

Human remains from Shahr-i Qumis, Iran, 1967-1978

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Shahr-i Qumis is located 5km south-east of Qusheh village in Damghan county, Semnan province (35°57'07''N 54°06'41''E, 1305masl) near the southern foot of the Alborz Mountains (**Figure 1**). In 1966 John Hansman identified there a large archaeological site that then was excavated in four seasons (1967, 1971, 1976 and 1978) and tentatively identified as Hecatompylos, the second capital city of Parthians from the final decades of the 3rd century to perhaps the early first century BCE (Hansman 1968:113). Excavations focused on most monumental part of the site including so-called Naqareh Khaneh (a ruined circular building with a circular outer clay platform from Islamic era) and several buildings that were used mainly during Parthian period (Hansman & Stronach 1970:29) (**Figure 2**).

Many structures dated to the Parthian period included assemblages of disarticulated human remains and a few regular burials that were originally studied by Shirley Jarman, but results of that research have been never published. The collection of bones from Shahr-i Qumis was subsequently stored in cardboard and wooden boxes in the basement of the British Institute of Persian Studies in Tehran. After several decades Mostafa Dehpahlavan started the Qumis Data Review project and in the winter/spring 2018 boxes with human remains from Shahr-i Qumis have been brought out from the storage rooms, with careful review of associated tags. All elements have been cleaned, catalogued and re-packed to new crates and subsequently moved to the storage facilities at the National Museum in Tehran.

On this opportunity basic osteological and odontological research on this assemblage of human remains has been undertaken in March 2018 by Pegah Goodarzi and Elham Farnam under supervision of Arkadiusz Sołtysiak. In total, 70 crania, 11 mandibles, 79 long bones as well as nine skeletons of variable completeness have been identified, most of them retrieved from the site during the 1971 season of excavations (see **Table 1**). They were measured and described using standard protocols (Buikstra & Ubelaker 1994; Steckel et al. 2005).



Figure 1. Location of Qumis in Iran (drawing by Pegah Goodarzi).



Figure 2. Location of excavated sites in Shahr-i Qumis (drawing by Sepideh Sepehri).
Map data: Google, CNES / Airbus.

Available documentation allows identification of some contexts where human remains were found. The building 6 excavated in 1967 was a rectangular structure dated to the Early Parthian period with a number of long rooms that were likely used for storage (Hansman & Stronach 1970:36). Two crania were retrieved from the western

room 3 and a skull with some postcranial elements from room 26A. In the report published by the excavators, a skull from the room 3 was attributed to a secondary deposit that may have been a part of an ossuary (*astōdān*) made in this place after the building 6 was no longer in use (Hansman & Stronach 1970:40).

In the season 1971, excavations continued in the buildings 4, 5, 6, 7 and 13. The building 4 was located in the north of the site and consisted of four main rooms. In total 18 crania, three mandibles and some postcranial elements retrieved from several rooms in this building have been available for research. The excavators mentioned these human remains briefly, as some human and animal elements mixed with fragments of glass vessels in rooms 6 and 13 (Hansman & Stronach 1974:8).

More detailed description is available for human remains from the square building 7, where eight crania and one mandible available for present research were retrieved mainly from rooms 4 and 5. A layer of bones in the room 4 was found 2.30m above

Table 1. The general register of human remains (except assemblages of long bones) from Shahr-i Qumis.

Year	Site	Room	Sex ¹			Age-at-death ²			Total ³		Chronology ⁴
			M	?	F	SA	Ad	Cr	Md	PCr	
1967	6	3W	1	1	-	-	2	2	-	-	Sel/Parth
		26A	1	1	-	-	2	1	1	1	Sel/Parth
1971	4	6	-	4	-	-	4	4	1	2	Parth
		13	-	2	-	-	2	1	1	1	Parth
		13E	-	4	-	1	3	3	1	2	Parth
		14	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	Parth
		?	1	6	1	1	7	8	-	3	Parth
	5	18	3	12	2	3	14	17	1	-	Parth
	6	?	-	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	Sel/Parth
	7	4	-	1	3	-	4	4	-	-	Parth
		5	-	3	1	-	4	3	1	-	Parth
		?	-	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	Parth
?	?	N1	-	1	-	-	1	-	1	-	?
		N2	-	-	1	-	1	1	-	-	?
		N3	-	1	-	-	1	1	1	-	?
		M1	-	-	1	-	1	1	-	-	?
1976	5	5	1	1	-	-	2	2	-	-	Parth
		6	-	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	Sel/Parth
		7	-	1	-	-	1	1	1	-	Parth
1978	5	46	-	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	Parth
		?	3	10	2	1	14	13	2	-	Parth
?	7	4	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	Parth
		5	-	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	Parth
?	?	?	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	?
Total			10	56	11	8	69	70	11	9	

