

Funeral rites at Zagheh: a Neolithic site in the Qazvin plain, Iran

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ABSTRACT – Recent discoveries of the Neolithic temple at Zagheh on the Iranian plateau have been presented. Funeral rites and the interrelation between temple functions and graves have also been discussed. It is pointed out that the nearest similar painted temple is located in Çatal Hüyük in Central Anatolia.

IZVLEČEK – V članku je predstavljeno neolitsko svetišče v Zaghehu na Iranskem platoju. Predstavljene so pogrebni običaji in povezave med obredi v svetišču in grobovi, odkritimi v neposredni bližini. Velja poudariti, da je najbližje podobno svetišče locirano v Çatal Hüyük v osrednji Anatoliji.

KEY WORDS – Iran; Neolithic temple; funeral rite; female graves

The region between the northern Zagros (N. W. Iran), the eastern Iranian plateau, and the Alburz system is centered on the central plateau of Iran, and includes the Qazvin plain in the west (Fig. 1). The plain is an alluvial basin covering an area of 443 000 acres. The area is approximately 1/130 m above sea level. In the plain there are areas whose natural resources offer fruitful prospects for the investigation of early sedentary life in the Neolithic period. In addition, the plain is well situated to encourage cultural connections. Therefore, it can be seen as a major highway linking northern Zagros with the eastern Iranian plateau. Qazvin plain is a region given prominence when it was thought that 'Archaic ware' – best known from the first phase in the Qazvin plain (Zagheh) – represented the earliest stage of settled life. But the problems of cultural sequencing in this region and its relation to other cultural zones in Iran have yet not been analysed (Talai 1983). This is important, since it can eventually contribute to our understanding of cultural development and relations between the central plateau and contemporaneous development in the eastern Iranian plateau and central Asia during the whole Neolithic period. The Neolithic site of Zagheh is located in the southern part of the Qazvin plain, about 60 km south of the provincial city of Qazvin. It is a

small mound covering an area 300 m long and 200 m wide, with a height of one metre, and more than six metres of archaeological debris. There are some ¹⁴C dates from seventh and early fifth millennium available. The site had been deserted in the fifth millennium

The first excavations on the site were by the Institute of Archaeology, University of Tehran in 1970, under the directorship of professor E. O. Neghaban



Fig. 1. Location map: 1. Ismailabad; 2. Tepe Hissar; 3. Stalk; 4. Zagheh (Qazvin Plain).

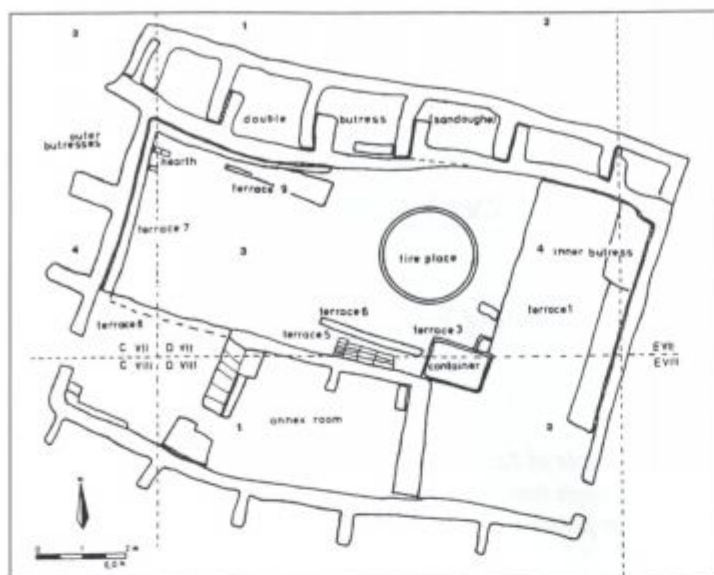


Fig. 2. Floor plain of Zagheh painted temple (after Neghahban 1984).

(Neghahban 1973; 1984). The excavation of materials then revealed that the site is basically Neolithic. It also indicated that the materials are potential sources of much new information concerning not only the relationship between the early and late Neolithic in the central plateau of Iran, but also the development of an early Neolithic painted pottery assemblage in the region. To develop this potential, an attempt was made to conduct long-term systematic annual excavations to obtain as much evidence as possible, particularly architectural remains.

