

CENOTAPHS IN THE BACTRIA MARGIANA ARCHAEOLOGICAL COMPLEX DOMAIN: A CASE STUDY OF NORTHEAST IRAN

BACTRIA MARGIANA KÜLTÜREL KOMPLEKSİ İÇİNDE ANIT MEZARLARI: KUZEYDOĞU İRAN'DA BİR ÇALIŞMA

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ABSTRACT

Spanning 2300-1500 BC, the Bactria Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC) was developed with a series of material and spiritual innovations in a vast region today comprising Northeast Iran, South Turkmenistan, North Afghanistan, and parts of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Burial traditions can provide an understanding of the intangible aspects of past societies. In this context, it is witnessed that the rise of the Bactria Margiana culture in Northeast Iran is concomitant with the appearance of a new burial form come to known as cenotaph. The term applies to a series of graves that lack human remains and only contain a group of burial gifts deposited in ritual context to honor the deceased.

Since the new mortuary practice is of primary importance in reconstructing the belief and ritual systems of the BMAC populations, the present paper sets to present and discuss the cenotaphs recorded in NE Iran, an attempt

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which might shed some light on the belief system of these groups. Related burials in the study area come from the two settlement sites of Shahrak-e Firouzeh in Neyshabur and Chalow in Jajarm. The instigation of cenotaphs in the region can be attributed to the dissemination of the BMAC's beliefs and ideology.

ÖZET

MÖ 2300-1500 yıllarına tarihlenen Bactria Margiana Arkeoloji Kompleksi (BMAC) günümüzde Kuzeydoğu İran, Güney Türkmenistan, Kuzey Afganistan ve Tacikistan ile Özbekistan'ın bir bölümünü kapsayan geniş bir alanda maddi ve manevi yeniliklerle gelişti.

Mezar gelenekleri, geçmiş toplumların maddi olmayan yönlerini anlamayı sağlayabilir. Bu bağlamda, Kuzeydoğu İran'daki Bactria Margiana kültürünün yükselişinin, Anıt Mezar olarak bilinen yeni bir mezar türünün ortaya çıkışı ile eşzamanlı olduğu görülmektedir. Bu terim, insan kalıntıları bulunmayan ve sadece merasimi onurlandıran ritüel bağlamda bırakılan bir grup mezar hediyesi içeren bir dizi mezar için geçerlidir.

Yeni mezar uygulaması BMAC nüfuslarının inanç ve ritüel sistemlerini yeniden yapılandırmada birincil önem taşıdıklarından, bu yazı, bu grupların inanç sistemine ışık tutabilecek bir girişim olan Kuzeydoğu İran'da yeni defin türünü tartışmaya başlamıştır. Çalışma alanındaki ilgili gömüler, Neyshabur'daki Shahrak-e Firouzeh ve Jajarm'daki Chalow yerleşim yerlerinden gelmektedir. Bölgedeki defin türü BMAC inanç ve ideolojisinin yaygınlaştırılmasına bağlanabilir.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeologists embark upon studying graves and burial customs in an attempt to grasp some intangible dimensions of past populations. In this regard, considering the ways in which the dead was treated, burial types and structure of graves or tombs can impart important information regarding the religious beliefs dominating the concerned communities. This paper is an attempt to present the so-called cenotaph burial form, which occurs for the first time in the earlier half of the 3rd millennium BC at Shahr-i Sokhta and in the latter part of the same millennium in the BMAC archaeological horizon. A novel, distinct burial tradition may either reflect the emergence of a new cult or the arrival of new groups. In northeastern Iran, these peculiar burials occur at two settlement sites, namely Shahrak-e Firouzeh in Neyshabur and Chalow in Jajarm. Interestingly enough, cenotaphs have thus far been reported simply from the BMAC horizon (2300-1500 BC) of the region and remain completely unattested in the earlier or later periods. Here we present the cenotaphs from the region to enhance our view of this mortuary practice. A brief description of the BMAC will precede the main discussion.

