
Introduction and Preliminary Assessment of Cist Tombs in Gahvāre District, Kermanshah Province, Western Iran

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Abstract: In summer 2015, during the preliminary survey to identify the tombs of Gahvāre district, about ten cemeteries were recorded including Mar Khāmūsh, Gawrajūb, Berya Khāni, Safar Shāh, and Chenār. Structurally the tombs of these cemeteries have similar features. In their constructions, large stone slabs had been used in four sides. After putting the dead body, the cap stone was placed on it and then it was covered with a pile of small and large stones. Most of the tombs were plundered which makes them difficult to date. Therefore on the basis of few pottery found from Mar Khāmūsh cemetery as well as comparative studies with other graves of central Zagros, the date of Iron Age II and III is suggested. The aim of this paper is to increase our knowledge about the Iron Age's graves in the central Zagros. Furthermore, some potsherds from Gawrajūb cemetery have been found which were comparable with Parthian pottery based on forms and technical features. It seems that the pottery is likely to be intrusive or its presence suggests reuse of the graves in the Parthian period. The archaeological excavations are needed to clarify this chronology and to achieve more precise results.

Keywords: Iran, Kermanshah, Gahvāre, Cemetery, Cist Tombs, Iron Age

1. Introduction

The burial tradition outside the residential areas and inside cemeteries was begun in the 3rd millennium; but the phenomenon was not very common in this millennium and with the start of the Iron Age, cemeteries were remarkably increased in most parts of Iran (Talai 2002: 175, 177). In the course of time, spread of various cemeteries including the western half of the Iranian plateau is notable. So with respect to the archaeological activities in western parts, various cemeteries can be mentioned such as: Pish-i Kuh and Pusht-i Kuh (Haerinck & Overlaet 1998, 1999, 2004; Overlaet 2003; Hasanpur et al. 2015), Tepe Giyān (Contenau & Ghirshman 1935), Tepe Gūrān (Thrane 2001), Changbār (Naghshineh et al. 2011), Zagros Graveyard in Kurdistan (Amelirad et al. 2011), and Shirah-penah cemetery in Ilam province (Davoudi & Hatami 2012) which mostly have stone constructions. Also during the archaeological survey in Gahvāreh district, several

cemeteries were identified with slight differences in appearance. They have often situated among the mass of oak trees on the mountains slope or ridge.

Although several researches have been undertaken in relation to the burial traditions in western Iran, the stone cist tombs of Gahvāre district still remain hidden from the eyes of archaeologists. In 2008, an archaeological survey was carried out in the Gahvāre district (Hozhabri, 2008), however there was no mention of the presented cemeteries, where most of the tombs had been plundered over times and no archaeological field works have been carried out there heretofore. Thus in the present paper, the authors decided to introduce and specify those cemeteries, as well as make them known to the researchers and archaeologists.

2. Methodology & Objectives

This research is based on both field method and library method. According to the local reports in order to presence of

several cemeteries in mountainous regions of Gahvāre district, a fieldwalking survey has been conducted by the authors. Each cemetery was documented by using Global Positioning Systems (GPS), taking photos of tombs structure and collecting the surface cultural materials which were limited to only potsherds. Then some of the tombs structure and surface potsherds were determined for illustration and they have been compared with the identified samples of peripheral regions.

This preliminary study aimed to:

- introduce and evaluate the unknown stone cist tombs of Gahvāre district to have a better realization of the chronology of this region.
- provide a preliminary record of the remains and make plans for survival the unplundered tombs which have not attracted scholarly attention, yet.
- improve our understanding of the potential of the archaeological resource in western Iran.
- make research data available to the widest academic audience for future investigation.

