

Tol-e Chega Sofla Cemetery: A Phenomenon in the Context of Late 5th Millennium Southwest Iran

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In the early 20th century, the discovery of elaborately decorated pottery vessels from Susa attracted much attention and created ample amazement among scholars of archaeology and art history. Although excavations of the Susa cemetery appear to be imperfect and dubious when assessed against our current stratigraphic and documentation standards, they have initiated many further actions; including numerous, and long-term, investigations in order to understand prehistoric developments in the Susiana plain and its neighboring areas. From defining chronological orders to pursuing attempts at a greater understanding of the process leading to the emergence of complex societies and early states, scholars have investigated archaeological evidence within the Susiana, and neighboring, plains for many decades. For some reason, however, Susiana's adjoining southeastern plains of Zohreh and Behbahan

have attracted less attention. While visiting our excavations at Tol-e Chega Sofla in the winter of 2017 (**Fig. 1**), Susan Pollock said: “*if Chega Sofla had been excavated before, our current understanding about the prehistory of the region might have turned out differently*”.

In this short paper we plan to present the newly discovered evidence from the Tol-e Chega Sofla cemetery which sheds fresh light on our current knowledge about the prehistoric societies of Greater Susiana. Its considerable extent, the diverse grave structures, the richness and diversity of recovered grave goods, as well as the large number of buried individuals are unprecedented phenomena compared to previously excavated contemporary sites. None of the excavated settlements in southwestern Iran have so far yielded such a considerable and coherent body of evidence, although this might be partly due to methodological



Fig. 1. Susan Pollock Visiting the Tol-e Chega Sofla Excavation, 2017. Photo: Medea Rahmani.

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Fig. 2. General Map of the Region showing location of Tol-e Chega Sofla. USGS/NASA Landsat 7 picture from the year 2000; modified by Mohammad Reza Rokni.

shortages in previous research. The findings from Chega Sofla not only reminds us to not underestimate prehistoric communities, but demonstrate the need to review many of our previous assumptions.

Tol-e Chega Sofla is located in the Zohreh Plain, 45 km south of the town of Behbahan in the most eastern fringes of Khuzestan Province. The plain is bounded by the two ridges of Aghajari and Pazanan in the north, and the Rag-e Sefid and Zeidun Mountains in the south. The Zohreh River, with its vast flood plain, flows through the middle of the Zohreh Plain. This has created an alluvial east-west terrain that is 166 m above the sea level (a.s.l.) in the east, and 20 m a.s.l. in the west. The Zohreh River empties into the Persian Gulf after passing through the Rag-e Sefid ridge (Fig. 2).

Tol-e Chega Sofla, also known as Chogha Sofla (BZ.71), was identified for the first time by Hans Nissen and his colleagues from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and the Freie Universität Berlin in 1970 (Nissen and Redman 1970–71; Dittmann 1984; 1986). Archaeological evidence recovered during recent excavations of the *Zohreh Prehistoric Project* shows that this site flourished in the Late Village Period, i.e. 4700–3700 BCE, and consisted of a residential and a cemetery quarter (Fig. 3). The residential quarter stretches over five lower and higher mounds, some of which were unfortunately damaged within the last 50 years, and is about 20 ha in total. The cemetery, as much as known today, covers a 2000 x 800 m area and is located between the residential quarter in the north and the Rag-e Sefid ridge to its south (Moghaddam 1997⁵, 27).



Fig. 3. Different mounds of Tol-e Chega Sofla showing its residential and cemetery quarters. Photo and drawing: Ramin Yashmi and Loqman Ahmadzadeh.

Tol-e Chega Sofla cemetery

Based on our current knowledge about prehistoric burial practices and traditions, we know that in southwestern Iran graves were buried beneath floors or in open spaces within the residential quarter of settlements until the late 5th millennium BCE. From this point onward, early cemeteries were established outside of the residential quarters (Hole 1989). It is not known, however, whether this was a widespread phenomenon or that only some settlements with some kind of specific social, economic and ritual status incorporated a distinct quarter as their cemetery. No discrete research has so far addressed this issue and our limited knowledge on the subject is based on sporadic evidence recovered mostly by chance from archaeological contexts. The relatively accidental discovery of the Susa cemetery in

the early 20th century by a French delegation (de Morgan 1908; 1909) represents the first prehistoric cemetery identified in Iran. The French methodology at the time left much unrecorded and lost: what is best known about this cemetery are the fine decorated beakers and vessels that have enriched museums since their discovery more than a century ago. Hakalan and Dumgar Parchineh are two other well-known excavated cemeteries located in the foothills of the Zagros in western Iran. They were excavated in the second half of the last century (Vanden Berghe 1987; see also Haerinck and Overlaet 1996 for the final report). No settlement was identified in their vicinity, which has led to some scholars, including the original excavators, attributing them to nomadic societies of this region (Vanden Berghe 1987; Hole 1989, 170; Alizadeh 1992, 57).

