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AN INSIGHT INTO THE SASSANIAN PILLAR OSSUARIES OF THE BAVANAT RIVER BASIN, IRAN

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Abstract: Extensive research has been conducted on the archaeology of the Sasanian period within the Fars cultural zone, and numerous archaeological sites from this era have been identified. However, some regions have received limited scholarly attention. Therefore, comprehensive archaeological surveys across all areas are necessary to develop a more holistic understanding of the region's Sasanian heritage. Given the archaeological significance of the Bavanat River basin, this region was surveyed by the author. During the survey, 54 sites were dated to the Sasanian period, among which two sites featured Dakhmak or pillar ossuaries. These structures consist of horizontal circular cavities accompanied by stone pillars. This paper introduces and analyzes the cultural and archaeological features of the pillar ossuaries identified in Bavanat. The evidence, along with comparisons to similar examples from the Marvdasht plain, suggests that these structures served a funerary function and were likely constructed for high-ranking members of society.

Keywords: Fars, Sassanian, Zoroastrianism, Dakhmak, pillar ossuary.

چکیده: تاکنون پژوهش‌های گسترده‌ای در زمینه باستان‌شناسی دوره ساسانی در حوزه فرهنگی فارس انجام شده و آثار باستان‌شناختی فراوانی شناسایی شده‌اند، اما با این حال در برخی مناطق پژوهش‌های اندکی صورت گرفته است، بنابراین نیاز است تا همه مناطق بررسی باستان شناسی شوند تا دیدگاه جامع‌تری ارائه شود. با توجه به اهمیت حوضه رودخانه بوانات از نظر پژوهش‌های باستان‌شناسی این منطقه توسط نگارنده بررسی شد. طی بررسی ۵۴ محوطه به دوره ساسانی تاریخگذاری شد که از میان آن‌ها، دو محوطه دارای دخمک یا استودان‌های ستونی بودند. این یافته‌ها شامل حفره‌های مدور ایجاد شده بر سطح افقی صخره یا ستون‌های سنگی هستند. این مقاله به معرفی و بررسی ویژگی‌های فرهنگی و باستان‌شناختی دخمک‌های شناسایی‌شده در بوانات می‌پردازد. شواهد موجود و مطابقت آن با نمونه‌های مشابه به دست آمده دشت مرودشت نشان می‌دهد که این نوع ساختارها کارکردی تدفینی داشته واحتمالاً برای افراد بلندپایه جامعه ساخته شده‌اند.

کلیدواژه: فارس، ساسانی، زرتشتی، دخمه، دخمک ستونی.

I. Introduction

The province of Fars, as the heart of the Sassanian Empire and the birthplace of its founder, Ardashir I, holds great significance in the studies of historians and archaeologists. Many of the prominent cities, palaces, and rock reliefs of the Sassanian period are located in this region. Numerous research projects have been conducted to explore the Sassanian era in Fars, which have focused on several key sites, such as the cities of Estakhr (Schmidt, 1939; Bier, 1983), and Bishapur (Ghirshman, 1971). However, the majority of studies have concentrated on the rock reliefs of this period (Trtimpelmann, 1975a, b; Herrmann and Howell, 1977; Vanden Berghe, L. 1983; Herrmann et al., 1989; Haerinck and Overlaet, 2009; Canepa, 2013; Khanipour et al., 2017). On the other hand, some important cities, such as Darabgerd, have not yet undergone extensive archaeological excavation, and many valleys of Fars, including Bavanat and the Darab plain, remain largely unexplored from the perspective of Sassanian archaeology. In addition, the burial practices of the Sassanian period in this region may offer unique insights into the culture and beliefs of this period. While burial sites in areas like Marvdasht have been well-documented (Trümpelmann, 1984; Jafari, 2007), the Sassanian burial methods in other parts of Fars are still not fully understood. During the author's archaeological survey in Bavanat County in 2015, several Sassanian sites were discovered, revealing the importance and prosperity of the region during the Sassanian period. One of the most notable finds in Bavanat is the discovery of pillar ossuaries or Dakhmakas at two different locations. While cairn burials are found in several places within the region, the pillar ossuaries stand out as a distinctive burial method from the Sassanian era. This article aims to investigate these unique burial structures by addressing key questions: What functions did the stone pillars and cavities serve? What period do these findings date back to? By comparing these findings with other sites, the article seeks to understand their function, historical significance, and the social status of the individuals buried within these structures.

