
Aspects of Kinship in Iranian Prehistory

As noted above, whereas social anthropologists can interview their informants, archaeologists and ancient historians cannot. In one respect, this is an obvious disadvantage. In another sense, however, it leaves the door wide open for speculations that can be difficult to refute, debunk, or at least be shown to be implausible, once enshrined in the literature. Given the absence of written sources, any reconstruction of the social organization of the earliest sedentary societies in the Near East, particularly in Iran, is always going to be speculative. Even at a biological level, assuming human skeletal remains from cemeteries could be recovered from which DNA could be extracted, or teeth were excavated which preserved epigenetic traits to establish kinship,¹ we might be in a position to tell that people were related, but this is to be expected in any relatively small community, and such analyses would not tell us *how* they were related or what kind of kinship patterns were present. Although Ernst Herzfeld claimed that “Back to prehistoric times goes the fourfold graduation of Iranian social order into *nmāna*- ‘house,’ *vis*- ‘clan,’ *zantu*- ‘tribe,’ and *dahyū*- ‘people,’”² we have no way of verifying this claim and, a priori, it seems more likely that the pre- or non-Iranian groups inhabiting Iran in prehistory were not organized according to the same principles as later Iranians were, at least according to the Avesta. Nevertheless, some categories of finds from Neolithic and Chalcolithic contexts (c. 8000–3500 BC) have been adduced in discussions of society and social relations, albeit in a rather oblique fashion, and these provide us with our first material for examination here.

1. See, e.g., Alt and Vach 1991 for the method. For an illustration of the study of epigenetic traits to identify relatedness among individuals in a Bronze Age collective burial in the Oman peninsula, see Alt et al. 1995.

2. Herzfeld 1937, 937.

APPROACHING THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF CERAMICS

Nonarchaeologists who have even a passing acquaintance with Near Eastern archaeological literature dealing with some portion of the last eight or nine thousand years are probably aware of the outsized significance of ceramics in the study of the ancient Near East. The reduction of a mass of ceramic data, often comprising thousands and thousands of broken pieces of pottery, coupled with tens of thousands of both qualitative and quantitative observations on them, into a coherent typology of forms and decorations that may be taken as the ceramic signature of a site, and then compared with the ceramic signatures of other sites, is among the primary aims of such studies. To say that work like this is labor-intensive, often tedious, and frequently an end in itself is an understatement.

The difficulty, of course, arises in attempting to convert typological data into social insights. When I was a student, a powerful reaction set in against the notion, often derided as hopelessly simplistic, that pots equal people—in other words, that the ceramic assemblage of a site, as a cultural signature, characterized the site's inhabitants and could be used to identify those people and chart their interactions, trade, conquests, and movements through space and time. Deploying a sort of neo-Boasian logic, it was argued that material culture, language, and “race,” by which we might today say biological group affinity, varied independently of each other.³ Hence, people who belonged to linguistically and biologically different groups, might still use similar material culture. Conversely, they might belong to the same biological or linguistic group but use different sorts of material culture. The warning was, therefore, clear: do not assume that a pottery style or assemblage, by which we understand the totality of forms, decorative modes, and functional categories in a site, stratigraphic unit, or region, was necessarily coterminous with a discrete human social unit, whether a small village, a federation of clans and families, or an entire nation.

Despite this sort of admonition, however, archaeologists have often found it almost impossible to decouple a ceramic style or its regional distribution at a series of contemporary sites, within a circumscribed area, from the notion of a social group. For example, it may be tempting to conflate so-called Lapui pottery, a fourth-millennium BC assemblage first identified on the Marv Dasht plain,⁴ with a concrete ancient community, even if modern archaeologists no longer use labels based on the chief characteristic of the pottery of a region in a particular period, like “the buff-ware culture,” or the “gray-ware culture.” Nor would most archaeologists today interpret the diverse wares present at a single site as evidence of distinct “cultures.” In the past, however, they did just that. For example, Donald E. McCown (1910–85) suggested in 1942 that the “light-toned pottery” and

3. See, e.g., Boas 1940.

4. Sumner 1988.

the “red ware” of Tappeh Sialk I “typify two different cultures.”⁵ In some cases, such pseudosocial, group identifications were further refined and conceptualized, for example, as tribes or part of a confederation of tribes, without even defining just what a tribe is.⁶ More commonly, however, the explicit characterization of a ceramically-defined “group” as a band, lineage, tribe, clan, community, people, and so forth is left unstated, even when the identification of a ceramic assemblage or stylistic horizon with some form of human group is implicit.

