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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mersin Chal Cemetery; Reflection of Cultural Interactions in the Northern Central Plateau of Iran Based on Archaeological Data Analysis

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Abstract

The Mersin Chal Cemetery is considered one of the extensive burial sites in Iran. It's strategically located on the corridor connecting the desert regions and the Iranian Central Plateau on one side with the northern and northeastern parts of Iran. The cemetery is situated along the southern edge of the eastern Alborz mountains. During the third season of archaeological excavations at this cemetery in 2021, 49 graves were identified and excavated. The data obtained from this season provide a valuable collection for studying burial practices and examining regional cultural dynamics from the late Iron Age III to the early Parthian period. The aim of this research is to examine the grave goods within the context of cultural interactions, particularly through typological and comparative analyses with contemporary sites in northern and northeastern Iran. The research methodology follows a descriptive-analytical approach, utilizing data collected from both fieldwork and documentary/library research. The findings reveal that the graves at Mersin Chal exhibit a relatively consistent pattern in terms of orientation and general structure, reflecting a stable burial tradition. However, variations in the quantity and quality of grave goods suggest social differentiation within the community. Furthermore, the pottery assemblages also show notable typological similarities to sites such as Shahr-i Qumis, Tepe Kesht, Tepe Dibaj, Velem Cemetery, Vestemin Cemetery, and Shahneh Poshteh, indicating cultural connections and regional interaction. Moreover, the discovery of a bronze seal ring, featuring an image of Heracles and a Greek inscription, holds particular historical and cultural significance. This find may point to contact with Hellenistic cultural spheres during the early Parthian period. Overall, the available evidence suggests that Mersin Chal, during the second half of the first millennium BC, was integrated into broader networks of regional exchange and cultural interaction, especially with northern and northeastern Iran.

Keywords: Mersin Chal Cemetery, Burial Archaeology, Iron Age III, Early Parthian Period, Northeastern Iran

Introduction

The third season of archaeological research and excavation at the Mersin Chal cemetery, located southwest of the village of Talajim (Mehdishahr County, Semnan Province), was conducted in 2021. Despite the extensive history of human occupation in northeastern Iran, dedicated research on cemeteries dating to the first millennium BCE within Semnan Province remains scarce. This scarcity of archaeological evidence—both material findings and written accounts—creates a significant limitation in our understanding of the material and burial cultures of the era. Furthermore, despite the favorable topography and strategic location, this region has received less scholarly attention within the scope of Iranian archaeological studies. In light of several decades of stagnation in archaeological research in this part of Iran, the present paper aims to study the cultural materials obtained from the Mersin Chal cemetery. Cultures of the first millennium BC, though emerging within a relatively short period, display remarkable vitality and complexity. A comparative analysis of contemporaneous cultural material from northeastern and northern Iran reveals intricate local patterns in the formation of social and cultural systems—patterns that profoundly influenced broader political and social developments across the region. Semnan Province—known in historical sources as Qumis or Hecatompylos—served as the capital of the Parthian Empire and, due to its location along the historic Silk Road, held exceptional strategic and economic significance (Sharifi, 2019: 145). On the one hand, the site's proximity to the cultural sphere of Qumis civilization has a direct connection with the political and cultural centers of Parthian power; on the other hand, it represents the first systematically excavated site attributed to the Achaemenid period along the southeastern shores of the Caspian Sea (Malekzadeh et al., 2023: 14).

In archaeological research, cultural interaction typically refers to a set of processes through which different societies come into contact and influence each other through various ways. This influence can occur through means such as the exchange of goods, population movement, technological transfer, or even the sharing of ideas and symbols, which can manifest in economic, social, and cultural domains. Cultural interaction does not necessarily imply extensive population migration or direct political dominance; sometimes it can only be identified through material similarities or the presence of certain external elements within local traditions. In this research, the identification of cultural interactions has been based on indicators observable in the archaeological data from the Mersin Chal cemetery. These indicators include typological and morphological similarities of pottery found at Mersin Chal when compared with contemporary sites in northern and northeastern Iran. Correlations in other grave goods such as seal rings featuring motifs like a running ibex and the figure of Heracles/Hercules with a Greek inscription, alongside silver ornaments and metal weapons; as well as structural resemblances in burial architecture and methods. However, the most striking feature at Mersin Chal is the persistence of local traditions alongside the presence of trans-regional elements. The structure of the graves and the burial practice reveal the stability of indigenous traditions, while specific grave goods indicate cultural interactions with the northern and northeastern regions of Iran. This suggests that Mersin Chal is not an isolated cemetery, but rather a site strategically located in a geographical corridor between the southern Caspian Sea region and the northern and northeastern areas of Iran. Such a position likely enabled the community inhabiting this region to participate in the broader interaction networks spanning