II. Burial Practices in the Sassanian Period

The Sassanian Empire, founded by Ardashir I in the early 3rd century AD, ruled a vast area of Western Asia for over four centuries (Christensen, 1942; Ghirshman, 1962; Daryaee, 2009). This empire stretched from the lands of Iran to regions near the borders of the Roman

Empire, including parts of Syria and Central Asia. Throughout this long period, the Sassanians governed diverse territories with varying cultural and religious characteristics, leading to significant diversity among their people. The official religion of the empire was Zoroastrianism, which played a major role in social and political aspects (Boyce, 2001). However, the empire also hosted a variety of religious groups. Christian and Jewish populations were significant in several regions of the Sassanian realm. Furthermore, Buddhist groups settled in the eastern parts of the empire (Simpson and Molleson, 2014).

Through archaeological surveys and excavations, various burial practices related to the Sassanian period have been identified (Trümpelmann 1984, Simpson and Molleson 2014; Farjamirad, 2015). During this period, burial rituals were influenced by Zoroastrianism, particularly by religious texts such as the *Videvdat*, which was codified at that time. This text outlines two main stages of burial for the deceased. The first stage involves exposing the body in dry, high, and desolate areas where the perishable parts of the body are quickly consumed by vultures and wild dogs, which is mandatory. The second stage, which is optional, involves the treatment and preservation of the cleaned bones, which may be stored in specially designated containers, if the family can afford it. Otherwise, the bones may be left to decompose on the exposure site (Hoff, 2004). Despite strict Zoroastrian prohibitions, ossuaries—purpose-built bone containers—are surprisingly rare outside of Fars. These ossuaries are most commonly found in the eastern regions, such as Khwarezm and Sogdiana, and are completely absent from Mesopotamia (Simpson and Molleson, 2014). Within Fars, a variety of burial types, such as rock-cut and free-standing ossuaries, have been identified (Huff, 2004). However, two primary burial types are more widespread across the vast geographical expanse. Cairn burials, which include poorly preserved or possibly secondary burials, have been discovered throughout southern Iran. Some scholars interpret these burials as belonging to pastoral nomads interred along their seasonal migration routes (Lamberg-Karlovsky and Humphries, 1968; Khosrozadeh, 2007). Simple burials have also been discovered in various regions of Iran, such as Fars, central Iran, the northwest, and Mesopotamia. These burials reflect simpler burial practices of the period (Burney, 1970; Kroll, 1979; Balcer, 1978; Soortijee, 2012; Mousavinia et al., 2018). These tombs typically include poorly preserved remains or informal burials, which may reflect the social status of individuals or cultural differences. These studies demonstrate that burials in the Sassanian period were still influenced by specific religious practices, yet diverse burial methods existed across regions and among different social strata.

III. The Research Background of Sassanid Burials in Fars

Vanden Berghe identified burial sites from the historical period of Fars (Vanden Berghe, 1953). The excavations at Tol-e Malyan led to the identification of Sassanian graves (Balcer, 1978). Leo Trümpelmann also conducted research on graves and burial rituals in the Sassanian period. His research is generally based on burial sites in Fars (Trümpelmann, 1984). Huff's research also led to the identification of additional burials in Fars (Huff, 1988, 1991, 1992, 1998, 2004). In his thesis, Mohammad Javad Jafari examined the Rahmat Mountain burials (Jafari, 2007). Nasrullahzadeh read grave inscriptions (2006, 2020). Bendezu-Sarmiento and Jafari described the burials of the historical period of Tange Bolaghi (2018). Tavakol studied the burials of Mount Hossein (2021). Farjamirad also studied Sassanid burials in Fars (Farjamirad, 2015a, b). Despite the various studies on burial practices, none of them have mentioned the burial places of the historical period of the Bavanat region.