BMAC

The term BMAC refers to a group of settlements that emerged and thrived between 2300-1500 BC and were characterized by the use of distinctive pottery types, a series of prestigious and ordinary objects made of indigenous and exotic stones (lapis lazuli, chlorite, turquoise, and marble), widespread use of bronze and precious metals (gold and silver), a series of unique and possibly ritual objects such as miniature marble columns, Bactrian hybrid statuettes, scepters, luxury mattocks, and most importantly cenotaphs.

Sarianidi forged the term the Bactria Margiana Archaeological Complex to describe the culture, a designation that would be embraced by several scholars, including Hiebert (Hiebert / Lamberg-Karlovsky 1992: 2). The term derived from the assumption that the culture flourished in the two oases of Bactria and Merv (Margiana). Francfort and Lamberg-Karlovsky condemned the term as being both “tongue-twisting” and of Greece origin; they instead suggested the moniker the Oxus Culture on the consideration that it stretched along the Oxus River (Lamberg-Karlovsky, 2013: 23; Francfort, 2005: 102). Recent archaeological evidence from the BMAC settlements in northeast Iran recorded in the course of excavations at Shahrak-e Firouzeh, Chalow, Tepe Eshq (Bojnurd), and Rازه Cemetery (Darmian) pushes the expansion of the culture beyond its previously defined boundaries. A glimpse at the distribution of the respective settlements over northern Afghanistan, south Turkmenistan, eastern Uzbekistan,

and northeast Iran suggests that the BMAC was not formed along the Oxus River or within the Bactria and Merv oases, and that its core falls in what became to be known as Khorasan in the Islamic period. Hence, Biscione suggested the term the Greater Khorasan Culture for this archaeological horizon.¹

It is noteworthy that chronologically² the BMAC may be split into a flourishing phase (2003-1750 BC) followed by a gradual decline phase (1750-1500/1450 BC) (Lunaeu, 2015: 303; Francfort, 2013: 166).

BMAC SETTLEMENTS IN NE IRAN

Prior to the recent fieldwork in Khorasan, the characteristic BMAC material culture in NE Iran was known from such sites as Tepe Hissar (Schmidt, 1937: pl. LX / LXI / LXII), Turang Tepe (Deshayes, 1975: fig. 1), and Shah Tepe (Arne, 1945: 282). It included a series of typical luxury items as well as ritual and mortuary objects. Surveys and excavations in the last decade recovered relevant settlements and burial grounds, providing new information on the local nature of the culture in Khorasan (Map 1). In light of the new data, Chalow (Biscione / Vahdati, 2011: 238), Tepe Eshq (Vahdati, 2014: 19-27), Shahrak-e Firouzeh (Basafa / Rahmati, 2012: 613-623), Tepe Damghani (Vahdati / Francfort, 2010: 17-36), Tepe Farizi (Sabouri / Tala'i / Garazhian 2014: 91-111) and Tepe Mokhar of Torbat-e Jam in Khorasan Razavi Province, and Rازه of Darmian in South Khorasan (Soroush / Yousefi, 2014: 271-273) are now known to contain indications of the BMAC presence.

CENOTAPHS

Between 3000-2500 BC, in Southeast Iran (at Shahr-i Sokhta) emerged an innovative type of burial custom utterly devoid of human remains, which has come to be known as cenotaph in the archaeological literature. In this funeral form a number of offerings are deposited within the empty grave to commemorate the deceased who failed to return to home (a war martyr or one who died abroad). The reason behind and the imperative for the creation of these graves is yet to be quite settled. What one can say is that the relatives were

¹ Since the designation has not yet gained currency in the archaeological literature and given that this part of the Bronze Age in the Greater Khorasan is not confined to this culture, here the Bactria Margiana Archaeological Complex is preferred.

² Note that the exact chronology of the culture is subject of some scholarly contention. Hiebert Lamberg-Karlovsky dated it to 2100-1700 BC (Hiebert / Karlovsky 1992: 2). Lamberg-Karlovsky later refined it to 2200-1700 BC (Karlovsky 2013: 22). Its beginning is dated to 2300 BC (Francfort 2013: 166; Basafa / Rahmati, 2012: 614; Biscione / Vahdati, 2011: 238). A date between 1500-1400 BC has been suggested for its ending (Francfort 2013: 166; Lunaeu 2015: 304).



