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BURIAL I. PRE-HISTORIC BURIAL SITES

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i. Pre-Historic Burial Sites

The earliest human skeletal remains found in Persia date from before the 8th millennium B.C. They have been excavated at several cave dwelling sites: Hotu Cave (Angel) and Belt Cave (Coon, 1951a, pp. 199-207; 1951b, pp. 81-92; 1952, pp. 231-49), both on the southeastern shore of the Caspian Sea; Behistun (Bīsotūn) Cave (Coon, 1951a, pp. 199-207) near Kermānšāh; and Konjī and Arjana Caves in Luristan. Most of the human remains in these caves seem to have been left where they fell, and it cannot be determined whether or not any of them was buried according to organized procedures; it is therefore not possible to argue that these sites represent the earliest graves in Iran. Between this early cave-dwelling period and the beginning of the historic period the ancient peoples of Iran developed an elaborate and complex set of burial procedures, including preservation of varied grave goods, which provide valuable evidence of their material culture that would otherwise have been lost to modern eyes.

When prehistoric human beings left their cave dwellings to settle on open land, they began to form agricultural communities and to develop visible form and order in their burials. Scientific excavations at such sites as Tepe Sialk

(Sīalk) near Kāšān (Ghirshman, I, pp. 10-11, 44, pls. 10, 24-25), Tepe Hissar (Ḥeṣār) near Dāmḡān (Schmidt, pp. 62-87, figs. 45-60), Tepe Yahya (Yaḥyā) near Kermān (Lamberg-Karlovsky, p. 156, figs. 6, 32), and Zagheh (Zāḡa) in the Qazvīn plain (Negahban, 1973, p. 129) have produced some information about the organization and construction of these early agricultural settlements, including burial customs. The earliest burials were made under house floors; only gradually did burials come to be made outside homes. Eventually a few funerary objects came to be interred with the dead, as early peoples slowly developed belief in an afterlife in which the deceased would have need for such objects.

At Zagheh, a prehistoric agricultural community (with some traces of industrial activity) dated to the 6-5th millennia B.C., a number of burials illustrate some of the earliest funerary practices (Malek, 1988, pp. 10-12). The graves at Zagheh are located within the village. Infants under three years old were buried under the floor of roofed enclosures, which may have been used for either living or storage; sometimes very small infants were placed in holes dug into the walls. No burial objects were found with these skeletons. Adults over fifteen years old were buried in open areas like courtyards or even entirely outside the living quarters, in alleys or other open sites. The bodies were coated with red ocher and were not positioned in any special way. These remains were accompanied by simple ornaments, tools, and small pottery vessels. Many graves were topped by piles of elongated sun-dried bricks. A few instances of very low brick walls aligned in the same way as the bodies beneath are the earliest indications of tomb construction at the site.

This type of burial pattern was also found at Tepe Hissar (Schmidt, pp. 62-87, figs. 45-60), an early village settlement with three main excavated levels dating from the 5th to the 2nd millennium B.C. In Hissar I (5th-4th millennium B.C.) bodies were found under houses, open courtyards, and lanes, as well as in uninhabited areas. They had been placed on their right sides with arms and hands positioned naturally, often in front of the face. Men and women were about equally supplied with funerary gifts, including pottery vessels, copper pins, daggers (for men only), seals or seal-shaped ornaments, and large numbers of beaded necklaces, bracelets, armlets, diadems, belts and anklets, made of gypsum and other materials. These objects were usually placed near the head and upper part of the body. There were no remains of coffins, but in several instances traces of matting and fabric remained, suggesting that bodies may have been wrapped or dressed and that matting lined the floor of the

grave.

By the time of Hissar III (3rd-2nd millennium B.C.) strict rules for positioning body and skull were no longer observed; the arms and hands were still arranged naturally, with a few exceptions: One corpse held an alabaster cup in both hands, and the limbs of another were arranged in a spread-eagled position, apparently deliberately. Among the many objects recovered from graves of the latter part of this period were pottery, metal, and alabaster vessels; ornaments of semiprecious stones; copper wands; seals; and, with the male skeletons, weapons. For the first time, the graves were massed in one area, the first suggestion of a cemetery in Iran.

