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Post-Achaemenid Legacy of the Persian Gulf Hinterland

Systematic Survey of Surface Remains from Tomb-e Bot, Fars, Iran

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Abstract

The archaeological site of Tomb-e Bot, located in the Mohr County of southern Fars Province, is a major settlement of Arsacid and Sasanid date. The site was selected for detailed investigation from among the 76 sites recorded by the general survey of southern Fars region to provide answers to outstanding questions on ancient Iran, in particular during the period from the Achaemenids to the Sasanids. The survey team systematically collected all visible architectural remains, including capitals with volutes and adorsed animal protomes as well as surface ceramics and attempted to draw and register the whole assemblage of finds. Documenting and analyzing the assemblage revealed that centuries after the Achaemenid demise the Persepolis artistic legacy had run on at the site in religious beliefs and among the local groups, from the Seleucid and Arsacid periods up to the rise of the Sasanids.

Keywords

Tomb-e Bot – systematic survey – Persepolis legacy – Post-Achaemenid period – Fars

Introduction

Available archaeological dataset on the early cultural periods in the northern Persian Gulf littoral comes solely from the sites in such localities as Siraf,

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Bushehr and Hormuz. Archaeological investigations in this littoral and its hinterland plains are either still pending or await publication. Where a bulk of publications on surveys and excavations carried out at the sites on the southern Persian Gulf region exists, hinterland plains of the Iranian coast still remain somewhat of an archaeological *terra incognita* for the most part. Thus, survey in the northern coast and the hinterland beyond it is essential.

Lamerd and Mohr Counties in southern Fars are comprised of three plains, which extend along the Zagros Mountains in a northwest-southeast orientation. In the wet season, three seasonal rivers of Alamrvdasht, Mehran and Daralmeyzan flow over these plains. Given the scarce water resources and the hot and dry regional climate, making the most of the available technology in exploiting ecological potentialities has always been vitally important for the indigenous groups.

Previous surveys have recorded early settlements in the region in particular from the prehistoric period.¹ During the historical period, the region formed part of the Achaemenid, Arsacid (through the local kings of Fars) and Sasanid kingdoms.² In the Islamic era, the sociopolitical developments triggered by the arrival of Islam in the Fars region acted on local population centers.³

It goes without saying that in any of the prehistoric, proto-historic, Achaemenid, Arsacid, Sasanid and Islamic periods, the expansion of settlement boundaries in the region was determined by the ways in which existing ecological potentials were turned to good use. The field surveys carried out by the present author have brought to light the capacity and the employed techniques to exploit these potentialities. Also, the geographical location of the region as a hinterland between the Persian Gulf coast and the inland parts of Fars Province played a pivotal role in trade and supporting imports and exports, economic development, and population size.⁴

Background of Archaeological Work

The region was partially surveyed in the winter of 1932-33 by Sir Aurel Stein, who registered 12 sites in its southern plain.⁵ Another 21 sites would be added

1 Stein 1937, 218-219.

2 For more details, see Toynebee 1954, vol. 7, 107-108; von Gutschmid 1888, 179-185; Nöldeke 1879, 48.

3 Aubin 1969-70, 21-63; Hinds 1984, 8-18; Williamson 1972.

4 Askari Chaverdi & Azarnoush 2004.

5 Stein 1937, 213-234.

to his catalogue by a later survey program by H. Gaube.⁶ Finally, the author's 1999-2000 fieldwork under the consultation of Dr. M. Azarnoush identified further 43 sites,⁷ raising the number of recorded sites to 76. The number would amount to over 100 as a result of frequent revisits between 2001-2011. Out of these sites, Tomb-e Bot was selected for a series of systematic surveys between 1998-2011 in the hope of finding answers for the outstanding questions on the historic period of Fars spanning from the collapse of the Achaemenid Empire through to the rise of the Sasanid Empire.

Location and Environmental Setting of Tomb-e Bot

Situated in the valley of the Mehran river some 40 km north of the port of Siraf, Tomb-e Bot lies at latitude 27°44'268" north, longitude 52°39'122" east, at an elevation of 500 m above sea level. The site, sitting at the foot of Mount Tang-e Siyah, is in the northwest part of the Lamerd and Mohr plain, 100 m north of the village of Shaldan (Fig. 1). The central mound covers an area of about 1 ha and is currently overlaid by actively farmed land that is hemmed in on three sides – Mount Tang-e Siyah to the north and the low archaeological mounds of Tomb-e Sefid, Qaleh Ruh al-Din and Qaleh Shaldan to the east and west (Fig. 2). The site covers a total area of 5-7 ha together with the adjoining mounds and the foothill. The finds which are the focus of the present paper come from the central mound. The mentioned farmland receives its irrigation water from a nearby well, which furnishes potable water. Thanks to its arable soil, the area enables the local agro-pastoral community to live there year-round. The seasonal Mehran River crosses the plain some 800 m to the south. Several chance discoveries of stone structural elements, with three cubic capitals with volutes, three capitals with addorsed animal protomes, a fragmented stone human bust, and two eagle protomes being the most intriguing instances (Figs. 3-16), have been made over the past few years as a result of farming activities.

