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Anadolu Araştırmaları
Anatolian Research

Anadolu Araştırmaları
Anatolian Research,
ANAR 2025, (33): 77–91

https://doi.org/10.26650/anar.33.1827552
Submitted 20.11.2025
Revision Requested 01.12.2025
Last Revision Received 03.12.2025
Accepted 04.12.2025

Research Article

Open Access

An Iron Age Chamber Tomb in the Hakkari Highlands: Surinis

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Abstract This article examines the Surinis chamber tomb, located in the southeastern Hakkâri Highlands, along with its grave goods. The chamber tomb, built on a hill in a valley in the Şemzinan region, exhibits typical Iron Age characteristics with its architecture, ceramics, and finds such as bronze bracelets and beads. The chamber tomb and finds in question were compared with Early and Middle Iron Age tombs and finds in the neighboring Lake Van and Urmia basins of Van and the Highlands. The tomb architecture and finds created some chronological confusion, but it was concluded that the chamber tomb, particularly based on its findings, could be dated to the Middle Iron Age. The Surinis tomb is particularly significant as it is one of the southernmost examples of the chamber tomb tradition, constructed with masonry walls underground. The trefoil jug and bronze bracelets with dot decorations, in particular, indicate a strong Middle Iron Age/Urartu influence in the region.

Keywords Hakkâri · Early Iron Age · Urartu · Bracelet · Chamber tomb

Citation: Timur, V. (2025). An Iron Age chamber tomb in the Hakkari highlands: Surinis.. *Anadolu Araştırmaları–Anatolian Research*, (33), 77-91. https://doi.org/10.26650/anar.33.1827552

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Introduction

The mountainous Hakkâri region, forming the northern extension of the Zagros Mountains, remains a geographically and archaeologically understudied area. Comprising rugged mountains and deep valleys, the region is bordered by areas whose historical development and chronology are well established: Mesopotamia to the south, the Lake Van basin to the north, the Tigris River and its tributaries to the west, and the Urmia basin to the east (Map 1). In recent years, archaeological excavations and surveys in Hakkâri and its surrounding areas have substantially enhanced our knowledge of the region's Iron Age. As a result of these studies, fortresses and cemeteries belonging to the Early Iron Age cultures, which began to influence the South Caucasus, Eastern Anatolia, and Northwestern Iran from the late 2nd millennium BC, have been identified. The evidence suggests that this geography, characterized by many topographically isolated micro-regions, accommodated multiple human groups during the Iron Ages, with settlement

Map 1

The Iron Age Sites in eastern and southeastern Türkiye and Northwestern Iran with modern cities.



Furthermore, we do not know the names of the people, clans, or powers who owned the Iron Age fortresses and burial chambers discovered in the region. First of all, no written documents from the Early and Middle Iron Ages have been found in this region to date. However, cuneiform inscriptions, particularly those belonging to ancient Mesopotamian cultures, provide some information about the people living in the Zagros Mountains, which includes the region. Indeed, the names of peoples such as the Lullubi, Guti, and Turukku appear in cuneiform texts from as early as the end of the 3rd millennium BC. Among these, we learn that Lullubi was the common name of several Zagros communities with ethno-linguistic ties, and that in later Old Babylonian texts, the name Lullubi was used to describe semi-nomadic mountain tribes (Schrakamp, 2012, pp. 4166–4167).

The mountain communities, mentioned in more detail in Middle Assyrian written documents, were dominant powers in the vast area stretching from the eastern Taurus Mountains to the Zagros Mountains, each dominating its region. The alliances these clans or tribes occasionally formed are mentioned in Middle and Neo-Assyrian inscriptions under names such as Uruadri and Nairi (Salvini, 1998, pp. 87-91). Assyrian accounts of military campaigns also reveal that these communities were tribes united against external threats rather than forming a central kingdom. These tribes, living

along the mountainous region stretching from the Taurus Mountains to the Zagros Mountains, lived a semi-nomadic life, primarily based on animal herding. By the Early Iron Age, these people had a culture characterized by fortresses and chamber tombs, each dominating the valley or plains where they lived.