IV. Archaeology of Bavanat

Bavanat County is located in the northeast of Fars province and consists of two districts: the central and Mazayjan. Khataban Mountain, with a height of 3482 m above sea level, is the highest point in the region. The lowest altitude is in the Marvast Plain with a height of 1670 m above sea level. For the first time, Stein excavated several Bavanat sites (Stein, 1936). Furthermore, Helwing and Askari have visited several sites in Monj (Helwing, 2007). Due to a lack of knowledge about the cultural history of this region, from prehistoric times to the present, there is a need to conduct archaeological surveys to identify and introduce historical monuments. The importance of this issue motivated us to conduct archaeological surveys in the central and Mazayjan District of Bavanat County from 13th March to 2nd May 2015. During the survey, 200 sites were identified, dated from the Neolithic to the late Islamic period. These sites include settlement sites, fortresses, temples, mosques, bridges, cemeteries, caravanserais, hammams (bathhouses), water mills, rock art, archaeological mines, and slag sites (Khanipour, 2024a). In addition, excavations at the Hormangan site were conducted in 2016 (Khanipour 2024b; Khanipour and Holakooei, 2025).

V. Bavanat in the Sassanian Period

During the Sassanian period, settlements increased, and a diverse range of remains emerged in the Bavanat River basin. Based on surface findings, 54 sites have been identified from the Sassanian era, including temples, burial structures, military and defensive installations (such as forts and walls), and settlement sites. The most notable site from this period is a group of remains known as the Chahar Taqi of "Heidar Beyg" or "Manj," first observed by Stein, who identified it as a mosque (Stein, 1936). The temple's architecture is situated on a natural hill, about 5 meters high above the surrounding land, approximately 30 meters from the Bavanat River. The structure comprises a building with three entrances on each side and a small pool in the center. However, it has since been destroyed, with only parts of the eastern and southern walls remaining. Additionally, it appears that a surrounding wall once encircled the structure, positioned about 10 meters away. Along the river, remnants of a stone dam are visible, with materials similar to those of the main building, suggesting a connection between the dam and the temple. In terms of dating, the surface pottery found in the area suggests that this site can be attributed to the Sassanian period. Several cairn burial sites were discovered, common in the Sassanian and Parthian periods in Fars (Khanipour and Kavosh, 2022; Khanipour and Molaie Kordshooli, 2023). Additionally, two locations named "Cheraghkashi" and "Fenjan" yielded stone pillars, the focus of this paper, which will be discussed further below.

To the north of the Bavanat River basin, a mountain range runs in a north-south direction, visible in the region's topographic maps and satellite imagery. The difficult terrain of this mountain range creates a natural barrier, blocking passage except through two narrow valleys, which provide the only north-south communication routes. At each passage point, two forts are located, likely controlling access through these routes. Additionally, where the mountain is less steep, a wall 150 centimeters thick and 110 meters long has been constructed, likely controlling access to these passageways.

The settlement sites in this region vary in size, most covering less than one hectare. These sites are believed to have been inhabited by farming or pastoral communities. The pottery discovered at these sites in the Bavanat basin can be categorized into three color groups: red, buff, and gray. These ceramics are often decorated with incised or applied, with glazed pottery being rarely found. These ceramics are comparable to those found at Sassanian sites such as Estakhr (Schmidt 1939), Tol-e Malyan (Alden 1978), Hajiabad (Azarnoush, 1994), Qasr-i Abu-Nasr (Frye 1973; Whitcomb, 1985), Qal'eh Yazdgerd (Keall and Keall, 1981), and Tol-e Gap Kenareh (Khanipour et al., 2021).

VI. Graves Known as Dakhmak and Pillar Ossuary

Based on the survey, two types of burials were identified: cairn burials (also known as khartkhaneh burials) and graves referred to as "Dakhmak." This article will focus on the Dakhmak burials. The structure of Dakhmak burials exists in two forms: cavities and stone pillars. The first type consists of circular cavities carved into the horizontal surface of large stones and rocks. These cavities are round, and this type of structure was identified at two locations in the Bavanat.

VII. Cheraghkoshi Site

The Cheraghkoshi site is located in the south of Mazaijan, approximately 6,500 meters southeast of Badbor village and 4,800 meters southeast of Pirkadoye spring. This site is situated in a mountainous landscape on the northern slope of a high mountain range within a valley (Fig. 1). The site contains four circular cavities in one of the rocks, each about 35 cm in diameter and 10 to 12 cm deep. Two of the cavities remain intact, while part of the other two have been damaged. A similar structure has also been identified through archaeological survey in Abadeh (Abul-Ahrar et al. 2018). Approximately 30 meters to the east of these rocks, the remains of a quadrangular stone have been found, with a circular cavity in the center measuring about 37 cm in diameter and about 6 cm deep. Additionally, around 100 meters from these rocks, the broken remains of a stone pillar were discovered, with a diameter of about 36 cm. Its original height is unknown due to its broken condition (Figs. 2-5).

