6. Going Underground: Affiliates, Proxies, and Delegates at Tsaghkahovit

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As the British archaeologist and diplomat Austin Henry Layard observed during his journey through Ottoman Anatolia in 1849, even the most ordinary constituents of the material world can play a part in the making of satrapal conditions. While passing through the governorate of Erzurum on his overland travels from the Black Sea port of Trebizond to Mosul (where he would resume his famed excavations at Nineveh), Layard encountered a number of humble mountain villages whose peculiar style of vernacular architecture caught his attention. He described the dwellings as “low hovels, mere holes in the hill-side, and the common refuge of man, poultry, and cattle” (Layard 1859: 12). Later European travelers also remarked on these curious abodes that dotted the landscape in villages across the Armenian highland. The distinctive houses were often likened to “ant-hills” or “small mud volcanoes” (Lynch 1901: 165; Tozer 1881: 287) because of their characteristic earthen domed roofs, left open at the top for light and ventilation (figure 38). Layard was particularly attuned to the political significance of these humble, semi-subterranean human and animal havens. They “cannot be seen from any distance,” he noted, so thoroughly were they concealed in the natural landscape. And not only did the “hovels” provide natural camouflage, they were also “purposely built away from the road to escape the unwelcome visits of traveling government officers and marching troops” (Layard 1859: 12). The “ant-hills” were also like pitfalls that could snare unsuspecting outsiders: “It is not uncommon,” Layard wrote, “for a traveller to receive the first intimation of his approach to a village by finding his horse’s fore feet down a chimney, and himself taking his place unexpectedly in the family circle through the roof.” In this remote corner of the Ottoman Empire, the people of the villages conspired with the earth itself to impose limits on the reach
of imperial surveillance and control. Later ethnographies of Armenian village life also give voice to the sociopolitics of the semi-subterranean habitats that, however modestly, afforded a measure of community protection and enabled a politics of evasion (Lisitsyan 1955; Villa and Matossian 1982).

This chapter charts the conditions and conditionals of empire in a single mountain village of the Armenian dahyu, and the differential and intertwined work of both humans and things in their production. The resolution of the analysis is higher than in the previous two chapters, as we home in on human–material confederacies at work in semi-subterranean domestic spaces at the settlement of Tsaghkahovit in north-central Armenia. The earth-sheltered dwellings that Layard and others encountered on their travels through what were—over two millennia before—the lands of Achaemenid Armenia represent a remarkably enduring human–material entanglement in a highland region long swept up in vicissitudes of imperial power. The great antiquity of such lantern-roof houses, as they are sometimes called, has long been known, thanks to a terse ethnographic description of highland vernacular architecture by the Greek historian Xenophon, who passed through the region on his long march through the Achaemenid Empire at the end of the fifth century B.C.1 But nine seasons of systematic excavation conducted at Tsaghkahovit between 1998 and 2013 have exposed for the first time, and in considerable detail, the practices that such underground havens made possible in the northern reaches of the dahyu. The findings from Tsaghkahovit provide a rare glimpse into the everyday work of affiliates, proxies, and delegates in a single village of Achaemenid Armenia.2 They offer a much-needed corrective to the constricted vision of Achaemenid archaeology, long focused narrowly on prominent

**Figure 38.** Houses with lantern roofs, Hasköy, Muş, in 1980 (courtesy of Akın Günkut).
royal centers, urban settlements, and elite residences and palaces (Khatchadourian 2012). The first section of this chapter provides an orientation to the site, reviewing matters of chronology, economy, and daily life in order to establish a context for the analysis of satrapal conditions.

**ORIENTATION TO TSAGHKAHOVIT**

In the analysis of highland settlement patterns discussed in the previous chapter, we saw that the Tsaghkahovit Plain—a small, high-elevation plateau bounded on the south by the soaring peaks of Mt. Aragats (4,090 m above sea level), on the west by Mt. Kolgat (2,474 m above sea level), and on the northeast by the slopes of the Pambak Range—was one of the few regions in the dahyu with clear evidence for newly arriving populations during the mid-first millennium B.C. (map 4). The return of settled life on a substantial scale took place after a prolonged period of abandonment, initiated by the violent destruction during the twelfth century B.C. of a number of Late Bronze Age (LBA) fortresses that had been built atop the lofty summits of the plain. The demise of the LBA fortresses marked the end of the earliest iteration of political complexity on the highland, in which the fortress had stood as an iconic settlement form. For at least five hundred years, the Tsaghkahovit Plain appears to have lain vacant. When new populations returned, sometime during the late seventh century B.C., they gravitated with unmistakable regularity to the dilapidated remains of the LBA fortresses. To varying degrees, regional survey conducted in 1998 and 2000 revealed evidence for Iron 3 activity in or near at least seven (if not eight) of the ten documented LBA fortresses, while turning up no evidence for Iron 3 settlement in dissociation from an earlier fortress site (Smith et al. 2009). The firm predisposition toward these LBA fortresses signals the traces of enduring, preexisting highland traditions that preserved certain spatial practices as essential to the putting down of new roots (Khatchadourian 2008).

However, the relationship between an LBA past and an Iron Age present is not reducible to a mere mimicking of old traditions. Simultaneous with the revitalization of the fortress was a refiguring of the spatial logics of social life, judging by the evidence from at least two of the sites, Tsaghkahovit and Hnaberd, where surface architecture (dated on the basis of both survey materials and excavation) attests to Iron 3 settlements that fanned out from the base of the fortresses into the surrounding foothills (figure 39). Nestled amid undulating terrain on a spur of Mt. Aragats, Tsaghkahovit is the largest and best-preserved fortress site that boasts both LBA and Iron 3 occupations, and therefore has been the main target of excavations to date. Dominating the site is an imposing fortress, which sits atop a conical volcanic outcrop (2,183 m above sea level) that rises 80 meters above the surrounding plain (figure 40). The Iron 3 settlement spreads out from the base of the outcrop to the south and east, while further to the east is a substantial LBA
Map 4. The Tsaghkahovit Plain, showing results of regional survey (Adam T. Smith and Lori Khatchadourian).
FIGURE 39. Site plan of Tsaghkahovit (courtesy of Project ArAGATS, created by Adam T. Smith).
cemetery of “cromlech” burials. It is at this site that we have the clearest understanding of the timing and nature of an architectural reformulation that appears to have inverted the ordering of social life from fortress summits, the central pivot of social life during the LBA, to semi-subterranean shelters.

Excavations across Tsaghkahovit testify to a substantial reoccupation in most areas of the site, likely in the last third of the seventh century B.C. The LBA citadel itself was reused, yet the nature of this reuse suggests that the fortress lost the status it had once held as the prime spatial location for practices of political authority. The reoccupation is marked by the reconstruction of the fortress wall, albeit using a more modest masonry style than the prior LBA wall, with its massive cyclopean blocks. Internally, the Iron 3 inhabitants evinced a thoroughgoing disinterest in the monumental space created by the ruins of a large LBA building in favor of a disarticulated internal arrangement of rooms (figure 41). The opportunistic partitioning of the pre-existing, readily available monumental structure, and the general absence of a new kind of large-scale architecture within the citadel during the Iron 3 period, conspire to cast doubt on the capacity of the fortress to have served as an effective base from which to project authority, cultivate awe, or naturalize a right to rule.