Map 1: Distribution of Settlements of BMAC in the North East of Iran / *Iran'ın Kuzeydoğu Bölgesindeki BMAC Yerleşmelerinin Dağılımı* (Vahdati, 2014:25).

particularly concerned with memorializing their dead loved ones, and it was for this reason that they built a grave to commemorate them as in they normally did for the other dead members. Their commitment to hold the customary cemetery required by the prevailing tradition is manifest in the placement of burial gifts within the empty grave. Erection of these graves would also offer console to next of kin.

In Shahr-i Sokhta Periods I and II,³ cenotaphs were graves with a simple bipartite burial pit.⁴ They mark the earliest attestations in the Iranian plateau. The available data suggests Shahr-i Sokhta as the region of origin for the burial custom, thence it presumably made its way to southern Turkmenistan via extended cultural and trade interactions.

The excavator of Shahr-i Sokhta observes: “A number of graves lacking human skeletons were also attested among the excavated burials..., which were ready in all respects to receive corpse but were never used so for certain reasons. A possible reason would have been that the deceased had died elsewhere; thus the grave with the

accompanying objects was erected to honor him/her”⁵. Some of these cenotaphs were merely simple and ready pits, while others contained between 3 to 18 gifts⁶. Note that in the context of the present paper, cenotaph denotes a grave that contains funeral gifts and lacks corpse, and those void of these gifts are merely considered graves ready to receive body. Thus, a distinction is made between cenotaphs and empty graves by virtue of the presence/absence of mortuary objects⁷. Empty, ready for burying graves occur at Gonur Depe⁸ and Shahr-i Sokhta⁹.

Given the broad cultural and trade relations that Shahr-i Sokhta maintained with southern Turkmenistan and northeast Iran, one may reasonably credit the site with the spread of the burial custom to the BMAC realm by means of these intensifying ties.

Cenotaphs are attested in the timespan of 2300-1500 BC in the BMAC zone—southern Turkmenistan (Togolok

³ Period I dates to 3150-2800 BC and Period II spans 2800-2500 BC (Ascalone, 2015: 93-95).

⁴ Cenotaphs No. 1608, 3000, 4000 and 5007 belong to Period I and Burials No. 3505 and 4100 date to Period II (Sajjadi 2007: 122-123/2009: 20-24).

⁵ Sajjadi 2010: 435.

⁶ Sajjadi 2006: 31.

⁷ Mortuary gifts at Gonur Tepe are: a) ceramic vessels (n= 2-9) in 100% of the graves; b) stone beads (n = 1-2) in 41%; c) kaolin pieces (n= 1-3) in 15%; d) bronze mirrors, flint arrowheads, and miniature stone columns in 11%; and d) gold and bronze beads and cosmetic tools in 7.5% (Sarianidi, 2007: 51). Those in Shahrak-e Firouzeh simply contained pottery vessels (Basafa 2014: 260-261).

⁸ Sarianidi 2007: 31.

⁹ Sajjadi 2006: 31.



Figure 1: Cenotaph of Gonur Tepe, No. 1230/ *Gonur Tepe'de 1230 No'lu Anıt Mezar* (Sarianidi 2007:51)



Figure 2: Cenotaph of Ulug Tepe, Southern Turkmenistan / *Ulug Tepe'de Anıt Mezar; Güney Türkmenistan Güney Kısım* (Lecomte 2013:182).

21, Gonur, Ulug Tepe) and Northeast Iran (Shahrak-e Firouzeh, Chalow). They represent a fairly important funerary custom among the BMAC groups, accounting for about 3.1% of the total burial types at Gonur Depe necropolis (Fig. 1)¹⁰. In particular, 74 of the total of 2853 graves excavated up to 2007 belong to this type¹¹. A single instance was reported from Ulug Tepe (Fig. 2)¹².

¹⁰ Sarianidi 2007: 51.

