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Changes and Developments in the Customs of Shahr-I Sokhta Based on the Burial Tradition

Zahra Rajabioun¹ 

Abstract

The customs surrounding burials hold significant importance as they shed light on the social and religious aspects of any given society. Shahr-i Sokhta is an ancient site of a sizable Bronze Age urban settlement, associated with the Helmand culture that dates back to the 3rd millennium BC. This is of great importance considering the fact that the information gathered from cemetery there proves instrumental in reconstructing the customs prevalent in this settlement. This article focuses on the changes observed in burial practices of Shahr-i Sokhta, specifically from period one to period four, and examines their correlation with the gender of the deceased. The study utilizes data obtained from excavations carried out during seven seasons between 1997 and 2003. A total of 213 burials with identifiable settlement periods were selected for the analysis. The study employed the SPSS statistical software and considered four factors: settlement periods, the number of burial objects, objects of significance, and gender. The settlement periods were treated as independent variables, while the remaining factors were dependent variables. The findings indicate a gradual increase in social class distinctions from the first period to the fourth period. Notably, these class differences are comparatively less pronounced during periods one and two.

Keywords: Shahr-i Sokhta; Customs; Burial.

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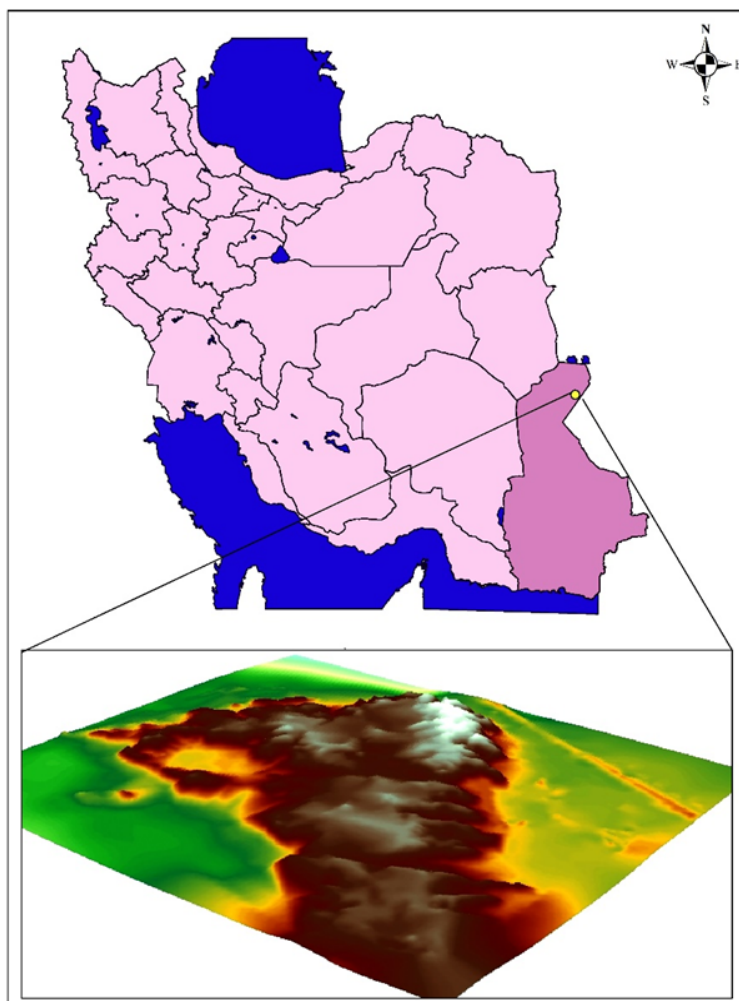
Introduction

Graves and burial traditions of prehistoric societies are among the most vital archaeological data that offer extensive insights into the spiritual aspects of those cultures (Talaie, 2002: 147). The significance of graves lies in their ability to provide diverse information on archaeology, anthropology, sociology, beliefs, and religious practices (Sarhadi Dadian, 2009: 72). By meticulously studying the data derived from graves, one can discern the societal characteristics of the individuals buried there (Sarhadi Dadian, 2009: 72). Furthermore, through the analysis of remains from graves and structures, it becomes possible to ascertain the social classes, occupations, religious affiliations, and the broad economic and cultural connections of ancient societies (Sarhadi Dadian, 2012: 82). Additionally, it facilitates the reconstruction of changes that transpired customs of these ancient societies.

