

Alabaster Vessels from Shahr-i Sokhta

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Abstract

During the excavations in Shahr-i Sokhta, alabaster and marble objects in various forms including dishes, cups, mortars, seals, beads, torches and discs were found in residential areas and the graveyard. Indeed, based on the available evidence, it seems that this city was a centre of production of such artefacts in the first half of the third millennium BC. Unlike most marble vessels, the alabaster objects are typically small cosmetic bottles. These objects were usually made of two parts, a rectangular or cylindrical body and a separate lid. The Shahr-i Sokhta samples are smaller than those of central Asia and some of them have decorated bodies.

1. Alabaster items

The excavated objects discovered in Shahr-i Sokhta include items related to daily life, such as vessels, items used for ritual and worship, human and animal figures, slings, instruments related to business and economics such as seals and seal impressions, administrative objects, jar stoppers, round and triangular laminae, textiles, rope, wooden objects, various type of beads, metal objects and tools

(Sajjadi 2017). Alabaster objects, mostly various types of vessel, are another important group of objects produced in this site.

During the excavations, many marble objects such as dishes, seals, beads, cosmetics bottles, torches, discs, etc. were also found. Hundreds and hundreds of marble vessels, intact and broken, have been recovered from the residential area and the cemetery of Shahr-i Sokhta. Based on the available evidence, it seems that this site was a centre of marble production in the first half of the third millennium BC in the eastern Iranian plateau, supplying the markets of neighbouring settlements and exporting to distant lands. The chronological distribution of marble vessels shows that a significant percentage were found in tombs that belonged to Shahr-i Sokhta Periods I and II, indicating that the production of such vessels was at its highest in these periods, falling significantly in Period III. In more than 90% of the graves only one marble vessel was found and in less than 10% of the graves two, three or four vessels were found. The marble objects of the city, especially the marble vessels and their various details, have been extensively studied and described (Ciarla 1979; 1981; 1985; 1990; Shirazi 2007; 2009; Boccuti *et al.* 2015; Festuccia 2019; Sajjadi - Mohammadi Sefidkhani 2019).

The present article does not provide descriptions of the types of alabaster, marble and other stone artefacts, but only introduces some of the recently found marble objects.

One group of marble objects is made up of cosmetics bottles. These objects are usually found in the graves of women, but they have also been seen in the grave goods of men and children. These objects were usually composed of two parts: a rectangular or cylindrical prism and a separate lid. The specimens recovered from Shahr-i Sokhta are smaller than those of Central Asia, and all of them contain cosmetics such as kohl. Some cosmetics bottles have decorations on their outer body and in at least one case (G.N.9022/8), the object is decorated with white stones. In addition to marble, cosmetics bottles made of other materials have been found, including a horn-shaped terracotta cosmetics container. The lid is usually

made of the same material as the body of the container, but there are exceptions, such as the one found in G.N.1405, where the bottle itself is made of black stone, most probably soapstone, and the lid is made of white streaked marble (Fig. 1).

There are three groups of cosmetics bottles with different structural characteristics. The first group and probably the oldest is almost cylindrical, with the body decorated with small rounded inlaid stones. The second group, mostly dated to Shahr-i Sokhta Periods II and III, has a conical or cubic body, or a body with a circular cross section. A variant of this group has a more or less everted stand and is related to Period IV. The third group includes cones with a curved cap in the shape of an animal horn and is associated with Periods II and III (G.N.1405/17 and G.N.1615/5) (Fig. 2).

As mentioned, other objects with the same characteristics but different functions have been found. These are mainly torches made of marble and terracotta. The main differences between the torches and the cosmetics containers are their size and their contents (Sajjadi - Shahin 2017). The torches are up to 15 cm tall, while the height of the tallest cosmetics container is about 10 cm. The torches of Shahr-i Sokhta are exclusively cylindrical, with a circular cross section (Fig. 3).

Another group of marble objects is composed of relatively large beads, sometimes believed to be spindle whorls, although considering their location in tombs, they seem to have had a ritual function (Sajjadi 2019). In such cases, beads were placed on the forehead, under the pelvis, or under the lumbar vertebrae. These beads were made of marble, soapstone, terracotta and, in very rare cases, bone (Fig. 4).

Marble vessels (Fig. 5) are made with a very special delicacy, which is proof of the development of the lathes used for emptying out the cavity inside the stone block and the methods used for polishing (Fig. 6). Some of these containers are really small and very delicate, including two miniature bowls (G.N.3203/9 and G.N.9120/12, which are 2.5 and 2.8 cm in height, 3.3 and 3.7 cm in diameter and only 1.2 and 1.5 cm at the base respectively (Fig. 7).



Fig. 1: inlaid cosmetics bottle, G.N.9022, marble and soapstone bottle, G.N.1405.

