

Death, the Underworld, and Burial: Continuity of the Enduring Tradition of Crypt Tombs in Iran Based on the Recent Excavation of the Khahar-e-Emam Mausoleum in Rasht

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Abstract

Burial in crypts is a long-standing and widespread mortuary practice, evidenced across various civilisations. Early examples include the royal tombs of Ur (Mesopotamia), Saqqara (Egypt), and Iranian sites such as the Middle Elamite “Palace of the Dead” at Chogha Zanbil and the tomb of Tepti-Ahar, revealing early human engagement with subterranean burial. These burials reflect not only social hierarchies but also conceptions of life after death, sanctity, and protection. The tradition continued through the Islamic period in Iran, where crypts were often incorporated beneath monumental mausoleums, as seen in the Alaviyan Dome, Soltaniyeh, and structures from the Seljuk and Ilkhanid periods. Although the origins of Islamic mausoleums are debated, the practice of subterranean burial showcases both pre-Islamic Iranian traditions and regional Islamic innovations. Recent archaeological excavation at the Khahar-e-Emam mausoleum in Rasht provides new evidence of this continuity. The main objective of this paper is to trace the continuity of the subterranean burial tradition (Crypt tomb) in Iran up until the Qajar period. The authors, through archaeological excavations at the Khahar-e-Emam site in Rasht, aim to demonstrate how this particular burial tradition has persisted over time and to highlight the enduring cultural and religious significance of subterranean interment. Methodologically, this article relies primarily on fieldwork conducted at the Khahar-e-Emam site in Rasht, supplemented by additional data collected from text resources, field experience, and interviews.

Keywords: Crypt, Burial, Khahar-e-Emam, Rasht, Qajar period

Introduction

Contemplating death, the meaning of life, and the relationship between the two have always been central to human history. The beliefs of ancient peoples regarding death and the afterlife are significant issues in archaeology. Burial practices and conceptions of the world beyond death stem from the beliefs and intellectual traditions of each society, resulting in a wide diversity of funerary rituals and mortuary customs. Thus, burial is a fundamental subject for understanding human beings and their belief systems. By examining different burial practices of past societies, we gain valuable insights into their religious conceptions and perspectives on death and the afterlife.

Life and death remain the greatest mysteries of human existence. The origin of the world and humankind, followed by the inevitability of death and the prospect of an afterlife, have persistently preoccupied human thought. The earliest human reflections on life and death gave rise to mythologies that continue to be passed down today. In the pursuit of immortality, driven by the fear of death and curiosity about the afterlife, humankind created myths and narratives to portray the world beyond death and to describe the continuation of existence in another realm. Among the most significant manifestations of human life are burial practices. One notable form is crypt burial, which consists of interment within subterranean tombs constructed beneath the earth. These tombs were accessible by stairways or sloping passages and could serve either as the resting place for a single individual or a family sepulchre. They often comprised one or multiple chambers, allowing the deceased to be laid to rest in various ways: placed upon the floor or on a funerary platform, interred in jars or coffins, or, in certain cases, containing the ashes of cremated bodies deposited within the crypt. This article aims to examine the continuity of the crypt burial tradition into later periods using new findings from the Khahar-e-Emam site. This study seeks to validate this claim based on the information obtained from the recent excavation.

On the Significance of Death and the Dead for the Life of the Living

The great twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger states: ‘death harbours within itself the presencing of Being’ (Heidegger 1971: 178–179). Accordingly, as Krell has also observed, ‘all intimations of Being are intimations of mortality’ (Krell 1986: x). Death—or more precisely finite mortality—is not merely the end of life; rather, it is the enabling condition of human existence.

In this context, drawing upon Heidegger’s idea of an agent’s awareness of perishability and the related concept of *Fürsorge* as a mode of discovery, it will be argued that the material remains of diverse funerary practices in antiquity indicate forms of interaction that may be interpreted as a mode of *dwelling*. That is, interaction with the world through death and burial rituals reflects a type of ‘dealing with death’ that ultimately leaves behind a visible archaeological record. These material traces may be considered a kind of existential state linked to notions such as mortality, care (*Sorge*), and solicitude (*Fürsorge*) (Tonner 2018: 11).

In archaeological and palaeoanthropological studies, the emergence of cognitively modern *Homo sapiens* is often inferred from early burial practices. It is reasoned that if these sites indeed represent intentional burials, the individuals who created them possessed minds complex enough to conceive of an existence beyond life (Taylor 2011: 97). This “death-awareness” is regarded as one of the indicators of a transformation in human existential consciousness across the evolutionary history of humankind.

In Heidegger’s terms, Dying is a possibility of Dasein and Dasein’s mortality is understood as being-towards-death: ‘Dasein exists as born; and, as born, it is already dying, in the sense of Being-towards-death’ (Heidegger 1962: 426). The term ‘dying’ stands for the ‘way of Being in which Dasein is towards its death’ (Heidegger 1962: 291). Based on data obtained from the excavation of the Khahar-e-Emam site, along with library and field studies, it can be argued that crypt burial represents one of the most tangible and significant manifestations of death and funerary practices. Such burials clearly reflect the importance of death, the afterlife, and human concern for existential

matters. The deliberate construction of these subterranean structures solely for the interment of the dead demonstrates the profound impact and significance that beliefs about mortality and the world beyond life held in human societies.