Beyond the fortress, surface architecture of the lower settlement points to two neatly clustered complexes, each made up of a compact nucleation of rooms,
situated at some distance from the base of the fortress to the south and southeast (Precinct A and Precinct B). A third area is marked by the disarticulated array of room blocks that immediately hug the base of the fortress in an arc from the east to the southwest (Precinct C). It is only in the area to the east of the fortress that investigations have exposed the remains of substantial LBA activity outside the confines of the citadel (Badalyan et al. forthcoming; Badalyan et al. 2008; Lindsay 2006), yet parts of this area were repurposed into domestic spaces during the Iron 3 period.

Targeted research into the Iron 3 period at Tsaghkahovit has centered on Precinct A and the room blocks of Precinct C that lie due south of the citadel (figure 42). Stratigraphy and radiocarbon dates indicate that both areas were occupied without discernable hiatuses after their initial establishment, until the site’s abandonment. The date of abandonment is uncertain, but may provisionally be estimated as the late fifth or early fourth century B.C. Precinct A is a well-preserved, agglutinative structure of interconnected rooms whose spatial regularity and integrated architectonics give the impression of purposeful planning (figure 43). In contrast, spatial arrangements in Precinct C appear comparably haphazard, with little apparent investment in creating a homogeneous arrangement of structures. The units here either stand alone, or cluster in pairs of two
Figure 42. Aerial view of the Tsaghkahovit Iron 3 settlement (photograph by Ian Lindsay, courtesy of Project ArAGATS).

Figure 43. Detail of Precincts A and C showing surface architecture and excavated units. The WS prefix stands for West Settlement. (Courtesy of Project ArAGATS, created by Adam T. Smith and Lori Khatchadourian.)
or three, rarely more. In both areas, rooms were built against natural slopes and ridges and were thus substantially subterranean. The walls were not freestanding but instead lined the surrounding earth, functioning as retaining walls. On present evidence, Precinct A appears to have been the residence of a leading family in the community and a locus of sociopolitical privilege. Apart from the scale and regularity of the structure, this interpretation is based on the mounting evidence that it constituted not an agglomeration of equivalent household units but, at least at first, a single and functionally differentiated complex whose users commanded considerable productive capacities as well as wealth in the form of large herds. Functional nonequivalency among the rooms in the complex is supported by the fact that few rooms excavated to date in Precinct A are the same in their dimensions or internal features (figures 44 and 45). Variability is particularly marked among Rooms I, N, S, H, and G, whose internal installations point to different kinds and degrees of food processing, production, and storage activities. These five unique rooms in a unified architectonic environment support the case for a single complex in which a variety of productive, consumptive, and ritual activities took place. Locations of doorways further suggest that this was a unified architectonic environment, primary entry into which was afforded through Room I, from where traffic flowed deeper into the cavernous complex. And yet several doors were clearly blocked over the course of the complex’s use, an enigmatic aspect of the site’s phasing.

Alongside this evidence for variability, some rooms in the complex, namely C, D, and M, are quite similar to one another; these are also the rooms that collectively hint at large-scale herd management in the precinct. Rooms C, D, and M, the largest of the complex, contain the lowest densities of small finds and ceramics (predominately coarse-wares). The rooms have in common elongated flagstone floors running northeast to southwest and associated receptacles, but no evidence for hearths or workstations (figure 46). It is probable that the receptacles functioned as troughs, and that the rooms were primarily mangers. But in the subterranean houses recorded by ethnographers of twentieth-century Armenia, a room in the dwelling complex known as the gomi oda, or cattleshed, also served during winter months as lounging or sleeping quarters for humans who, separated from the animals by a partition, nevertheless benefited from their body heat (Marutyan 2001: 95). Notably, it is specifically the doors of these rooms where excavations uncovered robust closures (as between D and G, and M and N). The reasons for the blockages can only be conjectured. Seasonal variations may have occasioned efforts to maximize or reduce cohabitation with livestock. Alternatively, inheritance practices may have led to the parceling of a once large complex into segmented units, each containing its own stable. Finally, changes in the organization of animal husbandry—an expansion in herd size or a change in management structures—could have necessitated the stricter containment of...
livestock from the working quarters of the complex. In any case, the existence of at least three such large mangers suggests that those who inhabited Precinct A enjoyed considerable command over one of the most important resources of the community.

The scale of exposures in Precinct C does not yet provide a clear understanding of the relationship between room blocks, though excavations to date lend support...
to the picture of disarticulated structures gleaned from surface architecture. Thus far, two pairs of interconnected rooms are clear: AC and AD, and DA and DB (figure 47). Until broader exposures are undertaken in Precinct C, conclusions concerning social differences between the two precincts must remain tentative. It is nevertheless notable that Room AC is comparable in scale to the larger rooms of Precinct A, and shares some features with them (flagstone floor and “receptacle”). But it differs from these rooms in a number of respects, including the presence of a grain-processing station in the center of the room and a flagstone floor that covers much of the interior. Moreover, the density and diversity of materials in Room AC were far greater than in the large rooms of Precinct A. It is possible that day-to-day activities that were otherwise segregated in the more privileged social space of Precinct A were combined in the tighter quarters of a two-or-three-room house.

Figure 45. Drawing of Rooms N and S (courtesy of Project ArAGATS, created by Lilit Ter-Minasyan and Lori Khatchadourian).
FIGURE 46. Photograph of the northwest half of Room D (author’s photograph).

FIGURE 47. Drawing of Precinct C, Rooms DB and DA (above), and AC and AD (below) (courtesy of Project ArAGATS, created by Lilit Ter-Minasyan and Lori Khatchadourian).
Working and living in such close quarters, in clear view of a more spacious complex to the south, would have reproduced on a daily basis the social boundaries of the community. The Iron 3 settlement at Tsaghkahovit was abandoned peaceably, without any trace of conflagration. There is no evidence of substantial subsequent occupation.

The Tsaghkahovit community was organized around a mixed, agro-pastoral productive economy that took advantage of the ideal pasturage on the north slope of Mt. Aragats and the open plain that extends west to east from the southern slope of Mt. Kolgat to the Kasakh River drainage. Tending to sheep, goat, cattle, pigs and horses (including domesticated taxon, Equus caballus), was an essential part of daily life. The nature of the faunal assemblage indicates a pastoral economy focused on meat consumption, as well as secondary products like milk and wool (figure 48a, b). The role of the horse in the Tsaghkahovit economy is particularly important given historical reports that Armenia met its tributary obligations with horses (see note 5 in chapter 5). It is possible that the village economy was partially structured around the rearing of horses (figure 48c). Notably, a worked-antler industry may have centered on the production of psalia, or cheek pieces.
There is a higher concentration of equids in Precinct C than in A, pointing to some marked difference of use for this particularly important animal. In contrast, faunal evidence of hunting (of bear, fox, and deer, for example) centers on Precinct A. Augmenting a diet of sheep, goat, cattle, and other animal products was a range of cultivated grains. Evidence of cereal processing in the form of basalt grindstones is abundant, and correlated with locales dense in
macrobotanical remains, inbuilt grinding stations, and hearths, such as Rooms I, N, S, and AC (figure 49).

