Newly-found Evidence of Sasanian Simple Pit Burial at Qaleh Iraj, Pishva, Iran

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One of the most important and, at the same time, the most uncertain subjects related to the Sasanian period is the recognition of common burial customs. Despite great attempts on the part of Zoroastrian religious texts to represent a uniform burial tradition across the whole Sasanian *Irānšahr*, archaeological findings reflect a great deal of variety in burial customs, of which some are as follows: towers of silence (*Dakhma*) and ossuaries (*astōdān*), coffin burial, jar burial, cavity interment, and simple pit burial. Out of these, simple pit burials are the most challenging, given the fact that they apparently stand against Zoroastrian teachings. According to Sasanian religious texts, the burial of the dead in the ground and infecting the soil, a sacred element in the Zoroastrian worldview, is repeatedly condemned and considered as an inexcusable guilt that should be prevented. However, mounting evidence indicates that simple pit burials are frequently observed from all over the Sasanian *Irānšahr*. How could this contradiction be explained? These burials have long been neglected because of being eccentric and divergent from Sasanian common burial traditions. Repeated discoveries of simple pit burials make the reasonable supposition that this phenomenon was not an exception and unusual practice, but a normal and probably common method. One of the instances of such burial is recorded in Qaleh Iraj, in which the corpse is in the crouched position. In the present paper, having investigated some examples of Sasanian-period simple pit burials, the authors describe the Qaleh Iraj case. Finally, the mentioned burial custom during the Sasanian period will be inspected closely. The results indicate that the burial of Qaleh Iraj is one of the lesser-known burial practices associated with architectural space previously reported only from Qumis and Gyaur Kala. In addition, according to the context, the burial of Qaleh Iraj is related to the final settlement phase of the southeastern (SE) gate and, thus, attributable to the late Sasanian period.

Keywords: *Burial Customs, Simple Pit Burial, Sasanian Period, Qaleh Iraj*

Introduction

Various burial traditions belonging to the Sasanian period have been recorded so far. Some of these traditions include towers of silence (*Dakhma*) and ossuaries (*astōdān*), coffin burial, jar burial, and simple pit burial (Farjamirad 2015: 25-32; Huff 2004: 593-630; Trumpelmann 1984: 317-329). Among the mentioned traditions, simple pit burials are the most challenging, given the fact that they apparently stand against Zoroastrian teachings. In *Wīdēwdād* (a collection of texts within the greater compendium of the Avesta), there is widespread criticism centered on the burial of the dead; and one can see attempts to display a uniform burial custom in the whole Sasanian *Irānšahr* (the greater Iran as expressed during the Sasanian period) (Darmesteter 1898: 24). Archaeological evidence, on the other hand, suggests that not only burying the dead (in simple pits) was practiced in the mentioned territory and during the mentioned period, but also it was supposedly a common tradition given its relative high frequency. Examples of such a practice are reported from numerous archaeological sites.

One of the Sasanain archaeological sites in which the burial of the dead has been reported is Qaleh Iraj; located 2km SE of Varamin. The first season

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of excavation in the southeastern gate, through a platform in the center of the gate, resulted in the discovery of a crouched-position burial. Based on this and other data on burying the dead recovered from Sasanian sites, it is now possible to suggest that such a burial tradition was common in Iran during the mentioned period. In this paper, it is attempted to delineate the archaeological data regarding the burial of the dead plus the related religious texts, which propose the appropriate practice. Then, both lines of evidence would be compared together in order to assess their degree of compliance. In addition, the burial of Qaleh Iraj will be described in a separate section, and its archeological importance in the studies related to Sasanian funerary and burial traditions will be examined.