Crypt tombs are also closely related to Foucault's concept of *heterotopia*. Foucault (1998) defines heterotopias as places where death and life are distinguished—spaces that create a boundary between temporality and eternity. These spaces are connected to all other forms of spatial organisation within a community or group, particularly because every individual and family may stand in relation to such places (Foucault 1998: 180; Lord 2006: 1). These places may be termed *heterotopias*: spaces created through ritual practices that establish the constitutive relations of a group. Heterotopic spaces are foundational to the rituals that define and maintain these relations. They serve as a necessary 'other', or a space of difference, enabling the representation and contestation of cultural norms that render these norms uncanny, contingent, and humanly produced, yet still operate like laws because they encapsulate the rules – perhaps the myths – that govern our lives. Encountering such spaces enables those reflective (disinhibiting) moments that are fleeting and that function as that in the face of which we continue to live our lives (Tonner 2018: 122–123).

By situating the empirical study of crypt burials within the conceptual frameworks of Heidegger's existential ontology and Foucault's heterotopias, this research posits that subterranean tombs are not merely architectural or funerary artefacts but rather material manifestations of humanity's profound engagement with mortality, temporality, and the afterlife. Heidegger's notion of being-towards-death illuminates how these spaces reflect a conscious grappling with finitude, while Foucault's heterotopic lens underscores their role as liminal sites where social, religious, and cultural orders are negotiated, contested, and ritualised. Through this integrative approach, the Khahar-e-Emam crypt is examined not only as a physical locus of burial but also as a spatialised expression of existential concerns, bridging the abstract contemplation of death with the tangible practices and material culture of past societies. A crypt or subterranean tomb represents merely the visible tip of an iceberg; the greater mass remains concealed beneath the turbulent waters that extend deep into the annals of human history (Fig. 1).

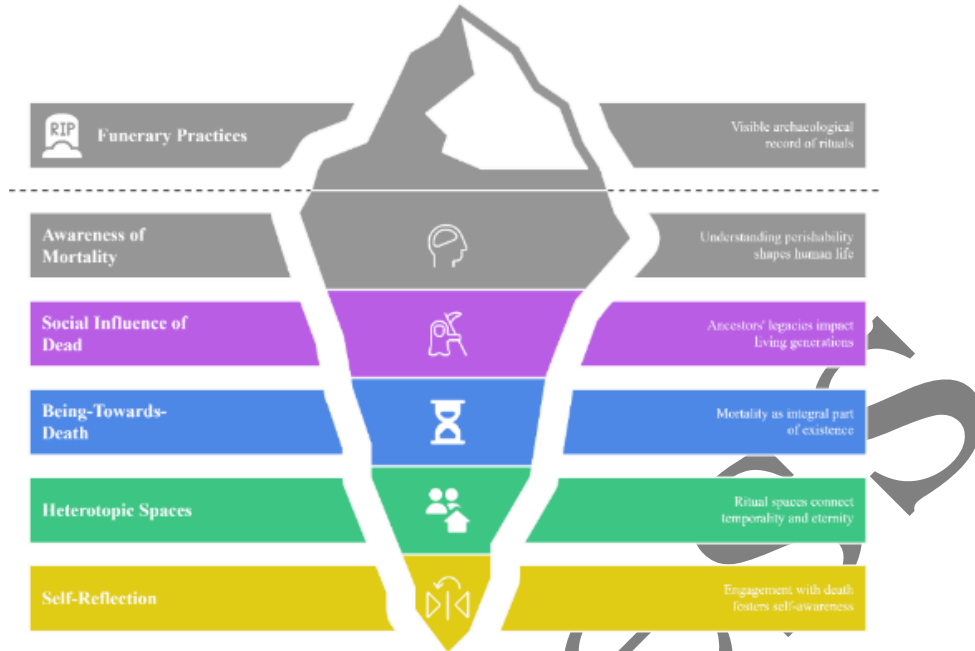


Figure 1. The Manifest Traces and the Missing Presences of Death (After: Authors)

Crypt Burials and Their Antiquity

In this section, an attempt has been made to review the earliest known examples of crypt burials based on the evidence currently available (a comprehensive discussion of all such examples lies beyond the scope of this paper). The information presented here serves as a historical overview of the development of crypt and substructure burial practices (For a detailed comparative analysis of the Khahar-e-Emam crypt, please refer to the *Discussion* section of this paper).

Among the earliest known instances of crypt burials are the royal graves of Ur in Mesopotamia (Woolley 1934) (Fig. 2). Similar examples can also be found in Egypt, including one of the oldest tombs at Saqqara, located in southern Cairo, which dates back 4,400 years (Waziri and Mohammad Youssef 2019). This type of burial is also attested in Iran. Notable examples of crypt burials in Middle Elam include the subterranean tombs of the “Palace of the Dead” at Chogha Zanbil (Ghirshman 1968) and the tomb of Tepti-Ahar (Negahban 1993) (Fig. 3). Later, in Neo-Elamite times, the subterranean tomb of Arjan provides further evidence of this practice (Tohidi and Khalilian 1982). A similar pattern can be observed in Mesopotamia, which continued into the Neo-Assyrian period (Margarete et al. 2012) (Fig. 4). After a lengthy chronological gap, evidence of such burials reappears during the Seleucid and Parthian periods, indicating the continuation of this funerary tradition (Boucharlat and Haerincq 2011). Despite the chronological hiatus and changes in religious practices, the tradition of crypt burials persisted with only minor modifications. For instance, continuity and change can be observed in the Middle Elamite crypts and the Elymaean tombs of Galalak (Rahbar 1994) and Dastva (Sarfaraz 1969) in Khuzestan. A key difference between Elymaean tombs and those of Middle Elam is the presence of coffins in the former, which are absent in the latter.

