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Ideological Representations and Ritual Behaviors in Bronze Age Southeastern Iran

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Abstract

The expansion of complex societies in southeastern Iran during the Bronze Age (3rd millennium B.C.) was driven not only by material and commercial networks with Mesopotamia but also by the transmission of ideological beliefs and ritual behaviors. Despite extensive research on trade and cultural relations between this region and its neighbors, the ritual and ideological aspects reflected in material culture have received less attention. This study aims to identify manifestations of ideology through iconographic analysis of reverence gestures and architectural motifs on figurines, seals, and chlorite vessels from Shahdad, KonarSandal (Jiroft), and Tepe Yahya. The central question is whether these material representations reflect direct Mesopotamian influence or demonstrate localized ritual practices. The hypothesis posits that if these motifs directly reflect Mesopotamian influence, a uniform pattern in typology and context should be observable across all sites; however, if they resulted from localization, significant differences in typology, context of use (funerary at Shahdad versus temple-related at Konar Sandal), and chronological range should be observed. This research employs a descriptive-analytical method based on published data from these sites, with comparative evidence from Mesopotamia and Central Asia. The findings reveal that while the prototypes of reverence gestures have origins in ancient Mesopotamia, they were reproduced in different contexts in southeastern Iran, indicating active adoption and localization. Furthermore, rather than a monolithic state ideology, the sites shared a flexible repertoire of ritual behaviors. Chronologically, the closed-hand gesture appears earlier and more widely, while the raised-fist gesture becomes more frequent in the second half of the third millennium B.C. It is concluded that although complete ritual homogeneity is not evident, shared symbols played a key role in connecting producers, local elites, and exchange networks toward Elam and Mesopotamia, though the mechanism of this link cannot be established from iconography alone.

Keywords: Ritual Gesture, Ideology, Bronze Age, Southeastern Iran, Iconography.

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Introduction

The major settlements of southeastern Iran experienced significant economic expansion and artistic development during the Bronze Age. Several of these sites reached a scale and level of social complexity that have led scholars to describe them as proto-urban or urban centers, although the extent to which they represent fully developed urban societies remains a matter of ongoing debate. Despite their geographical separation, these communities maintained both intra-regional and long-distance connections, including interactions with Mesopotamia, through which they influenced and were influenced by neighboring cultural spheres. These interactions are reflected in a wide range of material expressions, including seals, beveled-rim bowl pottery, writing systems, plaques, anthropomorphic sculptures, and figurines. While the first three categories have received considerable scholarly attention, the ritual significance and iconographic dimensions of statues, seals, and plaques have been comparatively less explored.

The reconstruction of ritual practices in the ancient Near East is inherently constrained by the uneven distribution of archaeological and textual evidence across both time and space (Westenholz, 2013: 247). Written sources from the third millennium BCE are preserved primarily from Mesopotamia, whereas contemporary communities in southeastern Iran and neighboring regions did not leave comparable textual records (Karlovsky, 2013: 569). Consequently, evidence for religious concepts, ritual performance, and ceremonial representation in southeastern Iran remains limited and is derived mainly from specific categories of material culture, including the anthropomorphic statues of Shahdad, cylinder seals from Tepe Yahya and Shahdad, the monumental figure from Konar Sandal South (KSS), and the flat seals from the Jiroft region.

Earlier scholarship tended to emphasize direct Mesopotamian influence in explaining the emergence of ideological and artistic traditions in southeastern Iran. However, recent archaeological and epigraphic discoveries have encouraged a broader consideration of the region's interactions with Elam. In particular, the identification of early Linear Elamite inscriptions at Shahdad, recently dated through radiocarbon analysis to the early third millennium BCE (approximately 2900–2600 BCE), demonstrates the existence of an indigenous writing and visual tradition closely connected with the Elamite cultural sphere rather than representing merely a passive adoption of Mesopotamian models (Eskandari et al., 2025).

Although sculpture began depicting royal and divine figures as early as the fourth millennium BCE, relief remained one of the dominant artistic media throughout much of the ancient Near East (Benzel, 2010: 11). In

southeastern Iran, however, the available evidence for religious ideology and ceremonial expression remains relatively restricted, represented primarily through statues, seals, and specialized objects such as chlorite vessels. The recurrence of these visual forms, together with shared human representations and architectural motifs on intercultural chlorite objects, suggests the existence of broader symbolic traditions extending beyond simple imitation. Nevertheless, the interpretation of specific examples, including the Shahdad statues and the Jiroft figure, remains subject to ongoing scholarly discussion.

Research Questions: How can ritual gestures and symbolic motifs within the material culture of southeastern Iran be interpreted in the context of Bronze Age ideological expressions? 1. To what extent do similarities among archaeological sites in southeastern Iran reflect shared ritual practices, cultural interaction, or processes of local adaptation during the third millennium BCE?

Research Hypothesis: Regarding Research Question 1, it is hypothesized that these gestures and motifs functioned as expressions of ritual reverence and authority. In the absence of written sources from southeastern Iran, their probable ideological significance can be reconstructed through contextual and comparative iconographic analysis rather than through formal similarity alone. Regarding Research Question 2, it is hypothesized that the available evidence is more consistent with selective adoption and local reinterpretation than with the direct transmission of a uniform Mesopotamian or Elamite ideological system. Hypothesis 2 predicts that variations in typology, archaeological context, and chronological distribution among Shahdad, Konar Sandal, and Tepe Yahya should accompany shared formal conventions. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 focuses on the interpretation of the motifs, whereas Hypothesis 2 addresses the nature of cultural interaction and processes of local adaptation.

Research Method: This research employs a descriptive-analytical method based on published archaeological evidence from key Bronze Age sites in southeastern Iran, including Shahdad (Hakemi, 1997: 97), KSS (Madjidzadeh & Pittman, 2008: 82; Madjidzadeh, 2003: 45; 2019, Vol. 2: 171), Tepe Yahya (Potts *et al.,* 2001: 223; Lamberg-Karlovsky, 1970: 56), and Shahr-i Sokhta (Tosi, 1992: 191). Comparative evidence from Elam, particularly Susa and Anshan (Malyan), as well as Mesopotamia (Diyala, Mari, and Ur) and Central Asia (BMAC/Gonur Depe), is also examined. The primary categories of material evidence include: 1) figurines and statues depicting reverential postures; 2) seals and seal impressions

representing ritual scenes; and 3) chlorite vessels bearing architectural or temple-related motifs.

Rather than equating ideology with trade, this study focuses on a specific line of evidence: recurring gestures of reverence and architectural motifs on chlorite vessels. These elements are examined through their formal characteristics, archaeological contexts, and chronological distribution at Shahdad, KSS, and Tepe Yahya, and are compared with parallels from Elam, Mesopotamia, and Bactria-Margiana. The symbolic materials discussed here should not be understood merely as artistic objects in the modern sense; for the communities that produced them, such objects may have carried ideological and ritual significance. Accordingly, this article seeks to develop an interpretation of ideology in Bronze Age southeastern Iran by examining how ideological concepts were expressed through material culture, how they transformed over time, and how their distribution reflects both local practices and broader networks of interaction.

Research Literature

The iconographic investigation of ritual gesture motifs within the material culture of Bronze Age southeastern Iran has not yet received a comprehensive and independent study. Although several scholars have addressed aspects of this subject, most notably Hakemi's pioneering analysis of the Shahdad statues (Hakemi, 1993), the interpretation of ritual gestures as indicators of ideological practice remains insufficiently developed. Existing comparative studies are distributed across three interconnected cultural spheres: Mesopotamia, Elam, and southeastern Iran itself.

Within the Mesopotamian context, Frankfort examined the Sumerian statues from Tell Asmar and Khafajah in the Diyala region and proposed a developmental sequence spanning approximately four centuries (Frankfort, 1939). Evans analyzed Sumerian sculptures within their temple contexts (Evans, 2012), Parrot investigated stylistic developments in Sumerian statuary (Parrot, 1961), and Winter explored royal images as recipients of ritual action within Mesopotamian ideological systems (Winter, 1992). These studies provide an essential comparative framework for understanding the relationship between bodily representation, ritual behavior, and expressions of authority.

For Elam, Álvarez-Mon examined Elamite sculpture and the Susa corpus, addressing questions concerning Mesopotamian influence, imported artistic traditions, and locally produced sculpture (Álvarez-Mon, 2018, 2020). In addition, Roach's comprehensive study of Elamite

cylinder seals provides an important comparative dataset for evaluating the distribution and development of ritual gestures at Susa and Anshan (Roach, 2009). Recent chronological reassessments of Shahdad further indicate that the administrative and visual traditions of the Iranian Plateau developed alongside Elamite cultural systems, maintaining significant connections with both Highland Elam at Anshan and Lowland Susiana (Eskandari *et al.*, 2025). The present study, however, does not attempt to reconstruct Elamite religious beliefs or theological systems; rather, it focuses specifically on the material and iconographic manifestations of shared visual conventions (Ascalone, 2013).