Shahr-i Sokhta, in the eastern regions of Iran, stood as one of the most significant centers of urbanization during the mid-third millennium BC (See Seyed Sajjadi & Moradi, 2022; MehrAfarin, 2022; Seyed Sajjadi, 2023). The remnants of this remarkable civilization manifest in the form of material cultural artifacts found throughout this ancient city (Ascalone, 2014: 240). The discovery of numerous artifacts in the form of study materials, museum pieces, and laboratory items within Shahr-i Sokhta attests to the wealth, richness, and overall prosperity of its inhabitants (Seyed Sajjadi, 2010: 449). Among these findings, the presence of materials and objects inside the graves holds particular importance as it pro-

vides substantial information about the society (Seyed Sajjadi, 2011: 426). Shahr-i Sokhta itself is divided into five parts (Seyed Sajjadi, 2003: 21), with one crucial component being the Shahr-i Sokhta Cemetery. The cemetery is located in its southwestern part on a flat and alluvial terrain devoid of archaeological traces (Seyed Sajjadi, 2003: 21) (Fig. 1). The cemetery consists of three primary sections: the northern, central, and southern parts (Seyed Sajjadi, 2003: 21), covering an area of approximately 20 to 25 hectares and containing between 20,000 and 37,500 graves (Seyed Sajjadi, 2008: 134). However, it appears that a cemetery of this size and number of graves was insufficient for a span of 1000-1200 years in Shahr-i Sokhta, which served as the center of the Hirmand River civilization and seemingly had connections through trade and political control over vast territories between Kandahār, the Makran Sea, and the Gulf of Oman (Seyed Sajjadi, 2009: 134). The commercial and cultural interactions of Shahr-i Sokhta with distant lands such as India, Central Asia, and Oman were extensive and intricate. Numerous pieces of artifacts demonstrate the city's connections with southern Mesopotamia, Elam, and other regions of the Iranian plateau, such as Tepe Yahyā. During the same period, substantial links existed between this city and northern Khorasan regions like Altin Tepe, Namazgah, Mundigak, and the Waziristan region overlooking the Indus Plain (Seyed Sajjadi, 2015: 16).

Regarding the historical background of studies conducted on Shahr-i Sokhta, early archaeological investigations were initiated in 1960 by the Italian Archaeological Board (Tosi & Karlovsky, 1972:

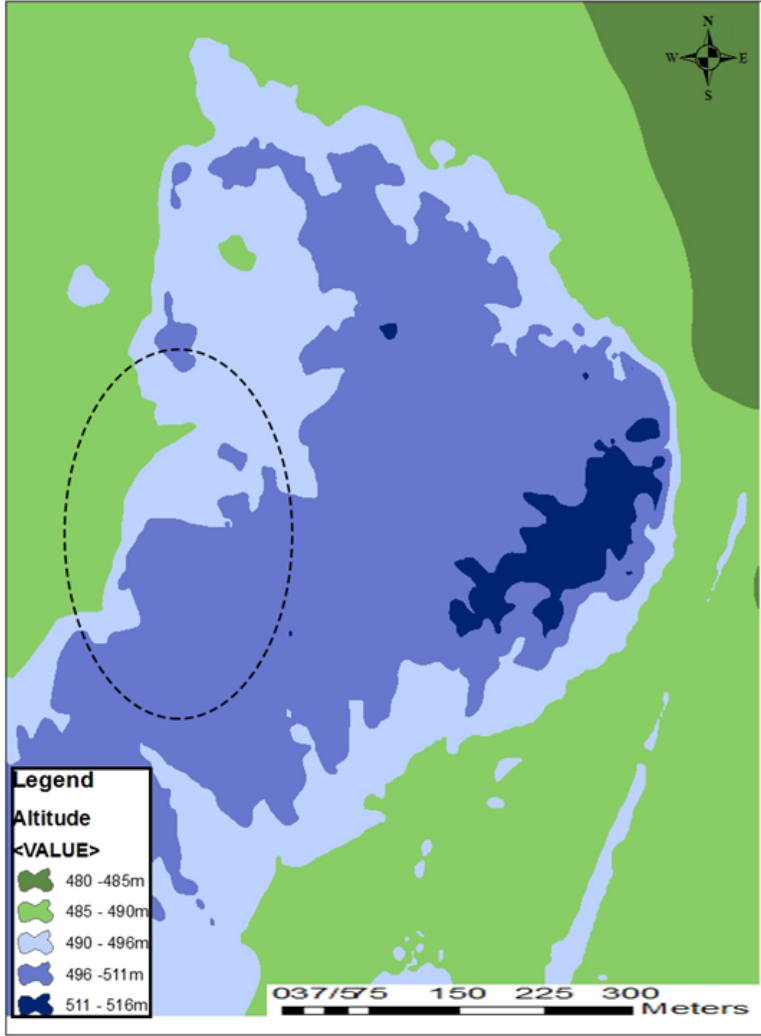


Map 1. Shahr-I Sokhta in Sistan and Baluchistan Province

23). This area was previously identified by Aurel Stein in 1916 (Stein, 1937). Subsequently, archaeological excavations commenced in 1967 under the supervision of Tosi, by the Archaeological Institute of ISMEO in Italy, and persisted until 1978 (Tosi, 1968). Later, in 1997, an Iranian delegation led by Seyed Mansour Seyed Sajjadi began its own archaeological excavations in the region (Seyed Sajjadi, 2014: 665), which have been ongoing since then.

Analysis of Changes and Developments in the Customs of Shahr-I Sokhta

The Shahr-i Sokhta cemetery is considered a valuable repository of diverse information and data due to the presence of numerous burial objects and materials (Seyed Sajjadi, 2011: 438). It serves as a comprehensive archive, offering a more complete and well-preserved record compared to other parts of the city (Seyed Sajjadi, 2011: 425). This cemetery holds immense significance as one of



Map 2. Shahr-I Sokhta and the Location of the Cemetery

the most important burial grounds in southeastern Iran. However, the earliest evidence of burial practices in the southeastern region of Iran can be traced back to the Neolithic period, specifically in the Mehrgarh area (Seyed Sajjadi, 2015: 10).

In terms of chronology, Shahr-i Sokhta encompasses four cultural-settlement periods. The first period spans from 3200 to 2800 BC and marks the formation and expansion of the area. The second peri-

od, from 2800 to 2500 BC, witnesses significant developments as the region takes steps towards urbanization. The third period, ranging from 2500 to 2300 BC, continues the ongoing advancements until the middle of the period. However, in the last quarter of this phase, the city experienced a decline, leading to various changes. Finally, the fourth period, from 2300 to 200 BC (or 1800 BC), brings about the rupture and destruction of the city