Simultaneously with the Seleucid and Parthian periods, examples of crypt burials were also discovered in regions adjacent to Iran. Notable instances include the city of Seleucia (Boucharlat and Haerinck 2011), Nippur (Peters 1897), Dura-Europos (Rostovtzeff et al. 1946), and Palmyra (Higuchi and Isumi 1991).

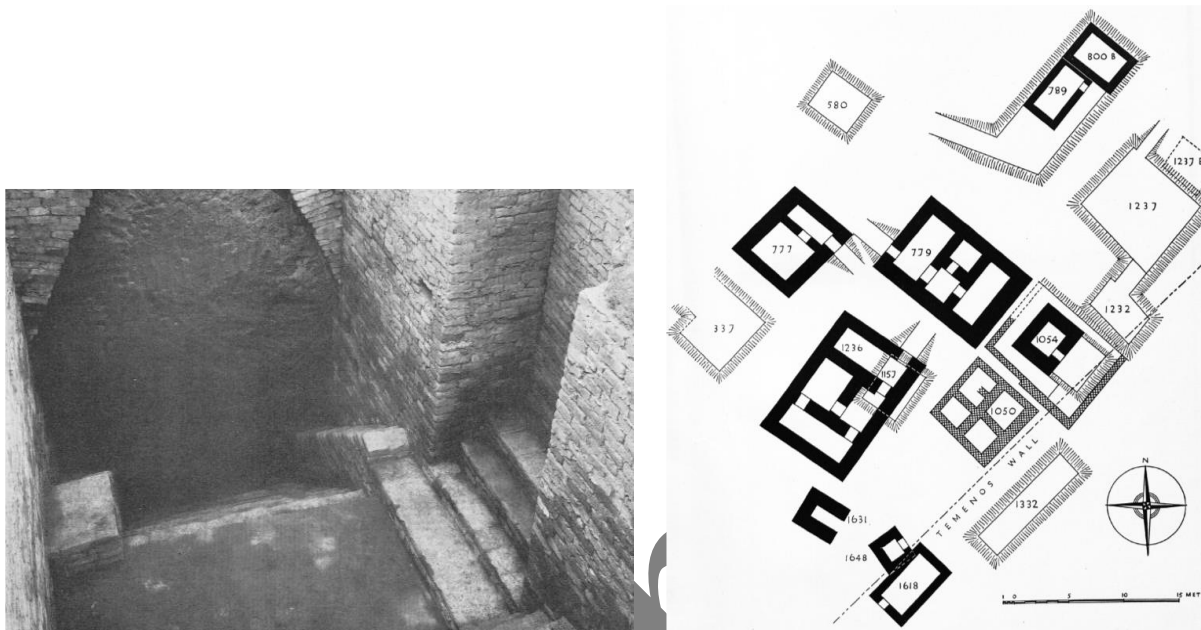


Figure 2. The Map of the Royal Tombs of Ur (Right) and The Entrance to the Tomb of Shulgi (left)
(After: Woolley, 1934: PL. 273, PL. 10)

From the Sasanian period, no confirmed examples of crypt burials have been discovered, and the few tombs attributed to this era by de Mecquenem are not considered reliable. Nevertheless, it is evident that the tradition of crypt burials continued beyond the political and cultural boundaries of the Sasanian Empire, with evidence found in Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere (Boucharlat and Haerinck 2011). Numerous examples of this type of grave from the pre-Islamic period exist; however, addressing all of them is beyond the scope of this article (for further reading, see Dehpahlavan 2025).

During the Islamic period, however, the practice of burial within crypts persisted, as exemplified by monuments such as the Alaviyan Dome in Hamadan (Oqabi 1997) or the Wadi-us-Salam cemetery in Najaf (Mervin and Tabbaa 2014). The survival of the crypt burial tradition into the Islamic period, despite religious and ideological transformations, is particularly noteworthy. This tradition, which originated in the third millennium BCE, has been influenced by factors such as religion, climate, and cultural patterns, yet has endured—albeit with modifications—across diverse geographical and cultural contexts. These modifications arose from religious beliefs, cultural traditions, climatic conditions, and related factors. Across all these examples, connections can be discerned. Despite the passage of time, changes in religion, and historical transformations, the persistence of this tradition in different regions reflects its adaptability to varying cultural and religious frameworks.

Narratives attributed to the Prophet Muhammad indicate that he strongly discouraged any attempt to distinguish his grave from others. Initially, this wish was respected, and his body was interred beneath the floor of one of the rooms in his house. However, less than a generation later, his burial place was marked with a structure. About seventy years after his death, the Umayyad caliph al-Walid I (r. 86 AH/705 CE) further adorned his grave and gave it an esteemed position within the Prophet's Mosque (Daneshvari 2011: 254). An illustrative example is the Wadi-us-Salam cemetery in Najaf, the largest Muslim cemetery in the world. Located 150 kilometres south of Baghdad, beside the shrine of Imam Ali, it contains over five million graves, with burials in this area dating back approximately 1,400 years (Mervin and Tabbaa 2014: 162). One common burial practice in this cemetery, both historically and presently, is interment in family crypts. The subterranean tombs in this cemetery typically reach depths of 2 to 4 metres and can accommodate up to thirty individuals.



