



New Evidence of Sasanian Burials in the Seymareh Valley, Western Iran

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Received: 09/ 04/ 2022; Received in Revised form: 27/ 05/ 2022; Accepted: 12/ 06/ 2022; Published: 20/ 06/ 2022

Abstract

Historical texts and geographic sources as well as archaeological studies place the Seymareh valley, located in present-day Ilam province of Iran, among the regions with great potential of producing outstanding archaeological evidence of the Sasanian period. Yet, the current state of archaeological scholarship in the region by no means reflects its high capacity. During the field surveys of areas between the Darreh Shahr and Badreh as well as the foothills of the Kabirkuh Mountain range, evidence of burials with rock-cut Astodans (niches) were identified at the villages of Zayed and Fazel-Abad. Judging from the recovered pottery and the comparison of burial spaces with those in other contemporaneous Iranian regions such as Khuzestan and Fars, this type of Sasanian burial spaces and the mountainous climate of the Seymareh valley seem to have played an important part in the adoption of such burial practices in the region.

Keywords: Iran, Sasanian, Burial, Seymareh Valley, Rock-Cut Astodans (Niches).

Article Type: Research Article

Introduction

Burial practices in pre-Islamic Iran can to a certain extent be reconstructed from archaeological evidence, parts of the Avesta, and other concomitant religious texts (Grenet, 1990: 559). The common belief is that during the Sasanian period human corpses were left to animals and wild birds to decompose, and thereafter only remaining bones were buried in niches or cavities cut into rocks, namely ossuaries (astodans) (Trumpelmann, 1993: 29). However, archaeological evidence shows that there prevailed in each region specific burial practices that were greatly inspired by previous traditions (Mohammadifar and Amini, 2015: 187, Shearbat and Nazari, 2017: 170; Daruwalla, 2016-17: 105-106). Darreh Shahr or Seymareh (as it is locally known) lie in southeastern Ilam Province (Figure. 1). Historical and geographical texts and other sources frequently make reference to the city during the Sasanian times. According to these sources, the Sasanian territory consisted of four

major quarters (kusts), and Seymareh lay 1 mile from Mihrajanqadhaq (Markwart, 1994: 49, Figure 2), which was a part of the southwestern quarter, viz. Xwarwarān Kust (Markwart, 1994: 43). Several sources mention Hormuzan and Firuzan as two ruling families of this region (Tabari, J.5, 1996: 1883, Izadpanah, 1984: 463).

History of Research

Burial rituals during the Sasanian period are covered in many publications, which mainly focus on case studies from different parts of the empire. Leo Trumpelmann studied the Sasanian burial practices with a focus on the Fars region (Trumpelmann, 1984). Studies of Dietrich Huff concentrated on the Sasanian burials in the same region (Huff, 1988, 1991, 1992, 1998, 2004). In addition, archaeological investigations in Fars have identified various types of burials in the foothills of the Kuh-e Rahmat dating to the Achaemenid and Sasanian times (Jaafari, 2008). Frantz Grenet made the pre-Islamic burial traditions in Central Asia as a



subject of his inquiry (Grenet, 1984). Archaeological work in Mesopotamian has also disclosed Sasanian burial practices (Simpson & Molleson, 2014).

A full chapter in the volume *The Sasanian Archaeology and Art* is dedicated to introducing the various burial traditions of the period (Mohammadifar & Amini, 2015). In a paper entitled “A Study of Burial Traditions in the Sasanian Period based on Archaeological Findings” (Shearbatf & Nazari, 2017) the authors introduce a variety of burial methods based on archaeological evidence. With respect to archaeological work in Darreh Shahr, one can refer to Sir Aurel Stein who, during

his visit to the city, describes a number of Sasanian sites and the remains of Tang-e Bahram Chubin (Stein:1940). Also noteworthy are the results of studies on the city by other archaeologists who have identified and recorded some 117 coeval sites (Mazaheri, 2006, 89, Shahbazi, 2005). “A Study of the Collection of Archaeological Remains in Bahram-e Chubin Canyon in Darreh Shahr City” (Mohammadi *et al*, 2014), discusses the Sasanian architectural remains and pottery from this canyon, comparing them to those from other Iranian regions.

