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## Cairn Burial of the historical period around Khansaar dam, Toujerdi district of Fars province, Iran

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**Abstract:** *In the historical period, the Fars region in Iran was one of the most important cultural areas in the world, and it is considered the origin of the ancient Achaemenid and Sasanian empires. Although some areas of Sarchahan county have been studied well, no archaeological survey has been conducted there until the construction of Khansaar Dam and rescue operations in its area. As part of an archaeological survey in the Toujerdi district of Sarchahan county, 92 cairn burials were found. According to the survey conducted in five areas around Khansaar Dam, the distribution of cairn burials, commonly known as Khereftkhaneh, has been identified. From Pakistan to the west of Iran, this type of burial method can be observed, and the burials of Toujerdi region can be considered associated with burials from the Parthian and Sasanian periods.*

**Key words:** Archaeology, Iran, Fars, Parthian, Sasanian, cairn Burial, Khereftkhaneh

### Introduction

During the historical period, the Fars province has always attracted political and religious attention. Vanden Berghe introduced some burials from this period following his archaeological activities in Fars.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Trümpelmann conducted research on the graves and burial rituals of the Sasanid period, based on burials at Fars.<sup>2</sup> As a result of Huff's research, more burials have been identified in this province.<sup>3</sup> It was in Jafari's thesis<sup>4</sup> that he addressed the burials of Rahmat Mount. Moreover, Nasrollahzadeh has translated some grave inscriptions.<sup>5</sup> The burials of the

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<sup>1</sup> Vanden Berghe, 1953.

<sup>2</sup> Trümpelmann, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Huff, 1992; 1998; 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Jafari, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Nasrollahzadeh, 2006; 2020; Nasrollahzadeh & Mohammadi, 2012.

historical period in the south of Iran were studied by Farjamirad.<sup>6</sup> The burial of historical eras of Bavanat region has also recently been discussed by Khanipour and Kavosh.<sup>7</sup>

There has been a significant amount of research conducted on the burial ritual and burial sites of the historical period of Fars, but none of them has mentioned province the burial places of the historical period of Toujerdi region. In addition, Sarchahan County is of particular significance because it is geographically located province in the north-east of Fars, with a mountainous landscape that ends in desert terrain. Archaeological surveys conducted in this county in 2020 revealed the presence of historical burials. In this area, archaeological surveys have identified numerous settlements from the historical period, most of which date back to the Sasanid period. In line with other regions of Fars, it appears that Sarchahan was part of the Sasanid empire, as we observe an increase in settlements and, consequently, a rise in population. As a result of the mentioned cases and the importance of rituals and burial rituals during the Parthian and Sasanid periods, these questions can be posed. As a result of the diversity of burial structures in Fars during this period, how were burial structures built during the Parthian and Sasanid periods in the Toujerdi region and what characteristics did they possess? In the context of Fars, how can these burial methods be explained? Given the importance of the topic and the questions raised in this article, this article attempts first to examine the structure of these types of burials based on the findings of the study conducted by the authors, and then to identify the rituals and burial structures of this region by comparing them with those of other regions.

### **Sarchahan county**

As far as political division is concerned, Sarchahan county used to be one of three parts of Bavanat county until 2018, but this year it became a separate county that includes three districts, Markazi, Bagh Safa, and Toujerdi. The Toujerdi district is located in the southern part of this county [Fig. 1], the Khatam County is located on the east side, and the Neyriz county is located on the west side. As a mountainous region with intermountain plains, this region has relatively sufficient water resources and a relatively cold and dry climate. In this region, the Azam River is the most important water resource, which played a significant role in the development of settlements and is now the site of the Khansaar Dam.

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<sup>6</sup> Farjamirad, 2015a; 2015b; 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Khanipour & Kavosh, 2022.