Figure 3: The Tomb of Tepti Ahar (After: Negahban 1993)



Figure 4: Tomb from the Neo-Assyrian Period, Arbil, Iraq (After: Margarete et al. 2012: Pl. 7)

In the Islamic period of Iran, the tradition of crypt burials likewise persisted. Due to the historical circumstances of the early Islamic centuries, few architectural remains from that time survive. However, from subsequent centuries onward, a significant expansion in funerary architecture can be observed throughout different regions. This expansion resulted partly from the migration and death of the descendants of the Imams (and Imamzadehs) in Iran, as well as the emergence of local and national dynasties. From this period, numerous mausoleums were constructed over the graves

of Imamzadehs, scholars, and prominent political and military figures. Although pinpointing the exact origins of Islamic mausoleum construction in Iran is challenging, the burial of Harun al-Rashid in Khorasan is considered foundational, serving as the basis for the later shrine of Imam Reza. Other early Islamic examples include the shrines of Fatima al-Ma'suma in Qom, Abd al-Azim in Rey, and the shrine of Astaneh-ye Ashrafiyeh in Gilan (Gharavi 1997). Due to the scarcity of surviving structures from the early Islamic centuries, writing a comprehensive history of these tombs remains difficult and somewhat superficial. Nonetheless, it is clear that the growth of Shi'ism was a pivotal factor in these developments. Among sacred buildings, the tombs of the Imams and their relatives in Karbala, Najaf, Samarra, Mashhad, and Qom naturally became focal points of Shi'i religious devotion. As mourning rituals and religious ceremonies grew more elaborate, graves were increasingly marked with symbolic features such as railings, ornate shrines, and wooden or metal enclosures, eventually leading to the construction of monumental mausoleums. The rapid spread of pilgrimage to the shrines of the Imams, along with prayers and rituals performed at these sites, and the growing competition for burial near the Imams' graves to obtain blessings, all contributed to the flourishing of mausoleum construction (Kiani 2000: 61).

Another theory regarding Islamic-period mausoleums in Iran suggests influences from the West, particularly the role of Roman funerary monuments, such as the tombs of early Christian martyrs and the mausoleums of Palmyra in Syria. Numerous such monuments have been preserved in the Near East, displaying clear similarities in both form and function to Iranian mausoleums, particularly during the early Islamic centuries (Kiani 2000: 62–63). Hillenbrand (2000) argues that Iranian Muslims may have borrowed the idea of mausoleum construction from their co-religionists in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, while the gradual violation of the Prophet's traditional prohibitions on burial practices also influenced Iran. Moreover, the influence of late antique and early Christian funerary architecture must be considered as part of the broader context for the development of funerary architecture in Iran.

The Seljuk period marks a crucial era in the history of mausoleum construction within the Iranian cultural sphere. Most mausoleums from this period were constructed on two levels: the upper level contained the main chamber, and the lower level or crypt served as the burial place. The upper chamber was often used for religious functions, which explains the presence of mihrabs or mihrab-like features oriented toward Mecca. These mausoleums were typically covered internally with domes or semi-domes, while externally, they were adorned with conical, pyramidal, or hemispherical domes that harmonised with the structure (Hatam 2000: 102).

Vaulted crypts are a distinctive feature of many Ilkhanid-period mausoleums, including notable examples such as the tomb of Chalabi Oghlu in Soltaniyeh, the towers of Juy and Ghafariyya in Maragheh, the tomb of Ghazan Khan, and possibly the tower of Salmas. These crypts typically featured short, pointed vaults that opened to the east of the building, serving both as entrances and sources of natural light. The inclusion of crypts raised the main prayer hall by one metre or more above ground level, necessitating the addition of staircases. Such vaulted crypts, integrated with stone foundations, are also attested in twelfth-century Maragheh mausoleums, such as the Gonbad-e Sorkh and the Gonbad-e Kabud (Golombek and Wilber 1988).

During the Safavid period and thereafter, mausoleum architecture experienced a decline. In this era, non-religious tombs were entirely replaced by shrines dedicated to holy figures. None of the Safavid kings was buried in a monumental tomb; the only exception among later rulers was Nader Shah Afshar, whose mausoleum in Kalat-e Naderi was constructed in a hybrid style that combined semi-Mongol and semi-Iranian elements. Safavid shrines, such as Qadamgah near Nishapur, the mausoleum of Muhammad Mahruq, and the tomb of Khajeh Rabi outside Mashhad, represent more modest and simplified continuations of Timurid mausoleum traditions (Kiani 2000: 77–78).

Crypt tombs from the Qajar period have been the subject of limited research, mainly due to their scarcity. However, the crypt of the Khahar-e-Emam shrine is considered one of the outstanding examples of the Qajar era, and few such tombs have been seen by the general people.

The City of Rasht: Its History and Geographical Setting

Rasht, the capital of Gilan Province, was first mentioned in *Hudud al-Alam* (Anonymous 1983: 149), and has historically been one of eleven districts along the western Sefidrud River, known since at least the ninth century as *Biyah-Pas* (Samarqandi 2004: 24). If Maqdisi's *Qaryat al-Rasad* refers to Rasht, its existence dates back to the fourth century AH (Maqdisi 2006: 373; Qazvini 1984: 26–27). By the early eighth century AH, Rasht had become a flourishing town, with its central square housing a mosque and the shrine of *Ostād Abu Ja'far*, who played a crucial role in the Islamisation of Gilan (Kashani 2005). The *Ostadsara* quarter, mentioned in texts from the ninth and eleventh centuries, likely derives its name from him (Mar'ashi 1968: 256; Fumani 1970: 269). An inscription on his tomb, dated 1009 AH, identifies him as a descendant of the Prophet and a foster-brother of Husayn ibn Ali (Sotudeh 1998: 263). Today, the shrine is located within the Rasht Municipality.

