
ANALYZING THE VISUAL AND CONCEPTUAL PATTERNS OF THE IBEX MOTIF ON THE POTTERY OF TALL-I BAKUN OF FARS, IRAN (5TH AND 4TH MILLENNIA BC) USING THE ICONOLOGY APPROACH OF ERWIN PANOFSKY

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ABSTRACT:

The art of ancient Iran, replete with pictorial elements, encapsulates themes and concepts that have intrigued scholars since the earliest encounters with imagery. These elements, especially prevalent in pottery designs, offer a window into the cognitive intricacies of the ancient human psyche. Iconology, a methodological approach in art interpretation pioneered by Erwin Panofsky, employs a layered analysis to decipher the meaning behind visual arts. This study aims to dissect the visual and conceptual patterns of the ibex motif found on the pottery of Tall-i Bakun in Fars (5th and 4th millennia BC). It specifically addresses how the ibex motif can be interpreted through Panofsky's tripartite framework of meaning. The findings suggest that iconological analysis can effectively unravel the original and ancient motifs of Tall-i Bakun in Fars. It posits that these motifs, steeped in ritualistic, cultural, and geographical contexts, reflect the broader ethos of Iranian art and culture. The recurrent motifs of the mountain ibex, emblematic of lunar associations, water, and fertility wishes, underscore the elemental significance and the continuum of life in the region's iconography.

RÉSUMÉ: ANALYSE DES MOTIFS VISUELS ET CONCEPTUELS DU MOTIF DE BOUQUETIN SUR LA CÉRAMIQUE DE TALL-I BAKUN, FARS, EN IRAN (5^e ET 4^e MILLÉNAIRES AV. J.-C.), EN UTILISANT L'APPROCHE ICONOLOGIQUE D'ERWIN PANOFSKY

L'art de l'Iran ancien, riche en éléments picturaux, encapsule des thèmes et concepts qui intriguent les chercheurs depuis les premiers contacts avec ces représentations. Ces éléments, particulièrement présents dans les motifs de céramique, offrent une fenêtre sur les subtilités cognitives de l'esprit humain ancien. L'iconologie, une méthode d'interprétation de l'art initiée par Erwin Panofsky, propose une analyse en plusieurs couches pour déchiffrer la signification des œuvres visuelles. Cette étude vise à examiner les motifs visuels et conceptuels du motif de bouquetin présent sur la céramique de Tall-i Bakun à Fars (5^e et 4^e millénaires av. J.-C.). Elle explore spécifiquement comment le motif de bouquetin peut être interprété à travers le cadre tripartite de Panofsky. Les résultats montrent que l'analyse iconologique permet de déchiffrer efficacement les motifs originaux et anciens de Tall-i Bakun à Fars. Ces motifs, imprégnés de contextes rituels, culturels et géographiques, reflètent l'esprit plus large de l'art et de la culture iraniens. Les motifs récurrents du bouquetin des montagnes, symbolisant des associations lunaires, l'eau et des souhaits de fertilité, soulignent l'importance élémentaire et la continuité de la vie dans l'iconographie de la région.

KEYWORDS: Iconology, Erwin Panofsky, Ibex, Tall-i Bakun, Pottery, Motif.

MOTS-CLÉS: Iconologie, Erwin Panofsky, Bouquetin, Tall-i Bakun, Céramique, Motif.

Introduction

The enduring legacy of Iranian visual art, characterized by a steadfast adherence to tradition amidst evolving aesthetic paradigms, necessitates a foundational understanding of its origins and thematic essence. The historiographical exploration of Iran's visual art has often been hampered by the scarcity and fragmentation of ancient pictorial sources.¹ However, advancements in archaeological methodologies have enriched the corpus of available data, facilitating nuanced analyses beyond the scope of traditional archaeological inquiry. The prehistoric pottery of Iran, adorned with distinctive and meaningful motifs, serves as a primary source of insight into the religious-

¹ Pakbaz 2000, 13.

economic, social, and aesthetic dimensions of ancient Iranian societies. Through the iconological examination of varied ibex motifs on the pottery of Tall-i Bakun in Fars (4th and 5th millennia BC), this research endeavours to elucidate the inherent meanings and content embedded within these symbols.

Situated in proximity to Persepolis in Marvdasht, Fars, Tall-i Bakun comprises two mounds with distinct chronological layers, offering a rich tapestry of cultural and artistic practices. The systematic analysis of ibex motifs, a prevalent theme in the region's pottery, reveals their symbolic significance intertwined with the local environment, beliefs, and societal structures.

Tall-i Bakun consists of two proximate mounds situated approximately 2.5 kilometres south of Persepolis in Marvdasht, Fars (Fig. 1). The artifacts from Hill A are chronologically later than those from Hill B. The insights into Tall-i Bakun predominantly derived from Abbas Alizadeh's doctoral research, revealing that Hill B encompasses two distinct cultural phases. The earlier phase is marked by the absence of architectural structures and the presence of coarse red pottery dating back to around 5000 BC. The subsequent phase, dating to approximately 4500 BC, is characterized by the inclusion of pea-coloured and patterned pottery. Hill A, rising about 4 meters high and measuring roughly 200 meters in length and 100 meters in width, was utilized as a cemetery in the Islamic period, a situation which has led to the disruption of its prehistoric layers' integrity; nonetheless, four distinct settlement strata have been identified here. Tall-i Bakun stands as a monument of antiquity, its very name hinting at its revered status, possibly denoting 'Hill of the Gods'. Locally known as "Bagun", this term reflects its divine association in ancient Iranian culture.²

