Summary

6.1 The Discovery of the Sanctuary at Veshnaveh

It was a matter of especial good fortune when the archaeological site Chale Ghar was discovered and excavated. Originally, alongside their Iranian colleagues, the team from the German Mining Museum planned to examine the prehistoric copper-mining area located close to the village of Veshnaveh in the mountains of central Iran. The first and largest mine which they intended to document was a mine of two chambers with the name Chale Ghar 1. Chale Ghar 1 had just one entrance, which was small and narrow, and accessible only by crawling. Inside the mine, in the main chamber, a basin, which had been hollowed out by copper-mining activities, had then filled with the water from melting snow; this water had to be pumped out of the mine to make excavation possible.

Not long after the beginning of the excavations, in the main chamber of Chale Ghar 1 objects were uncovered unrelated to prehistoric mining activities: among them were ceramics, animal bones, fruits and seeds, as well as jewellery and personal ornaments. As the excavation progressed, more and more such items were documented that had remained well preserved under water for centuries. The finds that came to light from the main and the rear chambers were so numerous that in order completely to expose the complex in Chale Ghar 1 three further campaigns had to be undertaken; during the last one, a similar discovery to that in Chale Ghar 1 was made in Chale Ghar 2, the mine located above it: in a corner a depression filled with humid dirt, ceramics, bones and jewellery was excavated.

The assemblage and the way in which the objects had been disposed support the assumption that the mines had probably served as a natural sanctuary. Aided by a $^{14}$C examination of charcoal collected at the bottom of the depositional features, and by the discovery of an Umayyad coin, it is sensible to assume that the use of Chale Ghar 1 ran from c. 800 BC to the 8th century AD.

6.2 The Examination of the Sanctuary at Veshnaveh

So, Chale Ghar 1 was in use during a surprisingly long period of time, and to understand the exact processes of deposition in Chale Ghar 1 and 2, the finds have to be examined in order to answer a series of different questions. As the first stage of this study, a chronological classification of the jewellery is worked out. On this basis it is sorted out in what chronological and spatial sequence the jewellery objects were deposited in Chale Ghar 1 and 2. To learn what kind of sanctuary existed at Veshnaveh, the results of the examination of the jewellery finds are considered in the context of other archaeological sites, ancient textual sources and knowledge about religion and popular belief. In this process of comparison an important role is played by the spatial environment in which the jewellery artefacts were deposited.

6.2.1 The Dating of the Jewellery Finds from Veshnaveh

Jewellery appears to have had a special importance within the depositions of Chale Ghar. Already during excavation what became apparent was not merely the great diversity of the jewellery finds, but also elements of chronological and spatial separateness.

First of all, the jewellery artefacts were grouped, and then they were chronologically classified by comparison studies. Altogether eight groups were formed: after starting with the coins, a relatively detailed section describes the numerous and diverse beads; then follow pendants, inlays and one gem, finger-rings, earrings and metal sheets; the remaining, very heterogeneous, finds are summarised in a final chapter.

6.2.1.1 Coins

Although present only in small numbers, coins serve as the prime criterion for dating the deposits in Chale Ghar 1: they come from the Parthian, Sasanian and early Islamic periods. In Chale Ghar 2, by contrast, no datable coins were found.
6.2.1.2 Beads

Beads are of great interest both quantitatively – in that they appear very frequently – and also typologically, since they are so diverse. Apart from simple monocrome glass beads, there are gold-in-glass beads, mosaic glass beads, eye glass beads and beads of various other materials, primarily cornelian and garnet, but also amber and shell. In the context of the chronological examination of the beads the manufacturing techniques used to produce them are also discussed. Obviously, the beads from Veshnaveh were manufactured by the use of such different techniques as winding, drawing, folding and overlay or gold-in-glass. These methods can give indications of the dating of certain find groups. One representative example is the class of gold-in-glass beads, which do not date before the 3rd century BC, as can be seen from technique of manufacture.

6.2.1.3 Pendants, Inlays and one Gem

Finds are termed pendants when they have off-centre string holes. They appear in smaller numbers than the beads, and, apart from the glass and the stone pendants – the latter being very few in number – two categories of pendant stand out from the assemblage, the golden pomegranate-shaped pendants and the bronze bells.

A number of glass and stone inlays are discussed in a separate section: among them is a noteworthy gem of blue glass illustrated by a Hellenistic or Roman warrior.

6.2.1.4 Rings

Apart from the pomegranate and other pendants, further metal finds from Chale Ghar 1 and 2 included the rings: heavily corroded iron rings, and part-decorated bronze or – in smaller number – silver finger-rings. Illustrations of birds account for the greater part of these decorations. The earrings were of a rather simple nature, and were made of simple bronze hoops or wires.