3. Geographical Location

Gahvāre district (also known as Gavāra and Gawareh) is located on the eastern part of Dālāhu County, Kermanshah Province, Iran (Fig. 1). It is subdivided into two rural districts including Qalkhāni and Gurāni districts. The most important river that flows through Gahvāre district is called Zimkān River which ends at Iraq. The project of dam construction on this river is on the agenda which will result in submergence and disappearance of many archaeological sites into the depth of water. Among the archaeological sites, cemeteries are the major parts which present lots of information. In the Gahvāre district many cemeteries were identified in the mountainous contexts (Fig. 2). In the following, structures and characteristics of the graves will be discussed in detail.

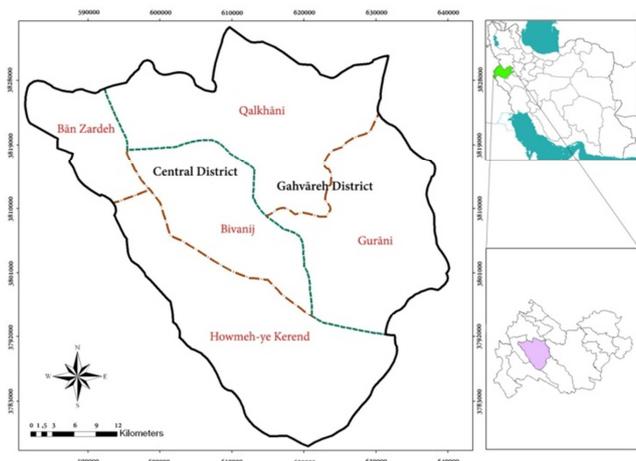


Figure 1. Geographical map of Dālāhu County, Kermanshah Province, Iran. Illustration by the mapping and GIS groups of Kermanshah province general governor.

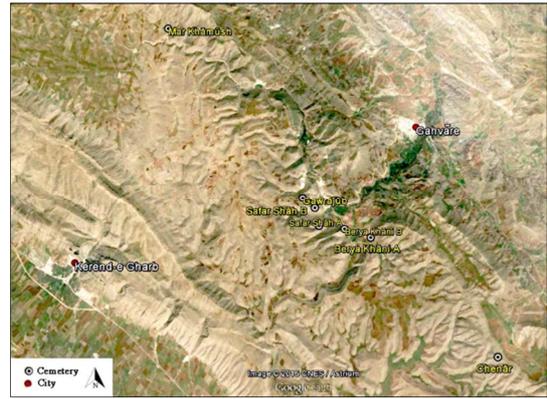


Figure 2. Location of the cemeteries mentioned in the text.

4. The Cemeteries

Chenār cemetery: $34^{\circ} 14' 46.78''$ N, $46^{\circ} 27' 27.80''$ E, 1729 m ASL. This cemetery is located over the mountain ridge in the south of Chenār village. Two tombs have been found here at a distance of about one kilometer from each other. This area had more tombs in the past, but they have been destroyed in the contemporary times and it caused difficulties in identification. The remained tombs structures indicate that four sides of the tomb had been surrounded by great boulders which present a rectangular shape. After placing the deceased in it, the tomb was covered by some cap stones and then the pile of unworked stones was put on it. One of the graves measures 1.50 by 0.78 m with a depth of 0.78 m. This grave was covered with a cap stone measured 1.40 by 0.55 m which has been moved by looters (Figs. 3-4). No cultural material has been found in this cemetery.

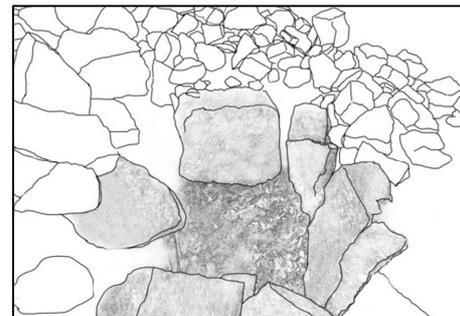


Figure 3. A plundered grave in Chenār cemetery.