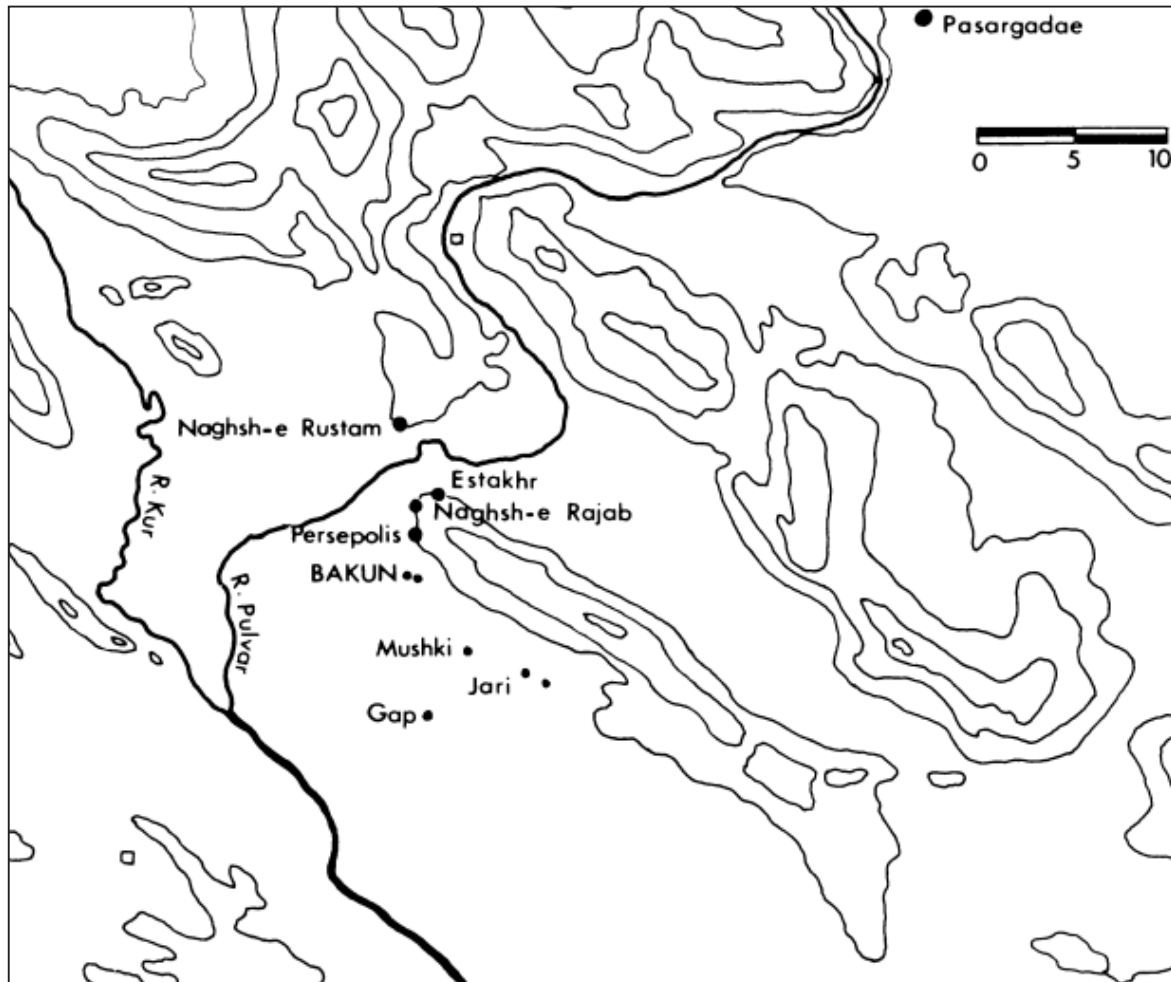


Fig. 1. The location of Tall-i Bakun (after Alizadeh 1988, 18).

Initial explorations by Herzfeld in 1928, followed by comprehensive excavations led by Donald McCown and Alexander Langsdorff under the auspices of the Oriental Institute of Chicago in the 1930s, have significantly

² Alizadeh 2006, 26.

contributed to our understanding of this site.³ These excavations, integral to the Oriental Institute's broader archaeological endeavours in Iran centred around Persepolis, have laid the groundwork for our current knowledge of the region's ancient past⁴ (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Excavation of Tall-i Bakun (<https://isac.uchicago.edu/gallery/prehistoric-mound-tall-i-bakun> - visited 3.10.2024).

In the ancient pottery of Iran, particularly in Tall-i Bakun of Fars, extensive research has been conducted on the production techniques, forms, and materials. Significant contributions include Alizadeh's⁵ (2006) analysis in "The Origins of State Organizations in Prehistoric Highland Fars," Kyani's⁶ (2000) exploration in "The History of Pottery and Pottery-Works in Iran," Girshman's⁷ (1999) insights in "Sialk Kashan," Malek Shahmirzadi's⁸ (1999) overview in "Pre-history Iran," Vandenberg's⁹ (1969) examination in "Archaeology of Ancient Iran," and Hertzfeld's (2002) findings in "Iran in the Ancient East." These works collectively examine pottery through an archaeological lens, elucidating the motifs adorned on these ancient artifacts. Azizi Kharanaghi et al.¹⁰ investigated the interplay between forms and motifs in Middle Bakun period pottery at Tall-i Rahmatabad, Fars. Furthermore, Maani et al.¹¹ conducted a petrographic analysis of Bakun A pottery from Fars province. Additionally, Dadvar et al.¹² presented a comparative analysis of human and animal symbols in pottery from three sites: Tall-i Bakun of

³ Langsdorff and McCown 1942; Alizadeh 1988.

⁴ Alizadeh 2006, 24.

⁵ Alizadeh 2006.

⁶ Kyani 2000.

⁷ Girshman 1999.

⁸ Malek Shahmirzadi 1999.

⁹ Vandenberghe 1969.

¹⁰ Azizi Kharanaghi, Salehi and Zayeri 2017.

¹¹ Maani, Saedi Harsini and Chaychi 2019.

¹² Dadvar, Bahmani and Samanian 2013.

Fars, Tepe Sialk of Kashan, and Tepe Gyan of Nahavand. Their work underscores the significance of these motifs, which will be explored in the context of fabric design in this article.

The exploration of symbols within ancient art has been significantly advanced by scholars such as James Hall¹³ (2006) in “Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols in Eastern and Western Art”, Ford and Bruce¹⁴ (2009) in “Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols and Signs in the World”, and Dadvar¹⁵ (2006) in “An Introduction to the Myths and Symbols of Iran and India in the Ancient Era”. These works scrutinize symbols for their meanings and concepts, providing a foundational understanding across a variety of cultural contexts. Recent scholarly efforts, including Abdi¹⁶ (2012) and Saberi and Mafi Tabar,¹⁷ have further enriched this field by applying contemporary methodologies to the study of artistic symbols, which also inform the current research. This study employs an innovative iconological approach to interpret and analyse the ibex motifs found on the pottery from the Tall-i Bakun region of Fars. By delving into the symbolic meanings and inherent content of the ibex motif, this research endeavours to uncover the layered significances these symbols hold within the context of ancient Iranian culture, thereby distinguishing itself through a rigorous application of Panofsky’s iconological framework.

