



Memorial Grave vs Cenotaph: A Common Ritual Practice during the Third Millennium BCE: Case Studies from Shahr-i-Sokhta and Djarkutan

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Abstract

Human burials in cemeteries have mostly been observed since the beginning of the third millennium BCE in areas of Southeast Iran and South Uzbekistan. The emergence of Urban Societies brought specific economic, social and cultural traits such as social classes, elites, craft specialization, long-distance trade, etc. Some of the latter traits can be traced in the archaeological evidence from cemeteries on the Iranian Plateau and the Oxus Civilization (also known as Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex, BMAC. Although the evidence discovered from the graves informs us about objective issues, it also offers valuable information about subjective issues and ritual practice. The aim of this article is two-folded: firstly, to analyse comparatively the graves without skeletons found at two sites (i.e. Shahr-i-Sokhta and Djarkutan) in the above-mentioned areas and dated to the third millennium BCE; and secondly, to assess common aspects in this kind of the graves at both sites. Many scholars have named this kind of the graves as “Cenotaph”, while in this article they are labelled as “Memorial Grave”.

Keywords: Cenotaph, Memorial Grave, 3rd Millennium BCE, Iranian Plateau, Oxus Civilization

ArticleType: Review Article

Introduction

As demonstrated at Shahr-i-Sokhta, the study of a graveyard illustrates burial rituals and grave goods (Tosi 1976: 168) and the distribution of wealth demonstrates the importance of craftsmen in the economy of a given site (Piperno 1977: 124). The larger the site, the larger the cemetery and the more complex can be considered the behaviour of its inhabitants. For example, Shahr-i-Sokhta covers an area of about 152 hectares and consists of two major parts: a settlement and a graveyard (Tosi 1976: 168), the latter being discovered in 1972 (Tosi 1983: XIV). The settlement covers 99.60 hectares and the graveyard 21.3 hectares (Tosi 1975: 138). Like Shahr-i-Sokhta, Djarkutan, which is located in the south of Uzbekistan, consists of a temple and palace building, a citadel, living quarters, craft areas, irrigation canals and cemeteries (Ionesov 2020: 92). The complexity of behaviours includes economic, social, cultural, and religious practices; therefore, understanding these types of behaviours

also requires understanding the ancient context of the societies. Certainly, the presence or absence of the enemy may be reflected in the context of a society. Thus, the presence or absence of weapons of war among the ancient burial evidence can be considered as an indication of possible intra-regional rivalries.

The Study Sites

Shahr-i-Sokhta is one of the key sites for studying the urban societies, because it possessed a number of urban traits and has a well-published sequence and strong absolute chronology. The name, Shahr-i-Sokhta, consists of a combination of two Persian words, “Shahr”, which means “city” and “Sokhta”, which means “burnt”. This name was given to the site because of the large amount of burnt material lying on its surface. According to the most recently published chronologies, this important settlement was the centre of the political and economic activity in Sistan for five/six centuries, mostly during the



first half of the third millennium BCE (Vidale & Tosi 1996: 262). The site is situated along on the Zabol-Zahedan highway, about 65 km south of Zabol, the administrative centre of the Iranian Sistan (Figure. 1) (Tosi 1968: 15).

Djarkutan is a proto-urban settlement in Uzbekistan and a centre of ancient civilizations in Bactria. The settlement, located near an old stream has two monumental buildings, a potter quarter, a citadel and an extensive burial ground. The site is located in the west of Surxondaryo Province, in southern Uzbekistan, about five kilometres southeast of Sherabad and 50 km northwest of Termiz (Figure. 1). Many years of archaeological excavations at the site of Djarkutan by the Institute of Archaeology of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences (Samarkand) discovered separate quarters, each with specific economic and residential areas, covering more than fifty hectares. Each area had its own tribal cemetery, in which burials of both ordinary people and tribal leaders were discovered. Over the last decades, the burial grounds of Djarkutan have

been archaeologically studied, and some cemeteries (Djarkutan 3A and 4V) have been completely excavated. The site is dated to the end of the second millennium BCE (Ionesov 2020: 92, 94).

Cenotaph or Memorial Grave?

