The International Journal of Humanities

Received: 2025/02/01
Accepted: 2025/03/25
Published: 2025/06/21

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Clay, Dance, and Spirit: Echoes of Neolithic and Chalcolithic Ritual Ceremonies in Iranian Plateau using some Archaeological Evidence

Chenour Seyyedi[1], **Seyyed Milad Hashemi** [1,2*]

1. Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Humanities, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran.

*. Corresponding Author
Email:
m.hashemisarvandi@modares.ac.ir

2. UMR 7194, HNHP, Associated Researcher to Pré-trop équipe, Musée de l'Homme, 17 Place de Trocadéro, 75016, Paris, France.

*** This article is derived from the first author's (CS) Master's thesis in Prehistoric Archaeology, which was defended at Tarbiat Modares University under the supervision of the corresponding author (SMH)

How to cite this article:
Seyyedi, C., & Hashemi, S.M. (2025). Clay, Dance, and Spirit: Echoes of Neolithic and Chalcolithic Ritual Ceremonies in Iranian Plateau using some Archaeological Evidence. *The International Journal of Humanities* 32(1): 136–158.

Abstract

The execution of ritual ceremonies has been a widespread phenomenon among both past and present human societies. People have employed rituals to reinforce territoriality, foster integration with their environment, strengthen group identity and social cohesion, treat material and spiritual maladies, influence weather, predict the future, and for similar ends. Given the central importance of these ceremonies, one can trace related motifs and other archaeological indicators on cultural remains. It is therefore plausible that such evidence survives on artefacts from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods of the Iranian Plateau. This study aims to examine the archaeological footprints of ritual practice on the Iranian Plateau during these periods. To that end, we survey cultural remains—including so-called "Venus" figurines, individual and group human depictions, secondary burials, and architectural features—at key prehistoric sites such as Ganj Dareh, Abdul Hossein, Sang-e Chakhmaq, Zagheh, Sheikh-I Abad, Tal-e Bakun, Tappeh Jafarabad, and Tappeh Sialk. This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach, drawing upon a review of the published literature from the specified sites; therefore, it is completely reliant on library and archival sources. The inquiry at hand is whether we can discern indications of belief-related rituals within the Neolithic and Chalcolithic archaeological findings of the Iranian Plateau. Furthermore, if such evidence exists, how should we interpret the motifs and features that have been uncovered, and to which specific ritual practices could they be linked? To address these inquiries, we begin by selecting and categorizing potential evidence—such as motifs, symbols, three-dimensional art forms like figurines, and other pertinent cultural artifacts—and subsequently analyze them through established visual arts methodologies, including compositional analysis. Our findings indicate that the rituals in question are indeed reflected, to varying extents, in the Iranian archaeological cultural materials belonging to Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods.

Keywords: Iranian Plateau, Neolithic Period, Chalcolithic Period, Rituals and Ceremonies, Archaeological Evidence.

Copyright@ 2025, TMU Press. This open-access article is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License which permits Share (copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format) and Adapt (remix, transform, and build upon the material) under the Attribution-NonCommercial terms.

1. Introduction and Problem Statement

Rituals and ceremonial practices are organized collective behaviours in which individuals participate as a group. Although their most conspicuous foundation is the system of beliefs and worldviews held by a society, ritualized conduct extends far beyond theology: virtually every human community performs some form of ritual (Rothenbuhler 2008: 15). Even though ritual ceremonies have been practiced around the globe, systematic study of these practices remains relatively recent. Over the past few decades, scholars have shown growing interest in the rituals and belief systems of past societies, recognizing that ritual and religion offer powerful lenses through which to examine cultural phenomena. In addition to anthropologists, sociologists, intellectual and cultural historians, and even biologists have investigated ritual practice. This convergence of inquiry has produced a broad, interdisciplinary discourse known as "archaeology of ritual" (Bell 2009: 3). For instance, the reader is referred to publications such as Clottes & Lewis-Williams (1998) on prehistoric shamanism, Bosworth (2003) on Central Asian shamanic traditions, and Dubois (2013) for an overview of shamanism. Rituals and ceremonial acts have appeared in myriad forms—magic, communal rites, birth- and fertility-related ceremonies, agricultural rituals—and there is evidence that, on the Iranian Plateau, Neolithic and Chalcolithic communities also performed such rites. In arid and semi-arid regions such as Southwest Asia, climatic fluctuations—especially variability in rainfall and water availability—would have had dramatic impacts on crop yields and herd survival. It is therefore plausible that, during the Neolithic, communities organized rituals to allay fears of drought or to invoke timely rains and protect agricultural productivity. In other words, fertility rites and ceremonies aimed at ensuring successful harvests or livestock reproduction were among the principal motivations for ritual performance (Gheorghiu 2018: 25; Whitehouse 2010: 5).

In accordance with the previously stated information, this research focuses on the following problem: Is there archaeological evidence supporting ritual and belief-related practices on the Iranian Plateau during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods? If such evidence is present, how should the identified material traces be interpreted, and which specific ceremonies or rites might they correspond to? An initial survey suggests that several prehistoric sites on the Plateau—namely Sheikh-I Abad, Ganj Dareh, Tappeh Jafarabad, and Tol-e Bakun—have produced archaeological remains (including iconography, symbols, figurines, secondary burials, and built features) that may reflect ritual activities (see Chapters 5–6 in Matthews & Fazeli-Nashli 2022).

In this study, the relevant archaeological materials are first identified and classified. They are then interpreted through the frameworks of anthropology of ritual, archaeology of religion, and iconographic analysis. Guided by this framework, two principal questions are posed:

1. What categories of evidence and thematic motifs attest to ritual and ceremonial practice during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic of the Iranian Plateau?
2. How can the putative evidence be explained and attributed to specific ritual actions?

Beyond its novelty in the Iranian context, this inquiry is important because it highlights aspects of Neolithic belief and tradition—such as ritual performance—that have received far less attention in archaeology than more tangible cultural expressions (e.g., pottery styles, technological systems, or architectural techniques).

2. Literature Review

To date, no single comprehensive study has systematically surveyed archaeological evidence for ritual practice on the Iranian Plateau during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods. However, a substantial body of scholarship on ritual, belief, and shamanic proxies in Neolithic and Chalcolithic contexts—both globally and in the Near East—provides an essential foundation for the present inquiry.

Several books, edited volumes and monographs have laid the conceptual groundwork for an archaeology of ritual. For instance, in *Archaeology of Religon in the light of searching the last rituals* (Mollasalehi 2018), *The Archaeology of Ritual and Religion* (Insoll 2002), *The Archaeology of Ritual* (Kyriakidis 2007), and *Ritual, Play, and Belief in Evolution and Early Human Societies* (Renfrew 2018), authors first define “ritual” in archaeological terms and then apply diverse theoretical approaches to reconstruct prehistoric ceremonial behaviour around the world and in the Near East. Within the Near East, Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen’s study of symbolic behaviour in the Late Epipalaeolithic and Pre-Pottery Neolithic (2002) examines shamanic markers in key Levantine sites, tracing continuity and change in symbolic practice. Morsch’s analysis of the clay figurines from Nevali Çori (2002) applies typology, statistical modeling, and technological study to explore their potential magical or ritual role. Russell and McGowan (2003), in their paper on cranes as ritual symbols at Çatalhöyük and elsewhere, interpret avian iconography through the distribution and context of bird remains. Grosman et al. (2008) focus on an early Neolithic burial at Hilazon Tachtit Cave, arguing that the exceptionally equipped interment belonged to a female shaman.

Other important contributions to the study of ritual in Southwest Asia include Gilead’s examination of magical-religious beliefs in the Chalcolithic levels at ‘Oren’, Palestine (2002), Whitehouse and Hodder’s exploration of ceremonial practice at Çatalhöyük as a model for the emergence of religious complexity (2010), Rollefson’s survey of ritual centres in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic of the southern Levant (2006), and Benz and Bauer’s identification of scorpion, bird, and snake iconography as shamanic motifs in northern Mesopotamia during the early Holocene (2015). Collectively, these works offer a comparative framework and methodological precedents that inform our search for ritual traces on Neolithic and Chalcolithic assemblages from the Iranian Plateau.

3. Research Method

A library- and archive-based approach is adopted in this study. First, all archaeological evidence and candidate indicators of ritual practice and belief during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic of Iran are systematically identified and classified. The selected materials comprise two-dimensional motifs, symbols, and signs; three-dimensional art such as figurines;

architecturally distinctive spaces and their built elements; and other relevant cultural remains. In the second phase, these materials are subjected to visual-arts analysis, most notably compositional and iconographic approaches, to interpret their formal features and contextual associations in light of ritual theory.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Ritual and Ceremonial Practice in Archaeology

From a structural perspective, religion constitutes a system of symbols that imparts and sustains overarching meaning by shaping a collective worldview. Clifford Geertz emphasizes belief and the symbolic meanings that rituals convey: symbols tell participants “where they belong” and, in so doing, help human communities to fashion new worlds of meaning (Geertz 1973: 90). The most visible symbolic expressions of ritual are often found in “primitive” religions, where ceremonies—whether performed on a sacred mountain, around an animal totem such as the bull, or beside a consecrated fire—may lack explicit doctrinal explanations but nonetheless command profound authority (Alston 2001: 99). Anthony Wallace defines ritual as the enactment of religious belief, observing that it is through ritual performance that religion finds its public expression (Wallace 1966: 102). Structuralists further argue that, since religion is a relatively stable cultural phenomenon and ritual embodies its rules in practice, ritual forms tend to persist over long time-spans. Because of this anachronistic nature[1], ritual practices can preserve valuable information about past communities across generations (Fogelin 2007: 57).

