5cm from the left forearm.
43. Bronze finger-ring contains a circular depression designed for a stone or glass inset (now missing), the shoulder decorated with small rounded bosses, discovered ca. 15cm from the left forearm.
44. Bronze finger-ring in the form of an open-ended thin wire, measured 1/8cm in diameter, worn on the right hand.
45. Bronze finger-ring in the form of a thin wire, measured 1/9cm in diameter, worn with the finger-ring No. 44 on the same finger.

Conclusion

As burials reviewed, there were various types of inhumation and funerary rites in Parthian period. Several burial types -inhumation in pit, coffin, urn, rectangular cist grave, and cairn- followed the ancient tradition and applied in widespread region, while there were other types of burial customs –inhumation in subterranean tomb- continued to be used under Parthians but it restricted to the particular places, where they were

applied in pre-Parthian period such as those discovered in Elymaean region. Some other funerary customs -inhumation in rock cut chamber complex, torpedo jar, and shaft grave- was introduced during Parthian period and appeared in special places. The tombs in Kharg Island were belonged to Palmyrene, who were trading on Persian Gulf or torpedo jars were applied for burial in the places, where this type of vessel used as containers of liquid for trading purposes. Shaft burial was a common funerary custom among Dahae nomads. It was introduced in northern Iran during Parthian period along ancient pit and jar burial types. Before recent excavations at Vestemin and Velem, this type of burial was only reported from Gilan province and connected to the cultures of the Sarmatian and Alan nomads. However, recent excavations have revealed the same burial type in Mazandaran. Therefore, it is plausible that shaft burial type came to Iran from eastern steppes in Central Asia as the movement of a group of nomadic people of Dahae and reached to Mazandaran and Gilan, however it requires further excavation for clarification especially in modern Khorasan and Golestan provinces. It must be noted, however, shaft burial custom might be penetrated into Iran from Caucasia region as well. Further, there were perpetual contacts between nomads and sedentary population. While it is possible that a group of nomadic people settled in north Iran, it is equally possible that the funerary rites of nomads influenced on sedentary people. Probably this custom stretched along the northern Iran, but for the moment we are unaware of similar burials in the center and west of Mazandaran and Golestan provinces. Interestingly, nomadic customs have been attested not only in funerary structures, but it also testified by horse burials in a recently found cemetery of Vestemin in Mazandaran. Therefore, nomadic elements were known in this region.

The construction of shaft burials at Velem is not very different from those discovered in other sites of northern Iran, however, it has its own special features. Graves characterized by a shaft, with the burial chamber opening from the short (eastern) wall of the shaft. Against other shaft burials, innovations were applied by digging a pit and creating a funerary platform in the chamber. Although funerary platform was known in other type of Parthian burials, but it has not recorded in the shaft burials yet. Another innovative element in the chamber was a recess along the platform. The chambers were circular or ellipse with a domed ceiling. After the burial was done, the arch-shaped entrance of chamber was closed either by stone slabs or pebbles, and the shaft was filled in. Burial gifts were discovered either beside the corpse on the platform or in the pit. Burial structure and finding parallels suggest a date during the middle and late Parthian period.

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the writing of this article.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Endnote

1. This funerary practice was recorded from various places in Bushehr peninsula such as Sangi, Sabzabad, Rishahr, and Liyan. They were attributed to Sasanian period (Simpson, 2019).
2. The stairway might be open to the sky as the tomb (T24) at Kal-e Chendar (Cellerino & Foietta, 2020: 23).
3. The tombs at Susa were dated to the late first century BCE-the second century CE (Boucharlat, 2019: 58).
4. Triangle plan was only recorded from Hasani mahale (Sono & Fukai, 1968: 11).
5. The name Dahzen translated as “protection by the Dahai” or “weapons of the Dahai” (Olbrycht, 2021: 270).
6. “Unguentaria” have functioned both in life and death. They were frequently found in the burial sites especially in the ancient Mediterranean. They were used as burial gifts or related to libations during funerary rituals. They were probably storing perfume or oil for the dead (Saraçoğlu, 2011: 3). At Gelalak (Rahbar, 1997: 180-182), Saleh Davoud (Rahbar, 2012: 306), and tepe Manbae-e āb at Kangavar (Kambakhsh Fard, 1995: 246) glass wares were found in the tombs.

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ولیم؛ گورستانی نویافته از دوره اشکانی در مازندران

رحمت عباس نژاد سرستی^I، راحله کولابادی^{II}

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چکیده

محوطه ولیم در حدود ۵۰۰ متری روستای ولیم در ۳۶ کیلومتری شهرستان بهشهر در شرق استان مازندران قرار دارد. این محوطه گورستانی در سال ۱۳۹۹ ه.ش. در جریان ساخت جاده‌ای نزدیک به روستا به شکل تصادفی شناسایی و یک سال بعد کاوش‌های نجات بخشی در محوطه آغاز شد. طی نخستین فصل کاوش، تدفین‌هایی از دوران پیش از اشکانی و به‌ویژه تدفین‌های شاخصی از دوره اشکانی کشف شد که از این میان، ۲۶ تدفین متعلق به دوره اشکانی و به شکل گورهای دخمه‌ای است. این پژوهش به تدفین‌های اشکانی در این محوطه در نخستین فصل کاوش اختصاص یافته است. با توجه به کمبود دانش ما از دوران تاریخی در شمال ایران و به‌ویژه استان مازندران، نتایج کاوش‌های محوطه ولیم اهمیت دوچندانی می‌یابد؛ ضمن این‌که تنها تعداد کمی محوطه اشکانی در استان مازندران شناسایی شده و اطلاعات تاریخی ما از شمال ایران در این دوران نیز محدود است. در این نوشتار با روش توصیفی-تحلیلی به بررسی و مطالعه یافته‌های نخستین فصل کاوش در ولیم پرداخته شده است تا به این پرسش‌ها پاسخ داده شود: (۱) ساختار گورها و شیوه تدفین در محوطه ولیم چگونه است؟ (۲) با توجه به رواج تدفین گوردخمه‌ای در شمال ایران، خاستگاه و علت پراکنش این شیوه تدفینی در این منطقه چیست؟ نتایج مطالعات میدانی نشان می‌دهد که گورهای اشکانی شناسایی شده در این محوطه به شکل گوردخمه‌هایی شامل دالان، ورودی و فضای تدفین هستند. هم‌چنین مقایسه تطبیقی گورهای این محوطه با نمونه‌های مشابه در شمال ایران و نیز خارج از ایران نشان می‌دهد که این نوع گورها در میان اقوام کوچ‌نشین رواج بسیاری داشته است و با توجه به موقعیت جغرافیایی شمال ایران، احتمالاً با نفوذ اقوام کوچ‌رو از جمله قوم داهه به منطقه مرتبط بوده و یا به دلیل تعاملات نزدیک بین اقوام کوچ‌نشین و ساکن در این منطقه پدید آمده است.

کلیدواژگان: اشکانیان، مازندران، ولیم، گورستان، گوردخمه.

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میراث فرهنگی و گردشگری، تهران، ایران

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I. دانشیار گروه باستان‌شناسی، دانشکده هنر و معماری، دانشگاه مازندران، بابلسر، ایران.

II. استادیار گروه باستان‌شناسی، دانشکده میراث فرهنگی، صنایع دستی و گردشگری، دانشگاه مازندران، بابلسر، ایران (نویسنده مسئول). Email: r.koulabadi@umz.ac.ir

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