6.2.1.5 Metal Sheets

A special find group consists of the decorated gold and silver sheets, among which is one with a figural illustration that will be discussed extensively: a probable explanation is that it is a cultic scene allegorised by a male figure wearing a short garment, standing next to a plant. Plants are also depicted on a golden and silver sheet. Apart from these items, silver sheets were excavated in the shapes of a fish, a hand and an eye, alongside undecorated and fragmented bronze, silver and gold sheets.

6.2.1.6 Miscellaneous Objects

Very different, but nonetheless noteworthy artefacts are subsumed under the heading ‘Miscellaneous objects’. First of all, a small globular glass vessel and the fragment of a small dark green glass bowl should be mentioned, especially since the latter is one of the few outstanding items from Chale Ghar 2. Other exceptional artefacts are a small phallus made of green glass, and a bronze arrow-head, the latter representing the only weapon within the depositions.

6.2.1.7 Chronological Classification of the Finds

For the chronological classification of the objects, the find groups are compared with other jewellery finds from Iran, the Near East and the Black Sea region – and in some cases with Roman artefacts, too. The result of these comparison studies is that most of the jewellery and personal ornaments from Chale Ghar 1 date to the Parthian and Sasanian periods, and a few to the early Islamic era. Only the arrow-head lies far outside such chronological ranges: it dates to the 7th century BC, and seems to have been deposited as an heirloom.

6.2.2 The Origin of the Jewellery Finds from Veshnaveh

Because the jewellery artefacts found at Veshnaveh are very diverse and were manufactured using very different techniques, the question arises whether the objects had been manufactured locally or had arrived from elsewhere: so an investigation is undertaken in order to try to identify exchange of goods. At first the materials themselves are discussed, with chemical analysis being likely to provide the first guidance. However, some individual objects attest that exchanges of goods over long distances had taken place involving Veshnaveh.

6.2.2.1 Imported Materials at Veshnaveh

A number of glass samples from Chale Ghar 1 were examined chemically and technically by J. Lankton and B. Gratuz, respectively of UCL and IRAMAT. Their analysis indicated the probable existence of important relationships between the Indo-Pacific and Veshnaveh in central Iran. Connections to eastern Europe were confirmed by an infrared spectroscopy carried out on amber from the sanctuary by E. Stout and C. Beck of the Amber Research Laboratory at the Vassar College. This material was identified as being exclusively Baltic amber, so-called succinite.
Other natural materials like garnet, lapis lazuli or cowrie shells were also brought to Veshnaveh from far away, whereas there appears to have been an adequate supply of metals from the region itself.

6.2.2.2 Imported Artefacts at Veshnaveh

Singular finds such as the globular glass vessel (pl. 46, no. 4553a) and a glass gem (pl. 27, no. 1505) seem to have been imports, as do a number of mosaic glass beads that obviously required a great deal of effort to manufacture. Additionally, the different nuances of the colours of the glass beads indicate that these beads came from chronologically or geographically distinct workshops.

6.2.2.3 Trade at Veshnaveh

Examination of the jewellery that was found in Chale Ghar 1 and 2 leads to the conclusion that some objects or the raw material used to produce them arrived through trade connections. Parthian and Sasanian trade routes are known, and they have remained in use through the arrival of Islam into modern times. One of these routes passes reasonably close to Veshnaveh.

A large number of jewellery objects were deposited into Chale Ghar 1, but they were distributed over such a long period of use that it is probable that only a few objects were laid down at any one time. There is not the evidence to suggest that a vibrant trade had established itself in the region; instead, it is likely that exchange of goods took place on an occasional basis.

6.2.3 Jewellery Finds from Veshnaveh and their Meaning

After the chronological framework has been specified, and the origins of the jewellery have been debated, next this study turns to examine the items of jewellery according to cultural and religious aspects of their possession and use.

The assemblage at Veshnaveh appears to have striking particularities, the complete absence of bracelets among so much jewellery being a prime example. The collection consists of selected objects that were deposited into water at a special place, and were then carefully part-covered with stones. A more extensive examination of the jewellery shows that the items not only belong to different categories and subcategories, but can also be divided into different types of amulets, which were said to have apotropaeic or luck-bearing effects: for instance, some of the amulets may have been connected to fertility or to the healing of diseases.

6.2.3.1 Material and Colour of the Amulets from Veshnaveh

Firstly, the materials of the amulets were believed to play an important role in generating their effects, and this statement is particularly true of metal and stone. Colour had a special meaning, and blue was believed to fend off evil, with green and yellow having positive effects, too. Besides the red found in the cornelian beads, these are the three colours that appeared most frequently in Chale Ghar 1 and 2.