Systematic Surface Survey

At the very beginning, the whole site was divided into two parts: the central mound covering an area of 4 ha and currently used for farming purposes, and the mounds that surrounded the latter and contained ancient relics. On

6 Gaube 1980, 149-166.

7 Askari Chaverdi & Azarnoush 2004, 3-18.

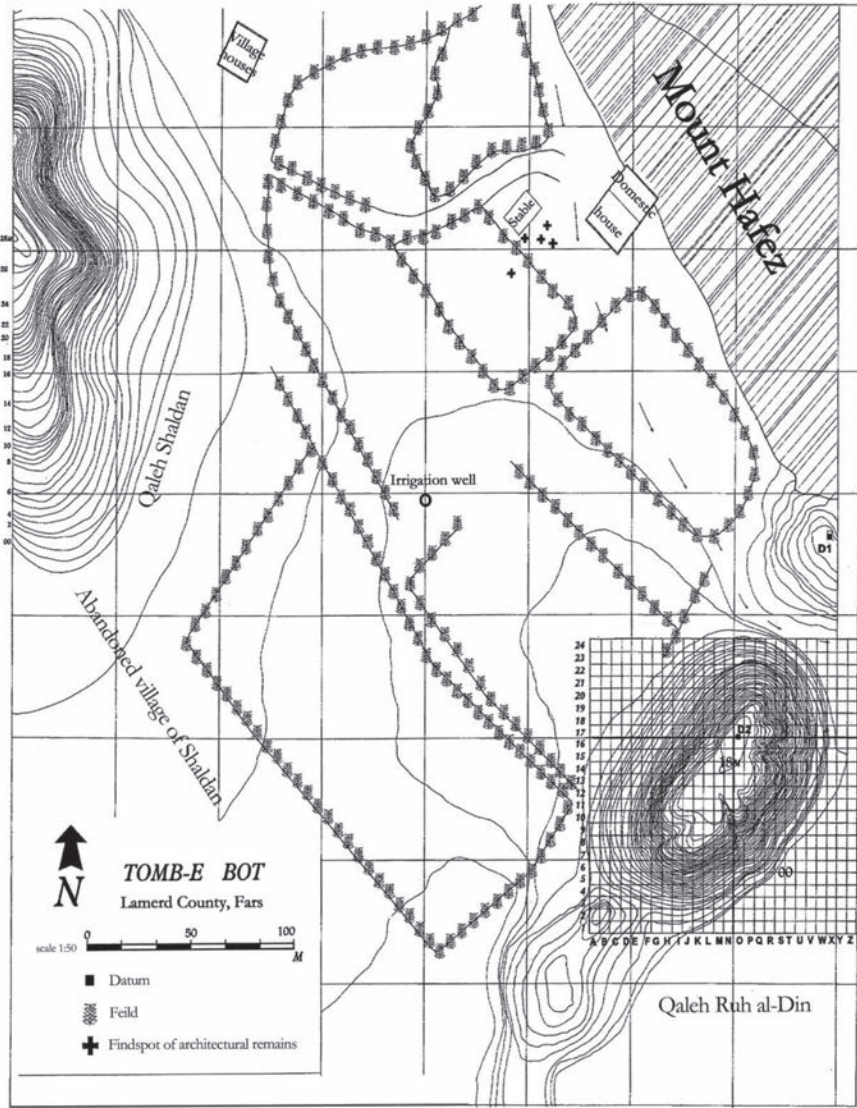


FIGURE 1 *Tomb-e Bot, map of the site showing the location of the imposed grid system to sample pottery and architectural remains.*

account of regular ploughing, the former part lacked any surface scatter of pottery sherds, thus leaving us with the two flanking mounds for pottery sampling: (1) the northwestern one, locally known as Shaldan, which is a natural mound 3 ha in area and 28 m in height; and (2) the southeastern mound, called Qaleh Ruh al-Din. As a result of the former's proximity to the namesake village, not



FIGURE 2 *Tomb-e Bot, view from southeast.*

only its surface has gone through modifications but also the villagers have entirely wiped away the ceramic sherds to use them in their modern bread ovens. Therefore, the pottery sampling was inevitably restricted to the south-east mound.

Qaleh Ruh al-Din (Fig. 1) was thus selected for sampling sherds as well as other cultural materials, with the collection methodology based on stratified systematic sampling. Representing the most well-preserved portion of Tomb-e Bot and somehow retaining its original morphology, the mound rises 18 m above the surrounding lands and measures 125 m in length and 120 m in width, with a total area of 15000 m². Once its area and height were measured, it was mapped with a 0.5 m contour interval, and a grid system was staked out over it (Fig. 1, bottom right). In all, 600 north-south oriented 5 × 5 m squares were established along the two axes, centered on a datum. The squares were labeled by Roman letters on the north-south axis and Roman numerals on the east-west axis. The southwestern corner was thus appointed as the site datum. The north-south axis, consisting of 25 squares, ran for a length of 125 m, while the east-west axis, including 24 squares, was 120 m long. Of the total of 600 squares, 118 lay within the above mentioned farmland, particularly in the east and northwest portions, making sampling practically impossible. Out of the remaining 482 squares, 241 alternate grid units were singled out for sampling work, at the end of which 8 proved to be void of any cultural materials. Thus,

the pottery sample comes from 233 squares and the statistical analyses consider the material deriving from these squares.