Rituals thus serve as the medium through which human groups create and reaffirm shared beliefs; in the process, ritual actions unite mind and body, producing social cohesion and collective meaning. From a structuralist standpoint, rituals are the mechanisms that bind individuals into a unified social whole (Rothenbuhler 2008: 15). Several archaeologists, notably Timothy Insoll and Joshua Pollard, have stressed the reciprocal relationship between ritual and material culture. Insoll argues that investigating the interplay of material remains and ritual practice is entirely appropriate for archaeology, because artefacts—figurines, motifs, architecture, ceramics, and so forth—though mute, are our most direct witnesses to past belief systems and ceremonial acts. By studying these remains, archaeologists seek to recover and reconstruct the spiritual experiences, ritual performances, and religious events of lost societies (Insoll 2009: 262; Mollasalehi 2018: 150).

4.2 Shamanic Ritual

One of the most widely recognized native ritual traditions globally is shamanism. The term “shaman” derives from a root meaning “one who knows” (Price 2016: 3). Archaeologists view shamanic practice as a continuous phenomenon from the Paleolithic through the present day, ritualized by an individual—the shaman—to allay anxieties, invoke rains, or secure agrarian prosperity. Shamans are believed to possess supernatural powers and healing abilities; through ritual performance, they intervene in events such as famine, drought, or resource scarcity, employing animal iconography, ecstatic dance, intoxicating beverages, and psychotropic plants to enter trance states (Zvelebil 2010: 43–44). Some scholars regard shamanic rituals as a historical phenomenon tied to the traditional religions of Siberian peoples (Winkelman 2012: 47), while others view it as a form of primitive religion (Craffert 2008: 2–9). Another group considers it to be rooted in magical practices capable of healing both psychological and physical ailments (Krippner 2012: 72–75), and yet others see it to prevent misfortune through communion with spirits and supernatural forces (Alizadeh 2016: 51). Shamanism blends two key dimensions: magic and religion. It is a spiritual path wherein shamans embark on a journey that enables them, in their belief, to establish contact with higher realms and spiritual beings (Price 2016: 3).

Early shamanic rites likely developed among hunter-gatherers before diffusing into agrarian societies. Some scholars date its origins to the Neolithic Period (Hodder 2001: 108; Yakar 2009: 291). During the Holocene, shamanism appears to have been especially prevalent in northern Asia, where practitioners honed trance techniques to communicate with ancestral and nature spirits, control malevolent forces, and even master fire or undertake visionary "flights" (Winkelman 2002: 75). Shamans differ from lay sorcerers: although both wield magic, shamans combine their sorcery with healing and trance—achieved through drumming, dancing, or ritual costume—to leave the ordinary realm and journey into the spirit world. In this transcendent state, they negotiate with spirits to cure illnesses, predict the future, or influence weather (Price 2016: 3; Clottes & Lewis-Williams 1998: 11). These distinctive trance practices, and the shaman's dual role as healer and mediator, remain the defining features of shamanic ritual.

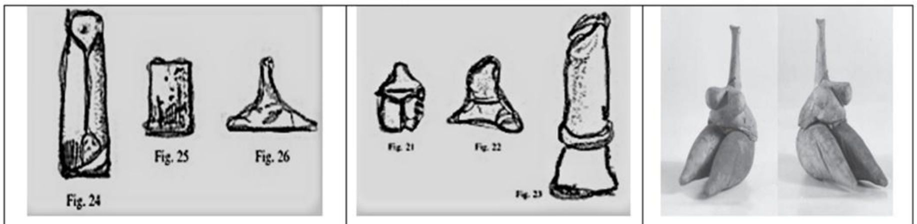
The origins of shamanic ritual can be traced back to hunter-gatherer societies and appear to have gradually permeated early farming and herding communities. Some scholars have attributed the emergence of shamanism to the Neolithic Period (Hodder 2001: 108; Yakar 2009: 291). Historically, shamanic practices were more widespread and elaborately developed among the societies of northern Asia than in other parts of the world (Price 2016: 6–8). Shamanism is fundamentally defined by the practitioner's mastery of entering altered states of consciousness or trance. Through such trance states, shamans perform acts considered inaccessible to others within their society—such as communicating with the spirits of nature and ancestors, combating malevolent forces, controlling fire, and undertaking magical flights (Winkelman 2002: 75). Shamans should not be conflated with ordinary sorcerers. While both may engage in magical practices, shamans are considered wise-healers within their communities, and their ritual methods differ fundamentally from those of conventional magicians. One of the principal distinctions lies in their capacity for healing. Another is their ability to enter ecstatic trance. To induce such states, shamans may engage in rhythmic drumming, dancing, and chanting. During the trance, the shaman's soul is believed to separate from the body and ascend from the "microcosm" to a supernatural realm, where it communicates with the spirits of ancestors, nature, the dead, and even malevolent beings (ibid: 76–77). Shamans enter these trance states to heal the sick, influence weather conditions, foretell the future, or control the afflicted individual's body. To achieve such goals, they may consume psychoactive substances, don ceremonial garments, and use animal elements such as prominent antlers while performing specific ritual movements. Shamans believed that their soul left the body and journeyed through spiritual realms, from which they could expel terrifying spirits or monstrous beings (Clottes & Lewis-Williams 1998: 11).

5. Candidate Indicators of Ritual Practice

5.1 “Venus” Figurines

One class of prehistoric artefact often linked to ritual activity consists of small female statuettes, commonly known as “Venus” figurines (Lesure 2011: 42). These objects were crafted and used for specific, albeit still debated, purposes (Myres 1930: 45; Gimbutas 1991: 176). Carved in materials ranging from stone, bone, and ivory to hematite, limonite, and clay, they represent one of the earliest known efforts to depict the human—or more precisely, the female—form in portable three-dimensional art. Their stylistic variability is striking: some examples are highly stylized and abstract, while others achieve remarkable naturalism. In all cases, the figurines are nude, with exaggerated sexual features—prominent breasts, hips, and thighs—emphasizing fertility or femininity (Vandewettering 2015: 1–2).

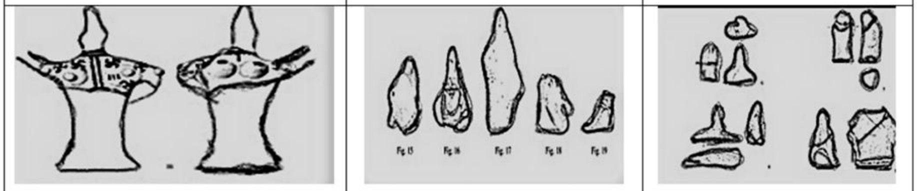
The oldest Venus figurines come from Upper Paleolithic Europe (ibid.: 1), but comparable statuettes do not appear in the Iranian Paleolithic record. Instead, true Venus-type figurines emerge in the Neolithic and Chalcolithic contexts of the Plateau. Sites such as Ganj Dareh, Abdul Hossein, Sarab, Chogha Mish, Chogha Sefid, Susa, Jafarabad, Zagheh, Sang-e Chakhmaq, and Tol-e Bakun have yielded numerous examples. At Tepe Sarab alone, excavators recovered 650 figurines, only eighteen of which are male; the remainder are unequivocally female (see Morales 1990; Figure 1a). Excavations at Susa and Chogha Sefid have produced so-called “T-shaped” figurines (Figure 1b), and fragments of female buttocks and breasts have also been found in ritual contexts (Hole 1977: 299). At Chogha Mish, Venus figurines display both cuboid and “T-shaped” designs (Delougaz & Kantor 1996: 236; Figure 1c). From Sang-e Chakhmaq, archaeologists recovered eleven Venus-type figurines plus several more T-shaped examples. Comparative analysis with the female T-figurines of Tepe Malyan suggests that the Sang-e Chakhmaq statuettes likewise represent female figures (Masuda 1973: 2; Figure 1d). Notably, some Venus figurines—particularly those from Tol-e Bakun—bear incised cross or swastika motifs, a decoration also found on Neolithic and Chalcolithic ceramics at Jafarabad, Sialk, and Susa. According to Alizadeh’s reconstruction (2006), the Tol-e Bakun statuettes are nude female figures with elongated heads or stylized coiffures, their arms often posed in unusual positions. Many of these figurines occur within secondary burials or apparent ritual deposits (Figure 1e).



c- The T-shaped and cuboid figurines from Chogha Mish

b- The T-shaped figurines from Chogha Sefid

a- The Venus of Tepe Sarab



f- T-shaped Venuses from Tol-e Bakun

e- Venus figurines from Tepe Zagheh

d- Venus figurines from Tepe Sang-i Chakhmaq

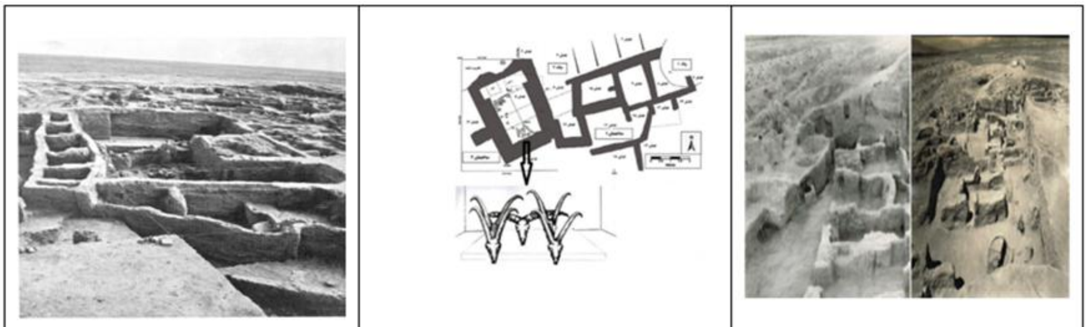
Figure 1. Examples of so-called Venus figurines from Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites in Iran (Daems 2004: 9–16; Alizadeh 2006: 231).