ARCHITECTURAL AFFILIATES

The subterranean interior spaces and material assemblages at Tsaghkahovit sustained a community that dwelled, on a day-to-day basis, in the folds of the earth itself. The rectilinear dugouts built into natural slopes were likely roofed through a corbelling technique that would have entailed an alternation between short beams placed diagonally across corners and beams laid parallel to the walls, in multiple levels, until the roof narrowed to an opening that provided light and ventilation. The resulting polygonal dome was then likely covered with reeds or straw and plastered with clay and earth, creating a heavy superstructure that was supported on the interior by wooden pillars (roughly hewn stone bases are extant in many rooms). Whether grown over with grass or laden with snow, from any distance the houses of Tsaghkahovit would have appeared like little hillocks. As Layard’s observations make clear, variants of this form of vernacular architecture endured into the twentieth century (figure 38, p. 154), from the foothills and plains of Muş, Erzurum, and Sivas, to the mountains of the South Caucasus, with modern names like “head house” (głkhatun in Armenian) or “smoke-hole house” (tütéklikli ev in Turkish) that allude its distinctive features (Akın 1996; Marutyan 2001).

Earth-sheltered habitats exist worldwide, in numerous ecological zones (Boyer and Grondzik 1987). In upland environments marked by dramatic fluctuations of climate, the protected and long-lasting edifices of semi-subterranean housing can maintain relatively stable interior temperatures due to the thermal “flywheel” effect: the soil and stone surrounding the lived space absorb and release the sun’s energy at a relatively slow rate, thus tempering the effect of dramatic temperature change (5). As thermally rechargeable materials, the basalt blocks that lined Tsaghkahovit’s earthen dugouts were continuously at work, intercepting and storing solar energy and returning that heat to their surroundings at cooler times thanks to their vibrant mineralogies, densities, and emissivities (Rempel and Rempel 2013). In general, underground living underscores the ways in which humans habituate to the challenges of extreme mountain zones, and explanations for the unique semi-subterranean houses of the Armenian highland often rest on the affordances of their thermal properties (e.g. Akın 1996).

But climatic factors alone cannot explain what is manifestly a built vernacular designed to enshroud. Centuries of occupation on the Tsaghkahovit Plain during the Early and Late Bronze Ages entailed the very opposite of underground living; communities of these periods favored above-ground constructions on mountain perches rather than subterranean shelters. Likewise, across the highland, there are no known antecedents to Tsaghkahovit’s semi-subterranean dwellings of
comparable scale and architectural sophistication. The closest comparanda may be the nearby and contemporaneous site of Beniamin, on the Shirak Plain, where limited excavations have exposed two rooms of a semi-subterranean complex that may also have resembled the modern lantern-roof houses (Ter-Martirosov et al. 2012: 201). At Tsaghkahovit, it is possible that the adoption of semi-subterranean stone dwellings emerged in the first instance out of a practical necessity to accommodate a changing subsistence economy that placed greater emphasis on pigs than had earlier societies. But this seems unlikely. Even though represented in higher proportions than during the Early and Late Bronze Ages, pigs make up too small a proportion of the faunal assemblage (7 percent) to be viewed as the driving factor behind greater sedentism and a style of permanent architecture that could both shelter humans and fodder livestock during the winter months. Ultimately, since Bronze Age and earlier Iron Age populations were able to weather the highland’s severe winters without resorting to such elaborate underground dwellings, determinative weight in explaining this building practice cannot be placed only on its environmental advantages.

In the last two chapters I developed the argument that communities of the highland during the late seventh century B.C. repudiated the technologies of the complex polity, or more specifically the draconian institutions of authority that the Urartian regime promulgated through its commanding and extractive hilltop fortresses. We saw this first with the introduction of the columned hall at Erebuni and the associated shift from vertical institutions of rule toward what I called congregational politics (chapter 4), and second with the distancing of settlements from locales once central to the Urartian political apparatus (chapter 5). It is in this context that we may understand the refounding of Tsaghkahovit in the late seventh century under new spatial logics, and the sociopolitics of the village’s underground dwellings. The decision to settle permanently in the mountains and submit to the challenges of severe winters and high-altitude agriculture was born, I submit, of an escape from the designs of sovereign states and the attendant institutions of surveillance and rule. It is noteworthy, in this regard, that the general location of the Tsaghkahovit settlement in the undulating terrain north of Mt. Aragats would have hidden it from view of north–south passing traffic across the plain. Seen in this context, the semi-subterranean complexes take on new meaning, as a kind of camouflage architecture that offered a solution to a collective concern for concealment. I am suggesting that the people of Tsaghkahovit, who came to the region at a time roughly coincident with the demise of Urartu, and there fashioned an underground lifeway in the protective embrace of the earth, did so, at least in part, to take shelter from the overbearing contrivances of extractive governments. It is not the case that the community cultivated a strict sense of isolation from the wider ecumene; too many artifacts point to Tsaghkahovit’s engagement with the cultural currencies of the mid-first millennium B.C.—a bronze snake-head bracelet, a
hinged iron fibula, the tang of an iron knife hilt, a bronze socketed trilobed point, and the proxies and delegate discussed below (figure 50a–d). But metaphorically and literally, the semi-subterranean architecture afforded the people of the village the opportunity to try to absent themselves from the reach of the state.

In so doing, they become beholden to new masters. What enabled a life of semi-subterranean living was a host of mundane but demanding material things. Building rooms required extensive earth removal and the quarrying, transportation, working, and stacking of large basalt blocks. Judging by our experience excavating these rooms, the mortarless stone walls would have required relentless attention, especially the retaining walls that were built against the hillsides. Retaining walls prevented down-slope movement and erosion, and depended on the weight of their mass to counter the lateral earth pressure imposed by the ridges into which they were built. They appear to be the most susceptible to caving and collapse. Building and maintaining the walls would have in turn required regular access to stonemason’s tools, such as the iron chisel and axe head buried under the floor of Room G (figure 50e–f), and the continuous transmission of specialized skills. Similarly, roofs would have called for regular, perhaps even annual,
upkeep, as heavy winter snows would take their toll on the earth, clay, and plaster materials, and eventually on the timber beams as well. In Hodder’s (2012: 17–18) terms (see chapter 3), semi-subterranean dwellings would have created constraining dependencies for those who came to live in them, locking people into regular and high-stake regimens of care. Given such dependency, it is little surprise that the Tsaghkahovit community continued to live in semi-subterranean shelters for centuries, well after Cyrus’s conquest of the highland in the mid-sixth century B.C. The day-to-day routine of going underground would have reproduced a sense of communal privacy and thus reinforced the very need to preserve such seclusion.

As a material apparatus of political evasion, Tsaghkahovit’s underground dwellings are consummate affiliates. As defined in chapter 3, affiliates are quotidian, inconspicuous things that reproduce social life under empire even as they preserve an inviolable space of experience within it. Affiliates fall beyond the gaze of sovereigns and satraps, and instead are bound in mutual dependencies with commoners caught up in imperial snares. Affiliates also maintain, deepen, and impel affective and practical ties to place, and to the community of human agents who collectively depend on them. As such, they make it possible to preserve difference, to retain an existence despite or alongside imperialism’s new “gifts.” Yet the work of affiliates is ambiguous. On the one hand they afford the practices of everyday life that make possible the exploitations of empire; on the other hand they preserve the possibility of a social existence once again unanswerable to distant sovereigns.