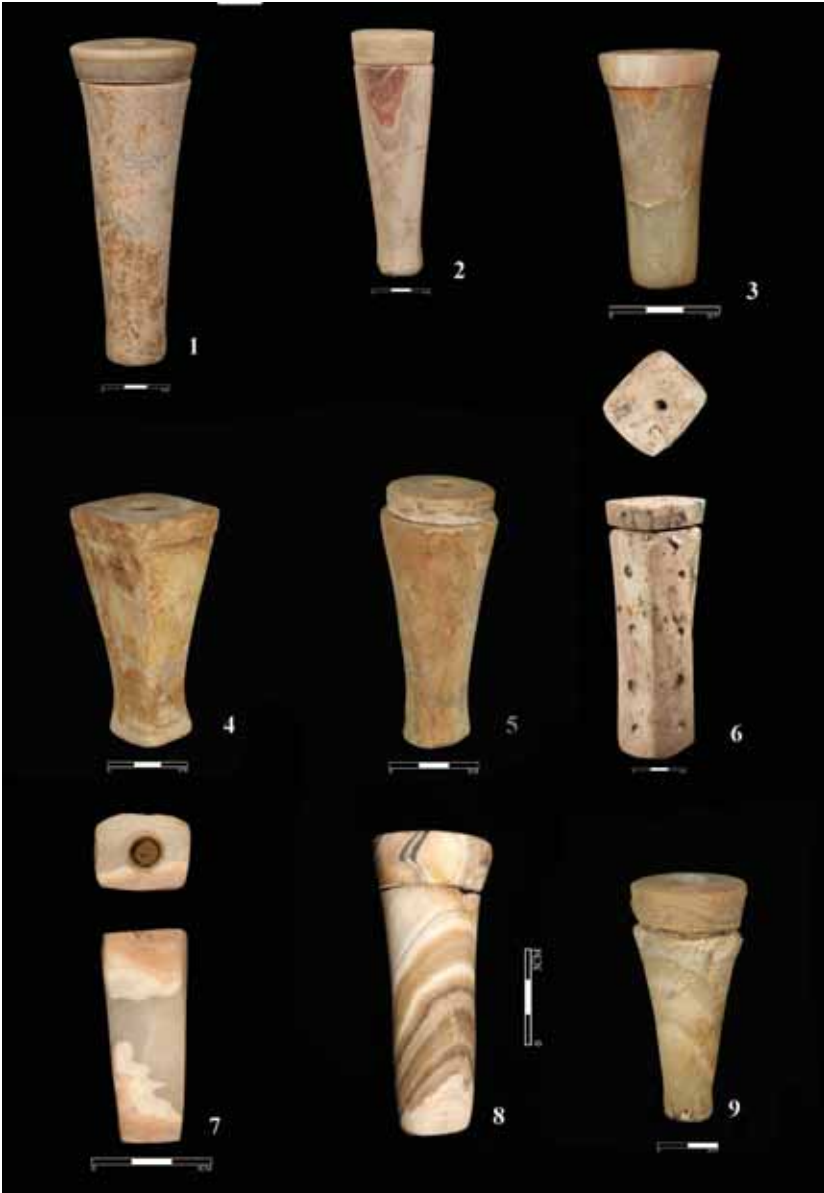


Fig. 2: types of cosmetics bottles: 1. G.N.9022/8; 2. G.N.9029/9; 3. Workshop 26 Cat. No. 26187; 4. G.N.9032/8; 5. G.N.8725/106; 6. G.N.8725/101; 7. G.N.8718/8; 8. G.N.8826/5; 9. G.N.9024/11.



Fig. 3: types of torch.



Fig. 4: large beads.



Fig. 5: collection of marble vessels discovered in G.N. 1394.



Fig. 6: incomplete containers and pieces taken out of a cylindrical container.

It should be noted that the objects found include various recycled objects, such as stone figurines that had lost their original use for some reason and were used as polishing tools for stone or pottery. The same is true for marble vessels and other objects: when a container was broken, it was then used for a different function after polishing the edges of the broken parts (Fig. 8).

The marble vessels discovered can be divided into three main groups: cylindrical vessels, conical vessels, and cups with stands, in addition to other shapes and forms such as small jars, rimmed bowls and the like. One of the most exceptional shapes ever found at Shahr-i Sokhta is a small jar (G.N.8906/5), not seen before among the marbles of Shahr-i Sokhta, which seems to be imported (Fig. 9).



Fig. 7: small miniature bowls: 1. G.N.9229/12; 2. G.N.9203/3; 3. G.N.2812/1.

