

# Elymaean Tombs of Gelālak of Shushtar, Iran

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## Abstract

Situated approximately 3 kilometers south of Shushter, Gelālak, a Parthian site, is nestled between two branches of the Karun River: Gargar and Shatit. Gelālak is a locality within the extended site of Dastowā. Archaeological excavations in Gelālak (1986-87, 1987-88, and 1989-90) led to the discovery of a rich collection of tombs, sarcophagi, ceramic and glass vessels, ornaments, metal objects, seals, and coins dating back to the Elymaean dynasty of the Kamanskiris.

**Keywords:** Elymaean Tombs; Gelālak; Orodes I; Orodes II.



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## Introduction

For many years, archaeologists have investigated and excavated the peripheral land of the Persian Gulf and accomplished considerable achievements (Rahbar, 2023a; Rahbar, 2023b; Poodat, 2023; Hozhabri *et al.*, 2024; Kavousi, 2024). Archaeological excavations in Gelālak led to the discovery of a rich collection of tombs. Situated approximately three kilometers south of Shushter, Gelālak is linked to the two branches of the Karun River: Gargar and Shatit. The intermediary land between these two branches, known as “Mian-ab”, is an alluvial plain and thus a fertile region. Excavations in this area (1986-87, 1987-88, and 1989-90) commenced with a test pit measuring 33 meters in length, which reached virgin soil at a depth of 3.75 meters. During the excavation, five tombs, two pottery kilns, a stone structure, two mud-brick structures, as well as various isolated architectural elements were discovered.

## Tomb 1

Immediately beneath the surface, the collapsed ceiling of a tomb became visible. Constructed with almost square bricks measuring 27.07 x 27 cm or 26.06 x 26.8 cm and bound with a gypsum mortar, the ceiling was the first feature to be exposed. The tomb consisted of a rectangular chamber measuring 3.80 meters in length and 2.70 meters in width. Its height from the floor was 2.20 meters. A space of 2 meters formed the staircase and threshold. The structure's brickwork was horizontal until the beginning of the arch, after which a single row of bricks was laid vertically on the southern and

western sides, followed by the tomb's arch (Fig. 2, 3, 4).

The tomb is situated to the east and is accessed via five narrow but relatively tall steps leading to a threshold. A slight difference in level between the threshold and the interior floor allows entry into the tomb. Apart from the burial chamber, which was covered with a brick arch, there was also an arch between the last step and the floor i.e., the threshold. The space containing the steps, which lacked an arch, was designed to be sealed off with several stone slabs (measuring approximately 90x135 cm), similar to the Elamite tombs of Haft Tepe and the subterranean tombs of Chogha Zanbil.

The tomb's interior consists of three platforms and a central corridor. The platforms are approximately 80cm wide and have been constructed with brick arches to create spaces beneath them for non-coffin burials. A 10cm high brick wall has been built in front of the platforms and front of the spaces beneath them. The platforms are approximately 90cm high, except for the front platform, which is 10cm higher than the side platforms.

A central corridor, measuring 250cm in length and 105cm in width, was designed for funeral rituals and movement within the tomb. On the opposite wall, a niche measuring 40cm in height, 37cm in width, and 29cm in depth was carved. A two-handled turquoise-colored vase, 3cm in height, was placed in this niche.

Additionally, on the front of the opposite (western) platform and in its center, a brick was placed, part of which was embedded in the wall below the platform for stability, and part of which protruded