VIII. Pahneh Mil Fenjan

Pahneh Mil Fenjan is located 2,300 meters southeast of Fenjan village and 400 meters from the road leading from Fenjan to Baghsafa on the left side (Fig. 1). At this site, there are two rocks featuring circular cavities about 20 cm deep and 50 cm wide. These boulders were moved from their original location and are now upside down. During a visit by the archaeologists of the Fars Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization in 2007, a stone pillar with a diameter of 60 cm and a height of about 140 cm was found next to these two rocks (Figs. 6-8). Unfortunately, this pillar was no longer present when we visited in 2015.

IX. Function

Before the identification of Dakhmak or pillar ossuaries in Bavanat, similar ones had been found at Koh Hossein (Trümpelmann, 1984), Semirom, and Shush-Sofla (Farjamirad, 2015). There has been much discussion about their function. Vanden Berghe (1968) discovered similar pillars in the Semirom region, which he named the Sassanian fireplace. Henning read the inscription on a broken fragment of a cylindrical pillar and stated that the inscription should be considered a burial inscription or at least a memorial inscription (Henning, 1958: 48). A pillar-like stone with an inscription is located in Teng-e Karam, where Gropp read some of its words and recognized the phrase "heaven's reward," a common expression on burial monuments (Gropp, 1970: 204). The Teng-e Karam stone pillar appears to be a burial artifact and a platform for placing a burial jar (Stronach, 1966: 224, Pl. XXIII; Huff, 2004: 610-611).

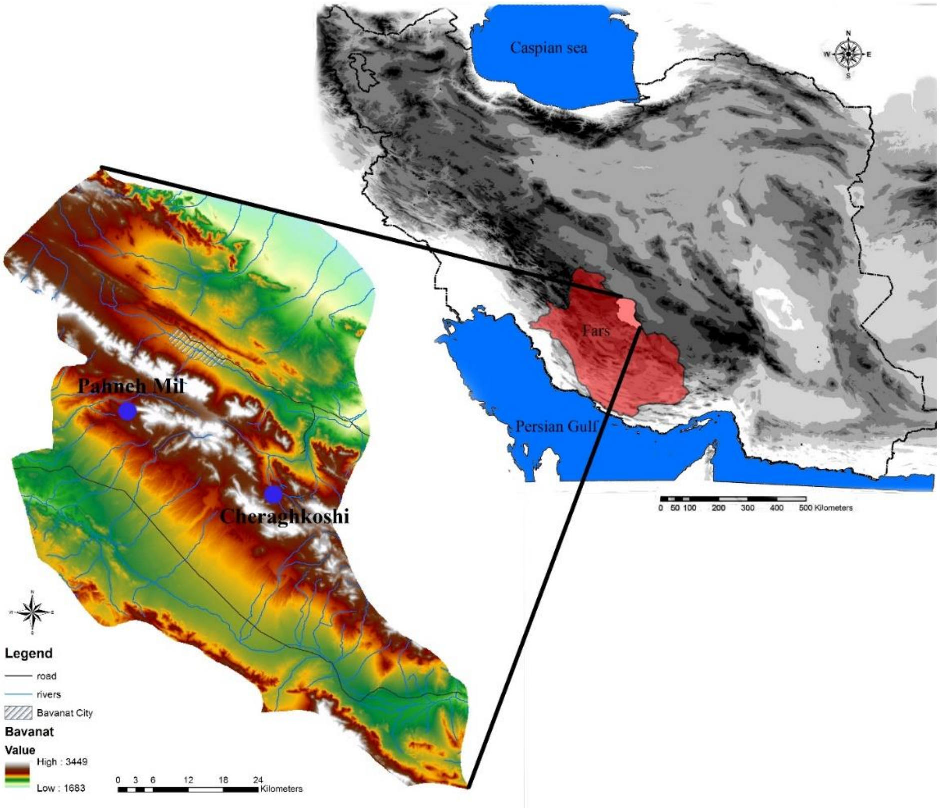

Figure 1: Geographic location of burial places in Bavanat.