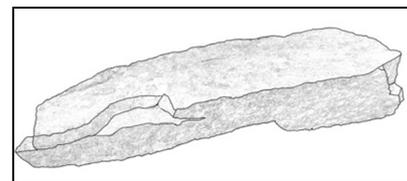


Figure 4. A grave's cap stone in Chenār cemetery.

Berya Khāni cemetery: This cemetery divided into A and B parts. Area A ($34^{\circ} 17' 44.98''$ N, $46^{\circ} 23' 38.03''$ E, 1835 m ASL) is located ca. 500 meters to the western Berya Khāni village (also 10 meters to the south of Gahvāre to Berya

Khāni route). Fortunately some graves still remain intact, so it is a very important issue to have a precise chronology. The graves have been made with great stones and then covered by various stones. This structure is visible through destroyed tombs (Fig. 5). There is a possibility about using bond stones in construction of some of the graves. One of the plundered graves measures 1.60 by 0.75 m with a depth of 0.30 m running east-west.

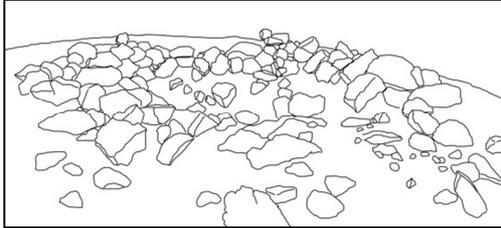


Figure 5. Berya Khāni cemetery (Area A).

Area B ($34^{\circ} 17' 58.00''$ N, $46^{\circ} 22' 49.70''$ E, 1543 m ASL) is situated ca. one kilometer to the southwest of Berya Khāni village and about 1 kilometer to the east of Safar Shāh village in the foothill of mountain. There is no particular geographical direction due to rocky bed of this area. The graves have various dimensions (Fig. 6). More than seven graves have been identified here. No cultural materials – which are helpful in tombs chronology - have been found. By the way there is an ancient mound about 300 meters to the southern area A and exactly between Area A and B. The archaeological activity is necessarily suggested in this mound in order to have a better analysis and to date the graves (Fig. 7).

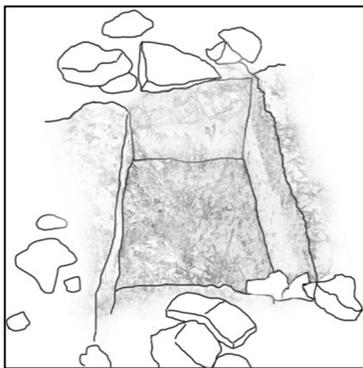


Figure 6. Berya Khāni cemetery (Area B).

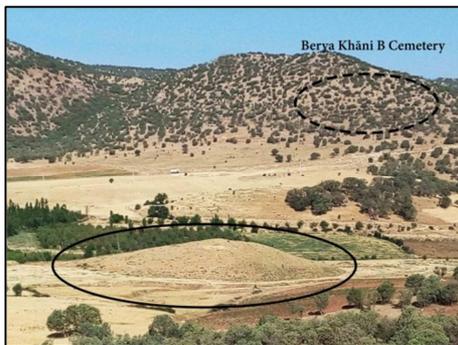


Figure 7. An ancient mound between Area A & B.

Safar Shāh cemetery: This cemetery is sub-divided into three parts including A, B, and C. Area A ($34^{\circ} 18' 02.58''$ N, $46^{\circ} 22' 02.48''$ E, 1579 m ASL) is located over the mountain for about 500 meters to the southeast of Safar Shāh Village. The Zimkān River runs in this village. More than thirty graves are identifiable in this cemetery. It should be mentioned that some of the graves have not yet been completed. Another point is that despite Chanār and Berya Khāni's graves, some of the graves' floors have been made of flat carved stone (Fig. 8).