Fig. 1. Map of Iran and Khuzestan Province

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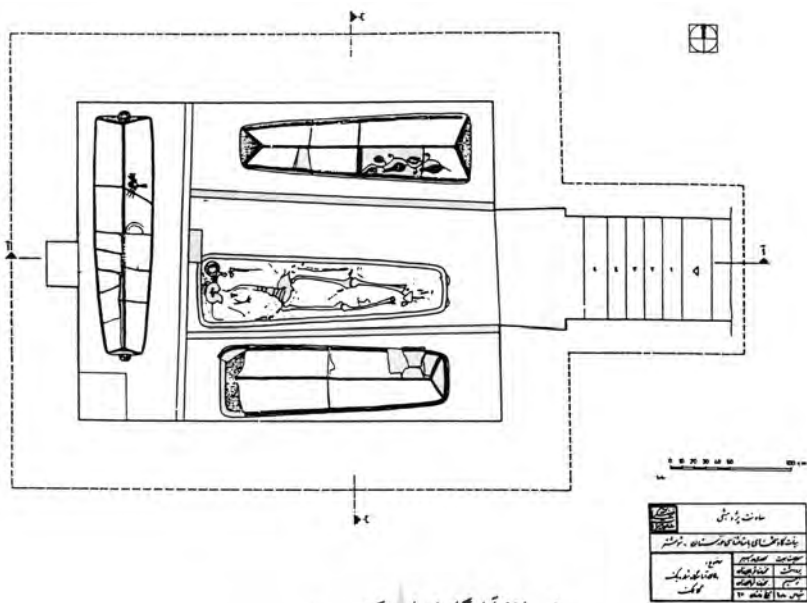
from the platform as a console to support a female bust (possible Anāhitā). The statue was made of molded plaster. The woman's right shoulder was bare, while a draped cloth covered the rest of her body. Three strands of a necklace adorned her neck and chest (Fig. 8).

On the right-hand platform, a ceramic sarcophagus with a blue-green glaze and underglaze decorations of stems, leaves, vines, and grape clusters adorned the exterior. The sarcophagus lid was gable-shaped, and its surface was decorated with leaves, branches, grapevines, and palm around the edges. The lid was made of two separate transverse pieces that fitted together. The boat-shaped sarcophagus measured 196cm in length and 20cm in height (Fig. 5, 6).

At the foot of the sarcophagus, a hole was created to drain any fluids resulting from the decomposition of the body. Above the head and on the platform, two nested glazed ceramic bowls were placed. A glazed ceramic cup and a two-handled

glazed perfume jar were placed on the platform below the sarcophagus. The head of the second sarcophagus faced north and was not far from the northern and western walls. The remaining space at the foot of this sarcophagus was occupied by a 40x40cm pit, approximately 90-cm deep.

The sarcophagus is 60cm wide at the head and shoulder. It is adorned with a turquoise color and features decorative elements on both the body and lid. The body is decorated with a raised, rope-like motif that runs around the entire sarcophagus, approximately 6cm from the edge. If the body of the sarcophagus is divided vertically in half, the lower half, towards the feet, is devoid of decoration, while the upper half is divided into two square panels by three vertical, rope-like elements with a zigzag pattern. Within each panel, there is a semi-raised circular motif. At the top, there are two horn-like projections, and below the horns, a bow-tie-like shape. While rows of circles and



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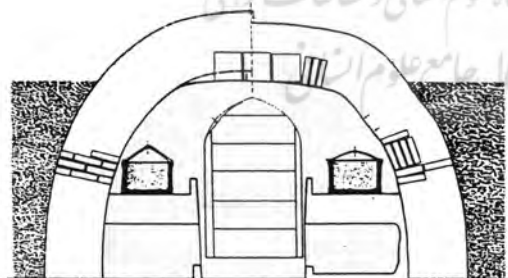
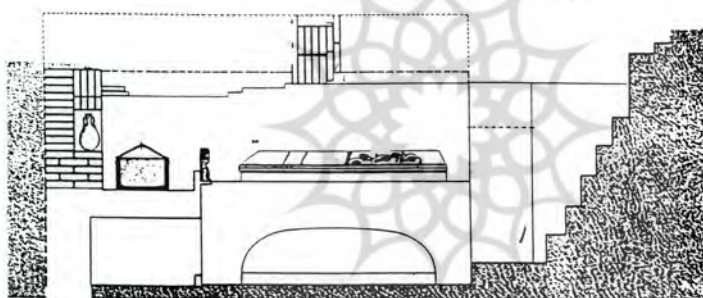


Fig. 2. Plan of Tomb 1

Fig. 3. Tomb 1

nail-like motifs adorn the projected surface of the rings, all sarcophagi have two semi-raised, circular projections at the

foot end, resembling a kneeling animal.