Therefore, as a result of several seasons of excavations, a considerable portion of the ancient village of Zagheh has been revealed (Malek Shahmirzadi 1977). The objects excavated from the site are so numerous that one can accurately depict the life style and the economy of the earliest dwellers on the Qazvin plain. Here it should be noted that the problems of cultural sequence and other archaeological aspects of the Zagheh excavations have already been described in both published and unpublished forms and need not be repeated here, except to give some description of Zagheh's painted temple in connection with the subject. It is a large, rectangular and fairly complex structure, which holds the central position in the ancient village of Zagheh (Fig. 2). Mud brick is the main, the most abundant and accessible material used in the construction. Inside the main room (117 m²) of the temple, nine platforms (benches) were built as seating. There is also a fireplace for heating in winter (Neghahban 1979). The walls were painted with a simple meander and dentation design (Fig. 3). The benches and the walls were mounted with mountain goat skulls and horns. The relatively considerable size of the temple and its

internal features indicate that the temple was used for social gatherings. In the excavating season of 1975 a large number of clay figures were found inside the temple, which further indicates that the building was a religious centre (Neghahban 1984). Structural details indicate that there must have been a long tradition in local architecture. However, the temple in Zagheh Neolithic village provides a first-hand opportunity to examine the inhabitants' religious practices.

It is worth noting that there have not yet been found similar painted temples on the Iranian plateau. The nearest counterpart is located in Çatal Hüyük in Central Anatolia (Mellaart 1967).

The following is a brief description of 8 graves found at Zagheh during the 1992 excavation season. We believe, on the basis of previous finds at the site (1971-1974), '...that the inhabitants of Zagheh buried their dead inside the Neolithic village. In most cases the children and the young were buried under the floor of the roofed areas of houses. All of the skeletal remains showed traces of diluted ochre. Various grave goods and presents were found with some burials.' (Malek Shahmirzadi 1990).

Graves were located about 9 meters from main boundary of the temple (trenches A8-E8) in the centre of the village. They are buried in a semicircular row positioned beneath the occupation floor of the buildings that must had been related to the temple.

All the remains are of young females (aged 25-30). Although they were buried in simple pits (Fig. 4), their faces were clearly oriented towards the temple

Fig. 3. Showing the inside of Zagheh painted temple, and also the pattern of design.



building (Fig. 5). They all showed the intensive use of red ochre, even inside their mouths (Figs. 6-7). I should point out that, at present, in some parts of Iran, villagers use ochre as a wall plaster for preventing insect penetration. Apparently, the use of ochre in funeral rites has been reported from many contemporaneous Neolithic sites in Iran. However, the pattern of orientation in Zagheh, as in the 8 graves illustrated, has not been seen at any other related sites in Iran. Clearly, this provides an opportunity to study the interrelation between temple functions and graves, but also the importance of the temple at funeral sites in the village communities of Zagheh. In Iran, burying the dead in and around holy places is a continuing practice. On the other hand, it seems that the 8 females were somehow privileged people that were buried around the temple; if this is accepted, this will give pause for thought concerning the social structure of the Zagheh community. Among the more interesting finds from the 8 graves, such as grave goods, were tiny drilled beads in some numbers made of agate, turquoise, lime-stone hematite

and unidentified stone. These beads, which have no clear pattern, were arranged to create strings (Fig. 8). They are unevenly distributed in each grave. Almost all the beads are finished products that indicate some degree of specialisation in bead production. The presence of such items in the graves in large numbers strongly suggests the bead production industry flourished in Zagheh; at the same time, a bead production workshop has not yet been found in Zagheh. On the other hand, since the only known deposit of turquoise reported from the extreme east of the Iranian plateau, one can further suggest the existence of long distance trade. The kinds and number of beads recovered from the graves is unique, and have rarely been found in other Neolithic sites in Iran.

In sum, as stated earlier, this is preliminary report on the data recovered from the cleaning of 8 graves at Zagheh. It is preliminary at almost every level of data collection, description, and analysis. I think it only reasonable that readers be given a sense of what kind of information is, or is not, presently available.

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Fig. 4. Zagheh. Grave beneath the house floor.



Fig. 5. Zagheh. Skeleton oriented towards the painted temple.



Fig. 6. Zagheh. Burial with ochre concentration.



Fig. 7. Zagheh. Burial with ochre deposited in the mouth.



Fig. 8. Zagheh. Stone beads found in grave.



Fig. 9. Zagheh. Skull after restoration.