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# Classification, Typology, and Relative Chronology of Personal Ornaments from the Ancient Cemetery of Liār-Sang-Bon, Amlash, Iran


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## Abstract


The Liār-Sang-Bon cemetery is located in Amlash City in Gilan province. During the field research, more than 100 pit graves, catacombs, and jar burials were identified at the cemetery. Some of these graves contained various types of ornaments. The questions which are raised in the current research are as follows: Considering the comparison of the ornaments of the Liār-Sang-Bon cemetery with similar sites, what time frame can be suggested for these data? Based on the discovered decorations, what exchanges did this area have with the surrounding areas? What is the relationship between the use of jewellery and the gender of the deceased in the tombs of Liār-Sang-Bon? It is suggested that the typology and classification of cultural finds obtained from this site and their comparison with other Iranian cultural sites, especially from the first century BC to the fourth century AD, can help us in dating the graves.


**Keywords:** Personal Ornaments; Cemetery; Gilan; Amlash; Parthian; Sasanian.

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## Introduction

One of many known ancient cemeteries in eastern Gilan, Liār-Sang-Bon has furnished a wealth of information on the region's culture and art in the historical era, especially the Parthian period. Five seasons of excavations at the cemetery in 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 have brought to light 130 catacomb, pit, and jar types of burials. Several graves contained two concomitant burials (Jahani 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). The archaeological complex of Liār-Sang-Bon lies in a steep valley at the *Shirchak* village of *Somam* Rural Agglomeration, Rankouh District, Amlash County, Gilan Province. The cemetery occupies the complex's eastern side, perching on Mount *Ahinbartale* at altitude 36°54'01" north, longitude 50°01'46" east, at an elevation of around 1900 m. To the northwest of the complex, within a 2 km limit, lie the two summer quarters of the Upper and Lower Shirchak villages, whose nomadic pastoralist residents only spent springs and summers at their houses. The town of Siahkuh is about 1 km to the northeast. Some 1800 m south, at a lower elevation, is the village of *Shiyeh*. The archaeological complex is generally accessed via a trail at the village of *Shiyeh*, which leads to the higher elevations and Shirchak. Radiocarbon dates deriving from the dentine collagen of two tombs from the 2016 and 2017 seasons fall between 38 BC-123 AD and 45 BC-80 AD, relating the cemetery to the Parthian period (Sottysiak and Jahani, 2019: 49). It is noteworthy that the objects presumably reflecting the Sasanian art also come from the site. It seemingly functioned as a cemetery from the Parthian to the early Islamic period. Excavations at Liār-Sang-Bon have yielded a large assemblage of burial gifts, including various pottery types, iron weaponry, personal accessories, and an array of per-

sonal ornaments. The latter consists of various kinds of beads, pendants, rings, finger rings, bracelets, earrings, pins, and medallions, made of various materials such as frit, glass, bronze, silver, gold, and bitumen.

## Research Questions and Hypothesis

Studies of the Parthian period, especially the art of this period, are minimal. No written research has been done regarding the introduction and classification of ornaments of the Parthian period in the northern regions of Iran. Therefore, the introduction and typology of ornaments used by ordinary people in the Parthian period of Gilan and posing the following questions are necessary to carry out this research. 1. What is the connection between these ornaments and deceased people in this cemetery? 2. What were the cultural relations of the local community of Liār-Sang-Bon with the communities outside it during the Parthian period? The research hypothesis is based on the fact that deceased female people in this cemetery are the primary users of ornaments. The residents of Liār-Sang-Bon and, consequently, the Deylaman area in the historical period, especially the Parthians, had close relations with cultures outside the region, including the northern regions of the Caspian Sea (Such as the Sarmatian graves around the Volga-Don Canal in western Russia).

## Research Background

1901 marked the beginning of archaeological excavations in the Alborz Mountains, especially in Gilan province. The regional excavations have almost exclusively concentrated on Iron Age cemeteries (Khalatbari, 2013: 175–178). The expedition of the University of Tokyo, directed by Namio Egami and Jiro Ikeda, conducted excavations at the villages of

the Daylaman region between 1960–61 and published their results in six volumes (Egami *et al.*, 1966; Fukai and Ikeda, 1971). These represent the most significant excavations of Gilan in the 1940s. Excavations implemented in the wake of the Islamic Revolution mainly cover the Iron Age sites and invariably remain unpublished, barring a series of released reports.