On the central part of the sloping lid, there is a raised decorative motif, exe-





Fig. 4. Tomb 1



Fig. 5. Coffin No. 2 in Tomb 1

cuted similarly to that on the body. The only difference from the body decoration is the presence of two ribbons that form

a bow-tie shape at the bottom. On either side of the circular motif, there is first a fire altar and then a depiction of a palm



Fig. 6. Lid of Coffin 2 in Tomb 1



Fig. 7. Pottery from Tomb 1, Gelälak





Fig. 8. Plaster Bust (possible Anahita) found from Tomb 1

tree with nine branches and two clusters of dates. The motifs on either side of the decorative ring are not symmetrical: on one side, the fire altar is depicted first, followed by the palm tree, while on the other side, the order is vice versa. The

body and lid of sarcophagus Number 2 are made as a single piece.

Bowls and perfume jars that were found with the body were typically placed on the platform outside the sarcophagus. However, the objects inside



Fig. 9. Tomb 2

the sarcophagus included jewelry and decorative items. Various necklace beads made of glass paste, bronze, and ornamental stones such as agate were found

in this sarcophagus. A necklace with small, bead-like elements and a magnifying glass made of glass paste was discovered.





Fig. 10. Tomb 2

On the northern side of Platform 2, a quantity of human bones had been scattered. Additionally, a number of decayed bones were found inside the pit created in the southwest corner of the tomb, which was in fact an ossuary. In this tomb, to create space for subsequent burials, bones from decayed flesh were removed from the sarcophagus and placed on the platform or in the pit, or a new body was placed inside the same sarcophagus alongside other body. This practice was evident on Platform 2 of Tomb 2. Furthermore, in this same tomb, sarcophagi Numbers 3 and 4 contained the burials of more than one individual in a single sarcophagus.

On the left side of the tomb, on Platform 3, there was an unglazed but decorated ceramic sarcophagus. It was 196cm long and 57cm wide at the head

and 38cm wide at the foot. Its height, excluding the lid, was 29cm. The body of the sarcophagus was decorated with raised and incised motifs of grape clusters, vines, stems, and leaves in the stylized manner. The top and bottom of the sarcophagus were bordered by rope-like motifs. On the side of the sarcophagus that was not visible, there were only three column-like elements with spiral motifs. The lid was gable-shaped and consisted of two separate pieces joined together lengthwise.

The head of the sarcophagus was oriented toward the west. Ceramic and non-ornamental artifacts were placed on the platform adjacent to the sarcophagus. A ceramic perfume jar and a small, black glass perfume jar, adorned with zigzag patterns in yellow and white, were discovered along with several cor-

