

# WOMEN'S STATUS IN THE IRON AGE BASED ON ETHNO-ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES OF THE WEST CENTRAL ZAGROS NOMADS

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In the western part of the central Zagros Mountains, archaeologists have discovered numerous Iron Age cemeteries. Often excavated in haste as rescue operations, many of the graves have been identified as belonging to women, but analysis of the material has been confined to description of the burial goods and the manner of their burial. While one explanation is the absence of written sources such as the inscriptions found in the repository of Takht-i Jamshid, more generally, studies on the position of women have only recently become an important subject in the archaeology of the region (see Niknāmi et al. 2011, pp. 5-17).

As a step toward remedying this problem, this article first will summarize for a number of cemeteries the evidence attesting to female burials. In only a few instances have skeletons been preserved. So the attribution must be based on the grave goods that may be considered gender specific. The assumption is that burials with weapons are male and that burials containing wristlets or anklets most likely are female. Other goods, such as pottery generally cannot be considered gender-specific. By themselves though, the burial goods do not provide us with sufficient

information on the position of the buried women in their lives. Nor can the material be juxtaposed with that of settlements, since none from the Iron Age have been excavated in this region in the vicinity of the cemeteries. In fact, scholars have asserted that these cemeteries are those of semi-nomadic societies, presumed to have had no fixed settlements (Godard 1931, p. 21; vanden Berghe 1982, p. 14; 1987, p. 203).

A semi-nomadic way of life in fact has been the dominant one in this area down to the present, allowing us to hypothesize that there may have been long-term continuity among the ethnic groups of the region. Hence, the second part of this essay, which is an ethnographic study of these groups in the present in order to see whether their traditions can shed light on what has been found by archaeologists with regard to the lives of women.

The area embraced by this research encompasses the western central Zagros which includes Dyala Province (Pārezgay Diyāla in Iraqī Kurdistān), the south and west of Kermānshāh, southwestern Hamadan and the western and northwestern parts of Ilām Province

in Iran, the territory of the Khezal, Malekshāhi, and part of the Kalhor tribes living in Aivān Township [Fig. 1]. These regions are known collectively as Posht-i-Kuh.<sup>1</sup> Data have been gathered through field investigation, especially by talking with tribal women. In addition, library studies have been used to complete the field research.

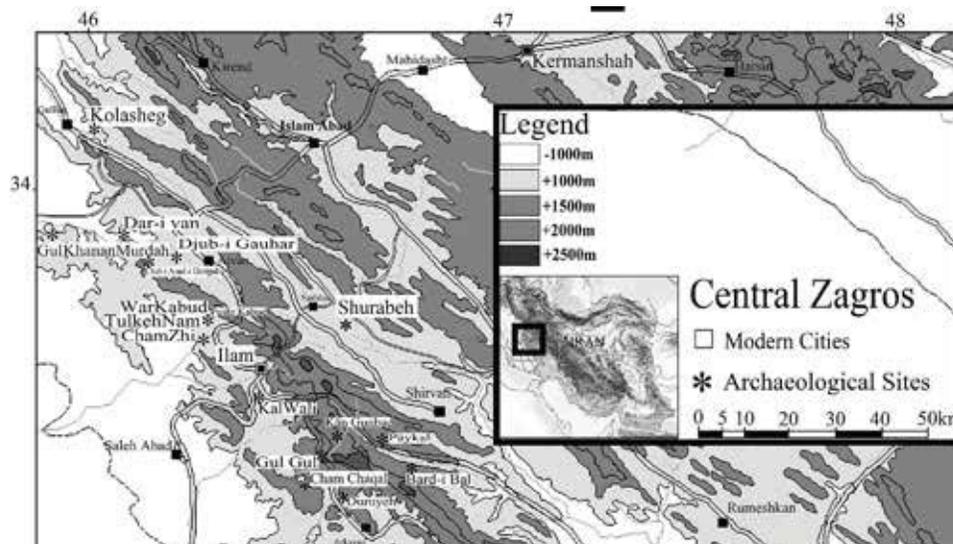


Fig. 1. Map showing archaeological sites in West Central Zagros. Adapted from Overlaet and Haerinck 1998, map 1.

## The archaeological evidence

We begin by summarizing in tabular form the evidence from excavations of Iron Age cemeteries, the work for the most part carried out by the Belgian Archaeological Mission in Iran (BAMI) in 1965–1979. In the tabulation, we indicate the name, location and proposed date of the graves, the dating generally

based on pottery typologies and stylistic similarities of other artifacts. In providing details about the graves, the focus is on those which may be identified as female burials. To provide some sense of the layout of the graves, we include a few illustrations from the excavation reports. A discussion of the archaeological evidence follows the table, beginning on p. 200..