Once identified for the first time by Vali Jahani in 2012, the cemetery of Liār-Sang-Bon entered Iran's National Register of Cultural Heritage as monument No. 31448 in March 2020. Given the heavy disturbance by clandestine diggings, consecutive salvage excavations covered the cemetery in 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2021. So far, no detailed studies have been dedicated to the typology and type of the rich assemblages of personal ornaments deriving from the systematic excavations across Gilan. The present work may provide some insight into the classification of the historical, especially the Parthian era jewelry from Gilan.

### Research Methods

In this research, the personal ornaments from the Liār-Sang-Bon cemetery were first spotted by appearance and function into these seven classes: 1) beads, 2) pendants, 3) rings, 4) bracelets, 5) earrings, 6) pins and brooches, and 7) medallions and roundels. It was followed by recording each class's specifications, which were then analyzed and compared with related materials from other sites to determine their relative chronology and origins.

### Classification and Comparative Analysis of Personal Ornaments from Liār-Sang-Bon Cemetery

The excavated remains from the ancient cemetery of Liār-Sang-Bon contain a

wide array of pottery vessels, metal weaponry in iron and bronze, crafting tools such as spindle whorls in diverse forms and materials, dress adornments, and personal ornaments. Of these, the latter category displays a particular diversity in both material and shape.

The recovered jewelry splits into seven classes based on their appearance and function: 1) beads, 2) pendants, 3) finger rings, 4) bracelets, 5) earrings, 6) pins or brooches, and 7) medallions and roundels. These pieces are in many materials, such as limestone, chalcedony, sandstone, quartz, glass, frit, bitumen, bronze, silver, gold, faience, and organic materials (bone and seeds). In terms of morphology, the pieces can be classified into geometric shapes, animal figures, human body parts, and natural phenomena (such as grape cluster earrings, cherry-shaped pendants, and moon crescent- and star-shaped beads).

### Beads

In the assemblages excavated in the five seasons, beads predominate in frequency. This class is comprised of spherical instances in stone, frit, limestone, agate, and bitumen and finds abundant parallels at cemeteries such as Ghalekuti (Sono and Fukai, 1968), Tepe Nush-i Jan (Curtis, 1984: 42–43, nos. 378 and 477), Deve Höyük (Moorey, 1985: 211), ed-Dur (Haerinck *et al.*, 1991, Fig. 35), in the Pamir Plateau (Yablonsky, 1995: 237, Fig. 108.e), at Dura-Europos (Rostovtzeff, 1936, 126–127, pls. XLIII, XLV, XLVI, L, LIV), in Caucasia (Chechenov, 2012: 31, pl. 19), at a temple in Dandara on the west bank of the Nile (Flinders Petrie, 1914: 10), Egyptian sites (Gustavus, 1916), and in general across a vast region extending from Europe to China (Taniichi, 1983a, 1983b). The available evidence suggests a date for these objects between the sec-

ond half of the first millennium BC and the Sasanian period (Schmidt, 1957, pl. 43/30). Such pieces were probably used as amulets or talismans. These beads display several sub-classes in terms of appearance, the most frequent of which are outlined below:

Round beads occur in a variety of materials. The bitumen specimens are paralleled at Noruzmahale (Egami *et al.*, 1966, pl. XIX/9). Those in frit with raised bands around the body find parallels at Noruzmahale (Egami *et al.*, 1966, pl. XIX/18, pl. XX/4–5) and Hassani Mahale (Sono and Fukai, 1968, pl. XXXVI/2). Tiny pieces in blue frit resemble the material from Ghalekuti I (Sono and Fukai, 1968, pl. L/4) and the examples from South Russia dating to around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC (Guliaev, 2003: 119, Fig. 3/11).

Cylindrical beads are reminiscent of examples from the Tandovin cemetery of Talesh (Khalatbari, 2004, Fig. 6/98), Ghalekuti I (Sono and Fukai, 1968, pl. L/9–11), and the Cheshmeh cemetery (Schmidt, 1957, pl. 43/31) dating to the Parthian period. A bone bead decorated with possibly incised, inlaid bands is comparable to the instances from Uygarak on the Syrdarya River downstream in Kazakhstan. As an indication of trade exchanges in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC between the Indian peninsula and Central and Southeast Asia, these objects span from the end of the Achaemenid to the beginning of the Parthian period (Yablonsky, 1995: 218, Fig. 50).