Many questions were raised following the discovery of the Susa, Hakalan, and Dumgar Parchineh cemeteries, answers to many of which we may never find due to both methodological and taphonomic problems. For those cemeteries, even some simple questions cannot be adequately addressed: Are we dealing with primary or secondary burials? What was the structure of the graves? What was the relation between the grave goods and the dead? Was the Susa cemetery established on virgin soil or did it cut through older debris, as the fragmentary reports of the French imply? How extensive was this cemetery? Were the dead buried within a short time span or successively over a long period of time? What was the relationship between the cemetery and the high terrace (*Massif Funéraire* and *Haute Terrasse*)? What do we know about the dead's sex and age patterns? Which grave types had unique and luxurious grave goods? Was there any difference in grave types for different groups according to their sex, age at death, or social status? Were there special graves for infants and children? Were people brought to the Susa cemetery from other areas outside Susa? Did the Susa cemetery belong to a certain class of the society? And many more such questions.

In contrast to the Susa, Hakalan, and Dumgar Parchineh cemeteries, the discovery of the Tol-e Chega Sofla cemetery was the result of our research agenda in the *Zohreh Prehistoric Project*, which explicitly targeted such issues. Earlier investigations had shown that Tol-e Chega Sofla was the largest prehistoric settlement in the Zohreh Plain, contemporary with the late 5th millennium sites of Greater Susiana (Dittmann 1984, 100–15). Hence, since the emergence of cemeteries in the Zagros foothills, Southwest Iran, and southern Mesopotamia is understood to have taken place in the late 5th millennium (Hole 1989), we assumed that Chega Sofla, which reached a considerable extent in the late 5th millennium, must have also had a cemetery.

During the 2016 excavations of the southwestern gully, where a seasonal river flows today, eleven graves were brought to light. This location may seem peculiar at first glance (Fig. 4), but considering the ever-changing landscape of this region, it was not an inappropriate location back in the 5th millennium. This part of the site was identified based on land surveys and geomagnetic inspections (Moghaddam 2016; 1397Š). Eleven graves, in total, were located within three excavation units named Areas A, B, and C, covering a total area of 163 m². Three graves in Area A (AG1, AG2, AG3), six graves in Area B (BG1, BG2, BG4, BG5, BG6, and BG7) and one grave in Area C (CG1) were excavated (grave BG3 in Area B remained unexcavated). Two major types of grave were identified; single and multiple burials, and a brief description of them follows. These were identified next to each other in one area, showing that there was no distinct area for single or multiple burials in the cemetery.

Single burial graves

Three single burial graves were excavated (AG3, BG4 and BG7) (Fig. 5). They were simple earthen pit graves with no architectural structure, in which the dead were placed following no specific direction or position. The skeleton in grave AG3 was laid

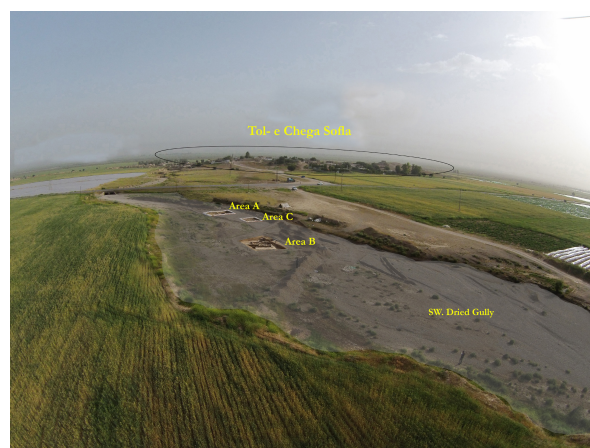


Fig. 4. Excavated Areas of the cemetery in the southwestern gully, 2016. Photo: Loqman Ahmadzadeh.

on its back with its hands placed over the chest with no grave goods. The upper body of BG4 was not excavated as it reached into the eastern section of the trench. Only part of the pelvis and legs were uncovered, indicating that the skeleton was placed in a fetal position on its left side. A small copper bowl was placed in this grave. Grave BG7 was exceptionally rich in terms of grave goods. It belonged to a ca. 25 years old female, which was named *Khatoun* (Lady) by the team. She was placed on her left side on the pebble-paved bed of her simple pit grave in a tight fetal position. Her face was towards the south. BG7's grave goods included copper and stone vessels, a pottery beaker, copper dagger and sword, a marble weight stone (7.2 kg), and small copper objects

like knitting/weaving hooks and knives. It was also noticed that the digging of grave BG7 had apparently caused some damage to Grave BG1 by breaking its bed stones, suggesting that the BG7 single grave most likely post-dated the BG1 multiple burial grave.

