



## Painted Bricks of Baba Jan: Stylistic Variation in Iron Age Iranian Decorative Brickwork

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### Abstract

Four seasons of archaeological excavations at Baba Jan Tepe in Luristan resulted in the discovery of a large mud-brick structure dating back to Iron Age II. Within this structure, particularly in a room known as the Painted Chamber, a significant number of painted bricks featuring geometric motifs were unearthed. These bricks were transferred to the storage of the National Museum of Iran following their discovery in the 1960s and 1970s, yet no specific studies have been conducted on them until now. Using a descriptive-analytical approach, the present study aims to describe and typologically classify the painted bricks from the Baba Jan Tepe, seeking to explore their relationship with other styles and traditions of decorative brick production during the Iranian Iron Age, including those from the Central Plateau and the Neo-Elamite and Mannaeian glazed tiles. For this purpose, the required data were collected through field and library studies. Field data were obtained through direct examination of the painted bricks housed in the National Museum of Iran, supplemented by information drawn from archaeological reports. The results indicate that the bricks from Baba Jan Tepe represent one of the four decorative brick-making traditions in Iron Age Iran, characterised by a distinctly local and independent style. Furthermore, the Baba Jan Painted Chamber was likely used as a temple, indicating that during the Iron Age in Iran, decorative bricks were primarily used for embellishing religious spaces.

**Keywords:** Painted Brick, Baba Jan, Iron Age, Decorative, Painted Chamber.

**Article Type:** Research Article

### Introduction

In the 1960s, a British archaeological expedition led by Clare Goff carried out extensive archaeological surveys in the Luristan region of western Iran. Following these explorations and the identification of numerous archaeological sites, the mound of Baba Jan was selected for excavation. This site contained cultural layers that spanned from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE. During the excavations, within layers attributed to the first half of the first millennium BCE, or, more specifically, Iron Age II and III, a large, massively constructed “Fort” was uncovered. On the floor of one of its rooms, known as the Painted Chamber, a significant number of colour-painted bricks adorned with geometric motifs were discovered.

These bricks were briefly described in the excavation reports (Goff 1969: 128-130; Goff 1970: 146-149; Goff 1977: 137-140) and were later transferred to the National Museum of Iran in Tehran. Since their discovery, they have been regarded as one of the most remarkable cultural finds of the Iron Age in Luristan. However, apart from a single article by Robert Henrickson (1983), which attempted to reconstruct their arrangement on the ceiling of the Painted Chamber, the bricks themselves have received little scholarly attention. They have not been studied within the broader context of decorative brickmaking traditions of the Iron Age Iranian Plateau, and even high-quality colour images of them were unavailable. Given the recent discoveries of decorated bricks at numerous Iron Age sites



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across the Iranian Plateau, which have considerably expanded our understanding of their geographic distribution, the necessity of revisiting and studying the Baba Jan bricks has become more pressing than ever.

The present article focused on the bricks housed in the National Museum of Iran. While introducing and classifying them, the study aims to answer several questions regarding their nature, including: “Which part of the structure did these bricks decorate, and what was the function of the Painted Chamber within the Baba Jan complex?” and also, “How were the Baba Jan painted bricks influenced by and related to neighbouring Iron Age cultures, such as Elamite and Mannaeen glazed bricks or the decorative bricks of the Central Plateau region?”. To address these questions, the paper first outlines the architectural features of the Iron Age complex at Baba Jan and the Painted Chamber. It then presents a description and typological study of the bricks, followed by a comparative analysis with other Iron Age decorated brick traditions across the Iranian Plateau.

### Methodology

The present research is a descriptive-analytical study where the required data were collected through fieldwork and library research. During the fieldwork phase, all the Baba Jan-painted bricks currently preserved in the National Museum of Iran in Tehran were directly observed, described, measured, and photographed, including both complete and fragmented pieces. The technical, decorative, and artistic characteristics of each specimen were recorded to enable comparison and typological analysis. In the library research phase, excavation reports and published studies related to Baba Jan, particularly those authored by Clare Goff, were thoroughly reviewed and analysed.

### The Iron Age Architectural Complex of Baba Jan

The site of Baba Jan is located near the modern city of Nurabad in northern Lorestan Province, western Iran. It was excavated for four seasons in the 1960s and 1970s under the direction of Clare Goff. Baba Jan refers not just to a single ancient mound but also to several large and small hills, the largest of which Clare Goff named the Central Mound and the East Mound. Her excavations focused pri-

marily on these two mounds, and she published reports of these excavations in several articles in the journal *Iran* (Goff 1968, 1969; 1970; 1977; 1978). Throughout the excavations of these mounds, five occupational levels were identified, representing periods from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, designated as Levels I–V (Goff 1970: 142, Figure. 1). The principal Iron Age occupation was uncovered in Level III of the Eastern Mound, where the painted bricks were also found. Although absolute dating is lacking, archaeological evidence places this occupation between ca. 900–700 BCE (Goff 1978: 42).

According to Goff’s reports, the architectural remains of Layer III on the Eastern Mound consisted of two interconnected complexes. She referred to the first as a “Fort” and the second as the “Painted Chamber” (Figure. 1). The fort, situated in the western and upper part of the Eastern Mound, included a central columned hall surrounded by smaller rooms (Goff 1977: 103–105). The most remarkable structure within the Baba Jan complex was in the south-eastern corner of the fort, on the right-hand side of the courtyard, identified by Goff as the Painted Chamber. Although this structure was architecturally part of the Fort, its larger size and the presence of red and white painted walls led Goff to classify it as a distinct unit known as the Painted Chamber. This large, irregularly-shaped hall measured approximately 10.4 × 12.5 metres and was likely accessed through a doorway from a smaller chamber that opened onto a courtyard to the south (Goff 1970: 144). Two narrow rooms flanked the northern and western sides of the Painted Chamber, with a possible additional annexe to the east that has since been destroyed. A large courtyard lay to the south (Goff 1969: 126; 1970: 144–145; 1977: 121–127). Near the northern doorway, a recessed fireplace was built into the thick wall of the structure. Another notable feature was the presence of stepped niches, referred to by Goff as recessed blind windows, along the western wall—likely mirrored by similar niches on the opposite wall that have since disappeared (Goff 1970: 144–146; 1977: 121–123). At the western end and in the middle of the northern wall, multiple rabbit doorways (or recessed doorways) opened into the adjacent rooms, contributing to the architectural sophistication of the Painted Room (Figure. 2). The walls were first coated with white plaster and then painted red; the floor was paved with square mud-bricks. In the centre, the remains of two column bases, each about 90 cm in diameter, were found

(Goff 1969: 128; 1970: 146–148; Goff 1977: 121, 137–139). However, the most remarkable finds from the Painted Chamber were undoubtedly the decorated bricks, which will be described in the following section.

### Painted Bricks

As mentioned above, during the excavation of the painted Chamber, a significant number of painted bricks were discovered, primarily found lying on the floor of this room (Figure. 3). Determining the

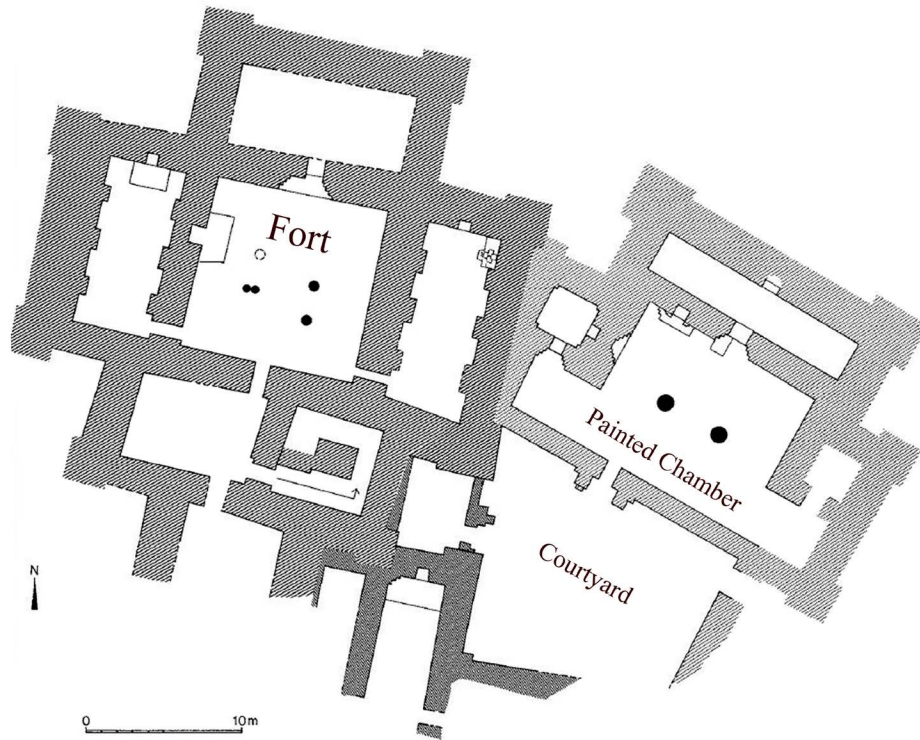


Figure 1: Plan of Fort and Painted Chamber of Baba Jan (After: Roaf 1998: Figure. 10)

