





Ritual Use of Shells in the Zagros Region of the Iranian Plateau

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Abstract

This study attempts to explore two fundamental questions: 1) Why have shells long been used as an exotic and non-subsistence commodity? And 2) Does the ongoing use and sacred character of shells provide evidence for the persistence of a religious and spiritual attitude toward them? Shell habitats include the northern shores of the Persian Gulf, as well as the Sea of Oman, extending from the southern Iranian plateau to the Indus Valley. The extraction and trade of seashells as commodities have been in demand since the Upper Palaeolithic and continue to this day. The analysis of the context used indicates that most shell objects are found in temples and shrines or given as offerings to the dead. Clearly, this context highlights a religious significance and reflects the beliefs of people throughout different periods regarding life after death and the special meaning attributed to these objects. In ethnographic contexts, shells symbolise spiritual forces, serving functions such as repelling demons and the evil eye. The brilliance and other physical properties of shells have captivated human interest from an aesthetic perspective. Water has also played a profound role in the ancient cultures of the Middle East, with gods associated with water evident in the ancient cultures of Iran from the Middle Bronze Age onwards. The enduring belief in the religious significance of shell objects, which has remained relatively unchanged since the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods, aids in the interpretation of ancient contexts.

Keywords: Shell, Persian Gulf, Ethnographic, The Zagros Region, Ritual.

Article Type: Research Article

Introduction

The valleys between the Central Zagros Mountains in western Iran and their surrounding areas were some of the earliest geographical regions to show evidence of permanent settlements during the Neolithic period. Human groups living in this region had to continually adapt to its specific environmental and climatic conditions (Matthews and Fazeli Nashli 2022: 93-114).

Before the Neolithic Revolution, valleys in the Zagros area served as suitable habitats for nomadic communities. Starting from the end of the fourth

millennium BCE, archaeological evidence indicates a growth in social and economic complexities among the cultures in this region, as well as long-term cultural continuity and adaptation. This, alongside the influence of Mesopotamian civilisation in the general neighbourhood, religious concepts, and attitudes, suggests both unity and cultural exchange (Matthews and Fazeli Nashli 2004: 66) (Figure. 1).

Among the archaeological data, the remains of seashells are of particular interest. The biological origins of these artefacts can be traced to the shores of the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman, reaching as far as the northern parts of the Indian Ocean and



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the Indus Valley. Nevertheless, shells have found their way from these far-flung points of origin to the valleys of the Zagros region, a considerable distance inland.

In recent decades, shell artefacts have sparked scholarly debates regarding the origins and development of complex cultural behaviours in human societies globally (Henshilwood *et al.* 2004; Henshilwood and Marean 2003; Kuhn and Stiner 2007), as shell ornaments possess certain qualities that make them valuable evidence in archaeological research. Shell products have served as prestige commodities because they are made from raw materials highly valued by many cultures in Asian, and they symbolise water, life, health, and fertility. The exchange of these material prestige goods has strengthened and reinforced interpersonal relationships within individuals, organisations, and communities (Yang 2011: 1-25).

The limited accessibility of these shell artefacts enhances their special significance, allowing them to serve as identifiers of social class and social rank.

On the one hand, the shells' quality and lustre could be associated with special supernatural forces; on the other hand, their uncertain marine origins evoke mysteries related to water and the sanctity of life. Consequently, shell artefacts could gradually come to be associated with the sacred forces of the sea, and accordingly were included among the sacred symbols and signs of cultures.

The brilliance of seashells likely dazzled the inhabitants of the Zagros region, which explains the history of their trade over distances exceeding 2000 kilometres from their native habitat. Shells were among the earliest human ornaments in Iran and the broader Middle East, serving as personal wealth and as a medium of exchange in trade.

The ongoing use of seashells defines the nature of a community, since these "moving objects" are part of a supernatural power reservoir that forms an integral part of a society's ritual system (Whalen 2013:624). Even today, shells are sometimes used as talismans. However, anthropologists often lack full knowledge of the true significance of these shells, or parts of them, and how they relate to other animals.