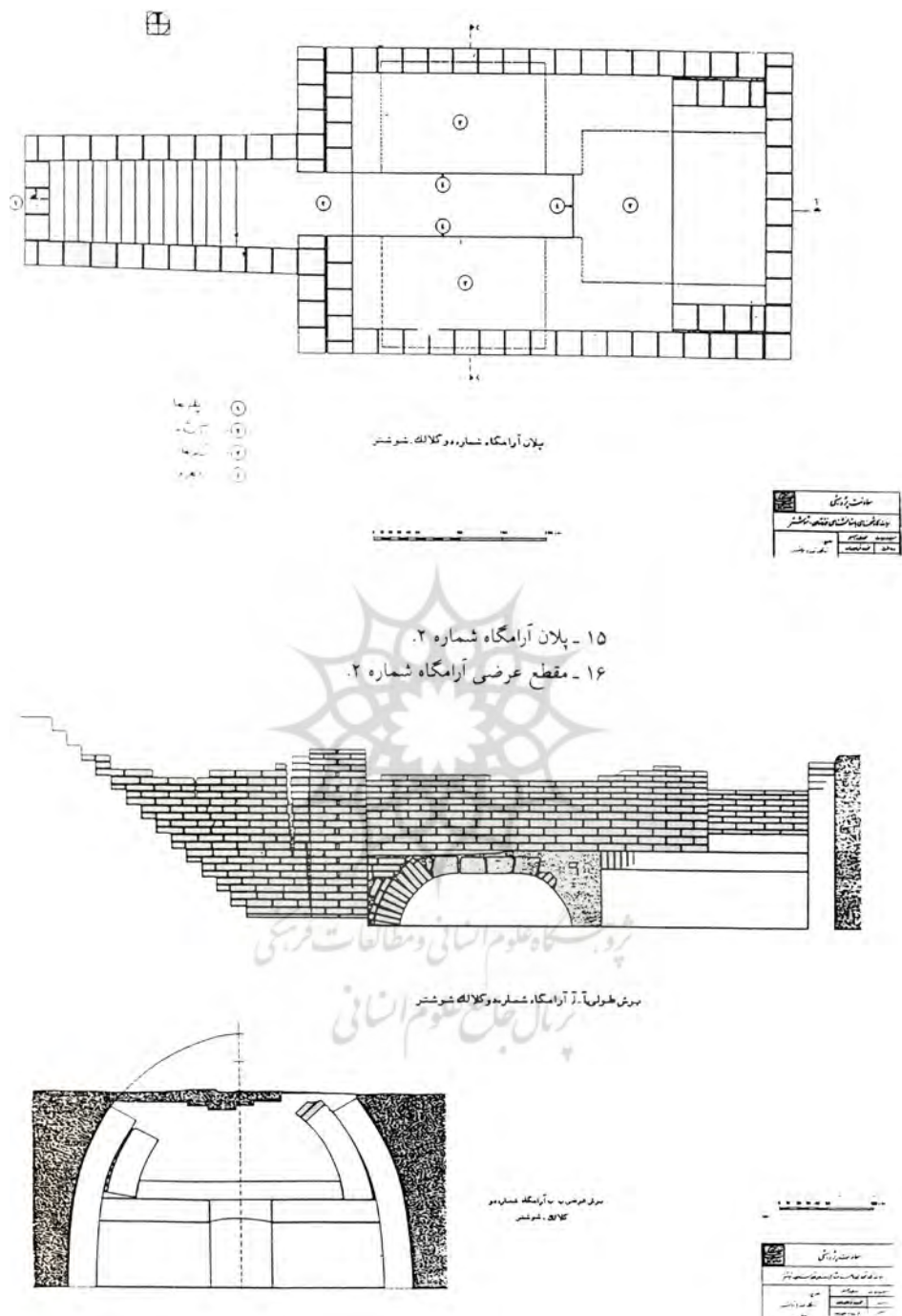


Fig. 11. Plan of Tomb 2

Fig. 12. Tomb 2

roded iron pieces, possibly remnants of a belt buckle or similar items. A lead object, likely a weight, was also found. This weight was positioned beside the

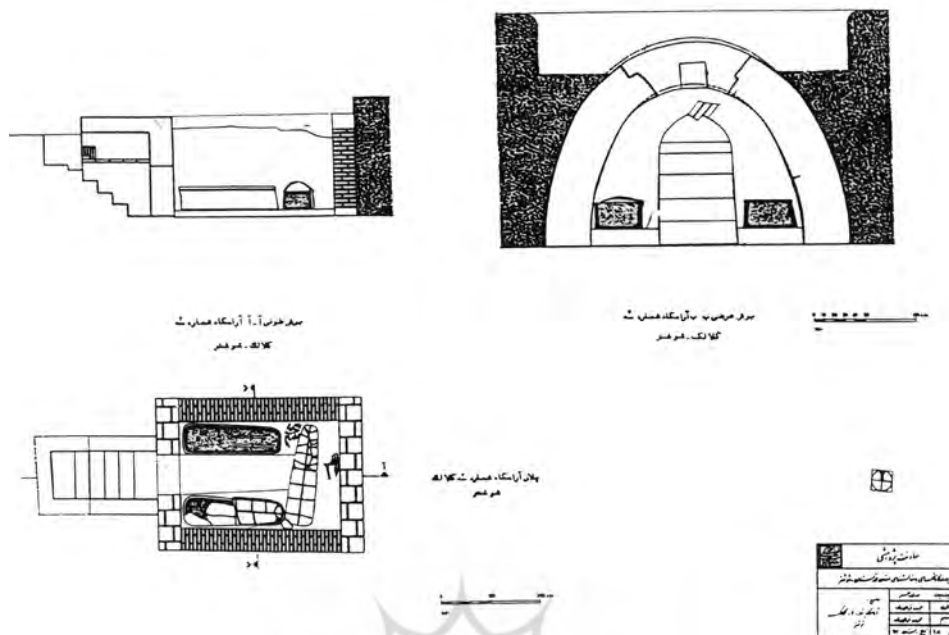


Fig.13. Tomb 3

sarcophagus, while inside the sarcophagus, near the chest area, a small bronze ring and a corroded copper coin were discovered.

