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Achaemenid Sarcophagi of Hossein-Abad in Susa, Iran

Mehdi Rahbar¹

Abstract

In 1994, it was reported that a group of smugglers had been arrested while excavating the hills of Hossein Abad, south of Susa, about 800m south of an area called Siahchal (Donjon). That excavation led to the revelation of half of a stone coffin or a sarcophagus and eventually led to the discovery of two more sarcophagi, which were located 2.5m from each other. The first sarcophagus was constructed in the form of a tomb with bricks of lion stamp patterns. Both sarcophagi are made of sandstones. The mine of these stones does not appear to have existed in Susa. However, the older fabric of Susa had instances of a sand mass, with underground cellars created inside these stones. Hence, the stones from which the sarcophagi were built could probably relate to Susa. No objects or human skeletal representing burial remnants were recovered from inside of the sarcophagi; however, out of Sarcophagus No. 1, some pieces of earthenware and perfume containers (Alabaster) were found. The bricks used in Tomb No. 1 were bearing lion patterns, as the pieces of earthenware and marble perfume bottles, numerous examples of which were reported from there, demonstrate they could reasonably be attributed to the Achaemenid dynasty.

Keywords: Burial; Achaemenid; Sarcophagi.

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Introduction

A lot of Achaemenid-era archaeological evidence has been obtained from Sistan and Baluchistan (MehrAfarin, 2021), Fars (Rezaei Naraghi, 2022; Nazari & Sharbaf, 2023; Askari Chaverdi, 2023) and other regions. Also, many articles and books have been written about the Achaemenid (See Arabzadeh Sarbanani, 2023; Khosravi, 2022; Salahshoor, 2022). The city of Susa was regarded as the most outstanding winter capital of the Achaemenid. In addition to palaces and barracks for soldiers and residences for the elites of this era, Susa was characterized by residential houses and large populations, which represented the significance

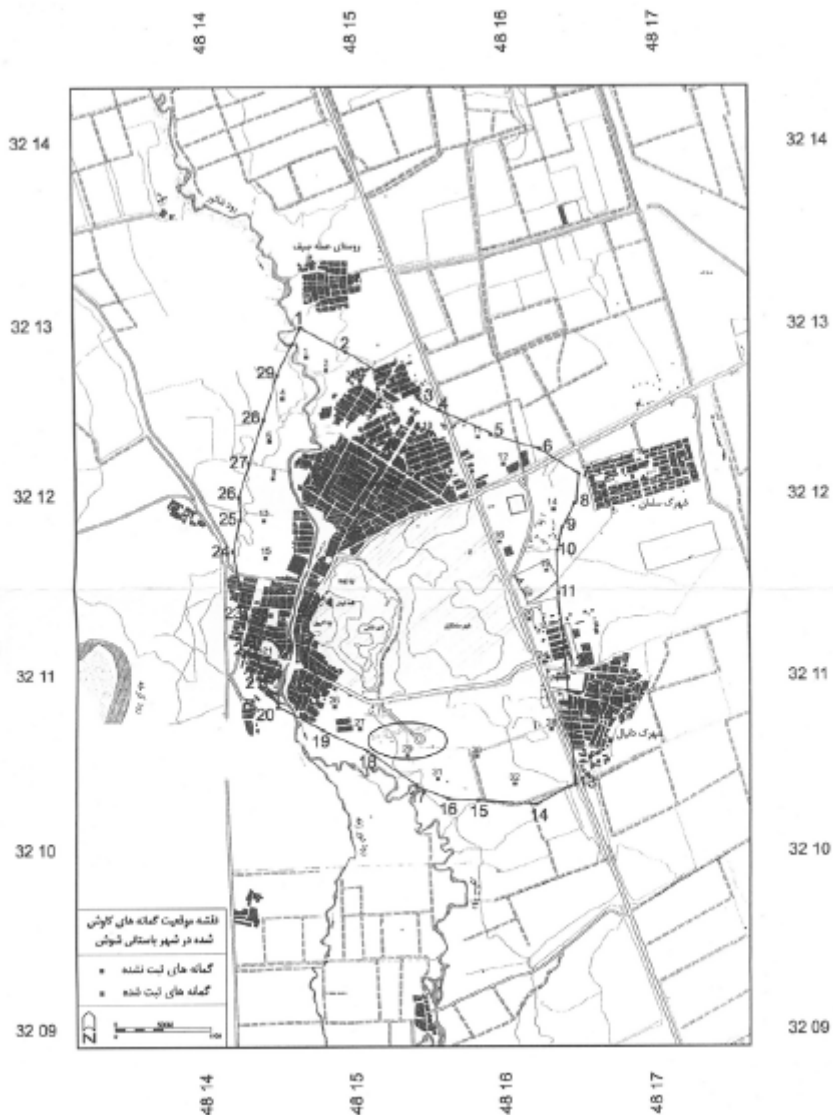
and prosperity of this city in the ancient world. It is a bit natural that a large city like Susa should have a cemetery to bury the dead. However, years of excavations by French archaeologists revealed nothing except a sarcophagus from an Achaemenid prince, which was reported by Jacque De Morgan in 1901.