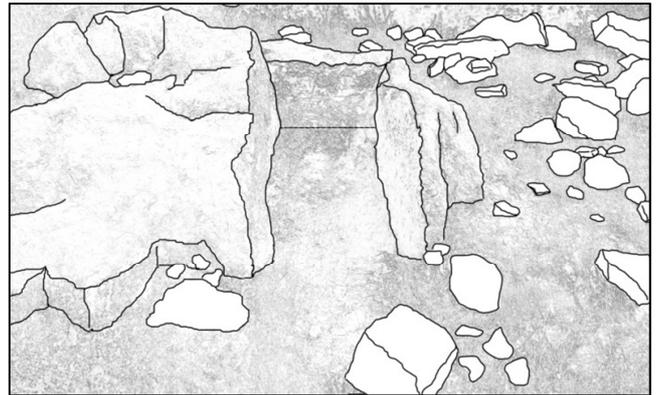


Figure 8. Safar Shāh cemetery (Area A).

Area B ($34^{\circ} 18' 30.04''$ N, $46^{\circ} 21' 54.44''$ E, 1625 m ASL) is situated in the southern part of the Safar Shāh village on summit of the mountain. About 400 meters to it, i.e. exactly in the village, the Zimkān river is visible. Structurally the graves of A and B are same as Berya Khāni. They also have been made by great slab stones in four sides and after putting the cap stones, they were covered by small and large stones as they look mound-like and will be easily identified. The graves have different dimensions. One of them measures 1.23 by 0.65 m and 0.65 m. There are more than ten graves in this cemetery. No cultural materials have been found next to them (Fig. 9).

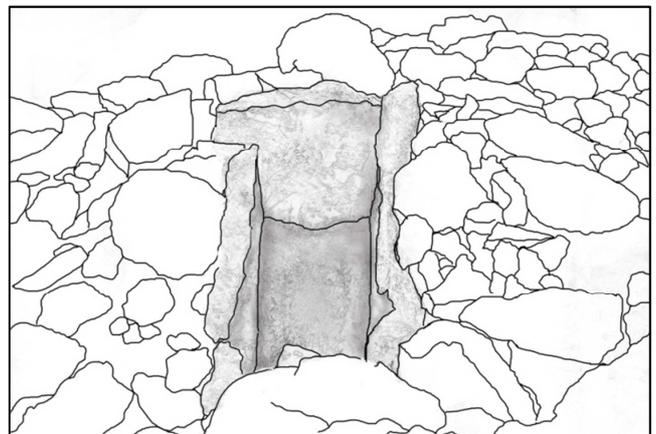


Figure 9. Safar Shāh cemetery (Area B).

Several graves were reported in a short distance (ca. 700 meters) to the south of Safar Shāh B cemetery and beside agricultural lands of Banavān Mountain. They are specified

as Area C (Fig. 10). These graves are similar to area B on the basis of structure, natural conditions, and location. An ancient great mound is visible next to the Safar Shāh village. Archaeological activities are suggested in order to have a better chronology for these graves.

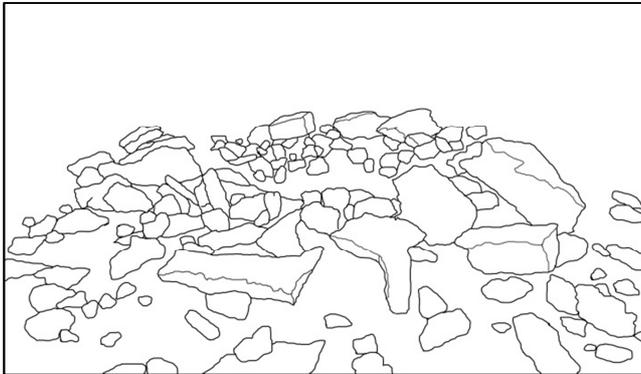


Figure 10. Safar Shāh cemetery (Area C).