The clear establishment of a distinct area for burial of the dead, who were surrounded by all the objects needed in the afterlife, can be recognized in the Royal Cemetery at Marlik (Mārlīk) in Gīlān province (Negahban, 1343 Š./1964). At the end of the 2nd and beginning of the 1st millennium B.C. the inhabitants of this area buried their rulers in tombs roughly cut from a stone hilltop; the bodies were surrounded by gold, silver, bronze, pottery, and stone objects, ranging from such simple everyday items as cooking utensils and toilet articles to bronze weapons in vast quantities, elaborate jewelry of gold, silver, and semiprecious stones; figurines and long-spouted ritual vessels of pottery and bronze; and decorated ceremonial vessels of precious metals.

The well-developed burial pattern of the Marlik people is exemplified in tomb 52 (Plate xxx), a fairly large tomb incorporating the large natural boulders of the mound, which were connected by walls of broken stone and clay mortar, faced only on the inner side. At one end lay a long stone slab on which several large daggers and spearheads had been placed, pointing inward. The body, with legs partly contracted, was placed on top of these weapons. Many textile fragments and gold buttons were scattered over the upper torso, indicating that it had been buried in elaborate clothing fastened with gold buttons. Behind the deceased was a gold bowl adorned with designs of gods and goddesses, broken into two pieces. (In other tombs such gold vessels, which seem to have held a sacred liquid, were placed before the mouth of the deceased.) On and around the body there were jewelry of gold and carnelian, shell beads with gold pendants, a gold chain and hair ornament, bronze buttons, and silver loops. In addition to the weapons under the body, there were several bronze mace-heads and many bronze arrow-points of various shapes, with fragments of the leather cover of a bronze quiver. Under the stone slab were fertility figures and vessels of pottery, along with bronze

cymbals, belts, and small tools and equipment. At one side of the tomb were large numbers of simple pottery and bronze vessels, including two large bronze cooking pots containing bird and animal bones with a bronze ladle and a skewer. There were also about two dozen small bronze figurines of animals, both wild and domesticated, and a small bronze model of oxen with yoke and plow. Apparently it was believed that the deceased would need his horse in the afterlife, for a small adjoining tomb contained a set of horse teeth, a bronze bit, and several bronze loops.

Around this Royal Cemetery were a number of burials of ordinary people, similar in type but on a simpler scale. In each the skeleton was laid on its side, with a few simple bronze ornaments and a plain pottery vessel positioned in front of the face.

The practice of burying the dead with a variety of objects that might be needed in the afterlife was known in other parts of Iran as well. Modern knowledge of the culture of Luristan in the 3rd-1st millennia B.C. is almost entirely derived from the elaborate funerary goods found in graves scattered throughout the area (Contenau and Ghirshman; Vanden Berghe, 1982; cf. also Thrane, pp. 27-35; Vanden Berghe, 1971, pp. 263-71).

Another royal burial surrounded by elaborate material remains was excavated at Haft Tepe, an Elamite site of the mid-2nd millennium B.C. on the southern alluvial plain of Ḵūzestān (Negahban, 1355 Š./1977). There, in a large baked-brick tomb with a vaulted roof, the body of the king, along with that of his principal wife, was laid out on a raised terrace. They had been washed with sacred water, covered with red ocher, and left with only a few simple objects. A smaller subsidiary tomb, also of baked brick with a vaulted roof, was tightly packed with several dozen carefully laid-out skeletons, perhaps attendants sacrificed for the burial of their master (Plate xxxi). To serve these tombs a large temple complex had been constructed; the duties of the ministering priests were carefully detailed on stone stelae installed in the courtyard. Throughout the entire complex there were additional burials, both contemporary (in sarcophagi or large jars) and later (unmarked, except perhaps by a few bricks placed beside the body).

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