These small, three-dimensional “Venus” figurines have long attracted the attention of archaeologists and other scholars, who argue that human representations like these can more readily convey the beliefs of past societies than many other cultural elements (Gemici 2018: 1). Some researchers—most notably Aurélie Daems and Peter Ucko—interpret such statuettes as portrayals of deities or goddesses, and thus as objects of worship (Ucko 1968: 443; Daems 2004: 9). Others, including Jean Markale, have even identified certain “doll-shaped” figurines as abstract representations of a Mother Goddess (Markale 1999: 3), reading all Venus-type figurines from prehistory through the Sasanian Period as fundamentally devotional, regardless of chronological or cultural change (Gemici 2018: 12–13). Marija Gimbutas and her followers see these Mother Goddess images as closely linked to fertility cults (Orphanides 1986: 69; Gimbutas 1991: 176). A contrasting interpretation holds that the presence of some Venus figurines within architectural contexts indicates human sacrifice took place at those buildings (Lesure 2011: 42). Yet another body of scholarship points to the co-occurrence of human and animal figurines in special ritual spaces—such as those at Jafarabad, Sang-e Chakhmaq, Sheikh-i Abad, Tol-e Bakun, and Zagheh (Figure 2)—as evidence that Venus figurines were employed in ceremonial rites. According to this view, their primary function was to personify and communicate with supernatural forces, thereby invoking protection against natural calamities (Beaulieu 1993: 241; Myres 1930: 45).

5.2 Architectural Evidence

Identifying architecturural evidence related to rituals and distinguishing it from domestic or utilitarian structures remains one of archaeology’s most complex challenges. Modified human crania, interments beneath building floors, and the presence of clay figurines (both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic) within Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites have raised the question of whether some buildings functioned as sacred or ceremonial spaces (Rollefson 1998: 44–45). Webb Keane has provocatively suggested that any cultural object lacking an overtly practical use might be considered a ritual artifact. Yet practical and symbolic functions can coexist, and one reliable strategy for recognizing ritual architecture is through iconographic analysis: vessels, figurines, wall paintings, and other symbolic media often occur in spaces dedicated to ceremonial activity (Finlayson 2015: 137). Boyd and Belfer-Cohen argues that most archaeological attempts to distinguish ritual from non-ritual spaces rely heavily on ethnographic analogy—comparing prehistoric contexts to the ceremonial behaviours of modern traditional communities (Boyd & Belfe-Cohen 2005: 26).

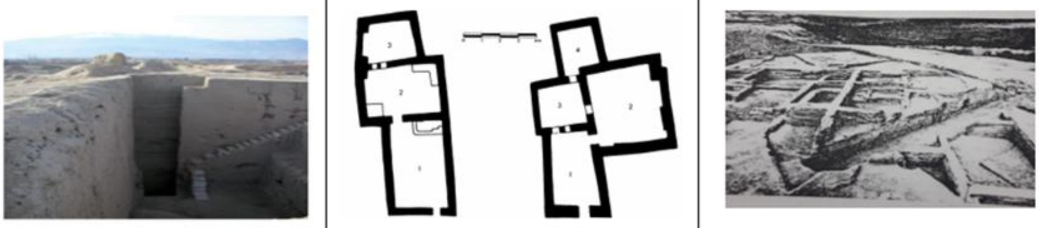
On the Iranian Plateau, several Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites exhibit architectural features that set them apart by scale, complexity, and associated material culture (e.g., hearths, platforms, figurines, painted walls, burials, and decorated ceramics—Figure 2). At the Pre-Pottery Neolithic site of Sang-e Chakhmaq, a large mudbrick hall with a red-plastered floor has yielded hearth installations, obsidian and antler tools, animal and human figurines, and *in-situ* burials. Archaeologists interpret this as a likely ritual structure (Masuda 1973: 1; Figure 2a). At Sheikh-I Abad, a robust T-shaped building—thicker and more monumental than surrounding houses—contained painted *caprine* and *ovine* skulls, bird bones, and clay figurines, leading researchers to designate it a shrine or temple (Mohammadi-Far et al. 2011: 14; Figure 2b). Zagheh's painted horseshoe-shaped hall, complemented with benches and walls adorned with animal skulls, likewise signals ceremonial use (Negahban 1979: 240; Figure 2c). In the Chalcolithic levels at Jafarabad, a large central hall flanked by smaller side rooms has produced ritual paraphernalia—offering vessels, figurines, and painted plaster—supporting its interpretation as a cultic space (Talai 2016: 171; Figure 2d). At Tol-e Bakun A, a central chamber with adjacent side rooms contained polychrome wall paintings, wooden pillars, painted pottery, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, and cylinder seals—assemblages characteristic of specialized ceremonial activities (Alizadeh 1988: 20–21; Figure 2e). Finally, at Chalcolithic Sialk, monumental multi-room constructions with painted murals likewise testify to ritual performance contexts (Azarnoush & Helwing 2005: 208; Figure 2f). These architectural complexes—by virtue of their scale, symbolic decoration, and associated material culture—provide strong evidence for dedicated ceremonial or sacred function.



c. Tepe Zagheh
(Negahban 1979: 240)

b. Tepe Sheikh-i Abad
(Mohammadi-Far et al., 241)

a. Tepe Sang-e Chakhmaq
(Tsuneki 2014: 7)



f. Tepe Sialk
(Azarnoush & Helwing 2005: 198)

e. Tol-e Bakun
(Alizadeh 1988: 22)

d. Jafar Abad
(Talai 2016: 171)

Figure 2. Probable ritual architectural spaces from Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites on the Iranian Plateau.

Typically, the function of architectural spaces is inferred from the cultural materials recovered within them, and there is no inherently ritual architectural form or structure. During the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods in Iran, however, certain buildings that are likely ritual in nature were constructed as large halls with adjoining chambers, distinguishing them from ordinary, everyday structures; these complexes have yielded cultural materials such as fine pottery, hearth installations, raised platforms, and distinctive figurines (Figure 2). Rollefson has argued that shifts in ritual architecture reflect broader socio-economic transformations. He observes that the transition from hunter-gatherer economies to early agriculture and herding in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic ushered in population growth, which accelerated through the Pottery Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods. This demographic expansion drove changes not only in “kin-based ancestral rites” but also in built form: ritual structures became architecturally distinguished from household buildings by the inclusion of figurines, underfloor interments, and modified human skulls (Rollefson 2004: 149).

Colin Renfrew similarly notes that Neolithic and Chalcolithic ceremonial buildings replaced simpler pit-houses, semi-subterranean huts, and rectangular enclosures. These new halls—arguably the loci of expanded “communal rituals” rather than family-centered rites—feature greater spatial complexity and isolation from habitation zones, signalling their role in fulfilling collective religious functions (Renfrew 1985: 21–22). Several scholars contend that the scale and seclusion of these ritual complexes imply they served restricted ceremonial groups rather than the entire community. As Neolithic populations swelled and subsistence resources became strained, societies turned to centralized ritual gatherings—possibly to secure water, crops, or herds—which in turn demanded purpose-built ceremonial architecture (Earle 1991: 7–8). Others propose that these elaborate buildings were reserved for elite practitioners—ritual specialists or shamans—whose activities required controlled, segregated spaces distinct from ordinary domestic quarters (Whitehouse & Hodder 2010: 142).

5.3 Collective and Individual Human Depictions

Certain human images incised or painted on archaeological materials from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic appear to record ritual practices and belief systems. Among these motifs, some portrayals stand out for their clarity and distinctiveness. Table 1 catalogs examples in which figures are depicted actively engaged in ceremonies or rites. The posture, attire, and associated iconographic elements of these individuals strongly suggest that they reflect the ideological worldviews of their communities.

Interpreting these scenes demands an archaeological sensibility attuned to prehistoric visual culture and compositional analysis. During the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, people occasionally sought to externalize their religious intentions and convictions through imagery (Culley 2008: 68–69; Yakar 2016: 165; Lewis-Williams 2008: 14–27). Human representations are particularly significant because the figures often wear masks or ritual regalia and assume stylized gestures, as though embodying supernatural entities. In many cases, the faces are deliberately altered to resemble magical or otherworldly forces—an iconographic strategy that facilitated communion with those powers through prescribed ceremonial movements (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990: 13). It seems likely that these figures changed their appearance—and perhaps even their social identity—to attract or channel spiritual energies (Mannermaa 2013: 195; Mykhailova 2016: 88). When viewed in context and alongside complementary symbolic signs, the assemblage of human and abstract motifs may narrate episodes of shamanic ritual performance (see Table 1).