Physiographic Details

Darreh Shahr¹ is a narrow strip stretching between the Kabir Kuh and the Seymareh River in the Zagros Mountains in Ilam Province. An easterly road links the city to the city of Pol-e Dokhtar in Lorestan province. To the south lies the city of Abdanan, and to the northwest the city is bounded by Badreh, a county of Ilam Province. Darreh Shahr is characterized by a diverse topography that ranges from peaks above 3000 m to plains with an altitude of below 300 m. Foothills, hillock chains, and other plain areas form other terrain types in the city. The Darreh Shahr region is often affected by the Mediterranean climate. Because of its seasonal and permanent rivers, fertile plains, and slopes of the Kabir Kuh, the region offers more favorable conditions for agricultural and pastoral modes of life. The vegetation includes plant species typical



Figure. 1: Geographic location of Darreh Shahr County .

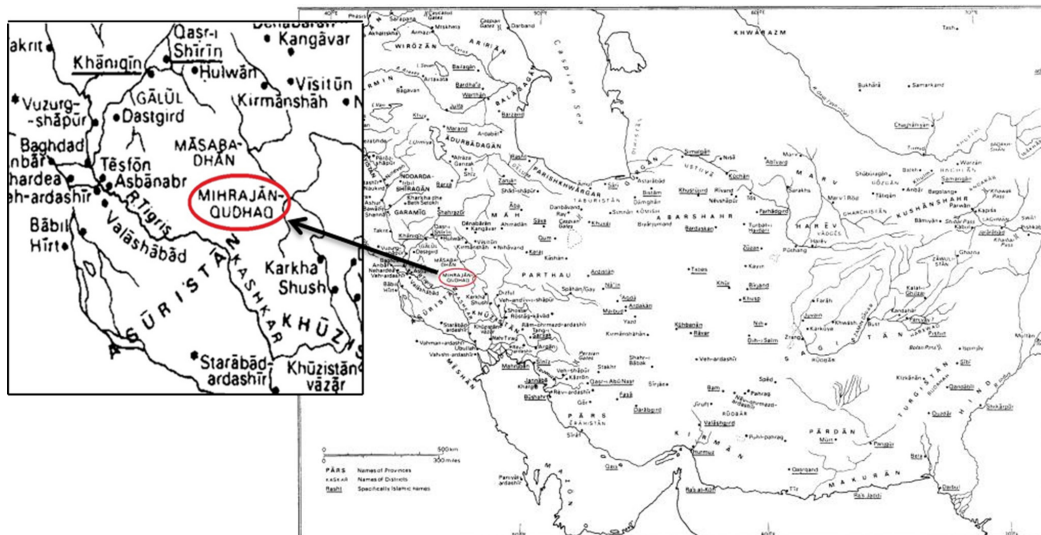


Figure. 2: Provinces of Iran in the early Sasanian period and the geographic location of Mihrājanqadhaq (After: Brunner, 1983: 749).

¹While currently forming a part of Badreh, the village of Zayed was formerly a dependency of Darreh Shahr. Therefore, in this paper geographic settings of Darreh Shahr is presented.

of mountainous, foothill and plain areas (Sharifinia and Shakarami, 2018: 6-24).

Sasanian Burial Types

Excavations and surveys indicate that in different parts of the Sasanian kingdom varying burial patterns were practiced. Such diversity in mortuary customs can be explained from a religious perspective. There were religious minorities with remarkable discrepancies in parts of their convictions. Even during the Sasanian rule, the Zoroastrian truth and unity could never be accomplished (Raisi Gahruii, 2017: 158-157; Grenet, 1990:560).

The burial diversity in this period, on the other hand, could be related to the existence of different religious communities across the empire, perhaps resulting in turn from the existing class division. Therefore the Christian, Jew, Manichaeon, Buddhist as well as other components that coexisted in the society were probably responsible for the archaeologically attested diversity in burial practices (Shearbaaf and Nazari, 2017: 175-174). The burial types recorded in different parts of the empire include the following:

1-Simple pit burials or inhumation, recorded at Tell Malian, Qumis, near al-Hirah, Iraq (Trumpelmann, 1993: 35-36; Balcer, 1978:90-99), the Kangelo fort in Savad Kuh, Mazandaran (Surtiji, 2011: 83), Shoghab of Bushehr (Toufighian and Bastani, 2017: 22), Haftavan Tepe (Burney, 1972: 142; Burney, 1970, 1972, 1973), Tell Songor and Tell Songor B in southern Hamrin, Iraq (Kamada & Ohtsu, 1988: 149-150; Yokoyama & Matsumoto, 1990:185), and Kushano-Sasanian cemetery of Teppah Kalae, Kandahar (Shaffar & Hoffman, 1976: 133-37).