From the 9th century BCE onward, the ethno-political structure and toponymy of the Hakkâri highlands—positioned between Urartu to the north and the Assyrian realms to the south—remain unclear. Although the Middle Iron Age (9th–7th centuries BCE) is well documented through cuneiform texts across the Near East, information on Hakkari's toponyms remains largely speculative. The most persistent claim is that the region corresponds to the kingdom of Hubuškia mentioned in Assyrian sources[1]. Another claim, updated in recent years following Radner's suggestion, suggests that Ukku, a local buffer state between Urartu and Assyria, was located in Hakkâri, while Kumme (*Qumenu* in Urartian) was located in the Beytüşşebap/Zümrüt hot springs region (Radner, 2012, p. 255). Unfortunately, no royal center with written evidence to support these suggestions has been found in the region to date. Contrary to a royal center, recent studies in the Hakkâri Highlands have yielded significant data from the Early Iron Age, characterized primarily by tombs and grave findings.

Iron Age Excavations and Surveys

Architectural, ceramic, and metal artifacts unearthed during excavations in the M1 and M2 underground chamber tombs near Mir Fortress in Hakkâri city center reflect the region's Early Iron Age culture. This includes the 13 stelae depicting hunter-warrior reliefs found adjacent to the Mir Fortress cliff. The ceramic samples from different regions and periods, particularly those found in Tomb M1, and the hunter-warrior stelae depicted in a primitive, regionally specific style, have sparked chronological debate (Franke, 2012, pp. 161-162; Sevin, 2015, p. 109). The first excavated site in this mountainous region, which can be considered a necropolis, is the Kaniya Bekan cemetery. Located on the slopes of Sakıt Fortress, which lies on the Deşte-Kanimiran plain in the Çatak region in the northwest of the Hakkâri Highlands, excavations have been completed for three underground chamber tombs with masonry walls. These tombs, which contain multiple burials and are capped with large flagstones and have entrances with and without dromos, date to the Early Iron Age (Ayaz, 2023, pp. 386-391). Another example of a tomb constructed in this style, which parallels the Early Iron Age tomb architecture found in the Lake Van and Lake Urmia basins, was unearthed at the Çatak-Akçabük/Gomiran site. The chamber tomb, constructed with underground walls, was covered with large flagstones and features a dromos entrance. This tomb, which also contains multiple burials, has a benched and niched interior, along with the grave findings, indicating that the region should be dated to the Early Iron Age II period, between 1000 and 800 BC (Kuvanç et.al, 2016, pp. 149-194). In addition to the excavated tombs, some tombs found during surveys were also considered Early Iron Age graves. These are the tombs in the Halguriya and Çeman localities in Beytüşşebap (Coşkun, et al. 2019, pp. 111-117), the Çatak-Avzini tomb (Ayaz, et al. 2023, p. 82) and the two chamber tombs in the Hakkâri-Dez valley (Timur, 2025, pp. 52-53).

Several fortresses and tombs dating to the Middle Iron Age have been discovered in the region. The first of these is Kunin Fortress, located south of the Avareş Stream, which flows into the Zap Valley, in the north of the region, and the rock tombs on its slopes (Sevin, 2015, pp. 20-24). Another is Berekele Fortress and its rock tombs near the village of Çatak-Ferhinis (Övecek) (Ayaz, et al. 2023, pp. 78-79). Kunin and Berekele fortresses, with their walls and tombs, surrounded by bastions of well-crafted, smooth stones, bear close resemblance to their neighboring Urartian fortresses and rock tombs. Sevin even suggested that Kunin Fortress and tomb may have been a small Urartian outpost (Sevin, 2015, pp. 20-24). Although both fortresses are relatively close to the Lake Van basin, the center of the Urartian Kingdom, they are located within the mountainous Hakkâri region. It would be more appropriate to speak of cultural interaction here. Moreover, no definitive findings indicating Urartian royal investment have been found in either fortress.

[1] For suggestion see. Medvedskaya, 1997, p. 197; Belli, 1984, p. 33; Sevin & Özfırat, 2001, pp. 509-510.