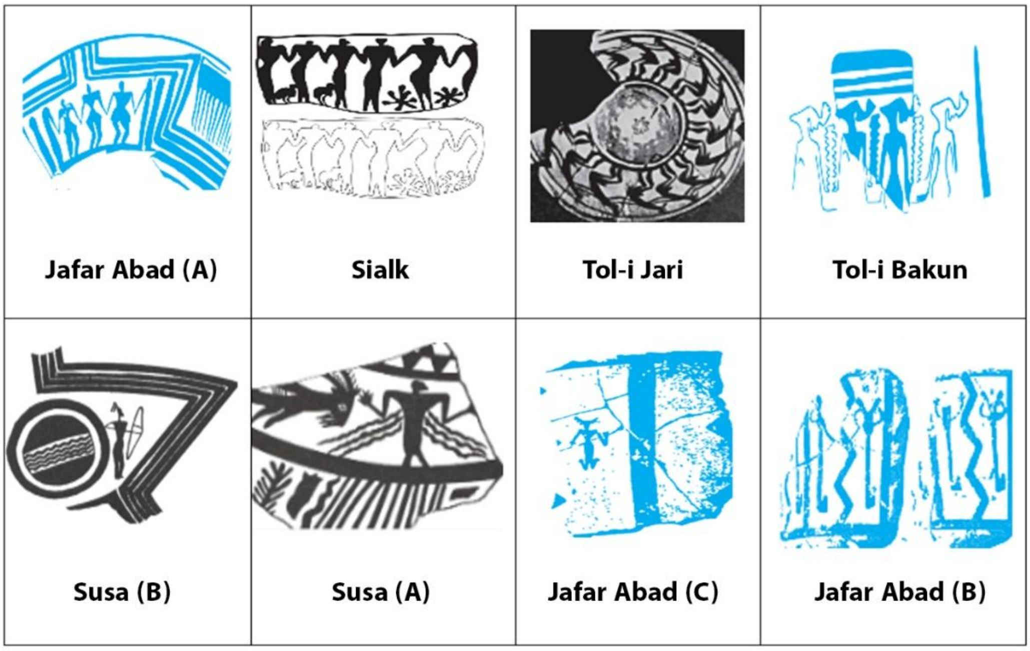


Figure 3. Human depictions from Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites on the Iranian Plateau.

Table 1. Characteristics of Human Depictions from Neolithic and Chalcolithic Sites on the Iranian Plateau.

Site	Gender	Depiction Style	Associated Iconographic Elements	Ritual Context	Characteristics of Depicted Figures
Tol-e Bakun	Female	Realistic	floral motifs	Collective	Nude; with goat horns and an elongated jaw or mask; face and body in profile; long hair tied at the back; possibly elongated skull or mask; no emphasis on individual identity—all figures are uniform
Tol-e Jari	Male	Realistic	fire or agricultural products	Collective	Nude; with elongated jaw or mask; face and body in profile; depiction of male genitalia; no emphasis on individual identity—all figures are uniform
Sialk	Female	Realistic	Birds and possibly a chariot	Collective	Nude; some with elongated jaws (possibly masks shaped like bird beaks); face and body in profile; no emphasis on individual identity—all figures are uniform
Jafarabad (A)	Female	Realistic	—	Collective	Clothed; elongated head; face and body in full frontal view; individual differences are depicted
Jafarabad (B)	Male	Abstract	—	Individual	With animal horns (deer?); arms raised; face and body in full frontal view.
Jafarabad (C)	Female?	Realistic	—	Individual	Nude; with animal horns (deer?) or hair tied in two sides; shown in a leaping posture; face and body in full frontal view.
Susa (A)	Male	Abstract	ear of wheat, male goat	Individual	Possibly clothed (?); arms raised; bald head; body in full frontal view; face in profile.
Susa (B)	Male	Realistic	bow and arrow, natural elements (earth and water)	Individual	Clothed; with animal horns or tied hair; elongated jaw or animal mask; shown in a defensive posture; face in profile, body in full frontal view.

Depictions of group dance scenes are illustrated on the pottery from Tol-e Bakun, Tol-e Jari, Sialk, and Jafarabad (Figure 3). As seen in the images, these depictions convey a sense of uniformity and sameness; however, such uniformity is not observed in the examples from Sialk and Jafarabad (A). Both men and women are depicted, and in most of the images, they appear to be wearing masks resembling the heads of animals such as goats and deer, or possibly have horns attached to their heads. It seems that in these representations, individual identity and facial features are not emphasized; rather, collective or group identity is prioritized. For this reason, the figures are portrayed with similar and uniform characteristics (Table 1). Comparable tableaux of men and women dancing in unison appear on Neolithic Period sherds from Nevali Çori and Hacilar in Anatolia (Schmidt 2010: 248; Uzunoğlu 1993: 67) as well as on pottery from Samarra, Halaf, and early Ubaid tradition sites in northern Mesopotamia (Pollock & Bernbeck 2010: 1–3).

In the examples from Jafarabad (B and C) and Susa (A and B), human figures are depicted individually. These images are shown in specific postures and, in contrast to collective scenes, appear to represent particular individuals or personae. The hands and bodies of these figures are positioned in distinctive gestures, and their heads are drawn in such a way that they seem to be wearing masks. Some instances, such as those from Jafarabad (C) and Susa (B), feature elongated heads with hair styled in a specific manner or adorned with animal horns. These individual depictions—when compared with ethnographic accounts from contemporary indigenous communities in Iran (Sa'edi 1976: 48–55; Darvishi 2005: 180; Mokhtarian & Vaez Shushtari 2017: 102)—suggest the possibility that the figures represent shamans. Among some contemporary indigenous groups in Iran, ritual practices such as *parkhāni*, *zār*, *kuse vavī*, and *Pīr-e Shālīyār* are still performed. The shamans participating in these ceremonies often wear animal horns on their heads and don animal-head masks, closely resembling the individual figures depicted on pottery from sites such as Susa, Jafarabad, Sialk, and Tol-e Bakun. Other interpretations include the possibility that these figures represent prominent individuals within a rural community or supernatural beings who serve as guardians of nature. For instance, in the example from Susa (B), a figure holding a bow is portrayed in a distinctive posture, possibly symbolizing protection over the village's water sources or, in a supernatural sense, guarding against future droughts affecting agriculture. In Susa (A), another figure appears to be protecting agricultural or pastoral products. However, the figures from Jafarabad (B and C) are different. Their bodies are shown in a leaping posture with raised arms, suggesting their involvement in a specific ritual performance (Figures 2–3). It is also worth noting that similar individual human representations have been discovered at Tel Hassuna, a site in Nineveh Province associated with the Samarra culture. A pottery image from Tel Hassuna shows a figure whose face appears to bear tattoo-like markings. Another comparable example was found at Tel Aswan in the Diyala region of Iraq (Stucki 1976: 241).

5.4 Secondary Burials

From an archaeological perspective, secondary burials and their associated grave goods are of considerable significance, as they can provide direct insights into societal beliefs and regional-local traditions. Excavations at Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites in Iran—such as Ganj Dareh, Tepe Sang-e Chakhmaq, Tappeh Zagheh, Tepe Abdul Hossein, and Sialk—indicate a shared pattern in the practice of secondary interment accompanied by accompanying grave furnishings, reflecting underlying ideological systems (Asouti, 2006: 83; Walsh & Matthews: 2018: 4)

Regarding sex distribution, in some sites—like Abdul Hossein, Zagheh, and Sang-e Chakhmaq—the interred individuals were predominantly female, whereas at Ganj Dareh only infants were placed in secondary burials. In contrast, at Sialk, both sexes are represented (Figure 3). Secondary burials at Zagheh, Sang-e Chakhmaq, and Abdul Hossein exhibit consistent body orientation: individuals were interred in a flexed or crouched posture, often on their side (Tsuneki 2014: 40; Pullar 1990: 10). In certain secondary burials, such as those at Abdul Hossein, the interment included a stone bowl, cattle scapula, and organic remains (Pullar 1990: 10). At Tepe Zagheh, grave goods extended to personal ornaments, including bracelets and necklaces (Vidale et al. 2018: 21). At Sang-e Chakhmaq, Ganj Dareh, and Sialk, only organic materials were recovered alongside the burials (Walsh & Matthews, 2018: 4–8). One interpretation suggests that these grave inclusions served to signify the social status of the deceased (Table 2). Notably, most secondary burials identified in these contexts were located beneath domestic house floors. At Sang-e Chakhmaq, a dual practice of burial was observed: some individuals were interred beneath house floors, while others were placed within wall structures (Tsuneki, 2014: 40–42). At Ganj Dareh, interments occurred exclusively within wall constructions (Walsh & Matthews, 2018: 5). The prevalence of these shared practices suggests the existence of regionally standardized ritual routines across the Iranian Plateau. Sedentary farming communities engaged in formalized ceremonies that involved burying individuals beneath floors or within walls—accompanied by grave offerings—indicating deeply entrenched mortuary traditions (Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of Secondary Burials from Neolithic and Chalcolithic Sites on the Iranian Plateau. *. Aligned with buildings interpreted as shrines.

Site	Sex of the Interred	Burial Position	Burial Location
Abdul Hossein	Female	Flexed, laid on side	Beneath domestic house floors
Zagheh	Female	Flexed, laid on side	Beneath domestic house floors*
Sang-e Chakhmaq	Women and infants	Flexed, laid on side	Beneath domestic house floors and within wall structures
Ganj Dareh	Infants	Flexed, laid on side	Within house walls
Sialk	Women and men	Flexed, laid on side	Beneath domestic house floors

The assemblage of objects accompanying secondary interments at certain Iranian Plateau sites is uniquely rich in modified human crania. Nearly all skulls recovered have been deliberately altered—often defleshed and sometimes perforated—and subsequently painted with ochre (Table 3). Researchers interpret this ochre application as a ceremonial act tied to Neolithic and Chalcolithic belief systems and likely influenced by shamanic traditions of healing and spirit communication (Walsh & Matthews 2018: 5). In shamanic rites, skulls are thought to house spiritual power, enabling the shaman to commune with ancestral or nature spirits and to effect cures (Schmandt-Besserat 2013: 231).