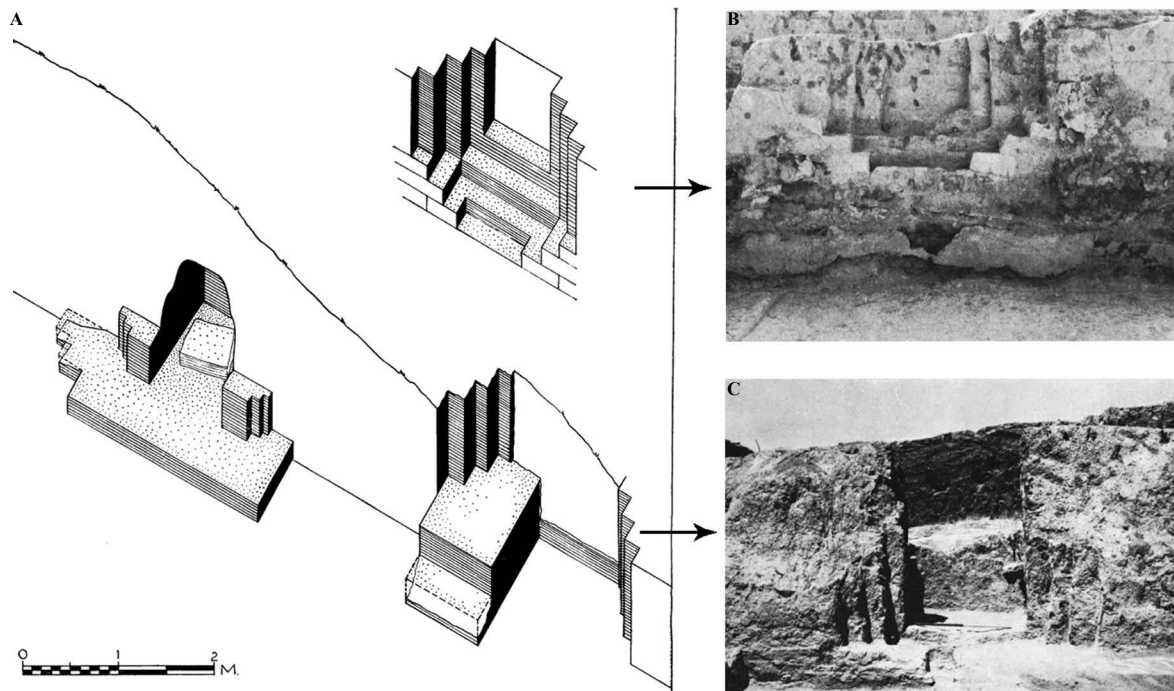


Figure 2: Painted Chamber details. (A) Reconstruction drawing of the chamber showing the fireplace, stepped niches and doorway with multiple rabbets (After: Goff 1970, figure. 3). (B) Stepped niches and (C) Doorway with multiple rabbets (After: Goff 1977, pl. 8a–b).

exact total of these bricks based on the specimens housed in the National Museum of Iran is challenging, as many of them are broken or fragmented. Among the collection, only 94 complete or nearly complete pieces are available for observation. The potential number of bricks that may have been transferred outside of Iran remains unclear. However, Clare Goff's excavation reports indicate that 176 complete or partially complete tiles were identified on the floor of the room. Although numerous brick fragments were also found among the debris and even within the rubble of the upper levels (i.e., Level II), it seems that the total number of bricks did not exceed 200 (Goff 1977: 123).

All of these bricks were made from fine sandy clay, and their dimensions were relatively standardised. Their length varies between 46.3 and 47.3 cm, their width between 41 and 42 cm, and their average thickness between 4.8 and 7 cm, resulting in an overall average size of  $47 \times 41.5 \times 6$  cm. Goff did not provide specific information regarding their weight, but measurements taken from the specimens in the National Museum indicate that these bricks weigh, on average, between 15 and 16 kilograms. The backs of the bricks are rough, while the painted surfaces are completely smooth, self-slipped, and slightly concave. The surfaces of all the bricks exhibit a light cream or buff colour, and for decoration, red paint, and in some cases, reddish-brown, was used. The design of the motifs follows a consistent standard: the edges and borders of all bricks, measuring about 3 to 5 cm wide, are left plain and undecorated, while only the central part is painted. The motifs are entirely geometric, consisting of two basic shapes, square and circle, arranged in various positive and negative patterns (Figures 4–11). Based on Clare Goff's notes and the examination of the bricks preserved in the National Museum, six main decorative motifs can be identified (Figure 4), for which we retain the same names used by Goff in her publications:

**Standard design:** The majority of the painted bricks fall into this category. The design features a large central square that fills most of the tile, with a plain border around the edge. The square is divided into quadrants by a white cross with a small red square in the centre. Each quadrant contains a red square enclosing a white square, which has a solid red block in the centre. Thus, each of the four squares contains three concentric squares. The edges of the white cross are lined with dots (Figures 5–6).

**Reverse design:** This design closely resembles the previous type; however, in this case, the central cross motif that divides the large square into four equal parts is red, with a small white square at its centre. In fact, a heavy red square border is divided into quadrants by a red cross with a small central white square. Lines of red dots outline the red cross. Nested within each quadrant is a central red block in a hollow red square (Figure 7).

**Nine Square design:** A heavy red border outlines a square cut into nine smaller squares by a grid of red lines. Each square may feature concentric arrangements of blocks, squares, dots, and checkboards. Only one complete example of this type exists in the National Museum collection, in which the inner squares are painted (Figure 8). However, according to Goff's published figures, one specimen had unpainted squares (Goff 1977: Pl. 16). Several incomplete fragments in both the museum and Goff's reports (Goff 1969: Figure 9; 1970: Pl. 3) indicate that, in some cases, the nine small squares had chequered centres (Figure 8).

**Twenty-five Square design:** A heavy red border outlines a square divided into twenty-five squares by a grid of red lines. The five squares forming a cross in the centre of the tile contain solid red squares with dots along the sides facing the central square (Figure 9).

**Cartwheel designs:** This group features four concentric red circles, with the innermost circle connected to the second by diagonal lines, producing a motif reminiscent of a chariot wheel. The outer circles are usually decorated with small red dotted designs (Figure 9).

**Diagonal Cross design:** A heavy diagonal cross bordered with dots cuts the field into four triangular areas, each containing three squares with dotted borders. The squares may either be solid or hollow (Figure 10). Goff referred to these tiles as the St. Andrew's cross design.