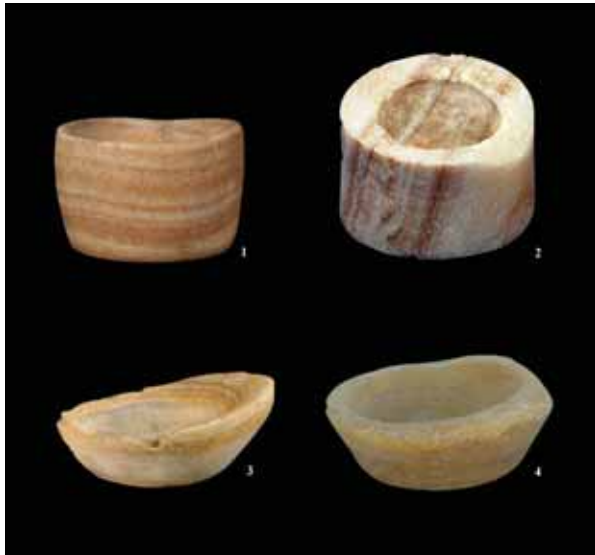


Fig. 8: reused fragments: 1. G.N.5705/1; 2. G.N.8824/4; 3. G.N.2909/2; 4. G.N.7930/3.



Fig. 9: rare shapes of marble vessels: 1. G.N.9022/10; 2. G.N.4314/28; 3. G.N.8906/5.

In a collection of 523 marble objects excavated from 168 graves, there were 214 containers including bowls, mortars and cups with stands. The numerical superiority of vessels compared to graves indicates that some had more than one container. The number of artefacts in a grave can be considered as an index of the social status of the deceased (Fig. 10).

The marble vessels of Shahr-i Sokhta are typically divided into two main categories: cones (bowls and cups with stands) and cylinders (mainly mortars). The four main forms are bowls, cups, mortars and jars.

Bowls

Marble bowls consist of conical vessels in various sizes (Fig. 11). They are found in the graves of females, males, children, infants and unidentified individuals (Fig. 12). They usually have a flat, smooth and robust body (Fig. 13) and can be deep, shallow and open-mouthed (Fig. 14). The largest bowl was found in a male grave (G.N.1704/6) and the smallest in a female grave (G.N.2905/2) (Fig. 8:2).

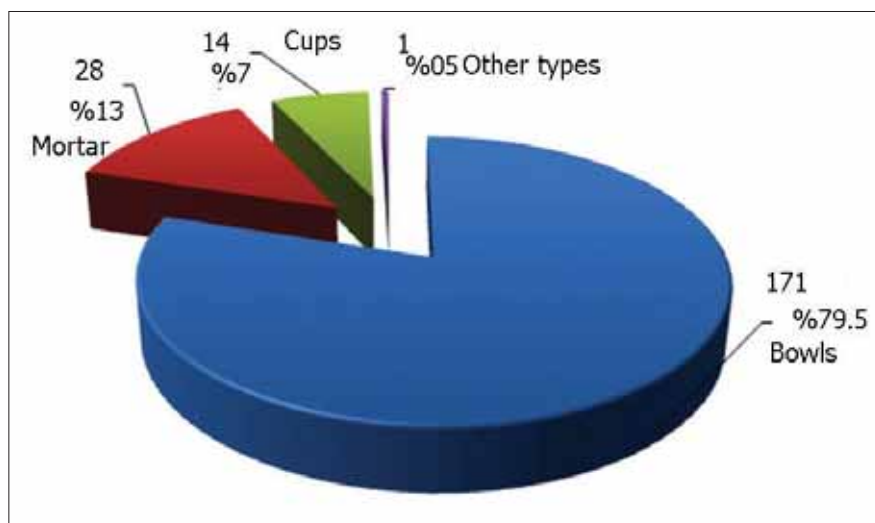


Fig. 10: frequency of marble vessels in the graveyard of Shahr-i Sokhta (Sajjadi - Mohammadi Sefidkhani 2019).