The iconological method, long employed in the analysis of artworks and artistic research, draws significantly from Erwin Panofsky’s theoretical framework. According to Panofsky, art interpretation is stratified into three distinct layers of meaning. The initial layer concerns itself with the realm of pure forms, where the primary meanings of motifs are discerned, enabling the identification of tangible forms and their interrelations. Following this, a secondary meaning emerges, predicated on the analysis and comprehension of the primary significance of each motif. This study primarily seeks to elucidate the form and appearance of artworks, aiming to unravel their overt and covert significances. The third and deepest layer of meaning taps into the fundamental principles that resonate with the specificities of a culture, including the historical context of motifs, their geographical origins, and the encompassing religious and philosophical convictions. These elements, often subliminally embedded within the artwork, offer a rich tapestry of symbolic values awaiting interpretation. The full potential of iconological analysis is realized when this third layer of meaning is identified and integrated with the preceding layers, thus offering a holistic understanding of the artwork’s embedded narratives and cultural significances.

The methodology employed in this study is descriptive-analytical, leveraging library research and the collection of visual data from books and museums. This approach aims to decipher the ibex motifs found on pottery from the 4th and 5th millennia BC in Tall-i Bakun of Fars through Erwin Panofsky’s three-tiered framework of meaning. Specifically, the research questions guiding this investigation are: “How can the ibex motifs on pottery from the 4th and 5th millennia BC in Tall-i Bakun of Fars be interpreted within Panofsky’s tripartite model of meaning?” and “What significance did the depiction of ibex hold for the potters of the 4th and 5th millennia BC in Tall-i Bakun of Fars?” By examining the visual symbols and patterns present in the pottery of ancient Iran, this study endeavours to unravel the intricate web of thoughts, beliefs, and cultural practices of ancient civilizations. Understanding these motifs is pivotal for uncovering the historical, mythological, cultural, and artistic narratives that aid our comprehension of past eras.

Research Method

The methodology of this study is rooted in a descriptive-analytical framework, augmented by the application of the iconological approach to art interpretation. Data collection was divided into library research and fieldwork. For the former, materials were meticulously selected from reputable sources to ensure the integrity and reliability of the information. Fieldwork involved the acquisition of empirical data, specifically targeting the collection of statistical populations from esteemed institutions. Notable among these were visits to domestic museums such as the Persepolis Museum and Qavam House Museum, in addition to engaging with the digital archives of the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago. This comprehensive approach facilitated a robust analysis of the ibex motifs, ensuring a blend of theoretical insights and empirical observations.

Iconology approach-method

Erwin Panofsky’s methodological framework for analysing visual arts is founded on a tripartite structure of meaning. The initial level, as posited by Panofsky, deals with the natural world’s objects and events, presenting

¹³ Hall 2001.

¹⁴ Ford and Burce 2009.

¹⁵ Dadvar 2006.

¹⁶ Abdi 2012.

¹⁷ Saberi and Mafi Tabar 2020.

them as self-evident and readily interpretable. This foundational stage is termed pre-iconography, where the analyst identifies and catalogues visible forms and motifs as recognizable entities. The subsequent level, iconography proper, ventures into the realm of conventional meanings attributed to these forms within the artwork, engaging in the detailed analysis of motifs and their cultural or symbolic significances. It is at this juncture that the artwork's thematic elements begin to unfold, revealing their embedded narratives. The apex of Panofsky's methodological approach is the exploration of iconology, where the deepest symbolic values are discerned. This entails an intuitive process, grounded in the artwork's iconographic analysis, aiming to unveil the fundamental principles underlying the depicted themes. These principles often reflect broader cultural, philosophical, or religious beliefs intrinsic to the work's context. Through this structured approach, the iconologist navigates from the tangible aspects of art to the intangible, culminating in a comprehensive understanding of its multifaceted meanings.¹⁸

The intermediary stage in Panofsky's framework, iconographic analysis, necessitates an accurate comprehension of motifs and their assembly to decode the artwork's underlying messages. This level delves into the secondary meanings or the cultural and conventional significances that these motifs and their configurations convey within the artwork. Here, the narratives, historical contexts, and stories crafted by the image creator are integral to understanding the piece's thematic essence.¹⁹ Iconography thus bridges the initial recognition of visual forms to the deeper exploration of their embedded meanings, providing a culturally and contextually relevant interpretation of the artwork. Panofsky's contribution to art history lies in his emphasis on this analytical dimension, distinguishing his approach by focusing on the content's significance over mere formal analysis. Before Panofsky, the trend among art historians leaned towards prioritizing the physical attributes of artworks. In contrast, Panofsky's iconography stresses the interpretation of thematic content, advocating for a nuanced understanding that encompasses both the visible form and the latent content within.²⁰

At the zenith of Panofsky's iconological analysis lies the interpretative phase, transcending mere analytical scrutiny to embrace a symbolic exploration of the artwork. This third level ventures into the artwork's profound and often concealed significances, facilitated by a deep, intuitive examination. It is here that the art historian or researcher integrates a mental synthesis of the work, potentially tapping into the collective unconscious of a specific culture or historical epoch. Such analysis not only reveals the artwork's latent narratives but also forges connections to broader disciplines, enriching the understanding of its significance within and beyond the realm of art.²¹

The task at this stage is to uncover the "unspoken words" of the artwork, the deeply embedded elements that the creator might have consciously or unconsciously incorporated. This involves delving into the most elusive aspects of the art piece, those not immediately accessible through a cursory examination or to the uninitiated observer. The iconologist seeks to interpret these hidden messages, considering the cultural and temporal context of the artwork's creation, to fully appreciate its intrinsic meaning and its resonance with the viewer's own time and culture.²² This final tier of Panofsky's framework thus demands a comprehensive engagement with the artwork, challenging the historian to decode the complex web of symbolic values that define its essence.

Results

In the analysis of the pottery motifs from Tall-i Bakun, a predominant theme emerged: the ibex. This motif, often depicted alone, in groups, or alongside other decorative elements, signifies a profound connection to the natural and cultural landscapes of ancient Iran. The ibex, a creature still found in the mountainous terrains surrounding the Persepolis plain, has been a native symbol of various Iranian regions since prehistoric times. Its frequent representation in pottery, including those from the Tall-i Bakun area of Fars, underscores its enduring symbolic relevance.