¹¹ Sarianidi 2007: 31.

¹² Mamedov/Lecomte/Bendezu-Sarmiento 2012: 23-24.

CENOTAPHS IN NE IRAN

As stated above, cenotaphs are known from Shahrak-e Firouzeh and Chalow. Among the late Bronze Age graves at the latter site a number of related burials were identified that typically lacked human remains but were associated with grave offerings¹³. Likewise, cenotaphs from the same chronological horizon were recovered at Shahrak-e Firouzeh in the form of simple pits with plain, utilitarian gifts¹⁴.

¹³ Vahdati/Biscione 2004: 321.

¹⁴ Basafa, 2014: 262; Basafa /Rahmati, 2012: 617

Given the chronology of the attested instances, one may attribute their advent in NE Iran to the development of the BMA culture, which was probably responsible for the establishment of novel ritual and ideological traditions bearing on burial and death in NE Iran. Lighting fire inside and outside the grave,¹⁵ the dog burials,¹⁶ the diversity and profusion of the burial gifts, and more importantly the cenotaphs, whose earliest attestations occur in the same horizon in NE Iran, are but a few manifestations of the said innovations. While their deposition not being peculiar to this period, it features an intensified diversity and plentitude of mortuary gifts. These incidents may be an upshot of the infiltration into NE Iran of the BMAC's beliefs and ideology, which obliged the society to fully observe the funeral rites even in case of those failed to return to their homeland. The gifts within the vacant graves give evidence to deep commitment to these rites.

Archaeological finds and indications at Tepe Hissar (Period IIIC) lend support to the existence of cenotaphs at the site. An assemblage of small finds was discovered from Period IIIC in Treasure Hill by E. Schmidt, who designated it as Treasure Hill Hoard II (Fig. 3)¹⁷. However, Hiebert tentatively interpreted the published hoards from the site as potential cenotaphs¹⁸. And, a quick look at the list of objects making up the hoard,¹⁹ presence of ceramic vessels and total absence of precious objects suggest a rather commonplace and trivial group of artifacts, undermining their designation as a hoard cached for any reasons. The claim becomes manifest if one compares these objects to the rich burial gifts of Treasure Hill Period IIIC both in quantity and nature of objects.²⁰ Given the presence of Period IIIC burials in Treasure Hill and their contemporaneity with the BMAC cenotaphs, the assemblage can be burial gifts from a cenotaph, which presumably honored a female judging from the nature of the recovered artifacts.²¹

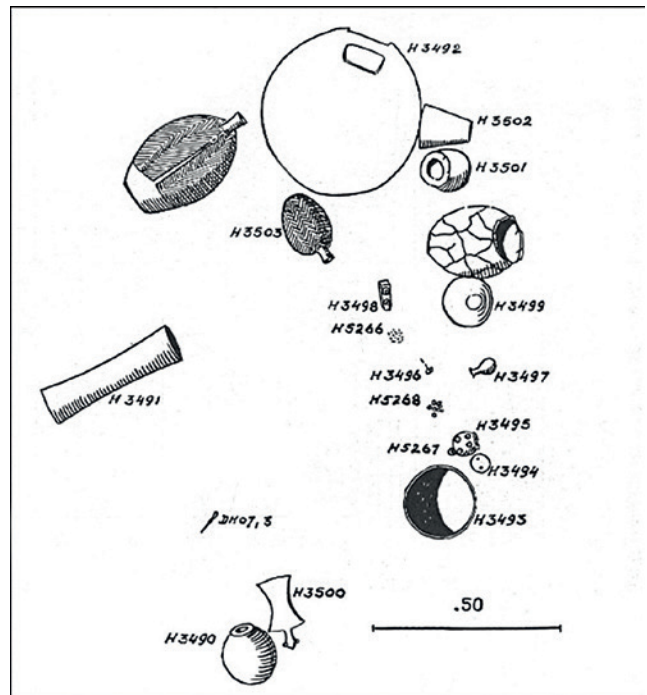


Figure 3: Cenotaph in the Tepe Hissar (Treasure No. 2 Tepe Ganj) / *Tepe Hissar'da Anıt Mezar (Tepe Ganj'da 2 No'lu Mezar Hediyelesi)* (Schmidet, 1937:175).