Multiple burial graves

The multiple burial graves exhibit a diverse range of types, in terms of architectural structure and building material, but interestingly they share a single, common direction (Fig. 6). This latter characteristic, along with other evidence imply the emergence of a standardized burial practice in Tol-e Chega Sofla in the late 5th millennium.



Fig. 5. BG4, BG7, and AG3 Single Burial Graves. Photos: Sara Freydouni.

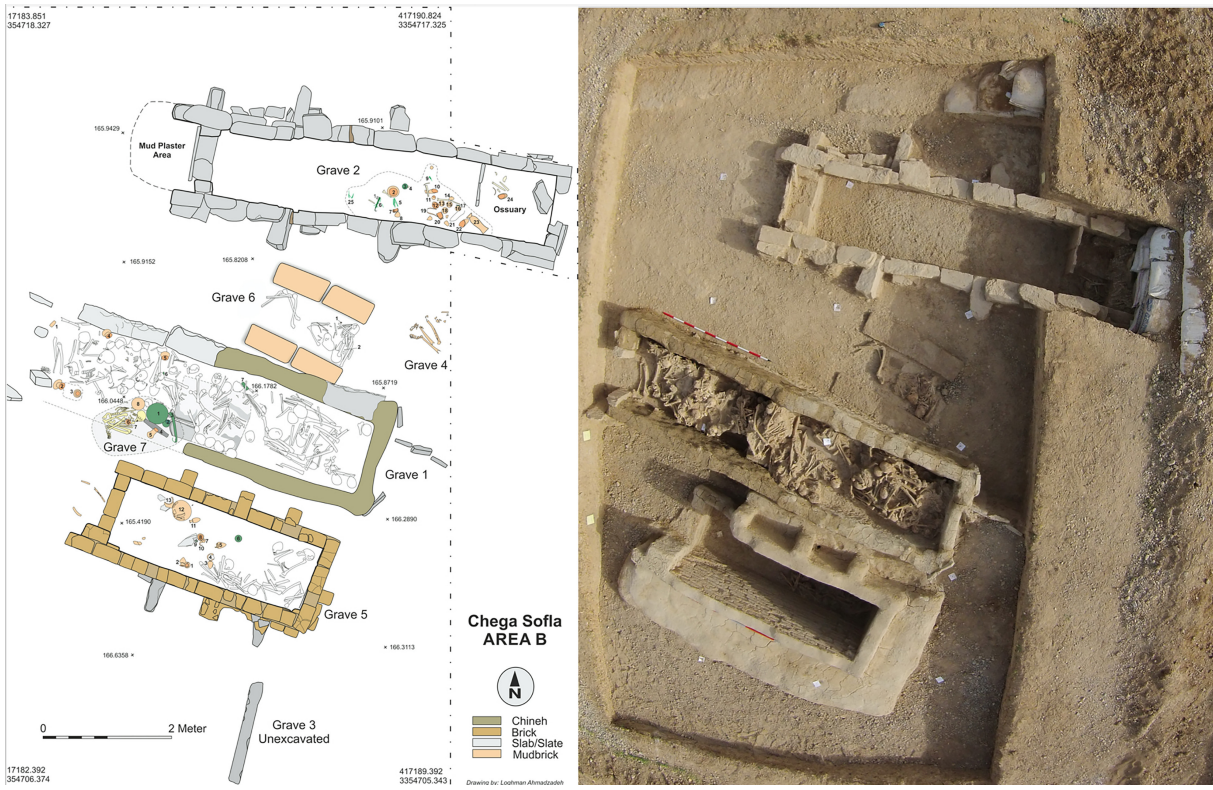


Fig. 6. BG1, BG2, BG4, BG5, BG6, and BG7 excavated graves, Area B. Photo and drawing: Loqman Ahmadzadeh.