the late Iron Age to the early Parthian period, while preserving their own traditions. In this regard, the main objective of the present research is to investigate the cultural context and conduct a comparative study of pottery and good graves. This aims to establish a relative chronology and achieve a systematic understanding of the cultural evolution within the region. The results of these studies can provide a new perspective on cultural interactions and socio-political reflections within northeastern Iran from the Achaemenid through the Parthian periods, and thereby serve as a significant step toward completing the cultural map of the eastern Iranian plateau.

Mersin Chal Cemetery

The Mersin Chal cemetery, with geographic coordinates X: 719131.920 and Y: 3991489.190, is situated to the east of Talajim village and on the southern bank of the Espeh Roud River, in the Poshtkouh section of Mehdi Shahr County, located in the northern part of Semnan Province, within the Central Iranian Plateau (Figures 1 and 2). This site was surveyed and identified in 2010 by Mortzaei and Maleki (Mortzaei & Maleki, 2010). To date, four seasons of excavation have been conducted at this site. The first and second seasons of archaeological excavations were carried out in 2014 and 2020 by Mehrdad Malekzadeh (Malekzadeh et al., 2015; Malekzadeh et al., 2023). The third season of excavations in 2021 was conducted by two archaeological teams, supervised by Mohammad Reza Nemati (Nemati, 2021) and Ata Hassanpour (Hassanpour, 2022). The third season of excavation at the Mersin Chal cemetery (Figure 3) took place across three trenches covering an area of 250 square meters, situated in the northwestern part of the site. Of the 49 excavated graves, 4 were located in Trench C11, 17 in Trench D11, and 28 in Trench E11 (Figure 4).

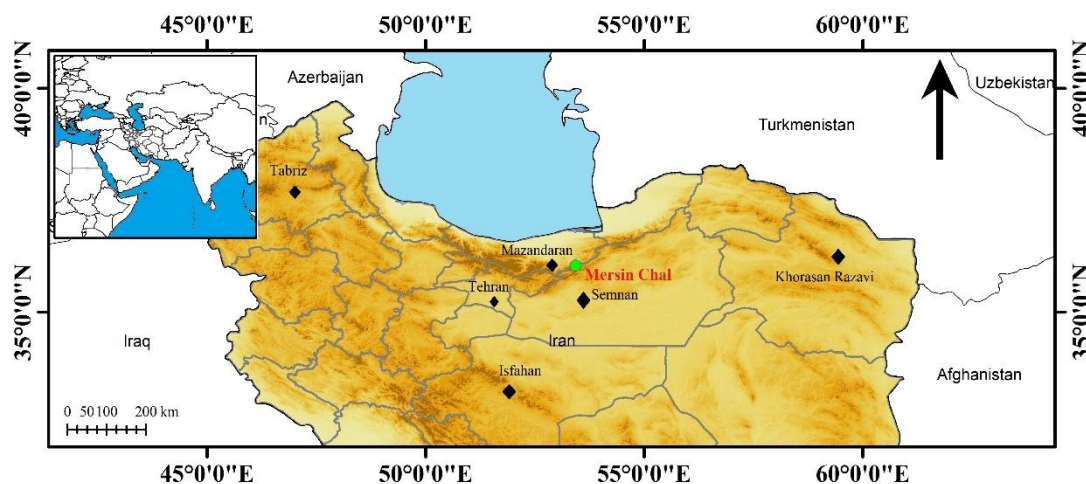


Figure 1. Map Showing the Location of Mersin Chal (Based on Google Maps, Drawn by: S. Bakhtiari).



Figure 2. The Location of the Mersin Chal Cemetery in the Aerial Image (Google Earth, 2024).



Figure 3. South to North View of the Mersin Chal Cemetery (Nemati, 2021).