For this study, a selection of ten pottery pieces from Tall-i Bakun, Fars, distinguished by their well-preserved ibex motifs, was closely examined. These artifacts, curated from the collections of notable institutions such as the Persepolis Museum, Qavam House, and the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago, offered valuable insights. Notably, the artistic renderings of the ibex placed considerable emphasis on the horns' size and shape, often disproportionate to the animal's body. This stylistic exaggeration, with horns depicted as significantly larger and more pronounced than in reality, perhaps knotted and tailored to the vessel's contours, highlights the ibex's symbolic significance. Such portrayal likely reflects the animal's esteemed status and its symbolic implications within the cultural context of the region (Table 1).

¹⁸ Kippenberg 1993, 142; Saberi and Mafi Tabar 2020, 7

¹⁹ Abdi 2012, 56

²⁰ Panofsky 1972,78; Nasri 2018, 30

²¹ Saberi and Mafi Tabar 2020, 7.

²² Panofsky 1972,79; Panofsky 2014, 70.

Table 1. Motifs of ibex on the Tall-i Bakun Potteries (authors).

					motifs of ibex
					

Discussion

The pottery of Bakun, characterized by its handmade craftsmanship, showcases a diverse palette ranging from pale goldenrod to deep shades of black and chocolate brown. The vessels, often with a conical base, exhibit a high degree of artistic finesse in their motif decoration. The repertoire of motifs is extensive and varied, drawing heavily from natural inspirations to cover the pottery surfaces with intricate designs. Predominant among these are motifs depicting humans, birds, mythical creatures, and a range of reptiles including snakes, lizards, and turtles. Additionally, the fauna of the region is represented through motifs of sheep, the ibex, boars, deer, horned wild animals, and fish, complemented by decorative geometric patterns. These motifs, far from being mere decorative elements, are imbued with deeper symbolic meanings, underscoring their significance beyond the aesthetic appeal.

Notably, the ibex motif emerges as a recurrent theme within the Bakun pottery collection, suggesting its prominence and cultural importance. The depiction of the ibex, along with other animal motifs, transcends simple ornamental design, reflecting a rich tapestry of symbolic interpretations relevant to the artists and users of these vessels. The complexity and diversity of these motifs highlight the sophisticated artistry and symbolic depth inherent in the pottery of this period, underscoring the cultural and artistic advancements of the Tall-i Bakun civilization (Fig. 3).²³



Fig. 3. Symbolic motif of ibex horn on Tall-i Bakun pottery, (Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago - <https://isac-idb.uchicago.edu/id/c6169b5b-088b-496c-aabb-c3327a019bdc>).

The first layer of meaning of the ibex motif

The pottery of Tall-i Bakun showcases a remarkable diversity in vessel shapes, bearing motifs that are complex and intricately executed. Artisans meticulously outlined the motifs with a fine pen before filling them with colour, demonstrating a careful and skilled approach to their craft. The conical bowls, characterized by thin walls and dimensions varying from 14 to 18 cm in diameter and 10 to 14 cm in height, possess sharp bases that inherently lack stability. It is presumed that for balance, these vessels were placed on clay bases, a hypothesis supported by archaeological findings in the region.

²³ Dadvar, Bahmani and Samanian 2013, 3.

The exterior of these vessels is adorned with a systematic pattern of decoration. Notably, two slender lines are etched along the vessel's upper edge and at the conical base, framing the depiction of two ibexes. The portrayal of the ibexes, with their disproportionately large horns, reflects a deliberate artistic choice, emphasizing the horns as the focal point of the motif. This disproportion, far from being a mere oversight, signifies the artist's intent to highlight the ibex's horns as a dominant feature, symbolic of its significance within the cultural and artistic lexicon of the time.

The meticulous arrangement of these motifs, complemented by geometric patterns of circles and squares in the intervening spaces, underscores a harmonious balance between the representation of the natural world and abstract design elements. This coherence between motif and vessel shape illustrates the sophisticated aesthetic sensibilities of the Tall-i Bakun potters, who not only sought to capture the essence of their subject matter but also to integrate these depictions seamlessly into the functional and decorative aspects of their pottery (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Bowl with ibex motif, Tall-i Bakun (Egami and Sono 1959, 40, 74; Egami and Masuda 1958, 57, 99).

The second layer of meaning of the ibex motif

The sacred reverence for horned cattle, particularly evident in the depiction of four-horned quadrupeds like the ibex, underscores their deep-seated significance in ancient cultures. Artists captured the essence of the ibex with minimalistic yet expressive lines, conveying vitality, motion, and a spectrum of behaviours—from aggression to fear and escape—in a stylized manner that transcends literal representation. The exaggerated horns, especially prominent when viewed in profile or frontally in the case of rams, become the focal point of the motif, with the animal's body significantly minimized to emphasize the horns' symbolic importance.

The ibex, revered as a national symbol of Iran, holds a special place in the country's cultural and historical narrative. Domesticated in the Zagros foothills approximately eleven thousand years ago, the ibex played a pivotal role in the early development of animal husbandry and cattle breeding, essential livelihoods of the era. Its depiction on pottery from various regions of Iran reflects not only an appreciation for its aesthetic appeal but also a recognition of its integral role in the natural and socio-economic environment.²⁴

Moreover, the ibex's motif carries additional layers of symbolic meaning, rooted in its longstanding association with leadership and power within the animal kingdom. Esteemed as the leader of the herd, the ibex symbolizes strength, authority, and resilience, traits highly valued by the people of the 5th millennium BC.²⁵ This reverence for the ibex as a potent emblem of power and dominance elucidates its frequent representation in ancient pottery, highlighting its enduring significance in the cultural lexicon of ancient Iran (Fig. 5).²⁶

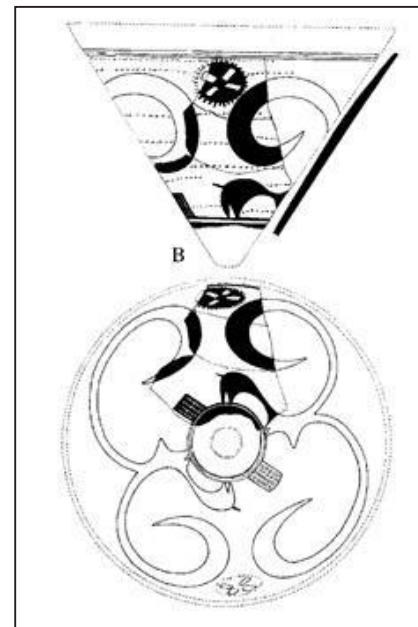


Fig. 5. Ibex motif on a clay vessel of Tall-i Bakun (after Egami and Sono 1959, 51).