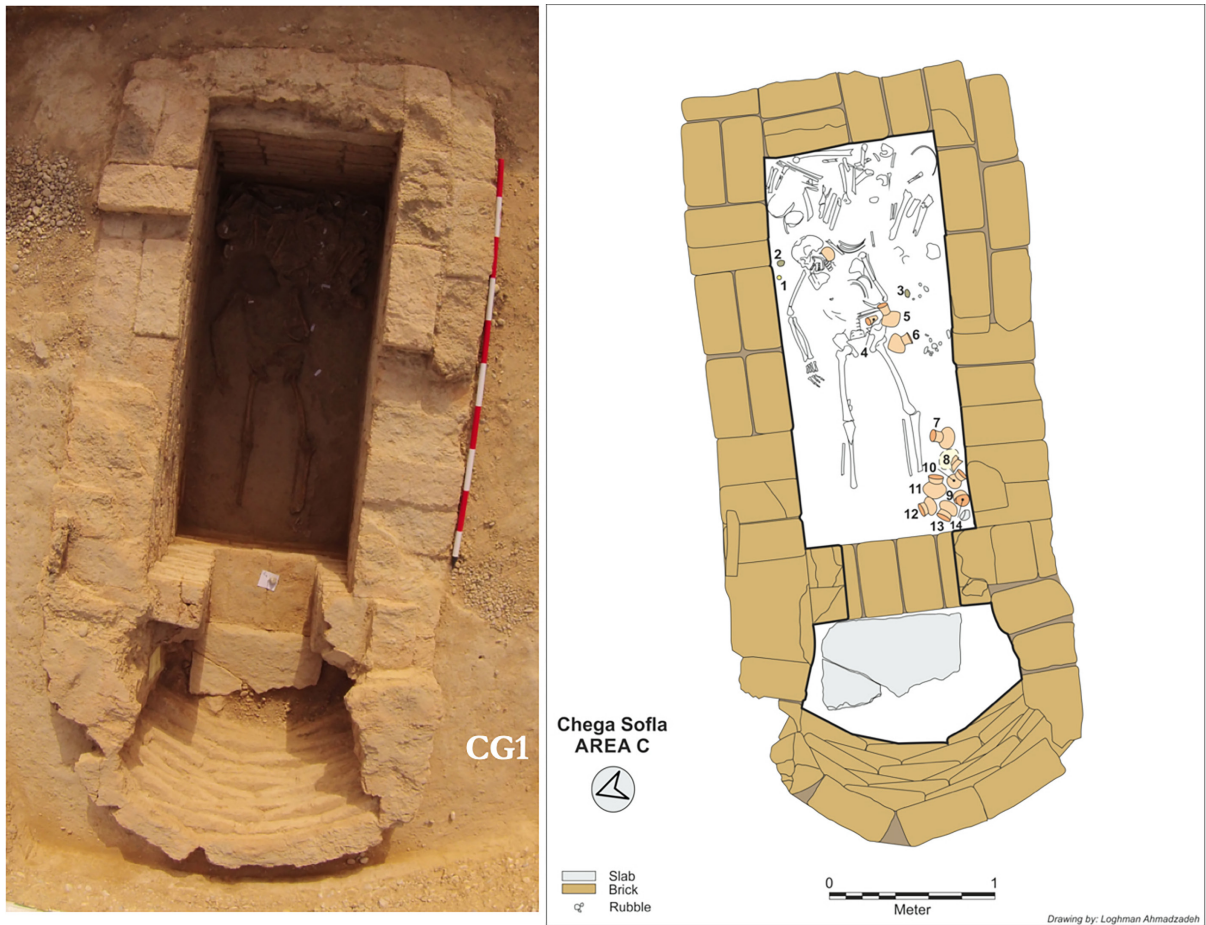


Fig. 7. Area C Brick Chamber Grave CG1. Photo and drawing: Loqman Ahmadzadeh.

In terms of structure, multiple burial graves include stone graves (AG1 and BG2), stone graves with *pisé* walls (AG2 and BG1), and brick (BG5 and CG1) (**Fig. 7**) or mud-brick graves (BG6). Multiple burial graves are all rectangular with a southeast-northwest orientation. Each grave has an entrance in its western side, at least as far as the excavated examples show.

Three distinct burial practices were recognized with regards to the multiple burial graves:

Type 1 – intentional arrangement of the bones: This pattern was clearly identified in BG1, where bones were arranged apparently according to their depositional age from the eastern end of the grave. The bones' general arrangement, their disarticulation with a circular arrangement of the skulls with the long bones placed among them, the accumulation of the skeletons, and the striking presence of deformed skulls show that the bones were either re-arranged or placed in the grave in several stages after decomposition of the bodies. Only one skeleton was identified in an articulated state.