Simple Pit Burials in the Sasanian Iran

One of the Sasanian burial traditions was the burial of the dead in simple pits. One may ask to what religious groups it belongs. Could some of these (if not all) be attributed to Zoroastrian citizens? Unfortunately, it is still impossible to relate this practice to any religion confidently. As mentioned, we only know that the practice of inhumation was quite common across the Sasanian territories. On the other hand, it is emphasized in the Zoroastrian religious texts that they had uniform burial customs. For instance, in *Wīdēwdād*, the Zoroastrian burial practices were described in detail and attempts were made to typify the exposure of the dead in towers of silence as a conventional Zoroastrian tradition during the Sasanian period. Furthermore, the simple inhumation has been deterred frequently; as an instance, "Tell me, thou the holy creator of the physical world, which ground is in great sadness and sorrow in second stage? *Ahuramazdā* answered: "The ground in which the corpses of men and dogs are buried in plenty" (Darmesteter 1898: 24). Another example is when *spitma Zartošt* (Zoroaster) asks *Ahuramazdā*: "O Maker of the material world, thou holy One! Who is that provides satisfaction and greatest joy for the Earth in the first place?" Ahuramazdā replied: "The one who digs out from the ground the highest number of corpses belonging to dogs and men". The discussion further continues: "O Maker of the material world, thou Holy One! Tell me who brings the second-degree joy to the Earth." Ahuramazdā answered: "He who destroys graves more than others, the graves in which the corpses of men and dogs are buried" (Darmesteter 1898: 26).

The mentioned reference of *Wīdēwdād* to inhumation as taboo may implicitly affirm the presence of such practice, indicated by archaeological finds too. On the other hand, *Wīdēwdād* has implicitly indicated that this burial tradition was probably related to some minorities. However, due to the ubiquity of this tradition across Irānšahr, its reference only to some religious minorities looks unrealistic and hard to accept. Nevertheless, at least some of such practices are attributable to the religious minorities in a Zoroastrian-dominated sphere; but to which minorities? Although it is true that the official religion during the Sasanian period was Zoroastrianism, religious minorities such as Christians and Jews especially in the west and Buddhists in the east of Irānšahr were among the most important groups. Despite the fact that there are several accounts mentioning maltreatment with non-Zoroastrian minorities, for instance, in the reigning periods of Warahram V (A.D. 421-439), Yazdegird II (A.D. 439-457), Pērōz I (A.D. 459-484), and Kawād I (A.D. 488-531), such conflicts were likely temporal, and the minorities were considered as accepted members of the community for most of the times (Insoll 1999: 166–200; Simpson 2007: 110–114; Simpson & Molleson 2014). If, as the Sasanian religious texts point out, the inhumation of the deceased was considered a huge sinful act, one may attribute such burials to the minorities more reliably. However, it is not yet safe to attribute all such burials to minorities definitively, especially when we have numerous archaeological reports hinting to the ubiquity of simple pit burials in almost all over the Sasanian territories, from east to west and north to south. Some of these include Pahluj Graveyard in Mirar Kola (Abedini & Khalili 2015), Piš Esbu Kola Cemetery (Abedini & Khalili 2015), Kangelo Castle (Soortijee 2011: 83), and Guilan Sasanian graves (Mousavi 1995; Sono & Fukai 1968) in the northern part of Irānšahr and Tell Malyan (Balcer 1978: 86-92), grave number 88 of Tang-i Bulaghi (Boucharlat *et al.* 2009), and Bastak

(Asadi 2008) in the south. Also, one could name sites such as Qumis (Hansman & Stronach 1970: 148), Gyaur Kala (Simpson & Molleson 2014: 85), Shamshir Ghar in Kandahar (Dupree 1958) in the east and Var Kabud (Vandenberghe 1972: 3-5), Baba Julan (Hasanpour 2012), Bastam (Kroll 1979: 113), Haftvan Tepe (Burney 1970), Abu Skhair (Negro-Ponzi 1972: 214-216), Tell Razuk (Gibson 1981: 81), Top Askar Adel Khatāt (Karim 2014), Yarim Tepe (Reade 1973; Roaf 1984), Tell Tayeh (Reade 1973; Roaf 1984), Tell Mohammed Arab (Roaf 1984), Umm Kheshm (Simpson 1987), Songor (Kamada & Ohtsu 1988), and Tell Mahuz (Negro-Ponzi 1968) in the western parts of Sasanian territories.