Against the southern wall of the burial chamber, a plain, unglazed ceramic sarcophagus adorned with relief decorations was discovered. Its head was oriented westward, with gable-shaped lid being fractured by the pressure of the overlying soil. The decorations included rope-like motifs, elements reminiscent of Ionic Greek columns, and a raised relief resembling a signet ring. To the right of the sarcophagus, on the chamber floor, a bowl, a small perfume jar, a cup, and a glass paste seal depicting a boar were found. A fragment of an iron chain with intertwined links was recovered nearby. The tomb's three platforms were supported by arches, creating spaces beneath them approximately 70cm wide

and 190 to 200cm long, which were evidently used for standard burials. Beneath the first platform, approximately seven bodies were found buried supine, either side by side or stacked. No specific burial orientation was observed; three skeletons were oriented with their heads to the west, while four were oriented towards the east. A limited number of accompanying objects, such as small glazed and unglazed bowls and vessels, were found. An unglazed footed cup was also discovered beneath the second platform.

### Tomb 2

The roof of this tomb had completely collapsed and therefore there is no traces of sarcophagi, skeletons, or bones, but amidst the soil, fragments of glazed and unglazed pottery, pieces of glass vessels, remnants of a fat lamp, a copper coin,



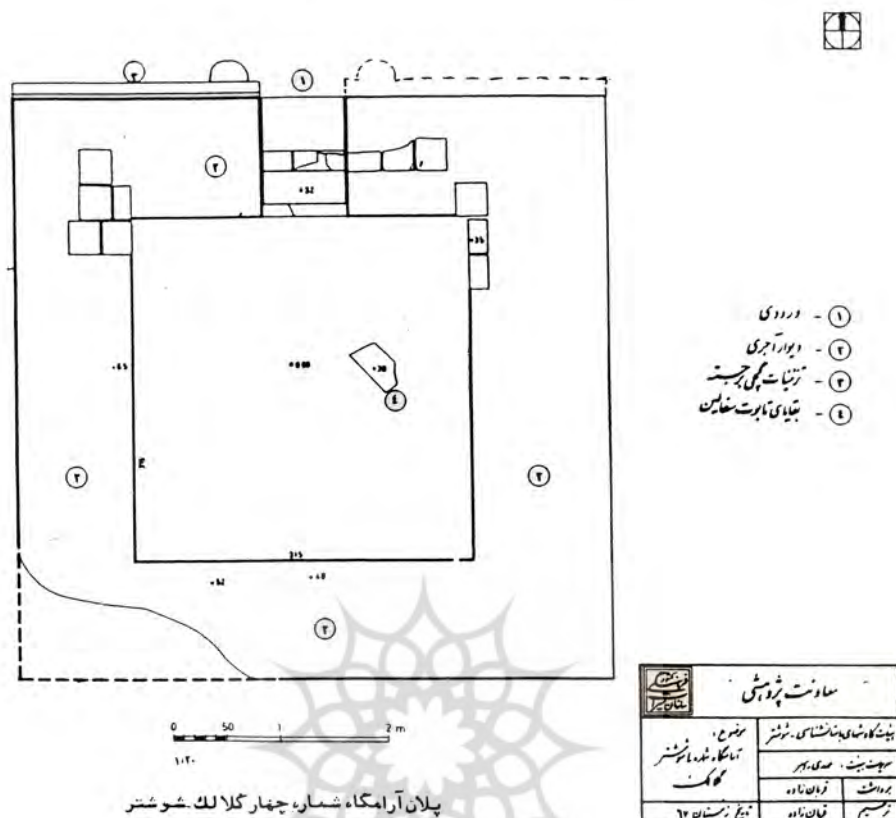


Fig. 14. Plan of Tomb 4

and a lead coin were recovered. Fragments of a ceramic jar were also found beneath the northern platform. Evidence of multiple repair layers, particularly on the platforms, indicate the prolonged use of the tomb. The absence of collapsed roof bricks, sarcophagi, and skeletons suggests that the tomb was emptied contemporaneously with the roof collapse (Fig. 9, 10).