As described above, six decorative motifs can be observed on the Baba Jan bricks. Out of the 176 discovered bricks, 133 (75.5%) bear the standard design, 21 (12%) the reversed design, 7 (3.9%) the nine-square pattern, 1 (0.56%) the twenty-five-square design, 4 (2.2%) the cartwheel pattern, and 10 (5.6%) the diagonal cross design (Figure 12). The statistical data presented here are derived from Clare Goff's excavation reports (1977: 137-139 and also Henrickson 1983). As noted above, many of

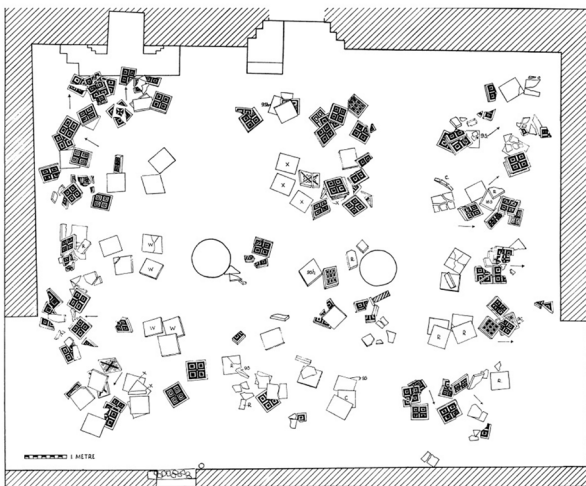


Figure 3: Plan of Painted Chamber of Baba Jan and tiles scattered all over the floor. (After: Goff 1970: Figure. 4)

cate that the Baba Jan bricks have a local origin and are not significantly influenced by the art of neighbouring regions. In fact, their motifs most closely resemble those found on the characteristic first-millennium BCE pottery of Luristan, known as “Genre Luristan Ware.” Similar motifs—crosses (+), diagonal crosses (×), checkerboards, and cartwheel designs—can be observed on these ceramics (Figure. 13). Despite the uniqueness of the Baba Jan brick motifs, a few comparable examples can be found. For instance, although the nine-square design and diagonal cross patterns have no exact parallels in neighbouring cultures, the diagonal cross motif does appear on Luristan Genre Ware pottery and on pottery from Necropolis B at Sialk, although the forms of the crosses differ (Ghirshman 1939: Pl. LXXI a, and LXXX a). Similarly, both the checkerboard and

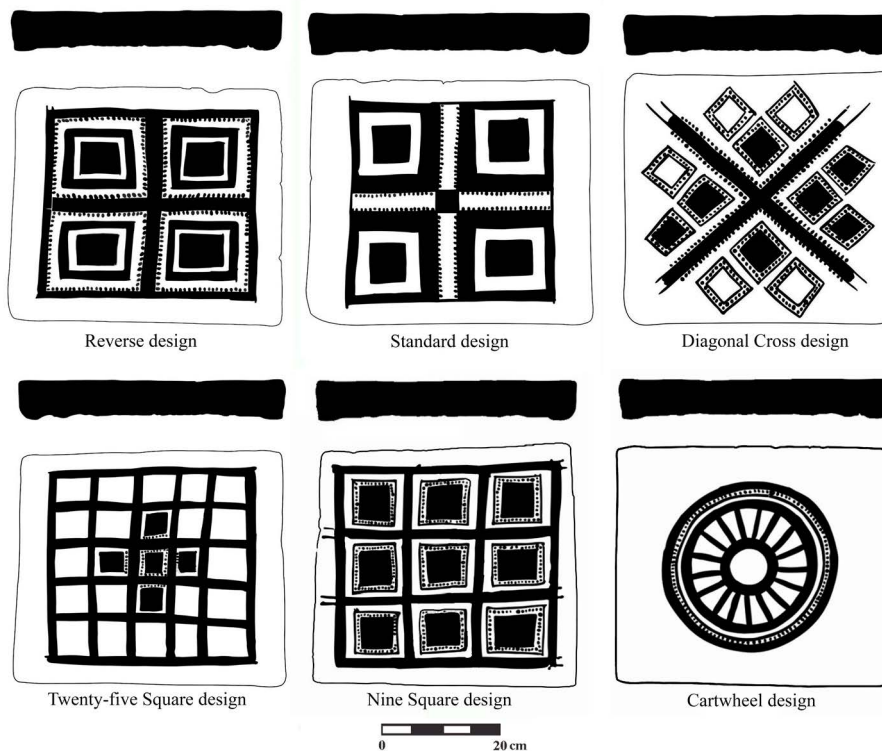


Figure 4: Six distinct designs of Baba Jan painted bricks

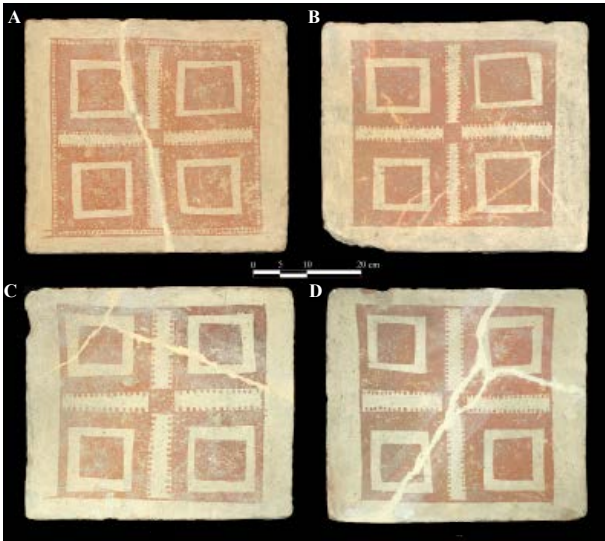
(Drawn by the authors based on photographs of brick objects housed in the National Museum of Iran).

the brick fragments housed in the repository of the National Museum of Iran are broken or incomplete. Only ninety-four intact or nearly complete specimens were identified, making it difficult to establish the relative frequency of the various decorative types.

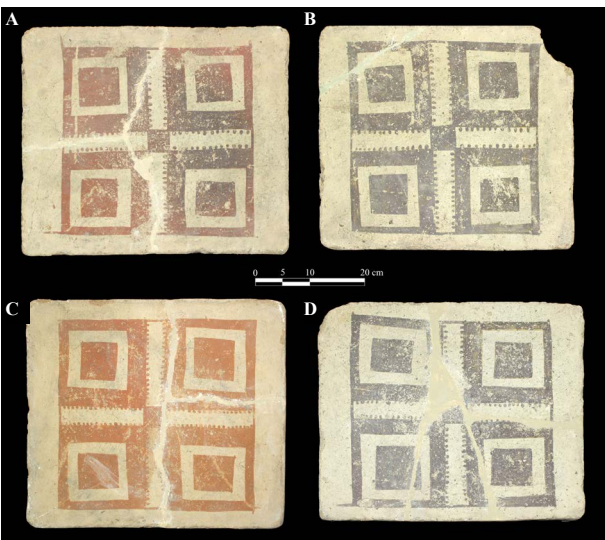
The investigations carried out in the present research, and the comparison of the decorative motifs on the Baba Jan bricks with those on pottery and bricks from adjacent and contemporary sites, indi-

reversed design have close parallels on pottery from Sialk, Necropolis B and on decorated bricks from Sialk (Figure. 14) (for reversed design: Ghirshman 1939: pl. LXIV, s 872; for checkerboard: pl. LIV, s 811 and s 813; for standard checkered: pl. LXVII, s 701; and for checkerboard motifs on bricks: pls. 21 and 98).

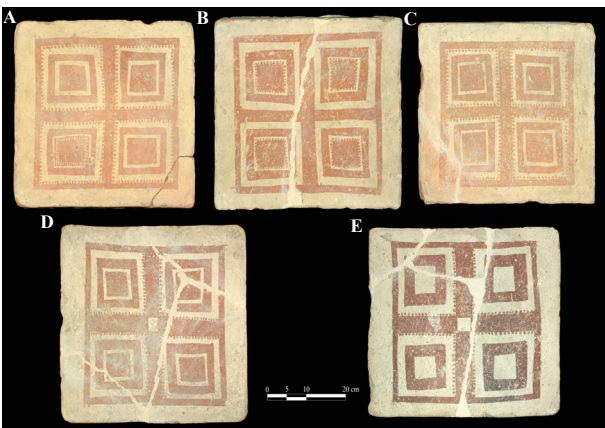
It appears that the main difference between the motifs on Luristan Genre Ware, Sialk Necropolis B pottery, and the Baba Jan bricks lies in their colour-



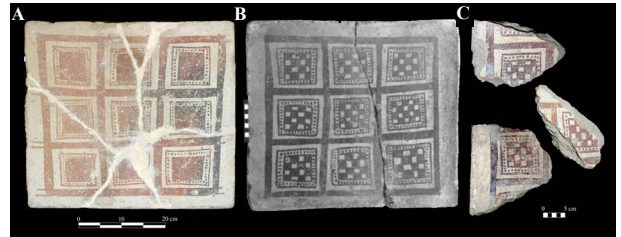
**Figure 5:** Composite image of four Baba Jan painted bricks with the Standard design. (A) Accession no. 6739; (B) Accession no. 6728; (C) Accession no. 6760; (D) Accession no. 6788. (Photographs taken by the authors of brick artefacts curated at the National Museum of Iran).