Triangular or lanceolate forms compare the examples recovered near Persepolis dated between the late Achaemenid and the early Parthian period (Schmidt, 1957, pl. 44/15). Further comparable forms occur in Taxila, Pakistan, from around the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (Beck, 1941: 30, pl. IX-27), the Cheshmeh cemetery (Schmidt, 1957, pl. 43/40), and examples

in glass are attested in the assemblages from Roman Egypt (Flinders Petrie, 1914, pl. XLIII/129a-b).

Crescent- and star-shaped beads in bitumen are comparable to the material from Sardis belonging to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC (Flinders Petrie, 1914, pl. II/24-d).

Other remarkable forms include those in the shapes of a turtle and a human fist in Egyptian faience that is paralleled at the ed-Dur cemetery (Haerinck *et al.*, 1991: 54, Fig. 35), the Sarmatian graves around the Volga-Don Canal in western Russia dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD (Moshkova, 1995: 159, Fig. 27b), and a cemetery in southern Kazakhstan assigned between the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (Podushkin, 2015: 73, Fig. 4/11–14). Further related evidence is found in a collection at the University College London, which derives from Egypt and has been dated to the period of the Roman conquest of the region through typological studies (Flinders Petrie, 1914: pl. I/13a-b).

The phallus-shaped bead from Liār-Sang-Bon finds analogies in the assemblages from Germi (Bagherpour Kashani, 2014, pl. 46, No. 3352), Hassani Mahale (Sono and Fukai, 1968, pl. XXXVIII-2, pl. LXIV7-8), ed-Dur (Haerinck *et al.*, 1991, 50, Fig. 28/7), Western Russia (Moshkova, 1995: 159, Fig. 27a), and Egypt (Flinders Petrie, 1914, pl. I/16a-d).

### *Finger Rings*

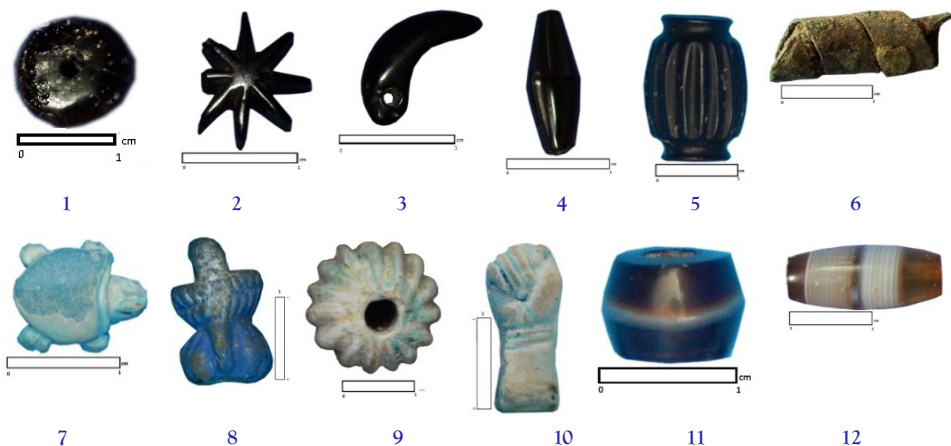
The rings obtained from Liār-Sang-Bon are made of bronze and silver; these items consist of simple or spiral hoops with or without a gem and an engraved plate on the hoop. Finger rings set with a glass or chalcedony gemstone are among the fascinating instances found at this cemetery. One has a spherical glass gem bearing the inscription “ROSA.” This unique piece is comparable to examples