Beyond Central Asia, textual and iconographic evidence from first-millennium BCE Mesopotamia—among the Sumerians, Assyrians, and Elamites—records the removal, ritual use, and reburial of skulls for healing purposes (Finkel 1984: 14). At Sialk, some skulls bear char marks in addition to ochre, suggesting pyric purification or symbolic burning (Table 3). Ancient Assyrian medical texts also prescribe the use of powdered skull ash in remedies for headaches attributed to spirit possession (Scurlock 2006: 253–256). Excavators at Zagheh and other Neolithic–Chalcolithic sites have also documented the inclusion of personal adornments—beaded necklaces and bracelets—alongside ochred skulls in secondary burials (Vidale et al. 2018: 21). The presence of such jewellery in only a few burials indicates elevated social status or shamanic office. In Siberian-style shamanism, practitioners don animal-tooth necklaces and bracelets—crafted from tiger, wolf, or other species—along with shell or bead ornaments to signal their power and prepare for spirit journeys (Eliade 2009: 242–244). Furthermore, they utilize marine shells, beads, and similar materials to craft personal ornaments. Shamans, it appears, don these items to prepare themselves for communication with spirits and supernatural realms (ibid., 243–244). In certain secondary burials—such as those from Abdul Hossein—alongside painted skulls, cattle scapulae were also identified, a combination that is unique within the Iranian archaeological record (Table 3). Researchers argue that shamans in the lesser world[2] doubled their power by performing sacrifices; accordingly, these findings may indicate ritual offerings involving both humans and animals within ceremonial structures (Lesure, 2011: 42).

Table 3. Cultural materials recovered from secondary burials at Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites on the Iranian Plateau.

Site	Skulls (painted/ burned)	Organic Remains	Personal Ornaments	Cattle Scapula	Bowl
Sialk	Painted and burned skulls	Yes	—	—	—
Ganj Dareh	Painted skulls	Yes	—	—	—
Sang-e Chakhmaq	Painted skulls	Yes	—	—	—
Zagheh	Painted skulls	Yes	Yes	—	—
Abdul Hossein	Painted skulls	Yes	—	Yes	Yes

6. Discussion

6.1 Social Function of Archaeological Indicators of Ritual

Every cultural phenomenon may serve multiple roles within a society, one of which is the social function (Nassaney 1995: 1). From the Paleolithic onward, membership in groups and collective living have been essential for survival. In early societies, grouping reduced predation risk, facilitated child-rearing, and accelerated technological innovation. Mutual understanding, alliance formation, and cohesive cooperation were enabled by shared group membership. Early communities resolved internal tensions—and maintained stability—through selective membership, public displays of commitment to shared values, collective cooperation, and rituals that fostered group solidarity (ibid.: 43). However, forming and sustaining a stable group over time was not straightforward. Ritual practices provided a powerful means to engender social cohesion by creating visible markers of similarity: those who participated together in ceremonies demonstrated common cultural norms and reinforced interpersonal bonds. Participation in group rituals permitted the community to admit new members and to reaffirm existing ties (Rappaport 1999: 26; McElreath et al. 2003: 127). In many hunter-gatherer societies, ritual affiliations even outweighed kinship ties in importance (Nassaney 1995: 43–44). Experimental and ethnographic evidence shows that synchronized movement—such as collective dance—increases cooperation, especially when participants share a common goal (Hill et al. 2014: 4).

From the archaeological standpoint, evidence such as depictions of humans dancing in groups across the Iranian Plateau suggests that early societies shared common intra-group beliefs, which fostered social cohesion and cultural solidarity; through these shared ritual practices, collective identity was reinforced and group longevity promoted (Figure 3; Table 1). Communal rituals, particularly group dances, appear to have functioned in part as mechanisms of social control, reinforcing cohesion and alignment of individual roles within the group (Miller 2005: 1187). During the Neolithic, limited resources, recurrent famine and drought, and low environmental carrying capacity generated stress and anxiety in communities. As a response, communal rituals—especially mass dance ceremonies—were conducted to alleviate societal tension, regulate scarcity, stabilize agricultural and pastoral yields, reduce aggression, and uphold collective identity (Dissanayake 2006: 11–13; Figure 4).

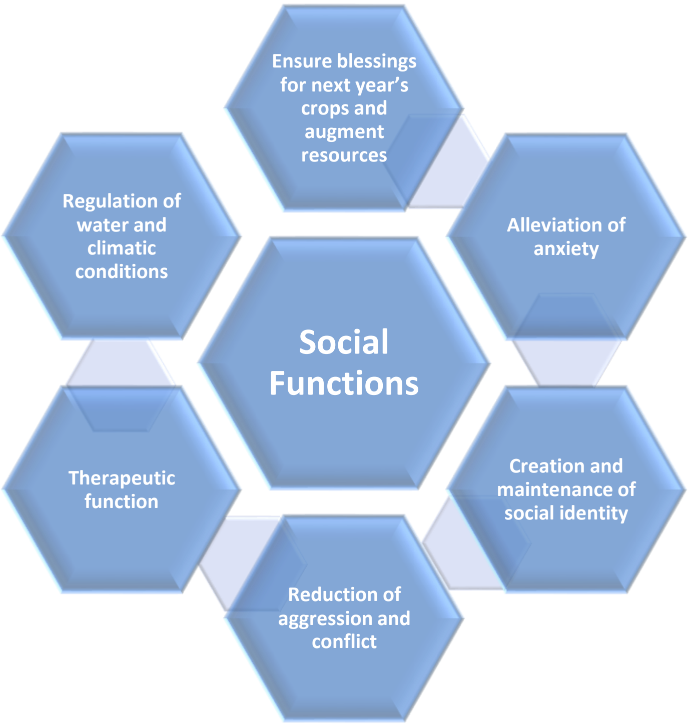

Ensure blessings for next year's crops and augment resources
Regulation of water and climatic conditions
Alleviation of anxiety
Social Functions
Therapeutic function
Creation and maintenance of social identity
Reduction of aggression and conflict

Figure 4. Probable social functions of ritual ceremonies during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods.

In the example from Tol-e Bakun (Figure 3), a floral motif is shown in the scene. Likewise, on the Tol-e Jari vessel (Figure 3), a floral design occupies the central register while dancers circulate around it. Shared ritual beliefs and practices reinforce intra-group bonds and heighten reliance on fellow members during periods of stress (Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016: 44–45). In the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, music and collective dance functioned as means to achieve social objectives and were, to varying degrees, integrated with other spheres of daily life. Music and group dance comprised inseparable components of ritual ceremonies, enacted with specific pragmatic purposes (Kapferer, 1983: 188; Seeger, 1987: 7). This interpretation is supported by iconographic evidence from Tol-e Bakun, Tol-e Jari, Sialk, and Jafarabad, where motifs on ceramics clearly depict group dances (Figure 3; Table 1).

6.2 Symbolic Function of Archaeological Indicators of Ritual

Symbols articulate the deepest realities of human societies by revealing dimensions of experience that elude straightforward comprehension. As Paul Tillich asserted, symbols encapsulate fundamental worldviews (Tillich 1959: 54). On the Iranian Plateau, Neolithic and Chalcolithic evidence—including grave goods from secondary burials, painted and incised motifs on pottery, Venus figurines, and hybrid human–animal statuettes (Figure 3, Table 3)—permits reconstruction of prehistoric cosmologies. Comparative analysis of ethnographic ritual in contemporary rural communities (Watson 1980: 55–56; Gamble 2002: 86) alongside these archaeological materials reveals critical parallels: communal dance, ritual gift offerings, animal sacrifice (cattle and sheep), and the wearing of animal costumes or masks (Table 4). These correspondences have captivated scholars across archaeology, sociology, and anthropology (Gould 1980: 3–4; Stiles 1977: 88), supporting the argument that modern healing shamans trace their origins to ancient ritual specialists (Tolley 2011: 225–26). Moreover, the prehistoric evidence discussed here parallels the ceremonial repertoires of today's popular Iranian rituals—*Pīr-Shālyār, Kūseh-Vavī*, *Zār*, and *Parīkhānī*—underscoring enduring traditions of communal worship and spiritual mediation (Table 4).

Table 4. Commonalities between contemporary rituals and archaeological evidence from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods on the Iranian Plateau.