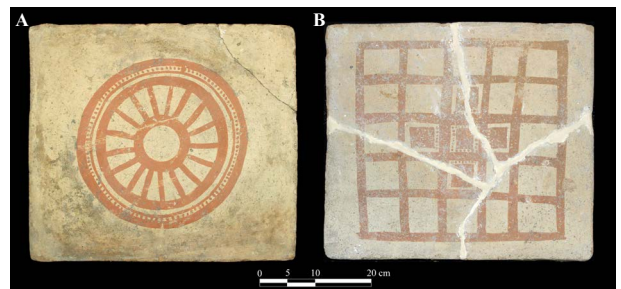
**Figure 6:** Composite image of four Baba Jan painted bricks with the Standard design. (A) Accession no. 6782; (B) Accession no. 6781; (C) Accession no. 6786; (D) Accession no. 6780. (Photographs taken by the authors of brick artefacts curated at the National Museum of Iran).



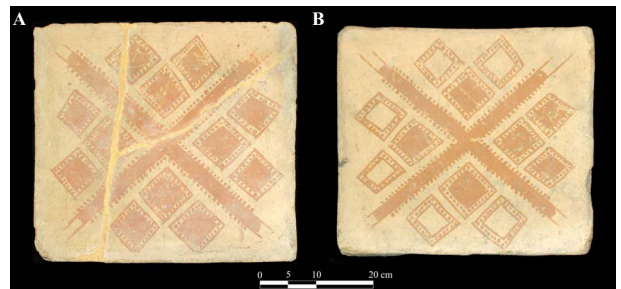
**Figure 7:** Composite image of five Baba Jan painted bricks with the Reverse design. (A) Accession no. 6733; (B) Accession no. 6767; (C) Accession no. 6778; (D) Accession no. 6757; (E) Accession no. 6776. (Photographs taken by the authors of brick artefacts curated at the National Museum of Iran).



**Figure 8:** (A) A painted brick with nine square designs. Accession no. 6737 (B) Nine square designs brick with a checkered pattern (After: Goff 1970: Pl. 3). (C) Fragments of nine-square designs brick with a checkered pattern (Photographs taken by the authors of brick artefacts curated at the National Museum of Iran).



**Figure 9:** Baba Jan painted bricks showcasing (A) A cartwheel design; Accession no. 6734 and (B) A twenty-five square design; Accession no. 6736. (Photographs taken by the authors of brick artefacts curated at the National Museum of Iran).



**Figure 10:** Two examples of painted bricks featuring the diagonal cross design. (A) Accession no. 6744; (B) Accession no. 6748. (Photographs taken by the authors of brick artefacts curated at the National Museum of Iran).



**Figure 11:** Examples of fragmented brick pieces of Baba Jan, showing rear, side, and cross-sectional views. (Photographs taken by the authors of brick artefacts curated at the National Museum of Iran).

ration. While most Sialk and Baba Jan pottery show dark brown or black designs on a buff background, the geometric motifs of Baba Jan bricks are executed in red on a cream or buff slip. Moreover, while Sialk Cemetery B pottery features a wide variety of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, vegetal, and geometric motifs, the Baba Jan bricks bear only simple geometric designs—indicating a cultural distinction between the Iron Age art of Sialk and that of Luristan. The Sialk bricks are also characterised by impressed, stamp-like decoration without any paint, which clearly distinguishes them from the painted decorative bricks of Baba Jan.

### Painted Chamber Ceiling

The placement of the bricks in the Painted Chamber Ceiling is noteworthy. Despite their considerable weight and large size, both Clare Goff (1970: 146–147; 1977: 123) and Henrickson (1983) asserted that the bricks were installed on the ceiling. Of course, these bricks alone could not have covered the entire ceiling; due to their dimensions, they probably decorated only a portion of it and were probably arranged within separate framed panels. It is believed that the bricks were cemented into a clay backing, probably reinforced with wooden tie beams. The rough rear surface of the bricks would

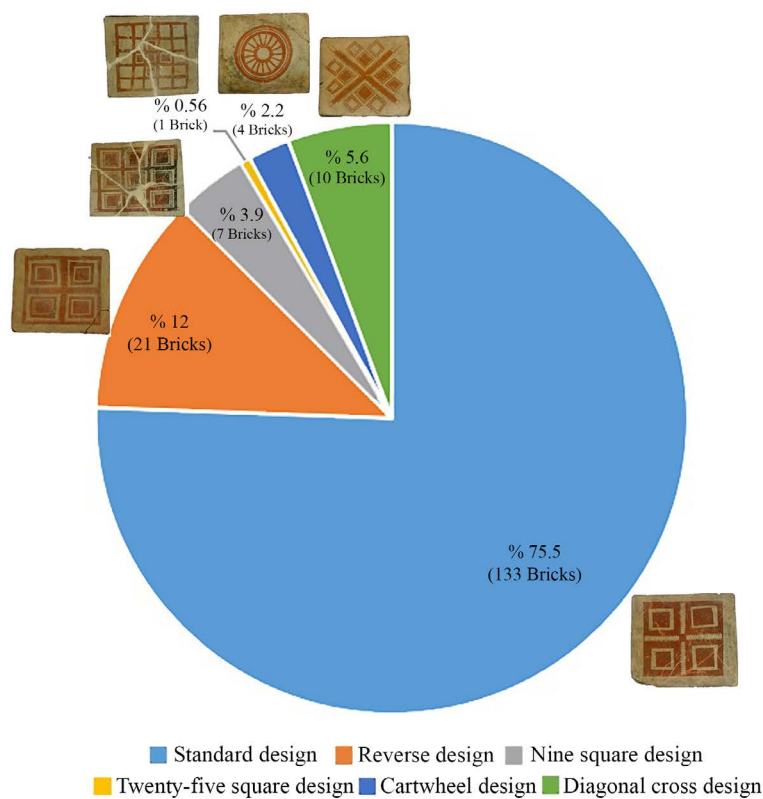


Figure 12: Frequency distribution of painted bricks by design type.

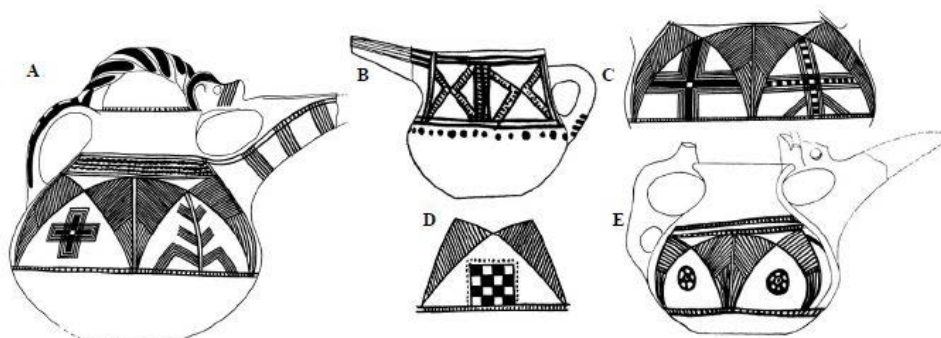
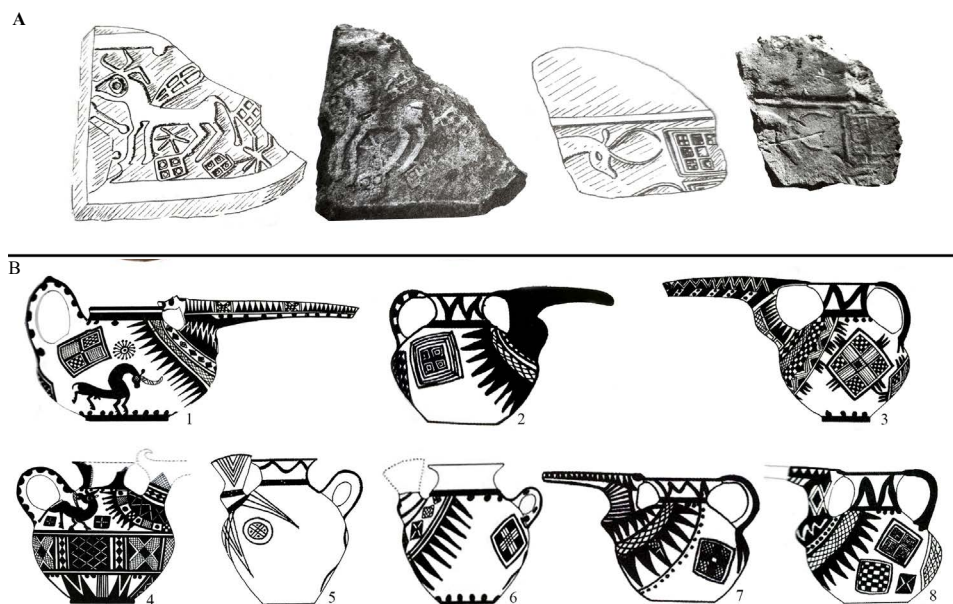


Figure 13: Geometric motifs on pottery from Level III at Baba Jan, showing close parallels with painted brick designs ((A–D) After: Goff 1968: Figures. 7:1–3 and 11:6; (E) After: Goff 1970: Figure. 7:10).