Architectural Elements

The most interesting among the surface assemblages from the site are stone architectural elements which were found scattered over the surface in the central mound. These include capitals with addorsed animal protomes and volutes. Also, throughout the central mound, a plethora of column shafts alongside human-faced and animal sculptures were recovered (Figs. 3-16). Assortments of stone vessels as well as other tools with relatively identifiable functions are further notable stone finds.

Cubic Capitals with Volutes

All four sides of these rectangular cuboids were embellished with multiple volutes (Figs. 3-6). At both the top and bottom of each capital a circular convex molding exists akin to a torus, with a shallow hole at its center possibly intended to join the capital to the column shaft. Each capital bears eight flutings on all four sides, and any individual volute is provided at both ends by an eight petal flower within a spiral circle, with each facet having 8 flowers overall, which add up to 32 on any individual capital. To the perforation at the center of each flower probably further ornaments were attached. Some variations are



FIGURE 3 *Tomb-e Bot, Capital with volutes No. 1.*

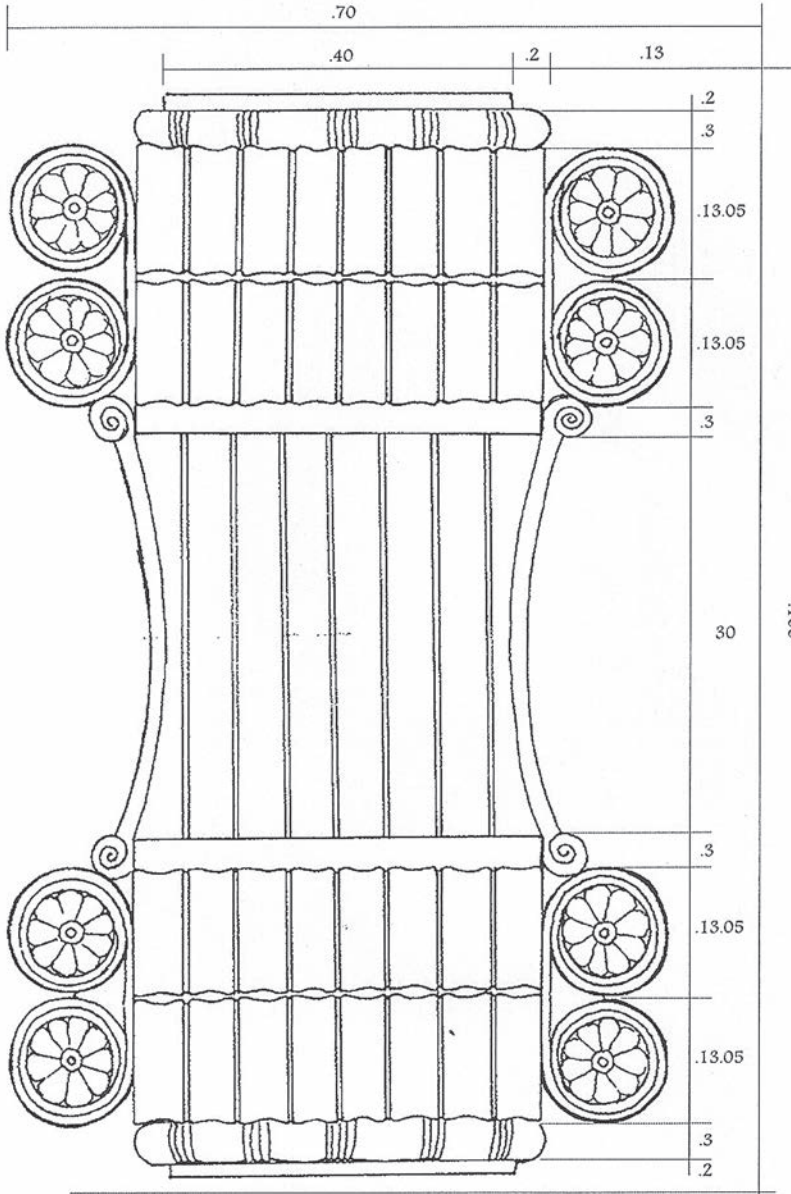


FIGURE 4 *Tomb-e Bot, Capital with volutes No. 1 (drawing by Stefano Tilia and Angela Bizzarro).*



FIGURE 5 *Tomb-e Bot, Capital with volutes No. 2.*

exhibited by the flowers on Capital 2, where some of them are six-petal and are framed by a simple circle.

