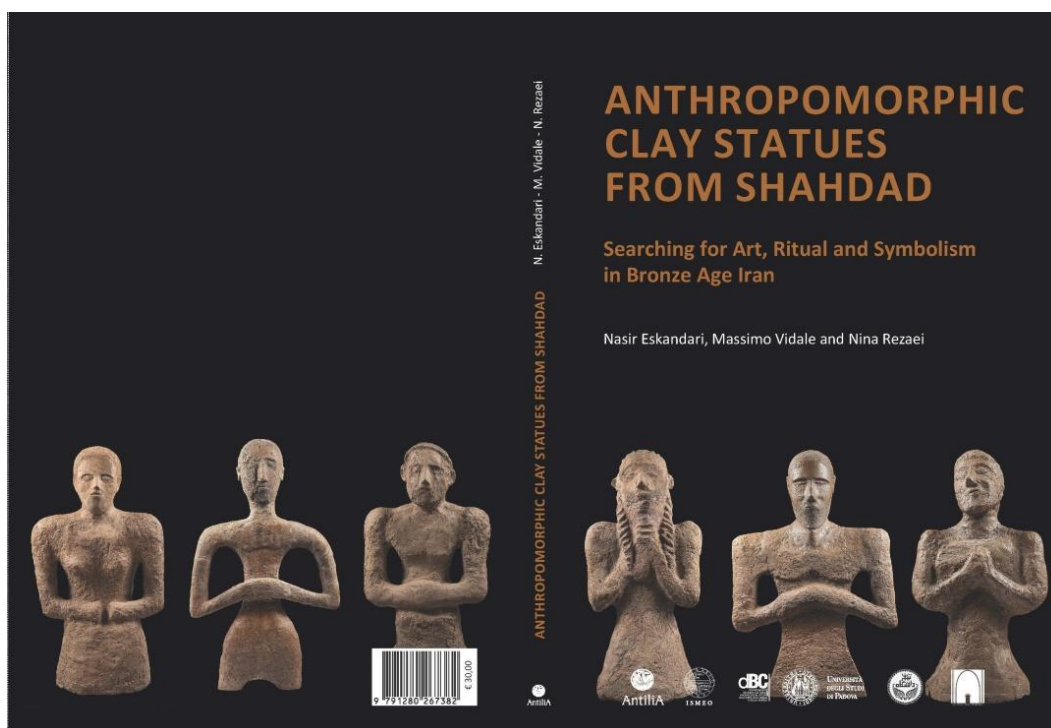


Introduction and Critique of the Book: Anthropomorphic Clay Statues from Shahdad: Searching for Art, Ritual and Symbolism in Bronze Age Iran

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1. Introduction and Significance of the Topic

The book “Anthropomorphic Clay Statues from Shahdad: Searching for Art, Ritual and Symbolism in Bronze Age Iran”¹ is a 256-page volume comprising thirteen main chapters and an appendix. The content structure is designed to provide, alongside archaeological analyses, a well-documented and scholarly foundation for future research. The book opens with forewords by Adriano Rossi, President of ISMEO, and Jebrael Nokandeh, Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism (RICHT) and Director General of Iran National. It presents a rich collection of high-quality two-dimensional and three-dimensional images as well as archaeological drawings of the graves from ancient Shahdad.

On this basis, the work may be regarded as one of the most systematic studies published to date on the clay anthropomorphic figurines recovered from Cemetery A of Shahdad, artifacts that, since the 1960s, have been recognized as among the most remarkable expressions of artistic production and ritual thought in Bronze Age Iran. Drawing upon re-examined documentation from Ali Hakemi’s excavations, as well as newly produced 3D scans, the authors, Dr. Nasir Eskandari Damaneh, Dr.

Massimo Vidale, and Ms. Nina Rezaei have sought to reinterpret these figurines both from artistic and technical perspectives, and to analyze them within the broader contexts of funerary ideology, social representation, and cultural networks in southeastern Iran.

2. Documentation and Visual Quality of the Book

For the first time, this book provides a coherent corpus of high-quality images and three-dimensional scans of the figurines, marking a genuine innovation in the scientific documentation of this exceptional assemblage. Many of the statuettes, excavated and transferred during the 1960s without standardized photographic recording, have now been documented using modern imaging techniques and 3D scanning. This effort allows for precise observation of morphological features, hand and facial details, traces of pigment, fractures, and previous repairs, thereby generating analytically usable visual datasets for future research. As a result, in forthcoming studies :

1. Three-dimensional scanning will serve as a baseline recording and monitoring method for accurate reconstructions, reducing ambiguities present in the initial excavation reports.
2. Comparative analyses between these figurines and analogous specimens from Jiroft, Central Asia, and Mesopotamia will become feasible.
3. The datasets are no longer dependent on in-person examination, enabling global scholarly access.
4. The scans function as a conservation tool, creating a stable digital surrogate that remains referenceable should the originals be damaged.