The study of intercultural chlorite vessels and their architectural motifs by Miroschedji (1973) provides another important comparative perspective, particularly regarding the circulation of symbolic imagery across regional networks. For southeastern Iran, Ascalone classified glyptic evidence into broad stylistic phases and emphasized the connections among Shahdad, Konar Sandal, and Tepe Yahya (Ascalone, 2013). Similarly, Hakemi and Pittman documented the statues, seals, and associated archaeological materials from Shahdad and Konar Sandal (Hakemi, 1997; Madjidzadeh & Pittman, 2008). Together, these studies provide substantial evidence for cultural interaction and shared visual traditions across the Iranian Plateau.

Despite this significant body of research, a systematic examination of ritual gestures themselves, including their formal characteristics, archaeological contexts, and chronological distribution across southeastern Iran, Elam, and Mesopotamia, remains limited. The existing research gap therefore does not simply concern the study of cultural interaction; rather, it involves the absence of an integrated analysis of ritual gestures as material expressions of ideological practice.

A further challenge derives from the uneven archaeological record. Unlike Mesopotamia, southeastern Iran lacks a comparable corpus of contemporary written sources documenting deities, ritual institutions, temple hierarchies, or ceremonial practices. Moreover, despite the exceptional concentration of ritual statues at Shahdad, no securely identified shrine or temple context has yet been established for these objects. Elam represents an important intermediate comparative field because sites such as Susa and Anshan preserve both glyptic and sculptural evidence that can be examined alongside southeastern Iranian material, while simultaneously reflecting sustained interaction with Mesopotamia.

Considering these limitations, the present study examines evidence from the Bronze Age (3000–2000 BCE) in order to distinguish recurring visual conventions from assumptions of direct ideological transmission. It

further seeks to evaluate the extent to which shared motifs were adopted, modified, and locally reinterpreted within different regional contexts.

The First Representations in Southeastern Iran

Three principal ritual evidence can be identified in the material culture of southeastern Iran: 1) A human figure with hands clasped in a gesture of reverence. 2) A human figure with one hand positioned symmetrically along the body and the other bent upward from the elbow, parallel to the face. 3) Architectural or temple motifs represented on chlorite vessels and miniature objects in the form of temple structures.

1) A Human Figure with Hands Clasped in a Gesture of Reverence

In 1972, excavations in virgin soil in the Lut Desert revealed three male statues deposited as funerary offerings. Despite their relatively modest material quality, one small standing figure, with arms extended along the sides of the body, demonstrates considerable artistic sensitivity, while a second, better-proportioned bust follows the same representational convention (Kleiss *et al.,* 1973: 203). Continued excavations at Shahdad in 1973 uncovered 68 additional graves, expanding Cemetery A, which now includes more than three hundred documented burials (Hakemi, 2007: 97; Kaboli, 1986: 55). Recent radiocarbon dating of lead-based cosmetic remains from two graves provides chronological anchors for this cemetery: Grave 30 dates to 2923–2667 BCE, while Grave 338 dates approximately to 2500–2300 BCE, demonstrating that Cemetery A remained in use throughout much of the third millennium BCE (Eskandari *et al.,* 2025: 125–128).

Fifteen clay statues of a relatively standardized type, representing both male and female figures, were recovered from these graves alongside ceramics, metal objects, beads, and clay models of cubic buildings with crescent-shaped roofs (Kaboli, 1974: 4, 46; Hakemi, 2006: 98). Approximately forty statues representing the deceased individuals, ranging between 40 and 97 cm in height, were placed beside burials. Nearly all display a reverential posture, with the hands positioned over the chest, while the head and torso received more detailed modelling than the lower body (Kaboli, 1974: 46).

At KSS South in Jiroft, a large but incomplete statue discovered at the entrance of the citadel presents another example of this gesture. Its fists are positioned symmetrically below the chest on a belt, recalling the statues from Tell Asmar, and the figure may originally have held an object in its

hands (Madjidzadeh & Pittman, 2008: 82; cf. Frankfort, 1966: 46). A related bronze statuette preserved in the Jiroft Museum, although lacking a precise archaeological provenance within the Halil Rud basin, demonstrates the same symmetrical hand position above a serpent-shaped belt (author).

At Tepe Hissar, thirteen nude male copper figurines and one female figure were discovered together in a non-funerary context dating to the late third millennium BCE. This assemblage has been interpreted as a possible ceremonial deposit, and at least five examples display the same hand position observed at Shahdad, recalling bronze figurines from the Shara Temple at Tell Aqrab (Gürsan-Salzmann, 2016: 256; Evans, 2012: 168). Another more fragmentary parallel derives from a burial context at Turang Tepe in Gorgan (Wulsin, 1932).

Beyond Iran, statues displaying clasped hands are attested at Susa IV, including an example from the Susa II period carved from a single piece of marble (Álvarez-Mon, 2020: 81; 2018: 604), as well as examples associated with the area near the Manishtushu temple, dated to approximately 2700–2400 BCE. The preserved arms from these contexts can be divided into two groups: figures with hands closed above the waist, and figures with arms crossed across the chest while wearing the Mesopotamian-style long kaunakes garment (Álvarez-Mon, 2020: 89).

Within the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC), composite stone, clay, and gypsum statues from both looted and excavated tombs display the same gesture, including a seated figure from Grave 2900 (Sarianidi, 2007: 71–74, 153). At the Gelot cemetery, a marble anthropomorphic statue from a wealthy female burial has been considered stylistically closer to Old Dynastic Mesopotamian traditions than to the broader BMAC corpus (Виноградова & Кутимов, 2018: 56; Natal'ja, 2020: 647). Similar representations of clasped hands occur at Gonur Depe in both gender-neutral figurines and a burial of a young girl with crossed hands. Chlorite figurines from the same cultural sphere also appear to follow this representational convention (Sarianidi, 2007: 71–74, 153).

A limestone statue from Tarut, located in the southern Persian Gulf and dated to Old Dynastic Period II (approximately 2700 BCE), displays the same clasped-hand gesture, as does a copper hand mirror from the Barbar II temple in Bahrain (Rice, 2002: 220; Potts, 2008: 168). In contrast, the second reverential gesture, characterized by one raised or bent hand, is not represented in southeastern Iranian statuary. Outside this region, its closest parallel is a damaged bronze female statue from Tell Asmar (Frankfort, 1943: 337).

2) The Role of Ritual Reverence on Seals and Seal Impressions

Seals constitute the second major category of material culture in which these gestures are represented. Cylinder seal engraving was the dominant form of glyptic production during this period (van Dijk, 2016: 19), and the two reverential gestures identified in statuary also appear in glyptic imagery: the symmetrical clasping of hands above the belt or chest (Table 2), and, particularly in the Jiroft corpus, seated figures with one clenched fist raised toward the face (Table 3).

A Shahdad seal presents a related composition, possibly depicting an act of gift exchange, in which a seated figure extends one bent arm alongside the head (Pittman, 2016: 79). The clasped-hand gesture also appears in Ascalone's classification of southeastern Iranian metal seals, with the earliest group attributed to production centers at Shahdad and KSS. At least one copper or bronze seal depicts a standing male figure with hands symmetrically positioned on the abdomen (Hakemi, 1997: 188). Another example represents a seated plant deity facing a horned deity, both associated with the same posture, while a Tepe Yahya IVB seal depicts a winged deity with hands clasped over the abdomen (Ascalone, 2013: 4), (Fig. 1).

At least three late third-millennium BCE Bactrian seals depict serpent-necked deities in the same posture, including two examples without objects and one apparently holding an object (Winckelmann, 2000: 50).

◀ **Fig. 1: Respect with clasped hands. a. Cylinder seal from Goňur (Lamberg-Karlovsky, 2013: 26). b. Cylinder seal from Tepe Yahya (Ascalone, 2013: 8). c. Cylinder seal from Shahdad (Ascalone, 2013: 4).**

A standing female figure, interpreted as a goddess, with both hands positioned on the abdomen is represented on a Shahdad seal (Ascalone, 2013: 4). At Tepe Yahya, seals from Periods IVA and IVB[1], dated to the late third millennium BCE, depict a winged female figure with clasped hands below the abdomen among seated attendants. Each attendant is represented with one hand placed at the waist and the other extended forward (Pittman, 2001: 262, 237). Potts interprets one of these compositions, featuring two seated deities, as an Iranian parallel to the Mesopotamian mythological pairing of Inanna and Dumuzi (Potts, 1981: 139). Both reverential gestures are also attested in the published corpus of Susa cylinder seals (Roach, 2009), (Table 2).