²⁴ Hertzfeld 2002, 47.

²⁵ Kambakhsh Fard 2005, 65; Pope 2008, 10.

²⁶ Naseri Fard 2012, 73.

In Iranian mythology, as recounted in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the narrative of Kiumars, the first human and king on Earth, introduces the ibex in a profoundly symbolic role. After Kiumars's demise at the hands of the devil, the emergence of a rhubarb plant from his blood and the subsequent birth of Mashya and Mashyana from this plant highlight the cycle of life and rebirth. The inability of these first humans to nourish themselves leads to divine intervention: an angel in the form of a white ibex is sent to provide them with milk. This act not only sustains them until they gain the knowledge to eat but also cements the ibex's role as a divine guardian of humanity, guiding its earliest ancestors towards survival and growth.

This mythological account elevates the ibex beyond its physical presence, imbuing it with angelic qualities and positioning it as a crucial figure in the sustenance and continuation of human life. The ibex, therefore, transcends its status as a mere animal to become a totemic symbol, revered for its sacredness. Its representation in ancient Iranian art, especially in contexts associated with water, speaks to its symbolic association with life, fertility, and protection. The motif's recurrence around water sources and its thematic connection to the quest for water reflect the elemental significance of this resource in the ancient Iranian worldview. The ibex, in this cultural tapestry, emerges not just as a symbol of physical sustenance but also as a spiritual emblem of nourishment and resilience, echoing the enduring values and beliefs of ancient Iran.

The third layer of meaning of the ibex motif

Throughout history, mankind has sought to express the intricate relationship with the divine through the language of symbols, as ancient artists captured the essence of this connection in their works.²⁷ This symbolic representation stems from humanity's primal fears and anxieties, driven by the hardships of life and the omnipresent threat of malevolent forces. To counter these fears, ancient peoples turned to symbols as a form of protection and invocation, imbuing them with the power to ward off the evil eye and destructive entities. These symbols, encompassing a broad spectrum of meanings from life force, creative energy, and protection to concepts of divinity, kingship, victory, and fertility, served as tangible manifestations of the gods and the higher powers governing existence.

Mythology, therefore, acted as a visual and narrative medium through which ancient societies attempted to make sense of the world around them, attributing the unknown and the inexplicable to the actions of deities and supernatural forces. These myths, encoded in the art and symbols of the time, not only reflected ancient man's quest for understanding but also his coping mechanisms for adversity, serving both as a protest against injustices and as a means to bring comfort in the face of life's uncertainties.²⁸ This deep-seated tradition underscores the profound human need to find order in chaos and connection in isolation, bridging the mortal realm with the divine through the enduring language of symbols.

Prehistoric artists channelled their creativity onto clay, stone, and metal, crafting motifs that bore the images of animals symbolic of deities, royalty, and cosmic elements. These artistic representations were believed to be imbued with mana, a spiritual force capable of influencing nature, societal tribes, and unfolding events.²⁹ This era marked a significant period where animals, revered as *Nia* or "Totem," were venerated, embodying the societies' spiritual guardians and protectors. Such totemic animals were not merely artistic subjects but were integral to the cultural fabric, embodying the community's collective strengths and vulnerabilities.

The depiction of these animals, including the ibex, eagle, lion, cow, and deer, served as conduits for expressing mythological roles and values. These representations transcended mere artistic endeavour, embedding themselves within the societal norms and religious practices, thereby illustrating early humans' deep-seated reverence for divine manifestations and their rituals of worship. Particularly, the ibex motif emerged as a prevalent totemic symbol in ancient Iran, signifying its paramount importance in the prehistoric period. This preference for quadrupeds, and especially the ibex, as totemic symbols, reflects a profound connection between the people's religious beliefs, customs, and the natural world around them. It underscores a complex interplay of symbolism where animals represented more than their physical form, acting as embodiments of spiritual beliefs and cultural identities (Fig. 6).³⁰

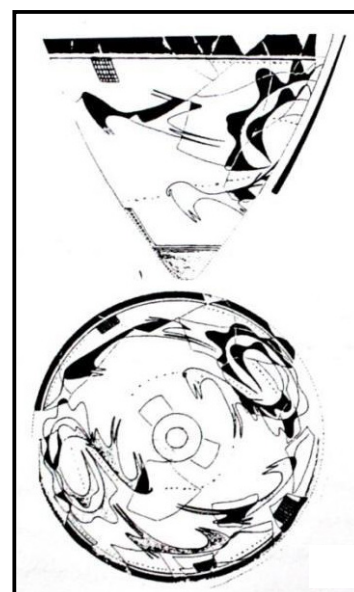


Fig. 6. Ibex motif on a clay vessel from Tall-i Bakun (Egami and Sono 1959, 7).

²⁷ Cooper 2000, 1.

²⁸ Amouzgar 2001, 18.

²⁹ Hall 2001, 19.

³⁰ Farhadi 1998, 130.

During the Iron Age, the ibex emerged as a potent symbol encapsulating themes of struggle, strength, fertility, birth, abundance, and the cyclical transformation of seasons, with its horns particularly symbolizing power. The enduring significance of the ibex within this period can be attributed to both its physical characteristics and its perceived qualities. The animal's ambitious nature, as seen in its combative interactions using its horns, alongside its utility in domestic contexts as a source of sustenance and prosperity, highlights its integral role in nomadic and pastoral societies.

The ibex's prominence in Iranian culture is further accentuated by the country's mountainous terrain, which not only provides a natural habitat for these animals but also a constant source of inspiration and interaction for its inhabitants. This interaction ranges from the admiration of the ibex's grace and vitality in the wild to its practical importance in the everyday lives of the people, where it has been historically hunted and revered. Thus, the ibex stands as a vibrant symbol in Iranian heritage, reflecting the deeply rooted connection between the people and their natural environment, and embodying the collective values and aspirations of strength, fertility, and prosperity.

The male ibex, characterized by its remarkable vitality and the energy it embodies, represents a force of life thriving in elevated terrains, signifying superiority. Its agility and propensity for climbing symbolize the relentless pursuit of truth. Ancients regarded the ibex as an embodiment of beneficial natural forces. In Lorestan, for example, the ibex was revered as a symbol of the rain angel, underlining its association with fertility and renewal. The curvature of the ibex's horns has been likened to the crescent moon, a connection rooted in ancient associations of the moon with rainfall and water, elements essential for life and prosperity.