Cenotaph is a tomb or a monument erected in honour of a person or group of persons whose remains are elsewhere. The word cenotaph is derived from the Greek *kenos taphos*, meaning "empty tomb." A cenotaph is a monument, sometimes in the form of a tomb, to a person or group of persons buried elsewhere. Ancient Greek writings tell of many cenotaphs, although none of them survives. Existing cenotaphs of this type are found in churches (for example, in Santa Croce in Florence, where there are memorials to Dante, Machiavelli, and Galileo). The term is now applied to national war memorials (Webster 2021). Cenotaph is a monument built in memory of soldiers killed in war who are buried somewhere else (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries 2021).

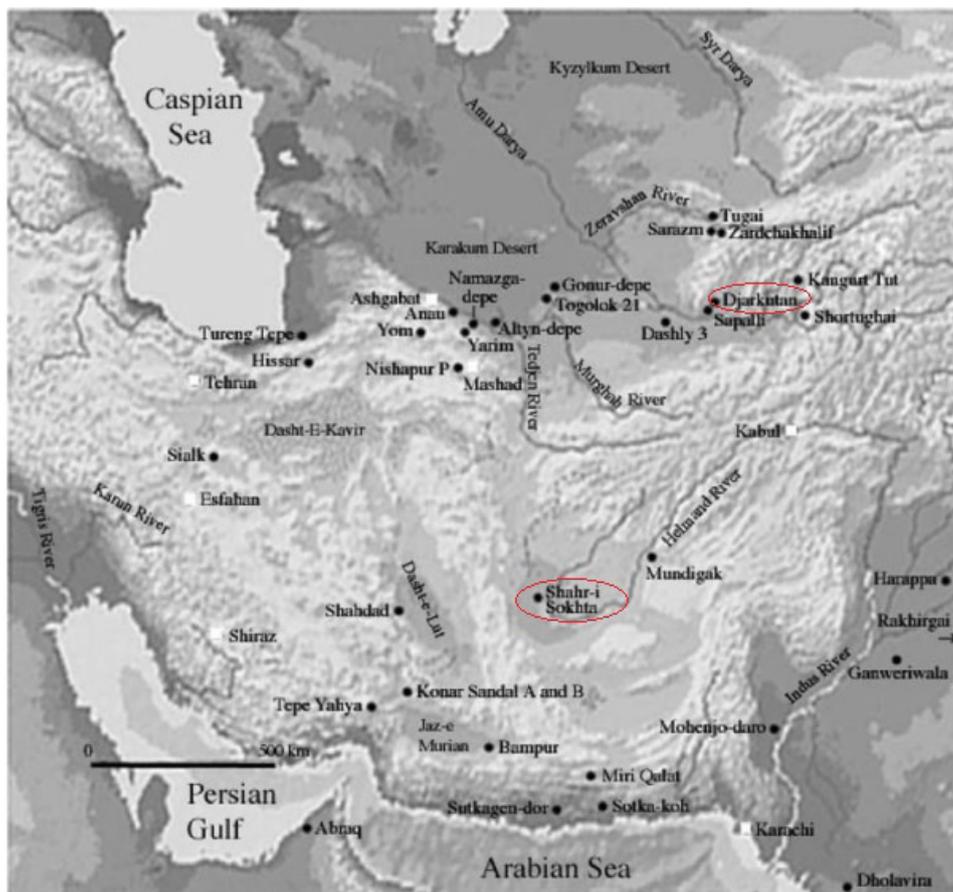


Figure. 1: Showing situation of Shahr-i-Sokhta and Djarkutan (After: Kohl 2007: 183; Fig 5.1)

Ionesov (2020) applied the term “Cenotaph” in his article about Djarkutan. Some of the tombs discussed in his article contain metal tools that are not known to have been used for hunting or as war tools. But there are a number of graves that do not reveal the presence of this type of tools. It is therefore suggested to use a more general term for this type of grave. Regarding the site of Djarkutan (Figure. 2) it is not yet clear whether this type of tool was used in wars or not! In addition, if it is accepted that the bronze tools found in some of the graves are related to weapons of war, the use of the term of “Cenotaph” for graves without metal tools is not justified. Iravani Ghadim and Tahmasebi Zave (2018) have also used the term in their article focused on a wider region, including Central Asia and the Iranian Plateau. They have emphasized the term especially in the case of Shahr-i-Sokhta (Figure. 3), but were unaware that no tools of war have been discovered from the tombs of the Burnt City.