In contrast, technological ascriptions are entirely justifiable, but whether or not they translate into demographic “signatures” is another matter altogether. Thus, for example, in 1965, when the late Robert H. Dyson Jr. identified an early “software horizon” in Iran, he correctly highlighted the widespread occurrence of a shared technology of pottery vessel construction by hand and of firing at low temperatures,⁷ a technology later investigated by Pamela Vandiver, who called it “sequential slab construction” because of the use of individual slabs of clay to build up the body of a vessel.⁸ Although Dyson scrupulously avoided conflating this technocomplex with a “people,” some scholars discuss ceramic assemblages, even such technologically defined types, as if they were living and breathing organisms rather than expressions of particular makers and diverse human groups employing a common technology. A particularly striking example of this is found in the work of Donald E. McCown. When discussing period I4 at Tappeh Sialk, for example, he wrote that “the red-ware culture began to influence the light-ware culture of Siyalk I . . . [and] by the time of Siyalk II the red-ware culture was predominant and had eliminated the use of light ware.”⁹ In more recent scholarship, too, an organismic analogy is sometimes implicit. Assemblages and styles may stand isolated; they may integrate; they may hybridize, as if a process of ceramic natural selection were at work, an unseen hand shepherding this material along over centuries, even millennia. The fundamental difficulty, of course, is that archaeologists are often capable of identifying and describing phenomena for which they can offer no explanation. When explanations are proffered, however, it is incumbent on us to consider whether they are either necessary or sufficient.

Following a time-honored practice in North American archaeology, some ceramic assemblages, ware groups, or stylistic/decorative groups are named after so-called type sites—that is, the sites where they were first recorded, or where they were particularly well-represented, or after villages or towns close to those sites. This approach is not universal in Iran, but some American archaeologists have used it. These include Joseph Caldwell at Tal-e Iblis in Kerman province;¹⁰ Robert

5. McCown 1942, 2.

6. On the tribe as a political construct see the discussion in chaps. 3 and 4 below.

7. Dyson 1965, 217.

8. Vandiver 1987.

9. McCown 1942, 2.

10. See, e.g., Caldwell (1967, 114) for types such as Bard Sir Painted, Iblis Plain, Lalehzar Coarse, etc.

H. Dyson Jr. at Hasanlu in the Urmia basin;¹¹ Frank Hole, Kent V. Flannery, and James Neely on the Deh Luran plain;¹² and William M. Sumner at Tal-e Malyan in the Marv Dasht plain of Fars. In the case of prehistoric Fars, for example, Sumner suggested that “the presence of Jari, Kutahi, Bizdan, and possibly local styles in Kazerun and Sarvestan implies a degree of cultural isolation in the plains of the valleys of Fars.”¹³ On the basis of later research by the Mamasani Archaeological Project, this view was queried by Lloyd Weeks and his coauthors, who pointed to the presence, at some sites in the area, of shells from the Persian Gulf, copper from the central Iranian plateau, obsidian from eastern Anatolia and southern Armenia, and bitumen from Khuzestan or Iraq—all of which speaks against the notion of cultural isolation.¹⁴ Moreover, they also stressed the fact that Kutahi ware has been found near Shiraz, while Jalyan and Bizdan wares are attested in Fasa and Darab. This, too, suggests anything but cultural isolation. But there is a further line of inquiry raised by Sumner that I believe has been overlooked but may prove productive.

It is a widely held belief that before pottery manufacture became industrialized and potting became a full-time profession, it was situated physically in the individual households of families, what Max Weber called the *Hausgemeinschaft*,¹⁵ where pottery was made by and for one or more household’s own use. It need not follow, of course, that, on a technical level, each household potter used perceptibly different methods to fashion their pottery. On the contrary, at any given point in time, within one region, there was probably always broad uniformity in manufacturing technique, with some measure of personal idiosyncrasy, experimentation, or a desire to do things differently accounting for elements of regional variation. Decoration, of course, varied as well. Within a community, there may have been broad norms and mental templates on which potters based their designs, as well as variation that reflected individual tastes, artistic ability, physical coordination, and sensibility. Taken out of a community context, and compared with the products of another village or kin-group, pottery styles may have seemed even more distinctive and distinguishable, not because potters tried consciously to express their group identity but because the way they approached their work and the way in which they had been taught by their kith and kin combined to produce a distinctive potting signature. Hence, where different styles as defined by archaeologists appear alongside each other—for example, in the same archaeological stratum or series of strata at one site—I would interpret this not as a sign of isolation, as Sumner suggested, but of the colocation of divergent styles made by individual

11. See, e.g., Voigt and Dyson (1992, 174–75) for types such as Hajji Firuz Ware, Urmia Plain, Pisdeli Painted, etc.

12. See, e.g., Hole, Flannery, and Neely (1969, 116–22, 162–63) for types such as Jaffar Plain, Khazineh Red, Memeh red-on-red, and Bayat Red.

13. Sumner 1977, 303.

14. Weeks et al. 2006, 20.

15. Hellmann and Palyi 1923, 41.

pottery in one community. The question is, what circumstances might lead to such a situation?