Type 2 – graves with an ossuary: an ossuary was identified in the eastern end of graves AG1, AG2, BG1, and BG2, in which a dense accumulation of bones was found. The ossuary was separated from the main burial chamber by a dividing vertical stone slab in BG2. All grave goods were also found in the ossuary among the compact collection of bones. Because of later damages and disturbances, the ossuary and dividing stone slab was not recognized in AG1, but the presence of small broken bones in the eastern end of this grave suggest a similar pattern.

Type 3 – Pushing back older bones: this third type is similar to both first and second types. Older bones were pushed back towards the eastern end of the grave as in Type 1, but there is no specific arrangement and no ossuary.

CG1 and BG6 are two examples of this type. One skeleton was interred in an articulated state near the grave chamber entrance and the older bones were pushed back towards the eastern end of the grave.

Compared to the number of interred individuals in the multiple burial graves, the quantity of grave goods is rather small. Except for BG2, in all of the other graves, goods were placed near the grave entrance. In BG2, they were found in the area between the main grave chamber and the ossuary.

The dead

Considering the size of the Chega Sofla residential quarter (ca. 20 ha), the number of dead individuals as indicated by the excavated graves is relatively high. At least 102 individuals were buried in the ten graves according to the MNI, calculated using the skulls. Many broken or decayed bones were not included when calculating the MNI. The high number of individuals in the multiple burial graves has a primary explanation, and that is constant use of graves for several generations. Some other explanations may also be considered: war or conflict, famine and starvation, pandemics, or the prominence of ritual activities for the Chega Sofla communities living in the Zohreh plain in the late 5th millennium, and who brought their dead to this cemetery. Unfortunately, our DNA tests did not yield promising results. It was not therefore possible to recognize any familial relationship for those who were buried in the multiple burial graves.

Based on our physical anthropology studies, the buried individuals in the ten excavated graves ranged in age at death between less than 6 years old to more than 40 years old. Most of them (21.3%) were aged between 30 to 35 years old and only a few were aged more than 40 years old (1.1%). Males and females were not separated and all age and sex groups were buried together with no applied segregation.

52.8% of the bones were not included in our statistical analysis due to their poor condition. From the remains that could be statistically analysed, 37.5% were males, and 9.7% were females (Vahdatinasab and Kazazi 1397Š, 160, Graphs 1-2).

Deformed skulls

While earlier scholars believed that some post-burial factors, such as pressure of the surrounding soil in the graves, created deformed skulls (Coon 1981, 307), it is now widely accepted that such deformed skulls were intentionally shaped during an individual's life to represent some sort of cultural or social meaning (Lorentz 2010, 125–48). Although post-burial factors could also deform skulls, such unintended and natural causes typically lead to irregular deformations. Deformed skulls are not unknown from archaeological contexts of the Near East and were common in a large area extending from southern Mesopotamia

to southern Turkey. The oldest examples of intentional cranial deformation were reported from Early Neolithic sites of Southwest Iran (Lorentz 2010). Here, they are reported from the Sefid Phase at Chogha Sefid in Dehluran (Hole 1977, 91), from Tepe Ali Kosh (Sołtysiak and Darabi 2017, 80), as well as much later during the Late Middle Susiana Phase at Chogha Mish (Ortner 1996, 321).

At Tol-e Chega Sofla, the concentration of deformed skulls in grave BG1 (12 skulls) is striking. One example was also recovered from BG6, although the actual number might have been higher. The Chega Sofla deformed skulls were shaped by one/two-band type circumferential head shaping from a very young age (Fig. 8). Some skulls were still in the process of being shaped at the time of death, while for some, the process had been completed. Seven female skulls aged between 9 to 30 years old (BG1.29, BG1.30, BG1.11, BG1.12, BG1.18, BG1.20, BG1.28), and 5 male skulls aged between 17 to 25 years old were deformed