Name of Cemetery	Location	Date	Descriptive details	Source citation
<b>Tulkeh Nām Awazā</b>	Chavār Township, close to Awazā Village, 10 km NW of Chavār	Iron Age IIB	One of three cemeteries in region. In <i>Grave 5</i> , female burial incl. stone tools, a plate and ewer of gray ceramic, an intact iron anklet, two bronze rings. In <i>Graves 1 &amp; 2</i> , only ceramics.	vanden Berghe 1968; Overlaet 2003, p. 15.
<b>Chāl-i Asad-i Derigeh</b>	W of Aivān and W of nomad village Derigeh on bank of a seasonal branch of Gangir River	Iron Age I and II	Excavated August 1977. <i>Graves 1 and 3</i> : male burials, incl. dagger with rimmed handle, bronze arrows and fire-starter flint; <i>Grave 2</i> , without weapons, female burial.	Overlaet 2003, p. 305, Pl. 14. In reports of BAMI, village mis-named.
<b>Dar-i wan B</b>	W bank of Gangir River, SW of Paliyeh Village, Zarneh Township	Bronze to Iron Age III	Excavated 1970, 1977; incl. <i>Grave 3</i> [Fig. 2], female burial with 3 bronze rings, one bronze button, 9 iron anklets, one iron ring, one stone ring, and 22 stone, shell and glass paste beads, along with ceramics. <i>Graves 1, 4, 6, 7, 12, and 14</i> contained only ceramics.	Overlaet 2003, p. 279, Pl. 3.
<b>Kan-i Gunbad</b>	30 km SE of Ilām in Ilām Township, on rte. from to Arkāvāz-i Malikshāhi	Bronze to Iron Age, possibly 1 <sup>st</sup> mill. BCE	<i>Grave 11</i> : walls of smooth-surfaced mountain stone 23–30 cm thick & measuring 150 × 125 × 56 cm, oriented 10° W of N. Contained disturbed remains of 4 bodies, many agate beads, a metal ring, and an 8 cm long piece of shell with square profile. No female burial objects (anklets) found in other graves.	Kābuli 1988.
<b>Kalwāli Hill</b>	30 km SE of Ilām, on right of road connecting Ilām, Sāleh Abād & Mīhrān; 5 km. from Cheshmeh Kabud Village	late Iron Age II	21 graves excavated, none with goods associated with women.	Overlaet 2003, pp. 335, 340, 342; Pl. 23.
<b>Cham-i Chakal</b>	near Mohammad Abad Village, 1 km N of Ja'far Abād bridge of Mishkhās (Meyakhās) Valley between Kabir-Kuh and Chamangir mountains	Iron Age IA	Two excavated graves: in <i>Grave 1</i> , earthenware and stone tools; in <i>Grave 5</i> , some round beads of shell, earthen dishes, dagger blades and arrow heads, suggesting male burial.	Overlaet 2003, pp. 373–74, 376; Pl. 43.
<b>Duruyeh</b>	Arkavāz, 1 km W of Arkavāz-Ilām road, 2 km from Gul-Gul Village (Mishkhās region)	Iron Age I and II	Of 19 graves excavated, 4 contained decorative objects. In <i>Grave 1</i> : 1 bronze ring; in <i>Grave 4</i> : 2 bronze rings; most of objects in <i>Grave 5</i> : bronze wristlets, 2 bronze hair pins, 2 bronze perforated pins (bodkins); in <i>Grave 6</i> : 2 perforated pins (bodkins) with decorative carvings. Such objects could indicate male or female burial; there were no weapons.	Overlaet 2003, p. 493; Pls. 126–30.
<b>Pāykal</b>	48 km SE of Ilām, 6 km from Chiniār-Biāshi Village near Bard-i Bal graveyard next to Pāykal Village of Garab	Iron Age IB and II	In 1969 and 1970, 15 graves excavated, 7 containing burial goods. <i>Grave 5</i> , a female burial as indicated by two anklets (no skeleton remained). Also contained some tubular dishes, iron and bronze ornaments (rings, pins). Other graves contained earthen dishes, ornaments (pins, hairpins, rings, finger rings, wristlets) and some other bronze items [Fig. 3]	Overlaet 2003, pp. 517, 521.
<b>Posht-i Kabud</b>	5 km. NE of Chavār in Ilām Township near Goleh Jārr Village	late Iron Age II to early Iron Age III	5 graves excavated. <i>Grave 2</i> , female burial, with 1 teapot, bowls, ceramic ewers and 4 iron anklets. <i>Graves 3, 4, 5</i> contained a teapot, ewers, a dipper and a ceramic pyxis but no anklets indicating female burial; no weapons.	Overlaet 2003, pp. 323, 325; Pls. 18–20.