Obviously, barter or exchange is one mechanism that could effect a spread of stylistically distinctive pottery between communities, but in societies where goods produced in the household stayed, for the most part, in the household, the appearance of diverse styles in one and the same settlement might instead indicate the presence of individuals from different communities, not because of trade and exchange but because of marriage patterns. In other words, the practice of exogamy could create a situation in which diverse styles that show no apparent relation to each other appear alongside one another at an archaeological site.

Reinhard Bernbeck queried precisely this sort of hypothesis thirty years ago in his study of the Neolithic pottery from Qale Rostam in the Bakhtiyari mountains, near modern Lordegan. As Bernbeck pointed out, three assumptions prevailed in Americanist investigations of ceramic production and kinship: first, that ceramic production was, in most cases, a female activity;¹⁶ second, that the crafts of pottery making and decoration were passed on from mother to daughter; and third, that a unified ceramic assemblage, with respect to form and decoration over time, implied that women (i.e., the makers of the pottery) remained in their original settlements after marriage and did not move to those of their husbands, if in fact exogamy was practiced. In other words, regardless of whether marriage was endogamous or exogamous, if stylistic continuity characterized a site over a period of decades or centuries, then residence was most probably matrilineal. To put it another way, the ceramic repertoire of the site was reproduced by female potters from generation to generation in the same locale.¹⁷

But for purposes of interrogating the more remote past, my concern is not so much whether pottery was made by men or women. Rather, the main issue is whether the ceramic assemblage of an archaeological site is stylistically, in form and decoration, relatively homogeneous—that is, whether or not the decorative patterns appear consistent within a particular design vocabulary. I raise this because the situation at Tol-e Nurabad in western Fars, c. 6000 BC, for example, evidences extreme variability (fig. 2).¹⁸ There, pottery that is enormously diverse, from a decorative point of view, appears in the same stratigraphic and therefore chronological context.

Such a situation could suggest exogamy. On one hand, if men made the pottery, then this degree of diversity could imply that they went to live in the home villages or settlements of their wives—an exogamous, matrilineal residence pattern—bringing with them their own suite of decorative patterns, which they painted on pottery manufactured for household use. If, on the other hand, women made the

16. See Bernbeck 1989, 186. With respect to industrial-scale ceramic factories, in ancient Mesopotamia, where these are attested in a wealth of cuneiform sources from the last century of the third millennium BC (Ur III period), the potters were men. See, e.g., Waetzoldt 1970–71; Sallaberger 1996.

17. Bernbeck 1989, 188. Cf. Allen and Richardson 1971.

18. Weeks et al. 2006.



FIGURE 2. Painted Neolithic pottery from Tol-e Nurabad in Fars, Iran. TNP 1432 (left) and TNP 1480 (right). Photo by the author.



FIGURE 3. Painted Neolithic pottery sherd from Tol-e Nurabad in the hands of a modern archaeologist with a clay object that may have been used to apply pigment. Photo by the author.

pottery, as seems more likely based on ethnographic evidence from around the world, then the diversity seen at Tol-e Nurabad would imply that women went to the home villages of their husbands, continued to make pottery for their new households, and thereby introduced new decorative patterns (fig. 3). Marriage may therefore have been exogamous and residence patrilocal. We may not be able

to determine whether residence in a given prehistoric situation was patrilocal or matrilocal, but the high degree of ceramic variation within an assemblage like that of Neolithic Tol-e Nurabad strongly suggests an exogamous marriage pattern.

In 1971, William Allen and James B. Richardson III argued that the determination of residence patterns from archaeological evidence was fraught with difficulty. Indeed, in discussing a Pacific example, they cited the case of two anthropologists studying the same community, and interviewing the same households, who came to diametrically opposed views on the question of whether residence in that community was patrilocal or ambilocal (i.e., mixed, in which some married couples resided matrilocally while others resided patrilocally).¹⁹ They also stressed the enormous divergence between ideal norms—what people say they do—and what people actually do. They questioned “the assumption that one can recover any uniformly prescriptive or preferential rules of residence.” In fact, they suggested that, “given the multiplicity of obstacles that confront . . . archaeologists in their attempts to make meaningful statements about prehistoric kinship systems, it seems justified to conclude that unless extremely detailed historic data exists, the analysis of kinship is best left to the ethnographer.”²⁰ All of this should be heeded, and cautionary tales abound, but it is, at one level, irrelevant, in my opinion, since the degree of variation seen in an assemblage like Tol-e Nurabad is consistent with population admixture. So long as pottery production in the Neolithic was a household activity, exogamy seems likely to have played a role in the distribution of diverse ceramic styles within one community rather than aesthetic sensibilities that varied wildly from household to household or intervillage and interregional exchange.