Methodology

In the present study, the explanation and analysis rely on both experimental and deductive methods.

Among the various locations studied, the most important are ports that provide documentary evidence of trade routes from the relevant time frame. This approach is widely recognised in archaeology today, particularly within the context of folklore archaeology. In fact, it may be the only way to reconstruct a tradition that has persisted since at least the third millennium BCE. Therefore, alongside standard archaeological studies, this study also incorporates direct, on-site field observation and communication with the last survivors of Iranian ethnic groups in western Iran, who have continued to preserve many elements of their traditional culture and way of life.

Archaeological Background of Shells Used in Western and Southwestern Iran

Numerous shells discovered in burial and ritual contexts, as previously described, indicate that most were found in excavated graves. However, despite the abundance of these findings, a significant problem arises when interpreting this data. Unfortunately, many of these excavations took place across various regions of the Iranian Plateau between the 1930s and 1970s, a time when precise methods for documenting objects *in situ* (within their discovery context) were not yet employed.

This limitation creates ambiguity, making it difficult to determine whether these shell fragments were part of the deceased's clothing ornaments or served as precious grave goods. Furthermore, due to the lack of human remains from the excavated graves, the age and sex of the deceased often remain unidentified in most cases. For example, during the Holmes expedition in western Iran, which uncovered a major portion of burial finds from the first and second millennia BCE, minimal reference was made to distinguishing the age or sex of the interred individuals (Schmidt *et al.* 1989).

Given these circumstances, we can propose the following analysis: Similar to surrounding regions – from the Levant to the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia – where shells in burial contexts held ritualistic and symbolic value beyond mere clothing ornamentation, it seems plausible that a similar practice was prevalent in the cultural sphere of the Iranian Plateau. This inference is supported by the precise typological similarities observed between the shells used in Iran and those in adjacent regions.

Some researchers have also addressed this reality in their interpretive reports, suggesting that, beyond merely depicting the trade routes of these spe-

cific goods, the shells held significance far greater than that of ordinary, everyday commodities. Hole *et al.* (1969) argued that, considering the flourishing interregional trade in specific goods like turquoise and obsidian, the presence of shells (particularly *Dentalium* and *Cypraea*) should be cited as one such commodity. They noted that the biological origins of these shells can be traced back to either the Mediterranean Sea or the Persian Gulf (Hole *et al.* 1969: 53, 78).

Shells in the Archaeological Sites of the Iranian Plateau

The earliest evidence of shell use on the Iranian plateau comes from symbolic decorative pendants made of shell found in the Late Palaeolithic layers of Yafteh Cave in Lorestan (Otte *et al.* 2007, 2011; Shidrang 2015). These shells belong to the families Olividae and Naticidae (Shidrang 2015). Shell artefacts have also been discovered in Ghār-e Boof Cave (Conard and Ghasidian 2011). Cowrie shells have been reported from the Neolithic period at the Chogha Sefid site in Dehloran (Hole *et al.* 1976:), Ali Kosh Tepe in the Dehloran plain (Hole *et al.* 1969:244) and Hajji Firuz Tepe, located south of Lake Urmia (Voigt 1983:263). The decorative beads from the Neolithic period in the D-layer of Ganj Dareh Tepe include a burial where a child was interred with a necklace consisting of three beads made from stone and shell. Smith identified one of these shells as likely originating from the Persian Gulf (Smith 1974:207) (Figure. 1).