	Pīr-Shālyār	***Zār***	***Kūseh-Vavī***	***Parīkhānī***	**Archaeological Evidence**
Group Dance	Group and Rotational Dance	Group and Rotational Dance	Group and Rotational Dance	Group and Rotational Dance	Identification of group and rotational dance
Animal Sacrifice	Sacrifice of cows and sheep	Sacrifice of cows and sheep	Sacrifice of cows and sheep	Sacrifice of cows and sheep	Identification of sacrificed cattle remains
Offerings	Offering gifts and donations	Offering gifts and donations	Offering gifts and donations	Offering gifts and donations	Identification of offerings in burial contexts
Animal Dress	Wearing animal-themed clothes	Wearing animal-themed clothes	Wearing animal-themed clothes	Wearing animal-themed clothes	Depictions of hybrid creatures (animal-human forms) in costume

In light of these parallels, it appears that the origins of healing and psychotherapeutic practices extend into prehistory. The prehistoric cultural materials discussed here—such as secondary burials accompanied by distinctive grave offerings—are not merely inert objects or visual motifs; they convey symbolic meanings and concepts. Evidence including painted skulls coated in ochre, charred organic remains, depictions of communal dances, and the inclusion of animal bone and blood within secondary interments provides substantial support for this hypothesis (Table 3). A healing shaman is an individual who addresses the psychological and spiritual needs of a community. Phenomenological and psychological analyses of shamanic practices have led scholars to conclude that shamans were humanity's earliest psychotherapists and, from the perspective of ancient or contemporary indigenous societies, their first physicians (Krippner, 2007: 16). Indeed, shamans have been active among hunter–gatherer societies since the Paleolithic (Furst, 1977: 21; Maringer, 1977; Walsh, 1990: 141–150). Healing shamans specialized in therapeutic techniques, claiming to communicate with spirits and, at times, to "merge" with them during treatment (Corbet, 2010: 2). Although their specific skills varied between cultures, key commonalities included disease diagnosis and treatment, spirit communication, ceremonial oversight, medicinal plant gathering, and mastery of the self. Moreover, shamans were required to learn and employ chants, dances, songs, and oral narratives as part of their healing repertoire (Krippner, 2007: 18).

In traditional societies, shamans are believed to possess the ability to perceive or interact with invisible forces. They are also thought to have the power of flight, invisibility, immunity to fire and the classical elements, and control over weather (Winkelman, 2002: 75). For psychotherapeutic work, they must enter a trance state, during which they may experience tremors, panic, fainting, collapsing, yawning, lethargy, convulsions, frothing at the mouth, bulging eyes, tongue protrusion, limb paralysis, and similar phenomena (Rouget, 1985: 13). Shamans must also have the persuasive authority to convince community members—since activities such as spirit communication, diagnosing illnesses as sorcery, or subduing supernatural entities require the consent and trust of others—and thus they require considerable rhetorical skill (Singh, 2018: 3–6). They regard certain buildings and spaces as loci of power and believe that flaws in a structure or site can cause illness. Consequently, they select a sacred space for healing rituals (Krippner, 2012: 72). Possible archaeological correlates of such ritual or sacred spaces on the Neolithic and Chalcolithic Iranian Plateau (Figure 2) include hearth installations, raised platforms or offering tables, figurines, select iconographic motifs, and secondary burials—some of which have already been outlined above (Figure 5).

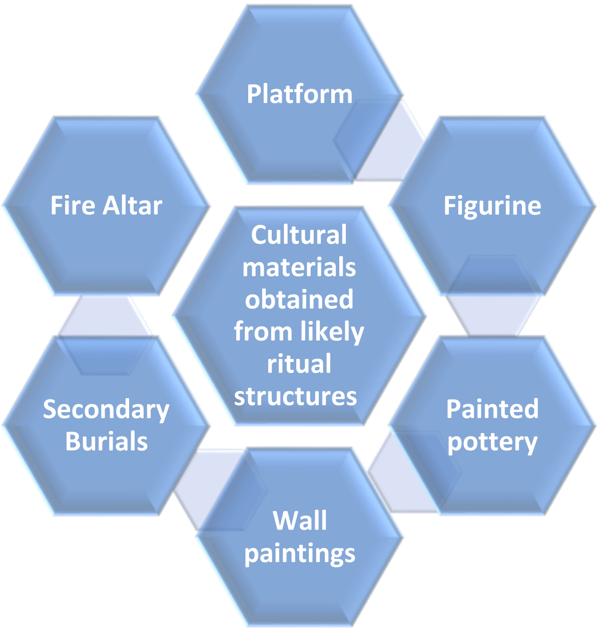


Figure 5. Materials obtained from likely ritual buildings associated with Shamanic ritual from Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites in Iran.

During healing ceremonies, dancing and rhythmic movement continue throughout the night. According to so-called “primitive” societies, this ritual facilitates the transfer of power from the shaman to the bodies of the community members. In some cultures, illness is believed to result from possession by spirits of the dead, who attempt to draw the living into their own realm. However, through the performance of specific rites and ceremonies, the healing shaman must demonstrate sufficient strength to repel these spirits and restore the health of the afflicted individuals (ibid: 77). Throughout such rituals, shamans employ symbolic objects—such as bird feathers, antlers of deer and goats, animal-skin garments associated with powerful creatures, skulls, blood, and the bones of cattle and other animals. These are used to communicate with the spirit world and aid in the healing process. Comparable materials have been recovered from Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites on the Iranian Plateau (Ojamaa 1997: 1–2; Clottes & Lewis-Williams 1998: 11; see also Table 3).

7. Conclusion

An overview of the evidence presented above suggests that rituals akin to shamanic ceremonies have been intertwined with human cognition and worldview since the earliest phases *of Homo sapiens* in the Paleolithic Period. Archaeological data from several Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites on the Iranian Plateau indicate that shamanic-like rites were practiced millennia ago across Southwest Asia, including this region. For example, iconographic depictions of collective dances—often showing nude men and women—hybrid creatures or human figures in specialized attire, secondary interments with distinctive grave offerings, and anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines recovered from probable ritual contexts all point to the presence of ceremonial activities resembling shamanism.

One can interpret these ritual traces under two interrelated domains: social and symbolic. In the social domain, the key factor is collective identity. Communal ceremonies—such as ancestor veneration or rites invoking natural forces—would have reinforced group cohesion, territorial bonds, and mutual support. From the Palaeolithic onward, membership in a social group was essential for overcoming challenges; by conducting group rituals and collective dances, prehistoric communities believed they could reduce anxiety, augment limited resources, regulate climatic conditions, stabilize agricultural and pastoral production, curb aggression, and preserve shared identity. Indeed, on all known ceramic vessels depicting group dances, the dancers' interlocked hands, uniform stature, and standardized details vividly convey strong intra-group solidarity.

In the symbolic domain, practices such as secondary burial acquire meaning through their role in spiritual consolation and physical healing via communication with ancestral and elemental spirits. These two domains are not mutually exclusive. Grave goods associated with secondary interments—in concert with mortuary arrangements—can be seen as material correlates of early ritual specialists' toolkit. At Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites on the Iranian Plateau, many of the implements one would expect a healing shaman to employ have been uncovered, including modified human skulls, animal bones, traces of blood, personal ornaments, ochre coatings, painted surfaces, and charred organic matter (Pullar 1990: 10; Vidale et al. 2018: 21; Walsh & Matthews 2018: 6–8).

Endnotes

1. **Anachronism**: Since most cultural traits—apart from core beliefs and ritual practices—tend to change more rapidly, the relative stability of ritual forms alongside the evolution of other cultural features may itself constitute a kind of anachronism.
2. **'Lesser World' and 'Greater World'**: In traditional cosmology, the "Greater World" (*ʿālam kabīr*) lies above the heavens and includes all non-human beings and cosmic realms, whereas the "Lesser World" (*ʿālam ṣaghīr*) exists beneath the sky and encompasses humanity. The Lesser World is regarded as a microcosm of the Greater World: by understanding the human domain (the Lesser World), one gains insight into the entire universe (the Greater World) (Cassirer 2012: 71–73).

8. References

[1] Alizadeh, A., 1988. "Socio-Economic Complexity in Southwestern Iran during the Fifth and Fourth Millennia B.C.: The Evidence from Tall-i Bakun A". *Iran* (26): 17–34.

[2] Alizadeh, A., 2006. *The Origins of State Organizations in Prehistoric Highland Fars, Southern Iran: Excavations at Tall-e Bakun.* OIP 28, Chicago: The Oriental Institute.

[3] Alizadeh, N., 2016. Investigating the origins of magic and witchcraft in prehistory and their effects on human behaviors (Unpublished master's thesis). Marlik Institute of Higher Education, Iran (in Farsi).

[4] Alston, W., 2001. *Falsafe-ye zabān* [The philosophy of language] (N. Jahangiri, Trans.). Mashhad: Ferdowsi University Press.

[5] Asouti, E., 2006. Group Identity and the Politics of Dwelling at Neolithic Çatalhöyük, in: *Çatalhöyuk Perspectives*. Pp. 75-91. UK: Oxbow books.

[6] Azarnoush, M., and Helwing, B., 2005. "Recent archaeological research in Iran – Prehistory to Iron Age". *Archaologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan, AMIT* 1(37): 189-246.

[7] Beaulieu, P.A., 1993. "An Episode in the fall of Babylon to the Persians". *Near Eastern* Studies, 52(4): 241-261.

[8] Bell, C., 2009. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[9] Benz, M., and Bauer, I., 2015. On Scorpions, Birds and Snakes - Evidence for Shamanism in Northern Mesopotamia during the Early Holocen. *Time & Mind* 29 (2): 1-22.

[10] Bosworth, C.E., 2003. *Shamanism: History of the civilization of central Asia*. London: I.B Tauris.

[11] Boyd, B., and Belfer-Cohen, A., 2005. “Some comments on archaeology and ritual”. *Neolithics* 2(5): 25–27.

[12] Cassirer, E., 2012. *The individual and the cosmos in Renaissance philosophy* (Y. Moqen, Trans.). Tehran: Māhī.

[13] Clottes, J., and Lewis-Williams, D., 1998. *The Shamanism of Prehistory. Trance and Magic in The Painted Caves*. New York: Abrams Books.

[14] Corbet, D., 2010.*The shaman as artist*. Australia: College of Fine Arts.University of New South Wales.

[15] Craffert, P., 2008. *Life of a Galilean shaman: Jesus of Nazareth in anthropological-historical perspective.* Cambridge UK: James Clarke.