Archaeological Description of Qaleh Iraj

Qaleh Iraj, with the geographical coordination of 35:20:30 N and 51:41:06 E, is located 2km SE of Varamin in Pishva County. It lies in the north of Askar Abad Village and south of Yusef Reza Village; and in its eastern and western landscape, one could find Deh Masin and Palang Darreh villages, respectively (Fig. 1). Qaleh Iraj, which is encircled with a huge circuit wall, covers an area of about 190ha; as a result, it is considered the largest walled-archaeological site in Rey region. Surface surveys have yielded potsherds belonging to the Chalcolithic period, Iron Age, as well as Sasanian, Seljuk and Ilkhanid periods. Scattered across the site are architecture-related remains such as bricks, mudbricks, and pieces of decorative stuccos. Unlike the surface finds, excavations yielded only Sasanian period remains, including potsherds, ostraca, and stamped clay pieces. As a result, Qaleh Iraj is considered a single-period (Sasanian) site.

A few archaeological studies have been conducted in Qaleh Iraj so far. E'temad al-Saltanah (A.D. 1843-1893), the well-known man of politics during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (A.D. 1831-1896) is the first ever person mentioning Qaleh Iraj and trying to describe the site, its circuit wall, and other surface finds from archaeological perspective (E'temad al-Saltanah 1988: 181-179). Marcel (A.D. 1844-1920) and Jane Dieulafoy (A.D. 1851-1916) also described a castle in their visit to Varamin, which most probably was the same Qaleh Iraj (Dieulafoy 1887: 142-145). George Curzon (A.D. 1859-1925) also visited Qaleh Iraj and



Fig. 1: *Satellite image of Qaleh Iraj indicating its location in relation to Varamin (After: Google earth, depicted on 14/08/2014)*

described its archaeological ruins (Curzon 1892: 352-53). Additionally, Pézard and Bondoux (1911: 61-3) provided a short report of Qaleh Iraj during a surface survey in Tehran Plain in 1903. The other accounts on Qaleh Iraj include a detailed report authored by Wolfram Kleiss (1987: 292-307) and a short one by Sylvia Anne Matheson (2001: 25).

Mohammadreza Khalatbari (2001: 397-99) also visited Qaleh Iraj during the surface survey of Varamin in 2001 and prepared a general description for the site. In 2002, an archaeological project entitled "Documentation Project of Qaleh Iraj" was conducted by the technical office of the deputy of conservation and restoration of the Cultural Heritage Organization. Directed by Afshin Farzin, the project led to the registration of Qaleh Iraj in the Iranian National Cultural Heritage List in 2003 (Farzin 2002). In an independent paper, Siamak Eskandari (2006: 71-109), a member of the mentioned project, undertook an archaeological appraisal of the site. Mohammadreza Nemati, to whom we owe the main part of our current information on Qaleh Iraj, from the Cultural Heritage Organization of Tehran province also explored the site in the years 2008, 2012, and 2015 (Nemati 2015). Finally, Seyed Mehdi Mousavinia from the University of Tehran dedicated a section of his PhD dissertation to the chronology and function of the site (Mousavinia 2015; Mousavinia & Nemati 2016). One of the most important discoveries made by M. Nemati during the second season of excavations at Qaleh Iraj SE gate was a crouched-position human burial in the central platform of the gate (Figs. 2 & 3). So far, no research has been done on this burial; for that reason, this paper is the first attempt to describe this burial and evaluate the significance of such burials during the Sasanian period.