6.2.3.2 Appearance of the Amulets from Veshnaveh

Blue is the colour of most of the eye beads that appear in Chale Ghar 1. Even today beads of this kind are said to be a means of warding off evil. Other apotropaic amulets from Veshnaveh are replicas of body parts, such as an eye and a hand with what appears to be the remains of an outstretched finger, which were found in the form of silver sheets. Also a small phallic made of glass was found in Chale Ghar 1. It is plausible that these amulets apart from their possible apotropaic meaning were dedicated with the wish to be healed from disease, or to offer thanks for such a wish being granted.

The recurring bird motif on bronze finger-rings is connected to luck or fertility. The bronze bells and golden pomegranate pendants, which were both found in Chale Ghar 1, were also regarded as amulets, and probably even as symbol of cultic instrument. Apart from the most important amulet types summarised here, a range of other amulets are discussed with consideration being given to their material and their appearance.

6.2.4 Chale Ghar – a Sanctuary

The discovery of combinations of specifically chosen jewellery objects deposited in the water of an ancient copper mine leaves hardly any room for doubt that Chale Ghar 1 and 2 were sanctuaries.94

6.2.4.1 Comparison with Cave and Water Sanctuaries

The most important attribute of the sanctuaries Chale Ghar 1 and 2 is the water inside them. In particular, the assemblages, which as found were very similar to those in other Iranian sanctuaries or grave inventories, attest the sacred character of these two mines.

Although the discovery at Veshnaveh and the range of documentation existing for it are unique, other ancient cave sanctuaries such as those at Niasar, Caraftoo,
Bishapur or at places in today’s Iraq indicate that the site stood in a row of ancient Iranian cave sanctuaries. Water obviously played a special role, being foremost both in the physical structures and conceptions of Zoroastrianism. The most famous example is the Sasanian Takht-e Suleiman, where the sacred buildings were built around a geyser, which even today has the appearance of a mystical lake. In Pir-e Sabz, a Zoroastrian sanctuary, and one still in active use today, water drips from the rock into the cult room.

6.2.4.2 Ancient Textual Sources Regarding Religious Practice

Historical descriptions and religious instructions likely to be relevant to practices performed in Chale Ghar 1 and 2 have passed down to us. Strabo, a Greek historian who wrote over the course of the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD, described how Persian magicians made offerings in the presence of water. But more important is a passage in the so-called Narengestan, an ancient Zoroastrian written source collected in turn from considerably older oral traditions. The Narengestan speaks of the “nourishing” of water. Such a ceremony of ‘nourishing’ did not accord with established notions of the purity requirements of Zoroastrian religion, and so the meaning of this passage remained unclear until Veshnaveh was excavated. Animal bones, fruits, jewellery and vessels that were probably used for libation rituals indicate that in the case of Veshnaveh the water indeed was ‘nourished’, or venerated with food and objects. It seems that at Veshnaveh either a much older Zoroastrian or – more probably, even – a pre-Zoroastrian cult had taken place amid the environment of a popular and rural community.

6.2.4.3 The Worshippers

Against the backdrop of information from previous studies, there arises the question of who deposited all these jewellery objects in the mines, or for whom they were offered. A survey, carried out at a distance of some kilometres from the sanctuary, showed that the region around Veshnaveh was settled from Iron Age III until the early Islamic period. It can be assumed that the people of these settlements knew about Chale Ghar, and that women and girls were among those to visit the sanctuary. Such female circles had special need of protection, and by tradition bore amulets. Moreover, the smallness of the finger-rings supports the assumption that they were mostly worn by women or children.

Special indications as to the identity of the worshippers are given by comparisons with modern popular Zoroastrian and Islamic rituals, particularly ones always carried out by women and connected with water, and in some cases with jewellery, too. Zoroastrianism and popular beliefs in the Near East have been subjected to transformations, yet certain basic ideas are still valid today, as examination of the amulets from Veshnaveh shows. Therefore it is legitimate to compare practices in Chale Ghar 1 and 2 with more recent popular cults.

6.2.5 The Chronological Sequence in Chale Ghar 1 and 2

To understand the chronological and spatial order of the depositions in Chale Ghar 1 and 2, the jewellery finds were evaluated with the help of a Geographic Information System (GIS). Using the documentation established for the finds in the course of excavation, three dimensional measurements were given, whence it became possible to represent these coordinates graphically and to analyse the distribution and depth of certain finds or find groups.

The result of this examination is that jewellery was deposited for the first time in the Parthian period in the middle of the pool in the main chamber of Chale Ghar 1. In the course of late Parthian and Sasanian times these offerings increasingly moved to the north-western area of the pool. During this phase the rear chamber was also filled with objects. In the late Sasanian period in particular visitors laid their offerings down into the north-western periphery of the water pool, which meant also over older depositions. Until the early Islamic period, the cult at Veshnaveh continued to be cherished, as the finds in the outer north-western corner of the pool prove. The rear chamber in Chale Ghar 1 does not seem to have played a role during the early Islamic period. The entrance area and Chale Ghar 2 probably reflect the last phase of depositions in the Islamic epoch. However, already at an earlier stage ritual activity might have taken place in the entrance of Chale Ghar 1 as 14C analysis shows.