2-Cairn burials, examples attested at Qasr-i Abu Nasr, Shiraz (Whitcomb, 1985: 210-216); Aseman Gar, Naser Abad, Dugan Bisheh Zard, Madovan Cemeteries, Tell Siah in Fasa, and the cemetery of Kuh Rahmat Mountain (Mohammadifar and Amini, 2015: 192-188).

3-Astodan burials, which are more common in the Fars region. The type is divided into the following four subtypes (Mohammadifar and Amini, 2015: 192):

A-Jar (vat) astodan, reported from Shoghab district of Bushehr (Toufighian and Bastani, 2017: 22; Toufighian *et al.*, 2011:3), Tell Songor and Tell Songor B in southern Hamrin, Iraq (Kamada & Ohtsu, 1988: 149-150), the Nuzi region of

North Mesopotamia (Starr, 1939:357); Busher (Farjamirad, 2016:301-303), and Lian (Simpson & Molleson, 2014: 81, Pl.2).

B-Coffin-shaped astodan, found at Lian, Bushehr (Simpson & Molleson, 2014: 81, Pl. 3).

C-Rock astodan, which in turn splits into four classes, including: "rock niches or cavities" represented in Zaqeh Mountains (Stronach, 1966: Pl XXVII, Figure. 21), and Kuh Rahmat Mountain, Zidoun, Sarvy, and Ayuob (Raisi Gahruii, 2017: 160); "stone pits" recorded at Kuh Hussein, the foothill of Kuh Gandashlu, and Kuh Shahrak (Stronach, 1966: Pl XXVI, Figure.18, Pl. XXIV, Figure 14-15, PL. XIX, Figure 5), and at such regions as Bishapur, Siraf, Kerman, and northwest Iran (Mohammadifar and Amini, 2015: 194-193); "open pit burials," found at Bishapur, Dorudzan, and Shahrak Mount (Mohammadifar and Amini, 2015: 195); and finally, "open pit columns" identified at Nagsh-e Rostam, Qanat Baaq, and Tang Garm (Mohammadifar and Amini, 2015: 196).

4-Tower of Silence or Crypt, with published examples of Qumis (Hansman and Stronach, 1970: 150,155), Cham crypt, Mountain crypt, Ardakan crypt in Yazd Province, Koumesh and Bandian Dargaz, Tehran, and Kerman (Mohammadifar and Amini, 2015: 199, Trumpelmann, 1993: 29, Figure. 3).

Newly Found Sasanian Burials in Darreh Shahr *Rock Astodan of Dol Dol*

The rock burial or astodan of Dol Dol is about 5km from the Fazel Abad village of Darreh Shahr, in a deep valley of the Kabir Kuh, at latitude 33°11'40" and longitude 47°14'26.66" with an altitude of 976 m above sea level (Map1, Figure 3). The niche-shaped astodan of Dol Dol is plain, lacks any inscriptions, and measures 1.2 m long, 0.5 m wide and 5 m deep. The interior space is smooth. On the main structure of this astodan, toothed chisel marks are still evident in the form of carving lines, which are attested for the first time in the reign of Darius I in southwestern Iran (Mollazadeh, 2014: 341). On the left wall of this astodan and close to its roof, irregularly shaped cavities were cut measuring ca. 15 × 30 cm, with a depth of about 10 cm, at 80 cm intervals. The inner spaces of these cavities are so rugged that makes it almost impossible to deposit within it any objects, including bones (Figure 4). Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain their function at the moment. A short distance from this astodan,

there is a spring, the great water discharge of which is today used by local nomads. On the basis of the results of a field survey within Dol Dol canyon, it is hypothesized that this spring played an important role in antiquity in facilitating human settlements, and was perhaps be the main factor in the creation of the astodan there.

on the statements of the locals, the related sites once contained an abundance of human bone remains, which are now disappeared due to the lack of protection and unawareness of the locals, who reused them in functions related to livestock and animal husbandry. Most of these sites are clustered on the western wall of the Zayed Strait, facing