<b>Bard-i Bal</b>	Badreh Township in Ilām, in the basin of Garāb River, near Chinār-Bāshi Village, 45 km SE of Ilām	Iron Age I-II, with Nos. 10, 11 reused in Iron Age III	70 graves excavated in 30 x 23 m area, 15 looted; ones with female burials as follows: <i>Grave 3</i> : disturbed remains of two skeletons; goods include hollow pipe, teapot or tubular container, bronze ring, four shell rings and 57 stone and shell beads. <i>Grave 10</i> (Iron Age III-II): 4 skeletons, 3 female, 1 male; 130 artifacts incl. 25 iron rings, 1 iron anklet, 3 bronze anklets, 4 ceramic pyxis, 1 ceramic bonnet, 5 iron pins, 1 bronze wristlet, 187 stone and shell beads. Also arrowheads, a dagger, iron blades, plates, bowls and goblets, trays, teapot, etc. <i>Grave 11</i> (Iron Age II): on stone cover of <i>Grave 10</i> , hence later in date; incl. 1 iron anklet, tubular dishes and 2 stone wares. <i>Grave 17</i> (Iron Age IIA-IB): disturbed remains of 2 adult men and 1 woman; 2 bronze anklets on tibia bones; 87 objects incl. bronze wristlets, 3 iron wristlets, 6 iron rings, 5 pins of which 6 of bronze with acorn-like heads, 4 of iron and bronze and the others of iron, 2 bronze anklets, beads of stone ceramic and shell, a mug, a ewer and other tableware, a dagger and arrowheads, etc. <i>Grave 29</i> : Skull found near north (back) wall; 2 bronze anklets, 3 bronze and 1 iron wristlet, 1 bronze needle, 2 bronze-iron pins; various tableware; no weapons. <i>Grave 62</i> (Iron Age I A but re-used in Iron Age III) [Fig. 4]: E-W orientation, rectangular built of 3 slab walls, its entrance closed by boulders, without a cover; external measurement 3.45 x 1.90, internal 1.85 x 1.16 x 0.78 m. Intact skeleton of 20-yr-old girl in center in curved position; but also in corners other human bones and teeth from 25-yr-old man. Grave goods incl. spiral hairpin 2 cm dia. next to skeleton, a 1.5 cm ring, 14.8 cm bowl (6.5 cm high), iron pin with a tubular head, 2 ceramic seals 2 cm dia. with engraved pictures of ibex and sphinx, necklace with 43 beads, 24 of sardonyx and 4 of limestone. <i>Grave 68</i> : disturbed remains of two bodies in NW sector, probably a man (with bronze daggers, horn axes and a whetstone) and a woman (with 2 bronze and 1 iron anklet). <i>Grave 70</i> (Iron Age IA): two bronze anklets found side-by-side in SE corner, indicating female burial.	vanden Berghe 1973, 1987; Overlaet 2003.
<b>War Kabud</b>	25 km NE of Ilām in flat areas between mountains near Lashkān R., tributary of Chavar R.	Iron Age III	Large cemetery, over 1000 graves in central part looted; 203 graves studied. Graves 85 and 102 with female burials [Fig. 5]: <i>Grave 85</i> : 3 bronze anklets, 1 earring, another lunate earring, 9 necklace beads. <i>Grave 102</i> : necklaces, gold lunate and silver tasseled earrings, circlets, wristlets, bronze anklets; pins, buttons, etc. Vanden Berghe indicates (1987, Tab. 5) that <i>Graves 10 and 17</i> were female burials, even though no gender-specific objects found.	Fleming et al. 2006, p. 31; vanden Berghe 1968, esp. p. 165, Figs. 26-29; 1972, Fig. 2; 1987.
<b>Cham-i zhi Mumeh</b>	45 km SW of Ilām and 1 km from Moumeh village at bend of river	Iron Age III	Under 2 m layer of alluvial soil, cemetery discovered when river bank eroded. Women's Graves Nos. 3, 4, 5, 14, 16, 23, 28, 36, 37, 42, 43, 46b, 67, 72, 76 and 79 identified by objects such as anklets, necklaces, beds, wristlets and silver earrings, with men's burials containing weapons, shields, etc.. Both contain other metal and ceramic objects. Of particular interest the bronze engraved bucket found in <i>Grave 43</i> [Fig. 6], described below.	Motamedi 1989, p. 35; vanden Berghe 1977, p. 54; Haerinck and Overlaet 1998.
<b>Kutal-i Gul-Gul</b>	SE of Ilām in precinct of Arkāvaz-i Malikshāhi	Iron Age I and II	17 intact graves excavated in 1972 [Fig. 7] Women's burials in Graves 2A, 4 A, 6A, 9A, 10A, 13A, 2B and 3B. Graves 9A, 10A and 4A contained a man and a woman. <i>Grave 4A</i> goods incl.: ceramic pyxis, 2 bronze pins with swimming ducks on heads, 2 bronze wristlets, 4 bronze anklets, 2 shell finger rings, 2 carnelian beads; also a dagger and several ceramic wares. The 6 bronze anklets on one skeleton identified the female.	Medvedevskaia 2004, p. 99; Overlaet 2003, pp. 393-96, Pls. 49-57.

<b>Shurābeh</b>	in Shirvan-Chardāwol Village, on S bank of Chardāwol River	Iron Age I, re-used in Iron Age II	Only one grave not looted; with stone slab walls, oriented E-W, measuring 1.6 x 1.2 x 0.8 m. Contained two bronze pins with acorn-like heads, 2 bronze needles (bodkins), 2 bronze wristlets, 2 decorated rings of shell, 2 daggers, 34 ceramic wares and several stone tools.	Medvedevskaia 2004, p. 98; Overlaet 2003, pp. 211-12, 634.
<b>Djub-Gavhar</b>	in the Eivan Plain within agricultural fields by Cangir R., about 200 m SE of Djub-Gavhar Village	Iron Age III (600-750/800 BCE)	Most of graves plundered; in 1977, 56 with reveted walls covered with flat slabs and 9 with some stone, including a pithos grave (No. 21) were excavated. Most graves contained one burial, but some as many as 4. Due to good preservation, could link grave goods with gender of skeletons; 11 graves (1, 2, 6, 7, 21, 37, 39, 53, 60, 62 and 63) belonged to women and contained anklets and wristlets. In <i>Grave 53</i> there were two skeletons along with a mace and axe; the anklet indicating which skeleton was the woman.	Haerinck and Overlaet 1999, p. 11.
<b>Golkhanān-Murdeh<sup>2</sup></b>	in Zarneh Precinct, a plain between the mountains in NW of Ilām province, NE of the Werāzāneh Mtns.	Iron Age III	80 graves excavated but difficult to determine gender, as skeletal remains poorly preserved and most goods not gender-specific. Only <i>Grave 59</i> identified as a female burial, with 10 anklets.	Nourollāhi 2005, p. 63; Haerinck and Overlaet 1999.
<b>Kolāsheg in Gilān-i Gharb</b>	6 km from S of Gilān-i Gharb, W of the central Zagros in Kermanshah Province, between the Miehkshesh Mountains and Taq-i Tuq on the bank of Kolāsheg River.	Iron Age II and III (New Assyrian Period)	Graves B1 and A4 were male burials. The intact grave of Trench C [Fig. 8] contained a skeleton oriented W to E, with 3 iron rings on fingers of left hand, a gold earring or eardrop near the neck, several anklets on the legs and several pottery wares. The ornaments and their position indicated a female burial.	Mohammadifar et al. 2014, pp. 32-33.

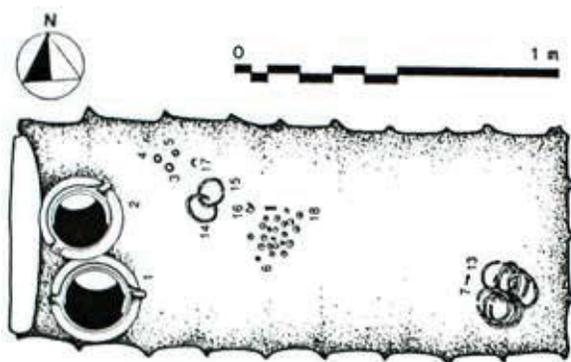


Fig. 2. Excavation plan of Grave 3 of Dar-i wan B. After: Overlaet 2003.