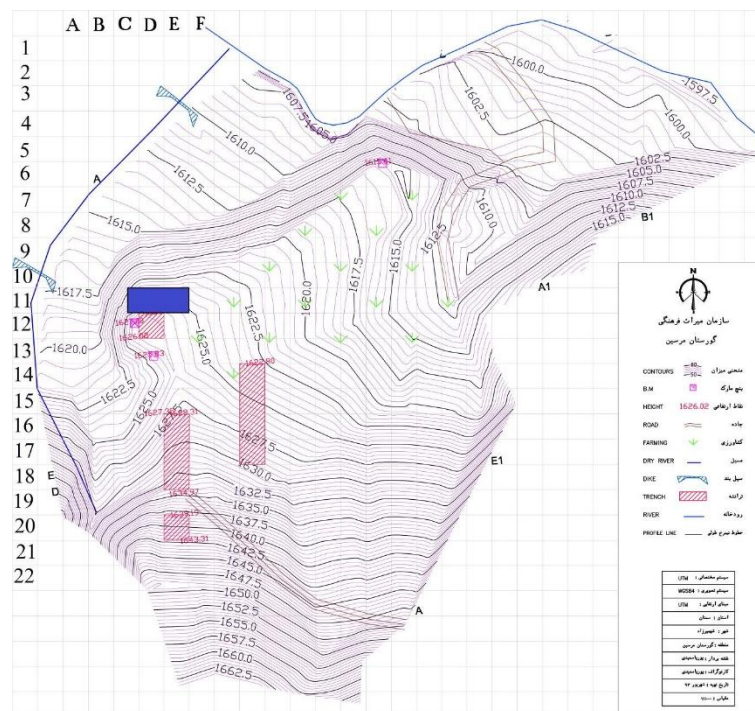


Figure 4. Topographic Map of the Mersin Chal Cemetery and the Location of the Excavated Trenches in the Third Season (Nemati, 2021).

Burials

Archaeological excavations confirm major changes in burial practices from the beginning of the Iron Age. The construction of structures for the ruling classes of society and the change in the trend of burying individuals in cemeteries outside of residential areas are considered characteristics of the Iron Age. At Mersin Chal cemetery, the pit graves are approximately the same size in dimension, and it appears that specific individuals prepared these graves. The burials are often oriented in a southwest-northeast direction. The burial was conducted amongst stone slabs that were placed vertically on the eastern and western sides of the grave. Furthermore, the structure of the graves is rectangular and enclosed, with a stone slab placed above the head and below the foot. A few of these flat stones above the head of the skeleton feature low-relief carvings that are difficult to discern. Among these carvings are the running ibex and the humped bull. In some cases, a horizontal slab or regular stone was also used on top of the vertical stone slabs. Most of the interments were conducted in the supine position, differing only in the arrangement of the head, hands, and feet. Except for one burial that was placed on flat stone slabs, which appears to belong to an individual of high social standing, the rest of the burials were conducted directly into the natural soil of the mound. The skeletons found in the graves were often not in good condition due to the region's soil type and agricultural activities, having mostly decayed or fragmented. The burials belong to adult males (24 graves), females (16 graves), and unknown individuals (9 graves). Alongside the burials,

objects were placed inside the grave and near the head, neck, hands, and feet of the skeleton as grave goods. The type of grave goods in burial was dependent on the social standing of each individual (Nemati, 2022: 470-472). The existence of burials with rich good graves, such as (C11:Gr2; D11:Gr6, Gr12; E11:Gr4, Gr13, Gr15, Gr16), indicates the presence of political, economic, and social stability in the Mersin Chal site, suggesting that those performing the burials did so with sufficient opportunity, and precision, interring the individuals in the graves along with various objects.

Grave Goods Obtained from the Mersin Chal Cemetery

Archaeologists, in analyzing the social structure of past societies, rely on material evidence (cultural artifacts) obtained from archaeological sites — especially cemeteries. These materials serve as symbols of hierarchy and networks of cultural exchange, acting as key tools for reconstructing the social dynamics of ancient societies. The study of the cultural materials from the Mersin Chal cemetery aims to bridge the existing gaps in our knowledge about the social structures of northeastern Iranian societies during the transitional period (from Achaemenid to Parthian) through the material evidence recovered from the graves.

Pottery

The Mersin Chal cemetery has a remarkably rich collection of grave goods. Out of 49 excavated graves, 8 graves (16%) were devoid of burial offerings, while 41 graves (84%) contained between 1 and 34 burial objects. Most of the graves contained items made of pottery, silver, bronze, glass, stone, and bitumen. The pottery largely consists of various types of pedestal bowls, flat-bottomed and convex-bottomed bowls, polygonal bowls, small jars, and a spouted pot with a horizontal loop handle. Most have an orange paste and slip, with a few being light brown or cooking wares. The majority were wheel-made, with mineral temper (fine sand and gravel). Some bowls show burnishing either on the interior, exterior, or on both surfaces.