As the only major difference in these cubic capitals is in their dimensions, here only Capital 1 will be described in detail. It is 1.10 m high and consists of three sections, lower, middle and upper (Figs. 3-4). The lower part consists of a convex molding, measuring 36 cm in diameter and 8 cm in height. A 13 cm deep 3×2 cm perforation was made vertically in the center of this discoid



FIGURE 6 *Tomb-e Bot, Capital with volutes No. 3.*

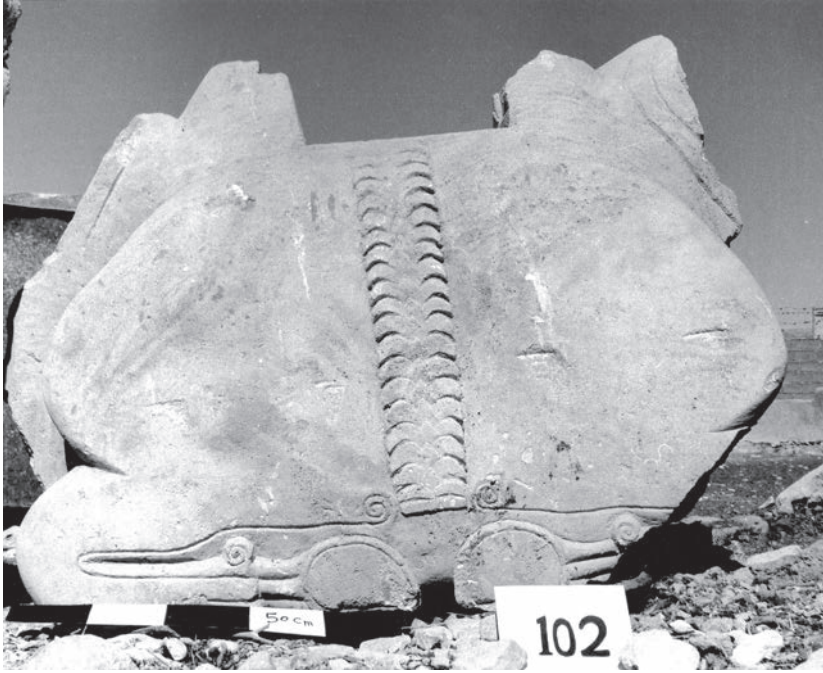


FIGURE 7 *Tomb-e Bot, Capital with addorsed animal protomes No. 1.*

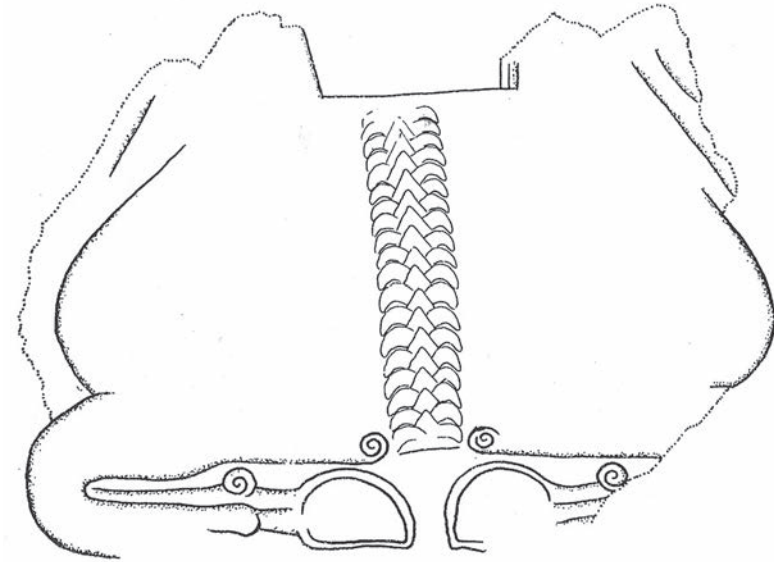


FIGURE 8 *Tomb-e Bot, Capital with addorsed animal protomes No. 1 (drawing by Z. Nowruzī).*