**Figure 14:** (A) Examples of decorated bricks from Sialk (After: Ghirshman 1939: Pls. 21 and 98); (B) Ceramic vessels from Sialk Necropolis B (After :Ghirshman 1939: Pls. 83, 64, 87, 80, 67, 88, 54, 87), all featuring comparable motifs to the brick designs at Baba Jan.

have suggested that they were intended to key into a mud plaster backing. Goff mentions that tiled ceilings are still made in this manner today, and are quite safe as long as the plaster is wet enough when the tiles are placed in position (Goff 1977: 123–127; Henrickson 1983: 85). Although Goff herself did not detail her reconstruction of the ceiling—her reports contain only brief and scattered remarks on the subject (1970: 146; 1977: 123), Robert Henrickson (1983), in a separate article based on Goff's excavation data, thoroughly addressed the reconstruction of the painted chamber ceiling and the arrangement of the brick panels.

The reconstructions proposed by Henrickson and Goff relied on the original positions of the fallen bricks, which had collapsed from the ceiling onto the floor during the building's destruction but remained relatively undisturbed. Most evidence suggests that the tiles found in the debris on the floor of the Painted Chamber were not disturbed after falling from the ceiling (for more details, see Henrickson 1983: 82–83; Goff 1977: 129). The position of bricks was carefully recorded during excavation (Figure. 3). From Goff's scattered notes and her final report on the Baba Jan excavations, it appears that she believed the painted Chamber's ceiling rested on a large east-west-oriented roof beam supported by two wooden columns (Goff 1977: 123). The bricks were probably installed in three ceiling

panels, each composed of sixty-five bricks arranged in thirteen rows of five, totalling 195 bricks. Goff also suggested that these three panels were themselves subdivided into smaller units of four or five bricks each (Figure. 15) (Goff 1970: 146; 1977: 123).

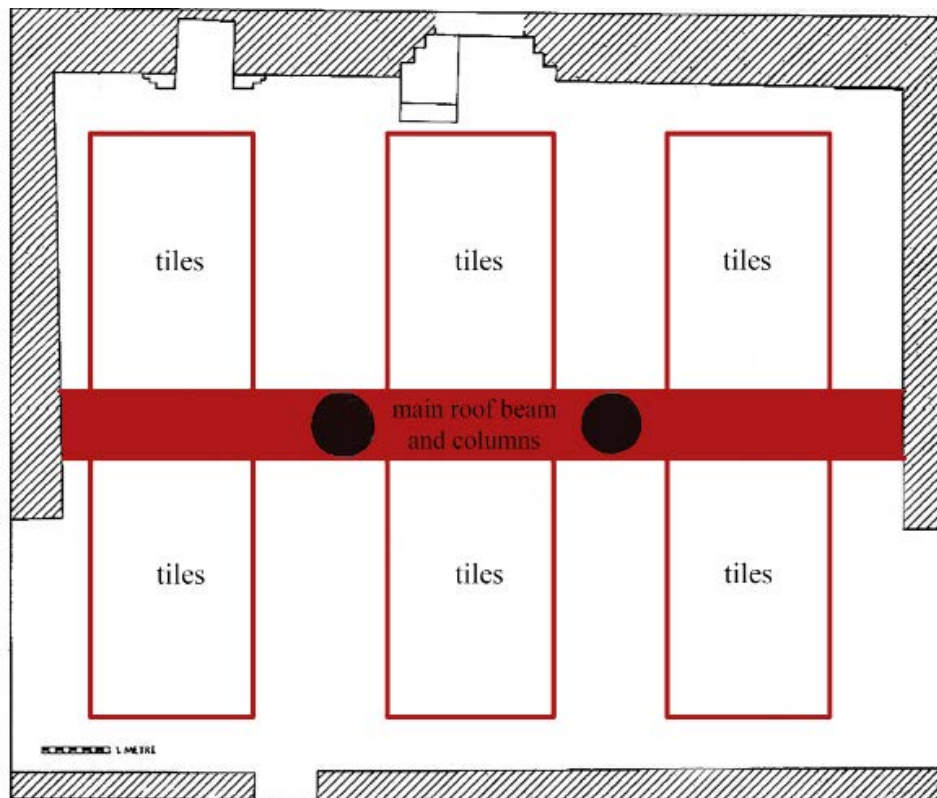
However, Henrickson's more detailed reconstruction indicated that the painted chamber ceiling had two main roof beams running north–south, each supported by a column. Smaller laths and joists spanned across these beams in an east–west direction. The bricks were set into the plaster ceiling within the spaces between the main beams and the side walls (Henrickson 1983: 84–85). Henrickson identified fifteen decorative panels arranged in three rows across the ceiling, with each row consisting of five square panels (Henrickson 1983: 90) (Figure. 16). Notably, according to the available evidence, the bricks were not installed in a strict pattern or sequence of motifs; rather their arrangement appears to have been largely random (Henrickson 1983: 95–96) (Figure. 17).

### **Decorative Brickwork in the Iron Age and The Painted Bricks of Baba Jan**

At the time of the Baba Jan excavations, knowledge of the variety of decorative brick styles across Iran during the first half of the first millennium BCE was limited. This may explain why Clare Goff's re-

ports lack comparative study and make no reference to other Iron Age brickmaking traditions. However, archaeological research and excavations conducted over the past few decades at Iron Age sites across the Iranian Plateau have revealed that four distinct traditions of decorated brickmaking developed and thrived during this period.

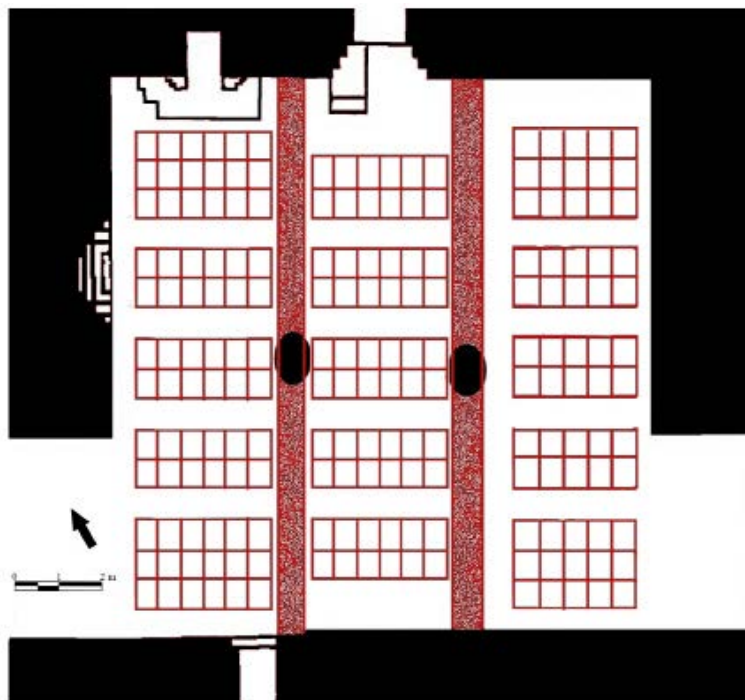
Thus, during the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE, four distinct decorative brickmaking traditions can be identified across the Iranian Plateau: the areas south of Lake Urmia, the central plateau, Luristan, and the southwest. Interestingly, the geographical distribution of these four cultural traditions closely corresponds with the political landscape of the Iranian Plateau during this time. Both