Accordingly, the publication of this book, particularly its extensive visual and 3D documentation, constitutes a decisive step toward standardizing the data pertaining to the Shahdad cultural horizon and opening new pathways for research into Bronze Age art and ritual in Iran.

3. Shahdad within the Cultural Network of the Bronze Age: From Jiroft to Mesopotamia

One of the most significant contributions of the authors, achieved through a comprehensive command of regional archaeological data, is their redefinition of the figurines' position within the broader cultural network of the Bronze Age Iranian world, spanning from Jiroft and Shahdad to Central Asia and Mesopotamia. Rather than treating the clay figurines of Shahdad as isolated artifacts, the authors interpret them as components of an interconnected cultural–artistic system extending across eastern Iran and its neighboring regions.

Through a comparative analysis of formal, symbolic, and ritual characteristics, and by juxtaposing the Shahdad figurines with examples from Jiroft (Halil-Rud), northern Kerman, the Sistan plain, the Oxus Civilization (BMAC), and even Mesopotamia, the book demonstrates that the Shahdad culture maintained continuous interaction with a constellation of contemporary cultural centers. This reframing suggests that the figurines are not merely reflections of a local tradition but serve as evidence for the circulation of ideas, artistic styles, and ritual concepts across the third millennium BCE.

The significance of this approach is twofold :

- It strengthens Shahdad's role as a “connective node” in eastern Iran.
- It effectively dispels outdated assumptions regarding the region's “cultural isolation,” opening new discussions on origins, mutual influences, and the co-evolution of artistic traditions in the Bronze Age.

By shifting the scale of analysis from a single funerary assemblage to a broad cultural sphere, the book reconstructs Shahdad's place in the history of Iranian art. Importantly, it avoids simplistic claims of “direct influence,” emphasizing the shared symbolic substrate characteristic of the Iranian cultural domain.

4. Critical Reconstruction of the Funerary Context: Revisiting Earlier Excavations and Proposing a New Reading

A major strength of the book is its critical reassessment of the earlier excavation reports from Shahdad, reports which, due to the technical limitations and differing methodological standards of the 1960s and 1970s, often failed to provide precise information on object provenience, stratigraphy, burial orientation, and associations among grave goods. By re-examining archival photographs, scattered field notes, and museum-held evidence, the authors identify the methodological shortcomings of those early excavations and, through this critique, formulate a new approach to reconstructing the funerary context.

The importance of this approach stems from the fact that the ritual and social meanings of the figurines can only be fully understood through a detailed reading of their grave contexts; without a rigorous reassessment, many earlier interpretations were either incomplete or based on weak assumptions. This renewed methodology allows for a more accurate analysis of the figurines' relationship to the human body, associated objects, burial orientation, and the spatial organization of the graves. In doing so, the book moves beyond outdated interpretations and offers a dynamic, scholarly reconstruction of the Shahdad funerary system, one that can serve as a foundation for future research in southeastern Iran. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, a number of graves still lack even minimal contextual information, leaving space for further investigations.

5. Stylistic and Semiotic Analysis of the Shahdad Figurines

The book's chapter on stylistic and semiotic analysis stands out as one of its most precise and successful contributions. This section examines the figurines in exceptional detail, hand positions, hairstyles, traces of pigmentation, and the degree of museum restoration, making it a valuable resource for both Bronze Age art historians and conservation specialists.

In the subsection on bodily form and body language, the book correctly emphasizes that the conical or cylindrical torso and the minimally detailed lower body are not indications of artistic limitation; rather, they may reflect the fact that the figurines were originally dressed in real garments or wrapped in textile coverings. In the subsection on facial representation, the authors draw attention to the striking individuality of the faces: well-defined noses, prominent chins, specific beard or hair styles, varied eye shapes, and even expressive "gazes" (such as the upward, supplicatory look), which, when compared to many contemporary visual traditions, suggest differentiated identities and possibly distinct social or ritual roles for the deceased individuals.

The strongest achievement of this chapter, however, lies in its semiotic interpretation. Through careful consideration of the funerary context, the positioning of the figurines, and insightful comparisons with other Iranian sites, the authors persuasively and innovatively argue that these figurines do not represent the actual appearance of the deceased. Instead, they function as markers of roles, offices, identities, or even divine attributes, constituting part of a performativity ritual enacted at the moment of burial rather than serving merely as objects accompanying the dead. This interpretive model is undoubtedly one of the book's most seminal and enduring contributions.

6. Methodological Limitations in the Analysis of the Shahdad Statues: Boundaries of Interpretation, the Absence of Scientific Data, and Its Consequences

From a methodological standpoint, the book can be regarded as the most rigorous study ever published on the Shahdad Statues. Nevertheless, several fundamental weaknesses underlie its analytical framework.