In some situations, archaeologists working in Iran have suggested that some painted decorative styles represent “hybrids”—that is, a fusion of two distinct traditions. This has been suggested in the case of pottery recovered in Chalcolithic graves at Hakalan and Dum Gar Parchinah in the Pusht-e Kuh, Luristan. More precisely, it has been suggested that “the hybrid style of some painted pottery vessels, not found elsewhere, may not only be attributed to the practice of interregional marriages; assuming women were active in pottery production, it also fits nicely with the mobile characteristic of . . . migratory tribes.”²¹ Setting aside for the moment this reference to “migratory tribes,” of which there is no evidence in this instance,²² it is intriguing that, whereas I have just pointed to residence patterns and exogamy as mechanisms that could account for the appearance of utterly distinctive painted pottery types at a site, through the arrival of their makers, whether men or women, in the communities of their spouses, here hybridity is interpreted as a possible result of exogamy. Furthermore, it has been suggested

19. Allen and Richardson 1971: 44–45.

20. Allen and Richardson 1971, 45, 51.

21. Alizadeh 2008, 18.

22. Potts 2014, 16–20.

that “if women were active potters or pot painters in prehistory . . . interregional marriages in patrilocal societies certainly would lead to the spread of specific pottery styles that in the course of time would become either diluted or would undergo hybridization.”²³ While this may, in theory, be possible, such an explanation would require that a potter from an outside community adopted some of the stylistic conventions of his or her new family or group and combined these with his or her own conventional patterns. Certainly in the case of Neolithic Tol-e Nurabad, hybridity is not the issue, but rather the colocation of completely different styles in one and the same stratigraphic level, suggesting that, if potters from outside communities changed their places of residence, they continued to make pottery as they had always done and did not fuse the styles of their new home with those of their traditional practice.

Regardless of how close to the mark or otherwise these speculations on ancient pottery production in Iran may be, we cannot escape one obdurate fact, namely, that the potters and painters of ancient Iranian ceramics will forever be anonymous. One qualification to this statement, however, is prompted by the widely documented, if far from universal, practice of inscribing or painting so-called potter’s marks on pottery. Many years ago I undertook a study of the incised marks on pottery from Tappeh Yahya as part of my dissertation. Shortly after I published a paper on these,²⁴ another study appeared by the French prehistorian Geneviève Dollfus and the linguist Pierre Encrevé discussing painted potter’s marks on fifth-millennium BC pottery from Tappehs Jaffarabad, Bendebal, and Jowi in Susiana.²⁵

At the time, I was interested in the possibility that the potter’s marks of Tappeh Yahya preserved some graphic similarities with so-called Proto-Elamite or Susa III writing, attested at Susa and elsewhere, including Tappeh Yahya, which were transmitted via Baluchistan to the Indus Valley, where similar signs were attested in the Harappan script.²⁶ This is not a suggestion to which I would adhere today; in fact, if I were to reanalyze the potter’s marks of any ancient Iranian site now, I would work from considerably different premises.

Many scholars have assumed that pottery was marked by prehistoric potters prior to firing in communal kilns so that their products would be easily recognizable and retrievable. As a corollary, some scholars have suggested that marks made, whether painted or incised, after firing indicated ownership. In 1983, for example, the late K. C. Chang pointed out that, at several sites in China, certain potter’s marks were specific to particular areas within a site, leading him to suggest that these were not the marks of potters but were rather “markers and emblems of families, lineages, clans, or divisions of these.”²⁷ This is analogous to the *tamga*

23. Alizadeh 2006, 26n56.

24. Potts 1981.

25. Dollfus and Encrevé 1982.

26. See also Potts 1982.

27. Chang 1983, 85.

used much later by steppe groups and Iranians, a subject treated in the final chapter of this study. A somewhat similar explanation has been proposed for the marks on Susiana pottery published by Dollfus and Encrevé and attested at Choga Mish as well. Given that more than two hundred potter's marks were found at Choga Mish, it has been suggested that these were not the marks of individual potters but rather marks that "indicated household or corporate groups who either had their vessels baked in a common fire, or else identified their vessels in common storage facilities, of which there is no evidence."²⁸ This, however, seems highly unlikely. In this regard, it is interesting that, in a wide-ranging review of nonindustrial ceramic production around the world, the late Carol Kramer found that whereas "some potters use identification marks . . . even in the absence of such marks, potters can usually identify their own products and often those made by other potters in their community as well," while others "use identifying marks only when firing jointly with another potter."²⁹ Another type of marking, which probably did not obtain in ancient Iran, at least in the prehistoric era, was the marking of pottery with the name of a customer (i.e., a purchaser). This implies a market and professionalization of pottery manufacture that only came about much later in time.