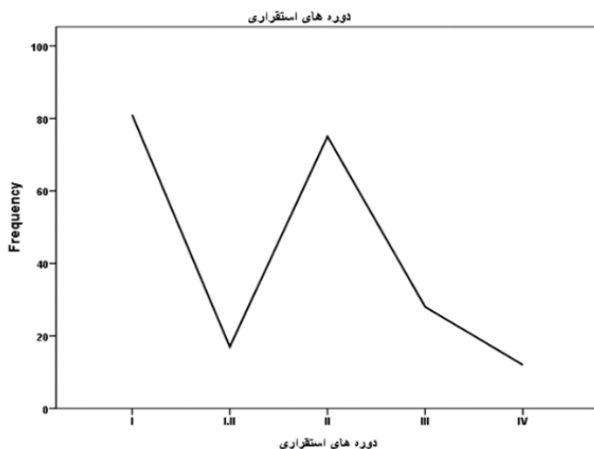


Chart 1. The Variable Number and Frequency of Settlement Periods

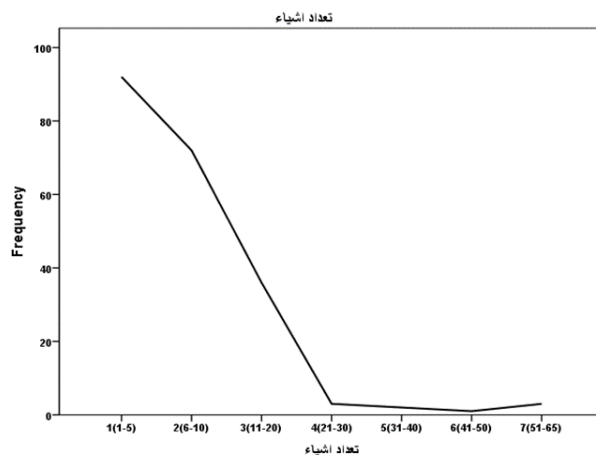


Chart 2. The Number and Frequency of Variable Number of Objects

(Moradi, 2008: 243). Over the course of approximately 1400 years of settlement in Shahr-i Sokhta, significant changes occurred in all aspects of social, economic, religious, and communicative life from period 1 to period 4. Consequently, these changes and developments are also reflected in the burial traditions of the site.

To investigate and examine these transformations, the data derived from the excavations conducted at the Shahr-i Sokhta cemetery over the course of seven

seasons from 1987 to 2003 were utilized (Seyed Sajjadi, 2007; Seyed Sajjadi, 2009). Among the collected burials, a selection of 213 graves, representing identifiable settlement periods, was chosen for this study. Given the abundance of data present in the burials of Shahr-i Sokhta, each of which holds significant potential for in-depth analysis, two factors have been specifically considered to explore changes in customs and their correlation with gender across different settlement peri-

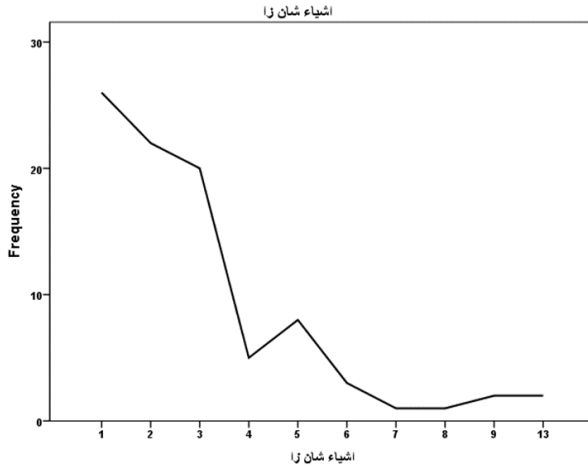


Chart 3. The Variable Number and Abundance of Luxurious Objects

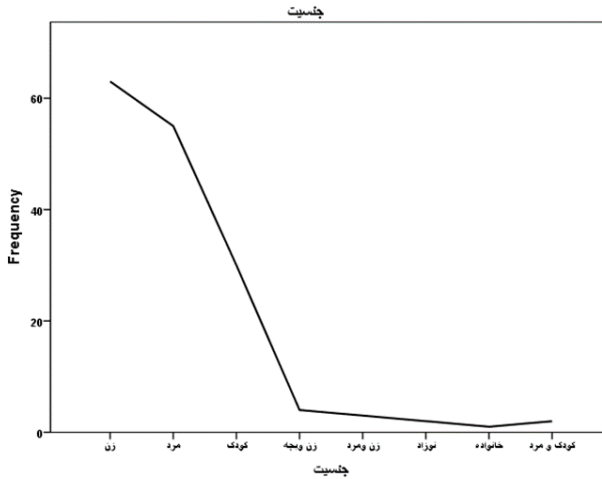


Chart 4. The Number and Frequency of Gender

ods. These factors include the quantity of objects and the presence of prestigious items, both of which are linked to the economic, social, and belief systems of the respective societies. The research incorporates four variables: settlement periods, the number of objects, prestigious objects, and gender.

One-dimensional tests, Multiple Regression, Pearson's R, and SPSS software were employed for the analysis. In this

analysis, the settlement periods are treated as independent variables, while the number of burial objects, luxury objects, and gender are regarded as dependent variables. The variable of settlement periods holds utmost significance and encompasses four periods numbered 1 to 4, along with an intermediate period labeled as 1.2, based on the available data. The variable of the number of objects encompasses all the artifacts discovered