Gawrajūb cemetery: 34° 18' 45.75" N, 46° 21' 31.57" E, 1649 m ASL. This cemetery is located on the summit of mountain in eastern Gawrajūb village. The graves lie in contrary to Safar Shāh B cemetery next to the Banavān agricultural lands and also near the Zimkān River. They are similar to Safar Shāh's graves based on structure, environmental conditions, and vegetation. Fifteen graves were reported in this cemetery. One of them measures 1.35 by 0.60 m with a depth of 0.60 m (Fig. 11). Beside two graves, several potsherds belonged to the rim, body and handle have been found which are comparable with the Parthian pottery on the basis of technical characteristics.

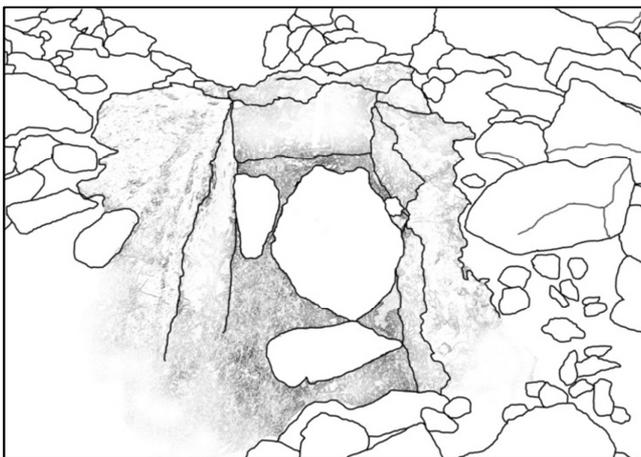


Figure 11. Gawrajūb cemetery.

Mar Khāmūsh cemetery: 34° 23' 11.86" N, 46° 17' 14.92" E, 1647 m ASL. After Tut Shāmi village next to the Tut Shāmi - Veyleh route, the famous cave is located known as Mar Khāmush. Shortly after this cave (ca. 200 meters to its west), there is a road through which we can reach to a cemetery situated in the mountain foothill (Fig. 12). Structurally the graves are similar to the previous ones. Some of them are clearly visible and there is no stone pile on them

(Fig. 13). In this cemetery more than eight graves, with east-west direction, are identifiable. Some of them have been looted and the others still remain intact (Fig. 14). Carrying out archaeological activities can help us to have a better understanding and more precise dating for the graves. Unfortunately some parts of this cemetery have been destroyed because of peripheral farmlands expansion. There are many potsherds related to handle, body, rim, and base of the wares in the farmlands located downward of the cemetery (ca. 10 m to it) some of which are collected due to studying and dating the cemetery. It will be mentioned in the following.



Figure 12. The extent of Mar Khāmūsh cemetery.



Figure 13. A plundered tomb in Mar Khāmūsh cemetery.



Figure 14. Mar Khāmūsh cemetery.

5. Tombs Structure

As mentioned previously, all tombs of reported cemeteries have a similar structure. The graves had no specific direction and different directions can be seen even in a single cemetery. All of the graves have been built with stones available around the sites without using any mortar.

The tomb has been constructed with large stone slabs and boulders which were placed in four sides of it. After putting the dead body, the cap stone was left on it and then it was covered with small and large unworked stones. This kind of burial pit coverage with one or more cap stones have been reported several times (Overlaet 2003: 63). It seems that most of the graves have no traces of stone floor but some of them in Safar Shāh cemetery are exceptional and the same kind of rocky stone bed has been used as the floor. Similar examples have been reported from Kalwali, Kutal-I Gulgul, Duruyeh, and Bard-I Bal cemeteries (Ibid, 66).