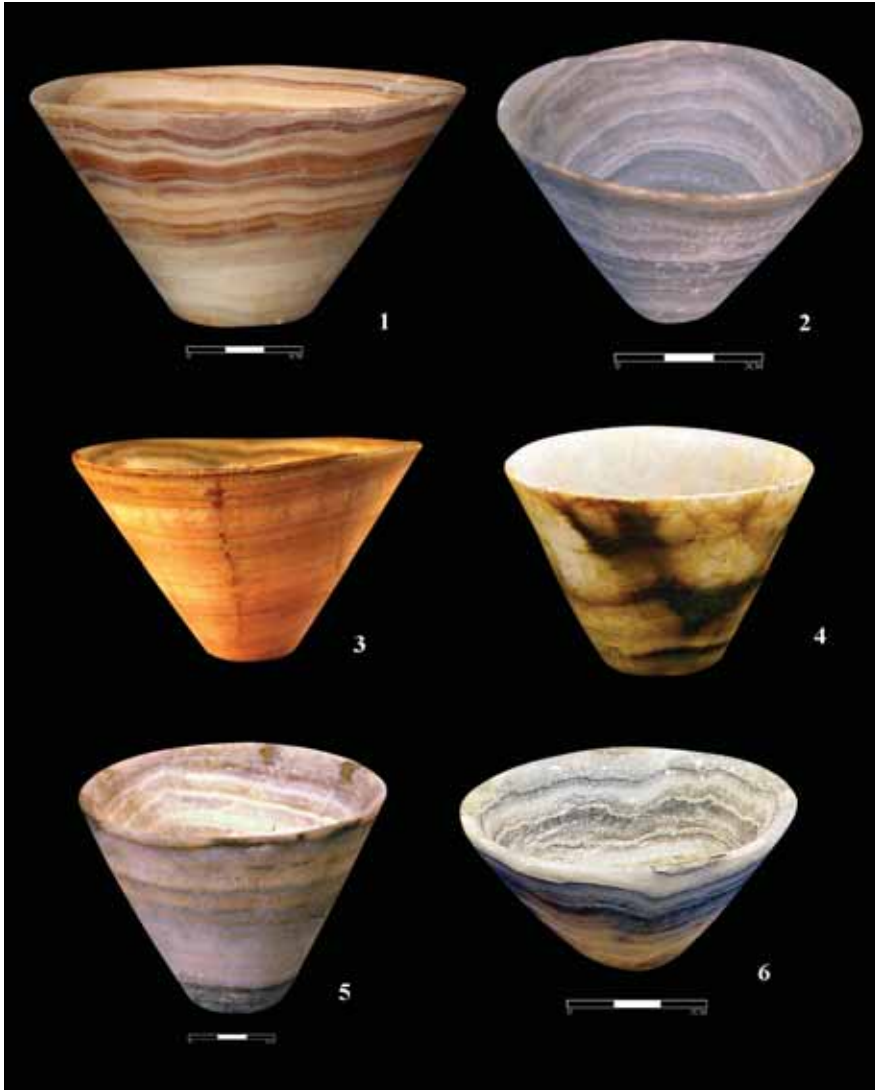


Fig. 11: types of bowl: 1. G.N.8823/8; 2. G.N.1300/9; 3. G.N.8305/6; 4. G.N.6704/4; 5. G.N.1516/4; 6. G.N.1516/4.

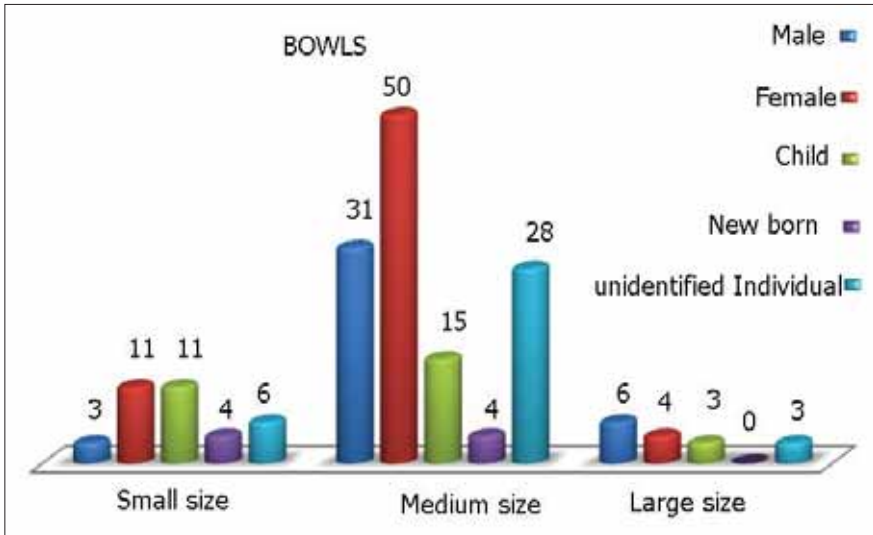


Fig. 12: frequency of bowls by gender and age of the deceased.

The majority of the small bowls were found in the graves of children and infants.

Cups with stands

Cups with stands are in the group of double-cone vessels (Figs. 15-16). These containers vary little in size, are less widely distributed and are divided into small, medium and large groups. In this case, too, the small cups are from children's graves and the medium and large cups are from adult burials (Fig. 17).

The smallest container is from the grave of a child (G.N.8510/3) and the largest is from the grave of a female (G.N.1716/6). These cups are almost equally divided across genders and ages.

Mortars

Mortars belong to the group of cylindrical vessels (Figs. 18-19). The same analytical process as was used with the bowls applies to mortars. Both the largest mortar (G.N.1615/24) and the smallest mortar (G.N.4314/28) belong to male individuals. Mortars come in two main forms: tall mortars with cylindrical bodies