Trümpelmann believes that the cavities around Estakhr all have the same function and were made to place jars containing bones (Trümpelmann, 1984). Such cavities can be seen at the sites discovered by Kleiss in Mount Hossein (Kleiss, 1976). Farjamirad also introduced two pillar ossuaries in Shush village and believes that they had a burial function related to the Sassanian period (Farjamirad, 2015). Therefore, based on the above inscriptions, it is clear that the pillars had a burial function. Considering the similarity, the Cheraghkoshi and Pahneh Mil sites can be considered as having a burial function.

Figure 2: Overview of Cheraghkoshi Dakhmak.

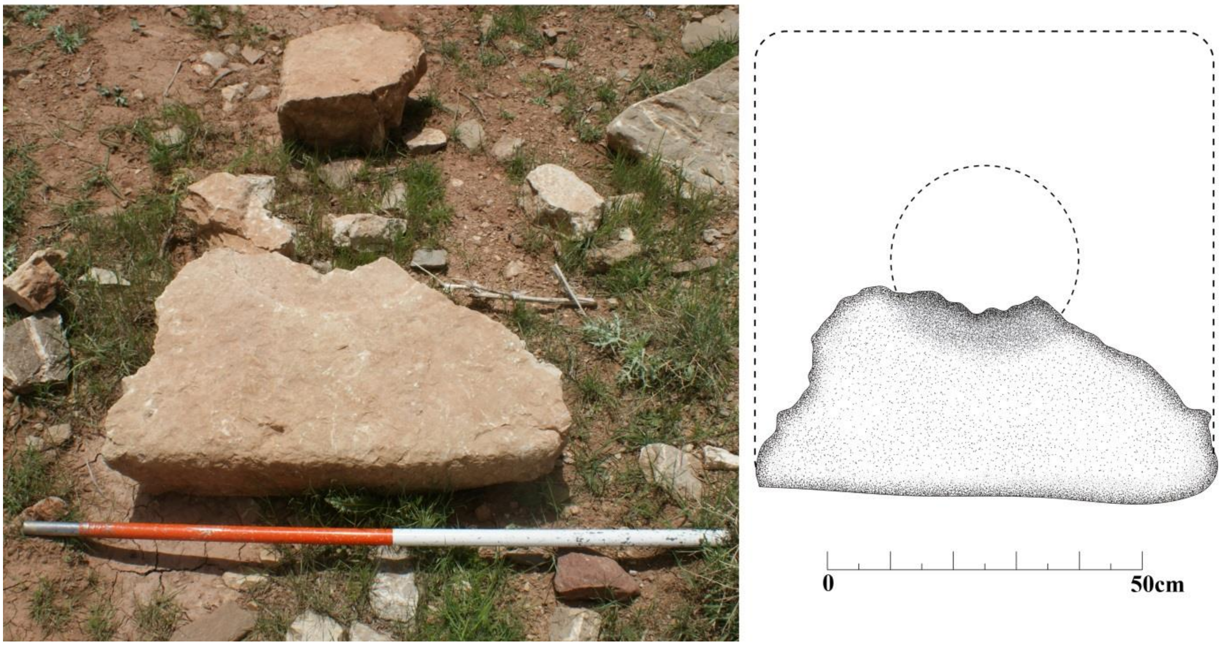

Figure 3: Sculpted stone (Design by Sepideh Jamshidi Yeganeh).