Fig. 1. Geographical location of Toujerdi

### **Archaeological surveys of Sarchahan**

On the border of Fars and Yazd provinces, Khansaar Dam provides drinking water for the county of Herat and a portion of the water needed for agriculture and industry in the region. The dam reservoir is located in the Toujerdi district of Sarchahan county. In response to a request from the regional water company of Yazd province for historical and cultural studies in the area of the dam, the Iranian Center for Archaeological Research has been asked to conduct an archaeological survey of this area. As a result of the lack of systematic archaeological survey in this region, a survey was required in order to identify and introduce all the sites related to the various cultural periods. It was therefore the author (and his collaborators) responsibility to identify all cultural sites in the region in the first step. In addition to the area around the dam and the water supply in Fathabad village in Khatam county, the Toujerdi village was also investigated for protection and research purposes. A drainage of the dam and improvement of water resources will certainly result in the growth of agriculture and related constructions. Since a survey has not been conducted in this district, there is the possibility that cultural sites will be destroyed.

Therefore, by identifying all cultural works, their destruction can be prevented. Stein, who had conducted surveys in different regions of Iran in the 1930s, passed through this county for the first time and speculated briefly on the advantages of Bavanat.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that in 2014, the author conducted a survey of the Bavanat<sup>9</sup> and only visited Tol-e Nevie in Toujerdi. He also excavated Hormangan.<sup>10</sup> As mentioned, in order to investigate endangered historical monuments in the area of Herat Dam, a survey was conducted in the Toujerdi district of Fars province and in a small area of Khatam county of Yazd, which identified 101 sites in the Toujerdi district and 8 sites in the Yazd province. The sites include ancient sites, cairn burials from historical periods, Islamic castles, mills, and Islamic cemeteries, as well as slag and qanat sites. The first traces of human settlement in this area date back to the Neolithic<sup>11</sup> era, and the most recent ones date back to the Qajar era.

### **Burials of the Parthian and Sasanid periods in the area of Khansaar Dam, Toujerdi**

The diversity of burial structures in Fars raises the question of what type of burial structures were used by the people of Sarchahan during the historical period. As a result of the survey, cairn burials and Khereftkhaneh burials were identified. Cairn Burial are found in surveys of the south [Fig. 2]<sup>12</sup> and southeast Iran,<sup>13</sup> Kuhrang in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari,<sup>14</sup> Pakistan,<sup>15</sup> UAE,<sup>16</sup> Yemen,<sup>17</sup> Saudi Arabia<sup>18</sup> and Oman.<sup>19</sup>

There are two types of cairn burials: cylindrical and stone pile. Graves such as these are typically found on rocky or soily areas of mountains. These graves are often associated with settlement sites that are nearby.<sup>20</sup> These graves are dated primarily based on their contents, including pottery, metal, stone, glass, and other cultural materials.

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<sup>8</sup> Stein, 1936.

<sup>9</sup> Khanipour, *et al.*, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Khanipour, Niknami & Abe, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> However, during a visit to one of the caves in this city, evidence of the upper Paleolithic/Epipaleolithic period was identified.

<sup>12</sup> Stein, 1937: 240-1; Sarlak & Nowrozi, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Stein, 1937; Lamberg-Karlovsky & Humphries, 1967; De Cardi, 1959; Sajjadi, 1989; Basafa, 2008; Hashemi Zarjabad, *et al.*, 2015; Khosrowzadeh, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Roustaei, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Besenval, 1997: 30; Ali Kalhor, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Haerinck, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Harrower, *et al.*, 2013: 264, Fig. 22.4.

<sup>18</sup> Reeler, Al-Shaikh & Potts, 2009: 352, Fig. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Yule & Weisgerber, 1998: 149, Fig. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Khosrowzadeh, 2007.