From the reign of Shah 'Abbas I, Rasht gained increasing attention from the Safavids. Safi Mirza, the Shah's son, resided there briefly to gain administrative experience but was executed in Muharram 1024 AH/1615 AD; his remains were later buried properly and transferred to Ardabil by Shaykh Baha'i, and a shrine—*Shahidiyyeh*—was built at the site (Nasrabadi 1999: 291; Falsafi 1985: 530–537).

During the Qajar period, Rasht served as the capital of Gilan. At times, the name "Rasht" referred to the wider district rather than just the city itself (Chodźko 1975: 12). Known also as *Dar al-Marz*, it was surrounded by dense forests and protected by rivers, notably the *Goharrud*, which connected the city to *Solayman Darab* and *Fuman* via bridges such as *Solayman Darab* and *Chumarsara* (Melgunov 1868: 329; Zahir al-Dowleh 1992: 60).

According to the *Map of Dar al-Marz Rasht*, the city was divided into seven districts: *Ostadsara*, *Zahedan*, *Khumeiran Zahedan*, *Chumarsara* and *Kiyab*, *Khumeiran Kiyab*, *Seyqalan*, and the *Bazaar* (Farasati 2002: 352). Rasht, rectangular in shape and oriented east–west, was unfortified and lacked defensive walls. It stretched from *Khumeiran Zahedan* and *Zahedan* in the east to *Chumarsara* and *Kiyab* in the west, with the highest population density found in *Zahedan* and the lowest in *Khumeiran Zahedan*. The shrine of the *Khahar-e-Emam*, attributed to *Fāṭemeh-ye-Okhrā* (the sister of Imam Reza), stood in the *Zahedan* (*Sāgharī-sāzān*) quarter and was venerated as a pilgrimage site by the people (Mirza Ebrahim 1976: 166) (Fig. 5).

Following Rasht's designation as the capital of Gilan Province, one of its most historically significant districts was the Sāgharī-sāzān quarter. Due to its location along the Zarjoub River and the presence of the Khāhar-e Emām shrine within this area, the sanctuary played a vital role in the cultural and political life of Rasht. The shrine's strategic and symbolic position made it not only a centre of religious devotion but also a site for social convergence, where local events, communal decisions, and even political expressions found tangible manifestation. A notable example of this is a decree inscribed in 1272 AH by Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh, penned by Malek Muḥammad Qazvini. This decree annulled the collection of taxes from bakers at the request of Hājj Molla Rafī' Shariatmadār. This inscription was placed within the sanctuary of Khāhar-e Emām to ensure public awareness of the royal directive. Such use of the site underscores its central role in Rasht's social and administrative life, particularly during the Qajar period, highlighting how religious sites also functioned as platforms for official announcements and civic engagement (Faḡih Mohammadi Jalali 2008: 58).

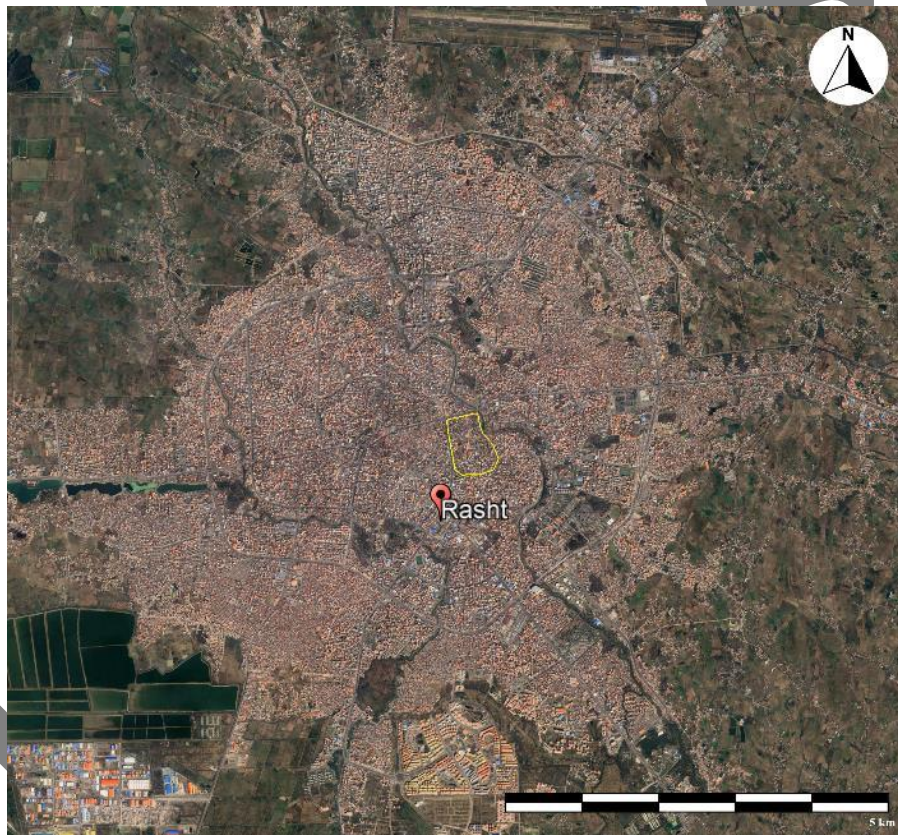


Figure 5: The geographical location of Rasht and Sāgharī-sāzān (yellow line) quarter in northern Iran (After: Google Earth 12/10/2025 and modified by Author)

The Shrine of the Khahar-e-Emam and the Crypt Discovered Therein

The mausoleum of Lady Fatemeh, known as the “Khahar-e-Emam,” is located in the Sūkhteh-Tekiyeh quarter and along the Rasht *Māl-furūshān* Bazaar (Fig. 6). This mausoleum and its adjacent mosque represent the second-oldest mosque of Rasht. The initial construction likely dates to the second half of the 8th century AH (14th century CE), during the Timurid period (750–886

AH), a fact also noted by ‘Abd ol-Fattāḥ Fūmanī (Fūmanī 1970). According to Rabino, this mosque was known as “Lāleh Shavi” during the Qajar era (Rabino 1987: 81). The oldest extant image of this mausoleum appears in the *Diary of Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh Qājār* (Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh Qājār 1989) (Fig. 7). “Fāṭemeh-ye-Okhrā,” the sister of Imam Reza, was born in 179 AH/795 AD and died at the age of twenty-four in 203 AH/ 818 AD (Faḡih Moḡammadi Jalali 2008).