The depiction of the ibex across various mediums, from pottery to frescoes, has served multiple symbolic purposes, representing male vigour, longevity, blessings, and the essence of originality. Intriguingly, some portrayals include the full moon nestled between the ibex's horns, evoking the imagery of a vessel brimming with life-sustaining water. This amalgamation of religious and magical symbolism elucidates the persistence of horned animal motifs within Iranian art, particularly in the realm of prehistoric pottery. Such representations highlight the deep-seated cultural and spiritual significance attributed to the ibex, reflecting its revered status within ancient Iranian lore and its role as a symbol of life's cyclical nature and the continuous flow of blessings.³¹

The female ibex, within the rich tapestry of ancient Near Eastern symbolism, stands as a potent emblem of fertility and the generative forces of nature. In the ancient cities of Susa and Elam, the ibex was revered as a symbol of abundance and growth, its horn often regarded as a divine manifestation. This reverence is deeply rooted in the belief systems of ancient Iran and Mesopotamia, where the ibex's horn was seen as a conduit of the gods' will, embodying fertility not just in humans but across the animal kingdom.

The significance of the ibex extended into the religious and mythological spheres of these cultures, equating it with deities of fertility such as the Sumerian god Tammuz and Nin Girsu. Its imagery in Sumerian mythology, where it is depicted as a god of vegetation engaging with the natural world, underscores its association with life and sustenance. Furthermore, the male ibex symbolizes Gilgamesh, the legendary Sumerian king, reflecting attributes of leadership, strength, and heroism, and is linked with Bahram (Verethragnen), the god of war and victory, as well as being a representation of Anahita, the deity of water and fertility.³²

These multifaceted symbolic associations illuminate the ibex's central role in the spiritual and everyday life of ancient civilizations, where it was not only a subject of artistic depiction but also an object of worship and veneration. The ancient belief in the ibex as a divine envoy, sent by the gods to ensure the continuity of life on Earth, reveals the profound spiritual significance attributed to this animal, marking it as a celestial intermediary that bridged the human world with the divine realm.³³

The ibex, with its rich tapestry of symbolic meanings across various cultures, embodies a wide array of attributes from divine to demonic. In Saami culture, it is associated with Marduk, the god of hunting, highlighting its importance in themes of survival and prowess. The symbol of the ibex in Hindu culture signifies the mighty Shiva, further underscoring the ibex's divine attributes and its association with Pavana, the god of winds, who is depicted riding an ibex, illustrating the animal's embodiment of elemental forces.³⁴

This symbolism extends to the Near East, where the ibex, in conjunction with the tree of life, represents fertility and the cyclical nature of life and death.³⁵ The animal's representation in Chinese culture as a symbol of peace and its association with the Chinese zodiac emphasizes its significance in harmony and cosmic balance. In Greek

³¹ Karimi 1967, 31; Mohammad Beygi 2015, 76.

³² Hinnells 1995, 41.

³³ Cooper 2000, 218.

³⁴ Mohammad Beygi 2015, 77.

³⁵ Willson 1988, 25.

mythology, the ibex's sacredness to Zeus/Jupiter, and its connections to Dionysus/Bacchus and satyrs, further illustrate its symbolic versatility, encompassing themes of virility, revelry, and natural instincts.³⁶

Christian art presents a more sombre depiction of the ibex, associating it with the damned, which contrasts sharply with its more life-affirming representations in other cultures. Yet, in all interpretations, the ibex stands as a potent symbol of life's dualities, embodying both creation and destruction, lawfulness and rebellion, fertility and desolation.³⁷

This diversity in symbolic representation underscores the ibex's universal appeal and its capacity to embody the complex spectrum of human beliefs and values across civilizations. Whether revered as a divine messenger, feared as a portent of doom, or celebrated as a symbol of nature's bounty, the ibex remains a powerful symbol of humanity's enduring connection to the natural world and the divine.³⁸

Regarded as the national animal of Iran, the ibex is often portrayed with exaggerated, crescent moon-like horns, embodying a myriad of cultural and natural significances. Ancient Iranian belief held that the ibex's arc-shaped horns possessed a magnetic quality, capable of invoking rain, thereby linking the ibex to themes of fertility and rejuvenation. This symbolic association extends to the ibex's horns as emblems of strength and power, encapsulating the animal's revered status within the society.³⁹

The imagery of the ibex in ancient Iranian art frequently symbolizes water and vegetation, indicating areas of abundance and life. Such representations suggest a deeply rooted cultural belief in the ibex's connection to the vital elements of water and earth, reinforcing its role as a harbinger of prosperity and growth.⁴⁰ The depiction of the ibex, particularly its spiralled horns, in pre-Christian pottery, underscores its longstanding symbolization of rain and fertility, attributes essential for the sustenance of ancient communities.

Moreover, the ibex's prominence in Iranian astrology as the sign of Capricorn, representing the winter months, further illustrates its integral role in the cultural and spiritual life of the Iranian people. This astrological significance imbues the ibex with additional layers of meaning, relating it to the cyclical nature of time and the changing seasons, thus highlighting its enduring presence in the cultural consciousness of Iran.⁴¹

In the artistic and mythological narratives of ancient Iran, Anahita, the goddess of water, frequently takes the form of an ibex, symbolizing her roles as the bringer of rains, the essence of life's energy, and the protector of the tree of life. This depiction aligns with the broader cultural reverence for water as a vital element, deeply intertwined with the worship of Anahita and the astrological influences of Venus and Mercury, celestial bodies associated with fertility, love, and communication, respectively.

Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, in his seminal work "Al-Tafhim," describes the astrological symbol of Mercury with imagery reminiscent of an ibex, drawing parallels between the physical characteristics of the animal and the astrological sign. This association is further echoed in the "Farahnameh," where the symbol is likened to the Arabic letter Al (ل) or the Persian letter ka (ک), suggesting a visual similarity to the ibex's profile.⁴² Moreover, the name Tishtar, used in some local dialects to refer to the male ibex, links the animal directly to the deity associated with rain, underscoring the ibex's symbolic connection to water and fertility in the ancient Iranian belief system. The Bundahishn, a Zoroastrian text, further cements this connection by equating Tishtar with Mercury, reinforcing the ibex's multifaceted role in reflecting celestial influences on earthly life.⁴³

Through these layers of symbolism, the ibex emerges not merely as an animal but as a potent emblem of divine intercession in the natural world, embodying the life-giving forces of water and the sacred protection of flora, as personified by the goddess Anahita and the celestial mechanics governed by the planets.