Fig. 2. Distribution map of cairn burials at south and southeast of Iranian plateau (after Lamberg-Karlovsky & Humphries, 1967)

In Fars province, this type of burial has been found in Darab and Fasa,<sup>21</sup> in Baghan and Kavar,<sup>22</sup> in Rahmat Mount,<sup>23</sup> Tange Bolaghi,<sup>24</sup> Firouzabad<sup>25</sup> and Bvanat<sup>26</sup> have been reported. A survey conducted in the vicinity of Khansaar Dam identified these graves in five areas [Fig. 3]. The local people of Fars refer to these types of graves as Khereftkhaneh, even though these graves are commonly referred to as Dambi and cairn burials. According to the people of Fars, during migrations in the past, these structures were built on top of mountaintops, and old people who could not migrate left with some food in them, so they could live for a time inside and then they died. Today, it is clear that these structures were constructed for burial purposes. As a part of this research, their local names are used, which will be discussed in the following section.

<sup>21</sup> Stein, 1936: 158.

<sup>22</sup> Stein, 1936: 114.

<sup>23</sup> Jafari, 2007; Gotch, 1971: 162-3.

<sup>24</sup> Stronach, 1978.

<sup>25</sup> Nowrozi, 2005: 321.

<sup>26</sup> Khanipour & Kavosh, 2022.

