

# Story of Reydokht; from forgotten grave to archaeological marvel

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EXCLUSIVE

For thousands of years, Reydokht was lying on her right side in the ground alone, forgotten all but one dream; to be unearthed by archeologists. The discovery of her grave earlier this month was a dream come true for her. An excavation team from Shahid Beheshti University unearthed her more-than-6,000-year-old skeleton in Cheshmeh Ali, an important archeological mound at the edge of the ancient city of Rey and a few kilometers from Tehran, on November 11. Hamidreza Valipour led the excavation team while Iman Mostafapour acted as his deputy.



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Some archeology students, who were cooperating with the excavation team, immediately named her as Reydokht or the daughter of Rey.

Valipour told Iran Daily that the most important achievements of the excavation in Cheshmeh Ali, which opened on October 1, was unearthing the architectural remains of a prehistoric village and this grave, dating back to approximately 4,300-4,000 BCE.

He said these new findings could shed light on the life and burial rites of prehistoric humans.

It was in the closing days of the excavation and the team members were ready to wrap up the fieldwork in their two trenches that they came across edges of a potential grave in the middle of one of trenches. That was a good luck. Therefore, they dug more carefully as excavation of a grave requires an experienced archeologist.

"Excavating a grave is exhilarating but it should be done in such a way that no damage is done," Mostafapour said. As Mostafapour was working carefully to expose the pelvic bones of the prehistoric girl, he was feeling the tremendous sense of joy. "The feeling that you are the first person to see it again and touch it for the first time after 6,000 years is the most fascinating part (of being an archeologist)."

After exposing her pelvic bones, the team stopped their part of excavation and asked Hamed Vahdati Nassab, a prehistoric anthropologist from Tarbiat Modares University, to join them and continue excavation until the skeleton was fully exposed. She was lying there in her grave on her right side in a flexed position.

The next step was to take samples for doing further studies. Archaeogenetics, archaeoparasitology, and carbon-14 dating are but a few of the disciplines and advances that can help an archeologist's work in any country. Some of the studies can be done in Iran, other ones like radiocarbon dating to determine the exact time of the burial and age of the skeleton need assistance from other countries.

Valipour said the preliminary studies by Vahdati Nassab on the skeleton and her anatomy revealed that she was a mature girl, aged around 15 to 16 years old with a height of about 160 cm. Her skull had an artificial cranial deformation that could be either a sign of her social status, or cultural affiliations or else, he added.

The alteration in the skull of human is an intentional body form modification, predating the written history. It was practiced by distorting normal growth of a child's skull by applying pressure.

Also, evidence showed that the prehistoric girl had tiny shell, bone and stone ornaments and beads, which were worn by her as anklet, necklace, bracelet, and headband. There was also ochre clay in her grave.

"While these ornaments provide hints about the personal aspects of her prehistoric life and the technology used by the prehistoric humans to make them, the ochre clay could give clues about their afterlife beliefs," Valipour explained.

"This burial is not just in the form of a pit that dug in the floor of the residential unit, but a wall or a burial chamber was created for it, the evidence of which was obtained in the form of standing bricks, and more work on it will be done in the next season," he said.

Cheshmeh Ali has been the focus of archeological interest since 1912, leading to two inconclusive excavations at the site in 1912 and in 1924. The US archeologist Erich Schmidt conducted extensive excavation during 1934-36 at the site and identified two historic Islamic and Parthian periods and two prehistoric Chalcolithic and Neolithic levels there. But the record of his excavation remained unpublished due to his sudden death in a plane crash in 1964.

After a 61-year hiatus, a collaborative Anglo-Iranian excavation was conducted in 1997 at the site to focus on the prehistoric sequence of Tehran plain. The result was

published.

Now after another break of 27 years, the archeological department of Shahid Beheshti University has proposed a five-year plan and resumed excavation at the 7,000-year-old mound, focusing on evidences to show whether the sociocultural evolution of the societies shows a pattern of continuity or change in the Central Plateau of Iran.

"This program aims to study the process of the cultural evolution of the societies from the Neolithic to the Chalcolithic periods," a statement by the archeological department of Shahid Beheshti University read. "It also will assess some proposed hypotheses and theories about the reasons for cultural changes in the Central Plateau of Iran and the variables influencing this process."

Valipour and Mostafapour revealed another more ambitious plan too that is turning Cheshmeh Ali into a site museum in the future.

This site museum can give tourists a view of how ancient societies lived; raise awareness and sensitivity among locals towards their heritage; preserve artefacts and objects; protect the site against heightened concern with looting and the last not the least provide financial resources for more archeological excavation and studies at the site.

For the time being until the site museum will open to make people familiar with the archeological works, the immediate concern of the excavation team is preservation of the findings, particularly Reydokht.

Mostafapour said that if the skeleton was left there in the grave, it could draw the attention of looters because "they always think something precious can be found in any ancient grave".

The best option was to mold the skeleton and put it on display in a museum for the public. But this option was not possible because the skeleton was on the verge of pulverization due to earlier irrigation by the municipality in the previous years. Therefore, the team had to walk into another path.

"We had to separate every single bone of her, record them and kept them in Archeological Research Center for later study," said Mostafapour to explain about the fate of Reydokht so far.

Divided to the bone, Reydokht may finally wish that her 6,000-year odyssey will one day end in a site museum in Cheshmeh Ali where she can rest in peace forever.