This gesture also appears on plaques, most notably on a limestone plaque of Ur-Nanshe, king of Lagash, who is depicted with children and

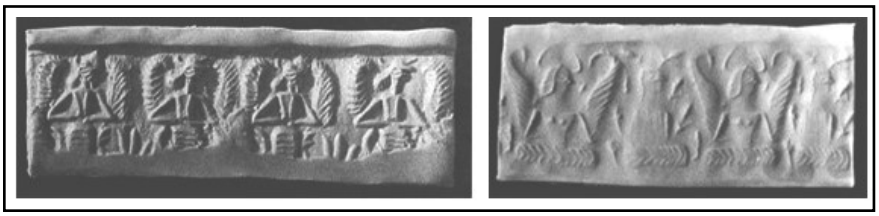
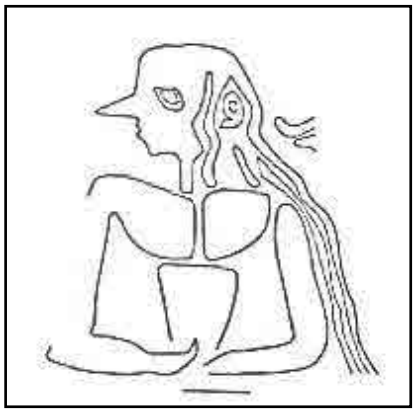


Fig. 2: Tepe Yahya seals depicting figures with hands clasped on the belly (Pittman, 2001: 261, 262). ▶



▲ Fig. 3: A type of ritual respect with both hands clasped (Majidzadeh, 2019: 298).

courtiers whose hands are folded obliquely over their abdomens, while in the lower register the king himself extends one hand to hold an object (Kramer, 1963: 64c). A small fragment of a cylinder seal from Jiroft likewise depicts a bare-chested male figure with hands respectfully closed above the abdomen (Majidzadeh, 2019: 297), (Fig. 3). Comparable to the KSS statue, this Jiroft seal is the only local glyptic example of this gesture. A related, apparently hybrid composition is attested on a cylinder seal from Goňur Depe in Bactria-Margiana (Lamberg-Karlovsky, 2013: 26; Winckelmann, 2020: 238).

The second reverential gesture, consisting of a seated figure with one hand placed at the waist and the other bent at approximately sixty degrees, perhaps in the act of offering something, is attested on several KSS seals (Majidzadeh & Pittman, 2008: 97; Majidzadeh, 2019, vol. 2: 294), on a Shahdad seal (Ascalone, 2013: 4), on a bronze pin from Shahdad (Amiet, 1974: 104), and on the Shahdad standard (Ascalone, 2013: 18), (Table 3 One rare seal combines both gestures within a single composition (Table 3 This gesture is rendered with particular clarity on the flat bronze seals of Jiroft, where seated figures on both faces hold a clenched fist before the face (Majidzadeh, 2003, vol. 2: 170–171), (Fig. 5). It also appears on another Jiroft cylinder seal from the northern mound, which shows two facing figures, one with an arm at rest and the other extended (Majidzadeh, 2019, vol. 2: 292), (Fig. 4).

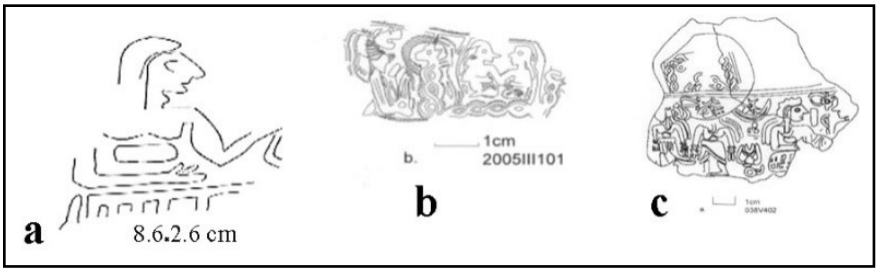


Fig. 4: Seal impression with a sign of ritual respect from KSS and KSN (Majidzadeh and Pittman, 2008: 97, 98). ▶

Comparable compositions are also attested in Mesopotamia: a disk from Lagash attributed to Eannatum I or II and dated to ca. 2450 BCE (Porada, 1993: 52); a seal that Porada associates with Kerman or Fars, showing a figure inside a circle with one hand raised to the face and flanked by two figures with raised hands (Porada, 1993: 93); and a damaged bronze

statuette catalogued by Frankfort, likely venerated in a similar manner (Frankfort, 1943: 337).

◀ **Fig. 5: A type of ritual respect with one hand on the waist and the other hand clenched into a fist and facing forward, c. 7-8 cm (Majidzadeh, 2003: 170, 171).**

3) Chlorite Motifs

Clay house models, considered ritual objects, were found in 33 graves at Shahdad, cubic in form and 20–30 cm long. Hakemi interpreted them as three-dimensional versions of the house motif on chlorite vessels and termed them shrines, and argued that they were made only at Shahdad (Hakemi, 1997: 62). Comparable models, however, are also known from Susa (Álvarez, 2020: 120), Damb Sadaat III in Balochistan (Fairservis, 1956: 228), and the Oxus culture of Central Asia (Namazga VI), (Amiet, 1977: 96). The chlorite vessels depicting a temple space likely encode a similar ideological role shared across the sites of southeastern Iran, as evident at Shahdad on a chlorite model (Hakemi, 1997: 615), on several vessels with a base showing a place of worship (Hakemi, 1997: 28–29), and occasionally on handbags (Vidale, 2017: 5), though most examples occur on vessels proper.

Chlorite vessels bearing the temple or palace motif include fragments from Susa, now in the Louvre (Miroschedji, 1973: 15), and examples from Saar in Bahrain (Potts, 2005: 70; Rice, 2002: 192). Further examples come from Tarut Island, Saudi Arabia (Porada *et al.,* 1971: 306); the Jiroft Museum, showing a standing man with one hand on his waist and the other bent toward his face (author); and a Bactrian vessel in the Louvre depicting a winged goddess with hands folded over her belly (Francfort, 2019: 259). A partial exception comes from Bampur, where carved pottery sherds each depict a doorway, recalling the chlorite vessels' architectural motif (De Cardi, 1970: 321–324), (Fig. 8); a comparable design occurs on gray pottery from Hili in the UAE, itself linked to imported third-millennium Iranian wares (Thornton, 2013: 613), (Fig. 8).

Discussion

The gesture of reverence has roots in Ubaid-period figurines, some shown with arms and elbows perpendicular to the waist and holding an object above the abdomen (Parrot, 1961: 56, 58); a comparable fifth-millennium BCE chlorite statuette in the Louvre has been attributed to southeastern

Iran (Jastrow, 2006). The closed-hand gesture may originally have involved holding a cup or jug, later simplified to empty clasped hands (Frankfort, 1943); twelve such ritual statues derive from the Abu Temple at Tell Asmar (Frankfort & Jacobsen, 1935: 55). Mesopotamian examples from the Early Dynastic through Akkadian periods show greater variety than those from southeastern Iran, differing mainly in elbow angle and the arrangement of the fingers. Hands were held at ninety degrees around an object, as at Tell Asmar; palms were pressed together with locked thumbs, as in the statue of Gudea (c. 2144–2124 BCE) from Lagash (Parrot, 1961: XXXI; Feldman, 2020: 292) and the seated Ebih-Il from the temple of Ninni-zaza at Mari (Evans, 2012: 185; Evans *et al.,* 2019: 52), (Fig. 6). This tradition continued after the fall of Akkad, as in the statue of Ishtup-ilum from Mari (Frankfort, 1966: 116). These Mesopotamian examples provide important comparative evidence, but formal similarity alone does not establish direct transmission to southeastern Iran; chronology, archaeological context, and the distribution of the motif must also be considered.