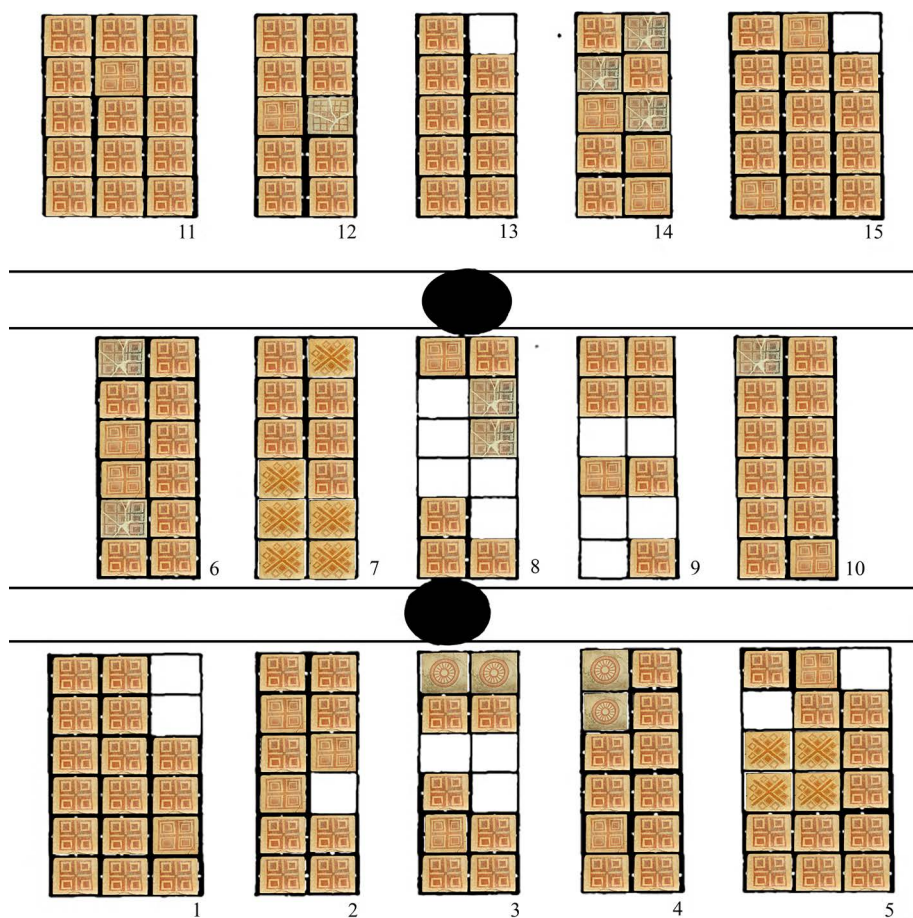
**Figure 15:** Combined plan of the painted chamber. The ground plan of the structure is shown in black, while the ceiling plan is overlaid in red to highlight its position within the structure. This reconstruction has been prepared by the authors based on the descriptions provided by Claire Goff (1970: 146; 1977: 123).

In addition to the Baba Jan bricks of Luristan, described above, and the glazed faience tiles of the *Neo-Elamite* period, which stylistically continue the Mesopotamian and Elamite brickmaking traditions of the second millennium BCE (Figure 18), decorated bricks have been discovered at numerous important sites in northwestern Iran and south of Lake Urmia. Notable sites include Hasanlu IVb (Dyson 1989: 9), Qalaichi (Kargar 2004; Hassanzadeh and Curtis 2021), and Rabat (Kargar and Binandeh 2009) (Figure 19), as well as locations in the Central Plateau region, including Qoli Darvish (Qom), Sialk (Kashan), Shamshirgah (Qom), and Qolam Tepe (Kashan) (Sarлак and Malekzadeh 2005; Malekzadeh and Naseri 2022) (Figure 20). For further discussion of these sites, see Fazeli Nashli and Dehghani (2022).

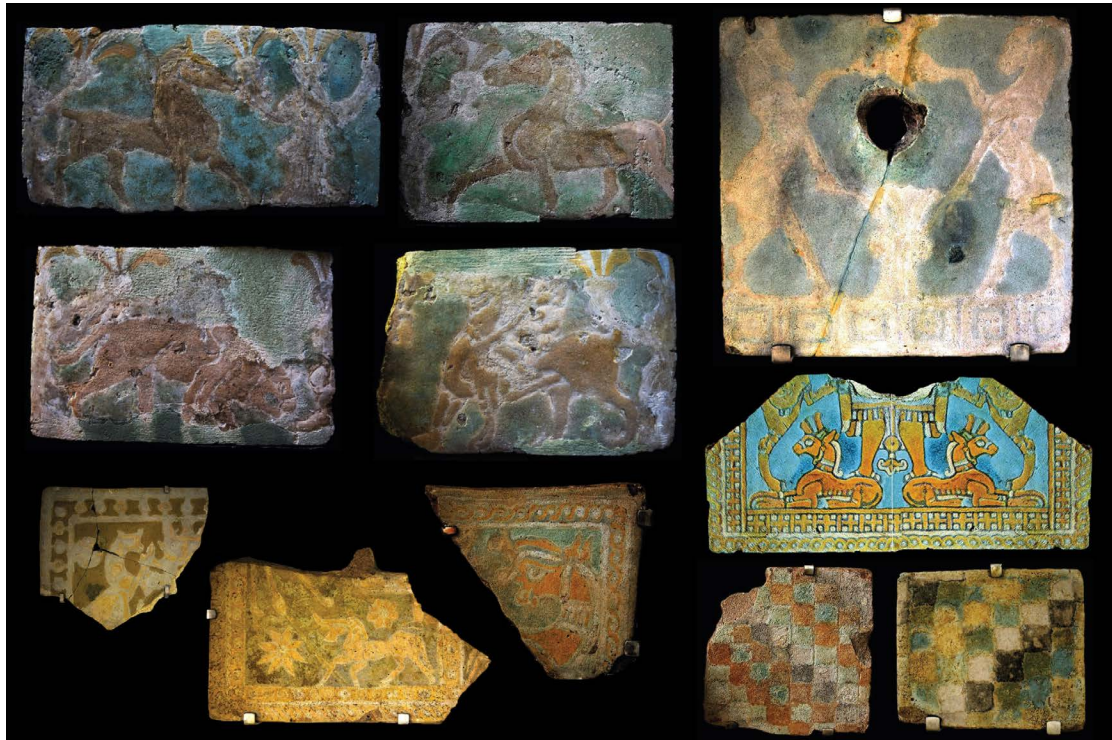
the written records from Mesopotamia and archaeological evidence indicate that, in the first half of the millennium, despite the existence of numerous small and medium-sized polities, four major political entities held regional power, each with its own geographical and cultural sphere of influence. These were: the *Neo-Elamite Kingdom* in Khuzestan and Fars, centred at Susa and Anshan, which became a regional power by the eighth century BCE; the *Kingdom of Mannaea* in the region south of Lake Urmia and Kurdistan; the Kingdom of Ellipi in Luristan (Medvedskaya 1999; Levine 1987: 230-233); and the *Median Kingdom*, which, during the Neo-Assyrian period, extended from the foothills of the Alvand and Zagros ranges to the Alborz mountains (Parpola and Porter 2001: 11-12; Saeedyan and Firouzmandi 2017: 71-89) (Figure 21).



*Figure 16: Combined plan of the painted chamber. The ground plan of the structure is shown in black, and the ceiling plan is overlaid in red to illustrate its arrangement within the structure. The plan has been adapted from Henrickson (1983: Figure 2) and subsequently redrawn and modified by the authors*



*Figure 17: The arrangement of bricks on the ceiling follows the layout detailed by Henrickson (1983: Figure 2). The authors embedded the actual bricks into their designated positions, using only one example of each brick design for this reconstruction.*



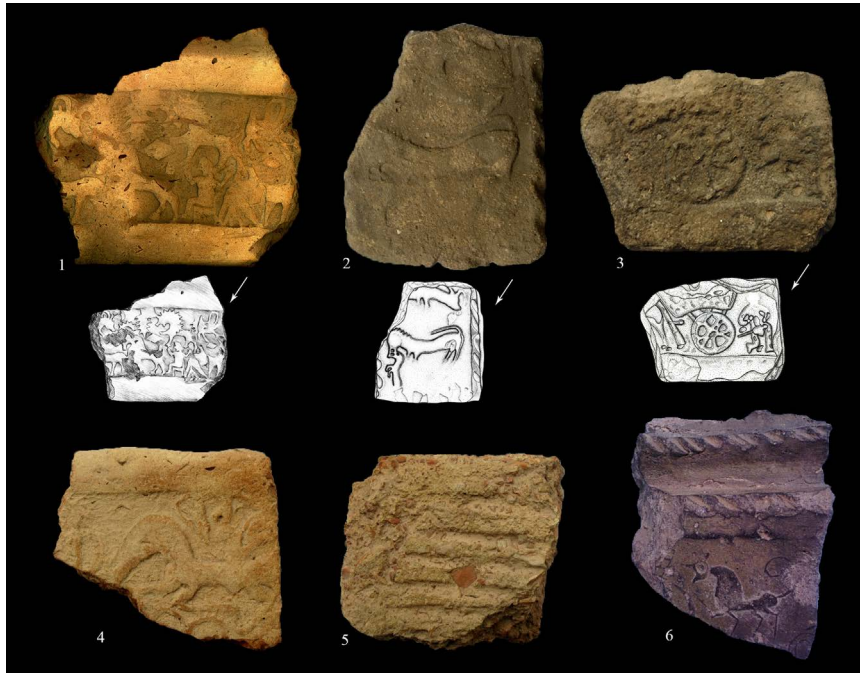
**Figure 18:** A composite image showcasing Neo-Elamite glazed bricks (After: Alvarez-Mon 2020, Plates 171–174).