A New Iron Age Site: Surinis Chamber Tomb

During our survey in the Hakkâri region in 2023-2024[2], a chamber tomb was discovered at the Kanigermk site, north of Şemzinan (Şemdinli), near the village of Surinis (Öveç). It was located on a mountain slope west of the Bembo Stream, which flows through the Surinis Valley. The chamber tomb was built on the slope of Kanigermk Hill overlooking the Bembo Stream (Figure 1). The tomb was accessed by villagers by opening the cover stones at the south and north ends of the chamber (Figure 2 Figure 3). Due to erosion on the slope, the cover stones were reached after approximately 50 cm of soil was removed from the surface. The tomb was built in a north-south direction. The chamber is 1.45 m high, 1.25 m wide and 3.90 m long (Figure 4).

Figure 1

In the front, the hill where the burial chamber was built, in the back, Surinis Village on the right.



[2]This tomb, which had been looted before, was examined on-site by means of a survey study conducted under the direction of the author of the article, Vedat Timur, with the permission "11.01.2024 dated, E-77734899-161.05-4638938 numbered" of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. On this occasion, the tomb of Surinis was briefly mentioned in the doctoral dissertation titled "Early and Middle Iron Age Hakkâri Region in the Context of Archaeological and Written Data" completed by the author in 2025 and submitted to the Department of Archaeology at Batman University. In this original study, the tomb and its finds were examined in detail together with comparative analyses.

Figure 2
North Entrance of the Tomb



Figure 3
South Entrance of the Tomb

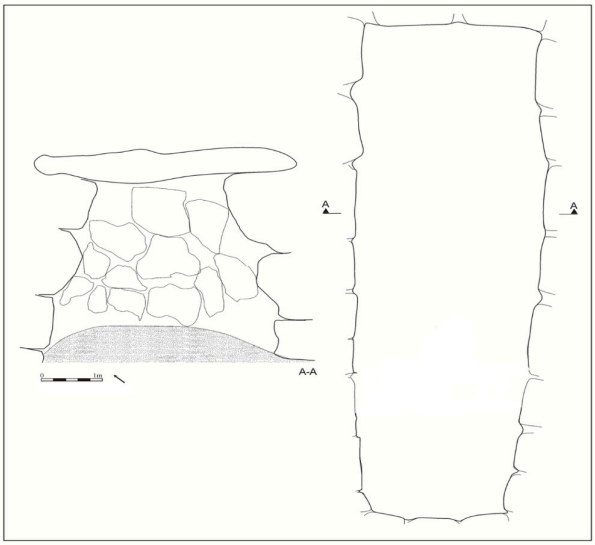


Figure 4
Interior view of the Chamber Tomb



The chamber tomb's plan is roughly rectangular (Figure 5). The tomb walls taper towards the ceiling. This is because the stone courses forming the tomb walls were overlapped toward the ceiling, creating a false arch to cover the tomb ceiling. The southern end of the tomb chamber is narrowed. While this suggests an extension or dromos entrance that could have served as the entrance to the tomb chamber, no trace of such an architectural design has been identified. This may have been due to the interior of the tomb chamber being filled with soil poured from entrances dug by villagers. Nevertheless, the tomb's entrance may have been accessed by a dromos in the narrowed southern section of the chamber.

Figure 5
Section and Plan of the chamber tomb



The tomb walls were constructed with unworked or slightly smoothed large and small stones. These are local limestones. The spaces between the stones and the masonry course were filled with earth mortar and small stones. The masonry courses do not follow regular lines. The walls, which rise as two rows of stonework side by side, were

probably constructed using the overlapping technique, pulling inwards from bottom to top. Thus, the ceiling of the tomb chamber was covered by placing large flat stones on top of the walls, which narrowed upwards. A small niche opening was identified in the long eastern side wall of the tomb. The niche was constructed as a gap left within the row of stones and measures 42 x 29 x 32 cm (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Niche on the east wall



The Surinis Chamber Tomb displays typical Iron Age tomb characteristics in terms of its architecture, plan, and location. Tombs with false-arched ceilings formed by corbelled walls are encountered in tombs dated to the Early Iron Age (1300/1200-900 BC) in the Lake Van basin, such as Ernis, Aliler, Karagündüz, Alacahan, Dilkaya, and Yoncatepe[3]. The closest analogues of the Surinis chamber tomb in the Hakkâri Highlands are Hakkâri M2 (Sevin, 2015, pp. 92-107), Çatak-Akçabük (Kuvanç et al., 2016, pp. 152-156), and Çatak-Kaniya Bekan chamber tombs (Ayaz, 2023, pp. 378-397).