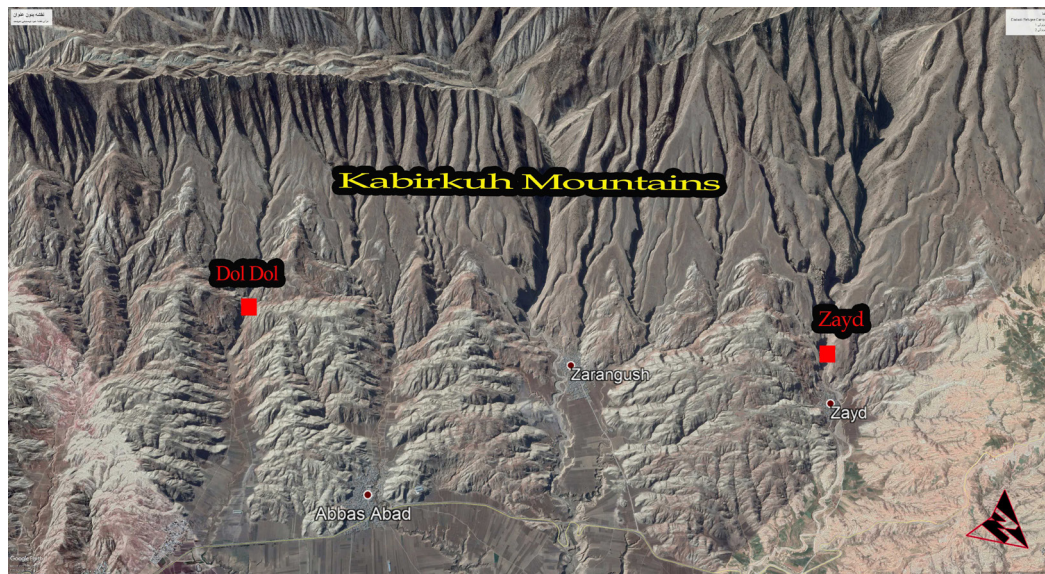


Figure 3: Geographic location of the astodan of Dol Dol and astodans of Zayed Strait in Darreh Shahr (Depicted from Google Earth 21/07/2018)



Figure 4: The rock niche of Dol Dol

Rock Astodans of Zayed Strait

Crypt burials of the Zayed Strait are in the southern part of the village of Zayed, on the border of the two counties of Badreh and Darreh Shahr, at latitude $33^{\circ}14'41.09''$, longitude $47^{\circ}11'8.36''$, rising 724 m above sea level (see Figure 3). Based

the sun. These sites feature geometrical shapes of different sizes. Yet, the majority of them have a simple structure, without any decorations but with an inner burial space. They somehow resemble rock niches, carved in different depths and sizes into the wall of the strait (Figure 5). With the local statements notwithstanding, given the lack of cultural evidence within and around these sites as well as their large number in the region, any hypothesization regarding the use of such sites requires detailed archeological investigations. In the preliminary investigations, cultural evidence was observed in only two of these sites, an outline of which follows.

These burial spaces are mostly located in the southern half of the Zayed Strait's western wall. Here, within the cliff incision, there are numerous juxtaposed spaces, with evidences of wall cutting, surface smoothing and a small gypsum wall to block the entrance. Within an almost intact example, there are two stone cavities cut in different dimensions of 1×0.5 m and 0.3×0.8 m in the form of an east-west oriented rectangle. Sadly, it was devoid of any cultural evidence due to clandestine excavations (Figure 6). The opening of these spaces was blocked by stone and plaster.



Figure 5: Structures resembling rock niches at Zayed Strait reused by herders



Figure 6: Interior of the rock niches and burial cavities

In a different part of the strait was spotted another example with a nearly identical structure. In the middle interior of these rock niches, a slippershaped depression is visible with approximate dimensions of 1×0.5 m and an approximate depth of 35 cm, orienting north-south (Figure 7).

Pottery Finds

As a result of disturbance and destruction, few sherds were found in these ossuaries. Based on the morphology of the four attested rims, the pottery fragments from the Zayed represent the following forms: jar with constricted mouth, jar with open mouth, open bowl, and large bowl.

Jars (Figure. 8)

Jar with constricted mouth (ZS:01)

This piece is wheelmade in a gray paste with mineral temper. This poorly fired fragment of medium quality bears a brown slip and lacks any sort of decorations. Possible related material occurs at Kurshahi-Shami Ko Abdanan (Habibi, 2017: Figure: 41) and in the Sassanian assemblages from northeastern Iran (Labaf-Khaniki, 2009: Figure:12:38).