The emphasis on water in the artistic expressions of ancient pottery reveals a profound understanding of its essential role in sustaining life. This focus is evident in the motifs chosen by artisans of the era, where elements like the moon, ibex, and horns serve as indirect symbols of water and its integral connection to agriculture. Recognizing the critical necessity of water, artists deliberately accentuated these symbols, either by enlarging them or positioning them centrally on the pottery, thereby highlighting the dependency of human life and prosperity on this vital resource.

³⁶ Hall 2001, 35; Mitford 2009, 65.

³⁷ Hall 2001, 35.

³⁸ Jobes 1991, 23.

³⁹ Seyyedani 2000, 329.

⁴⁰ Rouhfar 1990, 12.

⁴¹ Kyani 2000, 76.

⁴² Eqtedari 1975, 95.

⁴³ Amouzgar 2001, 22.

Through the abstraction of images and adherence to simple forms and compositional principles, these artists engaged in a form of visual communication with their contemporaries and future generations. They conveyed the importance of water not just for survival but as a cornerstone of agricultural practices that underpinned their society. The ibex, in particular, emerged as a prominent symbol within this context, representing not only prosperity but also its role as a divine protector of flora.⁴⁴ Its recurring depiction underscores the animal's long-standing significance in the cultural and spiritual life of the community, where it was revered not only for its physical attributes but also for its symbolic associations with strength, fertility, and the sustenance provided by water.⁴⁵

This artistic tradition reflects a deep-seated reverence for natural elements and a sophisticated understanding of the interconnectedness of water, flora, and fauna, serving as a testament to the ancient society's respect for the natural world and its cycles.

The ibex, with its deep-rooted significance across various cultures, has been revered not only as a symbol of fertility for both humans and livestock but also as an emblem of prosperity and growth. This multifaceted creature has been versatile in its symbolic representations, fluctuating between being an icon of the moon and the sun across different epochs, reflecting humanity's evolving understanding of natural phenomena and their impact on agricultural practices.⁴⁶

This duality in symbolism—where the ibex stands for both lunar and solar attributes—mirrors the ancient societies' reverence for celestial bodies and their observed effects on the earth's fertility. The moon, with its phases, has been linked to the cyclical nature of water and tides, which in turn affects agricultural cycles. On the other hand, the sun's role in nurturing life through its warmth and light, essential for the growth and development of plants, has also been encapsulated in the ibex motif. This transition in symbolic representation from the moon to the sun could be indicative of a growing awareness among ancient peoples of the sun's critical influence on agricultural productivity and plant vitality.⁴⁷

Such symbolic complexity is artistically rendered on pottery, where the ibex is often depicted with a sign resembling a multi-pointed star, possibly a lotus, positioned between its horns, symbolizing its connection to the sun and its life-giving energy.⁴⁸ This imagery not only highlights the ibex's importance in ancient iconography but also underscores the deep spiritual and practical significance attributed to this animal, reflecting its enduring legacy as a potent symbol of nature's bounty and the intertwined destinies of the celestial, the terrestrial, and the human.

The symbolic prioritization of the moon in ancient cultures can be attributed to its associations with water and fertility, foundational elements for the sustenance of life. As Ackerman notes, the sun's significance in human consciousness evolved with advancements in agricultural practices, particularly irrigation, which diminished the sole reliance on rain for crop abundance. The moon's link to fertility, especially in relation to women, is a theme deeply entrenched in human mythology and thought, reflecting the celestial body's enduring influence on life cycles on Earth.⁴⁹

The ibex, with its horns reminiscent of the crescent moon, embodies this lunar symbolism, further enriching its significance in ancient Iranian art and mythology. This resemblance not only highlights the ibex's connection to fertility and water but also to the lunar deity, reinforcing the animal's sacred stature. The mythological narrative that positions the moon as a purifier of the seminal essence of the first cow underscores the deep cosmological connections ancient Iranians made between the celestial bodies and terrestrial life.

Within the rich tapestry of ancient Iranian mythology, the ibex emerges as a significant symbol associated with Bahram, the god of victory. Bahram, representing the force that triumphs over adversity and evil, is often depicted in a dynamic and powerful form. The ibex's representation as one of Bahram's ten visualizations amplifies its symbolic potency, embodying victory, strength, and resilience.⁵⁰ This association with Bahram, particularly in the context of the Asurig tree myth, positions the ibex not merely as an animal symbol but as a divine ally in the cosmic struggle against malevolence, further solidifying its status as a powerful emblem of protection, victory, and divine favour in ancient Iranian culture.⁵¹

For ancient civilizations, mountains were not merely geographical features but held profound symbolic and spiritual significance, embodying the grandeur and divine presence. This reverence can partly be attributed to

⁴⁴ Mehrzad 1988, 22.

⁴⁵ Pope 2001, 10.

⁴⁶ Hall 2001, 35.

⁴⁷ Durant 1991, 73.

⁴⁸ Kyani 2000, 76.

⁴⁹ Eqtadari 1975, 95.

⁵⁰ Amouzgar 2001, 27.

⁵¹ Hinnells 1995, 42.

the mountains' role in the hydrological cycle, as they captured and stored rainwater, making it a crucial element for sustaining life. In such cultures, water was revered alongside wind, earth, and fire as fundamental forces that shaped the world and sustained existence. These elements were sanctified, seen as direct manifestations of the divine will and power.

The ibex, an animal intimately associated with the rugged terrain of mountains, thus took on a symbolic weight far beyond its physical presence. Its depictions in art—whether solitary figures or in groups—might reflect the social structures of ibex herds, but more profoundly, they signify the animal's sacredness. The ibex's habitat in the mountains, spaces considered the abode of gods, further amplified its significance. To ancient peoples, the ibex was a divine gift, embodying the essence of the mountains' majesty and the gods' favour.

The practice of depicting the ibex on pottery and metals, and its role in sacrificial rites, was likely intertwined with supplications for rain. In regions where water was scarce and precious, such rituals and artistic expressions were means of communicating with the divine, appealing for the sustenance necessary for life's continuity. This symbiotic relationship between the people, their environment, and their deities encapsulates a worldview where the sacred and the mundane were inextricably linked, and where the ibex stood as a symbol of both earthly sustenance and divine benevolence. In this context, the ibex transcends its status as mere fauna, becoming a central figure in the ancient narrative of survival, spirituality, and reverence for the natural world.