Fig. 6: Statues of respect: Ebih Il, Gudea and Ishtup Ilum. A. Statue of Ishtup Ilum from Mari (Frankfort, 1966: 116). B. Statue of Godea from Lagash (Parrot, 1961: XXXI). C. Statue of Ebih Il from Mari (Evans, 2012: 185). ▶

A third position is defined by the elbow resting upon the abdomen and inclined slightly upward, with two fingers interlocked over the hand; this configuration appears on the statues of Lugal-dalu and Nin-kisalsi (Banks, 1912: 191) from Adab, and on a statue from the Temple of Nintu V at Khafajah, although at the latter the hand and elbow are held straight (Frankfort, 1943: 214). Khafajah has likewise produced four further minor variants: one open hand laid across the other; an elbow angled toward the chest with fingers intertwined; both hands raised and crossed; and hands crossed at right angles (Frankfort, 1943: 209). Virtually all eight positions recur among the Shahdad statues (Table 1).

A related yet distinct posture is attested on Jiroft seals, where one hand is absent and the other is held at a right angle to the body, clenched into

a fist and sometimes grasping an object such as a beaker—a convention equally common among the Tell Asmar ritual statues (Frankfort & Jacobsen, 1935: 56). Royal images in this idiom favour idealized over individualized features, conveying either piety (the ruler as servant of the gods and temple builder) or power (the ruler as protector and expander of territory). Static, closed-handed, wide-eyed statues were installed in temples to embody the ruler's eternal presence, whereas more dynamic acts of piety or construction, as depicted on the Ur-Nanshe plaque (Kramer, 1963: 64c), were rendered in narrative relief. Sumerian ritual practice displays both continuity and variation among its participants (Westenholz, 2013: 247); Frankfort interpreted the Khafajah statues as connected to a fertility deity (Frankfort & Jacobsen, 1935: 54, 59). The surviving material suggests that both gestures underwent change during the third millennium: an object held in the hand (a beaker or similar) was gradually replaced by empty clasped hands, while the gesture itself shifted in status, originally reserved for deities, it was extended to kings and rulers by the mid-third millennium and, by its close, to courtiers standing before the king. The second gesture, although it became common later, appears to have followed the same trajectory. Woolley's 1930–31 excavations at the public chapels of Ur recovered a statue of Pabilsag dating to the Ur III period in the same clasped-hands posture (Woolley, 1931: 270). Unlike Mesopotamia, statues and figurines from southeastern Iran exhibit no consistency in type, size, material, or findspot: the Shahdad examples derive from graves, whereas Shahr-i Sokhta, despite its scale and its regional and transregional connections, has produced figurines but no comparable statues, an absence equally true of Mundigak in the Helmand region.

At Tepe Hissar, by contrast, the figurines differ in material and originate from a ritual rather than funerary context; such funerary and ceremonial practice more broadly serves to enact and reinforce elite ideological authority (Laneri, 2007: 6). No comparable figurine has been identified in Bronze Age Tepe Yahya, apart from a tentative candidate: a schematic fifth-millennium chlorite figurine from Period VII, possibly female (Beale *et al.,* 1986: 200). At the KSS citadel, the large statue recovered there has no parallel at any Bronze Age site in the region and likely signals the importance of ideology at that centre (Madjidzadeh and Pittman, 2008: 80). The Shahdad statues most closely resemble those of Khafajah and Tell Asmar (Eshnunna), mostly of Early Dynastic II date, though of markedly inferior quality: attention focused on the upper body, hands, and facial detail, with hair carefully rendered in only one instance. Kaboli considers the seated, hunched posture of one Shahdad statue closest to examples from

the Inanna temple at Nippur (Kaboli, 1986: 56–57); the earliest Shahdad statues were too idiosyncratic to date by comparison, whereas the 1974 finds permit more secure comparison (Amiet, 1976: 3). Because no temple has yet been identified at Shahdad and all statues come from graves, direct comparison with the temple-based ritual use documented in Mesopotamia is not straightforward. Most published Tell Asmar/Eshnunna statues, apart from four from a residential area, came from a temple built in the late Jemdet Nasr period and used into Akkadian (Sargonic) times (Frankfort, 1939: 2), and Early Dynastic sculpture more generally derives mainly from temple contexts (Al-Gailani, 2013: 379). Nearly thirty comparable statues, 15–30 cm high, come from Mari in Syria, some with hands on the belly in the same reverent posture (Parrot, 1938: 22); Parrot saw statuary developing regionally over three or four centuries, a trend most visible in the Diyala region rather than at Mari or in the Sumerian south (Parrot, 1961: 65). The most notable Shahdad statue shares the arm position and hairstyle of a Pre-Sargonid II statue and, like the earliest finds, lacks legs; its modelling likely drew on models widespread in central Mesopotamia. This differs from the 1973 find, whose posture instead follows an old Elamite tradition traceable on Susa I seals and later in the marble statues of the so-called Ancient Mines (Amiet, 1976: 3). Karlovsky's comparison of the Shahdad material with Hiebert's Central Asian finds established clear links to Turkmenistan, especially the Namazga VI horizon; he noted painted round architectural fragments built around the body in Shahdad graves, accompanying burial gifts, and in one case a statue that had fallen face down (Karlovsky & Hiebert, 1992: 135). Statues from Goňur resemble those from Shahdad in some respects and differ in others but share the same style and hand placement (Sarianidi, 2007: 71), supporting Karlovsky's connection. This round architectural burial feature points to a local Shahdad ritual; despite superficial similarities to Mesopotamian and Indus Valley sculpture, differences in size, material, and context indicate a distinct local tradition, with some effort to localize production (Eskandari *et al.,* 2021: 42). Following Hodder, such decoration can function as a symbolic and ritual response to ambiguity and anxiety in daily life (Hodder, 1992: 87); the harsh desert environment of Shahdad may be one such context, and the ideological significance of figures depicted in the act of venerating a ruler should not be underestimated (Westhead, 2015: 64).

In the Indus Valley and at Harappan sites, as well as in southern Afghanistan, this mode of reverence is absent from statues and figurines. In particular, the highly detailed statues from the Zhob and Loralai regions (Fairservis, 1959) and the Quetta Valley display no engagement with this

style (see: Fairservis, 1952: 14; 1956: 224, 225). It remains uncertain whether the statue from southern KSS represents a king, a priest-king, or a deity, because the identity of the structure, whether palace or temple, has not been established. The excavator, however, considered this structure a citadel (Madjidzadeh and Pittman, 2008: 82). Owing to the loss of the statue's head, the only basis for identifying it as a deity is the position of the hands, which are arranged in the manner of Sumerian gods at Tell Asmar and elsewhere. In the Sumerian period, such a gesture of reverence occurs in both kings (e.g., Gudea) and priests. Consequently, it is possible that, given eastern adaptations from Mesopotamia and unlike Mesopotamia, the architectural spaces of governance and worship were in the same place. Confirmation of this point, however, requires further data. This statue also appears in the Tell Asmar glyptic list (Nos. 616, 580, 617, 618, 713, 940), where, of course, not the god himself but one of his two attendants displays such a sign of reverence (see: Frankfort & Jacobsen, 1955). It appears that in Early Dynastic I and II, unlike statues found in palaces, such gestures of reverence on seals were rare, and emphasis fell on naturalistic and mythological motifs (Ibid: 1955). This gradually increased from the Early Dynastic III period, and in the Akkadian period both styles can be seen in greater numbers. In southeastern Iran, the same pattern was observed, with the Shahdad statues from Cemetery A overlapping with much of the chronology of the Takab IV1 and III1 cemeteries (Hakemi, 1997: 75). It must be said, however, with high probability that these statues relate to Takab IV1, where such statues were more common during Early Dynastic I and II. The second type of ritual posture, by contrast, may relate to the Early Dynastic III and Akkadian periods. In the case of Jiroft, the second type of reverence described above seems to have been more widespread; at least the seals and seal impressions suggest this. Given that the seals of KSS production (Trench III) are dated to ca. 2500/2400–2300 BCE (Ascalone, 2013: 4), their prevalence is much earlier than that of the type A seals, which date to the Akkadian period (Ibid: 4). According to the classification of the Susa seals (Roach, 2009) and given that both seal styles mentioned at Susa relate to the pre-Akkadian (Susa IV) and Akkadian periods, Ascalone's chronology can be confirmed. The situation in southern Turkmenistan during this period differs: the motifs on the seals found there have many similarities to those of the Iranian Plateau. Winckelmann relates several of these seals to the Shahdad site and the late third-millennium Bactrian cultural horizon (Winckelmann, 2020: 272; Winckelmann, 2000: 70). It remains unclear to what extent these motifs reflect cultural influences, the adoption of an ideology, or their use in a ritual role. There is, however, an