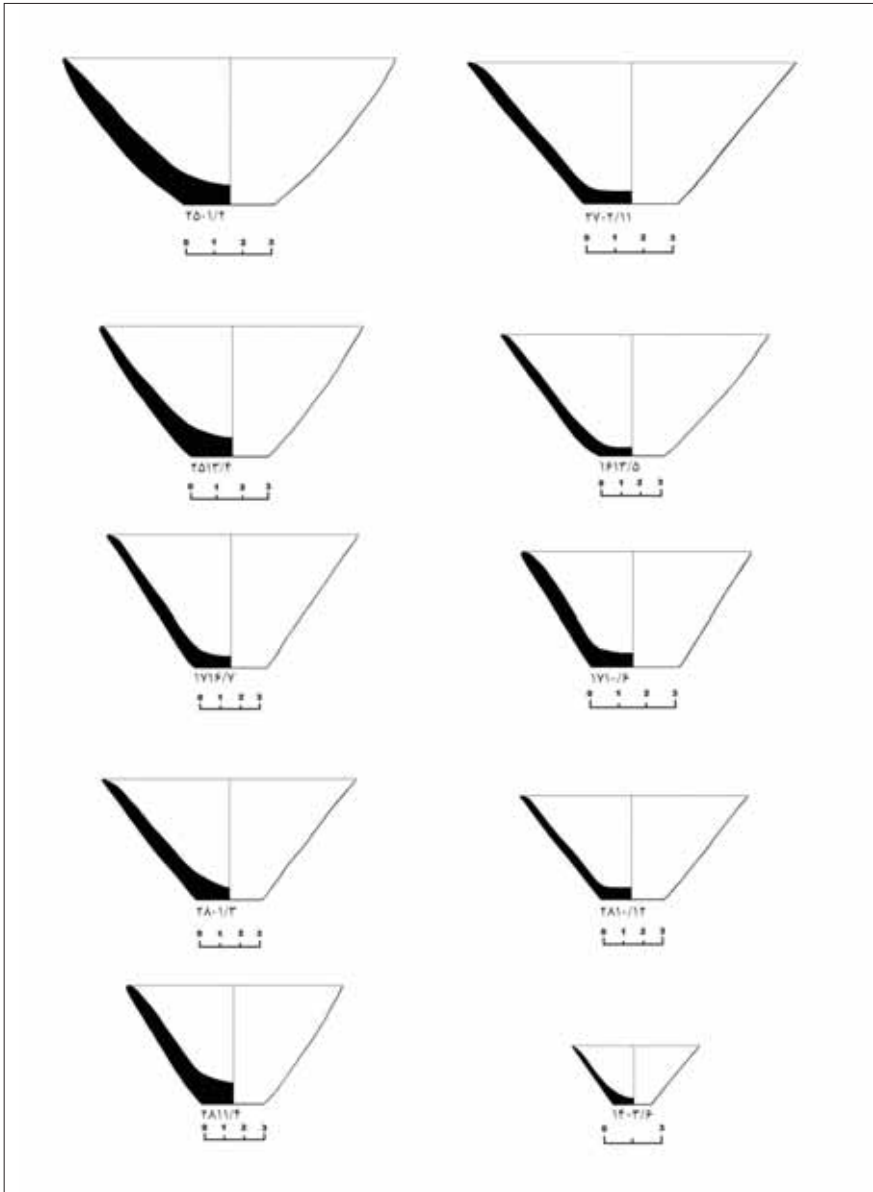


Fig. 13: deep Marble Bowls (Shirazi 2007: tab. 95).



Fig. 14: deep and Shallow bowls with open mouths.

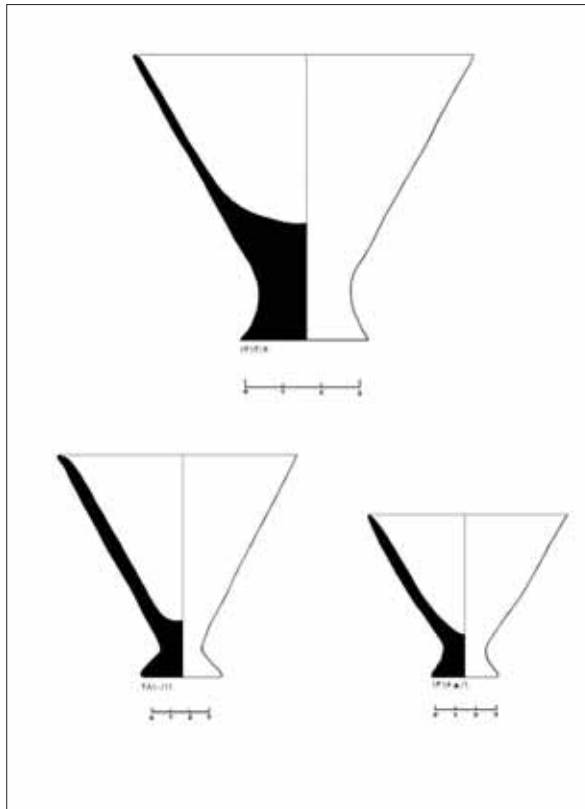


Fig. 15: cups with stands (Shirazi 2007: Tab. 97).