The entrance to Tomb 2 faced west and featured a relatively long staircase, a threshold, and a main chamber. The staircase consisted of 14 narrow steps, each measuring no more than 15 centimeters in width and approximately 15 centimeters in height. Beyond the short,

narrow steps, there was a threshold only 6 centimeters higher than the main floor of the tomb. Like the first tomb, this one also had three platforms, each approximately 90 centimeters high. These platforms were supported by arches, creating substantial spaces beneath them. Unlike the first tomb, however, the platforms and their underlying spaces lacked walls, and the niche opposite the entrance, set into the tomb wall, had its own, relatively large arch behind the ceiling arch, independent of it.

The burial chamber measures 3.70 meters in length and 3.25 meters in width. Including the width of the opposite niche, which measures approxi-



Fig. 15. Tomb 4

mately 108 centimeters, the total length of the chamber is 4.78 meters. When the length of the stairs, which is 3.20 meters, is added, the total length of

the tomb complex becomes 8 meters. The bricks used in this tomb measure 29x29x7 centimeters. The southern platform is 112 centimeters wide, and the



Fig. 16. Green Seal with the Name of "ΟρθΑκ" in Greek script

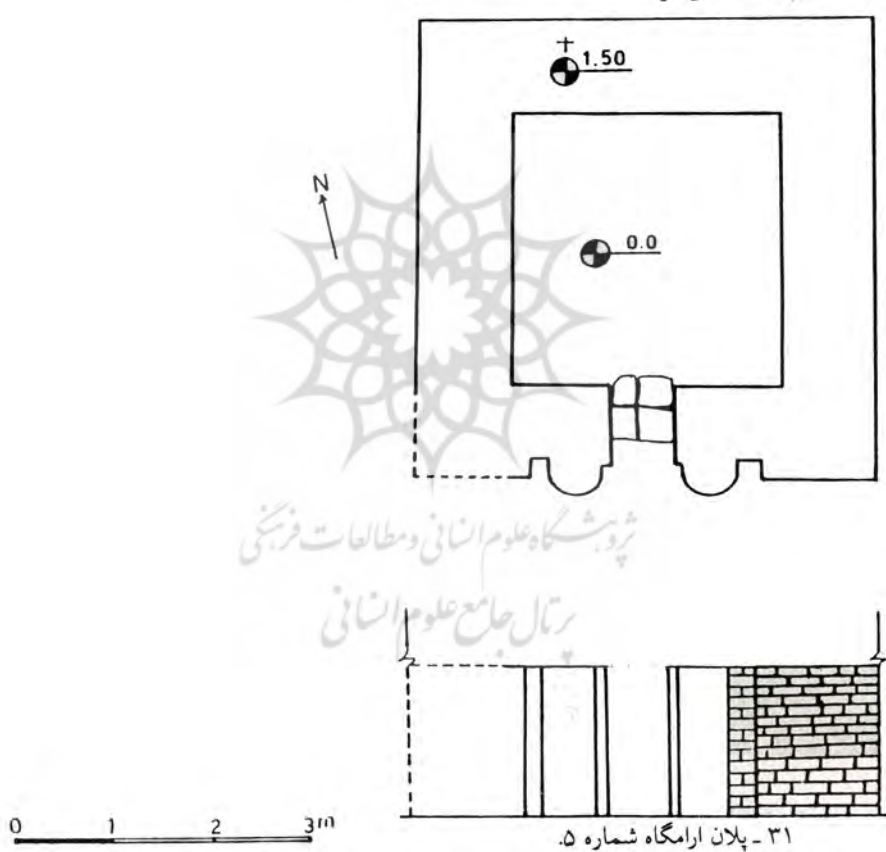


Fig. 17. Plan of Tomb 5

space beneath approximately 105x190 centimeters. The northern platform has the same length as the southern one

and is 114 centimeters wide. The eastern platform, or the platform facing the entrance, is larger as it encompasses





Fig. 18. Glazed Pottery that is part of a Coffin

both the platform space and the niche. Perhaps one of the most significant features of this tomb is the implementa-

tion of a cloister vault on the platforms, providing the earliest evidence of such vaults at Gelālak (Fig. 11, 12).