**Figure 19:** Composite image showcasing Mannaean glazed bricks. Bricks Nos. 1–5 are from Bukan/Qalaichi (After: Hassanzadeh and Curtis 2021: 37, 51, 63, 69, 94); Nos. 6–8 are from Rabat (After: Heidari 2010: Pl. LI; Kargar and Binandeh 2009: Pl. 8); and No. 9 is from Hasanlu IV (After: Dyson 1989: Figure 10a).

Given the correspondence between these political territories and the regions where decorated bricks have been discovered, it can be argued that these bricks provide insight into the influence of state structures on the architecture and artistic expressions of first-millennium BCE Iran. Accordingly, the decorated bricks from Qalaichi, Rabat, and even Hasanlu can be attributed to the cultural sphere of Mannaea (Figure 19), while the Baba Jan bricks belong to the cultural domain of the Ellipi

Kingdom in Luristan. The decorated bricks of the Central Plateau, found in the vicinity of Qom and Kashan (Figure 20), appear to have been part of the eastern Median realm (Eastern Media), known in Assyrian sources as the “powerful Medes” or “distant Medes” (Saeedyan and Firoozmandi 2017: 74–82). The Neo-Elamite glazed tiles are already well known (Figure 18) and require no further explanation here (for further information, see Alvarez-Mon 2020).



**Figure 20:** A composite illustration showcasing decorative bricks from the Central Iranian Plateau region. Nos. 1 and 4 are from Sialk (After: Malekzadeh and Naseri 2013: Figure 3; Naseri 2019: Figures 7.4 and 7.7). Nos. 2 and 6 originate from Qoli Darvish (After: Malekzadeh and Naseri 2022: Figure 8; Sarlak 2010: p. 281). No. 3 is from Shamshirgah (After: Malekzadeh and Naseri 2013: Figure 5), while No. 5 is from Qolam Tepe (After: Malekzadeh and Naseri 2022: Figure 6).



**Figure 21:** A map showing the geographical spread of sites featuring decorative bricks in Iron Age Iran, alongside the four dominant political entities of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE and their distinctive brickwork styles (After: Desset 2018, with modifications by the authors).

The main differences among the decorated bricks from these four Iron Age cultural regions of Iran can be summarised as follows: both the Elamite and Mannaeian tiles are glazed, while the Luristan (Baba Jan) examples are unglazed and decorated only with painted geometric motifs in red on the buff slip. The Central Plateau bricks are also unglazed and unpainted; they feature raised relief designs produced using flat negative moulds, resembling stamp impressions (Malekzadeh and Naseri 2013).

One can observe differences not only in the dimensions, methods of production, and painting but also in the motifs and decorative styles. The Luristan bricks, as discussed earlier, bear exclusively geometric motifs, while bricks from the northwest, the Central Plateau, and the Elamite regions display a wide range of motifs, including geometric, vegetal, animal, human, and mythological themes. It is important to note that, although the latter two groups share similar thematic subjects, their artistic styles are entirely distinctive and easily distinguishable.

The study of decorated Iron Age bricks across the Iranian Plateau demonstrates both the influence of neighbouring artistic traditions and the independent evolution of local artistic styles. For example, the Mannaeian bricks were heavily influenced by the art of the powerful Neo-Assyrian and Urartian kingdoms. Their geometric, animal, human, and mythological motifs are comparable to those found on glazed bricks and mural paintings from Neo-Assyrian temples and palaces (Curtis 2001: 34). However, the artistic execution and iconography of the Mannaeian bricks are not entirely Assyrian, and John Curtis has described them as a local adaptation of Assyrian art, executed by Mannaeian craftsmen (Curtis 2001: 34). Similarly, Hassanzadeh (2006) has proposed the term “Zagros Artistic Style” to characterise the visual characteristics of Mannaeian and other northwestern Iranian artistic traditions during the first half of the first millennium BCE.

In contrast, the Central Plateau bricks exhibit a wholly indigenous artistic style. Their motifs and execution methods are entirely distinct from those of neighbouring cultures. Furthermore, the motifs on these bricks closely resemble those found on the Necropolis B (Sialk 6) ceramics (Malekzadeh and Sarlak 2005: 60, Table. 1; Naseri 2019: Figure. 7.4), clearly indicating that they are from the same cultural sphere of the Qom–Kashan region, located on the edge of the Central Iranian Desert. The Baba

Jan bricks, as discussed earlier, also showcase a local style featuring geometric motifs similar to those on Luristan Genre Ware pottery, while certain motifs can also be compared to designs found on Sialk Cemetery B pottery and decorated bricks from Sialk.

### **Function of the Painted Chamber and the Decorated Bricks of the Iron Age**

The discussion on the function of the Painted Room at Baba Jan is somewhat complex and uncertain, and the exact use of this space cannot be definitively determined. However, based on the available evidence, it is plausible to propose a religious function for this structure.

In an article published in the *Journal of Iran* in 1970, Clare Goff argued that the Painted Chamber could have been a religious building, specifically a temple, comparable to the Temple of Nush-i Jan (Goff 1970: 147–148). However, in her later publication in 1977, she rejected this earlier hypothesis without providing a clear explanation, stating, “The Painted Chamber was almost certainly a large secular reception hall. There is nothing in it that corresponds to the fire altar at Nush-i Jan. Possibly at this stage, the Medes (and other Iranian groups?) were still worshipping at high places in the open, as Herodotus suggests” (Goff 1977: 125). Nonetheless, Goff’s theory regarding the non-religious nature of the Baba Jan structures, particularly the Painted Chamber, remains open to scrutiny. Two doorways with three external rabbits, along with a niche featuring multiple rabbits or stepped niches (Figure. 2), are the characteristic features of Mesopotamian temples. Additionally, the presence of a fireplace adjacent to these decorative elements, along with the red- and white-painted walls and the painted brick ceiling, distinctly separates this building from other structures within the Baba Jan complex. The ornamental features of the Painted Room strongly recall the temples of Nush-i Jan and the “Burned Building II” at Hasanlu, indicating a likely ritual function (Saeedyan 2019: 315–317).

In Mesopotamia, multiple rabbit doorways on the outer façade of a building are regarded as almost definitive evidence of a temple, functioning as the most prominent markers of Mesopotamian temple architecture (Roaf 1998: 143–144). Similar stepped doorways can also be observed in Urartian temples across Turkey, Armenia, and northwestern Iran (Roaf 1998: 147). Furthermore, elaborate re-

cessed/stepped niches were commonly found in Mesopotamian and Urartian temples. It seems that the highland peoples of the Zagros and the Iranian Plateau in the Iron Age adopted these ornamental elements from their Mesopotamian neighbours and incorporated them into their own temple architecture (Saeedyan 2019: 318–321). These architectural motifs not only persisted into the Achaemenid period, appearing in both religious and secular buildings (Stronach 1985; Roaf 1998), but they continued well into later historical eras, reaching even the easternmost parts of the Iranian Plateau. A striking example is the temple with stepped niches at the site of Ai Khanum in Afghanistan, dating to the Greco-Bactrian period (3<sup>rd</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE) (Francfort 1984). Thus, the presence of such features, multiple rabbet doorways and niches, within the Painted Chamber of Baba Jan may indeed be interpreted as a sign of its ritual function. In this regard, it must be added that the Painted Room is smaller in size than the central hall (Room 4), making it unlikely to be considered the main ceremonial room of the Baba Jan complex. Consequently, its specific plan, unique decorations, and the time and expense invested in its construction and ornamentation must suggest a separate, distinct function. Michael Roaf also posits that some Baba Jan structures, such as the Painted Chamber and Room 5, may have originally served as temples before being used as residences (Roaf 1998: 150).