During the recent renovation of the holy shrine of Lady Fāṭemeh-ye-Okhrā, a brick-built, crypt-like structure was unearthed on the western side of the shrine’s courtyard. This discovery seems to belong to an earlier construction phase of the sanctuary. Moreover, the exposure of scattered human bones in the debris further supported the hypothesis that this structure was a historical funerary space. The crypt is located at 37°16'44.7"N, 49°35'45.6"E, at an elevation of 2 metres above sea level, within the historic Sāgharī-sāzān quarter in central Rasht. Sāgharī-sāzān is among the city’s oldest quarters, extending from the Bādi-ollah quarter (present-day Moṭahhari Street) in the west to the Pol-e arāq quarter in the southeast. The neighbourhood has largely preserved its traditional urban fabric, with remnants of historic houses, bathhouses, and shops still visible in its narrow alleyways. Due to its prominent residents and its possession of a local market and bathhouse, Sāgharī-sāzān has historically been recognised as one of Rasht’s most notable quarters. Following the complete removal of debris from the excavated structure, evidence of a chamber containing powdered white bone material was revealed. In the lower section of this chamber, part of an arch was uncovered, suggesting the presence of another chamber beneath the terminal chamber of the passageway. The three components of this structure were accordingly designated as Corridor A, Chamber A, and Chamber B.



Figure 6: The Location of the Khahar-e-Emam Shrine in Relation to the Urban Fabric of the Sāgharī-sāzān quarter (After: Google Earth 05/06/2024)



Figure 7: The Earliest Known photograph of the Khahar-e-Emam's Mausoleum, from Naser al-Din Shah Qajar's Journey (After: Nāşer al-Dīn Shāh Qājār 1989: 50)

Corridor A

The entrance to the crypt is formed by a corridor constructed of brick and mud mortar, featuring a vaulted ceiling executed in the barrel-vault technique. This passage leads to a two-level brick-built space, where human skeletal remains were accumulated in each chamber. The first passageway, serving as the entrance into the crypt, was designated "Corridor A." Based on its physical characteristics (including brick and mortar type, the lack of flooring, and the absence of a direct connection with the two chambers), this corridor appears to have been a later addition to the original funerary structure (Fig. 8).



Figure 8. Entrance of Crypt and Corridor A (After: Authors)

Chamber A

The first chamber, referred to as “Chamber A,” lies at the end of Corridor A, on the upper level. It measures 280 × 210 cm, with a height of 210 cm. Wooden elements were identified at the springing of the vault. The chamber contained dense accumulations of human bones, reaching approximately 100 cm in height from the floor. Due to moisture infiltration and rainwater, the uppermost layers of bone were severely decomposed. The chamber was constructed of brick and mud mortar, featuring a barrel vault with a slightly pointed profile. It was closed on three sides, with access provided solely through Corridor A.

Chamber B

Chamber B, situated lower down, was accessed via a square-shaped brick structure and a step descending 70 cm from Corridor A. At a depth of 210 cm from the stairs’ entrance, the space ended at a bricked-up entrance. Upon dismantling the brick blocking, the chamber was found filled with human skeletal remains up to a height of 100 cm. Once these remains were cleared, the chamber floor was revealed, which was unpaved and consisted of compacted clay, consistent with the final brick course of the walls. To ensure the absence of further stratigraphic deposits, a test sounding was conducted in the northeastern corner of the chamber. At a depth of 50 cm below the floor, a layer of cobbles and soil was uncovered, representing the structural foundation of the building (Fig. 9).



Figure 9: Condition of chamber A (left) and chamber B (right), and the Human Bone Remains Within Them (After: Authors)

Secondary Deposits

Excavation revealed that the remains found within this Crypt had been introduced by humans during the reconstruction of the shrine over the past three decades. Unfortunately, this later intrusion has completely destroyed the original stratigraphic context. It should be noted that the following descriptions are not related to the archaeological analysis of the structure itself; they are presented solely to provide general information about the assemblage of materials recovered from within the crypt. However, some of the finds, while introduced to the site at a later time, are noteworthy due to their inscriptions and associated contextual information and therefore merit mention. Most of the discoveries originated from Chambers A and B of the crypt.

The majority of the recovered material consisted of human skeletal remains, accompanied by a small number of animal bones. An anthropological analysis conducted by the excavation team determined the minimum number of individuals (MNI) to be 92 adults and 29 subadults (aged 1 to 7 years). Pelvic examinations indicated that all individuals were female. Some bones displayed evidence of fractures and subsequent healing, suggesting physical trauma during the individuals' lifetimes. Signs of osteoporosis were observed in some specimens, potentially resulting from ageing, poor nutrition, or environmental conditions. The absence of healing in certain fractures may indicate fatal injuries or trauma occurring close to the time of death (Fig. 10).