FIGURE 9 *Tomb-e Bot, Capital with addorsed animal protomes No. 2.*

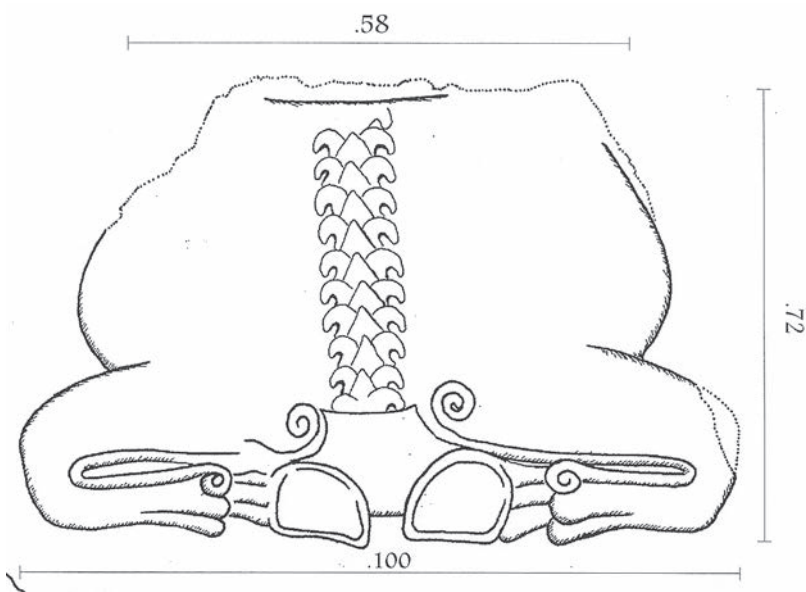


FIGURE 10 *Tomb-e Bot, Capital with addorsed animal protomes No. 2 (drawing by Z. Nowruzi).*

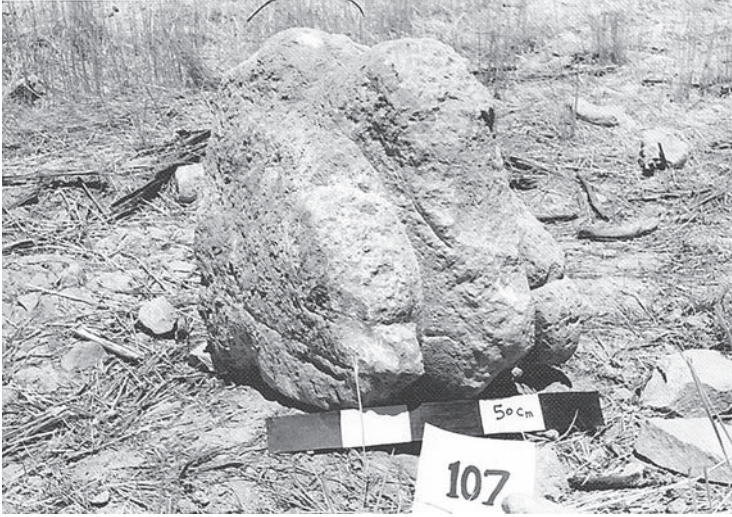


FIGURE 11 *Tomb-e Bot, human-headed animal forequarter.*

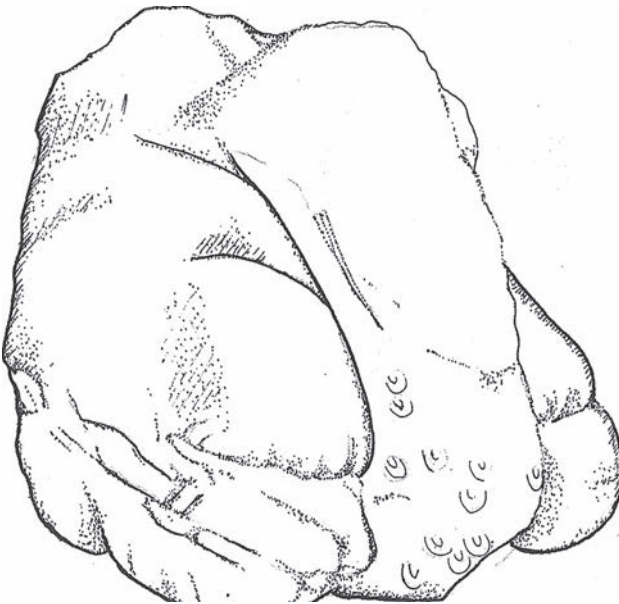


FIGURE 12 *Tomb-e Bot, human-headed animal forequarter*
(drawing by Z. Nowruzi).



FIGURE 13 *Tomb-e Bot, human bust.*

feature. Above the latter, a pair of volutes, each measuring 42.5 cm in length and 13 cm in height, flanks the capital on all four sides. The middle part is defined by two lower and upper, simple horizontal bands or *pillows*. This part is 42 cm high and spans 41 cm at the upper and lower pillows and 35 cm at the tapered center. The upper part is similar to its lower counterpart in both decorative elements and dimensions, though here the depth of the central perforation was reduced to 8 cm.

The elements ornamenting the lower part are as follows: 13 clusters of ribbing occur at regular intervals around the torus-like molding, with each cluster in turn formed by three narrow vertical grooves. The space between the pairs



FIGURE 14 *Tomb-e Bot, human bust (drawing by Z. Nowruzi).*



FIGURE 15 *Tomb-e Bot, eagle protome.*



FIGURE 16 *Tomb-e Bot, eagle protome (drawing by Z. Nowruzi).*

of volutes on each flank is filled with eight flutes, and, as stated, an eight petal flower adorns the lateral face of each volute. The middle part reveals the same eight flutes, and four protruding spirals mark the ends of both upper and lower *pillows*, serving as a frame for the middle part (Fig. 4). Either lateral flute is truncated in keeping with the tapered body of the capital.