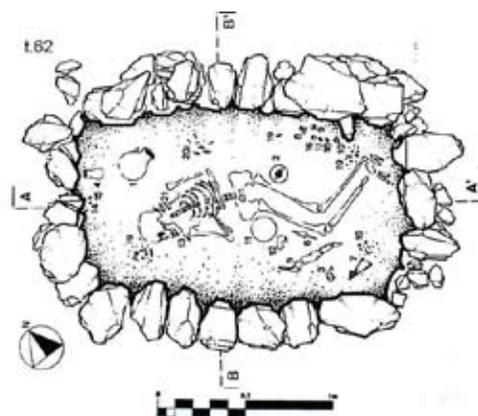


Fig. 4. Excavation plan of Grave 62 in Bard-i Bal cemetery. After: Overlaet 2003.

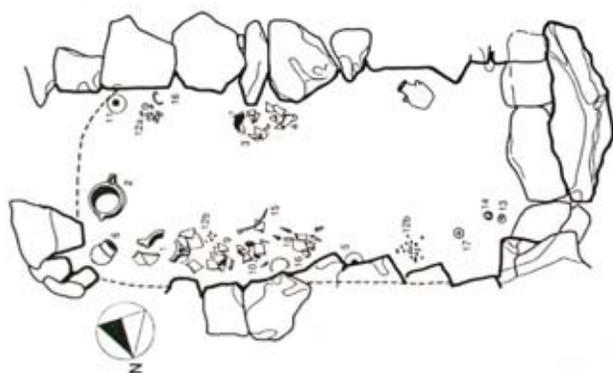


Fig. 3. Excavation plan of Grave 5 in Pāykal cemetery. After: Overlaet 2003.

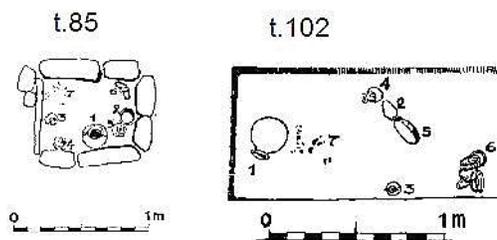


Fig. 5. Excavation plan of Graves 85 and 102 of War Kabud cemetery. After: vanden Berghe 1968.

Fig. 6. The bronze bucket obtained from Grave 43 in Cham zhi Mumeh cemetery.  
After: Haerink and Overlaet 1998.

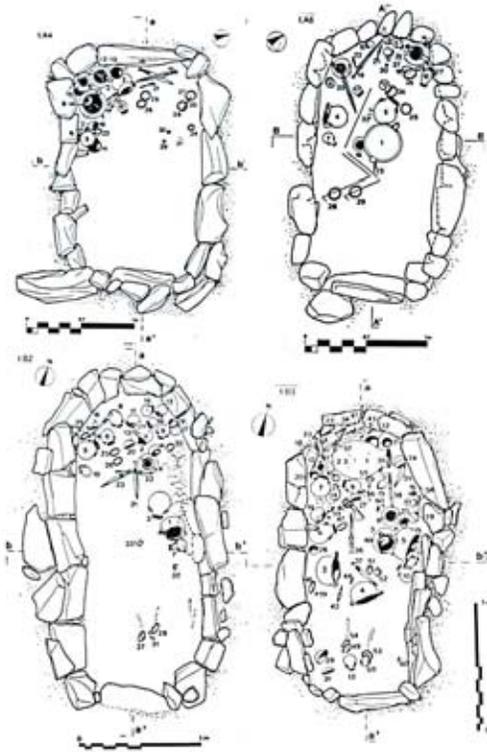
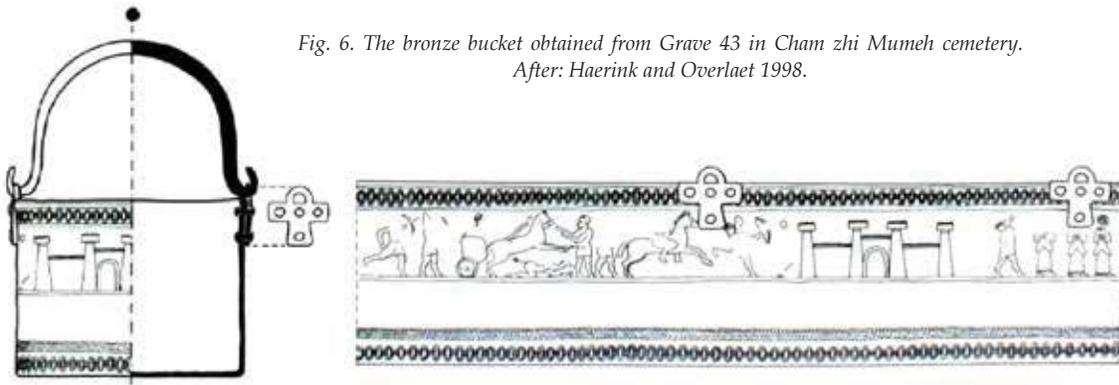
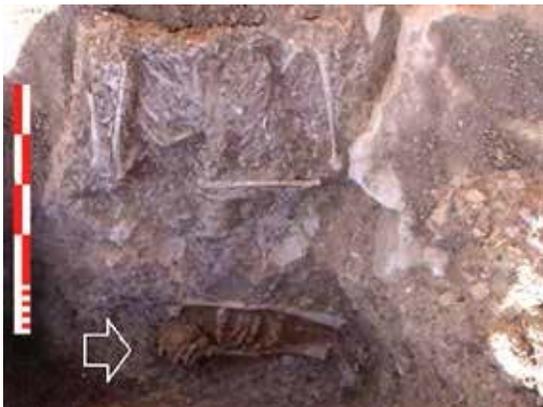


Fig. 7 (above). Excavation plans of Graves 2B, 3B, 6A, 4A in Kotal-i Gul-Gul cemetery. After: Overlaet 2003.

Fig. 8 (below). Grave 2 of Trench C1, Kolāsheg of Gilān-i Gharb. After: Mohammadifar et al. 2014.