exceptional example of a chlorite vial (Francfort, 2019: 259) on which a winged goddess is depicted with her hands clasped on her belly (Vidale, 2020: 319), (Table 2), a motif that has no counterpart in southeastern Iran. Jiroft's connections with chlorite exports to southern Mesopotamia have been established for this period (Perrot and Madjidzadeh, 2005: 147). The strong emphasis on this type of reverence at Jiroft, which was prevalent in Mesopotamia in the mid-third millennium, indicates the importance of ideological influences through cultural connections. This gesture became more common on seals during the Early Dynastic III and Akkadian periods, while the number of statues in temples decreased. All these factors seem to indicate a changing pattern of ideology in Mesopotamia and subsequently in southeastern Iran. Especially at Shahdad, these changes are also visible on bronze objects. Madjidzadeh and Pittman attributed the Jiroft seals to Early Dynastic IIIa, around 2400 BCE (Madjidzadeh and Pittman, 2008: 101), which is approximately the same time as the prevalence of this ideology. Perhaps, considering the chronology of the Tepe Yahya seals, which, according to Pittman (Potts *et al.,* 2001: 232), relate to the Old Akkadian period and are dated around 2400–2200 BCE, it would be more accurate to include part of Early Dynastic III in the dating of these seals. As emphasized above, according to Karlovsky, although there is a 200–300-year difference between the end of the Tepe Yahya IVC chronology and the beginning of the IVB period (see: Potts *et al.,* 2001: 276; Mutin & Karlovsky, 2013: 291), the pre-Sargonic period, or even the latter part of Early Dynastic III, seems a more reasonable starting point for this period. In particular, the chlorite fragment like the Tepe Yahya style (Fig. 7), which Frankfort and Jacobsen attribute to the temple of Sin at Khafajah (Frankfort & Jacobsen, 1935: 49), relates to Early Dynastic III. With this argument, the settlement gap at Tepe Yahya between the IVC and IVB periods can be considered narrower, according to Kohl, an estimated 200–300 years. Although the seals and statues found in Central Asia and in the Oxus, culture are very similar to the Shahdad complex (Table 3), according to Karlovsky (Karlovsky, 2013: 59), the radiocarbon chronology of Gonur Depe is reduced to about 2100–1800 BCE. This, of course, somewhat aligns with Potts' chronology of an Elamite cup depicting a woman, found near Persepolis, which was compared to a cup from Gonur. This site was attributed, with high probability, to the Elamite Shimashki dynasty and the time of Puzur-Šušinak (c. 2240–2220 BCE), (Potts, 2008: 191), overlapping with Karlovsky's chronology of Gonur Depe by about 100 years. Sarianidi also dates the seals found in the BMAC to the late third millennium and Namazga Depe VI (Sarianidi, 2003: 77), and estimates

the Bactrian objects as contemporary with Ur III, dating them to 2140–2000 BCE. Hiebert dated Namazga VI to 1750 BCE (Hiebert, 1994: 374), and Philip Kohl dated Namazga VI to the late third millennium and the first half of the second millennium BCE (Kohl, 2007: 180). Lyonnet and Dubova also date Namazga VI between 1900 and 1700 BCE. Dubova's chronology (Lyonnet & Dubova, 2020: 8) of Gonur is closer to reality and dates the beginning of Gonur to 2300 BCE (Dubova, 2019: 30; Lyonnet & Dubova, 2020: 8), which also overlaps with the Shahdad and Tepe Yahya seal inscriptions. Instead of relying on Mesopotamian diffusionist models, the Iranian Plateau's ritual repertoire can be better understood through its deep connections to Elam. The presence of the earliest datable Linear Elamite text in Grave 30 at Shahdad (Eskandari *et al.,* 2025), found alongside chlorite cosmetic vials with architectural motifs, establishes that Shahdad was an active participant in the Elamite cultural and visual network from the early third millennium BCE. This suggests that shared reverential gestures, such as clasped hands or raised fists, were part of a long-standing highland Iranian and Elamite visual continuum rather than secondary adaptations of Mesopotamian royal imagery.

The first gesture of reverence prevalent at Susa is absent, at least from seals and statues, during the early Elamite period (ca. 3100–2900 BCE), becoming common only in Susa IVA (ca. 2600–2400 BCE). Even in the Akkadian Susa IVB period, it remains very rare, at least on seals and statues. Álvarez attributed the statues found at Susa during Akkadian domination to Mesopotamian workshops (Álvarez, 2020: 90), making it difficult to regard them as indigenous or to gauge their influence on the southeastern Iranian sphere. These statues display decoration and carving comparable to Mesopotamian examples, being mostly of stone and similar in form and construction. Elite-sponsored monumental sculpture from Susa broadly follows Mesopotamian stylistic conventions, although recent reassessments favor a range of overlapping styles over the older two-phase "geometric" versus "realistic" model, drawing on comparanda from Eshnunna and Mari (Álvarez-Mon, 2020: 89). Unlike in southeastern Iran, however, these figurines cannot be considered indigenous to Susa. This situation is better explained by the assumption that temple objects were periodically renewed, with old or worn pieces buried or discarded in temple grounds. Thus, broken and damaged statues lie scattered in a layer beneath a certain floor level in Court K of the Temple of Sin and the Temple of Single at Tell Asmar (Frankfort, 1939: 16). The context in which the Susa statues were found lies near a shrine (Álvarez, 2020: 89), evidence for the prevalence of ritual worship and ideological use at Susa. Owing to

Akkadian dominance during this period, the possibility of Elamite interest in this style remains unclear.

According to Roach's epigraphic index, neither category of theme appears at Susa IV, but seals bearing the second type of reverential gesture were common in Akkadian-period Susa (see: Roach, 2009, vol. II: part II), although a mixed role is also attested (Roach's Glyptic Catalogue, nos. 2125, 2138, 2141). During Akkadian rule, Elam itself had been conquered by the Akkadians, making it difficult to separate Elamite from Akkadian art in this material. In the Akkadian-period seal catalogue from Susa, the first style of reverential gesture (both hands clasped) is more common (Roach, 2009, vol. II, part II: 333–337), whereas on seals from Anshan (Tal-e Malyan), the second style (one hand closed, one open), also common in southeastern Iran from the second half of the third millennium onward, is more frequent (Roach, 2009, vol. II, part II: 362–419), indicating a strong connection between southeastern Iran and Susa during the Awan and Shimashki periods. In the Susa IV period, seal imagery already shows the pose with one hand open and one closed (Roach, 2009, vol. II, part I: 307), although the frequency of this theme rises sharply in Akkadian-period Susa. Both types of reverential gesture occur together on seals of early Elamite date from Chogha Mish (Delougaz *et al.,* 1996: pl. 150, 152), and the clasped hands pose also appears on early Elamite figurines from the same site (Alizadeh, 2008: pl. 26). Two stone figures from the time of Puzur-Inshushinak (c. 2100 BCE), one representing the goddess Narundi, show both hands held on the abdomen in the same respectful pose (Majidzadeh, 1991: 111–112), alongside a small female figure and a nude female figure dated to the early second millennium BCE (Majidzadeh, 1991: 123, 128). More than fifty fragmentary female figurines from Anshan display the same variation seen at Susa, some with hands on the abdomen in the clasped pose and others with hands on the chest (Sumner & Reiner, 1974: 170). Most Shahdad statues are male, except for one or two that may be considered female. It is notable that both types of reverential gesture occur at Shahdad. The importance of these statues emerges from the large number of clay models of cubic architectural or temple designs with crescent roofs found in the tombs (Hakemi, 1997: 48), as well as bottles (flacons) significant both for their architectural form and their inscriptions (Hakemi, 1997: 28). Both house models and human statues were recovered from Cemetery A, dating them to the second half of the third millennium BCE (Eskandari, 2021: 42), and perhaps even a century earlier, given the Mesopotamian examples. Connections between Bactrian materials and Shahdad were numerous and significant, reflected in the degree of iconographic similarity as well as the

technologies used to produce the most complex metal and stone objects, from seals to ornaments and tools. Trade cannot be considered the sole explanatory factor. Not only did economic exchanges link Kerman with Bactria and Margiana, but shared ideologies also permeated this system, shaping political structures and religious beliefs (Salvatori & Tosi, 1997: 122).

According to Karlovsky, in the latter half of the third millennium, the Iranian plateau was characterized by a union of kingdoms, each independent, interacting, and self-sufficient (Karlovsky, 2001: 279). Geographical proximity, environmental similarity, shared cultural heritage, integrated exchange systems, and mutual ideologies were the coordinating factors behind the results of growing integration.