The Simple Pit Burial of Qaleh Iraj

As a result of four seasons of excavation at Qaleh Iraj under the direction of M. Nemati, four occupational phases of the Sasanian period were identified. During the first season, at the latest (4th) phase of the SE gate area on the central platform of the gate, a burial was unearthed. Buried in crouched position (Figs. 4, 5 & 6), the corpse is placed at the



Fig. 2: *Qaleh Iraj, general view of the SE gate and its central platform (source: Nemati)*

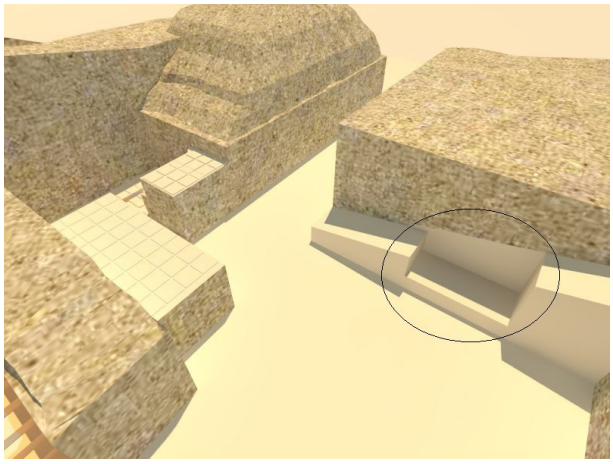


Fig. 3 *Reconstruction of the central platform (Drawing by M. Najafi)*

center of the platform; thus, it is most likely that the main purpose of the construction of the platform was merely burial means. It should be noted that the platform was not built in the first occupational phase; consequently, it is a later feature added to the main gate. Evidence of this addition was clearly observable at the time of excavation in this part (Nemati 2015). Therefore, the authors propose that the platform was probably designed to be a burial section. The mentioned platform contains a 40-centimeter-thick rubble and mud foundation. This substructure is in the fourth phase and is the highest floor discovered at the SE gate of Qaleh Iraj. There was originally a cubic tauf structure upon the foundation. Unfortunately, the structure and its associated burial were destroyed by pot hunters



Fig 4. *General view of the burial in the central platform of the SE gate (Source: M. Nemati)*



Fig 5. *Close-up view of the burial; the placement of head on the tauf structure (Source: M. Nemati)*

before any excavations were begun. Nevertheless, based on estimations, the dimension of the platform was most likely around 40×40×15cm. Scattered on this structure were the remains of ash. Next to these remains, an iron object resembling a scoop was recovered. A similar tauf structure was also excavated on one of the gate rooms, which, according to the director of excavation, functioned as a fireplace. As mentioned repeatedly, an adult crouched-position burial was discovered next to the tauf structure. While facing southwestward, the head was directly rested on the cubic structure. The foot was at a point about 20cm lower than the head. The difference in height between the feet and the head of the deceased indicates that the people who buried the corpse were well aware of the tauf structure on the platform and intentionally placed the corpse's head on it with prior knowledge. Based on this, there was a relationship between the tauf structure and the burial, and they must have been most likely contemporaneous. It seems that at the last phase, after burying the corpse in the platform of the gate, the corpse was covered with back dirt. This point is important because the coverage ensured the continuance of using the SE gate of the castle after

On the one hand, this burial is comparable to other simple pit burials of the Sasanian period in being in fetal-like position and backfilling with dirt. On the other hand, the placement of the deceased in the SE gate is a clear distinction between Qaleh Iraj and other simple pit burials of the Sasanian period. We do not yet know why the deceased was