Bowls: The bowls are classified into 7 categories: short pedestal bowls exhibit similarities with pottery found at Shahr-i Qumis (Stronach et al. 2019: 32-Fig18:27), Velam cemetery (Abbasnejad Seresti and Koulabadi, 2025,275- fig12:10) and Qiz Qal'eh in Bandar-e Torkaman (Puschnigg et al, 2019: 30- Fig6:8,31- Fig8:2); long pedestal bowls are found in Shahr-i Qumis (Stronach et al. 2019: 24-Fig10:9-10, 46-Fig33:15) and Achaemenid pottery from Mersin Chal (Malekzadeh et al, 2023: 10- Fig11:G13-3123); flat bottoms bowls resemble specimens from Shahr-i Qumis (Stronach et al. 2019: 24-Fig10:5-6), Velam cemetery (Abbasnejad Seresti and Koulabadi, 2025,275- fig12:9) and Qiz Qal'eh in Bandar-e Torkaman (Puschnigg et al, 2019: 30- Fig6:); concave bottoms bowls have similarities exist with pottery from Shahr-i Qumis (Stronach et al. 2019: 33-Fig19:9, 24-Fig10:2, 22-Fig8:1) and Achaemenid pottery from Mersin Chal (Malekzadeh et al, 2023: 5- Fig4:G0-3062); tripod bowls (Stronach et al. 2019: 32-Fig18:20), carinated bowls (Stronach et al. 2019: 32-Fig18:33) and polygonal bowls with concave bottoms (Stronach et al. 2019: 32-Fig18:37) are collectively noted to be similar to examples found at Shahr-i Qumis (Figure 5).

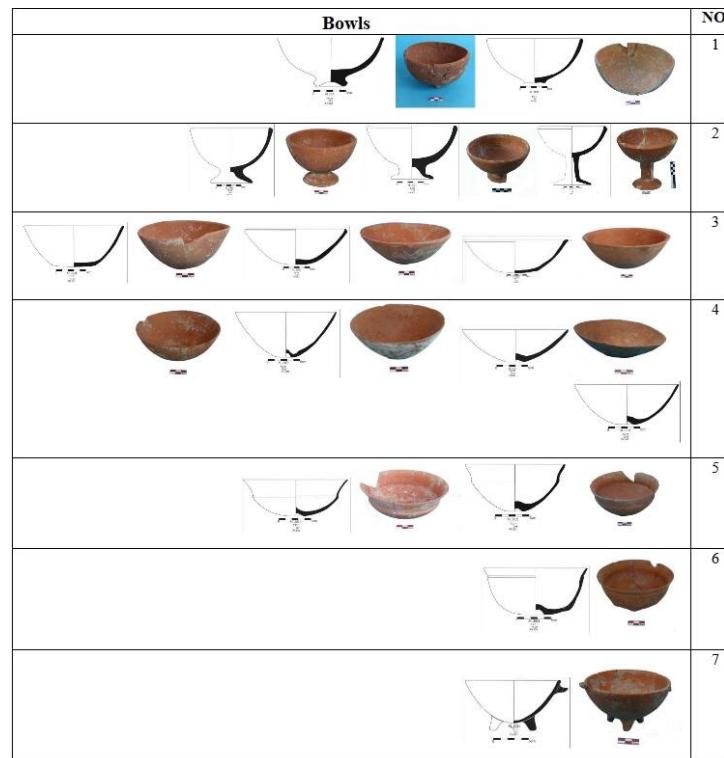


Figure 5. Typology of Burial Bowls in Mersin Chal Cemetery (Authors, 2026).