The frequent depiction of horned animals, such as the ibex, on pottery from Tall-i Bakun, reveals a deep-seated belief in the symbolic and magical properties these creatures embody. A particular bowl with a sharp base showcases this motif exceptionally: the ibex's crescent horns, dramatically oversized, dominate the vessel's exterior, suggesting a potent connection to water's magical essence. This artistic choice not only emphasizes the horns' significance but also, by rendering the ibex's body disproportionately small, imbues the imagery with a narrative quality, transforming a simple representation into a story in itself.⁵²

These artistic expressions go beyond mere aesthetic appeal; they are rooted in the community's desires, necessities, and fears—especially the fear of drought or the malevolent forces that might withhold the rains. Yet, despite these complex underpinnings, the beauty of the design lies in its simplicity and clarity. The inclusion of parallel and geometric lines within the margins further enhances the motifs, contributing to the overall strength and balance of the design. Such elements not only offer a visual contrast but also symbolize the harmony between human wishes and the natural world, encapsulating the ancient peoples' reverence for and reliance on the symbolic power inherent in their environment.⁵³ This intricate interplay between form, function, and symbolism in pottery designs offers invaluable insights into the spiritual and daily lives of ancient cultures, where the depiction of sacred animals like the ibex served as a conduit for expressing and mediating the profound relationship between humanity and the divine forces governing nature.

In the pottery of Tall-i Bakun, the emphasis on horn motifs transcends a mere aesthetic preference, embodying a deeper thematic resonance. This focus on horns, often the most distinguished feature on these artifacts, suggests a deliberate move not towards abstraction but towards encapsulating a thematic essence. The artists, by highlighting a specific aspect of their subject with such vigour, manage to convey the entirety of their thematic vision through this singular detail. This method underscores the belief in the symbolic potency of parts to represent wholes, imbuing the depicted horns with a sense of magical realism that bridges the tangible with the metaphysical.⁵⁴

The portrayal of movement through the curvature of the back and tail, along with the wavy lines suggestive of water, further enriches the narrative woven into the pottery's design. This attention to detail not only captures physical movement but also symbolizes the life-giving essence of water, tying the motif back to nature's fundamental elements.

Moreover, the inclusion of additional symbols within the horn motifs—representing the earth, sun, water, and irrigation canals—speaks to the artist's aversion to empty space. By filling these areas with symbolic imagery, the artists of Tall-i Bakun achieved a composition that is both visually complete and rich in meaning. The incorporation of the round sun symbol within the spaces bounded by the ibex's horns exemplifies this approach, integrating celestial symbolism into the earthbound figure of the ibex.

Such artistic strategies reveal a profound connection between the decorative motifs on Tall-i Bakun pottery and the broader symbolic language of the culture that created them. These designs are not mere decorations but are deeply imbued with the cultural, spiritual, and environmental values of the society, showcasing a sophisticated interplay between form, symbolism, and the cosmos.

⁵² Kambakhsh Fard 2005, 64.

⁵³ Kambakhsh Fard 2005, 67.

⁵⁴ Hertzfeld 2002, 49.

Conclusion

Throughout the extensive exploration of the engraved pottery from Tall-i Bakun, Fars, spanning the 4th and 5th millennia BC, a profound analysis has been conducted to unravel the intricate web of social, economic, cultural, and religious underpinnings reflected in the artistry of these ancient artifacts. The diversity in vessel shapes and the complexity of motifs underscore a rich tapestry of beliefs, practices, and mythologies that have informed the aesthetic expressions of ancient Iranian civilization.

Employing Erwin Panofsky's iconological approach has proven instrumental in deciphering the layered meanings embedded within these pictorial documents. By dissecting the imagery into pre-iconography, iconography, and iconology, this methodology facilitates a deep dive into the symbolic essence of the artwork, revealing the multifaceted dialogues between tangible forms and the intangible realms of belief and worldview.

Central to the motifs explored is the ibex, an animal deeply emblematic of the Iranian ethos, depicted with exaggerated, crescent-shaped horns believed to possess the power to invoke rain, thereby symbolizing fertility and abundance. This reverence extends to Anahita, the water goddess, often represented through the ibex motif, highlighting the paramount importance of water and its life-sustaining properties in the arid landscapes of Fars.

This research underscores the efficacy of the iconological analysis in bridging the gap between the visual and the conceptual, offering nuanced interpretations of the ancient pottery motifs that align with the broader cultural and spiritual landscape of ancient Iran. The recurring themes of water, fertility, and the celestial—embodied by the ibex—emphasize the interconnectedness of natural elements with human existence, shaping a civilization deeply attuned to the rhythms of nature and the divine.

In conclusion, the findings advocate for a broader application of Western theoretical frameworks, such as Panofsky's iconology, to the study of Iranian art, suggesting the potential for these approaches to enrich our understanding of ancient visual cultures. Moreover, there's an articulated need for the development of a symbology system rooted in Iranian imagery and motifs, fostering a deeper appreciation of the region's rich artistic and cultural heritage. This endeavour not only highlights the significance of water and celestial bodies in shaping ancient Iranian life but also underscores the enduring legacy of these symbols in the cultural consciousness, mirroring a universal reverence for life's continuities and the forces that sustain them.

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Liste des illustrations

Fig. 1. Localisation de Tall-i Bakun (d'après Alizadeh 1988, 18)

Fig. 2. Fouilles de Tall-i Bakun (<https://isac.uchicago.edu/gallery/prehistoric-mound-tall-i-bakun> - consulté le 3.10.2024)

Fig. 3. Motif symbolique de corne de bouquetin sur une poterie de Tall-i Bakun (Musée de l'Institut Oriental, Université de Chicago - <https://isac-idb.uchicago.edu/id/c6169b5b-088b-496c-aabb-c3327a019bdc>)

Fig. 4. Bol avec motif de bouquetin, Tall-i Bakun (Egami and Sono 1959, 40, 74 ; Egami and Masuda 1958, 57, 99)

Fig. 5. Motif de bouquetin sur un récipient en argile de Tall-i Bakun (d'après Egami et Sono 1959, 51)

Fig. 6. Motif de bouquetin sur un récipient en argile de Tall-i Bakun (Egami et Sono 1959, 7)

Tableau 1. Motifs de bouquetin sur les poteries de Tall-i Bakun (auteurs)

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