Addorsed Animal Protome Capitals

Two capitals are formed by a pair of addorsed kneeling animals; the heads of animals in both capitals are missing, and only one side of each capital remains

intact (Figs. 7-10). Due to these damages, it is difficult to measure the accurate dimensions, but the extant portion of Capital 1 is 90 cm high, 107 cm long and 52 cm wide. Capital 2 survives to a length of 82 cm, width of 33 cm and height of 72 cm. Beams rested atop these capitals, in the depression formed by the heads and necks of the addorsed animals. The fairly well preserved, almost intact, depression in Capital 1 is 31 cm long and 15 cm high. A vertical groove or “rabbet” was cut in the upper parts of the two opposite walls of the depression. The animal protomes in each capital are separated by a wide, central decorative band formed by two vertical rows of downturned “leaves” divided by a row of “buds.” This band consists of 20 leaves in Capital 1 and 11 leaves in Capital 2 (Figs. 7-10). Those of the latter are larger and more sparsely placed than what is seen in Capital 1 (Figs. 9-10). In the lower parts of both capitals, the ankles and legs of the animals are overlaid by two spirals, which join each other by long, narrow lines that outline the legs. Generally speaking, the animals in Capital 2 have more well-proportioned bodies when compared to those of Capital 1, as their elongated, bulging bodies are more congruent with their long, slender legs, and the legs are portrayed more naturalistically.

Human-Headed Bull Capital

This represents a kneeling creature that has a bust of an animal and the head of a human (Figs. 11-12). It sports a heavily-built body with fat shoulders and protruding hump, and has a nearly flat back. Entire portions, in particular head and face, are extremely damaged, and the part wherein the beam rested is partially missing. The extant portions are 66 cm high and measure 6 × 41 cm in the lower part. The badly damaged face hinders an accurate description, but judging by what is discernible now, the wide and elongated face was provided with a beard and curly hairs, because the lower face retains a series of hair locks.

Human Bust

The assemblage of finds from Tomb-e Bot also includes a human bust of whitish limestone sculpted in full face (Figs. 13-14). The bust has survived to a height of 27 cm and weighs 9.100 kg. Though head and face had partially fallen victim to the ravages of time, the fat face with chubby cheeks and protruding eyes is still discernible. The left eye, which is the only surviving one, has a bulging outline but lacks a pupil. Parts of the wide, protruding nose are missing. The mouth, with wide lips, is half-open. The wide ears are turned forward. The extremely stumpy neck has blotted out the body-head transition. The body

terminates in a circular bottom, roughly 15 cm in diameter and circled by a row of small raised beads.

This male figure has curly, almost puffed up hair, with curls hanging on both sides over the shoulders and tied by two ribbons at the back. Though the top of the head is broken, the extant parts appear to suggest that there was originally a crown or diadem. The beard, now represented only by sideburns and a small chunk below the chin, was indicated by raised circles. The figure wears an open-collared pleated tunic furnished by a row of raised dots around the neckband as decoration. A pendant necklace and earrings round out the personal ornaments of our figure. Earrings are large pearls suspended by small loops inserted in the earlobes. A big pendant, apparently imitating a precious stone, hangs from the center of the necklace, which is formed of round, large beads.

Eagle Protomes

Two broken eagle heads of limestone with wide, long beaks and prominent head and neck come from the site (Figs. 15-16). In both protomes, the head, broken at the neck in front, is 16 cm high and the neck has a diameter of 27 cm. Eyes are rounded and have pointed circular pupils. Feathers were indicated by slant, pointed lines, so that we are faced with an alert eagle with open eyes. Both pieces were rendered in the same style.

Systematic Sampling of Surface Pottery

From almost 50% of the established grid units, a total of 7496 objects assignable to an array of different periods were collected. These include 27 painted pottery sherds (accounting for 0.3% of the whole assemblage), 438 flakes, microliths and related waste products (5.8%), 61 glass fragments (0.8%), and 143 glazed pottery sherds (1.9%). The largest assemblage consists of the unpainted and unglazed ceramics, making up 91.07% of the whole finds. This sub-assemblage has already been subjected to separate meticulous analysis, description and classification⁸ because of its large size.

8 Askari Chaverdi 2001, 50-53.

Chronological Sequence at Tomb-e Bot

Diagram 1 gives the chronological sequence of the sherds from Tomb-e Bot spanning the pre-Achaemenid to late Sasanid period. The diagram in fact presents the statistical analysis of all rim, body, handle and base fragments which were securely attributable to a certain period/timespan on typological grounds.

Here, 185 pottery pieces consisting of rim (n = 100), body (50), base (28), handle (5) and foot (2) fragments were analyzed morphologically.⁹ While the analysis was able to assign 152 pieces, including 98 rim, 50 body, 2 handle, and 2 base fragments, to a specific historic or Islamic period or timespan, in case of the remaining 33 pieces, mainly base fragments, only a general attribution to the pre-historic period was possible (Tables 1-3).