The assemblages of things that make up the earth-sheltered dwellings at Tsaghkahovit provide a clear instance of the work of affiliates in the making of satrapal conditions. Such things enabled a mode of life that had no bearing on the dependencies and concerns that preoccupied the sovereign establishment. These affiliates would have worked contrarily to preserve communal ties to the hills north of Mt. Aragats, and to retain a distinctive and autonomous existence. To the extent that this mode of life obtained in other regions of the dahyu, as the excavations at Beniamin and Xenophon’s account make plain, semi-subterranean affiliates may have created common affects of attachment to mountainous lifeways that could have cross-cut immediate group allegiances. Yet at the same time, Tsaghkahovit’s affiliate architecture sustained a community that was unmistakably bound to the institutions of empire, thanks to a diverse array of ceramic proxies and one very significant stone delegate. It is to these imperial things that we now turn.

PROXY POTS

In the archaeology of the Achaemenid Empire and Classical Greece, relationships between prototype and likeness, model and mimic have long revolved around pottery “imitations” of imperial metalwares. Three of the vessels that we encountered
in chapter 5 have come to occupy the center of these discussions, namely, the phiale, the deep “Achaemenid bowl,” and the rhyton (figures 29, p. 130, and 30, p. 131). These metal delegates generated ceramic translations across the empire and beyond, from Attic Greece, to Asia Minor, to South Asia (Dusinberre 1999, 2003, 2013; Hoffmann 1961; Miller 1993; Petrie et al. 2008). As substitutes, it is tempting to view such “copies” (or, as conceptualized here, proxies), as unproblematic enablers of the kinds of consumption practices for which the metal delegates are well known, albeit reproduced with greater modesty. Elsewhere I have called this the “emulation hypothesis” (Khatchadourian forthcoming), which holds that objects of formal resemblance separated by the sociopolitical inequities of their users index particular affective dispositions toward a polity. Held in the grip of these affects of desire are political subjects, intent to preserve or enhance their relative power through reference to the aesthetics and practices of the sovereign establishment. The axiom assumes voluntary compliance, acquiescence, and an earnest ambition of the subjugated to replicate material forms, because of both their inherent capacities to project fixed social values (that is, a capacity that resides in the symbol-laden object) and their capacities to enable imitative practices as symbolic devices.

At first glance, a corpus of pottery recovered from across the underground havens of Tsaghkahovit would seem to fit neatly into this prevailing perspective. However, as we shall see, when the materials are approached through the logics of the proxy as developed in chapter 3, an alternative to the emulation hypothesis emerges that recognizes the potential for proxies to erode the power of their delegates. To the best of my knowledge, while the size of the Tsaghkahovit collection is modest, the corpus is nevertheless unprecedented in the diversity of Achaemenid metal feasting paraphernalia on which it is modeled (extending beyond bowls and rhyta to include amphorae and other jars), in addition to the secure and detailed contextual information on each and every vessel in the assemblage. The Tsaghkahovit materials are thus well suited for a reevaluation of the doxic view on ceramic “copies.”

In general, ceramic production in the Iron 3 period at Tsaghkahovit was primarily a local enterprise. Instrumental neutron activation analysis (INAA) of 250 sherds covering all the major ceramic types from Iron 3 Tsaghkahovit has made it possible to identify the general location of clay sources that were exploited in the production of the pottery from the site. Seventy-nine percent of the sampled sherds trace to clay sources on the north slope of Mt. Aragats, while the clays of 7.2 percent of the sample match deposits in the vicinity of Gegharot or in the wider Pambak range, on the north side of the Tsaghkahovit Plain. Only 4.8 percent of the sample has chemical signatures that differ appreciably from those known from the Tsaghkahovit Plain, and these vessels are most probably foreign to the region. Caution is required when attempting to infer ceramic production technology from
visual and tactile examination of sherds alone (Roux and Courty 1995); however, several factors point to an “individual workshop” ceramic industry (Rice 2005: 184). Let us now turn to brief descriptions of the proxies in question.$^{31}$

**Bowls**

Red- and black-burnished bowls with everted concave rims are extremely common in the Tsaghkahovit corpus. Many are quite shallow (and thus belong to a wider Iron Age tradition—figure 51a–h), but some exhibit the depth of the typical “Achaemenid bowl” (figure 51i), also known from other sites in Armenia, like the collective tomb at Jrarart, in the Hrazdan valley (Tiratsyan 1964: fig. 5). A variety of Achaemenid metal bowl prototypes are recalled in the form of two black-burnished omphaloi recovered from the floor of Room H and a buried cache of Room G (figure 51j), as well as a black-burnished bowl with petals or lotus buds from Room I (figure 51k).$^{32}$ Despite its phiale-like petals, this latter bowl departs from the standard metal phiale in that the rim is not everted and concave, but tapers continuously off the axis of the body, a form for which, to my knowledge, there are few metal examples (Abka’i-Khavari 1988: fig. 1). Another black-burnished bowl, this one from the floor in Room AC, is distinguished for the incised parallel
vertical grooves (rounded in cross section) that surround the body (figure 51m). INAA indicates that the chemical composition of the fabric matches ceramic reference groups of the Tsaghkahovit Plain (Minc 2009), and is thus the product of a local workshop. The vessel can be compared to numerous Attic black-gloss wares, themselves modeled on Achaemenid metal bowls (Abka’i-Khavari 1988; Miller 1993; Simpson 2005: fig. 97; Treister 2010: fig. 7).

Animal-Handled Amphorae

Near a hearth in the northern corner of Room I, excavations uncovered fragments of two amphorae with leaping quadrupeds rendered in relief on the handles (figure 52). One (figure 52a) is sufficiently preserved to discern an overall quality of axial symmetry created by the correspondence between the height of the neck and its base diameter (both 10 cm). A narrow relief rib marks the transition between the neck and shoulder. A bowed handle, circular in section, joins the vessel at the top of the rim and the top of the shoulder. The vessel’s orange-red exterior is slipped and burnished. Prolonged firing in an oxidizing atmosphere, high temperatures, and fine grain size account for the striking hardness of the fabric. Adorning the one preserved handle in low relief are three highly stylized anatomical elements of a four-legged mammal likely created during the leather-hard state through either a process of clay surface displacement, like planorelief carving, or applique surface addition joined by a fluid clay slurry or slip (Rice 2005: 146–148). The animal is depicted in profile. The lowest of the three linear components extends down the handle toward the shoulder and represents the beast’s hind limbs, whose terminus is either fragmented or abraded to a lower plane, and may have consisted of a hoof-like element. Attached to the hind leg is a second straight element that stands in for the beast’s minimal, diagrammatic body. This element is fragmented at the top, as is the third and shortest element, which parallels the second and appears to represent the beast’s flexed forelimb, tucked tightly beneath the body. The knee joint meets the vessel at the rim. The animal is, in other words, facing the vessel in mid-leap. The vessel likely had a second symmetrical zoomorphic handle, now lost. INAA indicates that the chemical composition of the fabric does not match any of the ceramic reference groups of the Tsaghkahovit Plain (Minc 2009). The vessel is statistically an outlier, and thus an import, though its place of origin remains unknown.