Burials and Finds

No bone remains were found in the burial chamber or its surroundings. They likely remained on the grave floor, which was filled with soil after looting. However, some ceramics and small artifacts were unearthed during illegal excavations conducted by villagers in the chamber tomb. Among these were five intact ceramics belonging to the brown-reddish ware group, along with five bracelets and 132 beads[4].

Pottery

Because the tomb was robbed, we cannot accurately determine the in situ condition of the grave goods. However, the samples recovered indicate a tradition similar to that of graves in the region during the Early Iron Age, particularly in the Van and Hakkâri regions. The number of ceramics recovered from this tomb is quite limited. A total of five examples were recovered, including three jugs and two bowls.

The ceramics exhibit a clay characterized by predominantly monochrome and brown-reddish colors. The existing examples are slipped and well-fired, displaying a reddish-brown ceramic paste fabric. Another characteristic feature

[3] Sevin, 2004, pp. 358-375; Özfırat, 2013, pp. 237–249; Özfırat, 2018, pp. 149-185.

[4] These artifacts, reportedly found by villagers during the looting of the Surinis chamber tomb, were seized by the gendarmerie in the village of Surinis (Öveç) on October 13, 2020. They were subsequently taken to the Hakkâri Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism and delivered to the Van Museum.

observed on the vessel surfaces is the black mottled discoloration resulting from uneven firing. Three of the vessels are wheel-made, while two are handmade. While the forms are quite limited, two are bowls, one is a vase, and two are jugs. These forms echo those known in the region from the Iron Age. One bowl has a simple, inverted rim, while the other has a slightly thickened lip **(Fig. 7/1-2)**. This type of bowl, with a closed rim and a rounded body, was a common vessel form found during the Iron Age, particularly in excavations at sites dating to the Early Iron Age in Eastern Anatolia, Armenia, and the Lake Urmia basin[5]. Another jar type, with a steep rim, a rounded body profile, and simple, undecorated style, is a well-known, widespread form **(Fig. 7/3)**. The simple, everted-rim vase has a low neck. Its closest counterparts were found in the Karagündüz necropolis (Sevin & Kavaklı, 1996, p. 10, Res.24/1-2). In addition, this type of vase has been unearthed at Dinkha Tepe (Muscarella, 1974, Fig. 37.332) in Iran and Masgede Kabud (Nowbari, 2004, Abb. 5/1-2) in Iran. The other two examples consist of trefoil-rimmed jars with vertical single-handled necks extending from the rim to the body **(Fig. 7/4-5).** Trefoil-rimmed jugs are encountered in some Early Iron Age settlements and tombs, such as Köşkerbaba (Bilgi, 1984, p. 114), Ernis/Evditepe (Özfırat, 2021, Fig. 12/4-5), Yoncatepe (Belli & Konyar, 2001, Fig. 38/4, Fig. 39/1), and Karagündüz (Sevin & Kavaklı, 1996, 11, Fig. 26-27). Sevin interprets the red-slipped, trefoil-rimmed jugs from Karagündüz as early forms of Urartian examples (Sevin, 2004, p. 367). The red-brown-slipped, well-burnished trefoil-rimmed jugs from Yoncatepe have been associated with the Urartian period by Köroğlu and Konyar (Köroğlu & Konyar, 2005, pp. 29, 33). This type of jug, with its high neck, round body, and thickened handle and rim, is encountered in many Early-Middle Iron Age centers in the Van-Hakkâri region.