### The structure of the graves

Archeological excavation in the western central Zagros has shown that none of the cemeteries have any connection with residential areas or settlements dating to the same era. Based on grave structures, these cemeteries have been classified in the following groups: 1) cist graves with a boxlike shape; 2) cist graves with an oval shape; 3) hole graves; 4) circular groups; 5) pithos graves; 6) semi-circular or horseshoe-like graves; 7) square-shaped cemeteries; 8) mass graves (megalithic); 9) pit graves. There is nothing about the grave structure per se that informs us about the gender of those who were interred.

### The indications of gender in the cemeteries

Certainly there is a relationship between the dead and the buried objects in the graves which determines the dead's gender or profession, a matter that is especially important in the frequent instances in Iron Age III cemeteries where the skeleton has decayed and just some fragments of the bones remain. Among the burial goods, earthen wares do not indicate the gender of the dead, either technically or by shape and form. However, vanden Berghe indicates that animal statues (cows or dogs) are found only in male burials, whereas twin or triple containers are distinctively indicators of a female burial. Burial goods that include tools and weapons such as axes, mace heads, shields, quivers, arrows heads, and helmets logically point to a male burial; whereas decorative objects such as pins, hairpins and clothes, safety pins, nose rings (in Kurdish language *khizmeh*), anklets (*khalkhal*), and necklaces would seem to suggest a female burial. However, rings, earrings and wristlets have also been discovered in men's graves (vanden Berghe 1987, pp. 201-06).

The find which may speak most directly to the position of women is an image etched on a bronze bucket found in Cham-i zhi Mumeh Grave 43 [Fig. 6]. The scene on the body of this bucket depicts a battle with horse, cart and foot soldier, as on the Assyrian reliefs, a castle with a fortified gate, and another scene showing a fighter who is taking three captives with fringed

clothing hanging to the feet whose arms are crossed over their chests (Haerink and Overlaet, 1998, p. 27). Comparing the clothes of two men hunting, depicted on the body of a ware discovered in Grave 37, it can be argued that the figures of the captives on the bucket in Grave 43 are women (Ibid., pp. 25, 29; Figs. 58-59).

In addition to the objects inside the graves, the builders of the graves placed emblems in the form of a standing stone or a bar on the ground to show their location and indicate the gender of the deceased. It seems that such stones are specific to the cemeteries of Iron Age I, II, and III, and can be seen in the cemetery of Kutal-i Gul-Gul (9 graves with 1 to 3 baculiform stones), Duruyeh (one grave with a baculiform stone), Pāykal (4 graves with 2 baculiform stones), Bard-bal (8 graves with 1 to 5 baculiform stones) (Overlaet 2003: Pls. 61, 71, 80-81, 157, 161, 175), Cham-i zhi Mumeh (Haerink and Overlaet 1998), and War Kabud (vanden Berghe 1968). Unaware of the roles of these stones, the excavators have not always mentioned them in their reports or drawn them in their plans. They have assumed that such stones were used to fasten something



Fig. 9. The standing stone and the baculiform stone as the markers on graves of Cham-i zhi Mumeh cemetery. After: Haerink and Overlaet 1998, Pls. 9,10.



Fig. 10. A grave in the cemetery of Gadameh Village, with the standing stones indicating the burial is that of a woman. Photo by Ali Nourallāhi.

to the grave walls (Overlaet 2003, p. 66). However, through studying the type of the burial, the shape and the form of the nomad graves of this region, we have determined the function of these stones which the nomads set on the graves to be a signifier of the gender of the deceased. To show that the deceased was a man, one stone was set on the upper end (head) of the grave, and, for a woman, two stones, one at the head and the other at the foot of the grave [Figs. 9, 10].

#### Ethnographic observations on burial practices

The grave is dug on a piece of the land near the grave of the closest relative. The size of the graves differs according to whether the deceased is a man, woman, or a child. For the woman, the depth of the grave is up to the chest of the deceased, a measurement being taken from the body with a thread before digging begins. The length of the grave is usually between 180–200 cm and its width is 90 cm. The next stage is to dig a trench within the larger pit where the corpse will actually be buried. This “niche,” termed *alhaee*, is usually 40 cm wide and located centrally at a distance of 20–25 cm from the longitudinal walls of the grave. The bottom of this trench is usually covered with a layer of soft soil and forms a kind of “coffin box” ready for the interment. Flat, wide stone slabs some 50 cm. wide are brought in to cover the burial niche. Some of the soil obtained from the grave will be screened, mixed with water and the mud formed into balls 25–30 cm in diameter. These muddy balls will be used to cover the slabs placed over the corpse after its burial in order to prevent mud resulting from rain or snow from entering the coffin box. These muddy balls are flattened by hand on the stones. After this the grave is filled with soil [Fig. 11, next page]. The grave is rectangular in the shape, banked with a mound of earth and marked. The stones showing the gender of the dead will be placed in this rectangle. Two oval or rectangular standing stones mark a woman’s grave. The prepara-

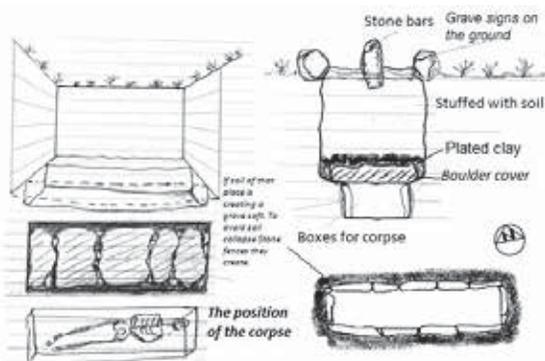
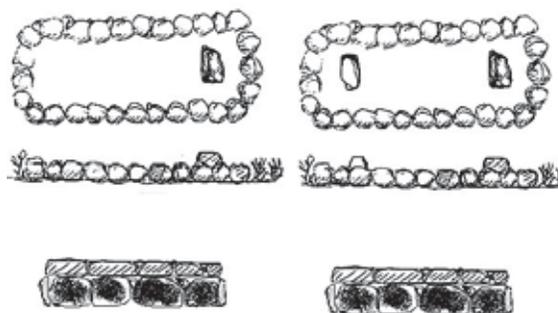


Fig. 11 (left). The stages of digging a grave by the tribes being studied.