EXOAMY IN THE PREHISTORIC RECORD

We turn now to another way in which ceramics in ancient Iran have been interpreted. Exogamous marriage patterns have also been invoked to account for the geographical distribution of a single, largely homogenous and easily recognizable category of ceramics: the so-called Bakun A pottery. Named after the Chalcolithic site of Tal-e Bakun near Persepolis (fig. 4), investigated in the spring and summer of 1932 by Alexander Langsdorff and Donald E. McCown,³⁰ the Bakun A ceramic assemblage, dating to the early fifth millennium BC,³¹ is dominated by a distinctive, well-fired, black-painted buffware. This, however, was not produced in individual households. Rather, it was made by highly skilled potters who had access to well-controlled kilns and were capable of replicating their products on a reliable basis. Although it has been suggested that "interregional marriages, an important factor in forging interregional alliances through kinship, could also be considered as a contributing factor in the spread of some classes of pottery,"³² in the case of the very fine Bakun A pottery, its spatial distribution, according to one interpretation, corresponded to "the locations of summer/winter pastures of the tribes of Qashqai, Bakhtiari, Khamseh, Mamasani and Boyr-Ahmadi

28. Alizadeh 2008, 10.

29. Kramer 1985, 82.

30. Langsdorff and McCown 1942.

31. Some of the best-dated deposits with classic Bakun pottery were excavated at Tol-e Nurabad. These date to c. 4800–4000 cal. BC. See Weeks, Petrie, and Potts 2010, 257 and table 16.1.

32. Alizadeh 2006, 17.



FIGURE 4. Tal-e Bakun A. Photo courtesy of Parse-Pasargadae Foundation Archive, ICHHTO, Fars, Iran.

confederacies”; hence, Abbas Alizadeh argued that “nomadic tribes . . . dispersed Bakun A culture over vast areas.”³³

One wonders, of course, where these hypothetical nomads acquired the fine Bakun A-type pottery they are alleged to have carried with them all over Fars, since it has not been suggested that it was actually made by them. Nor is the use of pottery characteristic of the very nomadic groups cited as models for fifth-millennium behavior. The French anthropologist Jean-Pierre Digard, who lived with and wrote extensively on the Bakhtiyari, noted that they used only containers made from organic materials, such as wood, along with wool, skin, hair, and fleece, whereas pottery was “totally absent” in their lives.³⁴

SOCIAL ENDOGAMY?

The architectural and glyptic record at Tal-e Bakun has also prompted some scholars to speculate on the practice of social endogamy at the site. It has been suggested that “a change in social structure that we can barely see archaeologically, i.e., a separation of kinship from economic and political considerations,” occurred at the site, and that “the internally specialized nature of the settlement at Tall-e Bakun A and the system of control exercised by some to limit access to certain parts of the community is . . . indicative of the presence of at least two class-endogamous strata.”³⁵ Furthermore, in an effort to interpret the presence of sealings produced

33. Alizadeh 1988, 28.

34. Digard 1975, 120.

35. Alizadeh 2006, 17.

by three different stamp seals in Building IV at the site, it has been argued that “since Tall-e Bakun A was a prehistoric society in which kinship ties may still have been strong enough to be a major factor in the workings of the socioeconomic organization, it can be postulated that Building IV belonged to a father, who carried Seal 1, and his two children, who carried Seals 3 and 5.”³⁶ We have here a series of inferences that may be restated as follows: first, the social order at the site consisted of two strata that were “class-endogamous,” by which one may assume that marriage was restricted to members of one’s class and did not occur across the two hypothesized “classes” of Bakun A society; and second, seal impressions produced by three different stamp seals, found in one particular building, can be attributed to a male and two of his children, whether male or female.

With respect to the first of these inferences, social-class endogamy is a well-attested phenomenon. In his posthumously published *Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Max Weber identified class endogamy—a situation in which daughters from elite clans married only their social equals—as one of the factors that contributed to the breakdown of the patriarchal *Hausgemeinschaft*.³⁷ More recently, as van Leeuwen and Maas noted, “social endogamy refers to marrying within the same class—and thus assumes the existence of a limited number of discrete classes—while social homogamy refers to marrying someone of approximately the same status—and thus assumes the existence of a continuous status scale.”³⁸ One doesn’t need to have seen *Downton Abbey* or read Anthony Trollope or Jane Austen to be able to conjure up many examples of both social endogamy and social homogamy. But as van Leeuwen and Maas correctly observed, the assumption of discrete classes is integral to the concept of social endogamy, and it surely stretches credulity to infer the existence of two social classes at Tal-e Bakun A simply because someone sealed off the door of a storage room, thereby implying that some individuals had access to its contents while others did not.

Equally suspect, moreover, is the above-cited inference about seal ownership. The assumption was based on the recovery of sixty-three door sealings in Building IV, the impressions of which were made by three different seals. Of these, Seal 1 accounted for thirty-six sealings, Seal 5 for fifteen, and Seal 3 for twelve.³⁹ Any inference about a potential familial relationship between the owners or, rather, users of these three seals must confront a significant chronological consideration. In fact, the recovery of these sealings in one archaeological “horizon” at Tal-e Bakun A by no means indicates that they were all produced and used contemporaneously, particularly as the horizon in question has been dated to a four-century-long

36. Alizadeh 2006, 88.

37. See Hellmann and Palyi 1923, 58: “Der Bruch erfolgte durch die ständische Endogamie, indem vornehme Sippen ihre Töchter nur an Gleichgestellte verheirateten.”