In the case of the second zoomorphic amphora (figure 52b), preserved after restoration are parts of the rim and thin-walled neck, as well as the upper part of a spouted (or “beaked”) handle, which is hollow and circular in section. The spout’s opening is fragmented, but the orientation of the orifice in relation to the horizontal plane of the top of the handle suggests that it extended outward, perpendicular to the axis of the vessel. Projecting vertically off the rim of the
Figure 52. Ceramic amphorae with zoomorphic handles from Room I (courtesy of Project ArAGATS, created by Vram Hakobyan and Lori Khatchadourian).

vessel where it meets the handle is a protrusion, semi-triangular in profile, which tapers toward the vessel's interior. Surfaces are slipped and burnished red on both exterior and interior. Straddling both sides of the spouted handle are linear relief elements that depict, once again, the legs of a leaping quadruped, created with the same technique of either displacement or applique. The limbs terminate through a gradual lowering of the plane of relief, without any apparent delineation of
hoofs. They appear to be the beast’s forelimbs (radii and metapodials), and the vertical projection on the rim its neck, providing the overall impression that the animal is meant to be leaping out of the vessel. The vessel’s second handle (likely not spouted, but also zoomorphic) is not preserved. The similarities in technical execution of the relief decoration, overall vessel morphology, and surface treatment suggest that the two pots were made by the same workshop or potting community, if not the same hand. Indeed, INAA indicates that the fabric of this amphora chemically matches that of the previous vessel. It is thus also an import from the same unidentified source. The overall body form of both animal-handled vessels likely resembled the vessel from neighboring Room H (figure 53a). A third spouted amphora with zoomorphic handles is strongly suggested by the
elongated tubular black-burnished spout and fragmentary zoomorphic sherd with the same fabric and surface treatments, both found together in Room H (figure 54). These vessels are similar in form and concept to the provenanced and unprovenanced silver zoomorphic amphorae discussed in the previous chapter as active participants at the Achaemenid royal table (see p. 131). The most securely dated objects of comparison are the amphorae that the Armenian and Lydian delegates carry on the eastern staircase façade of the Apadana (figure 10, p. 20), with composite animals on their handles, rendered through a combination of low relief and modeling. The relief elements include the bodies, wings, and extended hind legs of the beasts, while the tightly tucked forelegs are formed as if in three dimensions, in such a way that the joints of the bent legs meet the vessel rim. Rising above the top of the vessel are the rear-facing heads of griffins (in the case of the Armenian’s vessel) and bulls (in the case of the Lydian’s two vessels). Projecting perpendicularly from one of the handles of each vessel is a spout. The Tsaghkahovit ceramic variants of course differ in their material composition and the highly minimal anatomical elaboration of the animals. But there can be little doubt that the potters who made these vessels had the metal vessels in mind.

Also belonging to the category of zoomorphic-handled pitchers (possible amphorae) is a collection of five handle fragments, three from the floors in Rooms G, H, and S, and two from above the floors in Rooms AC and H (figure 55). The
most striking example is an animal-spout that takes the form of a bull’s head (figure 56). This black-burnished fragment (its surface treatment no doubt meant to invoke the sheen of silver) belonged to a ceramic jar. The animal has two flaring nostrils on the muzzle, and two incised arcs above the eyes. These few details suffice to recognize the direct iconographic parallels with stylized bull imagery from the Achaemenid heartland, most notably the double-bull’s-head capitals that supported the roof beams of the columned halls (figure 57). As Root (2002: 197–198) has noted, bulls figure prominently in Achaemenid art, not only as symbols of royal power, strength, and fertility (as they do in the art of earlier Near Eastern polities—figure 2, p. xxiv), but also as symbols of purity linked to Mazdean belief, in which the bovines held pride of place as the first animals of creation (see p. 12). Apart from the bull spout, the remaining zoomorphic handle fragments are more stylized, appearing to depict the face or head of an animal, in one case with possible horns. Trace-element analyses on these other examples suggest that none are clear imports.\textsuperscript{35} To my knowledge, there are few if any ceramic parallels for the zoomorphic amphorae from Tsaghkahovit.\textsuperscript{36}

Moving to other jar forms, five vessels from various rooms of the settlement (in both Precincts A and C) have circumferential vertical fluting that creates a series of alternating protrusions and depressions. Three of the examples have
lustrous black or dark-gray burnished exterior surfaces (figure 53c–d, p. 175). Three of the five are definite products of local workshops, firmly linked to the clay sources on the northern slope of Mt. Aragats (the remaining two have not been analyzed). Dark-burnished vertically fluted vessels like those from Tsagkhakovit find few ceramic parallels (Carter 1994: fig. 14.14), but are similar to the vessels carried by the Apadana’s Lydian delegation, as well as provenanced and unprovenanced silver amphorae and goblets (e.g. Amandry 1959; Özgen and Öztürk 1996: fig. 65–66; Treister 2007, 2010), including the Erebusi goblet rhyton (figures 10, p. 20, and 29, p. 130).

One last jar or amphora sherd is worthy of note (figure 58). The vessel was found on the floor of Room AC. Its surfaces are modeled with several distinctive decorative attributes. Horizontal fluting encircles the vessel’s neck, of which two thin arrises and one and a half individual flutes are preserved. A series of petals or lotus buds bulge on the shoulder, forged through a combination of grooving and pressure on the vessel interior. The adjacency of the petals is interrupted at one point where a handle would have joined the shoulder, suggested by the circular spall (another non-joining sherd is similarly spalled, where a second handle was affixed). And finally, widely spaced on the vessel body are a number of slightly arced, nearly vertical, elongated relief lobes created as if through the upward stroke
Figure 57. Restored bull capital from Persepolis (courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago).

Figure 58. Ceramic two-handled vessel from Room AC with horizontally fluted neck, petaled shoulder, and vertical lobes on body (courtesy of Project ArAGATS, photography by Vram Hakobyan).
of a thumb on the vessel’s interior.\textsuperscript{37} Each of these features occurs separately on Achaemenid metal bowls and jars, but to my knowledge they do not co-occur on any individual vessel in the known delegate assemblage. INAA results are inconclusive, providing a possible link to the northern Aragats clay sources.

**Zoomorphic Rhyta**

Two red-burnished vessels of this type have been recovered to date, one from the southern quadrant of the floor in Room H and the other in an alluvial deposit of Room N (figure 59). The former, substantially restored, reveals the rear, body, legs, and horn of a recumbent animal whose portly body bears down on its legs, each with precisely rendered joints and hoofs. The horn arcs across part of the animal’s upper body, marking it as a goat or ibex. The vessel’s overall form is uncertain, but the positioning of a recumbent animal at the base of a restricted vessel base is immediately reminiscent of the metal rhyton, even as certain details of the vessel make it quite unlike any specific metal delegate.\textsuperscript{38} INAA results on the fragmentary, unrestored specimen are inconclusive, providing a possible link to the northern Aragats clay sources.

* * *
Like all proxies, the Tsaghkahovit vessels reviewed above are things that palpably stand in for other things, specifically some of the most distinctive and powerful Achaemenid delegates, the indispensable objects of the feast. And as with all acts of mimesis, the sharing in the power of the represented also results in its dilution. Such dilution emerges specifically from the opportunities for slippage that I defined in chapter 3 as conditions for the realization of unruly or rogue proxies. These opportunities derive from the material properties of the proxies and the broader assemblages with which they commingle, each of which is now addressed in turn.