At the end of the third millennium B.C., the northern hill in the Gonur 1 area of the Namazga VI complex, where in the second half of the third millennium B.C. objects were found in palaces and rich burial contexts, reveals a cultural identity shared with objects from the southwest. Additionally, the proximity of Namazga V productions to the Elamite world contributed to this connection. All this economic wealth fostered advanced forms of political integration, which, in the second half of the third millennium B.C., brought the region into direct contact with Shahdad and the emerging state formations of the Kerman region after 2300 B.C. (Salvatori & Tosi, 1997: 131). The seal found in the palace temple of North Gonur, which has been discussed in relation to connections between southern Turkmenistan and the Iranian plateau, is an indication of the ideological connections between southern Turkmenistan and the Iranian plateau during this period.

The ideological connections between Shahdad and Central Asia seem to have been close, since the first type of ritual respect is dominant at both sites, while at Jiroft the second type of respect was much more pronounced. It appears that in ancient Mesopotamia, it was generally believed that most humans survived after death in the form of spirits or ghosts living in the underworld. One of the duties of the living was to offer offerings of food, drink, and oil to their deceased relatives. Extensive records from Girsu, dating to the Early Dynastic period, provide evidence of offerings made before the cult statues of deceased rulers and members of the ruling family. It is assumed that these statues were originally made by living individuals to stand in temples and pray continuously to the gods. After the death of the donors, the statues could not be moved and therefore received offerings (Black *et al.,* 1998: 34). It is difficult to determine the function of these statues on the Iranian plateau because there is no written record to provide

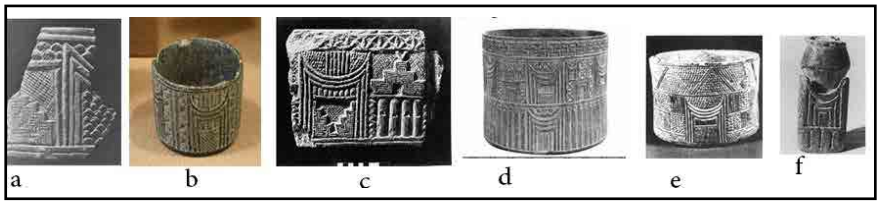
sufficient information about them. For example, Sarianidi suggests that these statues represent the deceased (which seems unlikely), local deities, or possibly images of a fertility goddess, such as the Sumerian Inanna (Sarianidi, 2007: 73–74), a view that differs somewhat from Hakemi's.

The importance of this type of ritual respect is also seen in Mesopotamian seals. In the list of Sumerian seals from the Diyala region, published by Frankfort, several seals depict such scenes (seal nos. 582, 586, and 612–618). Of course, the same posture, with an object in hand, is also seen on seals (seal nos. 591, 592, 593, 619, and 620), (Frankfort, 1955). Additionally, the features mentioned in these seals appear in the seal collection of Edward Knoll, published by von der Osten, in seals classified as Sumerian and Neo-Akkadian to Old Babylonian (von der Osten, 1934: 5, 6). In these, a god seated on a chair in the same style, with the same hand angle and gesture, is depicted giving something to a figure in front of him (plates XII, XIII, XV). This scene seems to have been a favorite of the Akkadians, as evidenced by a cylinder seal from the Akkadian period in which Ea, the water god, is shown seated on a chair, the only difference being that his fingers are open (Black *et al.,* 1998: 110, 117). Most Akkadian seals from the Diyala region depict the hand angled forward, offering something like a beaker, and later appearing empty-handed. Only one seal from this period (Glyptic Catalogue No. 700), (Frankfort & Jacobsen, 1955: plate 65) shows a gesture of reverence with hands clasped facing each other, involving a row of humans. During the Akkadian period, scenes of reverence or worship and theatrical scenes in which a human figure is led before a seated god became popular (Van Dijk, 2016: 264). A gray steatite seal from the Old Babylonian dynasty, found in Failaka, Kuwait, shows two gods seated facing each other (Potts, 2010: 24). The figures hold hands opposite and parallel to each other; although this seal differs in time from the one at Jiroft, it is similar in general pattern. At Susa, scenes depicting ideologically charged activities, such as combat and religious ceremonies, are usually accompanied by a larger-than-usual male figure representing a "king-priest" or city ruler. In contrast, scenes depicting various types of economic activity, such as agricultural labor and storage of agricultural produce, the transport of goods, herding of mountain goats and cattle, and the processing of wool and dairy products, are usually associated with niched buildings. The facades are generally thought to represent temples and/or palaces, based on similarities with excavated architecture (Algaze, 2009: 132). The angled hand position facing the body, with the elbows outstretched, is a common Akkadian motif, often showing a seated figure (king?) facing a standing figure. Another seal (seals 41–46) shows this

position. Several seals from the Third Dynasty of Ur are also of this type (49–51), (Eisen, 1940: VI, VII).

Images of gods, rulers, spirits, demons, and other beings, creatures, and symbols constantly surrounded the people of the ancient Near East. The visual impact of seeing these images everywhere on a daily basis is imaginable, and unlike much of contemporary Western art, these representations were not simply intended to record images or ideas, but to be imbued with the true essence and power of whoever or whatever they represented, thereby effecting change in the world (Benzel, 2010: 129).

In shared ideological concepts, the discussion of replica shrines and the role of the shrine on chlorite vessels as a sign of respect, similar to the Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods, is significant. On the chlorite vessels found in the Halil Rud area (Perrot & Madjidzadeh, 2006: 142), and also at Tepe Yahya (Karlovsky, 1970: 56; Potts *et al.,* 2001: 223), the importance of temple-like architectural design (Fig. 7) is evident on the chlorite vessels and plaques. The possibility that these vessels, which mainly emphasize ideological and mythological scenes and deal less with everyday matters, are related to a large temple located in southeastern Iran is not implausible, because a common motif of the architectural façade is repeated in the Halil Rud area, Tepe Yahya, and Shahdad.



◀ **Fig. 7: Types of temple models from chlorite vessels in southeastern Iran and the southern edge of the Persian Gulf. a. Tarout, gray steatite Height, 4.9 cm (Porada et al., 1971: 316). b. Khafajah (Frankfort and Jakobsen, 1935: 49). c. Tepe yahya (Karlovsky, et al., 2001: 223). d. Jiroft, (Perrot and Madjidzadeh, 2006: 140). e. Saar (Potts, 1992: 193). f. Shahdad (Hakemi, 1997: 29).**

Ascalone (2013: 21) attributes these common motifs, which are referred to as the Intercultural Style, to the second half of the third millennium B.C. However, the repetition of some architectural motifs on chlorite vessels in southeastern Iran is also related to certain ideological concepts. There is considerable evidence for an institutionally managed exchange that was conducted and supported by the temples and city palaces of early Mesopotamia in the third and second millennia B.C. Undoubtedly, as Polanyi claimed, a large part of this exchange was aimed at satisfying the ideological, not economic, needs of the early Mesopotamian religious and political elites (Algaze, 2009: 18). The importance of southeastern Iran's contacts with Mesopotamia cannot be ignored; the most obvious example was the chlorite and lapis lazuli vessels. This exchange introduced both material and non-material elements, but it should be noted that there was also an attempt to create a degree of ideological independence from

Mesopotamia, and that ideology became localized. The role of the temple, as seen on chlorite vessels from a range of sites in Iran, Mesopotamia, and the Persian Gulf, and whose origin dates back to southeastern Iran, indicates the presence of a significant temple in this region. The emphasis on the depiction of this role (apart from the issue of imitation in construction or a single origin) perhaps reflects its importance and sanctity. Religious categories, in other words, can carry direct economic functions just as 'high-status items' can serve as purely ideological symbols; while religion and wealth are easily distinguished at the level of cultural content, their function in material reproduction is harder to separate. This suggests that the dominant social structures or relations that organize production and reproduction may also organize other activities such that no cultural distinction is made between the economic and the non-economic (Kristiansen, 1984: 76).

Fagan argues that the combination of economic control over resources and the distribution of food and wealth, the development and maintenance of a stratified social system and its ideology, and the ability to maintain control by force were crucial to early states. Each of these domains was closely related to the others, but they can be studied separately in archaeology. Economic power depends on the ability to organize more specialized production and the various tasks of storing and distributing food. Over time, wealth stored in food and goods becomes dependent on relationships between those who produce or acquire wealth and those who control and distribute it. Economic power also relies on trade and long-distance exchange networks that provide access to goods not available locally (Fagan & Durrani, 2018: 273). Fagan and Durrani emphasize elsewhere that ideology did not cause the emergence of states; rather, after the emergence of states, it became an important and immutable part of their structure (Ibid: 276).