Memorial Grave

As mentioned, a memorial grave is more relevant than a cenotaph, because weapons such as daggers have been found in a small number of Shahr-i-Sokhta graves. These limited numbers have only been found in graves with bones, while memorial tombs do not have skeletons (see Seyed Sajjadi 2007).

Seyed Sajjadi (2005) wrote about this type of grave: “A number of human graves have also

been found among the Shahr-i-Sokhta’s graves, which were fully prepared for a burial, but for some reasons they have not been used. One of these reasons may be that the dead person has died elsewhere or no trace of him has been found. This is also a sign of the beliefs of the people of the Shahr-i-Sokhta’s society about the afterlife, who wanted to not only honor the memory of the deceased, but also to perform the usual rituals in the community about him/her elsewhere to perform religious duties, and have performed their rituals in full. In relation to religious beliefs, we can also refer to the group of graves that, in addition to having ordinary vows and offerings, also had sacrificed animals, which, in addition to showing the work of individuals, also showed the heavenly beliefs of the buried and their descendants.”

Farzad Foruzanfar, a physical anthropologist who has done many field studies at the graveyard of Shahr-i-Sokhta, mentions some graves in which there isn’t any evidence of human skeletons. Some of those graves include the following numbers: 1100-1102 (Trench IRS), 1401-1402 (Trench IUG), 1502 (Trench IUL), 1901-1902 (Trench HRJ), 2915 (Trench HYJ), 3000 (Trench HYO), 4000 (Trench IUP) and 4100 (Trench HYT) (Forouzanfar 2010).

As mentioned, there were ordinary offerings and sacrificial animals among the buried objects, while there is no mention of evidence of war or hunting. It should also be noted that Shahr-i-sokhta has become known as a site where the people lived in peace. While Lombardo (2001: 10-11) goes beyond

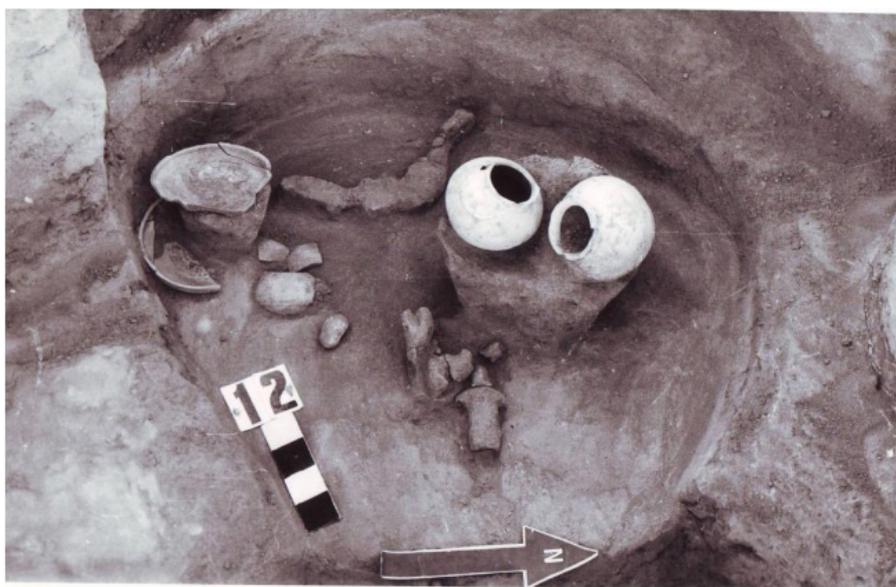


Figure. 2: Memorial Grave, Djarkutan (After: Ionesov 2020: 98)