6.2.6 Depositional Practice

With the help of the GIS analysis it was also possible to understand changes in depositional practice and the role of ‘fashion’. After the early depositions consisting of ceramics, bones and other materials in the centre of the pool in Chale Ghar 1, the first jewellery offerings started in the Parthian period. These were simple bronze ear-rings, glass and cornelian beads, as well as a few amber and garnet beads.

In the course of the Parthian and the Sasanian periods the depositions became more manifold and colourful: other materials were dedicated, and also relatively new were elaborately manufactured glass beads, made with the gold-in-glass and mosaic techniques. Emblematic of the Sasanian phase are bronze finger-rings, especially those with bird decorations.
The rear chamber was visited also in the Parthian, and even more in the Sasanian periods; there the finds appear to be more delicate than those from the main chamber. Looking at any one item very often leaves an impression of a *pars pro toto*: for example, individually configured chain links, or a decorated bone disc, which had probably been meant as a token, and that then had been intentionally cut. It is possible that different rituals were taking place in the rear chamber, or that it was being visited by different groups of persons.

While the ritual activity in the rear chamber presumably did not take place in later periods, the depositions continued in the main chamber until the early Islamic era. During the Sasanian and late Sasanian period it was a fashion to deposit bronze jewellery, such as the finger-rings mentioned above. This custom changed by the early Islamic period at the latest. Starting in the Sasanian period, more and more silver objects were brought into the sanctuary. However, iron rings, which are characteristic of late Sasanian and early Islamic offerings, were increasingly deposited. During this time no gold objects were dedicated.

Iron finds indicate that depositions happened as well in the entrance area and in the main chamber of Chale Ghar 1 during the later phases of activity in the mines, quite possibly even during the final phase. Also significant are the shell beads and cowries, which were found almost exclusively in these two areas.

6.3 Perspective

With the excavation of Veshnaveh physical evidence of an ancient natural sanctuary was uncovered, and that essentially broadens our understanding of ancient Iranian religion. The discovery of the sanctuary is a source of good fortune not only for the investigation of the pre-Islamic history of religion in Iran, but also for analysing small finds of the Parthian, Sasanian and early Islamic periods. So far, only a few assemblages comparable to the finds at Veshnaveh have been examined, although they have much valuable information to offer, as the results of this study show. A systematic documentation and analysis, for example of glass beads, together with appropriate references, may give indications as to the origins of objects and the chronology of their find location.

Yet the Parthian, Sasanian and early Islamic eras in Iran require much more fundamental investigation: questions that cannot be defined very clearly at the moment, particularly the differentiation of the periods and the transitions between them, need to be examined thoroughly and need to be taken forward as far as the evidence allows. It follows, therefore, that the examination of the jewellery and personal ornaments found at Veshnaveh provides a strong foundation for further detailed studies of the Parthian period up to early Islamic periods in Iran.

Above the meaning of Chale Ghar for the Near Eastern archaeology, the mines themselves are disposed in a long and worldwide tradition of cave sanctuaries. We know cave sanctuaries from European sites, that range from the paleolithic to modern eras (see e.g. Kusch 2001; Lindström/Pilz 2013, 267) and also have been influenced by Near Eastern religions as one can observe e.g. in the Mithras cult.

Most of the caves were visited by a local rural community, which is expressed through modest donations. Vessels and dishes for food point to ritual eating and drinking (Sporn, 61–62). Cultic activity in caves is often connected to fertility, healing and women concerns as well as oracles (Sporn 2007, 58–60). Until today narrow entrances like those in Chale Gar 1 served to wipe off sins or diseases or assisted in questions of fertility symbolising an ease of birth (Kusch 2001 171). In Greek mythology caves symbolised the birth of gods as well as protection and inspiration (Sporn 2007, 39–40).

We gain knowledge over ancient religions mostly by written sources or central sanctuaries, which usually do not mirror the popular belief. Furthermore in most caves typically only resistant materials like metal, bones or stone remain as finds and can only show a small range of activities which have been taken place there (Kusch 2001, 7). In contrary Chale Ghar exhibits a wide range of different offerings which were discovered and preserved and could be studied to gain further knowledge about ancient depositional practices. As a result of this the finds from Veshnaveh are not only relevant for further studies of Parthian, Sasanian and early Islamic periods, but also for the general comprehensive understanding of ancient ritual acts.