Figure. 1: Shells from a Child Burial at Ganj Dareh Tepe
(After: Smith 1974:209)

Shells in the Archaeological Sites of the Iranian Plateau

The most important archaeological sites yielding shells from excavations are located in Western Iran. From the third millennium BCE onward, the use of shells became increasingly prominent, reaching its peak during the Iron Age. Key sites in the Zagros region that have yielded shells include the Lorestan Bronze and Iron Age cemeteries, Chia Sabz and Kamtarlan I cemeteries (Schmidt *et al.* 1989), Kalleh Nisar cemetery (Haerinck and Overlaet 2008), Bani Surmah cemetery (Haerinck and Overlaet 2006), Darwand B cemetery (Overlaet 2003), Kan Gonbad cemetery (Kaboli 1989), Zagros cemetery (Amelirad *et al.* 2012), Surkh Dom Lori cemetery (Schmidt *et al.* 1989), Kutal-i Gulgul (Overlaet 2005, 2003), Dar Tanha (Vanden Berghe 1968), Tape Nourabad (Seyed Sajjadi and Samani 1999) Kamtarlan (Vanden Berghe 1968), Baba Jillan (Hasanpur *et al.* 2015) Mala Mcha (Amelirad *et al.* 2017), Hasanlu IVB (Reese 1989), Kani Koter (Amelirad and Azizi 2021), and Khaton Ban Lorestan (Haerinck and Overlaet 2003) (Figures 2 and 3).

Shell Finds in Their Archaeological Contexts

In certain regions, such as the Middle East and the Indus Valley, special relations existed between coastal and inland areas from the beginning of the third millennium BCE onward. Evidence of these special relationships includes the presence of exotic shells deliberately placed in graves (Méry *et al.* 2009:22). This suggests a trade network in the northern Persian Gulf and the northern Indian Ocean that began around 2700 BCE (Méry *et al.* 2009:23). Shells found in these graves are often interpreted as decorations or simply as food waste, while in other cases, they are classified as valuable or exotic goods placed as gifts in graves. Yet for the inhabitants of a particular site, different shells carried various meanings, ranging from being considered “weird” objects with magical properties to simply being artefacts added as decorations. Bar-Yosef Mayer pointed out that during the Bronze and Iron Ages, shells were predominantly regarded as decorative objects (Mayer 2005).

In summary, the presence of shells in graves can function as important evidence for reconstructing certain aspects of past social and economic mechanisms. Examining these finds provides a wealth of information about the source of shells, their final destinations (evidence of trade routes), how they



Figure. 2: The locations of shell-bearing archaeological sites on the map of Iran. No-1,2- Hasanlu and Hajji Firuz; 3,4-Mala Mcha and Kani Koter; 5-Zagros Cemetery; 6- Ganj Dareh Tepe; 7-Kamtarlan; 8-Pusht-i Kuh cemeteries. 9-Kan Gonbad; 10-Dar Vand; 11-Baba Jillan; 12- Surkh Dom Lor; 13-Susa; 14-Yafteh Cave; 15-Ali Kosh; 16-Chogha Sefid; 17-Chia Sabz; 18-Bani Surmah; 19-Kutal-i Gulgul; 20-Khaton Ban; 21-Kalleh Nisar; and 22-Ghār-e Boof Cave. (After: Digital vector map of Iran and modified by the authors)

were modified (evidence of technology), and their uses (whether functioning as exchange goods, funeral gifts, or mere decorations) (Mayer 2011: 186).

Symbolic Beliefs and Functional Uses of Shells

The widespread distribution of shells in archaeological sites is evidence of both their popularity and enduring use among the cultures of the Iranian plateau (as well as other areas, especially Mesopotamia). Marine shellfish have long been valued as a source of food and dyes in coastal areas (Claassen 1998: 174–199). Marine shells are distinct from other animal substances; they are prized not only for their shapes, colours, and brilliance but also for their increasing value the farther they are from their coastal origins (Winters 1999). The northern shores of the Persian Gulf, located up to 2000 kilometres away, are considered to be the closest source of shells found in Iranian burial sites. Their consistent

presence in shrines and tombs attests to their ritual value (Cattaneo-Vietti *et al.* 2016:39). The most important factor in identifying the explicit meaning of a product is its functional use. Any object whose form indicates its use will hold meaning for the viewer. Recognising the elements and constructing the message within the language of objects establishes a connection between form, function, and meaning (Moghadam 2009:77). Each symbol and motif used in past objects carries its own semantic function. Objects that serve as evidence of something, such as wealth, isolation, or nostalgia for something lost, tend to have significant symbolic and traditional value, resulting in a high semantic load (Baudrillard 2005:77).