Jar with open mouth (ZS:02)

This medium quality sherd in a red paste is wheelmade, plain, mineral-tempered, well-fired, and buff-slipped. It is paralleled at Qale-ye Seyram Shāh (Mohammadifar and Tahmasebi, 2014: Figure.14), Farsan city (Habibi and Heydari Babakmal, 2014: Figure.3:4) and Mahnesan Zanjan (Khosrowzadeh and Aali, 2005:Figure:15:4).

Bowls (Figure. 9)

Open Bowl (ZS:03)

This is a wheelmade fine fragment in a buff paste with mineral temper. The firing is adequate and a slip was applied, but no decorations exist. It

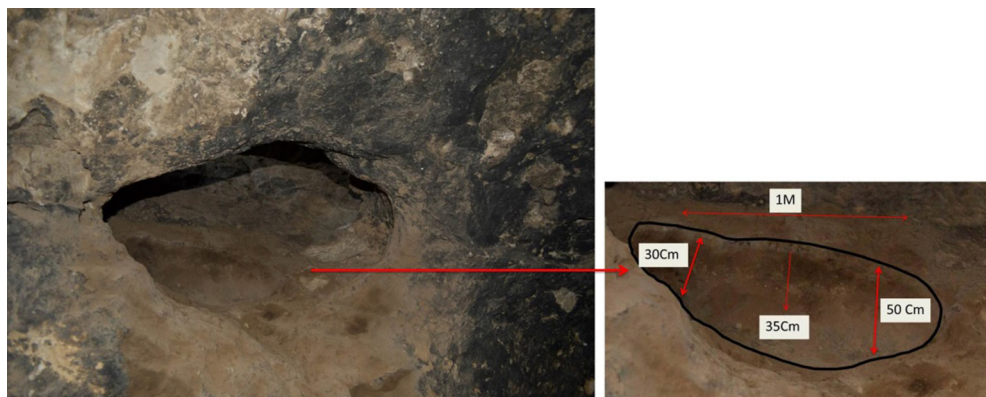


Figure 7: The hole cut within the rock niches of Zayed Strait

compares with examples from Qasr-i Abu Nasr (Whitcomb, 1984: Figure 3: i), the Sonqor-o Kolyaie plain (Sarikhani *et al.*, 2016: Figure 5), and Telur Abdanan (Habibi, 2017: Figure: 25:1).

Large bowl (ZS:04)

Again a plain, wheelmade, mineral-tempered and well-fired piece in medium quality, it is in a red paste with a buff slip on the exterior. Parallels occur in the assemblages from Qale-ye Seyram Shāh (Mohammadifar and Tahmasebi, 2014: Figure: 14), Mahneshan Zanzan (Khosrowzadeh and Aali, 2005: Figure. 14:5) and the Gorgan Wall (Priestman, 2013: Figure 18 :13. F, g).

Also present in the small assemblage from Zayed

Strait (Figure 10) is a ring base fragment (ZS05) in a red clay. This mineral-tempered, wheelmade, medium-quality and well-fired piece is paralleled at Qale-ye Seyram Shāh (Mohammadifar and Tahmasebi, 2014: Figure: 209 SS 25) in Seymareh. The assemblage is rounded out by two wheel-made, well-fired and unslipped pieces in a buff paste with mineral temper, decorated with a rope motif (ZS07) and incised lines (ZS06). The piece ZS07 shares comparisons with the material from Yazdgerd Castle (Keall and Keall, 1981: Figure. 27.3), and Qale-ye Seyram Shāh (Mohammadifar and Tahmasebi, 2014: 35: SS295), while the sole known comparandum to ZS06 comes from Yazdgerd Castle (Keall and Keall, 1981: Figure. 3.1.1).