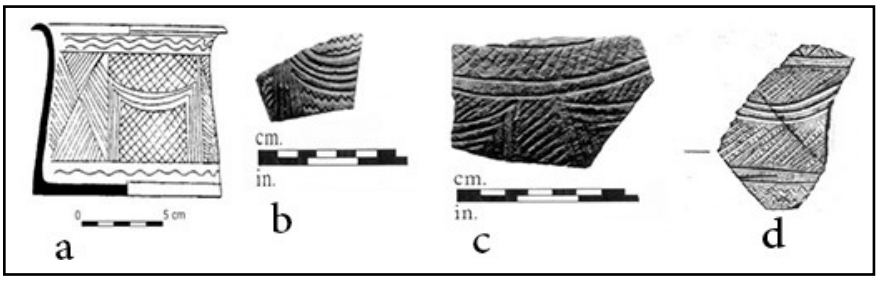


Fig. 8: a. Pottery with the motif of a temple entrance. Hili UAE Pottery from UAE (Thornton, 2013: 613). b, c, d, Pottery from Bampur Iran (De Cardi, 1970: 323). ▶

Westhead cites Ross, who states that cultures may maintain multiple, overlapping, or conflicting ideologies, although one usually dominates the others (Westhead, 2015: 11). Several external and internal factors may have altered the distribution and expression of ideology in southeastern Iran,

including environmental conditions, the extent of contact with Mesopotamia and Elam, local developments, changing political configurations, and the differing social contexts of individual communities. Potts attributes the motif on the Saar vessel, which depicts the front of a temple or shrine, to Sumerian designs also found in Elam (Potts, 1992: 192). Whatever its precise origin, the recurrence of architectural and gestural motifs suggests that ritual symbols could operate as social and political resources as well as ritual forms. Symbolic resources or prestige items may help focus attention on political power and the economic aspirations of emerging elites (Knapp, 1988: 156). The evidence from Shahdad and Jiroft is therefore important for comparative studies of the reproduction of ritual symbols in southeastern Iran. At the same time, the presence of both reverence gestures should not by itself be taken as proof of a centralized political structure; rather, it indicates the existence of shared symbolic conventions that could have been mobilized by elites in different local contexts. Ideology was not a stagnant phenomenon during the Bronze Age of southeastern Iran: material remains, especially chlorite vessels, reveal considerable ritual and ideological complexity (Knapp, 1988: 155).

Understanding this complexity requires attention to local forms of governance, the distances separating communities, and their differing social situations. Karlovsky cautions that political labels such as "Shimashki" can impose a coherence on what was probably a more complex and locally autonomous cultural landscape, and that such labels tell us little about indigenous social, ritual, economic, and political structures on the Iranian plateau (Karlovsky, 2013: 573). The material evidence indicates that several of the sites examined here shared certain ideological themes, expressed through funerary objects, seals, and carved figures (Pittman, 2013: 312), with the notable exception of Shahr-i Sokhta, where comparable ritual works are not well represented. Jiroft, Shahdad, and Tepe Yahya, by contrast, share several such elements, although differences in their archaeological contexts and in the frequency of particular gestures point to independent local expressions. The evidence therefore supports interaction and selective sharing rather than complete ideological homogeneity. The seal evidence from Anshan (Tal-e Malyan) and Susiana shows a strong regional alignment with southeastern Iran. In particular, the emergence of Linear Elamite script at Shahdad during the early third millennium B.C. (Eskandari *et al.,* 2025) confirms that visual and administrative tools circulated directly along the Elamite–southeastern Iranian axis, weakening the argument for direct Mesopotamian dominance in elite representation. These gestures served as markers of social status,

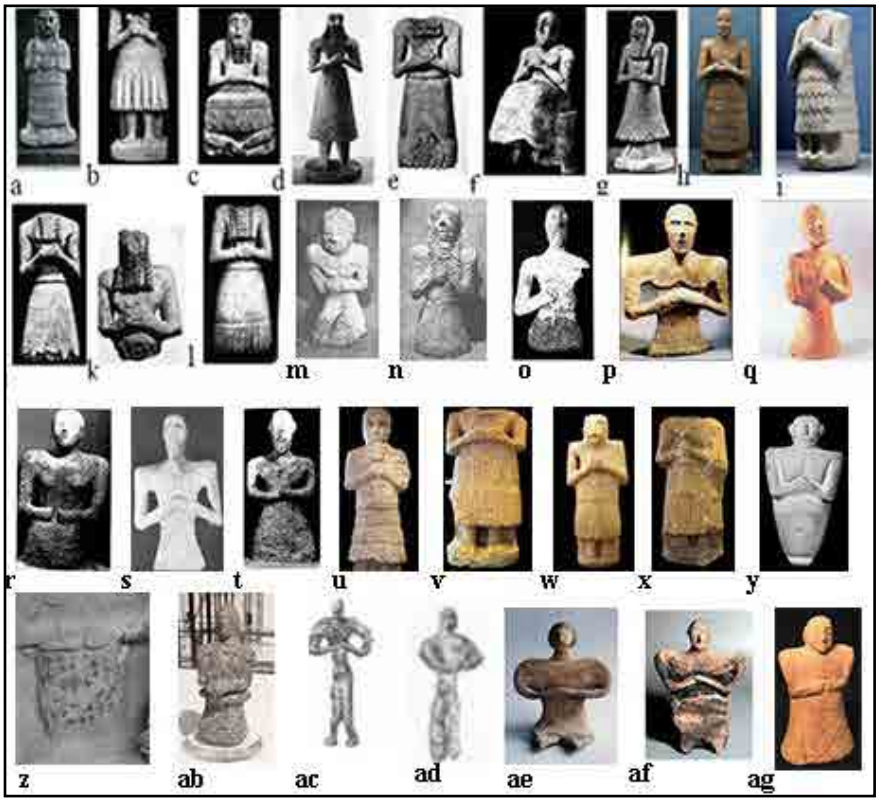


Table 1: Statues found in Mesopotamia and the Iranian Plateau. a. Statue of Ur (Woolley, 1931: 276). b. Statue from the Temple of Nintu V in Khafajah (Frankfort, 1943: 216). c. Statue from the Temple of Nintu V in Khafajah (Frankfort, 1943: 215). d. The square temple of Abu at Tell Asmar (Frankfort, 1943: 340). e. A statue from the Shara Temple at Tell Aqrab (Frankfort, 1943: 266). f. Statue of Ebih-Il from Mari (Parrot, 1938: VIII). g. Khafajah, the temple of Nintu V, (Frankfort, 1943: 209). h. Adab (Banks, 1912: 191). i. Adab (Banks, 1912: 443). j. Statue from the Temple of Nintu V in Khafajah (Frankfort, 1943: 227). k. A statue from the Shara Temple at Tell Aqrab (Frankfort, 1943: 263). l. Statue from the Temple of Nintu V in Khafajah (Frankfort, 1943: 214). m. Shahdad, 50×25 cm (Amiet, 1976: 4). n. Shahdad, (Amiet, 1976: 4). o. Shahdad, 64×50 cm (Hakemi, 1997: 457). p. Shahdad, (Kleiss *et al.*, 1973, n.p.). q. Shahdad, (Hakemi, 2006: 20). r. Shahdad, 55×31 cm (Hakemi, 1997: 347). s. Shahdad, 47×71 cm (Hakemi, 1997: 300). t. Shahdad, 29×60 cm (Hakemi, 1997: 382). u–y. Susa, u, statue, 50×12 cm, w, 27×12 cm, y, 1.8×5.7 cm (Álvarez, 2020: 90). x. Susa II, 19×12 cm (Álvarez, 2018: 604). z. Jiroft South KSS, statue (Madjidzadeh & Pittman, 2008: 82). ab. Jiroft Museum (author). ac–ad. Tepe Hissar (Gürsan-Salzmann, 2016: 257). ae–af. Gonur Depe (Sarianidi, 2007: 71, 72). ag. Gelot Cemetery (Natal'ja, 2020: 652). ▶

authority, and administrative affiliation rather than formal indicators of specific religious doctrines.