Proxy Matter

Unlike the silver of the delegate vessels, clay was not a substance that imperial agents cared for or regulated on an empire-wide scale as a necessity of political reproduction. Indeed, while it may well be apocryphal, the Greek historian Ctesias reports that the Persian king reserved clay vessels for those who did not merit his high regard (Ath. XI.464a, cited in Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1989: 133). The clay of the Tsaghkahovit vessels was in almost all cases locally extracted and worked, with the exception of the zoomorphic-handled amphorae, whose place of manufacture is unknown. Entailed in their production were local webs of extraction and relations of human–material reliance.

The differing relational properties of delegates and proxies between their chemical composition and the human groups they entrap gives rise to a constitutional potentiality for proxies to bend the rules. This possibility begins at the very point of production. In chapter 3 I discussed Ingold’s suggestion that materials engage their makers, a refutation of the notion that human artisans autonomously control the outputs of their craft, without any “say” on the part of the materials themselves. Since the ceramic proxies are made up of different materials from their delegates, their properties press themselves on their makers during the form-generating process in different ways, in turn producing forms that will differ, to greater or lesser degrees, regardless of the precision of the craftsperson’s template. The maker of the proxy has in mind a design, but the clay material does not follow blueprints or dictates, governed as it is by its own movements and tolerances. It is thus both the properties of the materials and the designs of the makers that account for the formal variance between delegates and proxies. Proxies are very rarely really copies after all, or at least not “faithful” copies (Taussig 1993: 52). The formal dissimilarity between delegates and proxies that can result from working with materials with significantly differing characteristics is in part what invites the possibility for roguery. It precludes the possibility of successful emulation, and, as we shall see, it can support efforts at makeshift creativity.

The clay medium of the vessels from Tsaghkahovit both forced and invited various departures in the form-generating process from the delegate template.
In the case of the zoomorphic amphorae, I have already noted the conspicuously minimalist rendering of the leaping animals, in contrast to the detailed renditions found on the metal vessels. To be sure, the use of relief rather than incision or paint to render the beasts’ bodies on the proxies bespeaks an effort to attain the modeled dimensionality of the toreutics, while the thin walls and red-burnished surfaces afford a delicacy and luster akin to the metal variants. But the plastic medium of clay simply would not permit the modeling of anatomical precision similar to what can be achieved with metal.

It is perhaps this unavoidable deviation from the metal delegate form, occasioned by the material medium itself, that opened the possibility for other forms of experimentation. With regard to the zoomorphic amphorae, for instance, the spouted vessel is most peculiar in the way the beast’s forelegs, loosely flexed at the knee, clearly face outward from the vessel. This is a complete reversal of the delegate’s form, in which tightly tucked forelegs always face the vessel, the knee joining at the rim. I suggest that the potter was here deliberately taking liberties, for which the clay itself created the conditions of possibility.

Other examples of experimentation that “play” on metal delegates include the “composite” jar from the floor of Room AC (figure 58, p. 179), with its horizontal flutes, petaled shoulder, and haphazard vertical lobes on the body. The vessel brings together a number of elements from Achaemenid metalware to ultimately novel effect. In making such a composite, the potter once again appears to have been exercising creativity that the commonplace, unregulated, plastic material of clay made possible. We might also see experimentation at work in the unusual Tsaghkahovit rhyton (figure 59, p. 182), for which close metal or ceramic parallels have also yet to be found (but see Moorey 1980: 24.568). A fourth and final example of “play” is the bull’s-head animal spout (figure 56, p. 178). Spouted bulls’ heads do not occur on Achaemenid zoomorphic metal jars, whose spouts are always simple linear projections that emerge horizontally from the animal’s body (figures 10, p. 20, and 54, p. 176). In this way the Tsaghkahovit vessel is at once both derivative and deviant. In concept and color, it clearly stood in for the classic metal animal-handled amphorae, and drew on Achaemenid bull imagery. And yet, measured against the corpus of delegates, the bull-spouted jar likely also would have appeared aberrant, anomalous, out of step.

To be sure, the divergences from Achaemenid metal delegates in part emerge from the creative intentions of the potters (in almost all cases local inhabitants of the plain) to, quite literally, take matter into their own hands and explore, through the medium of clay, subtle twists that nevertheless kept their craft within the bounds of Achaemenid styles. But I am also suggesting that the clay itself invited such manipulations, that the material opened the possibility of stretching the rules of the canon, and doing so at very low stakes, given the ubiquity of the material and its triviality compared to the strictly regulated silver. It is in this regard particularly
notable how casually, if not carelessly, some of the proxies appear to have been produced, against the standards of Tsaghkahovit’s own finewares. For example, apart from the bull protome, the other protomes are featureless in their execution; the grooved bowl (figure 51m, p. 172) is thick-walled and poorly polished compared to other serving and consumption vessels from the site; and the broadly spaced grooves of the “composite” vessel (figure 58, p. 179) appear hastily rendered with the stroke of a finger or tool, resulting in slightly arced elements, rather than the tightly adjacent linear grooves that would be expected of a metal delegate’s proper proxy. In terms of their formal properties, then, some of the proxies are products of an artisan-like inventiveness that stems in part from their material constitution. In some cases they conform to the basic form-concept of the delegates but dispense with those essential qualities of exactitude and elegance that make the latter objects of social distinction and the political sublime. In other cases, the proxies poach on the delegate through inversion, recombination, selective conformity—all of which can signal and enable the “plays,” “ruses,” or “ironies” of Certeauean tactics (see chapter 3, p. 72).

Proxy Assemblage

A second opportunity for unruliness defined in chapter 3 can stem from the company that proxies keep, which is to say the immediate assemblage of things with which they collaborate in the production of social life. Proxies make a difference in the world through their cooperation in object assemblages usually made up primarily of other nondelegates. All of the ceramic proxies from the modest underground havens at Tsaghkahovit mingled with a vast array of mundane affiliates—animal troughs and hearths, grindstones and cooking pots, bone and obsidian tools. Taking only the example of the amphorae, these most intriguing of the Tsaghkahovit proxies were recovered from one of the more clearly work-a-day spaces of Precinct A. Room I is a particularly prominent room in the complex. It is centrally located, afforded direct access to the outdoor courtyard (Area K), and contained a number of features indicative of large-scale food processing and preparation, from multiple grinding stations to a distinctive large hearth (figures 49, p. 166). While many other features in this room are functionally uncertain, they point to an area of intensive activity with high traffic flows, likely including livestock. This is a room whose faunal and botanical remains provide no compelling evidence for feasting, no evidence for marked consumption that would suggest the practices with which the silver delegates are associated. We are of course dealing with the partial evidence from a peaceably abandoned complex. But the spatial context, internal features, and extant remains nevertheless produced a rather unmistakably quotidian workspace of which the ceramic proxy amphorae were just one part.
By virtue of the wider assemblage to which they (and other ceramic proxies) belonged, these vessels were invariably more shallowly entangled in the work of safeguarding the Achaemenid project than their delegate partners. That is, against the context of Tsaghkahovit’s underground dwellings, it is rather unlikely that the user who seized the handles of the zoomorphic amphorae partook of the semiotic transfigurations that, as discussed in the previous chapter, rendered him a “Persian Man” (see p. 140). Instead, I propose that proxies such as these invited the playful manipulation of Achaemenid concepts and the loosening of the conventions of use that otherwise surrounded the metal delegates. The kind of imperial subject that such proxies helped forge was an ambiguous one—enlisted to have a hand in the practical affordances and symbolic resonances of the empire, and at the same time, under pressure from a host of relentlessly banal objects and spaces, provoked to redefine intended purposes and meanings. While the proxy amphorae represent their delegate partners, they also diminish their powers through the ordinary company they keep.