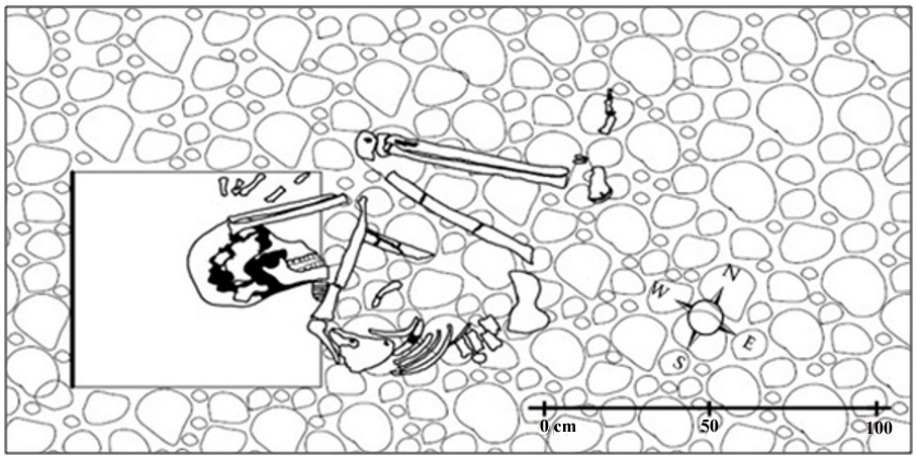


Fig 6. *Plan of the burial; the stone pavement and the tauf structure beneath the head is recognizable (Drawing by: M. Najafi)*

buried supposedly with a special funeral ceremony at this place. The examples of burying the dead in architectural spaces are very rare in Iran during the Sasanian period; comparable examples have been reported from Gyaur Kala and Qumis (Figs. 7 and 8). One of the Sasanian burials from Qumis is recovered from a room. The burial contains 140 pieces of human bones and some associated grave goods. The remains of textile next to the remains imply the corpse was buried with garments at the time of interment. The discovery of a coin belonging to Hormizd IV (A.D. 579-590) in close association to the grave affirms the suggested dating. According to the excavators, the burial was likely done after the desertion of the building at this place (Hansman & Stronach 1970: 148). The Gyaur Kala example comprises two Sasanian burials, one 3/4-year-old child and an adult, placed in between the walls of a castle. It is interesting to note that the surface immediately beneath the corpses was intentionally made very clean and smooth before the interment. In addition, the coins of Shapur II (A.D. 309-79), Bahram IV (A.D. 388-399), or Kavadh (A.D. 488-531) were recorded next to the corpses; hence, they suggested Sasanian dating for the burials. An anthropological analysis has suggested that the corpses were primarily exposed to open air for a period before the secondary interment between the walls of the castle (Simpson & Molleson 2014: 85).

Unlike Qumis, all the cultural materials of Qaleh Iraj including the mentioned burial correspond to the Sasanian period, and so far, no non-Sasanian excavation find has been reported from Qaleh Iraj. As mentioned above, it could be assumed that the platform was built solely for the purpose of the burial of the deceased and, then, was annexed to

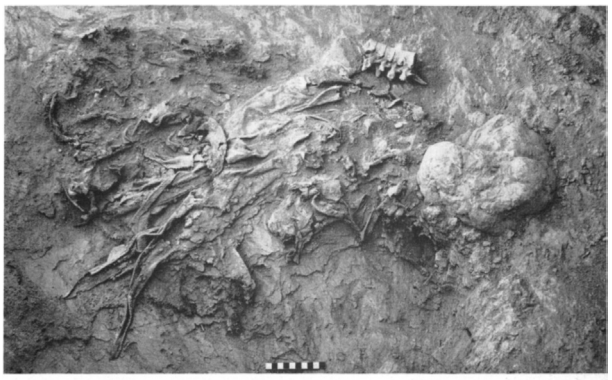


Fig 7. *The Sasanian burial in Qumis (Hansman & Stronach 1970: 153)*



Fig. 8: *The Sasanian burial in Gyaur Kala (Simpson & Molleson 2014: 85)*

the main wall of the gate. The burial is somewhat similar to Gyaur's. Both belong to the Sasanian period and are in crouched position. Additionally, the surface immediately beneath the corpses have been intentionally smoothed and cleaned; the only difference is that smoothing in Qaleh Iraj is done using riverine cobbles. Still, the most important difference between the burials of Gyaur Kala and Qaleh Iraj is the lack of evidence in the latter of the exposure of the corpse to open air. It seems the burial of Qaleh Iraj was a primary one in which the corpse was buried with a special funerary rite. The presence of the tauf structure beneath the head, cobble pavement, and a scoop-like object next to the dead all imply the significance and distinction of Qaleh Iraj burial in Sasanian studies.