38. Van Leeuwen and Maas 2005, 1.

39. Alizadeh 1988, table 1; Alizadeh 2006, table 31.

period, from 4500 to 4100 BC.⁴⁰ Thus, many alternative scenarios could be invoked to account for the presence of sealings from three different seals in one building (Building IV). The seals could have all belonged to one individual who, in the course of a lifetime spanning decades, used three different seals, either successively or concurrently. Alternatively, they could have belonged to three individuals, whether united by kinship ties or unrelated, who were responsible for the building in three successive centuries. Theoretically, ownership or stewardship of the building may have changed hands multiple times during the 400 year occupation of Tal-e Bakun A, and multiple generations may have separated the users of each seal. These are just a few of the considerations that must be considered in seeking to understand seal ownership at Tal-e Bakun.

NEOLOCAL RESIDENCE

In addition to patrilocal and matrilocal residence, another pattern not yet considered in this discussion is neolocal residence—that is, the situation in which a man and wife move away from their parental homes and natal villages and establish an entirely new residence. This raises an intriguing point about archaeological site formation that is often overlooked. Archaeologists are very familiar with the concept of virgin soil—that is, the ground surface on which the initial occupation of a settlement occurred—but we are not generally in the habit of considering the demographic implications of that first occupation of a site, which may in fact imply a neolocal residence pattern in the sense that the human actors involved had to have come from somewhere else before settling on virgin soil. The population implications are unclear, however, and need not necessarily reflect population growth and the fission of a preexisting settlement, with some inhabitants moving away to found a new one. As Arnold Wilson observed in 1908, “the Persian habit of deserting villages and houses, and of rebuilding houses, when necessary, upon new sites, is too well known to require mention.”⁴¹

A new settlement or resettlement, of course, need not only occur at the start of a site’s life. Archaeological sites are routinely abandoned, sometimes permanently, but often for an interval of time ranging from months or years to centuries or even millennia. The underlying causes of such periodic abandonments are many and varied, and in the premodern era we generally have few indicators, apart from signs of past earthquakes or paleoclimatic data suggesting drought, that would have induced the inhabitants of one site to leave it and establish residence elsewhere.⁴² In the nineteenth-century literature, however, vivid descriptions of settlement abandonment caused by cholera epidemics, plague, war, drought, and

40. Alizadeh 2006, 5. Previously the Bakun A phase had been dated to 4100–3700 BC. See Alizadeh 1988, 17.

41. Wilson 1908, 157.

42. See, e.g., Berberian et al. 2012, 2014.

famine exist.⁴³ These phenomena undoubtedly played a role in the remote past as well, not only drastically reducing populations periodically but causing major demographic shifts as some groups left their homes to establish new ones from scratch, while others joined existing settlements, swelling their numbers, and still others resettled on top of previously abandoned, unoccupied settlements. Neolocal residence patterns probably lurk behind some of the frequent stratigraphic and architectural discontinuities observed by archaeologists, for instance in the case of architecture built on a completely different orientation to that beneath it following a period in which a site had lain abandoned.

DETECTING DOWRIES ARCHAEOLOGICALLY

A further, marriage- and hence kinship-related feature has also been invoked in discussing the prehistoric cemeteries of Hakalan and Dum Gar Parchinah excavated by the late Louis Vanden Berghe. In an effort to understand the distribution of diverse objects found in the tombs there, it has been suggested that “such objects (at least some of them) may have been part of the ‘dowries’ acquired through inter-regional marriages, an important factor in forging inter-regional alliances through kinship.”⁴⁴ To the best of my knowledge, neither dowry nor brideprice have elsewhere been invoked as mechanisms that could account for the spatial distribution of material culture in ancient Iran, although they have been in Mesopotamia.⁴⁵ As such, these are interesting concepts to consider here.

“Dowry,” as Jack Goody and Stanley Tambiah noted half a century ago, “can be seen as a type of pre-mortem inheritance to the bride.”⁴⁶ A dowry was traditionally given from father to daughter, without intermediaries taking a share. The evolutionary anthropologist Laura Fortunato and her colleagues have noted that “in monogamous societies characterized by uneven resource distribution . . . parents can increase their inclusive fitness by securing a high-status husband for their daughters.” As a result, “forms of female-biased parental investment such as dowry are more common in these societies than elsewhere.”⁴⁷ Like bridewealth or brideprice—the transfer of wealth by the bridegroom and his family to the bride and her family—the movement of goods as dowry with a woman in a patrilocal situation could certainly, after a woman’s death or the death of her descendants and heirs, result in the appearance of what might be considered foreign items, particularly jewelry (earrings, finger rings, or torques), in the grave.⁴⁸ But many items in ancient Mesopotamian dowries, on which we have written records from