In such circumstances, where objective evidence may be lacking, archaeological approaches can be critical, because the continued use of shells and their trading system in remote areas until well into



Figure 3: From left to right: 1. Shells from Giyan (After: Louver AO 26405), 2. Sorkh Dom Lori (After: The Penn Museum: 43-29-103) 3. Susa (After: Louver SB 24278), 4. Baba Jilan (After: Hasanpur et al. 2015) 5. Hasanlu (After: The Penn Museum: 37-11-246), 6. Bani Surmeh, (After: Haerincx and Overlaet 2006) 7. the Zagros cemetery (After: Amelirad et al. 2012) 8. Abu Nasr Palace Shiraz Sasanian period (After: The Metropolitan Museum of Art : 48.101.208a), 9. Nishapur (After: The Metropolitan Museum of Art : 48.101.208a), 10. Siraf (After: The British Museum: 1613596120)

the 20th century is a well-established feature of nomadic tribal cultures in western Iran. Ridout-Sharpe (2017) believes that what led to shells being used as a special decorative element or a ritual symbol as a gift to the dead is their unique lustre and brilliance, as well as their rarity in inland areas (Ridout-Sharpe 2017:301; also see Trubitt 2003). Eliade (1991) argued that the ongoing significance of shells among many indigenous peoples can be traced back to their ancient magical importance, which still resonates within their cultures today. Although shells may primarily serve as personal ornaments, their magical value and importance have not been forgotten (Eliade 1991:144). This indicates that there must be some kind of symbolism in this phenomenon, because there is always a deep level of “primitive” thinking in creating symbolic concepts; its activa-

tion has undergone several interpretations over time (Eliade 1991:143-144).

In the ancient Roman religion known as Mithraism—itsself a derivation of the Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism, some also believed that semen was kept inside water lilies in Lake Hāmūn. This is why the images are sometimes depicted on water lilies or Lotus. Mithraism symbols are specifically knitted to water (Nikoei 2019:21). The maiden’s fertilisation and the growth of pearls in the water caused the followers of Mithraism to believe that Mitra was born from a shell, kept in the water, or that he grew up inside a water lily, leading to a strong association between Mithraism and the lotus, making both the lotus and the shell significant symbols within this tradition (Rostampour 2003:100).

The Use of Shells According to Ethnological Data

Anthropological and ethnohistoric descriptions of civilisations worldwide discuss the meanings and applications of marine shell decorations. Archaeologists have used these descriptions to develop models of the production, exchange, and use of prestige goods. Shell prestige items are material markers of past connections and relationships between individuals, organisations, and societies, as these items often pass through the hands of numerous people over extended periods. Thus, they allow archaeologists to interpret the actions of people from past eras. Even within a single culture, shell decorations and other prestigious objects may have been employed in various ways and practices. Based on ethnographic and archaeological data from the region, it is clear that shells have held significance not only for their aesthetic value but also for their ritual and social aspects, as evidenced by their continuous use from the Neolithic period to the contemporary era. Hodder (2013) pointed out that while societies today may share undeniable similarities with the past regarding traditions and religions, this does not imply that the meanings and functions of present-day behaviours are equivalent to those of the past (Hodder 2013:14-15). During the fifth millennium BCE, there was a significant change in burial practices, marked by the emergence of large cemeteries separate from their associated settlements. This phenomenon is observed throughout much of the ancient Near East, including southern Mesopotamia, northwestern Syria, the island region, Hamrin, the Shushan plain, and the central Zagros (Stein 2010: 30). In this regard, Hole (1989) considered the emergence of cemeteries as a sign of social groups claiming ownership of the land and believed that cemeteries, more than home burials, could represent group identities such as tribes and lineages (Hole 1989:175).