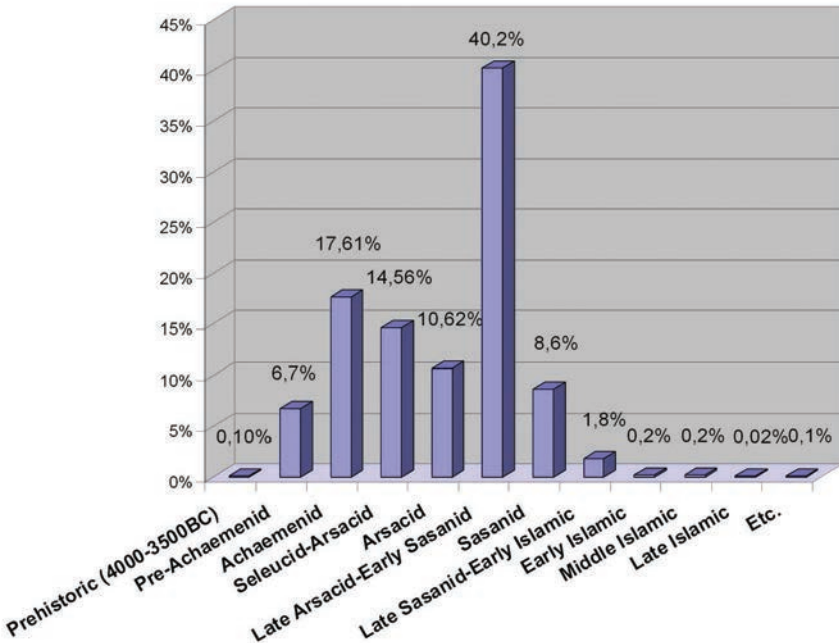


DIAGRAM 1 Chronological distribution of sherds from surface survey at Tomb-e Bot.

⁹ Askari Chaverdi 2001, 67-68.

TABLE 1 *Relative chronology of rim fragments from Tomb-e Bot*

Period/Timespan	Sherd No.
Late Sasanid-Early Islamic	38, 50, 94
Sasanid	19, 31, 35, 55, 56, 79
Late Arsacid-Early Sasanid	10, 14, 15, 20, 24, 26, 30, 40, 41, 42, 43, 47, 54, 58, 60, 61, 62, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 73, 77, 80, 83, 84, 88, 89, 95, 97, 98, 99
Arsacid	21, 28, 29, 33, 44, 52, 57, 65, 72, 75, 76, 82, 90, 92
Seleucid-Arsacid	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 23, 37, 45, 46, 48, 51, 59, 64, 85, 86, 91
Achaemenid	4, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 22, 25, 27, 34, 36, 71, 78, 93, 100
pre-Achaemenid	27, 32, 49, 81, 96

TABLE 2 *Relative chronology of body fragments from Tomb-e Bot*

Period/Timespan	Sherd No.
Late Sasanid-Early Islamic	–
Sasanid	45
Late Arsacid-Early Sasanid	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 15, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 46, 49
Arsacid	–
Seleucid-Arsacid	7
Achaemenid	8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 50
pre-Achaemenid	17, 28, 47

TABLE 3 *Arsacid-Sasanid handles and foot fragments from Tomb-e Bot*

Period/Timespan	Sherd No.
handle	2, 3
base	1, 2

In light of the exhaustive analysis,¹⁰ the typology of sherds evinced the existence at Tomb-e Bot of pre-Achaemenid settlements (probably the late second quarter of the 1st millennium BC).¹¹ In the Achaemenid period, the site continued to thrive hand in hand with the genesis and growth of the new imperial state, and it would undergo a relative decline in the succeeding Seleucid and Arsacid periods.¹² Tomb-e Bot burgeoned again in the middle Arsacid-early Sasanid times, but an enduring downhill trend would await it in the mid-Sasanid period.

Appraisal and Analysis of Available Evidence

No systematic work on the artistic-cultural traditions of the Fars region precedes the one reported here. Relevant finds, in particular those collected in the course of the systematic surveys of Tomb-e Bot, may therefore be deemed important and provide answers for innumerable questions with regard to the trends of the Achaemenid legacy in the Fars region.

Results from the surface survey of the southeast quadrant of Tomb-e Bot and study of the attested architectural elements have suggested a long sequence of settlement for the site. The most significant phase in this sequence, drawing on the surface finds, is the 2nd century AD, which marked many historical, political and social developments in the region. What has become apparent to a large extent from the analysis of the surface pottery assemblage from the site is that the late Arsacid period witnessed the apogee of Tomb-e Bot's opulence, a fact also supported by the style of artworks from the surface of the site, in particular the human bust, and their comparison to other related material dating to the late 2nd and early 3rd century AD.¹³

The assemblage from Tomb-e Bot might at first sight be regarded as recalling Achaemenid art, but a closer look reveals that it lacks the most characteristic feature of this court art – *i.e.* the formal finishing.¹⁴ Not even a single object in the assemblage reflects the fineness, meticulousness and proportionality displayed by Achaemenid sculpture. The typological similarities between the Tomb-e Bot assemblage and the Achaemenid remains at Persepolis are evocative of the local artist's passionate attempt to imitate the earlier masterpieces.