[16] Culley, E.V., 2008. “Supernatural metaphors and belief in the past: defining an archaeology of religion. In: *Theoretical Approaches to the Archaeology of Religion*. Pp. 67-83. California University Press.

[17] Daems, A., 2004. “On Prehistoric Human Figurines in Iran: Current Knowledge and Some Reflections”. *Ranica Antiqua xxxlx.* 1-31.

[18] Darvishi, M., 2005. *Dāyerat-al-ma‘āref-e Sāz-hā-ye Irān* [Encyclopaedia of Iranian musical instruments], Vol. 2. Tehran: Māhūr (in Farsi).

[19] Delougaz, P., and Kantor, H.J., 1996. *Choga Mish, The First Five Season of Excavation 1969-1971.* Chicago.: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

[20] Dissanayake, E., 2006. Ritual and ritualization: Musical means of conveying and shaping emotion in humans and other animals. In: *Music and manipulation: on the social uses and social control of music*. Pp. 31-56. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.

[21] Dubois, T.A., 2013. *An Introduction to Shamanism.* Cambridge: University Press

[22] Earle, T., 1991. The Evolution of Chiefdoms. In: *Power. Economy. and Ideology*. Pp .1-15. Cambridge: University Press.

[23] Eliade, M., 2009. *Shamanism: Fenūn-e kohan-e khalaseh* [Shamanism: Ancient techniques of ecstasy] (M. K. Mohājerī, Trans.). Qom: Adiyān Publishers (in Farsi).

[24] Finkel, I.L., 1984. “Necromancy in Ancient Mesopotamia”. *Archiv fur Orientforschung*. 2(30): 1-17.

[25] Finlayson, B., 2015. Houses of the Holy: The Evolution of Ritual Building. In: *Settlement, Survey, and Stone.* Pp. 133-143. ex-Oriente.

[26] Fogelin, L., 2007. “The Archaeology of Religious Ritual”. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 36(2): 55–71.

[27] Furst, P.T., 1977. “The Roots and Continuities of Shamanism”. *Stones, Bones and Skin: Ritual and Shamanic Art*. Toronto: 1-28.

[28] G. Bailey & P. Spikins (eds.), pp. 18–59. Cambridge University Press.

[29] Gamble, C., 2002. *Archaeology: the basics*. London: Routledge

[30] Geertz, C., 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

[31] Gemici, H.C., 2018. *Thesis The World of figurines in the neolithic and early chalcolithic North Aegean: the case of Uğurlu Höyük – Gökçeada*. Turkey: Graduate School of Social Science.

[32] Gheorghiu, D., 2018. Göbekli Tepe: A Shamanic Landscape. In: *Lands of the Shamans*, pp. 21–45. UK: Oxbow books.

[33] Gilead, I., 2002. Religio- magic behavior in the Chalcolithic period of Palestine in Oren. In: *Archaeology and Related Disciplines.* pp. 103– 122. Beersheva: Ben- Gurion University.

[34] Gimbutas, M., 1991. *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization*. New York.

[35] Goring-Morris, A.N., and Belfer-Cohen, A., 2002. Symbolic Behaviour from the Epipalaeolithic and Early Neolithic of the Near East: Preliminary Observations on Continuity and Change. In: *Magic Practices and Ritual in the Near Eastern Neolithic*, pp. 67–79. Berlin: ex oriente.

[36] Gould, R., 1980. *Living Archaeology*. Cambridge University Press.

[37] Grosman, L., Munro, N.D., and Belfer-Cohen, A., 2008. A 12,000-year-old Shaman burial from the southern Levant (Israel). *Time & Mind* 105(46): 17665–17669.

[38] Hill, K.R., Wood, B.M., Baggio, J., Hurtado, A.M., & Boyd, R., 2014. “Hunter-gatherer inter-band interaction rates: Implications for cumulative culture”. *PLOS ONE*. 9(7): 1–9.

[39] Hodder, I., 2001. “Symbolism and the Origins of Agriculture in the Near East”. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal.* 11(1): 107–112.

[40] Hole, F., 1977. *The Excavation of Choga Sefid, Studies in the Archaeology History of the Dehluran Plain*. Memories of the Museum of Anthropology: University of Michigan.

[41] Insoll, T., 2002. *Archaeology and World Religion*. Taylor & Francis: e-Library.

[42] Insoll, T., 2009. ‘Materiality, Belief, Ritual-Archaeology and Material Religion: An Introduction’. *Material Religion* 5(3): 260–265.

[43] Kapferer, B., 1983. A *Celebration of Demons: Exorcism and the Aesthetics of Healing in Sri Lanka*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

[44] Krippner, S., 2007. “Humanity’s first healers: psychological and psychiatric stances on shamans and shamanism”. *Archive of Clinical Psychiatry* 34(1): 16–22.

[45] Krippner, S., 2012. “Shamans as Healers, Counselors, and Psychotherapists”. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 3(2): 71–77.

[46] Kyriakidis, E., 2007. *The Archaeology of Ritual*. Los Angeles: Cotsen Inst.

[47] Lesure, G.R., 2011. *Interpreting Ancient Figurines, Context ،Comparison & Prehistory Art.* Cambridge University Press.

[48] Lewis-Williams, J.D., 2008. Religion and archaeology: an analytical, materialist account. In: *The Past. Theoretical Approaches to the Archaeology of Religion*. Pp.21-42. California University Press.

[49] Lewis-Williams, J.D., and Dowson, T.A., 1990. “Through the Veil: San Rock Paintings and the Rock Face”. *South African Archaeological Bulletin*. 45: 5-16

[50] Mannermaa, K., 2013. “Powerful birds. The Eurasian jay (Garrulus glandarius) and the osprey (Pandion haliaetus) in hunter-gatherer burials at Zvejnieki, northern Latvia and Yuzhniy Oleniy Ostrov, northwestern Russia”. *Publications Scientifiques du Muséum national d’Histoire naturelle.* 48 (2): 189-205.

[51] Maringer, J., 1977. “Priests and Priestesses in Prehistoric Europe”. *History of Religion*. 17(2): 101-120.

[52] Markale, J., 1999. *The Great Goddess: Reverence of the Divining Feminine from Paleolithic*. Inner Traditions. Rochester: Vt.

[53] Masuda, S., 1973 “Excavations at Tappe Sang-e Cagmaq”. *Proceedings of the 1st Annual Symposium of Archaeological Research in Ira*n. 1-2.

[54] Matthews, R., and Fazeli Nashli, H., 2022. *The Archaeology of Iran from the Palaeolithic to the Achaemenid Empire*. Routledge.

[55] Mcelreath, R., Boyd, R., and Richerson, P.J., 2003. “Shared norms can lead to the evolution of ethnic markers”. *Current Anthropology*. 44: 122–130.

[56] Miller, G.P., 2005. “The Legal functions of ritual”. *Cklawreviw*. 80: 1181-1233.

[57] Mohammadi-Far, Y., et al., 2011. Preliminary report on the Central Zagros Archaeological Project (CZAP): Excavations at Sheikhīābād Ṣahneh and Jānī Eslāmābād Gharb. *Nameh-ye Bāstān-Shenāsī*, 1(1), 9–30 (in Farsi).

[58] Mokhtarian, B., & Vaez-e Shushtari, T., 2017. Structural analysis of toy-horse and Kūs-weh-vi ritual in Iran and connections to Indo-European cults. *Iranian Anthropology Research*, 2, 93–115 (in Farsi).

[59] Mollasalehi, H., 2018. *Bāstān-shenāsī-ye dīn: Bā fānūs-e nazar dar jostujū-ye āyin-hā-ye gomshode* [*Archaeology of Religon in the light of searching the last rituals*]. Tehran: SAMT.

[60] Morales, V.B., 1990. *Figuines and other Clay Objects from Sarab and Cayonu Oriental instituteCommunications*. Chicago.: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

[61] Morsch, M., 2002. Magic Figurines? Some Remarks about the Clay Objects of Nevali Cori. In: *Magic Practices and Ritual in the Near Eastern Neolithic*. Pp.145–162. Berlin: ex oriente.

[62] Mykhailova, N., 2016. The cult of the deer of ancient hunters in Europe and Nothern Asia. Thesis for the degree of Candidate of Sciences (CSc), (Unpublished).

[63] Myres, J.L., 1930. *Who Were the Greeks*. California University Press.

[64] Nassaney, M.S., 1995. “Social Archaeology”. *Archaeology*. 1: 1-10.

[65] Negahban, E.O., 1979. “A Brief Report on the Painted Building of Zagheh Late 7th - Early 6th Millennium B.C”. *Paléorient* 5: 239-250.

[66] Ojamaa, T., 1997. “Tha shaman as The Zoomorophic Human”. *Folklore*. 4: 1-12.

[67] Orphanides, A., 1986. *Towards a Theory for the Interpretation of Materials Remains in Archaeology: The Bronze Age Anthropomorphic Figurines from Cyprus*. New York: University of New York at Albany.

[68] Pollock, S., and Bernbeck, R., 2010. “An Archaeology of categorization and Categories in Archaeology”. *Paléorient*. 36(1): 37-47.

[69] Price, N., 2016. “Shamanism”. in: *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion.* Pp. 1–25. London: University College.

[70] Pullar, J., 1990. *Tepe Abdul Hossein: A Neolithic Site in Western Iran Excavations 1978.* Cambridge University Press.

[71] Rappaport, R.A., 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge University Press.