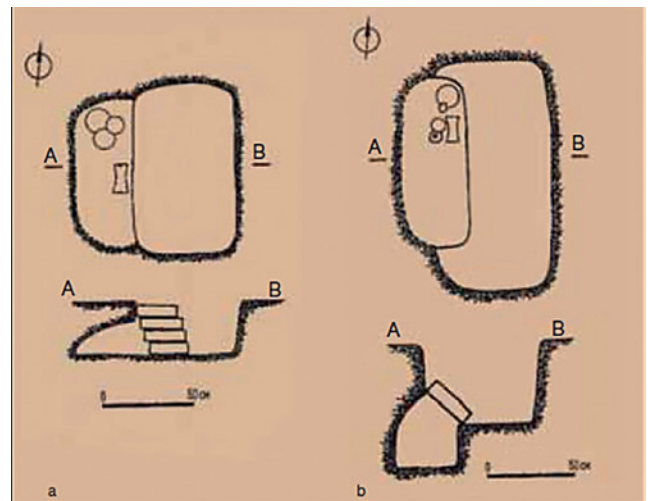


Figure 4: Various Structure of Cenotaph in the Gonur / *Gonur Tepede Çeşitli Anıt Mezar Yapısı* (Sarianidi, 2007:51).

¹⁵ For more details on the indications of lighting fire as part of the funeral ceremony in Northeast Iran, see Basafa 2014: 260; Vahdati, 2014: 26.

¹⁶ For more details on the dog burials associating human skeletal materials at Tepe Eshq in Bojnurd, see Vahdati 2014: 26.

¹⁷ Schmidt 1937: 140-142

¹⁸ Hiebert 1994: 75

¹⁹ A miniature column (H3491), a disc (H3492), vessels (H3494-5), a cosmetic container (H3498), a phialae (H3499), a jar (H3501), a marble statuette (H3500), a lead cosmetic container and a copper kohl stick (H3496-7), another phiale (H3502), a stone bead (H5268), a serpentine button (H5267), a strand of bead (faience, marble and stone) (H5266), two jars (H3490, H3503), and a grey pottery bowl (H3493).

²⁰ For more details on the burials of Hissar IIIC and their associated gifts, see Schmidt, 2012: 329-343).

²¹ On this same basis, the Hoard I from Treasure hill and the hoard

Also notable in this respect is a group of finds labeled North flat CF37 architectural remains. These include three miniature columns in marble (H1841-3), two marble discs (H1845-6), and a vessel in grey ware (H1848)²². The first two (miniature columns and discs) are usually found in burial contexts and are almost unattested in architectural contexts.²³

from the main mound may be interpreted as belonging to cenotaphs.

²² Schmidt 2012: 249, 291

²³ Their discovery within this structure even came as a surprise for Schmidt himself. He even admitted that architecture here was feeble (Schmidt 2012: 249).

If questions such as their association with architecture and the reason behind their placement can be solved, this group can be described as burial gifts belonging to a cenotaph. Regarding their location within the structures, it is notable that constructing cenotaphs in abandoned buildings is a tradition already recorded at Togolok 1, 21 and in the building complexes at Gonur South²⁴. The small finds from the latter complex find close parallels in the assemblages from a cenotaph excavated at Ulug Depe of southern Turkmenistan, which includes, among others, miniature columns and discs²⁵. These evidences all combine to suggest the North flat CF37 architectural remains as a cenotaph.

Given the nature of their gifts and the timespan in which they were erected (i.e. post-Burned Building IIIB), the cenotaphs at Tepe Hissar appear to have had their roots in the BMAC rather than Shahr-i Sokhta. Therefore, if substantiated, the existence of this distinct mortuary practice at Tepe Hissar will be a further support for the propagation of the ritual system of the culture in question in western Khorasan.