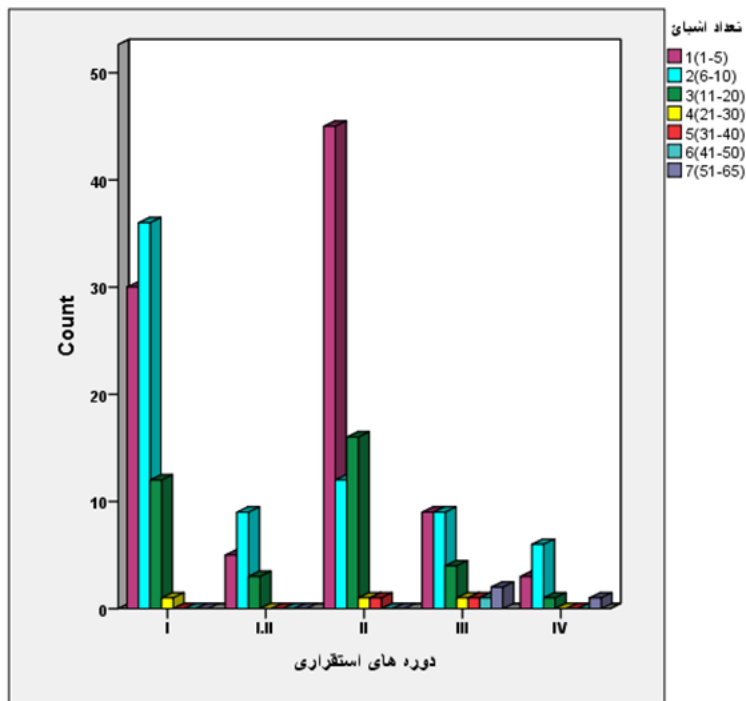


Chart 5. The Relationship between Settlement Periods and the Number of Objects

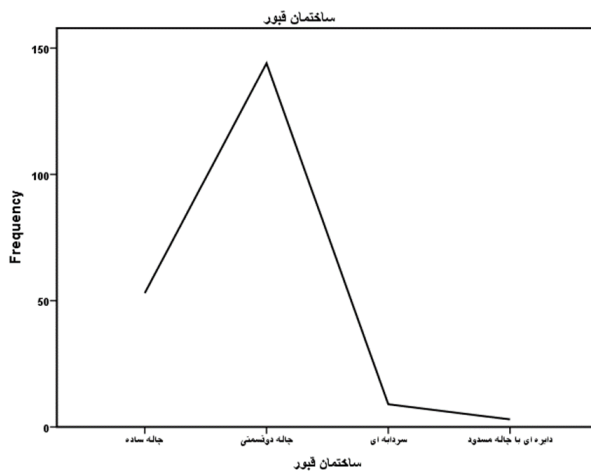


Chart 6. The Variable Number and Frequency of Grave Structures

from inside the graves, including pottery, decorative pieces, and so on. On the other hand, the variable of prestigious objects comprises items like bracelets,

necklaces, beads, bronze objects, marble objects, etc. These variables are further categorized into two: the quantity of objects and the presence of prestigious

