Secrets of the Zoroastrian Tower of Silence

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EXCLUSIVE

A mountain called Kooh-e Dakhmeh, or Tower of Silence, is located 5km southeast of Yazd, the capital city of the central province of Yazd. The word '*dakhmeh*' literally means cave, or sometimes, a dark and/or damp place. Two *dakhmeh*s are located on the highland, in which the ancient residents of the region placed their dead. They believed that earth, water, and fire are sacred elements, which should not be polluted with corpses, thus they transferred their dead outside of their cities.

They left the corpses for vultures and other birds to feed on them and, after some time, they collected and dumped the bones in an ossuary.

Fariborz Shahdadi, head of the Yazd Zoroastrian priests (*mobeds*) believes that such a custom was followed by the early Aryan settlers of the region; it has no connection with the basic religious rituals of Zoroastrians.

People who lived in Iran Vij, an early Aryan settlement located in the northern, cold region of the country, used this method, but it was not common in most other parts of the country.

After the reign of the Sassanid king, Khosrow Parviz, various religions entered Iran, and their followers gradually called themselves Zoroastrians. They took advantage of the weakness of the Zoroastrian clergy to promote some ideas; for example, in some areas they said that *dakhmeh*s should be built for the dead, while there was no such tradition in Zoroastrian culture.

He said most of the Zoroastrians' pilgrimages and holy places in Yazd were built on highlands in the heart of mountains, adding, Zoroastrians carried their dead to the top of the mountains. To reach the *dakhmeh*s, you had to climb the mountain slopes through the stairs.

The stone structure of the staircase shows that its age is not as old as the *dakhmeh*s, and for many years the people had to climb the mountain to reach them.

Shahzadi added that some strong men called *nesasalar* carried the corpses up to the Tower of Silence by themselves.

The ritual has not been performed for more than half a century, while Zoroastrians, like followers of many other religions, bury the bodies of their dead.

Shahzadi noted that the Zoroastrian religion called for its followers to act according to the norm in cases which are not considered among the principles of the religion.

"Since the tradition of placing the dead in *dakhmeh* is not a religious principle, Zoroastrians, like Muslims and their Iranian predecessors, bury their dead in the earth," he concluded.

Crafts in 'Era of Exchange'

Workshops for lapis lazuli have been found at several sites in early towns of Iran from the early 3rd millennium BCE, like Tappeh Hesar, Susa, Shahdad, Tal-e Malyan and Shahr-e Sokhta. At the latter, carnelian and turquoise were used in addition to lapis lazuli. Although no corresponding architectural layers were preserved, the work process could be approximatively reconstructed.

The raw material was divided into blocks with flint tools using a specific technique of carving and pressure. Those blocks were then divided up further into smaller pieces, depending on the intended dimension of the product. Sanding and polishing produced the final shape of the beads, and flint drills were used to create the perforations.

The same techniques were also used on other semi-precious stones, such as chalcedony and turquoise. Carnelian and agate were additionally subjected to strong heat to enhance their colour effect. Bead-makers were professional craftsmen, and some of them carried the tools of their trade with them at all times, even into the grave, as some burials from Shahdad demonstrate.

Steatite Carving

The simple procedures of sanding, cutting, drilling and polishing are sufficient to shape the soft steatite or chlorite, which is found in the Kerman region.

Since the 3rd millennium BCE, this special material had been carved into richly decorated vessels. Tappeh Yahya was one of the centres of steatite vessel manufacture, and its products were traded as far as Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula and the Indus Valley. The findings from Tappeh Yahya are to this day the best illustration of the vast distances that were crossed regularly in the trade of prestige objects. After the end of the 3rd millennium BCE, steatite workshops also appeared in the cities along the desert fringe, for example in Shahdad.

Just recently, Jiroft has been added to the list of known production centres for steatite vessels. Its products are characterised by their complex and inventive iconography.

Administration

The growing subdivision of individual economic branches and the craft specialisation that are the hallmark of the "Era of Exchange", required new methods and tools to document, manage and control the flow of goods and labour. Stamp seals had been in use as early as the Neolithic, but it was the fourth millennium BCE that saw the introduction of tokens, bullae and cylinder seals in order to label and authenticate documents.

Since the Late Uruk period, when the introduction of standardised accounting systems and – slightly later – the invention of writing took place, Mesopotamia had efficient documentation tools at its disposal. It is in this time and under the palpable influence of the Uruk culture that the earliest numeric tablets are also found in Iran, in layer 17B on the acropolis at Susa. The seal impressions on these bullae and tablets are stylistically indistinguishable from the ones found in Uruk itself, and demonstrate just how close the link between Susa and the Uruk culture was in this time.

However, real writing did not appear until the beginning of the Proto-Elamite Period, which coincides with Susa III, at about 3,100 BCE. The first Proto-Elamite tablets are to be found in layer 16C at Susa, while a set of numeric tablets with single and possibly Proto-Elamite glyphs came to light between layers 17B and 16C.

The particular and unique Proto-Elamite writing system was used to record a non-semitic language – the Proto-Elamite.

This term reflects the assumption that the language might be a predecessor of the later Elamite, which was spoken in Elam in the 2nd millennium BCE. Both the Proto-Elamite script and the glyptic demonstrate a new development that is completely detached from Mesopotamia.

The above is a lightly edited version of part of a chapter entitled, 'Early Towns in Iran', from a book entitled, 'Persian Antiques Splendor', edited by T. Stollner, R. Slotta, and A. Vatandoust, published by German Mining Museum. The photos were taken from the book.