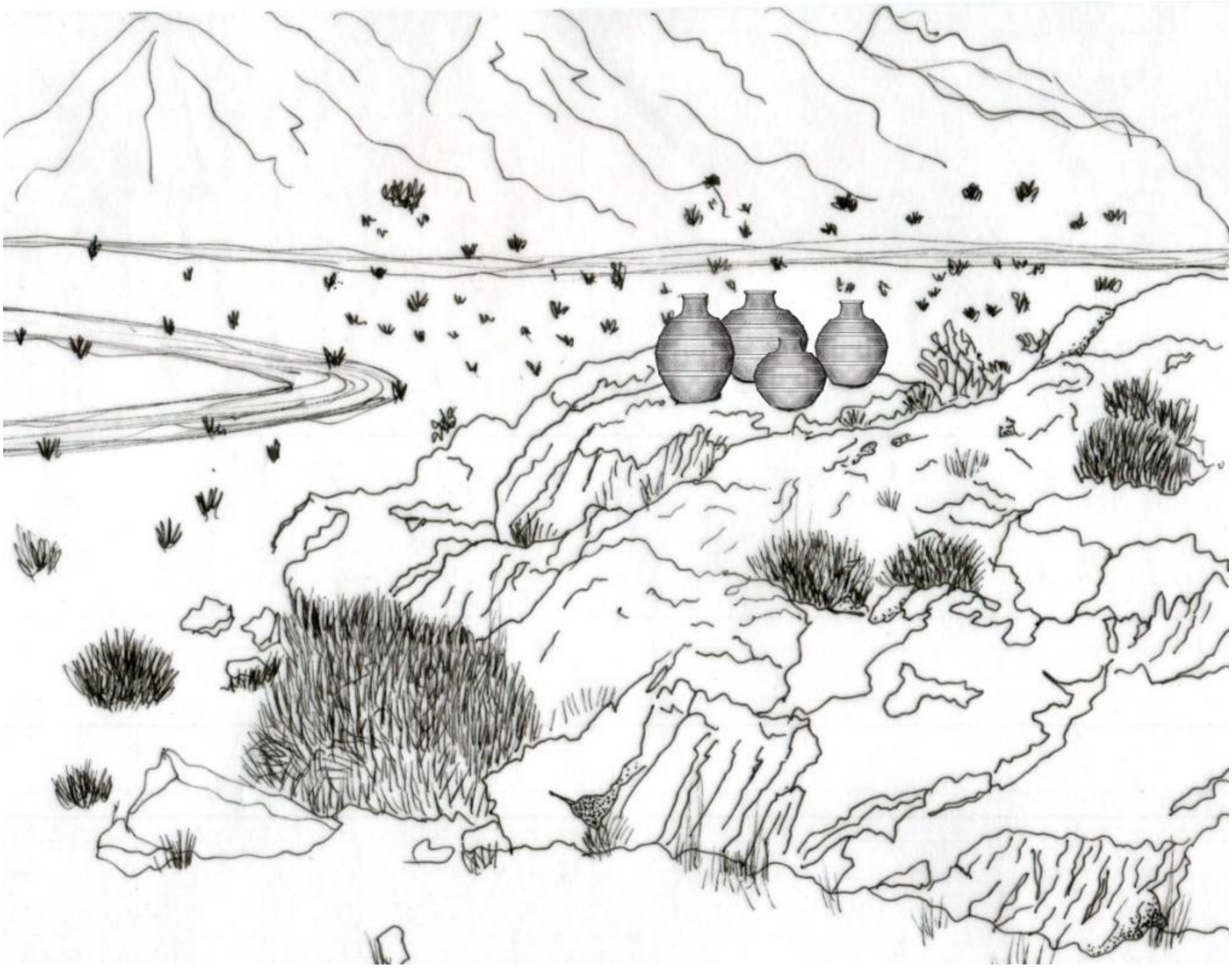

Figure 4: Examples of reconstructed dakhmas of Cheraghkoshi (Design by Sepideh Jamshidi Yeganeh).