¹ M – male; ? – undetermined sex; F – female;

² SA – subadult; Ad – adult;

³ Cr – cranium; Md – mandible; PCr – postcranial elements;

⁴ Sel – Seleucid; Parth – Parthian.

the original floor level and included several skulls, partially articulated human skeleton and several animal elements: an equid jaw, equid long bones and horns of black-tailed gazelle (Hansman & Stronach 1974:12). The excavators reported also an assemblage excavated in 1967, containing crania of several taxa (nine humans, three onagers, two dogs, a fox and a gazelle) above a complete skeleton of a pig (Hansman & Stronach 1974:14). Human remains from the room 5 of the building 7 and from other buildings excavated in 1971 have been also retrieved from the storage at the British Institute of Persian Studies, but their context is not specified in available reports.

During the third season of excavations in 1976, human remains were found in three buildings (5, 6 and 7), but only one human cranium from the building 7 has been mentioned in the report, as found in front of a horse cranium above the lintel of the entrance (Stronach 1977:179). No information about the archaeological context of human remains excavated in 1978 is available.

Three specific contexts (a large pot in the building 7, trench B in building 2, both excavated in 1978, as well as a context with missing tag) contained assemblages of long bones, in most cases with no epiphyses, mixed with some quantity of animal elements (Table 2). There is a clear bias in all these contexts, with femora much more common than other elements (72% in total) and three smaller long bones (fibula, ulna and radius) virtually absent, with exception of one ulna.

Table 2. Distribution of long bones in three multiple assemblages.

Context	Humerus	Ulna	Radius	Femur	Tibia	Fibula	Total
Pot from Site 7	4	1		11	1		17
Site 2, Trench B	3			17	4		24
No tag	2			29	7		38
Total	9	1	0	57	12	0	79

Most human crania from Shahr-i Qumis were incomplete and sex assessment was possible only for 21 individuals, including 11 females and 10 males, suggesting that there was no sex bias in the assemblage. However, subadult individuals were clearly under-represented with only one infant, four children, and three adolescents in a sample of 77 individuals (66 crania, 7 mandibles, 4 skulls with both cranium and mandible preserved). Such a frequency (10% of subadult individuals) is much less than expected at an attritional cemetery.

Most striking feature of the assemblages of human remains at Shahr-i Qumis is high number of crania in comparison to other elements, in all excavated buildings. Moreover, many of these crania exhibited chop marks and scratches suggesting that they were processed in a deliberate way to remove cranial base and face (Figure 3). Also most long bones from the secondary contexts lacked epiphyses and chop marks were common as well (Figure 4). The excavators of the site found some similarities



Figure 3. Chop marks on cranium; QM 71, site 5, room 18, skull 12 (photograph by Arkadiusz Sołtysiak).

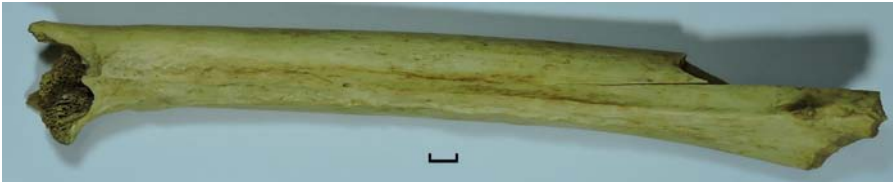


Figure 4. Chop marks on femur; QM 78, site 7, bone 1 (photograph by Joanna Szymczak). Scale bar 1cm.

between the assemblages of human remains and the Scythian burials in the steppes north to the Caspian Sea where also human skulls were found together with skeletons of the horses and other animals (Hansman & Stronach 1974).

Research on this assemblage of human remains is ongoing, focusing on the identification of taphonomic agents that affected disarticulated elements. The results may be helpful in understanding the burials rites during the formative period of the Parthian state.

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