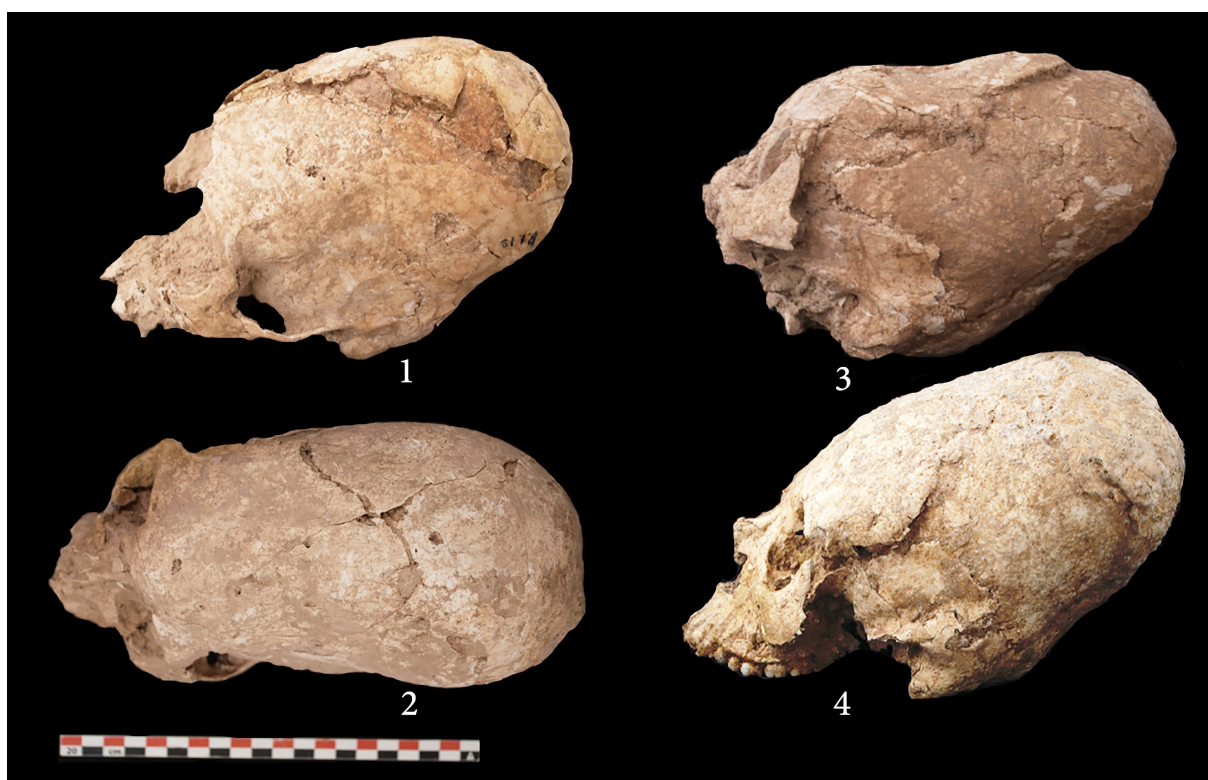


Fig. 8. Deformed Skulls: 1. BG1.12; 2. BG1.29; 3. BG6.1 and 4. BG1.5. Photo: Ramin Yashmi.

(BG1.5, BG1.32, BG1.48, BG1.48, and BG6.1), – in one case the sex and age at death could not be identified (BG1. 39) (Vahdatinasab and Kazazi 1397Š, 200, Tab. 5).

Findings

A wide range of findings including pottery and stone vessels, metal objects and vessels, as well as small ornaments were recovered from the excavated graves. The most interesting feature regarding the grave goods was a certain harmony between the diversity of grave goods in terms of type and material and the grave structures.

Archaeometallurgy analysis showed that, except for a small quantity of gold and silver, all metal objects were of high purity copper (Nezafati 1397Š, 333–40). Copper items were

already reported from the Susa cemetery (Tallon 1987), but the Chega Sofla collection of copper items is much more diverse. Copper vessels, weaponry (a sword and dagger), ornaments, and copper discs were found in the Chega Sofla graves. A silver bracelet from grave AG1 is probably one of the oldest silver object recovered so far (Fig. 9). In general, the relative abundancy of metal objects in the graves not only points to the importance of this material among the Chega Sofla people, but has revealed a new insight in to trade interactions between the southwestern lowlands and the highlands of the Iranian plateau, which are rich in copper sources. In this regard, marble vessels are likewise noteworthy, and identifying their source would be significant to gain a better understanding of prehistoric trade networks and mechanisms (Salmanzadeh and Sarkhosh 1397Š, 301–14).



Fig. 9. Various metal objects: 1. Copper knitting/weaving hook from BG7; 2–3. Copper knitting/weaving knives from BG7; 4. Copper axe head from BG1; 5. Copper disks from BG2; 6. Silver bracelet from AG1; 7. Gold ring from BG1; 8. Small golden sequins from BG1; and 9. Golden bead from BG6. Photo: Medea Rahmani.



Fig. 10. Various pottery vessels: 1. Painted jar from BG1; 2. Painted jar from CG1; 3. Small bowl with swastika motif AG1; 4. Very fine bowl with birds and symbolic designs from AG1; and 5. Large beakers with snake design from BG2. Photo: Medea Rahmani.