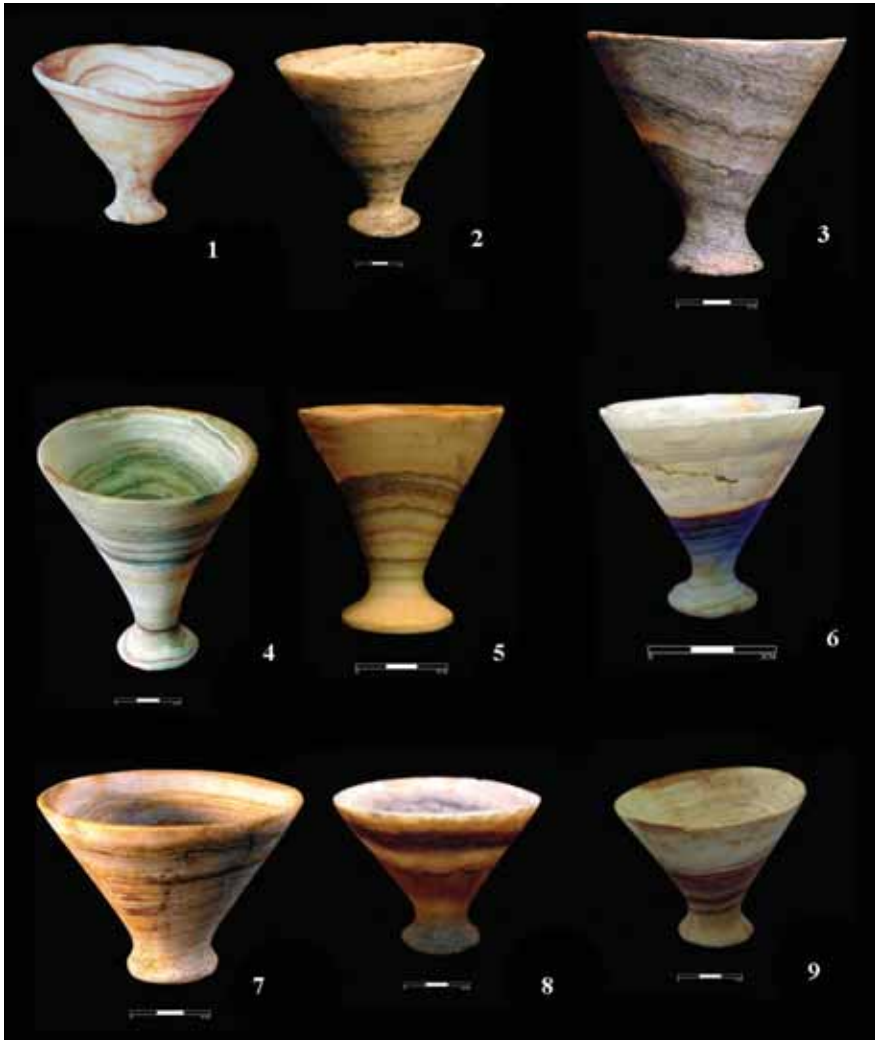


Fig. 16: types of cup with stand: 1. G.N.2810/11; 2. G.N.1716/6; 3. G.N.4314/6; 4. G.N.3208/5; 5. G.N.4303/3; 6. G.N.4306/1; 7. G.N.8119/4; 8. G.N.7809/6; 9. G.N.1413/6.

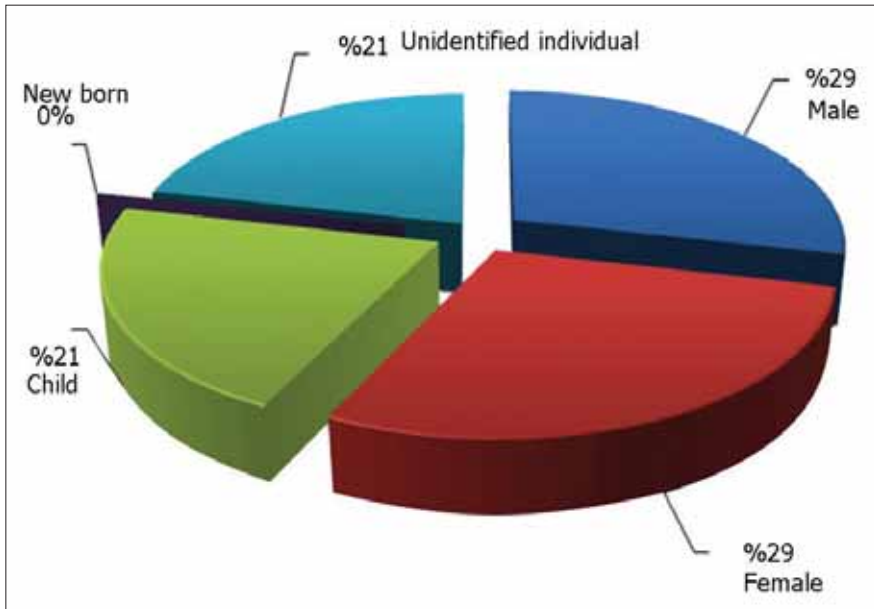


Fig. 17: frequency of cups with stands among genders and ages groups (Sajjadi - Mohammadi Sefidkhani 2019).

and short mortars with open mouths (Fig. 20). In terms of gender, female burials account for 36% of the mortars and males for about 30% (Fig. 21).