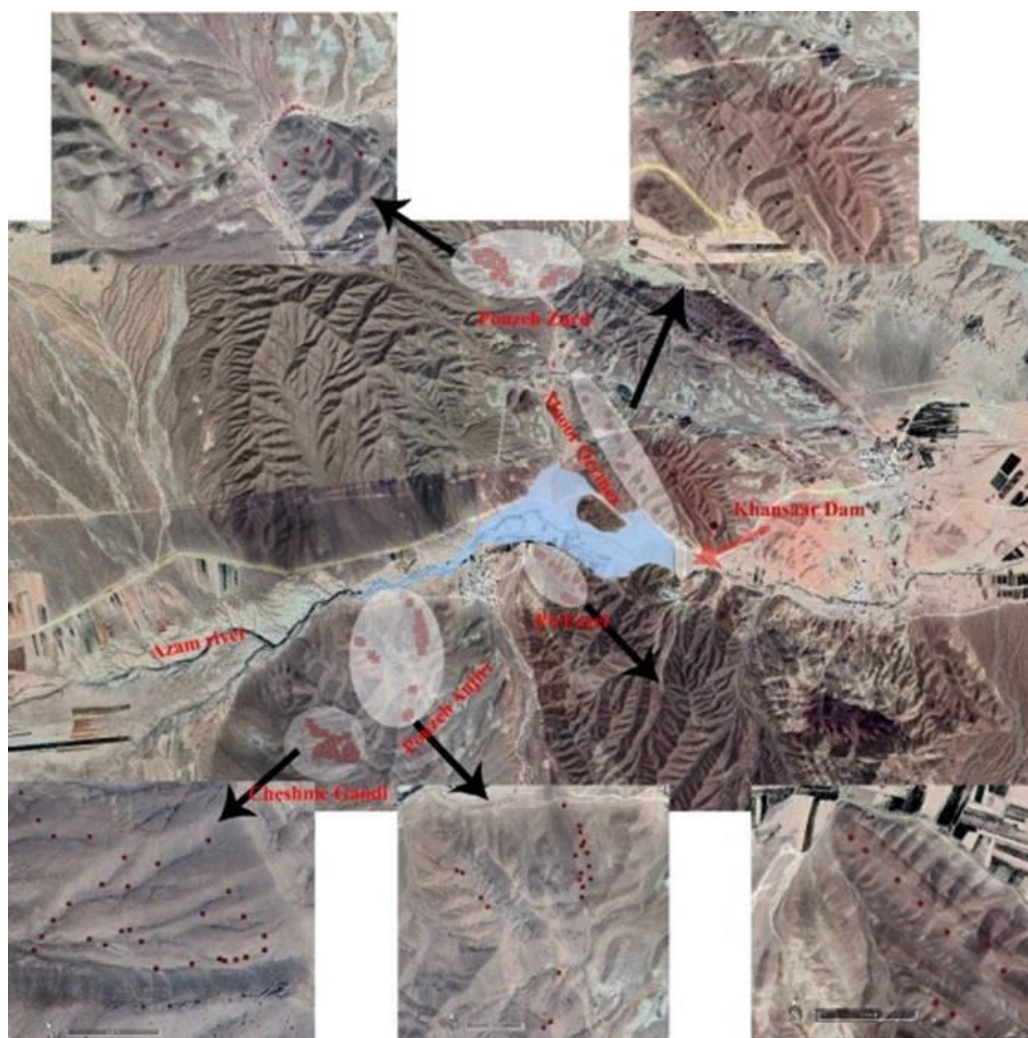


Fig. 3. Distribution of burials in relation to Khansaar Dam (photo by M. Khanipour)

### *Maoor Qermez Cairn Burial*

On the northern side of the dam, on the heights of the Maoor Qermez mountain, is the complex of Maoor Qermez graves located 1900 meters north-east of Borazjan village. There were 12 cairn burials identified in this collection, all of which were built on the peak using the carcasses of mountain stones. These graves all have circular plans and, unfortunately, since the structures of the graves have been destroyed and tampered with, the actual height of none of them can be determined. Graves are located in an area of  $200 \times 2400$  meters and at an average height of 2005 meters above sea level [Figs. 3, 4].



Fig. 4. Burial No. 12 of Maoor Qermez (photo by M. Khanipour)



Fig. 5. Burial No. 7 of Pouzeh Zard (photo by M. Khanipour)

### ***Pouzeh Zard Cairn Burial***

On the northern side of the Maoor Qermez, is the complex of Pouzeh Zard graves located 3500 meters north of Khansaar Dam. There were 20 cairn burials identified in this collection, all of which were built on the peak or slope using the carcasses of mountain stones. These graves all have circular plans and, unfortunately, since the structures of the graves have been destroyed and tampered with, the actual height of none of them can be determined. Graves are located in an area of 400 × 1400 meters and at an average height of 2036 meters above sea level [Figs. 3, 5].

### ***PirFazel Cairn Burial***

On the summit of PirFazel, the mountain between the top of the dam and Borazjan village, there are ten cairn burials that were built on top of the summit using the carcasses of mountain rocks. These graves are all circular in plan, and unfortunately, as a result of the destruction and alteration of the structures, the actual height is unknown for any of them. Graves are located in an area of 120 by 700 meters with an average height of 1970 meters above sea level [Figs. 3, 6].

### ***Pouzeh Anjiri Cairn Burial***

Pouzeh Anjiri graves are located 2400 meters west of Borazjan village, 3300 meters east of Bandeno village, on the northern slope of Kahtu mountain, known as Pouzeh Anjiri. In this collection, 20 cairn burials were identified, all of which were built on the peak or slope and using the carcasses of the mountain stones in the form of a dry pick. The plans of these graves are all circular and unfortunately due to the destruction of the graves, the actual height of none of them is known. The graves are located in an area of 130 x 100 meters and have an average height of 2001 meters above sea level [Figs. 3, 7-8].

### ***Cheshme Gandi Cairn Burial***

Cheshme Gandi Burials are located 2100 meters southwest of Borazjan village, 4100 meters east of Bandeno village, and on the slopes of Kahtu Mountain north of Cheshme Gandi. A total of 30 cairn burials were identified in this collection, which were all constructed with the remains of mountain rocks, and were all situated on the slope of four parallel valleys. All of these graves have circular plans, and unfortunately, because the structures of the graves have been destroyed, the actual height of none of them is known. This cemetery is located in an area of 500 by 300 meters and has an average height of 2073 meters above sea level [Figs. 3, 9].