Table 1. Typological Comparison of Ornaments of Liār-Sang-Bon Cemetery

No	Burial No.	Kind	Material	Place of Comparison and Source	Suggested Chronology
1	95507	Bead	Natural bitumen	Egami et al., 1966: PL.XIX/9	Parthian period
2	95808	Bead	Natural bitumen	Flinders Petrie., 1914: PL.II/24-d	Parthian period
3	95808	Bead	Natural bitumen	Flinders Petrie, 1914: PL.II/24-d	Parthian period
4	95808	Bead	Natural bitumen	Egami et al., 1966: PL.XIX/10 Flinders Petrie, 1914: PL. II/24-d Egami et al., 1966: PL.XIX/10	Parthian period
5	96303	Bead	Natural bitumen	Schmidt, 1957: pl. 43/31; Fukai and Ikeda, XXXIV/2-3 .1971: PL	Parthian period
6	--	Bead	Bronze	Egami et al., 1966: PL.XIX/15-17	Parthian period
7	96303	Bead	Fiennes	Haerinck et al., 1991: 54; Fig.35; Flinders I/13a-b .Petrie, 1914: PL	Parthian period
8	96303	Bead	Fiennes	Bagherpour Kashani, 2014: PL.46-no. 3352 Sono and Fukai, 1968: 19; Pl. XXXVIII ;1-2 Pl. LXIV 7-8; Haerinck et al., 1991: 50; Fig.28/7; Moshkova, 1995: 159, Fig.27.a Flinders Petrie, 1914: PL.I/16a-d	Parthian period
9	96303	Bead	Fiennes	Schmidt, 1957: pl. 43/30	Parthian period
10	96303	Bead	Fiennes	Haerinck et al., 1991: 50; Fig.28/7; Mosh-;b .27 .kova, 1995: 159, Fig Podushkin, 2015: 73; Fig.4/11-14; Flinders Petrie, 1914: PL. I/13a-b	Parthian period
11	96310	Bead	Agate	Schmidt, 1957: pl. 43/15	Parthian period
12	95504	Bead	Agate	Khalatbari, 2013: plate 1/24-image 5/100	Parthian period
13	96303	Bead		---	Parthian period
			Gold		
14	96310	Bead	Glass	XLIII/129a-b .Flinders Petrie, 1914: PL	Parthian period

15	95808	Bead	Rock	--	Parthian period
16	95201	Bead	Rock	Schmidt, 1957: pl. 44/15	Parthian period
17	95507	Bead	Glass paste	Sono and Fukai, 1968: 49, Pl. LXXXV,34-36; Schmidt, 1957: pl.43/11-12; Curtis, 1984: 42-43, no.378 and 477; Moorey, 1985: 211; Haerinck et al., 1991: Fig.35; Yablonsky, 1995: 237, Fig. 108.e; Taniichi, 1983a; 1983b; Haerinck, 1989: 459	Parthian period
18	96303	Bead	Glass paste	Spaer,1993:16-20; Sono and Fukai, 1968: PL. LXIV/14	Parthian period
19	96303	Bead	Glass paste	Sono and Fukai, 1968: PL. L/9-11	Parthian period
20	95502	Bead	Glass paste	--	Parthian period
21	96308	Bead	Glass paste	--	Parthian period
22	95507	Bead	Glass paste	Khalatbari, 2013: Image 6/98	Parthian period
23	95815	Bead	Glass paste	Schmidt, 1957: pl. 43/40	Parthian period
24	96310	Bead	Bone	Flinders Petrie, 1914: PL.II/19b-c	Parthian period
25	95507	Bead	Glass paste	Egami et al., 1966: PL.XIX/6	Parthian period
26	95401	Finger ring	Bronze	Schmidt,1970:70-Fig. 28/7	Parthian period
27	95401	Finger ring	Bronze	Schmidt,1970:70-Fig. 28/6	Parthian period
28	95401	Finger ring	Bronze	Schmidt,1970:70-Fig. 28/6	Parthian period
29	95401	Finger ring	Bronze	Marshall,1907:99-112	Parthian period
30	--	Finger ring	Bronze	Sono and Fukai, 1968: PL. XL/10; Bagherpour Kashani, 2014: PL.30	Parthian period
31	00204	Finger ring	Silver	--	Parthian period
32	95502	Pendant	Bronze	Fallahian, 2015:185-Photos 177-179	Parthian period