As mentioned before, marble items are found in both residential areas and the graveyard, but most of the complete vessels are from graves. In Shahr-i Sokhta ten different types of tomb structure have been reported (Sajjadi 2007), with marble vessels found only in four: 1, 2, 4 and 9. Among these four types of tomb structure, the greatest number of marble vessels are from bipartite graves (type 2), followed by simple pits (type 1), catacombs (type 4) and circular graves (type 9) (Fig. 22).

The distribution of marble artefacts in Shahr-i Sokhta cemetery can be examined in terms of their association with males, females, children, infants and unidentified individuals. The female group has the highest number of marble vessels, followed by males, individuals, children and infants. Given the prestige of marble vessels and their abundance in the female group, there may be a link



Fig. 18: types of mortar: 1. G.N.7817/13; 2. G.N.2903/2; 3. G.N.8914/8; 4. G.N.8315/1; 5. G.N.8603/8; 6. G.N.1400/2; 7. G.N.1403/6; 8. G.N.1200/00; 9. G.N.9005/11.

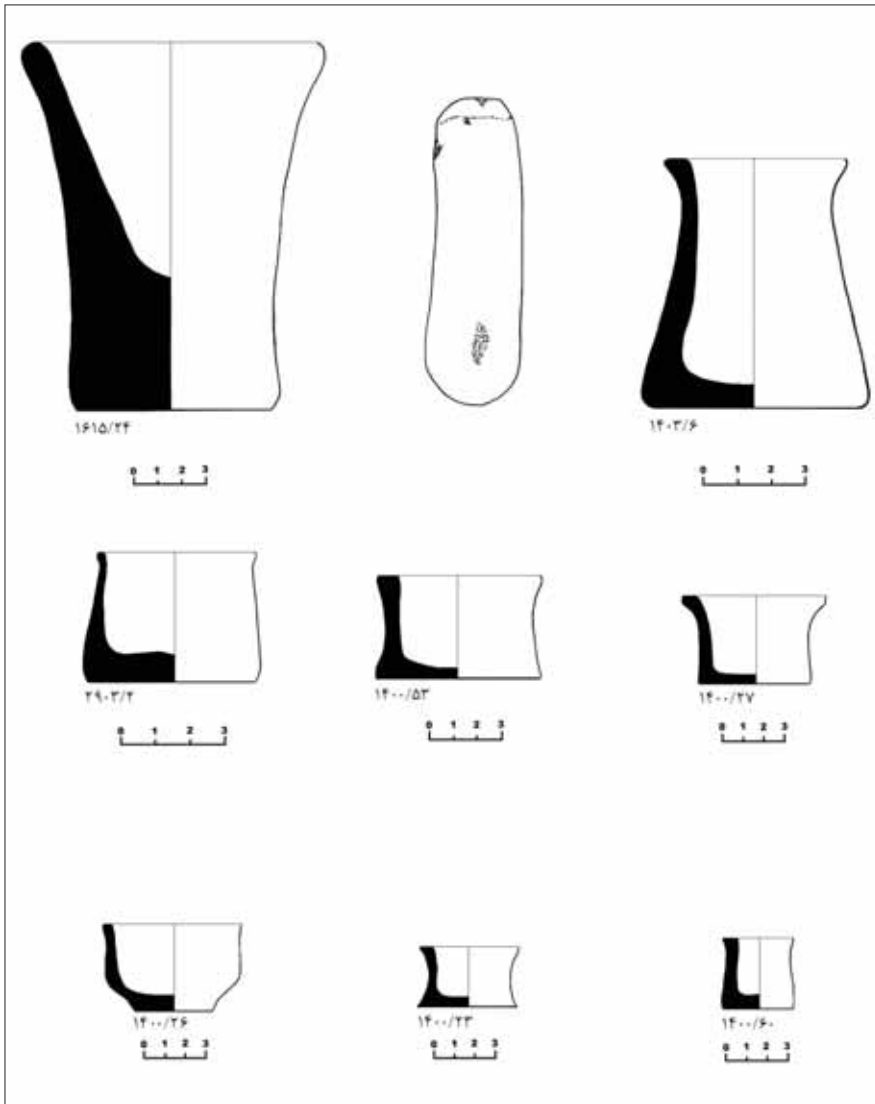


Fig. 19: cylindrical mortars (Shirazi 2007).



Fig. 20: tall and short mortars: 1. G.N.5005/51; 2. G.N.7817/13.