STRUCTURE OF THE CENOTAPHS

The cenotaphs at Shahr-i Sokhta fall in two classes of ordinary pits²⁶ and bipartite graves²⁷⁻²⁸. Various burial customs are attested at the cemetery of Gonur Depe, where 89.1% (n = 66) of the whole cenotaphs are shaft graves and about 9.4% (n = 7) are ordinary pits. A single cist cenotaph is of particular interest²⁹. Also excavated at the site where other 54 shaft graves and 11 ordinary pits, all being void of any human remains (Fig. 4)³⁰. As already stated, these must be differentiated from the cenotaphs and be classified as empty ready graves as they lacked burial gifts.

The various grave forms at Ulug Depe are in marked contrast with those excavated in Iran. The chambers at Challow³¹ and Shahrak-e Firouzeh³² are simple pits. The reason for the observed discrepancy between southern Turkmenistan and East Iran will continue to remain unclear due to the limited excavated exposures of BMAC settlements in the latter region.

ANIMAL BURIAL IN CENOTAPHS

The earliest animal burials within cenotaphs were documented for the first time at the BMAC site of Gonur Depe. The contemporary cenotaphs may contain the full skeleton of a single or more animals. So far 39 cenotaphs with animal burials have been excavated at Ulug Depe, where such species as sheep, camel, cattle and donkey were identifiable.

CONCLUSIONS

Cenotaph as a mortuary custom reflects aspects of the funeral, ritual and religious traditions of the BMAC. It is characterized by empty graves furnished with gifts to honor the deceased whose remains never returned home for certain reasons. Presence of the gifts testifies to the fact that the same customary rites were fully observed even in these particular funeral cases. The funerary tradition would have made its way through the intensified trade and cultural contacts between Shahr-i Sokhta and Southern Turkmenistan to the region that would make up in the later periods the BMA cultural realm. And whence the tradition would have been destined to return to NE Iran (Tepe Hissar, Shahrak-e Firouzeh, and Challow) at the same time the BMAC flourished in the former region. The appearance of cenotaphs in NE Iran was perhaps provoked by the penetration into northeastern Iran of new beliefs and ideology, which might evince the diffusion of the belief and ritual systems of the Bactria Margiana Archaeological Complex. In a sense, one may safely conceive the cenotaphs recovered in NE Iran to be evidences attesting to the ideological and cultural impacts of the BMAC.

²⁴ Hiebert 1994: 113

²⁵ Lecomte 2013: 182

²⁶ Cenotaphs 2915, 3505, 4000, 4100 and 5007 had a simple pit burial chamber (Sajjadi 2009: 20-24).

²⁷ The burial chamber in Cenotaphs 1608 and 3000 was bipartite (Sajjadi 2007: 122/2009: 20).

²⁸ Sajjadi 2007: 122-123; 2009: 20-24

²⁹ Sarianidi 2007: 51

³⁰ Sarianidi 2007: 51

³¹ Vahdati/Biscione 2014: 321

³² Basafa 2014: 262

no.	Cenotaph no.	sheep/goat	camel	dog	cattle	donkey
1	258			1		
2	1939			1		
3	2087			1		
4	87/2002			1		
5	2845	1				
6	2872			1		
7	3038	1				
8	3124	3				
9	3130	3				
10	3340					1
11	3377	1				
12	3398	1				
13	3547	1				
14	3548	1				
15	3597	3				1
16	3600		1			
17	3612	1				
18	3621	1				
19	3622	1				
20	3623	1				
21	3739	1				
22	3790	1				
23	3813			2		
24	3829			2		
25	3830	2				
26	3855	1				
27	3895				1	
28	3925	1				
29	3955			1		
30	3959			1		
31	4065			7		
32	4069			1		
33	4073			1		
34	4075			1		
35	4077			3		
36	4095			1		
37	4099			2		
38	4140	1				
39	18 North Palace		2			

Table 1: Genur Depe: Cenotaphs Associated with Animal Burials (extracted from Dubova 2015: 17-21, Table 2.1) / *Genur Tepe: Hayvan Gömüleri ile İlişkili Anıt Mezarları (Dubova 2015: 17-21, Table 2.1)*

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