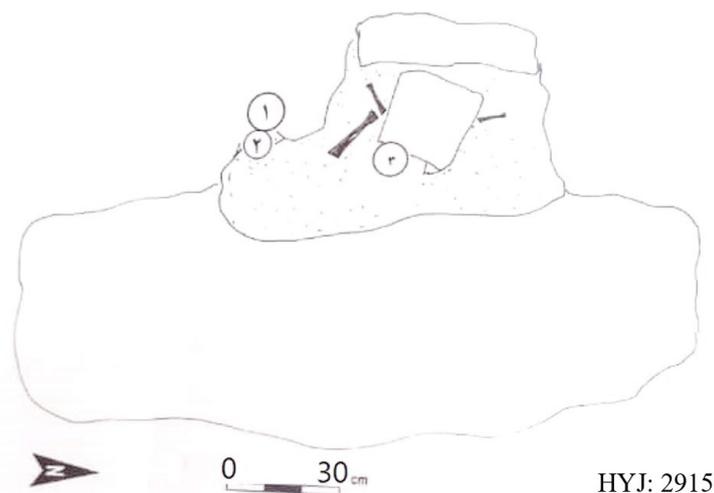


Figure 3: Memorial Grave, Shahr-i-Sokhta (After: Seyed Sajjadi 2009: 469)

that and writes: "In Eastern Iran, which coincided with the emergence of urban societies, new traits with specific tasks can be seen, however, there are no significant signs of inter-settlement conflicts."

Regarding Djarkutan's memorial graves, Ionesov (2020: 97) categorized them into six types:

- 1- Burials containing a wooden dummy and grave gifts;
- 2- Burials containing no grave gifts;
- 3- Burials containing clay figurines, modelled miniature vessels and other grave gifts;
- 4- Burials containing animals imitating a position of a dead body (usually that of a man);
- 5- Burials containing a dummy, a sacrificed sheep and grave goods;
- 6- Burials containing ritual clay vessels of cylindrical shape."

There is no evidence of metal weapons in his six-part classification, but he goes on to say that metal tools that are weapons have also been found in some of the graves (Ionesov 2020: 97). Regardless of whether these metal tools were weapons or kitchen utensils, many graves did not reveal the presence of such metal tools (Ionesov 2020: 98, figs. 7 & 8), therefore it seems more appropriate to label those as "Memorial Graves".

The most important point that can be mentioned about the chronology of the memorial graves discovered in both Southeast Iran and the Central Asia is that the graves discovered from Shahr-i-Sokhta are dated to the early and mid-third millennium BCE, while the BMAC memorial graves belong to the late third millennium BCE. Interestingly, two sites in north-eastern Iran, namely

Chalow (Vahdati and Biscione 2014) and Shahrak-e-Firouzeh (Basafa 2014) that are part of the BMAC culture have also evidence of memorial graves. The question may be asked here, whether the "Culture of Memorial Graves" might have spread from Shahr-i-Sokhta in south-eastern Iran to the sites of north-eastern Iran and Central Asia. The answer to this question requires further comparative studies in the future.

It seems that the connection between southeast of Iran and Central Asia had been established around 3000 BCE. One of the most peculiar and frequently attested pottery styles of the Indo-Iranian borderland is the so-called Quetta ware. This type of pottery, as is generally known, was also found in the Helmand and Arghandab Valleys (in layers of periods Mundigak III and Shahr-i-Sokhta I), and in southern Turkmenia (in the period Namazga III), all datable to c. 3000 BCE (Biscione 1973: 105).

Conclusion

To conclude, "Memorial Grave" is a general term that could also cover "Cenotaph" examples, on this condition that evidence of weapons is also found inside the graves. Shahr-i-Sokhta graveyard, with an area of about 21 hectares, is one of the largest Bronze Age graveyards in eastern Iran, where several graves with different structures have been identified. This graveyard was used from the beginning of the third millennium BCE to the end of this millennium: therefore, it can be considered as a key site in the study of burials and ritual practices. The identification of numerous memorial graves at

this site indicates the roots of the culture of this kind of burial in the early third millennium BCE. The geographical position of Shahr-i- Sokhta during the third millennium BCE (especially in the mid-third millennium), had connected it with several regions in the east, west, north and south, fostering cultural interactions between these areas.

According to several studies on the interactions between the Bronze Age sites in south-eastern Iran and coeval sites in southern Turkmenistan, it seems that these areas had extensive connections during the third millennium BCE. Recently, however, an increase in studies concerning areas of north-eastern Iran and Central Asia (such as the sites of Chalow and Shahrak-e-Firouzeh in north-eastern Iran, and Gonur in Central Asia) has provided further evidence of these connections. However, more comparative studies are needed in southern Uzbekistan that are related to the Sapalli culture, such as the sites of Sapalli and Djarkutan sites, to confirm these connections.

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