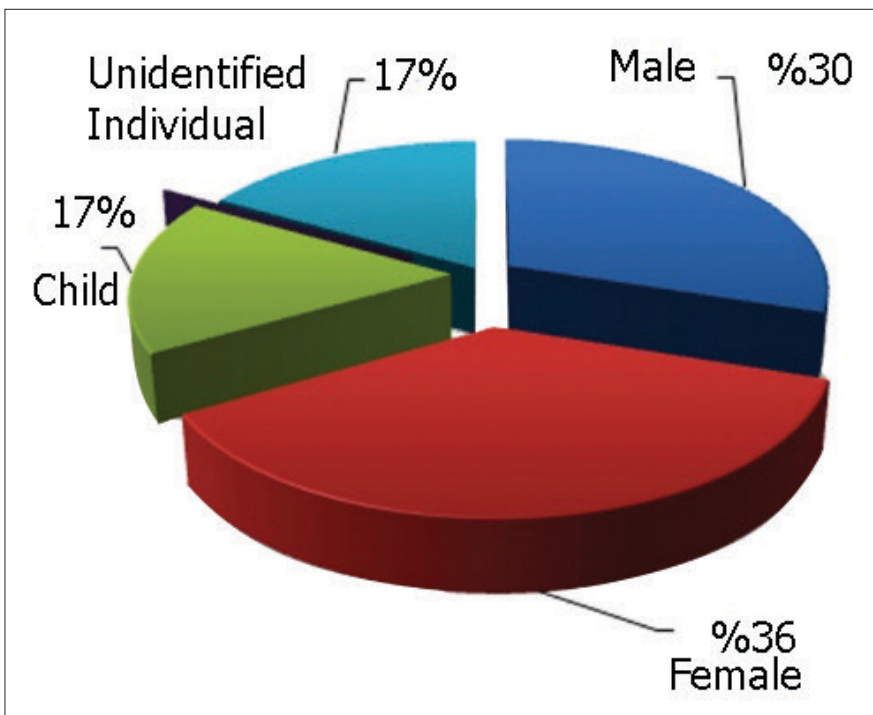


Fig. 21: distribution of the mortars across genders and age groups (Sajjadi - Mohammadi Sefidkhani 2019).

between women and the aesthetic and decorative aspects of the artefacts. In this regard, we should mention that in some groups of graves, a number of marble vessels have been seen that cannot be attributed to a specific gender, but rather must be assigned to both sexes.

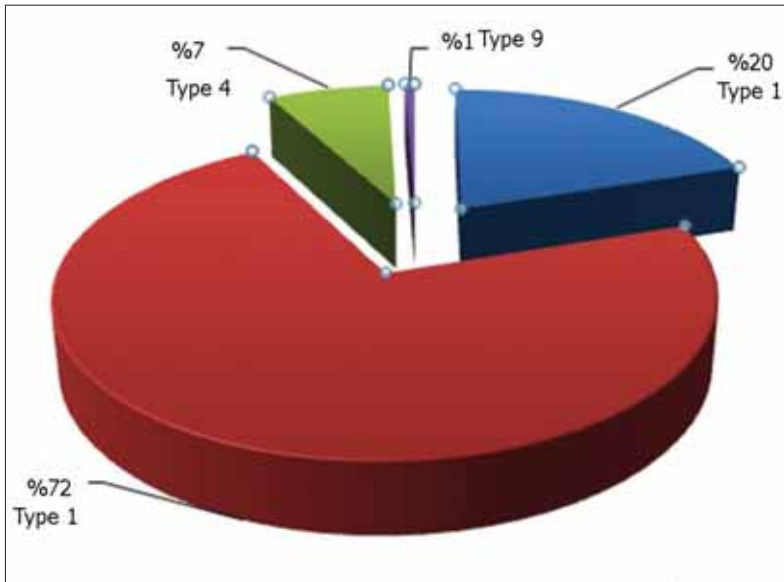


Fig. 22: distribution of marble vessels across grave types (Sajjadi - Mohammadi Sefidkhani 2019).

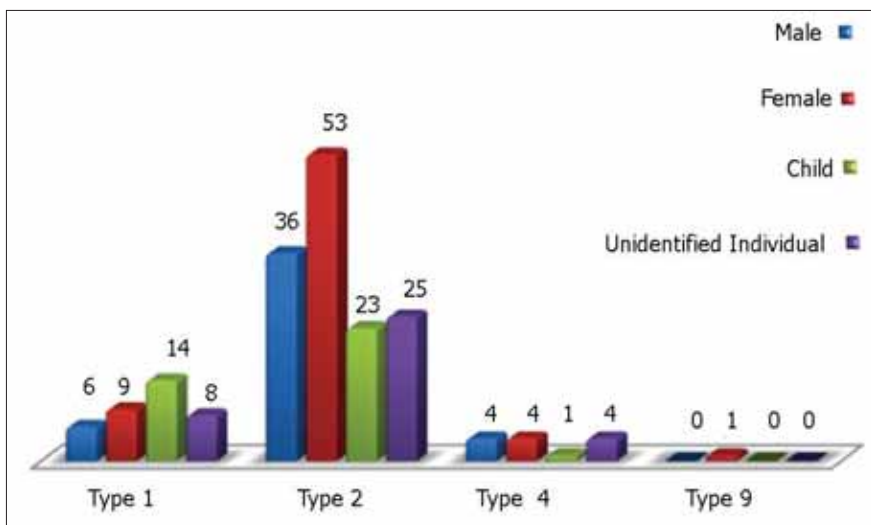


Fig. 23: distribution and abundance of marble vessels in different types of graves by gender and age group.

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