Among the animal remains, the following were identified: one humerus of a small ruminant, one humerus of an adult sheep, part of a distal sheep forelimb, and two metapodial fragments of a carnivore, corresponding to the terminal limb bones of animals such as dogs or other carnivores. Additionally, a bird clavicle was recovered from the bone assemblage.



Figure 10: Remains of Human bones and their pathological marks (After: Authors)

Artefacts retrieved during this excavation include six broken ceramic vessels, two inscribed glazed bricks, a copper coin dating to the reign of Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh Qājār, a fragment of fabric, and a broken inscribed marble tombstone. Two of the six ceramic vessels were glazed in blue-and-white, while the others were unglazed in shades of orange and brown. The inscriptions on the two bricks read, respectively, “غرّه محرّم” (Muharram month) and “...ور ولد مرحوم... کن...” (...son of the deceased...),” although both are incomplete and cannot be fully deciphered. The tombstone

features the inscription “مرحوم مغفور، معراج خانم ... صیقلانی ۱۲۲۰” (The late, forgiven, Me'raj Khanom, ... Seyqalani, 1220) (Fig. 11).

The ceramic fragments recovered from this structure date to a very late period and, in fact, are of types still in use today. Some vessels are made of modern porcelain, further supporting the hypothesis that these materials were introduced into the structure from outside at a later time. Two light buff-coloured pottery fragments with sand temper were also found; however, due to the absence of rims or bases, their forms cannot be determined. Based on their surface characteristics, these sherds closely resemble contemporary pottery from Gilan, which remains in use in the region today.

The tombstone, dated precisely to 1220 AH, provides a definitive chronological reference. Similar gravestones are often found in various shrines and mausoleums across Gilan, like Imamzadeh Hashem. The stone is made of marble, though a large portion is broken, leaving only the upper section with a legible inscription.

Two bricks were also recovered, both made from the same material as those used in the construction of the crypt. However, these bricks have a thin glaze layer with traces of an incomplete inscription that is illegible due to breakage. Unfortunately, no published parallels for this type of inscribed glazed brick have been identified yet. Nevertheless, based on their material and visual similarity to the structural bricks, the authors suggest that these inscribed bricks were likely contemporary with the construction of the crypt and may have been used as substitutes for marble tombstones placed over individual graves.



Figure 11: Objects Recovered from the Crypt Excavation (After: Authors)

Discussion: Continuity and Transformation of Sacred Burial Practices in Iran

Burial near or within sacred shrines has been a significant Shi'a practice in Iran and India, particularly during the Qajar era, embraced by nobles, dignitaries, and even kings such as Agha Mohammad Khan, Mozaffar al-Din Shah, and Fath 'Ali Shah (Jahangir Mirza ۲۰۰۰: ۲۱۸; Hosseini Fasa'i ۱۹۸۸: ۶۶۷-۶۷۰; Sepehr ۲۰۰۷: ۱۰۹۱). Tracing back to early Islam—with figures like Abu Bakr, Umar, 'Uthman, and several Imams buried in Medina and Baqi' (Tabari ۱۹۸۶: ۱۰۶۰; Al-Muttaqi al-Hindi ۲۰۰۳: ۶۸۹; Mufid ۱۹۹۲: ۱۳۸; Jafarian ۲۰۰۳: ۳۲۲)—this tradition persisted through the Buyid period (Junayd Shirazi ۱۹۴۹: ۳۶۷-۳۶۸; Mirkhvand ۲۰۰۱: ۱۶۴) and spread to India during the Safavid and Timurid eras (Badavni 1991: 134). Temporary interment before transfer was common, and bodies were often transported via pilgrimage caravans, as in the case of Agha Mohammad Khan (Hosseini Fasa'i ۱۹۸۸: ۶۶۷-۶۷۰; Serena ۱۹۸۴: ۵۶-۵۷).

However, the transfer and preservation of corpses posed serious challenges, including the spread of foul odours and the risk of disease. For instance, Gertrude Bell, who travelled in Iran during this period, described methods of temporary storage of bodies before their final transfer to shrines, noting that such practices contributed to epidemics:

“...They are placed in not very deep graves, covered with brick vaults, which give rise to terrible stench around cemeteries, especially after outbreaks of cholera. Months later, before time has eliminated the pathogenic microbes, these corpses are exhumed... loaded onto mules, and transported to distant shrines, often along their route they caused the renewed spread of disease ...” (Bell ۲۰۰۴: ۵۴).

From such accounts, one may infer the structural design of vaulted burial chambers used for the temporary deposition of corpses. Gradually, however, with the spread of literacy and public health awareness, this practice declined and was eventually abandoned.

Based on the architectural features of the Khahar-e-Emam crypt discussed earlier, clear similarities emerge between this structure and crypts from other periods and regions. Notably, in terms of architectural form, spatial division, and overall structure, the Khahar-e-Emam crypt shows a closer resemblance to early Mesopotamian crypts. The brickwork and vaulting techniques, in particular, are highly reminiscent of Neo-Assyrian crypts in Erbil, Iraq (Fig. 4). In the lower walls, bricks are laid in a superimposed manner with clay mortar, whereas, from the base of the vault upwards, the bricks are arranged in a semicircular arch pattern to form the curvature of the vault. This change in masonry technique continues to the apex of the vault (Figs. 4 and 9). Dimensionally, the crypt also exhibits notable parallels with Assyrian examples. As outlined in the architectural description, the upper chamber features an arched entrance and a vault constructed with superimposed bricks. This contrasts with the herringbone vaulting of the main chamber, resulting in a slightly smaller space with a projecting element. The lower chamber mirrors the upper chamber in both length and width, maintaining the same spatial proportions.