Fig. 12 (right). A woman's grave (right) and a man's (left).

Plans by Ali Nourallāhi.



ration of the grave is supervised by a “specialist” who personally digs the internal “coffin box” [Fig. 12].

It is customary among the nomad tribes to kindle a fire on the deceased's tomb for a week. Fire is greatly revered in the culture of nomadic tribes. In addition to the importance of fire in everyday life to illuminate the dark and cold nights of the migration and make living in black tents tolerable, it is seen a guide for the return of the dead's souls to the world of the living, a belief which has its roots in ancient Aryan beliefs. The light and warmth of the fire keeps some animals like badgers away from the grave.<sup>3</sup> Another rite specific to the nomads of Zagros is that after the funeral and the burial of the dead, if the dead is a man, his wife or mother cuts her own tresses, ties them to a standing post and puts it on the grave as a sign of attachment and the wishes which vanished upon his death. When passing through the region in 1836 Rawlinson (1983) had noted this rite, and it was prevalent up to 1960s among the residents of Ilām province. This ritual was also recorded in the epics about Achilles (see Mokhtāryān 2008, p. 52) and Gilgamesh (2004, p. 130), and in the *Shāhnāmeh* of Firdawsi (verses 2296-2298), that is, cutting off tresses and scratching the face during the mourning for the husband:

*From the house of Siavash, came the cry,  
And the world became, with Gersiwaz, angry,  
All the bondwoman opened their hair,  
And Farangis too her long noos-like hair,  
Cut it off and tied it to her waist  
And scraped her roses with her hazel nails.*

This custom of mourning, called *sheen* (yammer), is still prevalent in Ilām, Luristān, and Kermānshāh, where women gather to mourn the lost beloved scratch their faces while saying *Wa'e (ah)*:

*The lasso like tresses of the pretty ones opened  
They became dejected with faces scraped. (Ibid., 2299)*

Today, nothing is buried with the dead save a shroud, but 50–60 years ago, a kind of special bread (*papigeh*) was also buried with the corpse. In addition to this, as archaeology has demonstrated, because many pre-historic societies believed in an afterlife,

they secured the future for the deceased by including food and other necessities during special burial rituals (see Talā'i 2002, p. 177). In many cases, out of respect for the deceased (especially women), tribes buried personal decorative objects that were used during the woman's lifetime. Such tribal mortuary traditions continued to be popular in western Iran until recent decades and can be traced back to the traditions of the Bronze and Iron Ages and even earlier when the deceased were buried in four-layer graves with lined walls and covered with big rocks (see Haerincq and Overlaet 1996, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2004; Overlaet 2003). Studies show that the burial grounds of the Stone, Copper, Bronze, and Iron Ages in the west of central Zagros are not related to permanent settlements, but belong to semi-nomads. The traditions then seem to have been able to adapt to the particular environment and geography in the region, changing over time but retaining earlier elements (Nourallāhi 2005, p. 123).

### The household

The study of nomadic tribes and the tribes living in west central Zagros shows that individuality is not as important as the position of individuals within an interwoven and integrated system (the house or household) in which the activity of one of the members complements the others' activities. In the hierarchy of power and the social system of the tribes of this region, the household (*māl*) is the smallest unit of society. The positions of its men or women will be determined by the position of their household in the tribal hierarchy of the system. Hence, in what follows, we will discuss tribal structure, the household system, the division of labor, and, in particular, issues pertaining to women in this region.

The social system, manner of living, and the economic structure of the nomads of west central Zagros depend on their geographical setting, that is, the specific social system is coterminous with a specific territory. This social system includes: 1) The tribe (*il*); 2) gens (*tireh*); 3) clan (*tāyefeh*); 4) house (*khil*, *tokhmeh*, *houz*, *benah-māl*); 5) household (*māl*). The hierarchy of power within these tribes is as follows: 1) *khan* (the chief of the tribe); 2) *toushmāl* (the chief of a clan or some-



Fig. 13. Malekshāhi woman filling the *koneh* with drinking water.

times of a tribe); 3) *kādkhodā* or *kokhā* (the chief of the house); 4) The father, the head man or the caretaker of the household. The structure and the social system of nomadic tribes in Iran in general and the tribes of west central Zagros, in particular, is based on a kinship system and patriarchy. In fact, the household (*māl*) is the foundation stone of tribal society, and plays the greatest role in the hierarchy of social concentration and the relationships between relative consanguine groups. In addition to its generic function – maintaining society and ensuring its continuation – it plays a major role in economic production, as a kind of self-contained unit within which economic and the other activities (religious and social) of the members are performed (see Tabibi 2001, p. 196).

The household and the kinship system in Iran over the centuries have evolved through stages concerning which, unfortunately, detailed information is not available (see Tabibi 2001, p. 204). In this basic social

Fig. 14. Weaving on a ground loom the fabric for a black tent.