Jars: The jars are divided into 3 categories: handled jars show similarities with pottery from Shahr-i Qumis (Stronach et al. 2019: 25-Fig11:1, 26-Fig12:3, 39-Fig25:9), Tepe Kesht (Sharifi, 2019: Fig16), Tepe Dibaj (Sharifi, 2011: 50), Shahneh Poshteh (Fazeli Nashli et al., in Press:11-Fig4:5,9-Fig3:10); Handleless jars are further subdivided based on neck length: jars with long necks present similarities found at Shahr-i Qumis, Qiz Qal'eh, and Tepe Kesht (Stronach et al. 2019: 40-Fig26:7, 42-Fig28:9; Puschnigg et al, 2019: 35-Fig11:8; Sharifi, 2019:156-Fig14:6), while those with short necks show similarities noted at Shahr-i Qumis (Stronach et al. 2019: 30-Fig16:3); jars with an egg-shaped pedestal exhibit parallels with pottery from Shahr-i Qumis (Stronach et al. 2019: 27-Fig13:1, 45-Fig31:6), Tepe Dibaj (Sharifi, 2011: 48) and Achaemenid pottery from Mersin Chal (Malekzadeh et al, 2023: 5- Fig4:G8-3053) (Figure 6).

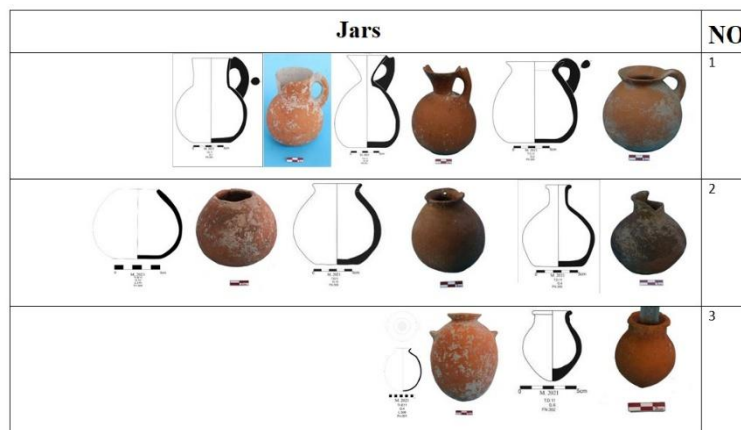


Figure 6. Typology of Burial Jars in Mersin Chal Cemetery (Authors, 2026).

Spouted pot with horizontal loop handle: A single example of a spouted pot with a horizontal loop handle was recovered from Trench D11, Grave 9 (Fig. 7). This pot is similar to Parthian pottery from Shahr-i Qumis (Stronach et al. 2019: 31-Fig. 17:5).

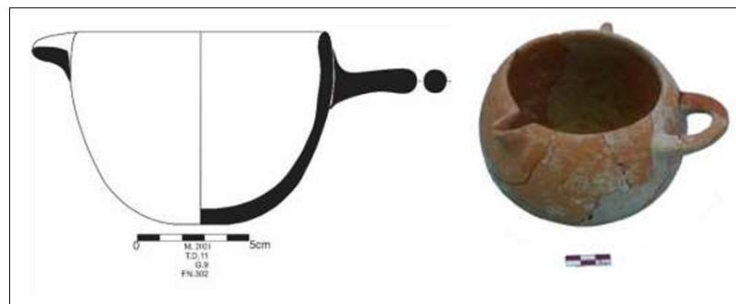


Figure 7. Spouted Pot with Horizontal Loop from Trench D11-Gr9 (Authors, 2026).

Cooking wares: A total of four cooking wares have been discovered in trenches D11 (graves 6 and 12) and E11 (graves 13 and 21) (Figure 8). These wares are very fragile and brittle. They have a brick-red color paste with mineral temper (sand and clay). The intense heat from the kiln has burned the bodies, so the outer surfaces are black. These include: A handled bowl (Stronach et al. 2019: 23-Fig. 9:8) found from trench D11, grave 6, a spouted pot with a horizontal loop handle from trench D11, grave 12 (Stronach et al. 2019: 24-Fig. 10:19), and a small jar (Stronach et al. 2019: 28-Fig. 14:4) from trench E11, grave 21.



Figure 8. Cooking Wares from Mersin Chal Cemetery (Authors, 2026).