Fig. 19. Sasanian Coin Found from the Excavation of Gelalak

### Tomb 3

This tomb is located 10 meters west of Tomb 1. It is north-south oriented with the entrance on the northern side. The tomb has 6 steps and three platforms, and its floor is covered with gypsum. The bricks used in the tomb measure 6.5x26x26 centimeters. Three unglazed ceramic sarcophagi with decorations were found, with arched lids. Within this tomb, an olive-green glazed ceramic jug, a ceramic cup, a copper coin, and a gold ring with a black gemstone were discovered. Iron pieces resembling nails were also found. The left-most sarcophagus lacked a lid, and several human bone fragments were found on Platform 3 beside the sarcophagus (Fig. 13).

### Tomb 4

Located in the western part, this tomb differs from its predecessors in a way that it was not constructed below the ground level. Instead, it is a relatively

small chamber with a ground-level entrance. The chamber itself is 35 centimeters below the level of the corridor and is accessed by two steps.

The tomb lacks platforms. It is a square chamber measuring 316 by 316 centimeters. The walls and floor are made of rectangular bricks measuring 318x31 or 305x30 centimeters, bound with gypsum mortar, and the floor is covered with a layer of gypsum plaster. Wall thicknesses vary between 110 and 120 centimeters. On the right side of the entrance, slightly above the ground level, a reclining half-column adorned with decorative plaster was found. Additionally, a fragment of a gypsum half-column with a base slightly larger than the shaft was discovered in the same area (Fig. 14, 15).

The presence of a fragment of a glazed ceramic sarcophagus indicates that, in addition to burials conducted at the surface level of the chamber, at least one sarcophagus was placed on the



Fig. 20. Elymaean Coins with Aramaic Script

chamber floor. Numerous human bone fragments were scattered throughout the chamber, particularly along the walls. Bodies were buried around the walls, and their associated vessels and objects were

placed beside them before being covered with a layer of soil.

The tomb yielded glazed and unglazed jugs, as well as ceramic perfume jars. A convex green gemstone was found,



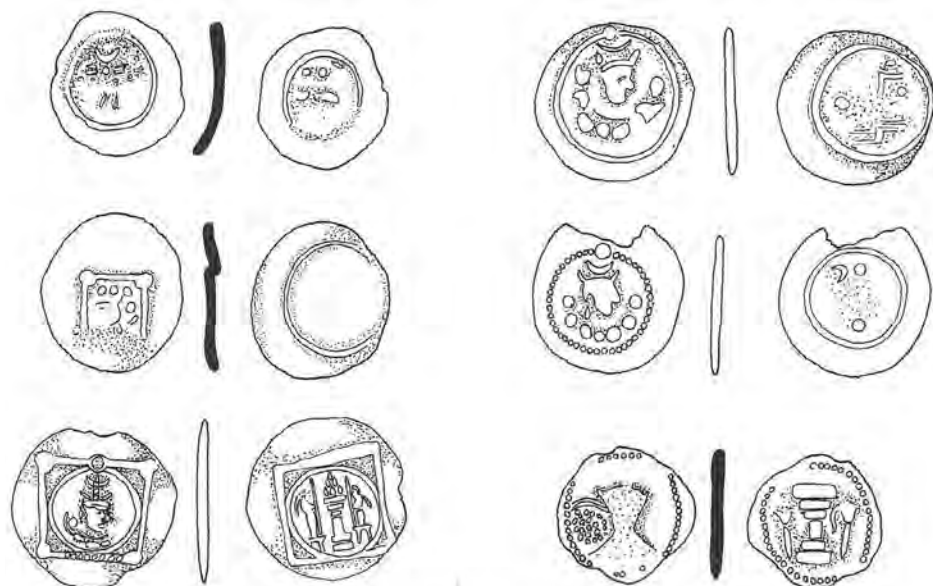


Fig. 21. Coins of Gelalak

serving as a personal seal. The inscription on the gemstone, in reverse Greek script, reads “ΟρωΔακ” (Orodak), which may have been the name of a local ruler (Fig. 16).