¹⁰ Askari Chaverdi 2001, 68.

¹¹ Askari Chaverdi 2001, 69.

¹² Askari Chaverdi 2001, 70-71.

¹³ Askari Chaverdi 2002, 72-75.

¹⁴ Askari Chaverdi 1999, 66-77.

However, the raw material, dimensions and particularly the stone cutting technique are by no means on a par with those of the latter. At Tomb-e Bot we see a deteriorated Achaemenid style and an exclusive reliance on local stone resources. Furthermore, motifs and decorative elements such as petals and buds decorating either flanks of the double animal capitals and the species of animal portrayed on these capitals were all rendered in a local style. Given the formal status of the Achaemenid art, particularly in the Fars region, the use of such a less refined style then points quite clearly to a post-Achaemenid tradition. Resurrection of the Achaemenid art – albeit in a depreciated form – in the late 2nd-early 3rd century AD in the southernmost part of Fars next to the Persian Gulf has raised multiple questions, the answers to which should be sought in the issues surrounding the rise of the Sasanid Empire at the end of this period in southern Fars. Perhaps the most fascinating claim with regard to the persistence of Achaemenid legacy in the region until almost four centuries after the fall of the empire is that the reuse of this early tradition at Tomb-e Bot soon before the rise of the Sasanid empire in a secure locality on the Persian Gulf was more presumably part of efforts to consolidate national identity to retain the territorial integrity and cultural homogeneity and could even have served as a vehicle for political ambitions to plant the spark that was expected to ignite a reformist uprising, rather than an endeavor trying to perpetuate memories of old traditions. Perhaps more or less the same could be said of the imitation in the same period of the Achaemenid Persepolitan elements in Estakhr.

The presence of religious and political symbolism at Tomb-e Bot, such as the stone bust with its stylistic affinities to the Sasanid decorations as well as the Arsacid stone sculpture works at Hatra and southwestern Iran, shows that the artist quite consciously and with political intentions had tried to revive Achaemenid art. At Tomb-e Bot, all artistic elements elicit questions which, beyond the symbolic aspect of art and continuation and evolution of its qualitative and ritual aspects, seek a political legitimacy, the starkest examples of which are the two stone eagle protomes (Figs. 15-16). The eagle would symbolize the royal political power all through the Arsacid and Sasanid periods.¹⁵ It is an oft-cited fact in most ancient texts that the imperial standard of the Achaemenid kings was topped by an eagle.¹⁶ In the *Bahman Yasht* and Ferdowsi's *Shahnama*, the emblem is mentioned in reference to the Kayanid kings of ancient Iran.¹⁷ Archaeological investigations show that the representation of

15 Pourdavood 1968, 35-38.

16 Shahbazi 1994, 312-313.

17 Pourdavood 1968, 35-38.

eagles occurs not only in the Achaemenid period¹⁸ but also on the coinage of the local Persis rulers in particular the Shahs who ruled in the 1st-2nd centuries AD.¹⁹ Having allegedly incarnated the Achaemenid court and the homeland of the Persian people, the eagle reappeared on the crowns of the Sasanid kings.²⁰

Archaeological evidence pertaining to the Achaemenid legacy in southern Fars proves the region's pivotal role in the continuation of the Achaemenid legacy in ancient Iran, and particularly during the intermission period and prior to the rise of the Sasanids. Given the frequent discussions in the recent decades on the Sasanids' intentional or unintentional imitation of the Achaemenid traditions, particularly in terms of architecture and art,²¹ new positions may be offered apropos the interlude between the Achaemenid and Sasanid periods in Fars region in the light of the close stylistic connections between artwork from Tomb-e Bot to the Achaemenid and Arsacid arts on the one hand and the Sasanid art on the other as well as the uninterrupted occupations of Tomb-e Bot from the Arsacid through the Sasanid periods, as suggested by its pottery assemblage.

From a certain perspective on the history of ancient Iran, in the Achaemenid period the local cultures, while retaining their indigenous characteristics, adapted to the formal structure of Great Iran. However, with regard to the question whether in terms of religion, art, agriculture, and sedentary or nomadic life they returned to their ancestral practices as a result of the disintegration of the central government and the cease of economic and political support,²² we may surmise that in the course of the political developments characterizing the transition from the Achaemenid to the Seleucid and Arsacid periods, the range of changes varied by differing political and religious status of each individual region during the Achaemenid period. By virtue of its effective socio-political system in the latter period, the Fars region kept its political organization within the boundaries of the present-day namesake province throughout the Seleucid and Arsacid periods until it was able to re-expand its territory from the same core area in the late Arsacid period at the opening of the 3rd century AD.

18 Shahbazi 1970, 347; Hignett 1962, 40.

19 Alram 1986; Hill 1922, 231, figs. 35-39.

20 Lukonin 1961, 234-235.

21 Roaf 1998, 1-7; Callieri 2011.

22 Briant 1982, 329, fn. 161; Boucharlat 2003, 25; Callieri 2007, 44; Askari Chaverdi & Callieri 2016, 134.

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