Metal Objects

The metal objects obtained from the excavations at the Mersin Chal cemetery are made of iron, bronze, and silver. They include various items such as arrowheads, daggers, knives, bells, sickles, horseshoes, figurines, beads, necklaces, earrings, bangles, bracelets, anklets, armlets, brooches, and seal rings. The metal objects not only demonstrate a variety of specific artistic qualities but also hold significant value, reflecting the skill of the artists who crafted them. The metal artifacts from Mersin Chal can be categorized into three groups:

1. **Weapons:** These are made of iron using a casting technique. Notable finds include arrowheads (recovered from 21 burials), daggers (identified in 16 burials), and knives (E11-Gr8, Gr16, Gr20) (Figure 9).
2. **Metal Objects:** This category includes items such as bells (E11:Gr13, Gr15, Gr16), sickles (D11:Gr16; E11:Gr3, Gr7), and horseshoes (E11:Gr16) (Figure 10).
3. **Ornaments:** Archaeological findings indicate that the production of ornaments was quite prevalent in the late second millennium and the first millennium BC. The identified ornaments from the Mersin Chal cemetery include necklaces, earrings, bangles, bracelets, anklets, armlets, rings, brooches, and hair ornaments (Figure 11).




Weapons			NO
			Arrowheads
			Daggers
			Knives

Figure 9. Typology of Weapons in Mersin Chal Cemetery (Authors, 2026).




Metal Objects	
	Bells
	Sickles
	Horseshoe

Figure 10. Typology of Metal Objects in Mersin Chal Cemetery (Authors, 2026).

Ornaments

The necklaces recovered from the Mersin Chal cemetery (C11:Gr2; D11:Gr6, Gr12, Gr13; E11:Gr4, Gr12, Gr13, Gr14, Gr15, Gr16, Gr27) consist of beads of various sizes and materials,

including metal (iron, bronze, silver), clay, bone, stone, agate, glass paste (frit), plaster, and bitumen. These decorative beads are predominantly found in colors of black, cream, and light green, and their shapes include flat, round, conical, oval, and cylindrical forms. Typically, they are arranged in multiples to function as necklaces worn around the individuals' necks. Occasionally, these necklaces also feature metal plaques. Notably, glass paste beads are particularly abundant, with some showcasing decorative grooves. The presence of these beads suggests indicators of social and/or religious status. Similar beads have been found at Parthian sites such as Tepe Kesht (Sharifi, 2019: 159-Fig 17) and Velem Cemetery (Abbasnejad Seresti and Koulabadi, 2025: 275-Fig 13:1-3). Additionally, these beads were identified during the second season of excavations at Mersin Chal (Malekzadeh et al., 2023: Fig 6), all attributed to the Achaemenid period based on C14 dating results. The earrings, except one made of bronze (E11:Gr4), are primarily made of silver (C11:Gr2; D11-Gr6, Gr9, Gr12; E11:Gr12, Gr13, Gr15, Gr16, Gr20). They can be categorized into two types: simple oval-shaped earrings and dangling earrings. The dangling earrings feature single or double decorations resembling grape clusters. Similar earrings were also uncovered during the second season of excavations at Mersin Chal (Malekzadeh et al., 2023: Fig 9). The bangles and bracelets (C11:Gr2; D11:Gr6, Gr12, Gr13; E11:Gr4, Gr10, Gr12, Gr13, Gr14, Gr15, Gr16, Gr27) are made from bronze and iron and can be classified into two categories: simple circular forms and decorated types. Some of the bangles and bracelets feature designs shaped like two snake heads, which is a common motif among the inhabitants of this period. In certain burials, both the right and left hands were adorned with multiple bangles and bracelets. Similar items have been found in the second season of excavations at Mersin Chal (Malekzadeh et al., 2023: Fig 9), as well as at the Parthian sites of Velem Cemetery (Abbasnejad Seresti and Koulabadi, 2025: 279-Fig 18) and Tepe Kesht (Sharifi, 2019: 159-Fig 19). The anklets are made of bronze and iron, and are identified from the burials (E11:Gr13, Gr15, Gr16). In both burials, Gr15 and Gr16, the deceased had anklets on both the right and left feet. Some anklets feature decorative grooves on both sides, while others have ends shaped like snakes. A silver brooch has been identified on the chest of the skeleton from graves 13 in trench E11. This brooch has no other similar examples in the Mersin Chal cemetery. Additionally, a bronze armlet has been found, with both sides in the shape of a snake's head. This artifact was discovered on the left arm of the skeleton from grave 12 in trench D11. A comparable bronze armlet, though twisted in design, has been found at the Shahneh Poshteh site (Fazeli Nashli et al., in Press: 24-Fig 9).