Conclusion

The evidence reviewed above suggests that two principal gestures of respect, namely clasped hands and the one-hand-open, one-hand-closed or raised gesture, together with the architectural motif on chlorite vessels, can reasonably be interpreted as components of ritual and ideological expression. Their recurrence on statues, figurines, seals, and vessels, as well as their association with funerary and other significant archaeological contexts, supports interpretations related to reverence, authority, and ritual practice. However, iconography alone cannot establish a single or precise religious meaning. Therefore, the first hypothesis is supported, although the ideological significance of these motifs remains probabilistic rather than definitive. The similarities among Shahdad, Konar Sandal, and Tepe Yahya do not indicate complete ritual homogeneity. Instead, differences in chronology, frequency, and archaeological context suggest selective adoption and local reinterpretation. The clasped-hands gesture appears earlier and more widely, whereas the one-hand-open, one-hand-closed or raised gesture becomes more prominent during the second half of the

Northeast Iran and Central Asia	Southwest Iran	Mesopotamia	Shahdad and Jiroft	Tepe Yahya
				-
	-	-	-	-

◀Table 2: Seals, Seal Impressions, and Other Objects Mentioned in the Text. Guide: A. Bactrian seal (Winckelmann, 2000: 50). B. Seal from Susa IVA (Matthews and Fazeli Nashli, 2022: 348). C. Akkadian seal from Diyala (Frankfort & Jacobsen, 1955: pl. 65). D. Shahdad (Hakemi, 1997: 661). E. Tepe Yahya (Karlovsky, 1970: 71). F. Bactrian/ BMAC seal (Winckelmann, 2000: 50). G. Susa (Roach, 2009: 333). H. Chlorite vessel from Bactria (Francfort, 2019: 259). I. KSS (Majidzadeh, 2019: 298). J. Shahdad (Amiet, 1974: 105). K. Tepe Yahya (Pittman, 2001: 263). L. Bactrian seal (Winckelmann, 2000: 50). M. Early Dynastic III (Porada, 1993: pl. IX). N. Shahdad copper/bronze stamp seal (Hakemi, 1997: 188). O. Tepe Yahya (Amiet, 1974: 106). P. Bactria (Salvatori, 1989:58). Q. Tepe Yahya (Pittman, 2001: 262). R. Gonur temple (Karlovsky, 2013: 26). S. Bronze female statue, Tell Asmar (Frankfort, 1943: 337). U. Akkadian seal (Al-Gailani, 2013: 389). V. Akkadian seal (Eisen, 1940: VI). W. Human figure, Jiroft Museum (author). X. Seal of Chogha Mish (Delougaz et al., 1996: pl. 150). Y. Seal of Susa related to Ur III (Roach, 2009: 390). Z. Female bone figurine from Chogha Mish (Alizadeh, 2008: pl. 26). AB. Figurine from Tal-e Malyan (Sumner and Reiner, 1974: 171).

third millennium B.C. Accordingly, the second hypothesis is supported, as the evidence is more consistent with localized adaptation than with the transmission of a uniform ideological system. The comparison with Elam is particularly important in this interpretation. Evidence from Susa and Anshan demonstrates both similarities and differences in the distribution of these gestures across periods and object categories, highlighting Elam as a major comparative context for southeastern Iran. Mesopotamian parallels likewise demonstrate the existence of a broader regional visual repertoire, but they should not be regarded as evidence of a single direction of direct transmission. Overall, the evidence supports a connected Bronze Age interaction sphere involving southeastern Iran, Elam, Mesopotamia, the Persian Gulf, and Central Asia. Within this sphere, visual and ritual conventions circulated across regions but were adapted to local social and archaeological contexts. The archaeological record therefore favors a model of selective transmission, local reinterpretation, and overlapping ritual traditions rather than a single homogeneous ideology.

Table 3: Comparative of Artifacts: Susa / Persian Gulf / Central Asia – Mesopotamia – Jiroft – Shahdad (Authors, 2025). ▶

Susa / Persian Gulf / Central Asia	Mesopotamia	Jiroft	Shahdad
Susa, Akkadian Related Style (Roach, 2009: 337)	Cylinder seal of the Akkadian Period (Black *et al.*, 1998: 110)	Seal impression (Majidzadeh & Pittman, 2008: 97)	Shahdad Standard Flag (Ascalone, 2013: 18)
Plaque from Susa IVA (Álvarez, 2020: 85)	Plaque associated with Ur-Nanshe (Kramer, 1963: 64c)	(Majidzadeh & Pittman 2008: 98)	Cylinder seal (Pittman, 2016: 79)
Early Babylonian from Failaka, Kuwait (Potts, 2010: 24)	Seal from Girsu (Cros et al., 1910: 143)	Seal Impression of KSS (Majidzadeh & Pittman, 2008: 98)	Bronze pin (Amiet, 1974: 104)
Seal of Gonur (Winkelmann, 2020: 274)		Seal of Lapis Lazuli (Majidzadeh, 2003: 171)	
	Akkadian seal (Eisen, 1940: VI)	Seal of Lapis Lazuli (Majidzadeh, 2003: 171)	
	Akkadian seal (Al-Gailani, 2013: 389)	Jiroft Museum (Author)	
	Late Akkadian seal (Frankfort, 1955: pl. 58:616)	Seal impression from KSN (Majidzadeh, 2019: Vol. 2: 294)	

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Conflict of Interest

In adherence to ethical publication standards, the author affirm that there are no conflicts of interest, either personal or financial, that could have influenced the content or conclusions presented in this research.

Endnote

1. Potts considered the material from which these seals were obtained (the hole) to belong to Period IVB and dated it between Old Dynastic II, the earliest possible beginning of Period IVB, and the Akkadian period (Potts, 1981: 136). This chronology depends on accepting that Period IVC at Tepe Yahya was contemporary with Susa Acropolis III: 14–16, corresponding to the Jemdet Nasr period and Old Dynastic I.

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بازنمایی‌های ایدئولوژیک و رفتارهای آئینی در عصر مفرغ جنوب‌شرق ایران

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چکیده

گسترش جوامع پیچیده در جنوب‌شرقی ایران در عصر مفرغ (هزارهٔ سوم پیش‌ازمیلاد) نه‌تنها تحت‌تأثیر مبادلات مادی و شبکه‌های تجاری، بلکه تحت‌تأثیر گردش باورهای ایدئولوژیک و اعمال آئینی بود که اغلب به‌صورت محلی بازتفسیر می‌شدند. باوجود پژوهش‌های گسترده دربارهٔ روابط تجاری و تعاملات فرهنگی، ابعاد آئینی و ایدئولوژیک فرهنگ مادی توجه کمتری یافته است. این مطالعه از طریق تحلیل شمایل‌نگاری دو حرکت احترام (دست‌های قلاب‌شده و یک دستِ باز همراه با دستِ بسته یا بالابرده) و نقوش معماری روی ظروف سنگ‌صابونی محوطه‌های شهداد، کنار صندل و تپه یحیی به این موضوع می‌پردازد. پرسش اصلی آن است که، چگونه این بازنمایی‌ها نشان‌دهندهٔ تأثیر مستقیم خارجی هستند یا اقتباس گزینشی و نوآوری آئینی محلی را بازتاب می‌دهند. فرضیهٔ پژوهش آن است که اگر نقوش به‌صورت گزینشی پذیرفته و محلی بازتفسیر شده باشند، تفاوت‌هایی در گونه‌شناسی، زمینهٔ کاربرد و توزیع زمانی آن‌ها مشاهده خواهد شد. روش پژوهش توصیفی-تحلیلی و مبتنی‌بر داده‌های منتشرشدهٔ جنوب‌شرقی ایران همراه با شواهد تطبیقی از ایلام، بین‌النهرین و آسیای مرکزی است. یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهد که اگرچه مشابهت‌های اولیه‌ای در شمایل‌نگاری بین‌النهرین و ایلام وجود دارد، رخدادهای جنوب‌شرقی ایران با هیچ مدل واحد انتقال فرهنگی همخوانی ندارد و الگوی پذیرش گزینشی همراه با بازتفسیر محلی را تأیید می‌کند. محوطه‌ها مجموعه‌ای انعطاف‌پذیر از رفتارهای آئینی را به اشتراک گذاشتند، اما تفاوت‌های زمینه‌ای و زمانی بیانگر تمایز محلی در بیان آئینی است. حرکت دست‌های گره‌کرده زودتر و گسترده‌تر ظاهر می‌شود؛ درحالی‌که حرکت یک دستِ باز در نیمهٔ دوم هزارهٔ سوم پیش‌ازمیلاد رایج‌تر می‌گردد. این نمادهای مشترک احتمالاً ارتباطات میان تولیدکنندگان، نخبگان و شبکه‌های تبادل را تسهیل کرده و جنوب‌شرقی ایران را با ایلام و فلات ایران پیوند داده‌اند. مشابهت‌های بین‌النهرینی بیشتر به‌عنوان چارچوب مقایسه‌ای ثانویه عمل می‌کنند تا منبع مستقیم انتقال؛ با این‌حال، سازوکارهای دقیق این ارتباطات را نمی‌توان تنها از شواهد شمایل‌نگاری تعیین کرد.

کلیدواژگان: احترام آئینی، ایدئولوژی، عصر مفرغ، جنوب‌شرق ایران، شمایل‌نگاری.

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