Sarcophagi of Hossein Abad in Susa

In the aforementioned region, a borehole of 5×10m was excavated leading to the discovery of a sarcophagus. The borehole's layers were almost intermingled, which yielded both plain and glazed earthenware of the Islamic and historical eras. Even at the depth of 220cm of the



Fig. 1. Aerial Photo of the Susa and Location of the Sarcophagi of Hossein-Abad. Photo By George Grester (Thanks to Shahram Zare).



Map 1. The Ancient City of Susa and Hossein-Abad.

hill surface, a not-so-consolidated wall with Elamite bricks of $7 \times 37 \times 37$ was uncovered. Excavation continued until the depth of 330cm, where two sarcophagi were found, with both lying 2.5m away from each other.

The mine of stones used in the con-

struction of the aforementioned sarcophagi does not appear to have existed in Susa. However, the older fabric of Susa was made over a sand mass, with underground cellars created in these stones. These types of stones are easily formed and are easy to work on. Despite this,



Fig. 3. Excavated Area and Sarcophagi, Right: Sarcophagus 1, Left: Sarcophagus 2.



Fig. 4. Excavated Area and Sarcophagi, Right: Sarcophagus 1, Left: Sarcophagus 2.

they are highly fragile and vulnerable. If it is assumed that Shushtar or Dezful gravel stones were used to make Susa sarcophagi, the stones should have been carried there for construction.

Sarcophagus No. 1

Sarcophagus No. 1 or the southern sarcophagus measures 218cm long, with the shoulder and leg sides measuring 73 and 43cm wide, respectively. The height of



Fig 5. Findings Around the Sarcophagus 1, The Stone Lid of The Sarcophagi, Bricks with the Image of a Lion, and Pieces of an Alabaster Container.

the sarcophagus was no more than 38cm. The thickness at the bottom was measured between 26 and 28cm, while the wall was 10cm thick.

A part of the stone lid, belonging to the upper part of the chest that covered up until the head and measured 83cm long and 63cm wide, was recovered next to the sarcophagus. Architectural remains of three brick-made walls indicate that the sarcophagus was lying inside a small tomb, whose dimensions were a bit larger than those of other sarcophagus. Presently, there are just three rows

of wall bricks left, but the fragmented pieces of bricks, along with the rubble, indicate that the tomb walls were even higher.

The bricks measuring $8 \times 33 \times 33$ cm were used, with their center bearing an image of a lion in a stamp form and engraved in 6×8 cm dimensions. No objects or remains of human bones or skeletal were recovered from inside the sarcophagi; however, some pieces of earthenware and perfume bottles (Alabaster) were found in Sarcophagus No. 1.



Fig. 6. Some of Potsherds

Sarcophagus No. 2

Lying about two and a half meters away from Sarcophagus 1 was another one built with the same material. This sarcophagus is 227.5cm long and 75.5cm wide, while its height ranging from 26 to 28cm. The only difference between these two sarcophagi is the way the head is placed; in this case, it is quadrangular. This sarcophagus is also devoid of any objects or bones. Another sarcophagus of the same kind,



Fig. 7. Sarcophagus No. 2

discovered in 1988 from this place and later transferred to Susa, which is similar to Sarcophagus 1 in terms of its form and size. As suggested by Mir Abedin Kaboli, no objects or bones were uncovered from this sarcophagus as well except an engraved lion image over there.