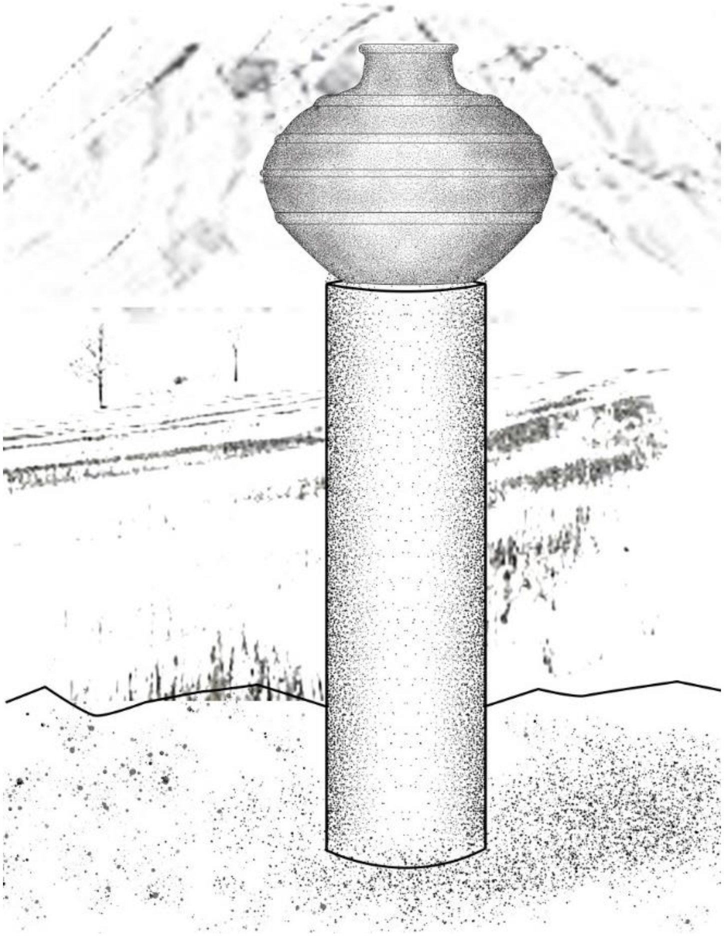

Figure 5: Reconstructed pillar ossuary of Cheraghkoshi (Design by Sepideh Jamshidi Yeganeh).

X. How to use

There are various opinions about how Dakhmak or pillar ossuaries should be used. In most cases described by Vandenberg (1968), Trümpelmann (1984), and Jafari (2007), stone pillars and cavities were found together. In both Bavanat sites, the stone pillars and cavities are located together. However, how human burials are placed in these types of graves is still unknown. Since the deceased's body does not fit inside this limited space, bones were kept in the open air. During the Sassanid period, the bodies of the deceased were left in the open air, and after disintegration, the remaining bones were buried in niches or recesses (Trümpelmann, 1984). Heinz also considered Dakhmak as a kind of structure for the preservation of bones after disintegration (Hinz, 1969: 241). According to Huff's reconstruction, there were probably caps on these cavities (Huff, 1992: 212). During the Sassanid period, large jars existed, one of which, with an inscription, was discovered from Qale Dokhtar in Firouzabad (Huff and Gignoux, 1978: 144). Such jars containing bones could easily be placed in wide cavities, while smaller jars could fit in narrower pits. Kleiss mentions that pottery collected from the surface of Mount Hossein mostly belonged to large jars (Kleiss, 1976: 150). Additionally, according to Trümpelmann, these jars were placed on top of the Dakhmak or pillar ossuary (Trümpelmann, 1984).

Based on the above, it seems that jars were placed inside these cavities and on top of the pillars (Figs. 5 and 8). Of course, Trümpelmann suggests that the commemorative aspect of the stone pillars should also be considered (Trümpelmann, 1984). Some believe that a cover was placed on these Dakhmaks (Huff, 1992: 207-17; Farjamirad, 2015a). Since the existing samples around Naqsh Rostam and the two identified sites in Bavanat have been destroyed, it is impossible to comment on how the Dakhmaks were covered. As explained, a cube-shaped carved stone piece was discovered a few meters from Cheraghkoshi, with a cavity in it. This stone is considered to be the cap of one of the cavities (Fig. 3). It can also be assumed that this piece of stone was created from a slab and placed in position. Since no intact samples of this type of burial have been found so far, it is not possible to determine with certainty whether these holes were covered or where the vat containing the body was placed. Perhaps, without these inscriptions, researchers would not have been able to easily identify the funerary function of these structures.

Figure6: Pahneh Mil dakhmak

Figure 7: Pillar ossuary of Pahneh Mil (Photo from the Cultural Heritage organization of Fars Archive).