The possibility for earnest efforts at emulation cannot, of course, be entirely foreclosed. But close contextual and material analysis of the Tsaghkahovit proxies instead points to a field of human–thing interaction geared toward the minuscule procedures of “making do,” whose effects, as Certeau realized, dilute in small
measure the solidity of the dominant social order. The efforts that concern proxies are reducible to neither resistance nor conformity. Rather, they amount to what Alexei Yurchak (2006: 28), writing in a very different context, has called “minute internal displacements and mutations” that “do not have to contradict the political and ethical parameters of the system and, importantly, may even allow one to preserve the possibilities, promises, positive ideals, and ethical values of the system while avoiding the negative . . . constraints within which these are articulated.” The proxies at Tsaghkahovit were not contrarian, not discernibly defiant of, say, onerous demands for tribute or troops. And they may well have held open the possibility of preserving the promises and values of their delegates. On present evidence, however, their efficacy in creating imperial subjectivities can best be described as partial, as they, along with their makers and users, sometimes worked tactically as bricoleurs to allow conformity that evades, escape without leaving. Such are the workings of the conditionals of sovereignty that define the satrapal condition.

A STONE DELEGATE AND THE DIVINE

And yet imperial matter is not to be underestimated, for sometimes delegates insinuate themselves into the most unlikely places. Room G in Precinct A is an exceptionally unique space. In this small room there is no flagstone floor, no storage receptacle, no hearth or any other of the internal features found elsewhere across the settlement (figure 44, p. 162). In the northwestern side of the room, approximately two meters from the threshold, a large jar was deposited beneath the floor, its dark gray ashy contents suggestive of a cremation burial. In the southern corner, also buried under the floor in an otherwise sterile clay matrix, was a collection of iron stonemason’s tools—chisel and axe head (figure 50e–f, p. 169)—accompanied by a set of matching painted bowls and the black-polished omphalos (figure 51j, p. 172)—perhaps the curated objects from a work feast. This room, a repository of cached memories, is located relatively deep in the Precinct A complex, accessible only by passing through two other rooms.

In situ on the floor of Room G was an unusual assemblage of objects (figure 61). Half of a smashed footless green stone plate lay centimeters away from a ceramic, hourglass-shaped stand, whose diameter is only one centimeter larger than the diameter of the base of the plate (figures 62 and 63). The plate, as we shall see, has secure and well-known comparanda, but the matching ceramic stand is, to the best of my knowledge, without known parallels. A small fragment of a second stone vessel appears to be an open spout decorated with a linear incision. The possible spout is too small to definitively associate with any known vessel forms, but the very presence of an incised stone vessel in the same context as the serpentine plate is itself notable given that no other certain stone vessels have been found at the site to date. Just centimeters away from the ceramic stand lay a basalt mortar,
while a second, unusually well-made mortar was recovered from elsewhere in the same room (figure 64). Relatively small mortars such as these are exceptionally rare in the Tsaghkahovit lithic corpus \((n = 4)\), compared to other types of grindstones \((n = 47)\), and thus the presence of two in the same small room is noteworthy. Strewn amid these artifacts were fragments of large storage jars, and carinated and uncarinated bowls, along with a fine red-polished jug (figure 53b, p. 175) with a one-of-a-kind ornamented handle.

It is the stone plate (figure 62) that calls for sustained attention. The plate has a slightly protruding base in the shape of a flat disk, and a shallow, convex body leading continuously to a square rim. The vessel’s highly polished surfaces have the characteristic greenish mottled appearance of some serpentines, and indeed, mineralogical, chemical, and petrographic analysis conducted by Arkadi Karakhanyan and colleagues, of Armenia’s Institute of Geological Sciences, confirmed this attribution. Serpentine deposits exist in the South Caucasus, in the Shahdag or Sevan mountain range (northeast of Lake Sevan), as well as in the Zagros and Elbrus ranges. The specific mineralogical composition of the Tsaghkahovit plate, which is chrysotile with enstatite-pyroxene inclusions, points most probably to a source in the Zagros Mountains of western Iran.

Figure 61. Artifacts on the floor of Room G (author’s photographs).
The closest parallels for the Tsaghkahovit serpentine plate are to be found in the abundant corpus of green stone plates discovered in the Treasury at Persepolis (Schmidt 1957: 53–59, 89). The comparable Persepolis plates are made of green stone—veined chert or green-and-black mottled serpentine. Nearly 300 chert and serpentine footless plates were found scattered in the northern halls of the Treasury.
particularly Halls 38 and 41), and of these, 263 have plain square rims that make them morphologically nearly identical to the Tsaghkahovit plate (figure 65). All of the plates vary only slightly in size, and the Tsaghkahovit plate fits within the standard diameter range. The majority of the chert plates from Persepolis were ink-inscribed on the base exterior in Aramaic (Schmidt 1957: 55). Only one of the 270 serpentine specimens carries an inscription (91, table VIII). Until now, sourcing analysis has not been performed on the serpentine plates from Persepolis. Nevertheless, the Tsaghkahovit plate is quite clearly an import, likely from the imperial heartland, which probably reached the village through a number of down-the-line exchanges that at one point involved privileged imperial actors.

It is possible to propose an approximate date for the serpentine plate from Tsaghkahovit based on the dating of the inscribed vessels at the Treasury at Persepolis that co-occur with the comparable vessels. The inscriptions point to a pattern of activity surrounding these plates occurring especially during the reign of Xerxes (486–465 B.C.) and Artaxerxes I (465–424/3 B.C.). I thus propose that the Tsaghkahovit plate was made no earlier than the reign of Xerxes. Therefore, the activity implied by the complex of in situ artifacts on the floor of Room G occurred some time after 486 B.C. This is the most conservative estimate. The Tsaghkahovit plate is among the few serpentine vessels directly comparable to those found in the Treasury at Persepolis that archaeologists have uncovered through systematic excavations. It is also a rare example (if not the first) of a footless serpentine plate

**Figure 65.** Chert and serpentine footless plates: a. chert plate from Treasury at Persepolis, diameter 20.4 cm (Schmidt 1957: Pl. 24.23); b. serpentine plate from Treasury at Persepolis, diameter 21.6 cm (Schmidt 1957: Pl. 59.57); c. serpentine plate from Tsaghkahovit, diameter 20.5 cm.
excavated outside the imperial heartland and found on a floor, in a use context with associated artifacts.44

The serpentine plate is the only delegate thus far discovered at Tsaghkahovit, and the objects with which it occurs combine to suggest a rather effective assemblage that helped to create satrapal conditions of subjection in this semi-subterranean village. It will be recalled that imperial things are delegates with “thing power” (Bennett 2010) when imperial agents are dependent on the physical materials from which they are made, and when such “contingent reliance” on matter (Hodder 2012: 17–18) leads to the control over extraction, or the regulation of flows, or the imposition of standards, or the specialization of skills (chapter 3). We have already seen that the Achaemenid court coveted and cared for vessels of green stone, particularly serpentine, and while it is unclear how the Achaemenids regulated the flows of this particular material and the labor that surrounded green-stone manufacturing, the accumulation and sequestering of chert and serpentine vessels in the Treasury and their comparability of form suggest considerable investment in controlling the transfers of the green-stone materials and the skills entailed in working them.