The archaeological literature provides ample evidence that shells frequently carry symbolic meanings and that the diverse applications of shell ornaments reflect the diversity of meanings associated with these objects (Smith 1983:228). Iranian folk culture is deeply rooted in historical customs, traditions, and beliefs. Among the various elements of popular culture, magic, amulets, and talismans have had a wide presence in the lives of the Iranian people. This includes stones, plants, animals, and shells. Spells and supplications are believed to possess extraordinary magical powers and have long been integral as practical and influential forces in tribal people's daily lives.

A fetish is an object thought to possess supernatural powers, particularly a human-made object believed to exert control over others. Essentially, fetishism involves attributing inherent value, or powers, to an object. The belief in the power of fetishes amounts to the use of hidden power in inanimate objects. In other words, fetishes sanctify certain material objects of primitive cultures and reinforce the belief that these objects contain great hidden and current forces that are useful for the finders and their companions while potentially harmful to their enemies (Nas 1975:15).

Shells Used as Amulets in the Context of Contemporary Folk Studies

Everything integrated into the rituals, customs, folk beliefs, and traditions of a culture represents a blend of belief and reality. Over time, every fact and truth undergoes transformations that can evolve into superstitions. This process leads to the formation and alteration of superstitions, which then find their place in society. Spells, supplications, and magical elements endowed with extraordinary power have existed throughout various periods, fueled by human imagination, giving rise to beliefs in Iranian popular culture (Alipour-Saadani and Sheikh Zadeh 2009:65). For many years, seashells have *symbolised* divine blessing, serving to counteract the evil eye while promoting beauty, female fertility, and healing from disease. In his book on women in the Qajar era, Rice (1923) reports that women wore shells in their hair as amulets and as antidotes for evil eyes (Rice 1923:189). Chardin (2012) mentions that shell games were played in Iranian coffee houses (Chardin 2012:790). René d'Allemagne (1911) pointed out that wealthy women adorned themselves with gold and jewellery, while poorer women used amber and shell for decoration (d'Allemagne 1911:280). Among the Bakhtiari and Kurdistan people, shells are hung in cradles to protect children from the evil eye (Figure. 4). The Lor and Kurdish tribes crafted shells into pendants; small shells were drilled, threaded, and fashioned into necklaces.

Shells have also been used on headbands and necklaces by the Renan children. In addition to the beauty of this type of jewellery, the Renan believed that shells not only guarded against the evil eye and disease but also enhanced female fertility. Additionally, shells were hung on the headbands of mares and lambs because it was believed that such adornments would protect the animals from

demonic forces and eye-related diseases while they were in motion (Figure.6). This type of headband and decoration, known as the *sherdeng* [*Sherdeng* (also *shirding* or *shedrang*)] is a handicraft made in different sizes, patterns, and colors by nomadic women and was hung in the form of decorative ribbons at weddings and celebrations (Figure. 5). On the tripod of *Musk* or *Mashk* [*Mashk* is the skin of an empty goat whose four legs are closed at the ends and at the head end with a piece of wood] Among nomads, two hands put the *Mashk* on one side of the rope and two feet on the other side of the same rope on a tripod. Then they pour milk into it, and, by beating the musk (that is, by moving the musk back and forth), they separate the butter from the milk itself. Blue beads and shells have been used both as ornaments and as symbols of blessing (Figure. 7).

Shells are also used as amulets, pinned on the left shoulder of the child or attached to the baby's sugar headband among nomads (Tofighi 2015:87).

A particular type of shell, called a "*Kecheck*," is used to repel the evil eye (Hussouri 1992:2; Mortensen and Nicolaisen 1993:144, 349, 353). During a talk at the Archaeological Conference of Western Iran, Kaboli (2006) mentioned the discovery of several necklaces and bracelets tied to a long-standing tradition in Lorestan. He noted that "In present-day Lorestan, rosaries or bad neck strings are torn and buried in the grave when the dead are buried". Kaboli believed that this custom traces back to human behaviour in the third millennium in the Turgsin region near the modern-day Ilam, referencing a type of necklace discovered in this area made from a marine gastropod operculum called a cat's eye (*Cheshmae Gorbe*) (Kaboli, 1989). This shell remains sacred among the Lor tribes and is used as an antidote for the evil eye (Sarmayeh Newspaper 2006). In many cases, these shell beads are also called "*Gabri beads*" (Figures. 4-8).