33	96310	Pendant	Bronze	Moshkova, 1995: 160, Fig.30.h; Yablovsky, 1995: 206, Fig.11. b; Aslanov et al, 1959: 63; Pl. XVIII/5-7, 14 16	Parthian period
34	97201	Bracelet	Bronze	Schmidt, 1957: pl. 46/3; Sono and Fukai, 1968: PL. LXIII/9; Dostieva, 2013: 43-T. II/1	Parthian period
35	96303	Bracelet	Silver	Sono and Fukai, 1968: PL. LXIII/9	Parthian period
36	96310	Bracelet	Silver	Esayan and Kalantaryan, 1988: PL. XLIV/17; Khalatbari, 2004: plate 1/12-image 1/92	Parthian period
37	00103	Earrings	Gold	Egami et al., 1966: PL.XIX/3; Magomedov, 1994: 100. Fig.8; Negahban, 1996: PL.XXVIII	Parthian period
38	96303	Earrings	Gold	Egami et al., 1966: PL.XXX/1	Parthian period
39	--	Earrings	Gold	Egami et al., 1966: PL.XXX	Parthian period
40	00104	Earrings	Silver	--	Parthian period
41	00104 97209	Pins	Bronze	Sono and Fukai, 1968: PL. XLVII/4a-b; Schmidt, 1957: pl. 46/7; Bokovenko, 1995: 312, Fig.21	Parthian period
42	97403	Medallion	Bronze	Makhortykh, 2016: 174; Egami et al., 1966: PL. XVIII	Parthian period
43	--	Roundel	Bronze	Negahban, 1996: plate 54, 55; Khalatbari, 2016: 397	Parthian period







from ancient Roman art kept in various collections, such as those of Frank and Castellani, and date between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD (Marshall, 1907: 99–112).

The simple circular and spiral rings are made of silver and find parallels at many prehistoric to Islamic sites over vast regions (Schmidt, 1957, pl. 45/32; Hakemi, 2016: 88).

Examples with a plain plate or engraved with incised geometric or linear patterns share affinities with the samples from Naqsh-e Rostam (Schmidt, 1970: 70, Fig. 6/28), Noruzmahale (Egami *et al.*, 1966, pl. XIX/4), Late Sarmatian cultures in Russia (Moshkova, 1995: 159, Fig. 28a), Chale Ghar of the Veshnavah village near Qom (Bagherpour Kashani, 2014: PL.30) span in the date the Parthian to the end of the Sassanid period.

### *Pendants*

Bronze, glass, and frit pendants form another class of personal ornaments from the Liār-Sang-Bon cemetery. These pieces are geometric, natural phenomena, and animal and human forms. The geometric instances are likewise attested at Qalaku-ti I (Sono and Fukai, 1968, pl. LI/15–16), Tepe Hissar IIIb (Schmidt, 1937, pl. LXX/H2788), Hassani Mahale (Sono and Fukai, 1968, pl. XLII/6), and in Russia (Bokovenko, 1995: 311, Fig. 18 h). Bell-shaped bronze pendants occur in Western Russia (Moshkova, 1995: 160, Fig. 30 h), Kazakhstan (Yablonsky, 1995: 206, Fig. 11b), and the Republic of Azerbaijan (Aslanov *et al.*, 1959: 63, pl. XVIII/5–7, 14–16). A couple of zoomorphic pendants appear to be unique to this cemetery, as they remain thus far unreported from any other cemetery in the Daylaman region. Of these, the one in the shape of a bird resembles a piece from Marlik (Negahban, 1996, pl. 69, no. 276). Animal figurines were popular throughout the Iron Age and even

continued into the historical period in the southern Caspian littoral (Fallahian, 2015: 185, Figs. 177–179). This bird pendant dates back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD judging from the associated burial gifts.

A particularly unique instance from the cemetery of Liār-Sang-Bon is a glass pendant epitomizing a standing human figure with his right hand in front of the mouth. The figure represents Harpocrates, the Greek god of silence. As the Egyptian Horus the Child, and the son of Isis and Osiris, he was represented as a naked boy, with the finger of his right hand in front of his lips, usually wearing a horned crown. He sometimes holds a lotus, a cornucopia, or a whip in his left hand. From Hassani Mahale comes an analogous pendant, albeit either without or with totally effaced decorative patterns (Sono and Fukai, 1968, pl. LXIV/14). Pieces closely resembling the glass pendant from Liār-Sang-Bon occur in Dobkin's private collection. These include three decorated pendants in golden-colored glass, dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (Spaer, 1993: 16–20).

### *Bracelets*

The bracelets from Liār-Sang-Bon are in bronze and, less frequently, silver and generally occur in the penannular form with open ends. Both plain and decorated examples are seen. Those with crenate decorations compared with models from the Cheshmeh cemetery (Schmidt, 1957, pl. 46/3), Hassani Mahale (Sono and Fukai, 1968; pl. LXIII/9), and in the Republic of Azerbaijan (Dostieva, 2013: 43-T. II/1).