Pottery vessels are all well fired, fine buff ware decorated with brown paint and include bowls, jars, and beakers. The most common decorative motif is the stepped design, while other geometrical motifs like swastikas, as well as animal motifs such as rows of lizards or bending snakes are also frequent (Fig. 10).

The pottery collections from the graves are overall comparable with contemporary examples from Susa, Ja'farabad, Jowi, Bakun, and Dumgar Parchineh (de Morgan et al. 1900, Pl. VVIII: 12, 15, Pl. XXII: 13; de Mecquenem 1912, Pl. I, Pl. XIX: 4, Pl. XY; Pottier 1923, Pl. 12: 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 37; Langsdorff and McCown 1942, Pl. 4: 8, Pl. 30: 1.5, Pl. 57: 2, Pl. 59: 2, Pl. 51: 1, Pl. 43: 7; Stève and Gasche 1971, Pl. 40: 7–9; Dollfus 1983, Fig. 29: 13; Delougaz and Kantor 1996, Fig. 30: XVd; Haerinck and Overlaet 1996, 47: 8, 11, 13; Alizadeh 2008, Fig. 35: B). The only exceptions are the beakers from BG2 that were so far only found in this site (Zadehdabbagh 1397Š, 261–84).

Stone vessels were made from aragonite and other types of limestone (Fig. 11). A total number of 23 stone vessel were found from graves BG1, BG2, BG3, BG5, BG7, and CG1. They have brown, pink, and grey veins and occur in a diverse range of forms including jars, pots, bowls, and conical beakers. Some of them are comparable with parallel specimens from Tal-e Bakun A and Dumgar Parchineh (Langsdorff and McCown 1942, Pl. 81: 5–6, 11–13; de Mecquenem 1934, 191, Fig. 24: 20; de Mecquenem 1943, 27, Fig. 20: 15–16; Haerinck and Overlaet 1996, 18). The Chega Sofla stone vessels have, however, a better manufacturing quality compared to their contemporary examples (Valizadeh 1397Š, 285–99).

A diverse range of small objects in different shapes and types were also recovered (Fig. 12). They include shell, metal, stone, bone, bitumen, and enstatite items (Freydouni 1397Š, 316–32). Some of them are practical objects or tools such as stone spindle whorls,



Fig. 11. Various stone vessels: 1. Goblet from BG3; 2. Small jar from BG5; 3. High necked jar from BG5; and 4. Small vessel from BG2. Photo: Medea Rahmani.

weight stones, or metal pins that were mainly related to weaving practices. Other important finds include several stamp seals: three from grave AG1, one from BG6, and one from CG1. Except for the seals from CG1, the design of which is not recognizable due to the poor quality of the stone, the other seals bear geometric designs. The Chega Sofla stamp seals are very much comparable to those from Bakun A (Langsdorff and McCown 1942, Pl. 8: 1, 3, 7).

Final remarks

The 5th millennium cemetery of Susa was discovered in the early 20th century but despite the impressive amount of work done in southern Mesopotamia, further attempts at identifying similar burial practices in southwestern Iran were not followed. The excavations at the two cemeteries of Hakalan and Dumgar Parchineh were not motivated by such research questions, rather they were encouraged following the discovery of the famous Lurestan Bronze items in the region, and these two cemeteries were excavated among some other Bronze and Iron Age cemeteries.

Tol-e Chega Sofla is a focal point in a region which is almost unknown and overlooked in prehistoric studies. Our current evidence shows that a rich polity lived in this settlement in the late 5th millennium BCE. In addition to their extended regional communications and interactions, these people had developed a certain ritual tradition reflected in many symbolic manifestations, whether it be their pottery decorations, metal objects, elaborate stone vessels, or even their brick graves, which are unparalleled in any other contemporary site.

In spite of its seeming similarities, Tol-e Chega Sofla varies fundamentally from its other excavated counterparts. The Chega Sofla cemetery was established outside of the residential quarter. As mentioned earlier, no residential site was identified in relation to the Hakalan and Dumgar Parchineh cemeteries, and the definite separation of the Susa cemetery from its residential quarter is not an easy task. Based on the available evidence, we know that the Susa cemetery was next to a massive terrace. Although the Hakalan and Dumgar Parchineh cemeteries had a considerable extent, it seems that the Chega Sofla cemetery