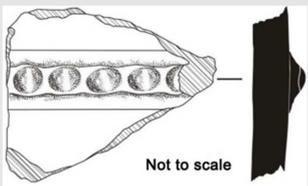
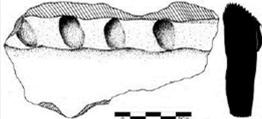
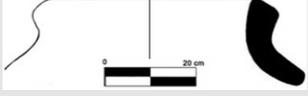
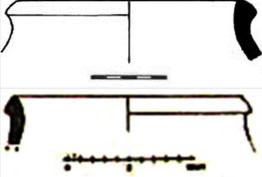
In general, some parallels with Gahvāre graves' structures have been reported mostly from the graves which belong to the Iron Age IIB which are well-known through Belgium excavations in the Kalwali Tepe and Pusht-I Kabud (which are in rectangular shape with stone slabs). This type of graves are a good indicator for dating (Haerinck & Overlaet 2010: 304, d-e; Overlaet 2003: 324, 339-342, Pl. 17-21, 22-40;

2005: Pl. 7,9). During archaeological excavation in Ilam a megalithic cemetery has been found that on the basis of pottery, bronze, and iron materials, it was dated to the Iron Age II (ca. 1000-800 B.C.). Some of its graves had stone structure and were comparable with our mentioned tombs (Soto-Riesle 1983: 179, figs. 5-6).

6. Archaeological Data

The cultural materials found from this preliminary survey are limited just to the small quantity of potsherds. It is clear that these data do not let us to have a comprehensive result for the chronology of the cemeteries. Nevertheless during the survey, few sherds have been found near Gawraǰūb and Mar Khāmūsh cemeteries. Pottery related to Gawraǰūb is parallel with the Parthian pottery based on the forms and technical characteristics. These sherds include rim, handle and body of wares. The latter was decorated with cordage motif and has been reported from many Parthian sites such as Bisotun (Alibaigi 2010: Pl. 7), Qaleh-I Yazdigird (Nazari 2014: Pl. 32-33) and etc. (Table 1: 1). As mentioned, a straight, everted jar rim has also been found here (Table 1: 2) which is a diagnostic type in many Parthian sites such as Māhnešān (Khosrowzade & Aali 2004: Pl. 8: 7-12) and Bisotun (Kleiss 1970: Abb. 26:12).

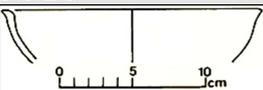
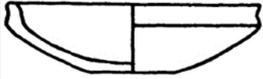
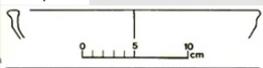
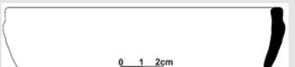
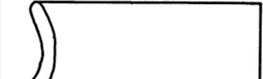
Table 1. Comparative Table of Pottery from Gawraǰūb Cemetery.

No.	Cemetery	Sherds	Parallels	Site	References
1	Gawraǰūb			Bisotun	Alibaigi 2010: Pl. 7
				Qaleh-I Yazdigird	Nazari 2014: Pl. 32: 9
2	Gawraǰūb			Māhnešān Bisotun	Khosrowzade & Aali 2004: Pl. 8: 8 Kleiss 1970: Abb. 26:12

Surface pottery taken from the Mar Khāmūsh cemetery is divided into bowls and jars. Mostly they are well-fired, wheel-made with mineral temper. The colors of interior and exterior surfaces include a range of buff, orange, brown, and rarely gray. Bowls are sub-divided into various forms, on the basis of rim including: bowl with an everted, flattened rim (Table 2: 1). No. 1 can be compared with the bowl reported from Godin II (Young & Levine 1974: fig. 46: 24). Another form includes a bowl with an everted, pointed rim and a groove below the rim (Table 2: 2); its similarities have been

reported from the Iron Age sites such as Hasanlū IV (Young 1965: fig. 6: 4), Bābājān (Goff Meade 1968: fig. 10: 7), Godin II (Young & Levine 1974: fig. 45: 13) and with slightly difference in profile from Ziwiye (Young 1965: fig. 3: 3). Next form is a bowl with straight, rounded rim and a groove below the rim (Table 2: 3); it seems that this type of bowl followed tradition of some bowls introduced from Haftavān V in accordance with Iron Age I (Talai 2005: fig. 1). This form also occurred amongst Ziwiye common ware (Young 1965: fig. 3: 5).