Another important factor supporting the ritual function of the Painted Chamber is the presence of the painted bricks themselves. These bricks, originating from various regions of the Iranian Plateau in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE, despite their stylistic differences, share a commonality in function; they were predominantly used to decorate temples and sanctuaries (Saeedyan 2019: 312–318; Dehghani and Fazeli Nashli 2022: 58–59). Firstly, we must note that the tradition of creating glazed tiles and knobs in Mesopotamia and Elam was closely tied to the region's ritual architecture at its inception. The earliest examples of glazed wall decorations in Mesopotamia, dating to the mid-to-late 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, often (like the Hasanlu examples, Figure. 19.9) featured a central hole and were installed on the wall as glazed knobs. These early samples, primarily in green, blue, and yellow, were reserved only for decorating sacred spaces; for example, glazed knobs were discovered in abundance in the Ishtar Temple at Nineveh (Reade 1979: 21), as well as

in the Ishtar Temple at Nuzi and the private shrine of the Nuzi Palace (Starr 1939: 59). However, the most interesting examples of glazed ceramic knobs were found at the Chogha Zanbil Temple during Ghirshman's excavations (Ghirshman 1966: 12). Therefore, these tiles initially served to decorate sacred spaces in Elam and Mesopotamia. However, over time, the exclusive function of these bricks for temples gradually faded. During the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Neo-Elamite periods, the use of these decorations expanded to include palaces and non-religious structures, although they continued to be predominantly utilised in temples (Moorey 1994: 313–315).

The Elamite glazed faience tiles and knobs, found in both the Middle Elamite and Neo-Elamite periods at sites such as Susa and Anshan, were primarily utilised to decorate sanctuaries and religious structures, although they were sometimes found in ceremonial buildings as well. The most prominent example from the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE is the altar located in the Square Chapel of Inshushinak in Susa (Alvarez-Mon 2020: 398 and Pl. 171). Reports and available evidence suggest that painted glazed bricks from sites in Northwestern Iran were used to decorate temples and ritual spaces during the 9<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, particularly in Mannaeen temples. Three key sites, Hasanlu, Qalaichi, and Rabat—all located south of Lake Urmia, shed some light on this practice. The glazed tiles from Hasanlu were recovered from Burned Building II, which the excavators confidently identified as a temple based on its architectural features that resemble those of Mesopotamian temples (Dyson and Voigt 2003). At Qalaichi, the excavator also introduced a mud-brick building complex, which includes a columned hall and adjacent structures, with which the glazed bricks were associated, as a religious complex. The excavator believes that several ritual objects related to the blessing ritual, common among the Mannaeans, Urartians, and Assyrians, were recovered from these spaces (Kargar 2004: 233–234). Of course, factors such as the complex's plan, the absence of defensive or military structures, and the discovery of glazed tiles also influenced the excavator's conclusion. Additionally, an Aramaic inscription at Qalaichi (Eph'al 1999), which largely contains religious content and prayers, further indicates the general and ritual function of the Qalaichi complex.

Furthermore, the glazed bricks from Rabat Tepe have also been associated with religious structures.

Excavations at Rabat uncovered a relatively large mosaic-like pavement area with several empty spaces, suggesting the presence of independent structures that have since been destroyed. The site excavators believe these empty spaces may relate to a platform with a likely ritual function (Kargar and Binandeh 2009: 117). The glazed bricks were mostly found around these platforms. Researchers Julian Reade and Irving Finkel concluded that the shape and form of these empty spaces, along with other evidence, likely indicate an elevated platform in an open area, on which an altar existed. According to these two researchers, the glazed bricks found around this space were likely used to decorate the sacred platform, the altar, or its steps (Reade and Finkel 2014: 588-591). Similar sacred platforms adorned with glazed bricks have also been reported from several sites in Mesopotamia, including the courtyard of the Nabu Temple at Khorsabad (Loud and Altman 1938: 42), which is almost contemporary with Rabat Tepe, and another structure dating to the 10<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE at Tell Halaf (Naumann 1950: 71-78). Additionally, a wall panel in Sargon's Palace at Khorsabad also depicts a similar structure (Botta and Flandin 1849: 114; Reade and Finkel 2014: 589-591). The altar of the Square Chapel of Inshushinak, from the Neo-Elamite period, is another notable example of these structures decorated with glazed bricks (Alvarez-Mon 2020: 398 and Pl. 171). Beyond the observations made by the excavators of the Qalaichi and Rabat sites, the motifs found on the bricks of these sites, which primarily depict mythological and religious subjects, can also indirectly suggest the ritual function of the buildings that the bricks adorned.

Commentary on the Central Plateau bricks and their function requires more extensive studies in the future. In fact, except for the Qoli Darvish site in Qom- whose architectural characteristics we know somewhat well- other sites containing decorated bricks in the Central Plateau region do not significantly help clarify our question. The bricks from the Shamshirgah and Qolam Tepe sites were collected from surface surveys, and it is unclear what type of structures they belong to (Malekzadeh and Naseri 2022: 203-204). Ghirshman also believed the painted bricks from Sialk are connected to a large mud-brick platform from the late Iron Age (Ghirshman 1939: 51), but due to the destruction of the structures on the large platform from Sialk and the incomplete excavation of the site, determining its

function remains difficult. Qoli Darvish Tepe is the only site that offers some clarity. The bricks found there confirm their connection with a large mud-brick platform, which spanned about 300 square metres and had a remaining height of around 3 metres at the time of excavation (Sarлак 2009: 97). Surrounding this platform were gray-coloured painted bricks featuring geometric and animal motifs (Figure. 20). The bricks from this site are comparable to the decorative bricks found at the Sialk and Shamshirgah sites. However, unlike those, they were found during excavation in a specific chronological context and in connection with the aforementioned mud-brick platform (Sarлак and Malekzadeh 2005). Excavation on the eastern side of the mud-brick platform led to the discovery of the remnants of a sanctuary building. For this reason, the excavator suggests that the construction of the mud-brick platform likely served both governmental-social and religious purposes simultaneously (Sarлак 2011: 396). Therefore, in the only discussable example in the Central Plateau region, we see that decorated bricks were still used in ritual spaces.

In summary, based on the available evidence, it can be said that the Iron Age decorative bricks mostly served to decorate the religious buildings and temples of this period, although they may also have been used in monumental and ceremonial structures. Based on this, and given the unique architectural features of the Baba Jan Painted Chamber, it can be inferred that this structure was likely a temple, decorated with painted bricks, similar to many temples on the Iranian Plateau during the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE.

## Conclusion

Excavations conducted by the British mission at the site of Baba Jan in Luristan during the 1960s unearthed a large architectural complex dating to the first half of the first millennium BCE. One of the rooms within this complex exhibited distinctive architectural ornaments and decorative elements, prompting the excavator to refer to it as the Painted Chamber in her reports. From the debris accumulated on the floor of this structure, a considerable number of painted bricks were unearthed. These bricks were probably installed on the ceiling, arranged within several separate decorative panels. All the bricks were painted and featured geometric motifs, including square grids, circular and cross-shaped patterns, which can be broadly classified into

six main categories. The decorated bricks of Baba Jan are unique in their kind and have no exact parallels either in Iran or in the neighbouring regions. Although during the Iron Age and the first half of the first millennium BCE, four distinct traditions of decorated brickmaking were attested across different parts of Iran, namely the Mannaeen bricks of northwestern Iran, the Elamite glazed bricks of southwestern Iran, the Ellipi bricks of central Zagros (Baba Jan), and the Median bricks of the central plateau, each of these traditions appears to have developed independently, with limited mutual influence. The Baba Jan bricks were painted solely with geometric designs, while the Mannaeen and Elamite examples were glazed and featured a wide variety of geometric, floral, animal and human motifs, often influenced by Mesopotamian artistic traditions. In contrast, the Central Plateau bricks were unpainted but richly embossed, featuring motifs in relief produced by negative moulds. Although certain similarities can be observed between the square and checkerboard designs of the Baba Jan bricks and those found on pottery from the Sialk Cemetery B and the decorated bricks of the Sialk mudbrick structure, differences in colour application and execution technique clearly distinguish these two artistic traditions. In fact, the motifs represented on the Baba Jan painted bricks are more closely comparable to the geometric patterns painted on local Baba Jan pottery itself. Another significant observation is that the decorated bricks of the Iron Age in Iran appear to have been used primarily in sacred and ritual contexts, adorning the temples and sanctuaries of that period. This case is well attested at sites such as Hasanlu, Qalaichi, Rabat, and Qoli Darvish. By drawing analogies from these sites, it may therefore be concluded that the Painted Chamber of Baba Jan also functioned as a temple or cultic chamber, whose ceiling was ornamented with these painted bricks.

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