### Tomb 5

In the northwestern part of the site, in Trench T12, another tomb was discovered, constructed using bricks and sandstone with gypsum mortar. The tomb measures 2.80 by 2.80 meters, with walls approximately 90 centimeters thick. The entrance, 70 centimeters wide, is located on the southern side. It has two steps, and both the entrance and the floor of the tomb are brick-paved and covered with a layer of gypsum (Fig. 17).

The tomb features two cylindrical gypsum half-columns. Fragments of a glazed ceramic sarcophagus, apparently the only one in this tomb, were scattered over the floor at various depths.

Fragments of a cow's femur and jaw were found among the soil and at the foot of the steps. Of the human skeleton, only a broken skull was discovered in the northeastern corner, accompanied by fragments of the sarcophagus. In addition to ceramic vessels such as bowls, cups, and perfume jars, as well as fragments of glazed and unglazed pottery, numerous pieces of relatively large jars coated with bitumen on the interior were found.

A fragment of a cup, with the incised image of a fish on interior surface and the tail of another fish visible nearby, suggests that the cup was decorated with at least three fish around its circumference. A tubular vessel with a depiction of an animal with two large eyes was also found. The animal's horns encircle the tube and are in relief.

Furthermore, fragments of a glazed ceramic sarcophagus adorned with relief decorations of human heads and raised

decorative studs should be mentioned. These studs were placed alternately near the edge of the sarcophagus. The relief of the human head, with disheveled hair, resembles Greek satyrs. A relief of a woman on glazed pottery, possibly part of a sarcophagus, was also found. Half of the woman's face is still remaining. The background of the image is turquoise, while the hair is auburn, and the face is white with black or auburn eyes and eyebrows (Fig. 18).

### Conclusion

Archaeological excavations at Gelalak have yielded a rich collection of artifacts, including tombs, sarcophagi, ceramic and glass vessels, ornaments, metal objects, seals, and coins. A total of 37 copper and lead coins were discovered, both during excavations and surface surveys. The study of a number of these coins suggests that some belong to the Orodes I and Orodes II of the Elymaean dynasty of Kamanskiris. Coins were found during surface surveys and within the stairways of tombs, the inscriptions on them have been worn away. One lead coin bears the image of a fire altar, possibly dating back to the Sasanian period.

Copper coins typically depict a king on one side, either facing forward or in profile. On the reverse side, a moon, a star, and a trident, which is believed to represent an anchor, can be seen. The reverse sides of the coins often have indistinct raised lines and sometimes depict the goddess Artemis. The coins are inscribed with Aramaic script around their edges. On one coin, the incomplete Greek word "βασιλ[εύς]" the genitive case, meaning

"king", can be read. Additionally, a large copper coin, or Tetradrachm, was found depicting a king on one side, looking to the right, and irregular raised lines on the reverse. The remaining coins are smaller and are drachms.

A green gemstone with an Iranian name but in Greek script was discovered in Tomb 4. It belongs to a person named "ΟρωΔακ" (Orodak), who likely held a significant position or had social status. This tomb undoubtedly belonged to him. The relief of a woman with hair flowing freely over her shoulders, while not typically Iranian, is also difficult to find in the Greek art of this period. Therefore, it is best considered influenced by the Greek art.

The tombs can be categorized into two groups: **a. Subterranean tombs:** These include tombs numbered one, two, and three. They are distinctly Iranian and strongly influenced by the Elamite art, demonstrating the continuity of indigenous architectural art from the Middle Elamite period until that time. **b. Surface-level tombs:** Although these tombs are located slightly below ground level, ranging from 30 to 60 centimeters, they are classified as surface-level tombs. Unlike the first group, they lack platforms and consist of simple chambers. However, they feature plaster decorations and decorative half-columns at the entrance, which are influenced by foreign, specifically the Greek art.

Based on the evidence, these tombs belong to the reign of Orodes I and Orodes II of the Elymaean dynasty of Kamanskiris in the first and early second centuries AD.

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