Table 2. Comparative Table of Pottery from Mar Khāmūsh Cemetery.

No.	Cemetery	Sherds	Parallels	Site	References
1	Mar Khāmūsh			Godin II	Young & Levine 1974: fig. 46: 24
2	Mar Khāmūsh			Hasanlū IV	Young 1965: fig. 6: 4
				Bābājān	Goff Meade 1968: fig. 10: 7
3	Mar Khāmūsh			Godin II	Young & Levine 1974: fig. 45: 13
				Ziwiye	Young 1965: fig. 3: 3
4	Mar Khāmūsh			Haftavān V	Talai 2005: fig. 1
				Ziwiye	Young 1965: fig. 3: 5
5	Mar Khāmūsh			Hasanlū III	Young 1965: fig. 1: 10
				Haftavān V	Talai 2005: fig. 7: P
5	Mar Khāmūsh			Zar Bolagh	Malekzade et al. 2014: Pl. 14: 3

The next group of pottery contains necked jars. One example of a necked jar has an everted, rounded rim (Table 2: 4) which is comparable with the reported pottery assemblage from Hasanlū III (Young 1965: fig. 1: 10) and Haftavān V (Talai 2005: fig. 7: P). There is also a pot with an inverted, rounded rim (Table 2: 5) which is similar to the late Iron Age of Zar Bolagh ceramic assemblage (Malekzade et al. 2014: Pl. 14: 3). Therefore, according to the pottery comparisons and presented similarities from other Iron Age sites of Zagros, it is suggested that the collected pottery from Mar Khāmūsh probably belongs to Iron Age II and III.

7. Conclusion

In general, during the preliminary survey at Gahvāre district, many tombs with rectangular shaped structures were identified. The materials to construct their walls were of great natural rocks. The tombs had been built with large stone boulders and slabs on four sides of their walls. This type of

tombs called *cist tombs* due to their forms. After putting a dead body into the tomb, it was roofed with great cap stones. Afterwards over the tomb was covered with different size of unworked stones. Such tombs are called *Gawri* in the local language. In addition some of them such as Chenār tombs are known as defensive strongholds.

Unfortunately most of the tombs have been plundered because of their easy identification. There are no cultural materials near most of them and it results in difficulties to date the tombs. Despite this, there were a few pottery pieces next to the Mar Khāmūsh and Gawrajūb cemeteries that seems to be related probably to the Iron Age and Parthian periods. Typologically the reported potsherds of Mar Khāmūsh cemetery comprised with presented pottery from the Iron Age sites of Godin II, Hasanlū III-IV, Bābājān, Ziwiye, Haftavān V and Zar Bolagh; Moreover, the similarities between cist tombs structure of Gahvāre district with graves of Pusht-I Kuh regions can support the authors' suggestion for dating these cemeteries to the Iron Age II-III.

It is clear just a scientific archaeological excavation can clarify this chronology.

All the graves have located in the foothill or summit of the mountains beside seasonal springs or permanent rivers. So environmental conditions and geographical contexts such as water sources and rocky mountain have a major role in dispersion pattern of the graves. Some of the graves have a short distance with archaeological mounds including Berya Khāni and Safar Shāh. So unlike other similar graves in central Zagros- which are explained in connection with nomadic tribes – it is not possible to analyze these two cemeteries without any archaeological excavations in them and surrounding areas. But other cemeteries, which were not formed in relation to the settlement areas, can be likely interpreted in connection with nomadic tribes. Anyway our current knowledge on the Gahvāre district cemeteries is not enough to answer the questions about the tombs' identification and their chronology. More and also interdisciplinary field research is needed to complement the present data and verify some ideas about settlement patterns, population density, and precise chronology of these cemeteries.

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