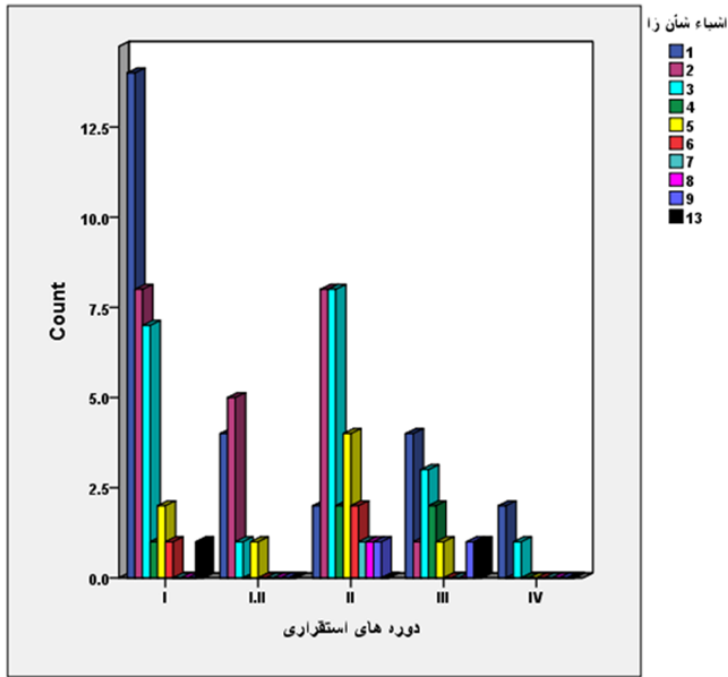


Chart 7. The Relationship between Settlement Periods and Prestigious Objects

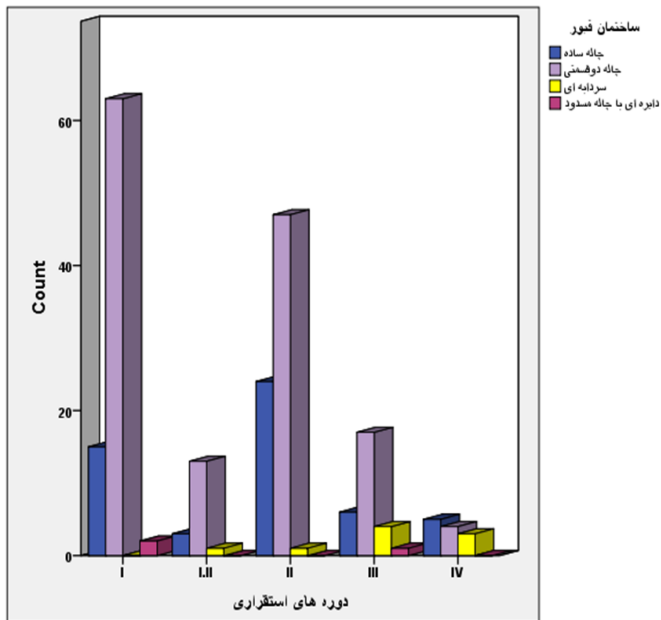


Chart 8. The Relationship between the Construction of Graves in Settlement Periods

objects. Notably, the number of objects increases progressively from the first category to the last.

The results obtained from the one-di-

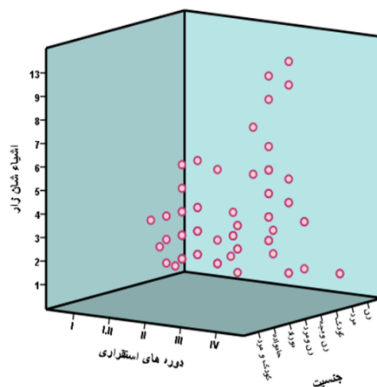
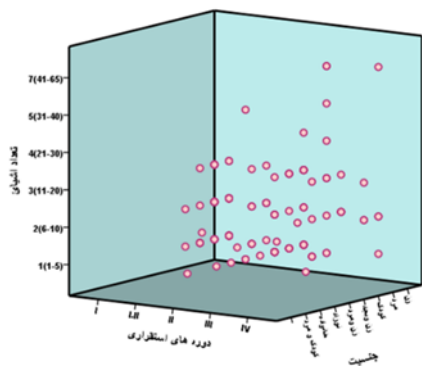


Chart 9. The Relationship of Gender Variable with the Number of Objects and Settlement Periods
 Chart 10. The Relationship of Gender Variable with Prestigious Objects and Settlement Periods



Fig. 1. A Simple Pit Burial (Reconstruction of Burial No. 3603)

mensional or frequency tests reveal that the majority of graves are associated with period 1 and period 2 (Chart 1). Therefore, in this study, in addition to considering the test results, the number of occurrences and their proportions are taken into account. Moreover, within the variable of the number of objects, most graves contain fewer than 10 artifacts, while a small number of burials possess objects

falling into higher categories (Chart 2). This pattern is also evident in the case of prestigious objects. Few burials contain a higher number of prestigious objects, with the majority falling into the lower categories (Chart 3).

The gender variable encompasses categories such as women, men, children, women and children, women and men, babies, families, and children with men.



Fig. 2. A Two-part Burial (Reconstruction of Burial No. 4304)

However, the largest number of instances is attributed to the first three categories: women, men, and children (Chart 4). The remaining categories, due to their significantly smaller numbers and lack of satisfactory results in the tests, are addressed to a lesser extent. It is worth noting that the number of female individuals exceeds that of males and children. The test results take into account the ratio of their differences.