Fig. 15. Making *hizah*, the leather bottles for carrying fat.

unit and unit of production and consumption, members of the household act under the control of a supervisor, and have a shared economic, political, and social goal (see Bāhārvand 2005, p. 129). The supervisor or the care-taker is either a man or a woman,<sup>4</sup> who is responsible for harmonization among other members. Also, he/she is known as the head or the representative of the household who has the duty of performing the jobs related to transactions and participating in social-political activities. With regard to the combination of the members, Bāhārvand (2005, p. 129) has delineated five types of households in this region, viz.: 1) core; 2) polygamous; 3) open; 4) allied; 5) imperfect. As the Kurds' kinship system is based on patriarchal families, the households with which we are concerned here are either of the allied or open type.<sup>5</sup>

The division of labor within the households of this region's tribes and clans is by age and gender. Some of the duties are specific to women and some are common between men and women. The duties specific to women comprise a long list<sup>6</sup>: rearing children; providing water; cooking; cleaning the house; making clothing; spinning; dying; weaving (the black tent, *chit* [a type of cover which is like a wall for the black tents], saddle bag, and the other necessities of nomadic life) [Figs. 13, 14]; making ceramics (until recent decades this was done within the tribes of this region in a limited manner, but it is now a forgotten skill); making leather bottles – *hizah* (for carrying fat), *koneh* (for carrying water) – out of goat-, lamb-, and calf-skin [Fig. 15]; processing dairy products [Figs. 16a,b, next page]; collecting edible plants (acanthus, goosefoot); midwifery; medical treatment (using traditional medicine<sup>7</sup>); transferring traditions; choosing spouses for the young; and entertaining guests. Work shared with the men includes milking, shearing (washing and preparing the wool to be woven), and cultivation (collecting lentils and cereals).



Figs. 16a,b. Milking at a nomad camp (Photo courtesy of Frank Hole); preparation of milk products by a Kalhor woman in Aivân.

The burden of all these tasks does not mean that women are merely relegated to a supporting role in household decisions. Among the majority of the region's tribes, the woman is responsible for managing the family's money and property. Women in fact have substantial influence beyond the nuclear family; in many cases they settle inter-familial and tribal disputes. Such women are called *gissdâr* (a woman who is greatly respected). Moreover, within the Khezeli, Malekshâhi, and Kalhor tribes and their clans, women have a special position, which may involve their taking on the duty of the chief of their tribes. Notable examples are Halimeh Xānom, the chief of Hakari; Adilah Khānom, the chief of Halabcheh; and the Headman Narges Shewan (see Tabibi 2001, p. 207). People of this region talk of the women who, in the absence of their husbands, have taken charge. For example, Shāparwar, the wife of Khan Mansur, managed the affairs of the Kalhor tribe during the years when her husband was accompanying Nāder Shāh of Afshār in the Qandhār War (see Ghāsemi and Khāni 2000, p. 26). Some of the clans here are known by the name of a specific woman and have taken their name and familial name from the woman who has been the head of the clan for a while.<sup>8</sup>

When women mediate in disputes and intercede, they may rescue the life and properties of one who is in danger. An individual guilty of a misdeed usually grasps the hem of the skirt of a woman (*dāwān*, the lower part of the attire of Kurdish women) and asks for forgiveness, an act which is called *Dast wa Dāwān Boun* (resort to a skirt). Another example is when a woman asks for forgiveness for one of her children or relatives, and removes her headscarf while presenting her appeal. In such situations, the guilty is rescued, on account of the respect in which that woman is held.



Since a household has numerous functions (see Bahārvānd 2005), depending on the type of the household in which they live, women's position may be very different. In the past, for example, there was a tradition maintained by the *khun solh* (a meeting of people to make peace between two families) whereby a girl from the family of a murderer was required to marry a member of the family of the victim. Indeed, most of the time these women were deprived of any social and even human rights and had to cope with the difficult conditions of such a marriage. Nowadays though, this tradition has disappeared among the tribes examined in this study (the Khezeli, Malikshâhi, and Kalhor). Another of the issues which bears on the position of women is the question of monogamy and polygamy. In this region, the dominant practice is monogamy, but, among tribal chiefs, headman, and great herdsmen polygamy has also been common frequently for its political role in strengthening the relationships among the tribes and the clans. In cases where the woman is barren or does not breed a son, their husbands will marry again, and the woman will become a co-wife. Among these tribes, divorce is frowned upon and thus very rare. So the position of women in tribal systems and among the nomadic tribes we have studied is very complicated and subject to considerable variation.

#### **Clothing as the symbol of the woman's position and individual status**

In tribal culture generally and specifically in the culture of the tribes of west central Zagros, clothing is



Fig. 17. Girls dancing at a wedding

seen as part of the body, and as such, is an important symbol of one's status. Unlike that of men, women's clothing varies in terms of color, reflecting in each period of their lives their status and age. There are some exceptions in cases where a woman may wear men's

clothes and perform a man's job. In general though, there is a progression as the girl grows, marries, becomes a mother and a grandmother. Young girls wear colorful clothes with bright and cheerful colors [Fig. 17; Color Plate IX]. Adult girls may wear similar clothes with pictures of large flowers [Figs. 18, 19]. After marriage and before giving birth, women wear clothes with light colors and scarves with bright floral designs (*golvani*); After giving birth women wear still wear clothes with a floral design, but in darker tones. From ages 30 to 50, they wear clothes with a black, dark green, or brown background with little flowers [Figs. 20, 21; Color Plate IX]; old women wear entirely dark, navy blue clothes and a black headband which is called *ghatra* [Fig. 22]. All of the clothes may be decorated with silver and, sometimes, with gold coins, both as a way of keeping cash and as a symbol of honor and wealth. In special cases where a woman is famous, she may wear a silk headband (*sarvan*) called *tākāri* with a long ribbon that extends to the ground.



Fig. 18. A young nomad woman near Bistun.

Fig. 19. Nomad women at Asman Abad.  
Photos by Ali Nourallāhi.

Fig. 20 (below). A woman in a black tent in Palayeh of Aivān.

Fig. 21 (right). A middle-aged woman baking bread.



Fig. 22. One of the old women of the Kalhor tribe.



## Conclusion

As Willeke Wendrich and Hans Barnard have warned us (2008, pp. 13-14),

The direct historical approach, where present-day populations are considered a continuation or 'survival' of ancient inhabitants of the same area or region, is indeed a dangerous bedfellow for archaeology because it limits the explanatory power of research and denies ancient populations the ability to change... But analogical reasoning, when done correctly, is not only extremely useful but a method we simply cannot do without.<sup>9</sup>

Analysis of the data we have presented here is but in its beginning stages and still needs to be informed by methodological and comparative studies, many of which have as yet been unavailable to the author. Among the approaches needing still to be developed for the region of our study, if we wish to reconstruct the earlier history of nomadic or semi-nomadic societies, will be to examine closely the evidence of what today's nomads leave behind from their camps, which may then help to interpret the archaeological data.<sup>10</sup> However, in the absence of comparative Iron Age settlement data, for now that may prove to be of little use.