43. See, e.g., Potts 2014, 305–7 with refs.

44. Alizadeh 2008, 18.

45. See, e.g., Brereton 2016, 204.

46. Goody 1973, 1.

47. Fortunato et al. 2006: 356.

48. Roth 1989/1990, 2, 17–19, 33.

the third through the first millennium BC, were made of perishable materials and, consequently, have left no trace archaeologically. These include various items of clothing and other textiles, leather bags, reed baskets, and animal-hide rugs, not to mention wooden tables, chairs, chests, beds, combs,⁴⁹ and spoons, as well as slaves and oil.⁵⁰ Moreover, in some cases land—a field or a date grove—constituted part of a bride's dowry.⁵¹ In other cases, however, items that would have been useful, if not absolutely essential, seem never to have typically formed part of a woman's dowry. As Stephanie Dalley noted in discussing Old Babylonian dowries in Mesopotamia of early second-millennium BC date, "Although the basis of a dowry was to provide the needs of a domestic woman, none of these dowries include knives. . . . Mirrors also are not found. . . . A sieve . . . is not found. . . . Not every woman took spindles or a loom to the new house."⁵²

In thinking about the archaeological correlates of dowries, however, we must remember that the diffusion of goods could also be effected in other ways. As the Dutch Assyriologist Marten Stol noted, "as early as the betrothal some or all of the dowry would be made over to the man,"⁵³ a practice that could result in the appearance of what were originally dowry objects in both male and female graves. Similarly, the law code known as the Laws of Lipit-Ištar (§24), dated to the nineteenth century BC, stipulates that the dowry of a man's second wife could only be inherited by that woman's children, not those of the first-ranking wife,⁵⁴ thereby potentially effecting the even wider dispersal of goods into the graves of both male and female descendants of the mother. Moreover, according to the Codex Hammurabi (§162), a woman's dowry became the property of her children upon her death and reverted neither to the woman's father who had originally given it nor to her husband.⁵⁵ We should note, however, that the payment of brideprice or bridewealth by a man's family to his bride-to-be and her family could have had a similar long-term effect to a dowry—that is, shifting material from one community to another. This will not necessarily be discernible archaeologically, however, particularly in societies where a great deal of wealth may take the form of herds, slaves, or land, all of which are attested as brideprice.⁵⁶ Be that as it may, the cases

49. Wicks (2019, 195) has suggested that the "combs and multiple mirrors" in tomb JuT1 at Jubaji of Neo-Elamite date may have included "dowry items."

50. Stol 2016, 19; Dalley 1980, 57, 60, 61; Wunsch 2005, 376; Wunsch 2007, 244–45.

51. Wunsch 2005, 371–74.

52. Dalley 1980, 55–56. Compare what Soheila Shahshahani wrote about the Mamasani of western Fars: "Women are at the centre of making a household take its particular identity. This is done by the most basic necessities of a household. . . . The dowry of a woman contains the goods which make a house a Mamassani one" (Shahshahani 2003, 93).

53. Stol 2016, 134.

54. Roth 1995, 31.

55. Roth 1995, 112.

56. Stol 2016, 118.

of Dum Gar Parchinah and Hakalan are particularly ill-suited to a discussion of dowry, or any kind of property transfer, because although twenty prehistoric burials were excavated there, not a single one has been sexed. We can hardly discuss an institution like dowry when we have no idea whether any of the interments at Dum Gar Parchinah and Hakalan were in fact those of females. Moreover, with the possible exception of some inscribed objects, foreign objects acquired originally as bridewealth or dowry are probably impossible to distinguish from those obtained through barter or exchange. Tempting as it might be to talk of dowry in the fifth millennium BC, many obstacles stand in the way of an intelligent assessment.⁵⁷

A FEW WORDS ON THE NOTION OF “TRIBE”

The last topic to be treated here is the tribe as a social construct. As noted above, some scholars have invoked nomadic tribes as the agents of the dispersal of Bakun A culture “over vast areas” and asserted that “we can reasonably demonstrate the presence of nomadic tribes.”⁵⁸ Nor is such a mechanism limited to Fars, where Tal-e Bakun is located. Rather, in discussing ceramic parallels between sites in the Diyala, the Jabal Hamrin, and the Pusht-e Kuh regions of late fourth and early third millennium BC date, it has been suggested that these were the “result of a coalition and close contact among the mobile pastoral tribes in this region.”⁵⁹ Let us look at the term *tribe*, particularly in view of the fact that scholars who invoke tribes and draw parallels with modern groups like the Qaşqa’i and the Bakhtiyari, rarely if ever define the term.