First, a significant portion of the inferences relies on reconstructed datasets from the excavations of the 1960s and 1970s, datasets whose limitations the authors themselves repeatedly acknowledge. Despite this recognition, the final narrative does not consistently draw a clear boundary between empirically verifiable observations and probabilistic interpretations. This

issue becomes particularly evident in sensitive topics such as the precise orientation of the Statues within the graves or the position of the deceased's body. Introducing indices of uncertainty, distinguishing interpretive layers, and marking reconstructed data could have substantially strengthened the scholarly reliability of the arguments.

The second major limitation is the complete absence of modern laboratory-based analytical techniques. Today, methods such as clay provenance analysis, pigment identification through Raman spectroscopy or XRF, and micro-residue studies are readily available; yet the book makes no use of these tools. This gap restricts the discussions on manufacturing techniques, production workshops, and potential distribution networks, preventing the development of a more comprehensive understanding of the technology and organizational structure of figurine production in Shahdad. The lack of bioanthropological data further compounds the problem. Although the severe deterioration of skeletal remains is understandable, methods such as bone micro-analysis, isotopic studies, or the examination of dental micro-residues could have offered a fuller picture of the biological characteristics, diet, and social structure of the Shahdad funerary community.

7. Theoretical Contributions

From a theoretical perspective, the book represents one of the most significant intellectual contributions of recent years to the Bronze Age studies of southeastern Iran, fundamentally challenging the prevailing paradigm. Its most notable achievement is the reconceptualization of death as a ritual performance: the figurines are no longer interpreted as merely decorative objects or grave accompaniments but as active agents in a ceremonial enactment that unfolds precisely at the moment of burial. Their placement at the chamber entrance, in front of the deceased, or in poses of watching and supplication indicates that the funerary ceremony in Shahdad served as a major arena for expressing power, hierarchy, and collective identity.

A second key contribution is the introduction of the concept of ritual identity. The authors argue that the figurines are not literal portraits of individuals but symbolic renderings of hereditary, gendered, political, or even mythological roles performed by persons during their social and ritual lives. This perspective fundamentally reshapes our understanding of individuality and community in prehistoric Iran.

Finally, the book convincingly shows that the technological aspects of statue production, symbolic pigmentation, the conical torso, and the deliberate use of unfired, fragile clay were themselves embedded within the ritual semantics of funerary performance. Aesthetics in Shahdad, the authors argue, cannot be disentangled from ritual action. Collectively, these three contributions turn the work into a transformative reference point in the archaeology of death in Bronze Age Iran.

8. Conclusion

Overall, Anthropomorphic Clay Statues from Shahdad represent a milestone, both empirically and theoretically, in the study of Bronze Age sculptural traditions in Iran and the broader Near East. The book's principal strength lies in its combination of meticulous documentation, critical reassessment of earlier excavation data, and engagement with interdisciplinary approaches. Through this synthesis, it successfully clarifies the cultural, ritual, and artistic significance of the Shahdad Statues within the complexities of third-millennium BCE Iran.

While the foundational limitations of the 1960s–70s excavation data, the absence of modern scientific analyses, and occasional ambiguities in distinguishing levels of interpretive certainty pose challenges, these shortcomings do not diminish the analytical value of the work. On the contrary, the book advances the field by posing new questions and proposing expandable theoretical frameworks that push Iranian archaeology toward higher scholarly standards. Regionally, it demonstrates that Shahdad was part of a wide and intricate interaction network

extending from the Halil-Rud/Jiroft region to Sistan and the Central Iranian Plateau. In this perspective, the figurines are not merely artistic objects but unique socio-ideological documents that illuminate power structures, mortuary cults, and cultural interactions in eastern Iran. The collaboration between the National Museum of Iran and ISMEO adds exceptional scholarly and institutional credibility, making the volume a durable, authoritative, and inspiring reference for future generations of researchers.

9. A Proposal Prompted by the Publication of This Book

A fundamental observation highlighted by this book, and one of particular significance to the present author, is the profound absence of a “library-based and archival archaeology” approach in Persian-language scholarship. In the Iranian research tradition, field excavation and excavation reports have typically been privileged. However, global archaeological practice shows that much of the major theoretical, historical, and cultural progress has emerged not from digging the ground but from the systematic study of collections, archived documents, museum records, and previously published data.

What survives in museums and archives, from early reports to field notes and dispersed collections, is often more important than data obtained through new excavations, precisely because such materials are durable, revisitable, and open to new analytical methods. This is especially crucial in a country where destruction, erosion, and the absence of long-term conservation infrastructures frequently prevent the sustained continuation of fieldwork.

Revitalizing and institutionalizing library-based archaeology, and allocating dedicated research funding for it by the Iranian Center for Archaeological Research and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage is an urgent necessity. The publication of this book stands as a successful example of this approach. It demonstrates that advancing Iranian archaeology requires not only field excavators but also archival scholars capable of reconstructing alternative histories of the past from documents, images, archives, and museum collections.

Endnote

1. Eskandari, N. Vidale, M., & Rezaei, N. (2025). *Anthropomorphic clay statues from Shahdad: Searching for art, ritual, and symbolism in Bronze Age Iran*. ISMEO – Università degli Studi di Padova.

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