Dating Evidence

As mentioned above, excavations in the SE gate of Qaleh Iraj yielded four occupational phases all belonging to the Sasanian period. There is not a single excavation find datable to other periods. The burial belongs to the last phase of the SE gate. In the deposits related to this phase, some Sasanian potsherds and eight ostraca containing late Sasanian Book Pahlavi scripts were recovered (the letters are joined together in this style of writing). Referring to this data adds more precision to our comparative dating. Therefore, having regards to what is mentioned here, the burial of Qaleh Iraj belongs to the later Sasanian period.

Potsherds

Potsherds are among the most important lines of evidence that help excavators to date the burial of Qaleh Iraj. Like the burial itself, these pottery pieces are recovered from the fourth or final occupational phase of the SE gate. Totally, 2,146 pieces were recorded in this phase. Out of these, 10 pieces were selected and described (Fig. 9 & Table. 1).

Ostraca

In the fourth occupational phase of the SE gate, 8 pieces of ostraca have been discovered. They are inscribed using Book Pahlavi scripts (Fig. 10). Based on numismatics and the late Sasanian inscriptions, the oldest possible estimation for the origination and evolving of Book Pahlavi scripts dates back to the early sixth century A.D., contemporary with

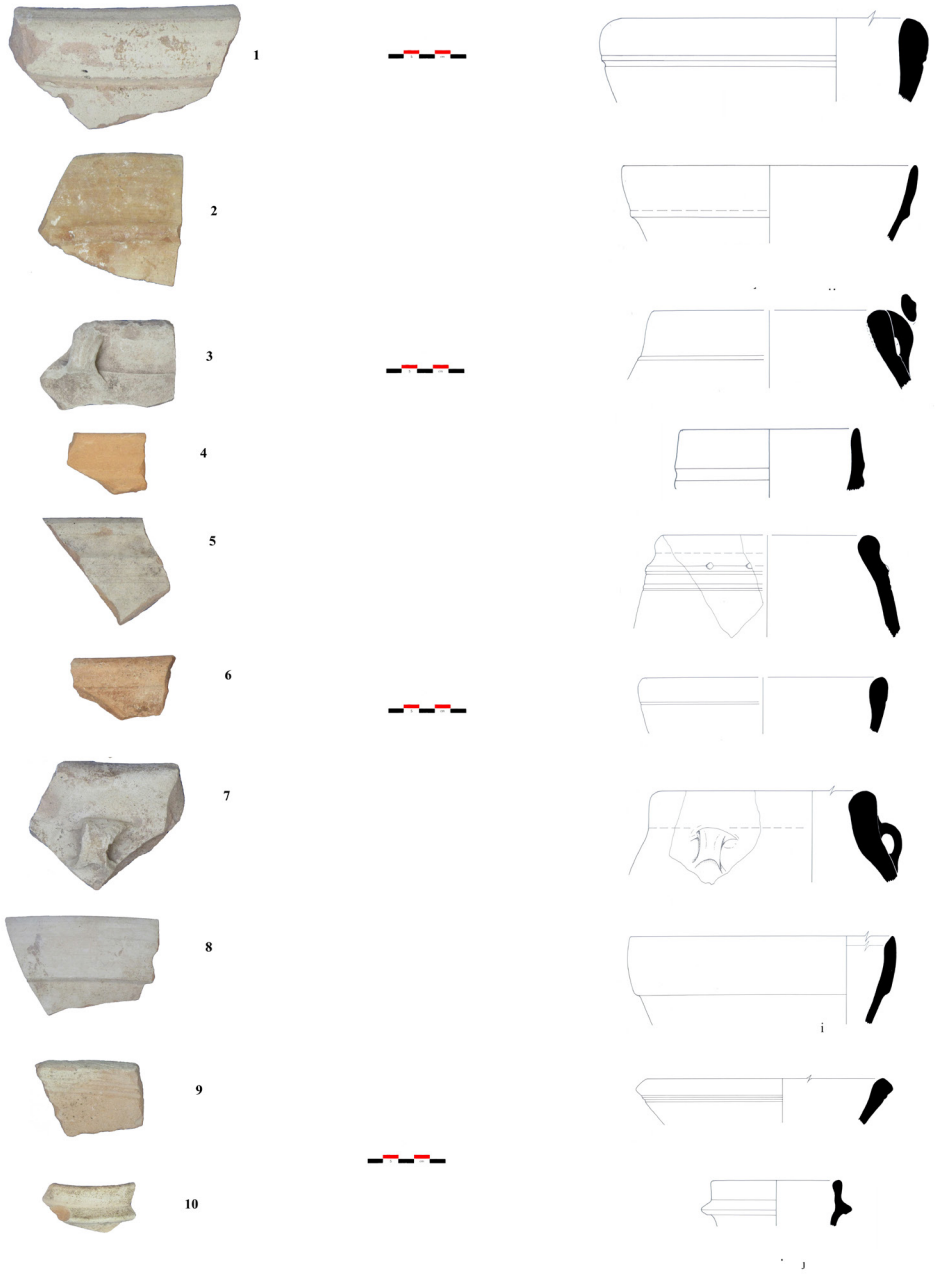


Fig. 9: *Selected potsherds recovered from the 4th occupational phase of the SE gate*

Table. 1: *The description of the selected potsherds shown in Fig. 9*

No.	Description
1	Rim, buff paste covered in a buff thin slip, sand and grit-tempered, coarse, wheel made, incised and grooved decoration, from the 4th occupational phase of the SE gate in the trench BZ 132. Parallel to a piece from Ecbatana (Tajbakhsh & Azarnoush 2013: pl.1, p, u).
2	Rim, red paste coated in a buff thin slip, sand and grit-tempered, well-fired, wheel made, coarse-made, even in section, incised and grooved decoration, from the 4th occupational phase of the SE gate in the trench BZ 132. Parallel to pieces recovered from Atashkouh fireplace and Ecbatana (Rahbar 2000: drawing 27; Tajbakhsh & Azarnoush 2013: pl.1, h, w, y).
3	Rim, buff paste with buff thin slip, sand and grit-tempered, well-fired, wheel made, medium thickness, even in section, grooved and incised decoration, from the 4th occupational phase of the SE gate in the trench BZ 131. Parallel to pieces recovered from Atashkouh fireplace and Ecbatana (Rahbar 2000: drawings 7, 18; Tajbakhsh & Azarnoush 2013: pl.1: r).