Conclusion

There were some difficulties with the dating process due to the lack of objects

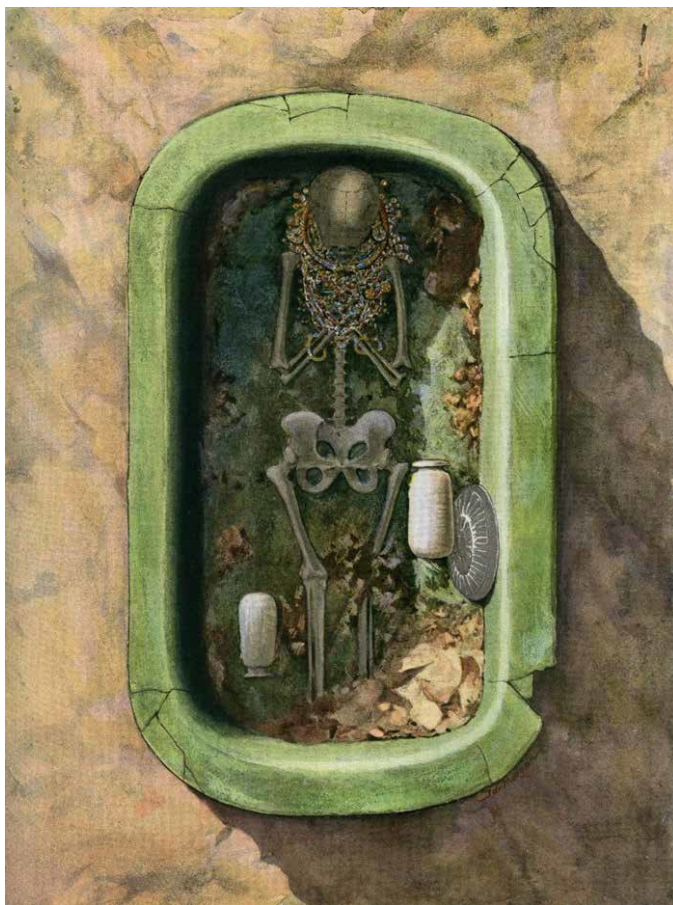


Fig 8. An Achaemenid Sarcophagus Uncovered from Susa (De Morgan, 1905).

inside the sarcophagi, nevertheless to the pattern of stamped seals on the bricks used in the construction of Tomb 1 attributed to the Achaemenid era, could help ascertain the chronology of these sarcophagi. In other words, stamped bricks bearing the image of lions, recovered from the Apadana of Susa and the Shavour Palace (Hesse, 1973: Pl. X- XI; Labrousse and Boucharlat, 1972: 8, Fig. 8), are comparable with the bricks of Tomb 1.

Therefore, the studied tombs and sarcophagi can probably attributed be to the Achaemenid era or a little after that,

due to the image of lions used on them. Moreover, the discovery of some pieces of perfume or cosmetic container made of marble stones with Egyptian origins, as found next to Sarcophagus 1, confirms that it did belong to the Achaemenid era.

Similar to marble containers inside of the Achaemenid sarcophagus of Susa were also found in Pasargadae, Persepolis, and the Achaemenid Tomb of the Hacinebi in Turkey (De Morgan, 1905; Stein, 2014: Fig. 20.9; Schmidt, 1957, Pl. 65: 1 & 12; 2014, Fig. 20.4: HN 2298 & Fig. 20.7: HN 12122 & 12133). A hieroglyphic inscription of the Ardashir reign was also



Fig. 9. An Alabaster Container Found from the Sarcophagus of Susa (Harper *et al.* 1992: 252, No. 180).

found, which bears the name of Ardashir the Achaemenid (Schmitt, 2001). Until now, not much is known about the Achaemenid burials in modern-day Iran, and our knowledge is limited to stone cemeteries of Pasargadae, Bozpar, and stone tombs of Persepolis and the Rustam Pattern. Some tombs were also recovered from Tang-e Bolaghi, Talesh, Roudbar, and the Sang Shir Cemetery of Hamedan.

Of the few non-stone burials performed in Rustam sarcophagi was the one belonging to an Achaemenid prince of Susa.

A not-so-accurate report of this sar-

cophagus, discovered in 1901 by De Morgan (1905), suggests that it lacked a lid. De Morgan cited this absence as a reason for the exposure of the body to scavengers. But such argument brings about conflict as they discovered a small tomb such as Sarcophagus 1. Among other Achaemenid tombs discovered in recent years is a cemetery in Zanjan's Dosaran (Rahbar, 1990), carved with conglomerate stones. Thus, contrary to previous thoughts, the Achaemenids were faithful Zoroastrians who used to bury their dead inside stone, metal, and conglomerate coffins to avoid contaminating soil.

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