A similar pattern can be observed when comparing the Khahar-e-Emam crypt with the Tappati-Ahar tomb (Fig. 3). In terms of structural organisation, brickwork, and vaulting, the Khahar-e-

Emam crypt closely resembles Tappati-Ahar. However, the latter exhibits more refined architectural details. The Tappati-Ahar tomb features a burial platform and niches, and its overall dimensions are larger: the interior length is approximately 10 metres, the width is around 3.25 metres, and the height from the floor to the underside of the barrel vault reaches 3.75 metres. A substantial platform that occupies most of the interior floor area, connects to the northern and western walls, measuring roughly 10,8 metres in length and 2,9 metres in width. A comprehensive comparison of the Khahar-e-Emam crypt with similar cryptic structures extends beyond the scope of a single study, given the abundance of analogous examples within Iran and its neighbouring cultural regions. Therefore, the present analysis focuses on highlighting the key similarities that illustrate common architectural patterns and construction principles. By concentrating on these core correspondences, it becomes possible to situate the Khahar-e-Emam crypt within a broader tradition of subterranean burial architecture while acknowledging the limitations imposed by the extensive regional corpus.

During the Islamic period, cryptic structures underwent significant transformations due to advancements in architectural techniques and artistic practices. These crypts typically exhibit larger dimensions, elaborate tilework, stucco decorations, and sophisticated spatial arrangements, demonstrating a level of refinement far exceeding pre-Islamic examples. Notable examples include the Gonbad-e-Sorkh crypt in Maragheh (Fig. 12) and the tomb of Öljaitü in Soltaniyeh. While these structures retain the fundamental concept of subterranean burial, their architectural designs markedly differ from earlier traditions.



Figure 12: Subterranean structure (crypt) of Gonbad-e-Sorkh (After: Dehpahlavan 2025: 226)

For instance, in the Öljaitü tomb, the crypt entrance is located on the southern iwan of the tomb, accessed via a staircase of nine steps leading to a landing, which then continues 1.65 metres down to the crypt floor. The architectural plan of the crypt is highly complex, comprising at least seven distinct volumes that do not share direct spatial connections. These passageways converge into spaces functioning as halls, flanked by thick structural piers, with narrow corridors that do not

permit ordinary circulation. The corridors open into a rectangular chamber, centrally divided into inner and outer burial areas specifically designed for Öljaitü's interment. On the eastern side of the hall, stairways lead to two additional chambers measuring approximately 4.20×1 metres and 4.20×3.9 metres, respectively. The decoration in these spaces is relatively simple, consisting mainly of brick and stucco designs. These examples illustrate that Islamic-era crypts, while conceptually continuous with earlier subterranean burial traditions, display a dramatic evolution in scale, spatial complexity, and decorative sophistication, reflecting both religious function and aesthetic development in Islamic funerary architecture.

One of the closest parallels to the Khahar-e-Emam crypt, as observed by the author in Gilan, is the shrine of Ali ibn Akasha in the town of Sangar, which exemplifies the same local continuity of subterranean burial practices. This shrine, one of the oldest surviving Imāmzādehs in the region, remained intact until recent decades and even withstood the destructive Rudbar earthquake. An inscription on the structure dates its construction to 920 AH. Beneath the main tomb chamber was a small crypt-like space of low height, divided into six compartments intended for the burial of six individuals. According to interviews with elderly local residents, until the late Qajar period, people continued to place their dead within this crypt before transferring the skeletal remains to the holy shrines (Pers. Comm., ۲۰۲۴). Unfortunately, this historically valuable and architecturally significant monument was later demolished due to poor administrative oversight, and a new structure was erected in its place, resulting in the complete loss of its original form and identity (Fig. 13).



Figure 13: The former structure of the shrine of Ali ibn Akasha (After: Authors)

Conclusion

The excavation of the Khahar-e-Emam crypt has provided new insights into the continuity and transformation of subterranean burial architecture in northern Iran. While earlier studies largely

focused on monumental Islamic tombs, this research demonstrates that smaller, crypt-like burial spaces persisted in regional contexts well into the late Islamic period. Architectural analysis reveals striking formal and technical parallels with earlier Mesopotamian and Assyrian prototypes, suggesting that construction traditions adapted to local materials and religious needs continued for a long time.

This continuity manifests not only in structural terms but also in rituals, as the crypt exemplifies the ongoing cultural practice of subterranean interment and the social-religious significance attached to burial in sacred spaces. The study situates the Khahar-e-Emam crypt within a broader cultural and historical trajectory, demonstrating that such spaces served not only as sites for interment but also as loci for the expression and perpetuation of local memory, identity, and devotion over centuries. A compelling parallel can be drawn with the former structure of the shrine of Ali ibn Akasha in Sangar, Gilan. This historically significant Imāmzādeh, featuring a small crypt space, exemplifies the same local continuity of subterranean burial practices and reinforces the interpretation of the Khahar-e-Emam crypt as part of a sustained regional tradition. These comparisons underscore that the persistence of crypt burial in Gilan reflects both architectural conservatism and a culturally embedded approach to mortuary practices, which continued to resonate within the local religious landscape into the late Islamic era.

Overall, this excavation and research contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between ancient architectural models and regional cultural frameworks. By highlighting the Khahar-e-Emam crypt as a representative case, this study provides a fresh perspective on how sacred architecture, mortuary customs, and local identity intersect, offering a nuanced appreciation of the historical and cultural dimensions of subterranean burial traditions in northern Iran.

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