Figure. 4: Shell ornaments for children and women (Photo by: Hossein Moghimi)



Figure. 5: Nomadic tent decorations or *Siah chador* [*Siah chador* (black tent) is a kind of Tent. The nomads have certain places to stay in summer and winter, and they usually live and rest under these *Siah chadors*. Black tents are always woven from goat hair] blue bead (*lapak*) and *Sherdeng*

(Photo by: Hossein Moghimi)



Figure. 6: The use of blue beads and cowrie shells on a Mashk from the Bakhtiari tribe. They believe that these beads ward off the evil eye from the Mashk, which their livelihood depends on¹.

(Photo by Hossein Moghimi)



Figure. 7: Cattale² : Horse ornaments in a funeral ceremony accompanied by shell and blue bead buttons, among Bakhtiari nomads and Mashk (Photo by: Hossein Moghimi)

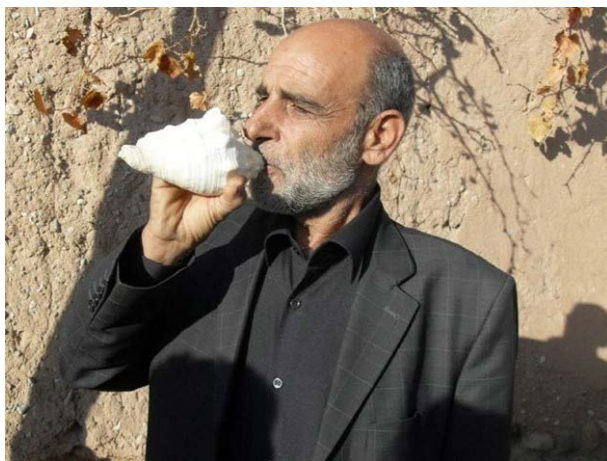


Figure. 8: A resident of Chatroud (Kerman) blowing a shell trumpet³. (After: Naseri 2023).

¹Mashk is the skin of an empty goat whose four arms and legs are closed at the ends and at the head end with a piece of wood. Among nomads, two hands put the Mashk on one side of the rope and two feet on the other side of the same rope on a tripod. Then they pour milk into it, and, by beating the musk (that is, by moving the musk back and forth), they separate the butter from the milk. In the tropics, water is poured into this musk and sold with it. And some others pour doogh (yoghurt and water) in the same musk.

²Cattel refers to the horse or mare of the deceased who is dressed in black in mourning and is supported by a gun or rifles. The Cattle is run by one of the relatives of the deceased around the place (Mafeh) created with special ceremonies.

³The residents of this village beat the instrument three times to announce the death of a villager. Also, on the day of Ashura (the day of the martyrdom of the third Imam of the Shia Muslims), this instrument was blown and they believed that the voice of YA Hussein could be heard from this instrument.

The Role of Shells among Western Iranian Tribes

An analysis of shell artefacts in both archaeological and ethnographic contexts shows that the people of Western Iranian communities believed in the magical and supernatural powers of these artefacts. This is partly due to their special characteristics, including strength, durability, and distinct lustre and colours. Similarly, rare metals, such as gold, have a similar value and prestige among various primitive cultures, even those lacking shared heritage or cultural contact. Figuratively, objects serve as metaphors for their meanings. For example, the cowrie shell, with its curved shape resembling an eye, led people to associate it with the concept of an evil eye. Physically and visually, this way of thinking goes back to the category of perceptual archaeology, where shared sensory-nervous systems among geographically and historically separated humans explain similar behaviours (Figures. 9-12)



Figure 9: Shell description, name- cowrie (with open dorsum), profile, and habitat. Archaeological context: This type of shell has been used as currency in many areas (After: Yang 2019) and as an ornament in the Bakhtiari tribe (Photo by Hossein Moghimi)