To examine the correlation between the independent variable (settlement periods) and the dependent variables (number of objects and dignified objects), Multiple Regression, Pearson's R, and *F*-test were employed. The results indicate a significant connection between independent and dependent variables. As we progress from period one to period four, the number of graves containing a higher quantity of objects increases. Specifically, the variable of the number of objects exhibits higher categories in periods 3 and 4. This relationship and correla-

tion between settlement periods and the number of objects are relatively strong (Chart 5). However, the connection and correlation between settlement periods and dignified objects are weak (Chart 7). This discrepancy arises from a decrease in the appearance of dignified objects during the fourth period. While the relationship can be observed from period one to three, there is a sharp decline in prestigious objects during the fourth period. This reduction may be attributed to the economic, social, or communicative status of the society in relation to other regions or lands.

Another aspect related to the number of objects pertains to the construction of graves. In fact, the number of tomb structures varies across periods 1 to 4. Among the 10 known types of Shahr-i Sokhta graves, four are identified based on the available data: simple pits, two-part graves, crypts, and circular pits with a blocked section (depicted in Figs 3, 4, 5, and 6). Among these four types, the



Fig. 3. A Crypt Burial (Reconstruction of Burial No. 2802)

majority are two-part graves, followed by simple pits, crypts, and pits with a closed circle (Chart 6). Using the SPSS F test, the relationship between grave construction and the number of objects has been examined. The results indicate that, among the four types of graves, the crypt stands out significantly in terms of objects. The other types display relatively similar levels in this regard. Notably, crypt graves contain the highest number of objects, and their frequency increases from period one to four (Chart 8). Additionally, Seyed Sajjadi points out that the variation in objects and the quality or type of materials used in their construction also depend on the specific type of grave structure (Seyed Sajjadi, 2009: 145).

The subsequent subject that arises is

the examination of the relationship and correlation between the variables of objects and dignified objects with the gender of the deceased and how these relationships manifest across all settlement periods. The Pearson's R test was utilized to determine these relationships. Based on the results obtained from these tests, it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between independent (gender) and dependent (number of objects and dignified objects) variables for all three cases: women, men, and children. However, when considering the number of graves for each gender in the settlement periods and analyzing the graphs, it is evident that equality exists among men, women, and children in terms of the number of dignified and



Fig. 4. A Circular Burial with a Blocked Entrance (Reconstruction of Burial No. 1403)

other objects. This equality is consistent across all periods, and no notable differences can be observed between them with regard to quantity of dignified and other objects (Charts 9 and 10).

Conclusion

Given that Shahr-i Sokhta has experienced approximately 2021 years of settlement, it is likely that numerous changes have occurred in the customs of this region. This article employs the SPSS statistical software to examine changes and developments in the customs of the burnt city from period 1 to period 4, along with their relationship with the gender of the buried individuals. To this end, various tests including one-dimensional, Multiple Regression, Pearson's R, and *F*-test have been utilized, based on the

type of data and the research objectives. The four factors under consideration are settlement periods, number of objects, dignified objects, and gender.

When analyzing the data, it is important to note that a higher proportion of burials are associated with periods 1 and 2. Therefore, the analysis focuses on the ratio of graves across different periods. Overall, the obtained results demonstrate a significant relationship and correlation between independent variable (settlement periods) and dependent variables (number of objects, dignified objects). As we move to higher periods, higher categories of objects are observed in the graves. Specifically, periods 3 and 4 exhibit the largest number of objects in a grave, despite there are other graves containing fewer objects in the same peri-

ods. This suggests an increased class distinction among people. A similar pattern is observed for dignified objects, with the only difference being the specific variable of objects. Notably, the 4th period shows a sharp decline in prestigious objects, indicating the economic and social state of the society or its relations with other regions.

Furthermore, when considering the structure of graves in relation to the number of objects inside, among the four

types of graves (simple pit graves, two-part pit graves, crypts, and circular pits with a blocked section), the crypt stands out as distinct. These types of graves tend to contain a greater number of objects, and the highest number of crypt graves is found in period 4. Interestingly, when examining the gender variable, an equal distribution of objects and dignified objects can be observed. This equality between genders holds true across all establishment periods.

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