We have the evidence from the cemeteries, which may suggest women had high status in those societies when buried with a full array of artifacts alongside men or in individual graves. Some of this evidence, where there are group burials, may point to polygamy. In the absence of skeletons though, the gender-specific artifacts are few, and there is a large body of grave goods which seem to have been shared by both sexes. While modern burials may have clear indicators of the gender of the deceased (the placement of head- or foot-stones) similar to what can be documented in ancient burials, the absence of artifacts in the modern burials then limits any comparison we might wish to make. The status of Iron Age women might be indicated by the extent to which they were accompanied into the afterlife by a rich array of decorative objects, but the analogies we would wish to draw with the present for the most part need to be based on the clothing and decorations of the living, separated by two or more millennia during which a great deal may have changed. Except in one case where we have an incised depiction on a vessel, we have nothing to provide details of the Iron Age dress from this particular group of graves. It is rare to find, as in grave 62 of Bard-i Bal, seals, an indication of ownership, but does that then suggest but limited rights of women to ownership in a way that is analogous to the traditions of modern times?

Of particular interest is what the modern ethnographic studies have documented about the impressive extent to which women have shared responsibility and

even acted in positions of power in their households and tribes. It is easy enough to find analogies from other nomadic societies (for example, in the Mongol Empire). Whether evidence can be found in the archaeological record to demonstrate that such was the case in the region we have studied in earlier centuries remains to be seen. So we may, at best, have to fall back on suggestive analogy and hypothesis in order to fill in the details of any picture we might wish to paint of the position of women in Iron Age west central Zagros. So far, the artifact data do correlate with what we can document about "women's work" today amongst the nomads, but even in such matters, some of the most important functions cannot be expected to leave behind any material evidence. Literature (in the broad sense) may be of some help here, but like the evidence from ethnographic observation, it always must be used with caution, when trying to extrapolate for life in pre-literate societies of a much earlier time.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## NOTES

1. Geographers have divided the regions of Ilām and Luristan, separated by Kabir-Kuh Mountains, in two parts which are called Posht-kuh and Pish-kuh, respectively.

2. Golkhanān was one of the pretty girls of the Kalhor Tribe in Aivān who died in this place; her name has remained in this area. Poems describing the beauty of this girl were composed by Khān Mansour and Shākeh, two of the famous poets of Aivān in Nādir Shāh's time (see Ghāsemi and Khāni 2000, p. 61).

3. This tradition is prevalent among the tribes of west central Zagros, that is, Khezel, Malikshāhi, Kalhor and other Kurdish tribes of Ilām Province and its adjoining regions, and even rural and urban societies, including Shirwān-Chardāwel, Aivān, Ilām, and other towns of Ilām Province.

4. Among the nomads and tribes of the other regions such as the Bakhtiyari, after the death of the head of the family or his becoming incapacitated, this responsibility-caretaking is transferred to the eldest son or the family's uncle. However, among the tribes being studied here, the responsibility is taken by his wife and it is she who harmonizes the members.

5. Sometimes core and open households have been observed here. This is generally the result of the children's education, familial disputes, socio-economic problems, and the conditions of the new era. This does not mean that all the families and their children live together in a black tent (*dawār*): after marriage they separate from the family and live in a separate tent but in other affairs are governed by their household.

6. The woman of the family usually has had a paid servant with the responsibility for most of these duties. The engagement in political issues is mostly effected through the intervention of such servants.

7. Treating headaches (*Sar aw gerten*), stomachaches (*nawk aw gerten*), children's diseases, and also treating the diseases among livestock has been done mostly by women. In spite of availability of medicines, today these therapies are mostly done by women. The late Dawlat-I Nāseri, Nāzok-I Nāseri, Tauty-i Takesh, and Ezat-i Sayedi-Nejād, all from Gadameh Village of Gholiwand Clan of Khezel Tribe are women known for their ability to heal just by the touch of their fingertips. Unfortunately, such traditional therapies are now being forgotten.

8. Such as Nargesi, Gawhar, and Zoleikhā villages in Aivān Township, Golzar in Ilām, Farkhinawand in Shirwan-Chardawel, and Narges in Sāleh-Abad, all of which no longer migrate.

9. They cite here Nicholas David and Carol Kramer, *Ethnoarchaeology in Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 2001), and Alison Wylie, "The Reaction Against Analogy," in Michael B. Schiffer, ed., *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, Vol. 8 (New York: Academic Pr. 1985), 63-111, work which we will need to consult as we continue to study our material.

10. This is the approach outlined by Roger Cribb in his much-cited *Nomads in Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1991). For a brief introduction to what is involved, see Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, *Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London, Thames & Hudson, 2004): 190-92.

**Plate IX**

Nourallahi, "Women's Status,"  
p. 205.

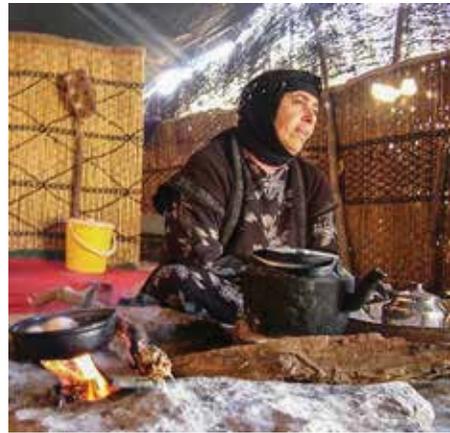
*(top right) A middle-aged woman  
baking bread.*

*(middle right) A woman in a black  
tent in Palayeh of Aivān.*

*(below) Nomad women in the  
West-Central Zagros.*



All photos by Ali Nourallahi



*Girls dancing at a wedding.*