Although few of my colleagues not concerned with cuneiform law would begin, in the first instance, with the notion of *Hausgemeinschaft*, literally a house and the land appertaining to it, whether communally owned and worked or not, of a single family,⁶⁰ in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, this is more or less what most of us probably have in mind when thinking about the smallest unit of social organization in Neolithic and Chalcolithic Iran. Even if the evidence from Tal-e Bakun does not warrant the assumption of social classes, other sites bear witness to significant disparities in wealth. In the fifth millennium BC cemetery at Tol-e Chega Sofla on the Zohreh plain, excavated by Abbas Moghaddam,⁶¹ rich offerings were found in some graves. These included alabaster vessels; seals; copper-bronze weaponry, vessels, disks, and beads; and gold rings, beads, and disks. Cranial modification was also attested, and although we do not know what this means, and whether or not it was a status marker, it was clearly a sign of

57. For bridewealth in the later Sumerian sources see Greengus 1990.

58. Alizadeh 1988, 28.

59. Alizadeh 2010, 371.

60. Koschaker 1933, 72n1.

61. Moghaddam 2016, 2018, 2020.

distinction.⁶² Differential access to wealth, as evidenced by smaller and larger multiroomed houses or movable property—we can know nothing of land ownership or herd size—is reasonable to assume given the pronounced variability in mortuary assemblages. But it is important to recognize that all of this evidence pertains to sedentary communities. And thus the question must be asked: where do tribes fit into this discussion?

In his classic study *Nomads of South Persia*, the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth described the tribe (*il*) as an agglomeration of descent groups or sections (*tira*). These in turn were made up of herding units, usually two to five tents, or families, which banded together and had “freedom of association” on migrations and at campsites comprising ten to forty herding units.⁶³ In a sense, the tent of the nomad offers a parallel to Weber’s *Hausgemeinschaft*. Writing on the origins of the Basseri, Barth noted that, according to their own oral tradition, they had coalesced out of two distinct groups: the Weis, who originated in Khorasan, and the ‘Ali Mirzai, who believed they originated locally, in Fars. Yet some sections had different traditions, claiming Qaşqa’i and even Arab descent.⁶⁴ The fact that tribes are not necessarily composed of genetically related, linguistically homogeneous groups that originated in one area and sprang organically from a kin-related set of people recalls the late Pierre Oberling’s definition of Turkic tribes. “Tribe,” he wrote, “is a political rather than an ethnic concept. A ‘tribe’ is a group of families, or clans, whose only bond is their pledge of allegiance to a common chief. . . . Individual tribes tended to be ephemeral,” he noted, whereas “the tribal system itself displayed great resilience.”⁶⁵ Scholars who have invoked the existence of tribes in prehistoric Iran have failed to articulate any details in their conception of what a prehistoric tribe might have looked like, but underlying their discussions is an unstated tenet corresponding to a broad social dichotomy that can be stated succinctly: sedentary communities had one kind of social structure, whatever that may have been, whereas putative nomads were organized as tribes. Given our currently available range of data from later Iranian prehistory, it is difficult, albeit not to say impossible, to see how one might discern those societal features that, for a Barth or an Oberling, characterize tribes in prehistory. Moreover, it is clear, from historical studies of Kurdish tribes, that not all tribes were nomadic; some were sedentary.⁶⁶ Whether they had originally been nomadic is beside the point. The question is, can tribal social structure, if by that we mean divisions into descent groups and sections, as well as loyalty to a chief, be maintained in a sedentary

62. For the phenomenon more broadly in prehistoric Iran—for example, at Ganj Dareh, Ali Kosh, Tepe Abdul Hosein, Choga Sefid, Choga Mish, and Seh Gabi—see Daems and Croucher (2007); Croucher (2010); and Lorentz (2010).

63. Barth 1961, 22, 25, 38.

64. Barth 1961, 52.

65. Oberling 1964, 98.

66. Sykes 1908, 453, 458–59; Soane 1914, 42, 109, 172, 223, 382.

situation? The answer seems to be most definitely yes. That sedentism and tribalism are not incompatible concepts is well-illustrated elsewhere in the Near East—for example, in Yemen, where, as the late Robert B. Serjeant used to stress, “Tribesmen living in an urban situation could do so for generations without losing their tribal status.”⁶⁷ Whether the population of Tal-e Bakun A or any other prehistoric community in Iran was organized in a way that might resemble the later tribes of Iran is impossible to say. We have too little data to discern quarters in settlements, a feature often associated with settled tribes living in towns and cities. Moreover, most of the material culture commonly recovered in excavation—mudbrick architecture, ceramics, groundstone, personal ornaments, seals—is simply unsuited to the differentiation of tribal from nontribal social structure. The prudent approach, as I have tried to follow in assessing the likelihood of nomadism in prehistory, is surely not to project a form of social organization onto a prehistoric situation, whether in Iran or anywhere else in the world, for which the evidence simply doesn’t exist. Descent groups almost certainly existed in Iran’s earliest sedentary communities, but their precise character remains elusive.

67. Lewcock 1986, 37.