The plate is also a delegate because it afforded, through direct somatic encounter, a practice that was relevant to the underlying values of the Achaemenid politico-religious project, and thus to the reproduction of the sovereign’s prerogative to rule. The plate did this in partnership with the other things found alongside it on the floor of Room G, and indeed in collaboration with the wider assemblage of green plates and associated objects in Persepolis. The case to be made here is complicated, and rests on the existence of an enigmatic concentration of 97 green chert mortars and 80 pestles alongside the chert and serpentine plates in the Treasury (Schmidt 1957: 55). The plates, mortars, and pestles were likely used in sets (Cahill 1985: 382), making the presence of mortars in the Room G assemblage no mere coincidence. The sets appear to have been involved in a religious rite that entailed crushing a plant with a mortar and pestle and the consumption of the resulting substance with a footless plate. A number of seals and seal impressions depict mortars and pestles in association with a fire altar.45 In one instance, the mortar and pestle are held in a figure’s hands (Curtis and Tallis 2005: no. 200), while in two other cases the objects are shown on a low stand placed beneath the god Ahuramazda in a winged disk (figure 66). At least two, and possibly three, of these glyptic examples also show a flat plate in the hand of one of the figures (figure 67; Boardman 2000: fig. 5.31; Moorey 1979: fig. 3A). It is generally accepted that the seals with mortars and pestles depict a ritual ceremony linked to fire and the patron deity of the empire; the presence of the plates on the Gordion seal, coupled with the physical association of plates with mortars and pestles in the Treasury, gives good grounds to argue that the footless plates also figured in this rite.
Figure 66. Impression of a seal from Persepolis (no. 20) showing two figures on either side of a fire altar (holding sticks, possibly haoma twigs) and a stand on which rests a mortar and pestle (source: Schmidt 1957: pl. 7, courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago).

The precise nature of the rite remains uncertain. Many scholars agree that it likely involved the crushing of a hallucinogenic plant or flower, called haoma (Bowman 1970: 6–15; Cahill 1985: 382; Razmjou 2005: 153; Root 2015: 26; Schmidt 1957: 55). Complications arise, however, because the details of the ceremony are known to us from later, codified Avestan religion (and Vedic materials), in which the haoma (or soma) ritual involves the crushing of a plant and the combination of the resulting juices with another liquid to create a sacred drink with psychotropic effects (Malandra 1983: 150–158). The Avestan rite required plates, mortars, and pestles, and the stems or stalks of an unknown plant. With regard to the latter, it is notable that on at least two of the Achaemenid seal impressions a figure appears to be carrying a twig or twigs.

The parallels between the rite known from Avestan religion and the combination of implements found in the Treasury and depicted on the seals are unmistakable. It
is of further significance that the vessels, both chert and serpentine, are green, and the word for “green” is linguistically linked in Iranian languages to Vedic *soma* and Avestan *haoma* (Rossi 2006: 462, cited in Root 2015: 2026). Moreover, it is quite clear that the word *hauma* (as it appears in Old Persian) was already in use in the fifth century B.C., and it may have had religious connotations even then. However, the details of the rite and indeed its very name are provided by later sources. It would be anachronistic to assume that the ceremony occurred in the same way, and with the same meanings, during the period of the Achaemenids as it did in later times. And it would be contrary to reason to entirely dismiss the correspondences that would suggest that the chert plates, mortars, and pestles were used in a religious rite, perhaps involving the juices of a plant. To date, no alternative interpretation for the practice involving these objects has been put forward.

Let us return, then, to Room G at Tsaghkahovit, with its serpentine plate, basalt mortars, ceramic stand, stone vessel fragment, and ceramics. I have already noted the rarity of mortars at Tsaghkahovit, and while one of those recovered from Room G is unremarkable, the other is strikingly well made compared to all other grindstones from the site, suggesting that it served a special purpose. As to the one-of-a-kind stand, its association with the plate is beyond doubt. Morphologically, the stand does not correspond with any other stands in earlier phases of the archaeology of the Caucasus. I note only in passing that the symmetrical hourglass profile of the stand, with squared-off top and bottom surfaces, broadly mirrors that of the altars with stepped top and base that are depicted on some Achaemenid seals.
and on the royal tomb facades at Naqsh-i Rustam (figure 6, p. 8), one of which was recovered in fragments at Pasargadae (Stronach 1978: 141). In sum, the Achaemenid religious rite involving footless plates, mortars, and altars and/or stands that would have taken place in the imperial heartland also appears to have taken place at Tsaghkahovit. Given the apparently primary deposition of the plate, stand, and mortar on the floor of Room G, it is possible that we are seeing the remains of a final enactment of the ritual before the site's abandonment.

Whether observed by many at Tsaghkahovit or restricted to a privileged few, the serpentine plate and associated objects would have reaffirmed the social status of the actors involved in this rarified rite. The delegate and associated things (like the basalt mortar proxy) may have conferred legitimacy on the local leaders in Precinct A, a legitimacy perhaps derived in part from religious authority. The precise social position of the celebrants eludes us. While the haoma-crushing ceremony is usually associated with priestly individuals (the Median maji), Boyce (1982: 147) and Bowman (1970: 7, 15) have suggested that laymen or military commanders belonging to a warrior class could have conducted the rite. It is possible that social boundaries between political, military, and priestly roles were blurred at Tsaghkahovit, precisely through practices like the religious ritual implied by the artifacts in Room G. The combination of artifacts on the floor on this room suggests that certain individuals at Tsaghkahovit had privileged access to what may have been rather esoteric kinds of knowledge. In reinforcing that privileged access by conducting the ritual, these actors would have reproduced their positions as political/religious leaders in their community.

At the same time, the serpentine delegate and its human users would also have reproduced, in small measure, the prescribed rules of a single religious and political institution of the empire. While the specific meaning of the ritual in the Achaemenid context remains uncertain, the link between the green-stone vessels (especially those of chert, but I have suggested those of serpentine as well) and Ahuramazda, the divine guarantor of the Persian realm, is not, judging by the glyptic evidence. The delegate at Tsaghkahovit made its own difference in this community. It called for a ritual stand; it called for a mortar (and a pestle now lost); and it called things into a new entanglement that was closely bound up in the metaphysics of imperial sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that in one mountain village of the Achaemenid highland, architectural affiliates and ceramic proxies established the limits of subjectivation, working with human users to define and preserve an autonomous existence under empire. And yet, I concluded with a material delegate and associated things from Room G that pointed to the very opposite phenomenon—an
assemblage that helped create satrapal conditions of subjection even in this remote corner of the realm. In this way, the findings from Tsaghkahovit speak directly to the paradox at the heart of imperial sovereignty: that it is only possible if it is partial; that it is grounded in an irreconcilable tension between practices that at once erode and buttress a sovereign’s prerogative. We saw in chapter 5 that the Achaemenid kings were nothing but self-assured in their claims to hold sway over Armenia. And while several lines of evidence from Tsaghkahovit and the wider highland have revealed the frailty of those royal assertions, the delegate assemblage belonging to an occult imperial practice that took place in a dark semi-subterranean room of a secluded mountain village forces the recognition that the only folly as great as accepting the truth of the stories sovereigns tell about themselves is dismissing those stories as false.