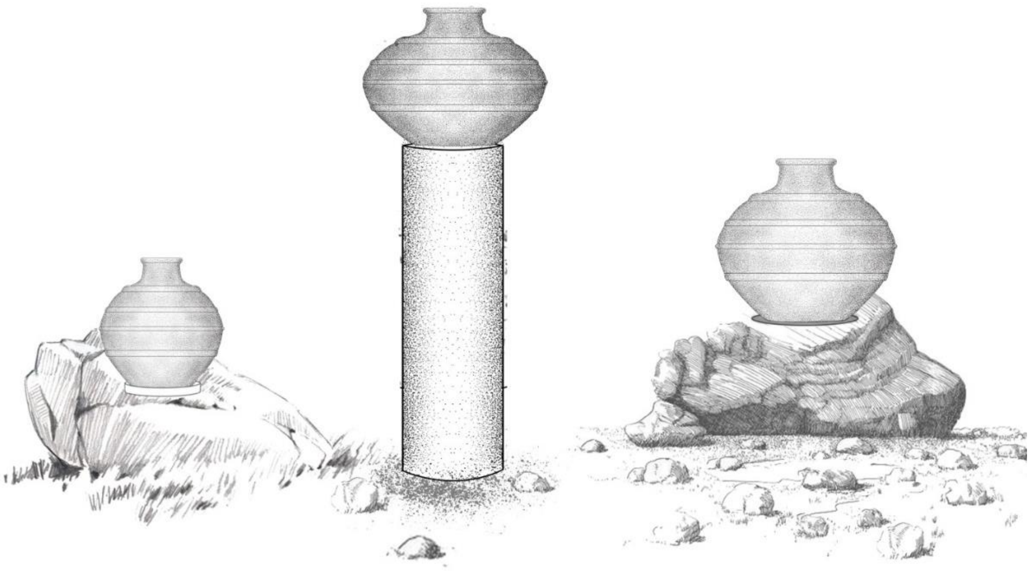

Figure 8: Reconstruction of the pillar ossuary and dakhmaks of Pahneh Mil.

XI. Dating

From the surface of the two sites, Cheraghkoshi and Pahneh Mil, no archaeological materials such as pottery, tools, or other artifacts were found that could directly provide an absolute or relative date for these locations. This absence of diagnostic materials poses challenges in establishing a definitive chronology for the sites. Therefore, their dating must rely on comparative analysis with similar archaeological features and inscriptions from other well-dated sites.

The inscriptions and structural features observed at comparable sites, such as Estakhr and Teng-e Karam, provide significant clues. These sites, which are associated with the Sassanid period, contain inscriptions and architectural elements that resemble those found at Cheraghkoshi and Pahneh Mil. For instance, the presence of stone pillars and circular cavities at these locations aligns with similar burial structures and ossuaries identified at Estakhr and Teng-e Karam. Moreover, historical evidence indicates that such pillar ossuaries were a characteristic burial practice during the Sassanid era. These features, combined with the stylistic and functional parallels, strongly suggest that Cheraghkoshi and Pahneh Mil were also constructed and used during the Sassanid period. While further excavation and analysis could potentially uncover additional evidence, the current interpretation places these sites within the broader context of Sassanid-era funerary practices in the Fars region.

XII. Conclusion

One of the defining characteristics of burials during the Parthian and Sassanid periods was their diversity, with each region exhibiting its own distinct methods and features. During the survey of the Bavanat river basin, two types of burial structures were identified: cairn burials and Dakhmak (pillar ossuaries). Dakhmak and pillar ossuaries were discovered at two sites, Mill Fenjan and Cheraghkoshi. Based on comparisons with similar structures at Naqsh-e Rostam, Estakhr, Semirom, and Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, as well as the inscriptions found on some of these pillars, they are likely associated with the Sassanid period and used for burials. However, there are three primary interpretations of how these burials were conducted. First, it is suggested that jars containing remains were placed on the stone pillars or inside the holes. Second, bones may have been deposited in the holes or cavities, which were then covered with a lid.

A third interpretation considers the commemorative aspect of the stone pillars as their primary purpose. At the Cheraghkoshi and Pahneh Mil sites, no pottery remains were found, which might have been expected if jars were used. However, the absence of pottery cannot be definitively interpreted as evidence against this practice, especially given the minimal alterations to the surroundings.

A cube-shaped stone base found at Cheraghkoshi could potentially represent a cover for one of the burial cavities. Unlike other burial practices of the Sassanid period, pillar ossuaries or Dakhmak have been identified only in limited areas. The discovery of these sites in the Bavanat region suggests that northeastern Fars may represent an additional distribution zone for this rare burial tradition. Considering the scarcity of pillar ossuaries, it is plausible that this method of burial was reserved for high-ranking members of society. Thus, Dakhmak or pillar ossuaries may have been exclusive to local elites or individuals of significant social standing.

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