In terms of its paste, Surinis pottery exhibits the characteristics of the reddish-brown ware group, two major ware groups encountered in Eastern Anatolia, Armenia, and Northwestern Iran from the late 13th century BC onward (Ayaz, 2020, p. 58). Similar examples can be found in both the Hakkâri and Çatak tombs. The limited pottery recovered from Surinis can be considered ceramics reflecting the Iron Age pottery tradition in the Van-Hakkâri region.

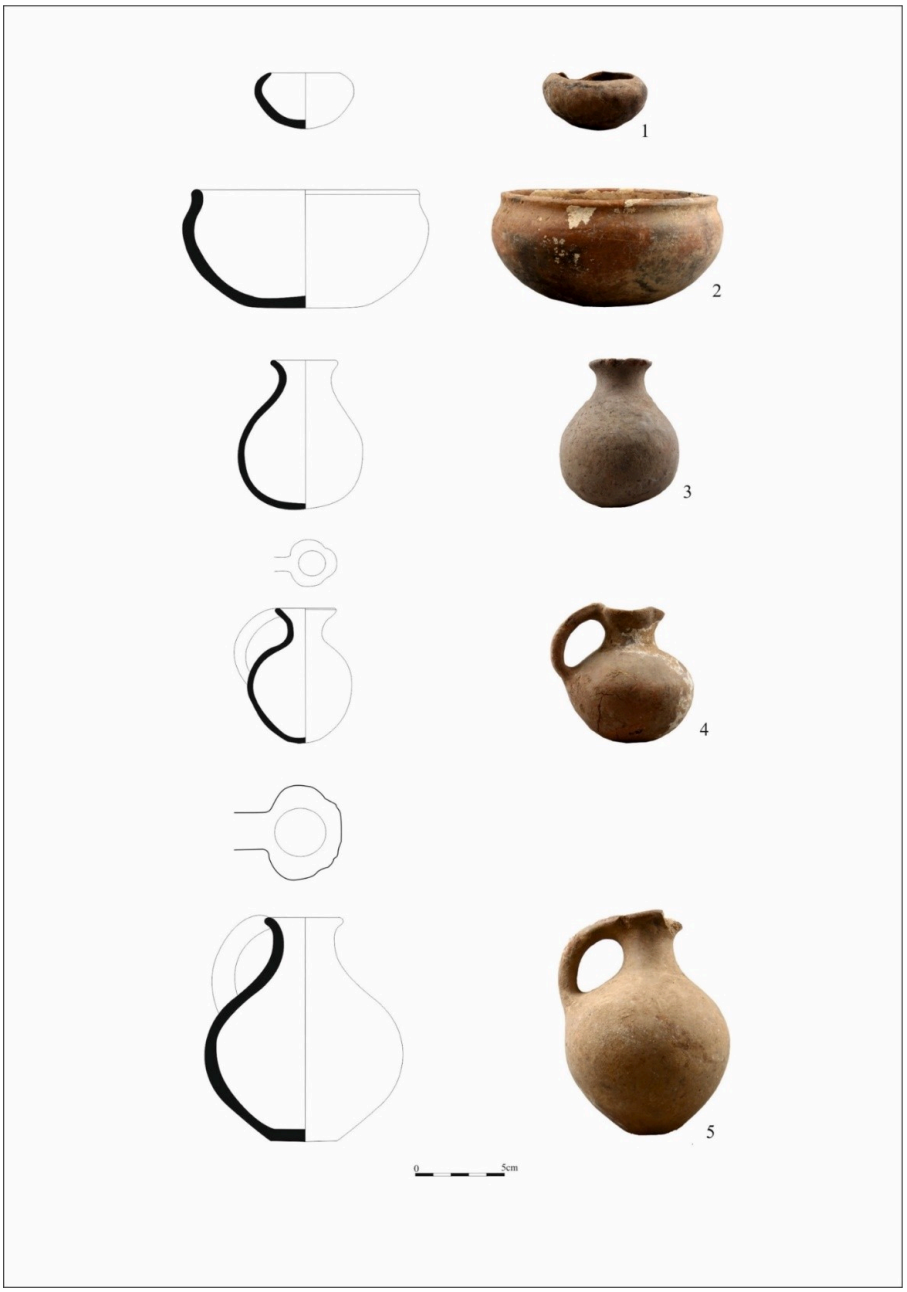
Pottery Catalog

1. Bowl, reddish paste, self-slipped, medium sand tempered, coarse grit, plant, and mica, burnished. The exterior has a color change to black due to firing, handmade, R 7 cm, h: 5.5 cm. Van Museum Inv. no: 3792 **(Fig. 7/1).**
2. Bowl, brown paste, self-slipped, medium sand tempered, plant, and mica, medium-fired, wheel-made, mottled (exterior), R 22 cm, h: 11,5 cm. Van Museum Inv. no: 3791 **(Fig. 7/2).**
3. Vase: reddish paste, self-slipped, medium sand tempered, coarse grit, mica, burnished, medium-fired, handmade. R 6 cm, h: 14,5 cm'dir. Van Museum Inv. no: 3793 **(Fig. 7/3).**
4. Trefoil-Jug: brown paste, self-slipped, medium sand tempered, fine grit and mica, burnished, medium-fired, wheel-made. R 6 cm, h: 13.7 cm. Van Museum Inv. no: 3790/1, **(Fig. 7/4).**
5. Jug: brown paste, self-slipped, medium sand tempered, coarse grit, and mica, burnished, medium-fired, handmade. R 7.5 cm, h: 21.5 cm. Van Museum Inv. no: 3790/2, **(Fig. 7/5).**

[5]Closed-mouthed, round-bodied bowls were found in the Büyükardıç settlement of Erzincan and in Karagündüz, Van (Ayaz, 2017, p. 229). Parallels were found in Armenia, Horom (Badaljan et al., 1994, Fig. 17/3) and in Hasanlu, Iran (Danti, 2013, Fig. 4.46 B).

Figure 7

Pottery found in the Surinis Chamber Tomb



Jewellery