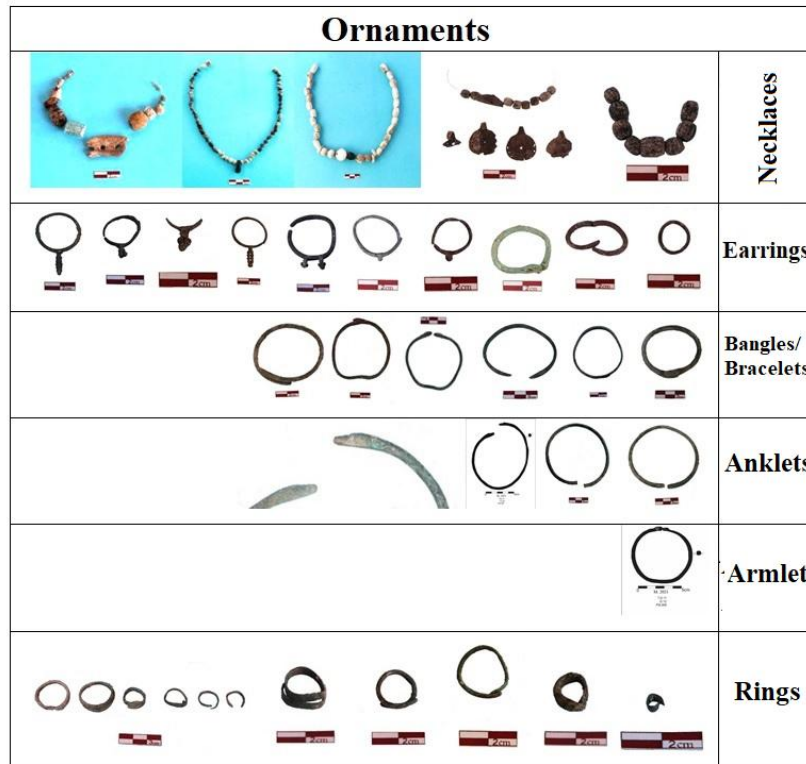


Figure 11. Typology of Ornaments in Mersin Chal Cemetery (Authors, 2026).

Spindle-Whorls

Twelve spindle whorls made of pottery and plaster (E11:Gr13) have been discovered from the excavations at the Mersin Chal cemetery (Figure 12). The spindle whorls from this site exhibit a uniform morphology with conical and flat shapes. Some of them feature geometric relief designs. These have been identified in both male and female burials. Similar spindle whorls have been identified from the Parthian site of Tepe Kesht in Damghan (Sharifi, 2019:159-Fig. 19).

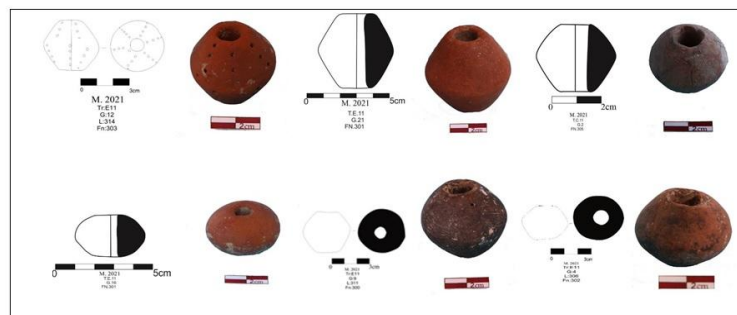


Figure 12. Spindle-Whorls from Mersin Chal Cemetery (Authors, 2026).

Seal Rings

Due to the foreign nature of the Seleucids and the emergence of new cultural interactions, novel styles and themes appeared in seal art (Qasemi, 2013: 411). During the Seleucid and Parthian periods, the cylindrical seals, which were common in earlier periods, were completely phased out, and ring seals became prevalent instead (Niknami et al., 2016: 154). The chronological succession of the Seleucid and Parthian periods, along with the similarities between seals from these two eras, often makes it challenging to distinguish between them (Mohammadifaret al., 2014: 108), as some Parthian seals display a continuation of the Seleucid style. From the excavations at the Mersin Chal Cemetery, two bronze ring seals have been identified. The first metal ring seal, recovered from Grave 13 in Trench E11, features an engraving of a running ibex on its bezel. Similar ring seals have been identified from the Vestemin Cemetery (Sharifi Holaei et al., 1401: 133, Fig. 9), the Velem Cemetery (Abbasnejad Seresti and Koulabadi, 2025, 275-Fig 13-8), and Qumis (Osten, 1931: 224-No. 36), all dating to the Parthian period. Furthermore, a second metal ring seal was identified in Grave 15, also in Trench E11. The motif on the bezel of this seal displays a human figure holding two animals upside down by their legs. This seal has a motif of Hercules with a Greek inscription (Figure 13). This important finding indicates that, chronologically, it can be stated with greater certainty that this cemetery belongs to the early Parthian period.