4	Rim, red paste with red thin slip, sand and grit-tempered, well-fired, wheel made, medium thickness, even in section, grooved and incised decoration, from the 4th occupational phase of the SE gate in the trench BZ 133. Parallel to a piece recovered from Atashkouh fireplace (Rahbar 2000: drawings 10, 11).
5	Rim, red paste with buff thin slip, soft grit temper, well-fired, wheel made, medium thickness, grooved and incised decoration, recovered from the 4th occupational phase of the SE gate in the trench BZ 131. Parallel to pieces recovered from Atashkouh fireplace and Qaleh-I Yazdegerd (Rahbar 2000: drawings 10, 29; Keall & Keall 1981: fig.9, 38).
6	Rim, red paste with buff thin slip, sand and grit-tempered, well-fired, wheel made, medium thickness, even in section, grooved and incised decorations, recovered from the 4th occupational phase of the SE gate in the trench CA 130. Parallel to pieces recovered from Atashkouh fireplace and Ecbatana (Rahbar 2000: drawing 6; Azarnoush 2013: pl.1: e).
7	Rim, red paste with buff thin slip, grit-tempered, well-fired, wheel made, medium thickness, even in section, recovered from the 4th occupational phase of the SE gate in the trench CA 131. Parallel to a piece recovered from Atashkouh fireplace (Rahbar 2000: drawing 21).
8	Rim, red paste with buff thin slip, sand and grit-tempered, well-fired, wheel made, coarsely-made, even in section, recovered from the 4th occupational phase of the SE gate from the trench CA 131. Parallel to pieces recorded in Ecbatana and Qaleh-I Yazdegerd (Keall & Keall 1981: fig.17: 8, 18; Tajbakhsh & Azarnoush 2013: pl.1: a-b).
9	Rim, buff paste with buff thin slip, sand and grit-tempered, well-fired, wheel made, medium thickness, recovered from the 4th occupational phase of the SE gate in the trench BY 131. Parallel to a piece from Ecbatana (Tajbakhsh & Azarnoush 2013: pl.1: y; Rahbar 2000: drawing 7).
10	Rim, red paste coated in a buff thin slip, fine grit temper, well-fired, wheel made, medium thickness, even in section, from the 4th occupational phase of the SE gate in the trench CA 131. Parallel to pieces recovered from Atashkouh fireplace and Qaleh-I Yazdegerd (Keall & Keall 1981: fig.12: 7-8; Rahbar 2000: drawings 7, 9, 29).