The five bracelets can be classified typologically into three groups. All of these bracelets, made of bronze, open at both ends, and intact, reflect Iron Age characteristics in terms of production and stylistic features. The snake-head bracelet, represented by one example among the bracelets, has an angular body with a snake-head-shaped tip (Figure 8). The bracelet must have been placed in the grave in a bent position, a known burial custom. The snakehead is reported to be the most suitable form adapted for bracelets and the earliest type of animal-head bracelets used in the Near East (Muscarella, 1988, p. 36). This type of bracelet, made undecorated, was preferred throughout the Iron Age. Iron and bronze examples from the Early Iron Age can be cited from Karagündüz (Ayaz, 2014, p. 237) and Dinkha Tepe (Muscarella, 1974, p. 45). In the Middle Iron Age, snake-head bracelets, particularly those found in numerous Urartian graves (Timur, 2011, p. 66), have a more plastic tip, and the snakehead lines are more pronounced.

Figure 8

Photographs and drawimg of the snake headed first type bracelet.



The second type of bracelet found in the Surinis tomb consists of two bronze bracelets, each cubic in shape and covered with interlocking dot-shaped decorations (Figure 9 Figure 10). The central part of the shafts of both bracelets is flattened. Dot-shaped decorative patterns are applied to this area and the entire surface of the bracelets. In fact, the bracelets are given the popular serpent shape, again, by dotted decoration. The closest parallels to these decorations can be seen on bone objects unearthed in the Urartian (Kuvanç, 2014, pp. 229-242) excavations, as well as in Hasanlu (Danti, 2013, Fig.17.19) and Dinkha Tepe (Muscarella, 1974, p. 71) excavations in Iran. Another example of dot motifs can be seen in the metal earrings found in the Hakkari M1 tomb (Sevin, 2015, Res.111-112).

Figure 9

Photographs and drawimg of the snake headed second type bracelet.



Figure 10
Photographs and drawimg of the snake headed second type bracelet.