[72] Renfrew, C., 1985. *The Archaeology of Cult. The Sanctuary at Phylakopi*. London: Thames and Hudson.

[73] Renfrew, C., 2018. *Ritual, Play and Belief, in Evolution and Early Human Societies*. Cambridge: University Press.

[74] Rollefson, G., 1998. “Ain Ghazal, Jordan: Ritual and Ceremony, III”. *Paleorient*. 24(1): 43-58.

[75] Rollefson, G., 2004. “The Character of LPPNB Social Organization”. *Studies in Early Near Eastern Production, Subsistence, and Environment* 5: 145–155.

[76] Rollefson, G., 2006. “Early Neolithic Ritual Centers in the Southern Levan”. *Time & Mind* 2(5):3-13.

[77] Rothenbuhler, E., 2008. *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony*, A. Gīviān (Trans.). Tehran: Imam Sādegh University Press.

[78] Rouget, G., 1985. *Music and trance: A theory of the relations between music and possession*. University of Chicago Press.

[79] Russell, N., and McGowan, K.J., 2003. Dance of the Cranes: Crane Symbolism at Çatalhöyük and Beyond. *Time & Mind* 77(297): 445–455.

[80] Sa'edi, G., 1976. *Ahl-e hovā* [People of the winds]. Tehran: Amir Kabir (in Farsi).

[81] Schmandt-Besserat, D., 2013. *Symbols at 'Ain Ghazal* (*'Ain Ghazal Excavation Reports 3*. Berlin: ex oriente.

[82] Schmidt, K., 2010. "Göbekli Tepe – the Stone Age Sanctuaries. New results of ongoing excavations with a special focus on sculptures and high reliefs". *Documenta Praehistorica XXXVII*. 37(21): 239-256.

[83] Scurlock, J.A., 2006. *Magico-Medical Means of Treating Ghost-Induced Illnesses in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Leiden: Brill.

[84] Seeger, A., 1987. *Why Suya Sing: A Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[85] Singh, N., 2018. "The cultural evolution of shamanism". *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. (41): 1-62.

[86] Stiles, D., 1977. "Ethnoarchaeology a discussion of methods and applications Man". *The Digital Archaeological Record (tDAR).* 12: 87-103.

[87] Stucki, W., 1976. *Unterlagen zur Keramik des Alten vorderen Orient*. AEA-Verlag Zurich.

[88] Talai, H., 2016. *Īrān pīsh az tārīkh: 'Asr-e mes/ sangī* [Prehistoric Iran: The Chalcolithic era]. Tehran: SAMT (in Farsi).

[89] Tillich, P., 1959. *Theology of Culture*. London: Oxford University Press.

[90] Tolley, C., 2011. "Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic". *Academia Scientiarum Fennica*. 1(2). 225-226.

[91] Tsuneki, A., 2014. *The First Farming Village in Northeast Iran and Turan: Tappeh Sang-e Chakhmaq and Beyond.* Japan: University of Tsukuba.

[92] Ucko, P.J., 1968. *Anthropomorphic Figurines of Predynastic Egypt and Neolithic Crete with Comparative Material from the Prehistoric Near East and Mainland Greece*. Andrew Szmidla: London.

[93] Uzunoglu, E., 1993. Women in Anatolia from Prehistoric Ages to the iron Age. In: *Woman in Anatolia 9000 Years of the Anatolian Woman*. Pp.16-24. Istanbu: Turkish.

[94] Vandewettering, K.R., 2015. "Upper Paleolithic Venus Figurines and Interpretations of Prehistoric Gender Representations" *PURE Insights*. 4 (1): 1–7.

[95] Vidale, M., Fazeli Nashli, H., and Desset, F., 2018. The late prehistory of the northern Iranian Central Plateau (c. 6000–3000 BC): Growth and collapse of decentralised networks. In H. Meller, D. Gronenborn, & R. Risch (Eds.), *Überschuss ohne Staat–Politische Formen in der Vorgeschichte: Tagungen des Landesmuseums für Vorgeschichte Halle, Band 18* (pp. 103–145). Verlag des Landesmuseums für Vorgeschichte Halle.

[96] Wallace, A.C., 1966. *Culture and Personality*. New York: Random House.

[97] Walsh, R., 1990. *The Spirit of Shamanism*. Los Angeles.

[98] Walsh, S., and Matthews, R., 2018. Articulating the disarticulated: human remains from the early Neolithic of the eastern fertile Crescent (eastern Iraq and western Iran). In*: Neolithic Bodies*. Pp. 1-13. Oxbow Books, Oxford.

[99] Watson, P.J., 1980. "The Theory and Practice of Ethnoarcheology with special reference to the Near East". *Paleoriént*. 6: 55-64.

[100] Watson-Jones, R.E., and Legare, C.H., 2016. "The Social Functions of Group Rituals". *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 25 (1): 42-46.

[101] Whitehouse, H., and Hodder, I., 2010. Modes of religiosity at Çatalhöyük, in: *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization: Çatalhöyük as a Case Study*. Pp. 122–145. Cambridge University Press.

[102] Winkelman, M.L., 2002. "Shaman and cognitive evolution". *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 12 (1): 71–101.

[103] Winkelman, M.L., 2012. "Shamanism in Cross-Cultural Perspective". *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies,* 31(2): 47–62.

[104] Yakar, J., 2009. "The Nature of Prehistoric Anatolian Religions. An Etnoarchaeological Perspective". *Colloquim Anatolicum VIII*: 291–324.

[105] Yakar, J., 2016. *Symbols and abstract motifs in Neolithic art: More than just fanciful aesthetic designs?* In Ü. Yalçın (Ed.), *Anatolian Metal VII: Anatolia and its neighbours 10,000 years ago* (*Der Anschnitt* Beiheft 31, pp. 165–178). Deutsches Bergbau-Museum Bochum/Zeitschrift für Kunst und Kultur im Bergbau .

[106] Zvelebil, M., 2008. Innovating hunter-gatherers: The Mesolithic in the Baltic. In: G. Bailey & P. Spikins (Eds.), *Mesolithic Europe*, pp. 18–59. Cambridge University Press.

The
International
Journal of
Humanities

خاک، رقص و روح: پژواک مراسم آیینی دوران نوسنگی و مس‌وسنگی در فلات ایران بر پایهٔ برخی شواهد باستان‌شناختی

چنور سیدی[۱] ، **سید میلاد هاشمی**[۱و۲]*

۱. گروه باستان‌شناسی، دانشکده علوم انسانی، دانشگاه تربیت مدرس، تهران.

*. نویسندهٔ مسئول

Email: m.hashemisarvandi@modares.ac.ir

۲. پژوهشگر وابسته، مرکز پژوهشی مشترک UMR 7194 (MNHN-CNRS-UPVD)، گروه Pre-trop، موزهٔ انسان‌شناسی پاریس، پاریس، فرانسه.

چکیده

اجرای مناسک آیینی یکی از پدیده‌های مشترک در میان بسیاری از جوامع انسانی در گذشته و حال بوده است. انسان‌ها برای تقویت حس قلمروگرایی، یکپارچگی با محیط پیرامون، تقویت هویت گروهی، درمان بیماری‌های مادی و معنوی، تغییر در وضع هوا، پیشگویی آینده و مواردی از این دست به انجام مناسکی متوسل می‌شدند. به دلیل اهمیت این مناسک، می‌توان حضور نقوش و سایر شواهد مرتبط با برگزاری مناسک آیینی را برروی مواد فرهنگی باستان‌شناختی پیگیری کرد. احتمالاً چنین شواهدی در مواد فرهنگی مرتبط با دوره‌های نوسنگی و مس‌وسنگی فلات ایران هم قابل ردیابی باشد. هدف از این پژوهش، بررسی ردّ پای مرتبط با مناسک آیینی در فلات ایران در دوره‌های بیان شده است و بدین منظور، بقایای فرهنگی برخی محوطه‌های پیش از تاریخی ایران از دید باستان‌شناسی بررسی می‌شود. روش گردآوری داده‌ها، کتابخانه‌ای و اسنادی است و پژوهش به روش توصیفی-تحلیلی انجام می‌پذیرد. نگارندگان می‌خواهند بررسی کنند که آیا می‌توان شواهدی از برگزاری مناسک مرتبط با باورها در بقایای باستان شناختی فلات ایران از دوره‌های نوسنگی و مس‌وسنگ یافت؟ و در صورت وجود، مضامین یافته شده چطور توضیح داده می‌شود؟ در این جستار، تلاش بر آن است که ابتدا، شواهد فرهنگی و نامزدهای احتمالی از ردّ پای آیین‌ها و مراسم مرتبط چون نقوش، نمادها و نشانه‌ها، هنر سه‌بعدی چون پیکرک‌ها و سایر مواد فرهنگی انتخاب و طبقه‌بندی شوند و سپس، به کمک رویکردهای رایج در هنرهای تجسمی، مانند بررسی ترکیب‌بندی، به آنالیز آن‌ها پرداخته شود. در نتیجهٔ این پژوهش، به نظر می‌رسد که مناسک مورد بحث کم و بیش در مواد فرهنگی به نمایش در آمده و قابل بررسی هستند.

کلیدواژگان: فلات ایران؛ دوره‌های نوسنگی و مس‌وسنگ؛ آیین‌ها و مناسک؛ شواهد باستان‌شناختی

* این مقاله مستخرج از پایان‌نامهٔ کارشناسی ارشد نویسندهٔ نخست است که در دانشگاه تربیت مدرس تحت راهنمایی نویسندهٔ مسئول از آن دفاع شد.