Fig. 10: *Some ostraca recovered from the 4th occupational phase in the SE gate, Qaleh Iraj*

KawādI. It then soon became a very common style of writing (Cereti 2008: 184-190). On the coin obtained from the second reigning period of KawādI, the first evidence of what has been named the midway script (its style is in midway point between Inscriptional and Book Pahlavi) is found alongside inscriptional scripts. On these coins the name of the mint is written with inscriptional alphabet, while the reigning year of the king is in midway script which evolves gradually to Book Pahlavi scripts (Schindel 2004: 383). The results of this evolution are more clearly visible in the coins of Hustraw I (Mochiri 1977: 538), Ohrmazd IV (Gariboldi 2003: tav. V, fig.51), and Hustraw II (Gariboldi 2003: tav. VI, pl.61), in which Book Pahlavi scripts are nearly fully developed. However, the oldest datable Book Pahlavi inscriptions are found in Darband which Harmatta (1996: 82) places them in the 37th reigning year of Khosrow I and Henning (1958: 48) relates them to his 27th reigning year. This script has been in use in Iran until the early Islamic centuries (Cereti 2008: 175-186). However, the discovery of some Sasanian potsherds, in the same deposits that the ostraca have been found indicate the ostraca belong to Sasanian period as well.

Conclusion

Several funeral customs have so far been reported from Sasanian archaeological sites; one of them was the interment of the deceased in simple pit burials. As mentioned, such burials stand against the Zoroastrian teachings of exposure of the dead in open air in towers of silence and avoidance of infecting the sacred soil through the burying of human corpse. In *Wīdēwdād*, there are numerous quotations given by Zoroaster and Ahuramazdā that forbid underground burying of the dead strictly. Unfortunately, the grave goods and other archaeological data associated with these burials have not helped us to deduce the religion and worldviews of the deceased. However, the ubiquity of this tradition and its extensive distribution in most parts of the Sasanian Irānšahr hint to a likely proposition that simple pit burial, apart from the religion of the deceased, was a common funeral tradition during this period. Probably, due to the Zoroastrian explicit accounts which forbid underground burial of the dead, such tradition could be attributable to religious minorities such as the Jews, Christians, and the Buddhists. However, the possibility of attributing this tradition to Zoroastrians should not be strictly set aside; since, apart from the simple pit burials, a limited number of Sasanian burials have so far been recorded.

One of the Sasanian archaeological sites in the Iranian Plateau in which simple pit burial has been recorded from is Qaleh Iraj in Varamin. Despite being dug into ground, the Qaleh Iraj example is different from other simple pit burials of the Sasanian period in that it is considered a burial dug into architectural spaces. In this respect, it indicates similarities to Qumis and Gyaur Kala. In Qaleh Iraj, the upper part of the platform next to the SE gate was paved with cobbles and, then, the head of the deceased was placed on a tauf structure on the platform. In addition, the burial pit was most probably filled with dirt. According to the archaeological data recovered from the SE gate, especially, the potsherds and ostraca, and regarding the discovery of a similar tauf structure near another gate named *Atashkadeh* (fireplace), the burial of Qaleh Iraj belongs to the late Sasanian period.

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