Figure 13. Seal Ring from Mersin Chal Cemetery (Authors, 2026).

Discussion

The burial practices observed in the graves at the Mersin Chal cemetery, particularly their consistent southwest–northeast orientation and the frequent use of vertical stone slabs, suggest the presence of a standardized burial tradition within the community. Although the grave architecture is largely homogenous, significant differences are observed in the grave goods, which point to social stratification within the society. Whereas 16% of the graves contained no funerary offerings, some others yielded up to 34 objects, including weapons, ornaments, and other items. The concentration of rich assemblages in certain graves (e.g., C11:Gr2; D11:Gr6, Gr12; E11:Gr4, Gr13, Gr15, Gr16) most likely indicates individuals of higher social or economic status within the community. A closer examination reveals no clear correlation between biological sex and the type of grave goods. Both weapons and ornaments are found in male and female burials alike. This pattern challenges traditional assumptions that associate weapons exclusively with masculinity and ornaments exclusively with femininity. Instead, the evidence suggests that these objects carried more complex meanings tied to social identity

rather than gender alone. A clear example of this is the spindle whorls, which were found in burials of both sexes. Their presence in male graves indicates that they cannot be interpreted solely as markers of female activity; they likely held symbolic significance, potentially reflecting family affiliation, broader economic roles, or social responsibilities rather than the deceased person's daily profession or activity. Overall, when considering the variation in the quantity and quality of grave goods, it seems the differentiation between graves was linked more to social status than to gender. Some graves contain numerous valuable items, while others lack them; this disparity may indicate that the burial tradition functioned as a way to display the social hierarchy within the community. Moreover, the continuity of burial practices from the Achaemenid to the early Parthian period at the Mersin Chal cemetery signifies the persistence of local ritual traditions, despite broader political changes. It appears that the expression of social differences was conveyed more through grave goods than through variation in grave architecture. This emphasizes the importance of material culture as the primary means of displaying identity and social standing in this regional context.

Conclusion

The third season of archaeological excavations at the Mersin Chal cemetery was carried out in three trenches. The total excavated surface area in this season amounted to 250 square meters, during which a total of 49 distinct burial units were identified, documented, and investigated. The number of graves provides reliable data for statistical and comparative inferences. The precise determination of the period of this cemetery was based on the simultaneous analysis of multiple archaeological indicators, such as pottery, seal rings, ornaments, burial methods, etc. The results of the relative dating, inferred from the comparison of pottery with contemporary sites in northern and northeastern Iran, including Qiz Qal'eh in Bandar-e Torkaman, Tepe Dibaj, Tepe Kesht, and Shahr-i Qumis in Damghan, as well as Vestemin Cemetery in Kiasar, Shahneh Poshteh in Babol, and the Velem Cemetery in Behshahr, confirm that this cemetery belongs to the second half of the first millennium BC (Iron Age III through the early Parthian period). The most important chronological achievement of this season was the discovery of a metal seal ring with mythological motifs (Heracles/Hercules) and an inscription in Greek. The presence of this seal, which is typically associated with the cultural and administrative exchanges of the Hellenistic and early Parthian periods, provides undeniable historical-cultural evidence, pushing the relative dating toward a more precise date at the beginning of the Parthian period. The burial traditions observed at Mersin Chal, including grave structure, burial type, and grave goods, indicate that the burial practices utilized throughout the Achaemenid, Seleucid, and early Parthian periods have demonstrated considerable structural stability. This persistence of burial tradition, despite the historical transition from Achaemenid to Parthian rule, reflects certain cultural beliefs within the region's local communities. The findings regarding the grave goods, particularly the ornamental and luxury items, reflect a significant level of economic affluence within this society. The abundance of these types of materials indicates that luxury items held a special place in the material culture and social rituals of these people. The Mersin Chal cemetery serves as an important resource for mapping and explaining cultural developments and understanding social structures over a wide period from the Iron Age III to the early Parthians. Given its geographical location and rich cultural material, this site has the potential to fill existing knowledge gaps regarding the region's history during these periods.

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Statement of Conflicting Interests

The Author(s) state(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

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