The simple bracelets with locking clasps resemble a piece from Oshakan in Armenia (Esayan and Kalantaryan, 1988, pl. XLIV/17). The other penannular type parallels the work from the Marian cemetery (Khalatbari, 2004; pl. 11/12, Fig. 11/92).

### Earrings

The discovered earrings are of bronze, silver, and gold. Typologically, they include simple circular, circular, with a decorative groove paralleled at Marlik (Negahban, 1996, pl. 86, no. 385), circular with a cherry-shaped pendant, and circular with grooved decorations and a grape cluster pendant. The silver and gold instance with a grape clustered pendant is comparable to the material from Noruzmahale (Egami *et al.*, 1966, pl. XIX/3) and Verkhnecho in Makhachkala, Dagestan (Magomedov, 1994: 100, Fig. 8) dated to around the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD. Related examples are known from Marlik (Negahban, 1996, pl. 84, no. 360).

### Pins

These pins of bronze bear geometric and animal decorations. The type with crenate ornaments paralleled those found at the Cheshmeh cemetery near Persepolis and belongs to the late Achaemenid to the early Parthian period (Schmidt, 1957, pl. 15/46). The animal-headed example with a goat or horse's body terminals finds parallels in the Tagar culture of southern Siberia (Bokovenko: 1995, 312, Fig. 21) and at Ghalekuti II (Sono and Fukai, 1968, pl. XLVII/4a-b), the Cheshmeh cemetery (Schmidt, 1957, pl. 46/7), and Pirkuh in Amarlu (Khalatbari, 2013: 397). Such objects were prevalent in many cultures from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC to the end of the historic period.

As a further class of ornaments discovered from Liār-Sang-Bon, brooches are circular and have a central pointed projection.

### Medallions and Roundels

Liār-Sang-Bon's bronze medallions are reminiscent of examples from a site on the bank of the Terek River in North Caucasica (Makhortykh, 2016: 174).

The recovered bronze buttons and roundels were sewn on ceremonial clothes. Some cases still retain unequivocal traces of fabric. All the buttons have one or two holes for attaching to clothes. Morphologically, they come in geometric forms paralleled at Marlik (Negahban, 1996, pl. 54, 55) and animal form in the shape of a winged horse. A similar piece originally functioned as a brooch comes from Rashi and dates to the Sassanid period (Khalatbari, 2013: 397).

### Analysis and Conclusion

According to the results of carbon dating tests and comparison with other objects found next to them and other sites, the jewelry collection of the Liār-Sang-Bon cemetery covers between 45 BC and 80 AD, which is the same as the Parthian period. These objects can be compared with the samples obtained from the sites located on the northern shores of the Caspian Sea, the cemeteries of western Russia related to the late Sarmatian period, as well as the Cheshmeh site near Persepolis, the Ed-Dur site, the sites associated with the Roman conquest in Egypt, and also the sites located near Liār-Sang-Bon in Deylaman<sup>1</sup>, such as Noruzmahale, Ghalekuti 1 and 2 and Hassani Mahale. Based on this, it is likely that the Liār-Sang-Bon cemetery was used as a burial for the tribes living in this area before the Parthian period, from the Achaemenid to the early Islamic period.

Based on the typology and a compara-

<sup>1</sup> Deylaman is the land of the Deylam tribe, who lived in the mountainous region east of the Sefidroud River. The eastern limit of this land reached the west of Kelar land. At the time when the sons of Boyeh gained power and conquered Tabarestan, this name was applied to the mountainous area between the Shemiran Tarom castle and the Gorgan plain (Sotodeh, 1996: 13).

tive analysis of ornaments from this cemetery, it is most likely that these goods were not locally produced and were brought to this region through trade. Examples comparable to many of these objects have been found in a wide range of areas ranging from the Middle East to Egypt and the Far East, Central Asia, and Europe. This seriously doubts the opinion of many historians who believed that the northern regions of Iran, including the lands of Deylama and Kadusi, were not independent of other parts of Iran and were under the central government. In his article on the political situation of Deylaman before Islam, Ahanchi notes that the bias and opposing sentiments of Greek historians towards Iran and their efforts to show the weakness of the central government, along with insufficient information, have led to the distortion of historical facts. During the Parthian and Sasanian eras, many parts of Gilan were ruled by princes and members of the Sasanian family, which shows the central government's focus on this region.

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