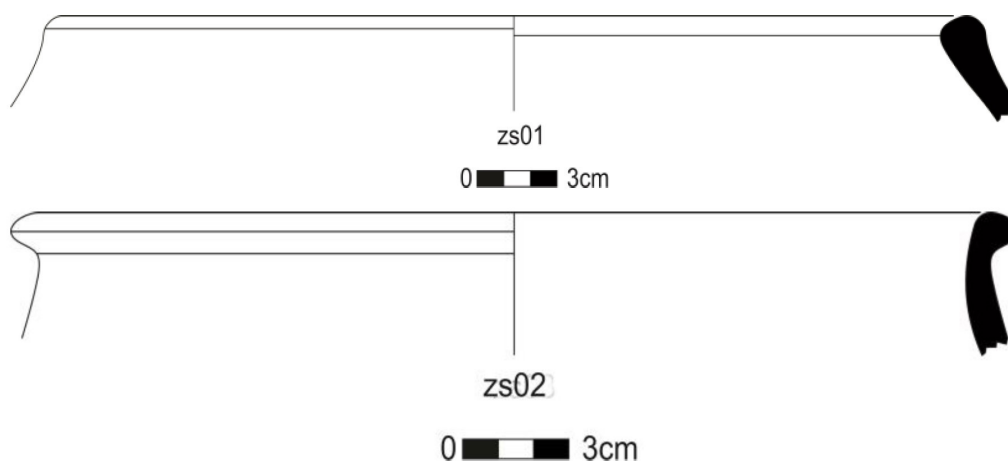


Figure. 8: Pottery jars from Zayed Strait

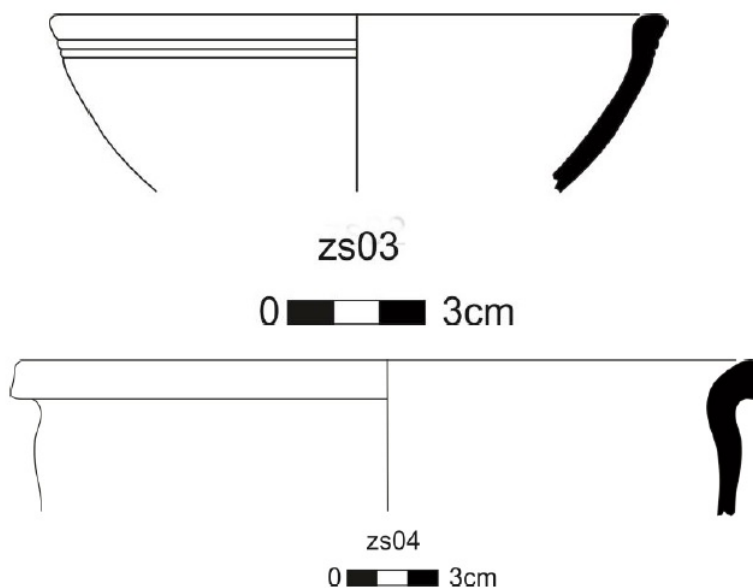


Figure. 9: Pottery bowls from Zayed Strait

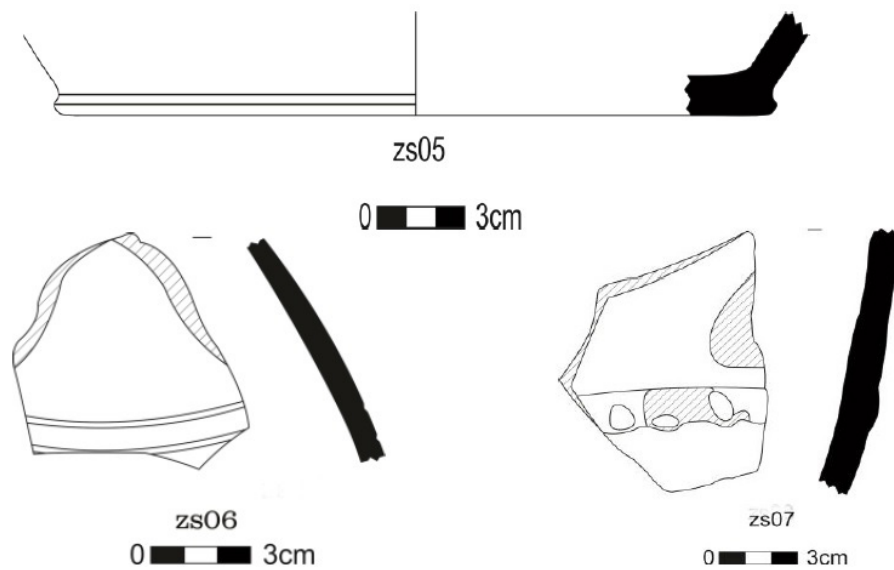


Figure 10: Pottery sherds (a base and two wall fragments) from Zayed Strait

Discussions

The Sasanian period witnessed the conversion of Iranians to Zoroastrianism on a much larger scale than the previous centuries (Wiesehöfer, 1998: 247). The Zoroastrian clergy regarded water, wind, soil and fire as sacred elements not to be contaminated with dead bodies. Hence, corpses were disposed of on high structures called Tower of Silence, where carnivorous birds would eat their flesh and leave their bare bones, which were then collected and placed within rock-cut crypts or astodans (Razmjou, 2012: 337). This burial type was more common in the Fars region, and scholars divide it into four groups of stone niche, stone pit, open rock astodan, and open rock pillar (Mohammadifar and Amini, 2015: 192). A large number of rock-cut niches have been identified in Zaqeh Mountain (Stronach, 1966: Pl XXVII, Figure. 21), Kuh-e Rahmat, and Zidoun (Raisi Gahruii, 2017: 160), Jareh Dam (Sharifi, 2009: 54-51), and several other localities. Carved into rock walls, these niches (crypts) are in the form of a square or rectangular. Their dimensions vary in different regions of Iran, and they are either undecorated or exhibit simple ornamentations and inscriptions in Pahlavi script. They generally date to the late Sasanian and early Islamic periods (Mohammadifar and Amini, 2015: 193-192, Figure. 11).

These burials are almost identical to rock-cut graves identified at Zayed Strait in the Jareh Dam of the Ramhormoz region of Khuzestan (Sharifi, 2009:

9). Some scholars discredit the interpretation of these burials, having their roots in the Achaemenid and earlier periods, as astodans. In fact, these graves were made of rock and, thereby, kept bodies in a way that prevented contamination of the sacred elements (Razmjou, 2012: 340). Yet, given the shared enrooted Zoroastrian belief enjoining the caring of the sacred elements and the shift to rituals in the form of ossuary and rock tombs, it appears that such burials can be considered a kind of ossuary with different burial rites aimed at preserving the sanctity of the sacred elements. In addition, there are many instances in different regions of rock niches identical to those found in Zayed Strait and Fazel Abad in the Seymerah valley. As already stated, this type of niche graves are attested not only in Fars Province (Kuh-e Hossein, Kuh-e Rahmat, Zeidun Mount, Ayoub Mount, Sarvy Mount, Zaqeh Mount, Sar