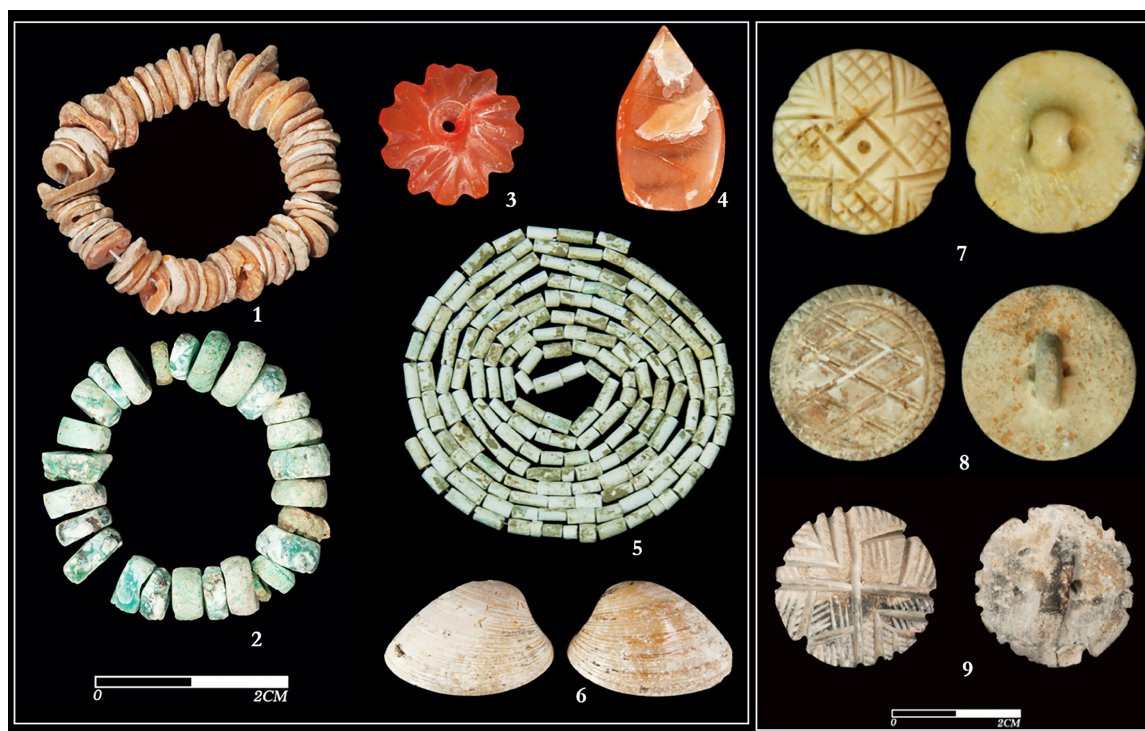


Fig. 12. Various ornaments: 1. Small beads made of fish bones from CG1; 2. Small beads made of green stone from BG1; 3-4. Agate beads from BG1; 5. Small white beads made of enstatite form BG1; 6. Clam shell from AG1; 7-8. Stone stamp seals from AG1; and 9. Stone stamp seal from BG6. Photos: Medea Rahmani.

was much larger; even more so than the Susa cemetery, with its reported 750 m² area being smaller than the Chega Sofla cemetery.

Another aspect of evidence pointing to a major differentiation between burial practices at Tol-e Chega Sofla and other contemporary burial traditions is the striking use of brick architecture in some graves. Grave CG1 is a particularly great example built with much care and skill. The arrangement of stone slabs in the stone graves is also very systematic and precise. Using buttresses for the grave walls is another characteristic feature in the Chega Sofla grave structures. The interior space of the multiple burial graves presents a distinctive pattern as well. As is clearly visible in BG2, the ossuary is separated from the main chamber by a stone divider, and the ossuary is filled with bones from previous burials.

Our excavations are still very limited and much remains to be discovered. Nevertheless, Chega Sofla has opened a new chapter in the

prehistoric studies of the Near East. The recovered evidence shows that a diverse range of communities were emerging in the late 5th and early 4th millennium BCE. Settlements such as Chega Sofla might be one of those missing components for understanding the transitional process of state development in south and southwest Iran. Clearly, archaeological investigations regarding the formation and emergence of early states, and in particular the Elamite kingdom, are now invigorated considering the new evidence from Chega Sofla. More specifically, with its traits reminiscent of both Bakun and Susa, Chega Sofla has turned our attention away from the traditional dichotomy of lowland/highland to the Persian Gulf littoral, and with it a different landscape; a region that was previously ignored or underestimated in prehistoric archaeological interpretations. And these are all a testimony to Susan's statement: "if Chega Sofla had been excavated before, our current understanding about prehistory of the region might have turned out differently".

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