Fig. 6. Burial No. 10 of Pir Fazel (photo by M. Khanipour)



Fig. 7. Burial No. 7 of Pouzeh Anjiri (photo by M. Khanipour)



Fig. 8. Burial No. 11 of Pouzeh Anjiri (photo by M. Khanipour)



Fig. 9. Burial No. 9 of Cheshme Gandi (photo by M. Khanipour)

## Discussion

Since this type of burial is widely distributed geographically, many attempts have been made to date these graves. In the past, grave contents inside the cemeteries were destroyed and looted, which makes dating these cemeteries difficult. In addition, surface material cultures surrounding these sites are rarely found or are very few and undiagnosable. As a result, it has been difficult and even impossible to date some of these sites.<sup>27</sup> According to the contents obtained from the excavations, these graves belong to the 3rd millennium BC,<sup>28</sup> Iron Age,<sup>29</sup> Parthian<sup>30</sup> and Sasanian<sup>31</sup> are dated.

It should be noted that during the excavations that took place in the Fars tombs that were dated to the Parthian and Sasanian periods, it is possible to reasonably date the tombs located in Toujerdi, as well, by comparing the excavated samples. As part of his exploration of several graves in the Bisheh Zard region of Fars, Stein discovered a coin associated with Yazdgerd III in one of the graves. The coin and other findings indicate that this cemetery was constructed during the Sasanid period during the 7th century CE.<sup>32</sup> Stronach also excavated some cairn burials at Bolaghi during his excavations in Pasargadae. His findings date these graves to the 1st century BC, during the Parthian period. Based on the contents of graves excavated near Qasr-e Abu Nasr, Whitcomb also dated these burials to the end of the Parthian period and the Sasanid period.<sup>33</sup> In some areas, settlements surrounding graves have also been used to date them. There were no settlements identified in the area between the 2nd millennium BC and the beginning of the Achaemenid period during the survey conducted in this area, therefore the assignment to these periods is somewhat problematic. However, since these types of graves can be dated to the Parthian and Sasanid periods in the Fars region and we also see the expansion of settlements in the Tojerdi region during these two periods, the Parthian and Sasanid periods are likely to be attributed to this type of burial in Toujerdi.

Generally, these graves have circular, oval, or polygonal plans. There was no evidence of a polygonal plan in Toujerdi during the survey. Toujerdi burials have a conical or cylindrical stone mass structure composed of small and large stones. These graves are typically round in shape. There is a wide range in diameter between 2.8 meters and 5.70 meters for these graves. Their actual height is not known due to destruction, but the remaining height ranges from 30 to 170 cm. It is unfortunate that

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<sup>27</sup> Khosrowzadeh, 2007: 92.

<sup>28</sup> Jasim, 2003: 86-93.

<sup>29</sup> Benoist, 2008: 37, Fig. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Stein, 1937: 76-7; Stronach, 1978; Jasim, Hamza & Altaweel, 2006: 219; Hashemi Zarjabad, *et al.*, 2015: 95.

<sup>31</sup> Sarlak & Nowrozi, 2017; Stein, 1937: 158-9.

<sup>32</sup> Stein, 1937: 158-9.

<sup>33</sup> Whitcomb, 1985: 216.

all the graves identified in this survey have been looted and there are no intact samples to be found.

### Conclusion

As part of the characteristic of burials during the Parthian and Sasanid periods, these burials have found their own method and characteristics based on the intellectual and religious context of the regions in which they were conducted. Khansaar Dam area surveys revealed the presence of burials in five areas that were buried in a structure known as a granary. This indicates that cairn burials were used in this area where 92 graves were identified from this type of burial. This method is one of the most common burials in a large part of Iran's south and southeast as well as the southern shores of the Persian Gulf and Oman Sea. The foundation stones are laid at the same time a rectangular or oval cube chamber is constructed in the center of the pile of stones, and the body is placed within the chamber and the stones are placed on top of it, which is then covered with rubble. Furthermore, since Khereftkhaneh graves were easy to construct, this type of burial method was the most popular among the general population. Another point to consider is that most cairn burials are located on the slopes or top of the mountain. Through Archaeological field surveys, it is hoped that the burial structures of each region will be identified, thereby providing a comprehensive picture of historical burial practices.

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