Mashhad) but also in Khuzestan (Behbahan and Jareh) and Siraf (Shearbaaf and Nazari, 2017: 168). In the course of the surveys of the areas to the south of Kuh-e Hossein and to the east of Naqsh-e Rostam, three pairs of rock niches were identified along with nine inscriptions in Pahlavi scripts. As indicated by the inscriptions, these niches were used for burial as the term “crypt” occurs explicitly in the texts and corresponds to the Sasanian Zoroastrian terminology (Shearbaaf and Nazari, 2017: 168). The clustering of rock niches with Pahlavi inscriptions in Fars Province seems to point to a sort of social ranking, the greater influence of Zoroastrian beliefs

among the local inhabitants, and the compulsion imposed on them as a result of their being in the Sasanian belief center, i.e. Fars province. But in other parts of Sasanian Iran, more distant from the religious and doctrinal center, i.e. Fars province, rock niches, as an optional burial type alongside several others, were favored due to environmental conditions, that is, the mountainous environment. For example, the presence of mountains such Kabir Kuh in the Seymareh valley provided the possibility for the use of rock niches.

Conclusions

Drawing on a comparative study of the rock-cut astodans of Dol Dol and Zayed Strait, examples of which also occur elsewhere in Iran, and a comparative pottery analysis, one may argue that the burials in the Seymareh valley most probably date to the Sasanian period. In light of historical and archaeological studies, this burial type was among the most popular practices during the Sasanian period, inspired by Zoroastrian beliefs and intended to prevent the consecrated elements such as soil and air from being contaminated. This chronological attribution is further strengthened by the results of archaeological studies, which reveal that the majority of human settlements in the concerned region relate to the Sasanian period. On the other hand, the mountainous climate of the Seymareh valley encouraged a mortuary custom in the form of rock-cut astodan (niche), as was the case in the Fars region. Therefore, it seems that in the imminent fieldwork in the Seymareh valley, the rock-cut astodan burials will be more prospective than any other burial practices of the Sasanian period. Undoubtedly, future archaeological work will provide a more complete picture of the burial customs in the Seymareh valley, and will indicate the confirmation or refusal of the hypotheses advanced in this paper.

Acknowledgment

The authors appreciate the referees' insightful criticism, which helped to improve the manuscript.

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