Another type of bracelet found in the Surinis chamber tomb is a pair of bracelets, flat on the inside and round on the outside (Figure 11). The bracelets are thickened in the middle of the body. The bracelet's wall thins towards the ends, giving the ends a stylized snakehead shape. Flattened bronze bracelets are a bracelet form frequently encountered in the Middle Iron Age. Examples of flat bracelets can be given from Hasanlu IV (Muscarella, 1988, Plate IX d-f), Dinkha Tepe II and Khurvin (Schauensee, 1988, p. 51, Plate IX c), Gilan (Dalalian & Grekian, 2004, Fig. 1), Malatya Museum (Demircan, 2009: 36, Plate XI a-b), Erzurum Museum (Köse, 2008, p. 35, Fig. 1) and finally Van Museum (Timur, 2025, No. 54-64, Figs.72-82).

Figure 11
Photograps and drawings of he snake headed third type bracelet.



A total of 132 beads were found in the Surinis tomb **(Fig.12).** The most significant group consists of bright blue and black glass beads. In addition, two antimony beads and a relatively larger bead made of mountain crystal were also recovered. The bead repertoire is consistent with those frequently encountered at sites dating from both the Early Iron Age and Middle Iron/Urartu periods in the Van and Lake Urmia basins.

Figure 12
The beads of Surinis tomb



Conclusion

The Surinis chamber tomb, which remains a significant archaeological mystery, provides us with important information about the Iron Age in the Hakkâri Highlands. The tomb's findings also raise some questions. While the Surinis chamber tomb, which generally reflects Iron Age characteristics in both its architecture and its findings, cannot be definitively distinguished between Early and Middle Iron Ages. Of course, some features of the tomb and the findings bear close resemblance to Early Iron Age centers in the Van and Urmia Lake Basins, neighboring the mountainous Hakkâri region. This similarity is particularly evident in the Surinis tomb architecture, bowls, snakehead bracelets, and glass beads found there. However, the trefoil jugs and bronze bracelets with flat and dot decorations, also found in the tomb, exhibit typical Middle Iron Age characteristics. Therefore, we cannot categorically date the Surinis tomb to the Early Iron Age. Here, we can point to a chronological discrepancy between the tomb architecture, burial style, and the findings. The same problem has also been raised in discussions surrounding centers such as Karagündüz, Dilkaya, and Yoncatepe, located in the Lake Van basin and dated to the Early Iron Age (Köroğlu & Konyar, 2005). Nevertheless, based on the trefoil jug and dot-decorated bracelets, we can date the burial chamber to the 9th–7th centuries BC. Indeed, trefoil jugs are more commonly associated with the Urartian period in the region (Sevin, 2004, p. 327; Köroğlu & Konyar, 2005, pp. 29, 33; Khatchadourian, 2011, p. 481). Some details about the Surinis tomb's architecture, such as whether it had a dromos, are unknown because it has not been systematically excavated. Nevertheless, chamber tombs containing multiple burials of this type, made of roughly dressed local stones, are found throughout a wide area extending from the Armenian Highlands to the area around Lake Urmia. These tombs were family tombs belonging to clans living in the region, housing burials of all ages and genders. Although we were unable to find bone remains in the Surinis chamber tomb due to looting, the abundance of similar pottery found within suggests that it contained multiple burials. The question of whether there were other tombs in the area beyond this tomb remains unanswered. However, ceramic fragments and stone blocks found on the natural hill surface chosen for the chamber tomb suggest that the site was used as a necropolis. Examination of the village of Surinis and its surroundings revealed no traces of an Iron Age settlement

or a fortress with defensive walls extending from the South Caucasus to the Van and Urmia lake basins. Perhaps there was no need for a fortified fortress in this remote, hidden valley of the Zagros, surrounded by steep hills. The high-grassed Surinis Valley, through which the Bembo Stream flows, was likely one of the regular year-round stopovers of the herd-owning nomadic Iron Age community. The Surinis grave findings indicate that the clans in these deep valleys, despite their geographic location, engaged in cultural interaction with other regions during the Iron Age.

As a result, an Iron Age site has been discovered for the first time in the Şemzinan region, located in the southeast of the mountainous region in question. This is significant because it demonstrates the continuation of the tradition of chamber tombs built with underground walls, common throughout the Iron Age, in the Zagros Mountains. Furthermore, the ceramic and bronze finds from the Surinis chamber tomb can be said to reflect the cultural spread of the period.

Peer Review Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

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