Figure 10: Shell description, name – Dentalium, profile, and habitat- It has different types, and its size varies between 5 to 15 cm. It has been seen in the waters of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Archaeological context: This type of shell has been seen at many ancient sites. In the Ali Kosh area, dating back to the Neolithic period, as well as at Iron Age sites related to the cemeteries, Hasanlu, and other sites. (After: Overlet 2003, 2008; Ress 1978). Ethnographic context: In Iranian belief, these are associated with the snake bead, which is the shell itself (Turbinidae). Some mistakenly believe it is a product of a liquid resulting from an intercross between two snakes, which then becomes an adjective and turns into a snake bead. This nut is known to increase a person's love, friendship, and attractiveness (After: Naseri et al. 2023)



Figure 11: 1. Shell description, name – Olivia, profile, and habitat - The size of this shell ranges from 19 to 46 mm. its location includes the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and the Ocean Atlas (Persian Gulf Molluscs p 95), Archaeological context- Yaffte Cave (After: Otte et al. 2007: 2011; Shidrang 2015) Ganj Dareh (After: Smith 1974: 207), Ethnographic context- Among the Bakhtiari and Qashqai tribes, examples of this shell have been used for women's ornaments (After: Naseri 2023).



Figure. 12: Shell description, *Nassarius* spp *Nassarius* profile, and habitat. It is a genus in the family Nassariidae, closely related to the family Buccinidae, belonging to the superfamily Buccinoidea. Members of the Nassariidae have a broad geographic distribution and inhabit diverse environments from tropical to temperate waters, primarily in tropical and subtropical regions (After: Cernohorsky 1984). Archaeological context –Surkh Dom-Lori (After: Shmidt 1989), Hasanlu (After: Resse 1987). Ethnographic context. In nomadic areas of Iran, these shells are used as black tent decorations (Photo by: Hossein Moghimi).

Conclusion

Shells are natural objects that require archaeological interpretation when discovered in archaeological contexts. Unfortunately, many archaeological teams in Iran have paid less attention to analysing these valuable findings, which field studies have shown to be from shells. From the Late Palaeolithic period to the modern century, it has been used by the inhabitants of the Iranian plateau. Although seashells in their natural habitat are mostly caught and collected by the coastal inhabitants to use their internal contents as food, the distribution of their hard and shiny shells in areas far from the coast suggests that these objects were used as commodities. They carry special values and concepts and were traded among various groups. Contemporary beliefs among primitive societies about shells can help us understand their function in ancient societies. Ethnographic studies show that tribes in western Iran still believe that shells possess magical and otherworldly powers, such as averting the eyes. Wounds destroy spells and magic, prevent the spread of diseases, and increase fertility, so these shells are sewn into children's clothes or saddles and caparisons of some animals. Some of these shells today, such as cowrie, dentalium, *Lambis*, etc., are either left in their natural state or carved for use in ritual contexts such as the remains of temples or as grave goods in burial sites. The spatial relationship of these objects with ritual contexts reflects their ritual and religious significance. It seems that the special form and shape of shells are closely tied to the ritual

value assigned to them. For instance, cowrie shells, resembling half-open human eyes, are believed to ward off evil eyes. Symbolically, the birth of shells in the heart of water- an element historically regarded as precious and sacred by tribes in arid regions of Southwest Asia- has been effective in honouring shells. In ancient Iranian Mithraism, there exists a belief that the seed of Mithras is hidden in the heart of the water lily, an aquatic plant, highlighting the symbolic value of sea creatures. The lotus flower has thus remained a consistent motif in Iranian art, both before and after the advent of Islam. From an archaeological viewpoint, it seems that the emphasis on seashells in ritual contexts, together with their presence in significant burial sites from the 3rd millennium B.C.E onwards, symbolically indicates the growth and expansion of complex societies during that time. The association of these shells with specific ethnic or political groups in certain geographical areas further suggests a sense of ownership and belief systems akin to totems within those communities.

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