

News & Notes

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ARCHEOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS IN IRAN AND SYRIA, 1972-1973

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The gendarme stood in the middle of the dusty road to Farrashband, tall, with a great mustache, speaking with some farmers. He motioned to me to stop and I slowed the motorcycle until I was a few feet from him; I began to introduce myself. . .

—You're the archeologist we were telegraphed about, he began, where is your party?

—I am alone, I answered.

—Alone? Where is your landrover, your equipment?

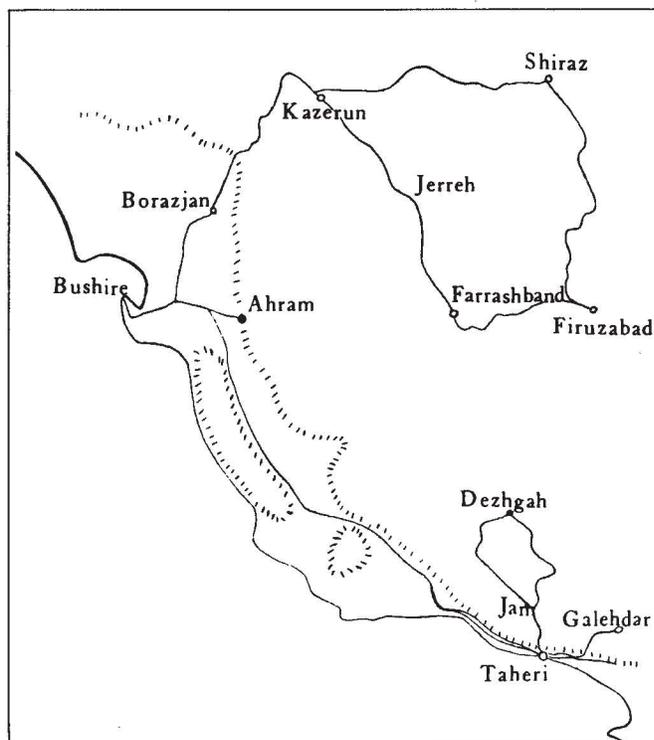
—I have only this cycle and these saddlebags.

—You are an American archeologist? Well, come . . . come along with me.

He leapt on the back seat, much as one leaps on a horse, and we went on down the road until the gendarmery post appeared in view. The post was a small fort, brightly white-washed with square towers and crenelated ramparts, the Iranian flag hanging in the still, hot air. The image of a Foreign Legion post was almost too real. This was to be my base and home for the next week as I surveyed the valley for archeological sites.

Farrashband is one of several valleys in Fars Province in southern Iran where I intended to examine the ancient remains in a somewhat unorthodox, if not eccentric, manner. The scene at Farrashband was typical: the gendarmery post lay up against a rocky and barren mountain rising abruptly out of the flat plain. The plain was likewise barren where this year's wheat had not been planted and had almost reverted back to emptiness as the harvest was almost finished. It was June and hot and dry. Around the fort and edging the mountain was a narrow margin of palm groves and occasionally some small citrus orchards. Nothing moved until evening when cattle and goats appeared and the village leapt to life. In Farrashband, the mud-brick houses are clustered on the edge of the groves, but this is a town and regional center and a straight road cuts

Maps of the regions surveyed in southern Fars province and on the Persian Gulf coast in Iran



through the settlement lined with neat new shops full of goods from the city of Shiraz; on another street are found the health clinic and other government buildings and an electric generator, tempermental but trying to adjust to the heat of the evenings.

This valley and the valley of Kazerun connected the two regional capitals of Sassanid Iran (250-600 A.D.), Firuzabad (Gur) and Bishapur. Both valleys lie about half-way between the Persian Gulf and the city of Shiraz on the high plateau of Iran. From the Sassanian and more especially the early Islamic period have come the first records pointing to a lively sea trade, by which the interior of Iran was brought into contact with products from Egypt and China passing through the Persian Gulf. We also hear the first accounts of nomad tribes, their power and participation in the civilization of southern Iran, but the records lack details of the culture of this region, its settlements, trade routes, and its resources. The region is a composite of high, rugged mountains and small valleys, almost all of which are totally unexplored by persons interested in the cultural geography and archeology of the area. This difficult topography led me to attempt a survey using a motorcycle. In each valley I lived in a central village, relying upon the local inhabitants for information and hospitality, neither of which was ever lacking.

In the Kazerun and Farrashband valleys the most ancient remains are a few prehistoric mounds of the Chalcolithic period. These mounds have a distinctive painted buff ware similar to the middle Susiana in southwestern Iran and Tall-e Mushki on the plateau near Shiraz. Near Lake Famur is a rock shelter with a Neolithic aceramic assemblage. Most of the mounds in the valley appear to date much later, however; there is little indication of extensive occupation until the Sassanian period and a majority of sites appear to be early Islamic (600-1200 A.D.). The valley has a series of Sassanian monuments called *chahar taqs*. These have been carefully studied by Vanden Berghe, who attributes many of them to the vizier Mehr Narse who lived ca. 430 A.D. These buildings, which might have been fire temples, may stand isolated, consisting of four (*chahar*) high parabolic arches (*taq*) surmounted by a high dome, or they may be incorporated in a large complex of rooms and corridors. Both the style and building techniques are very distinctive, far more so than the pottery (which serves to identify the periods) found on the mounds both large and small.

Particularly intriguing is the Tul-e Khandaq type of mound. A *khandaq* is a moat and these mounds are circular with a 50 meter wide moat protecting them. The mounds are usually 10-15 meters high but, in contrast to occupational mounds, the inside is hollow, both flat and empty, over 100 meters across. Mr. Sarfaraz of the Archeological Research Center in Teheran has suggested that these are a type of Sassanian monuments of religious character, but they seem to me more on the order of corrals and defensive in nature, always placed to dominate part of the valley. Almost no diagnostic pottery is found, but one Tul-e Khandaq has strong storerooms outside the moat which appear Sassanian or even Achaemenian. Although mostly confined to the highlands, a mound of this type was found near Borazjan on the coast.

Through the help of Mr. Yasi, who is in charge of the archeological survey of the Persian Gulf, I received permission to survey parts of the Persian Gulf coast; this provided valuable comparative material on the types and distribution of sites on the littoral. The region around Borzajan and Ahram differs dramatically from the highland valleys. Here the small villages of the littoral plain are set



The chahar taq near Jerreh



The Tul-e Khandaq near Borazjan



Tul-e Dowlatabad in the Dezhgah valley

against the massive curtain of the mountain ranges and become lost in dense forests of date palms. Often only foot paths and "log bridges" run through this forest and one cannot see a mound until almost on top of it; here the cycle proved ideal, if risky, transportation. Most mounds were Islamic in date and probably only the more substantial survived the constant waterlogging and cultivation. The prize however lay at the edge of the groves where a great city of the early Islamic period stretched along the river. This was almost certainly the ancient Tawwaj, famous for its woven goods and as a trade center, connecting the ports of the gulf with the cities of the plateau.

I had the opportunity of further exploring this problem of the relationship of the early Islamic ports with the highlands. I began at the British excavations at Siraf (the modern Bandar Taheri) under the direction of Dr. David Whitehouse. Siraf was perhaps the largest port on the Persian Gulf in the eighth to eleventh centuries A.D. and an emporium of goods from as far as Africa and China. The excavations in this ancient port have turned up a wealth of information on the very early mosque, the sumptuous merchants' houses, the bazaar, and the tomb towers, as well as a fortified enclosure of probably Sassanian date. The medieval geographers, when describing this city, state that water and food came from the mountains of Jam. I was asked to lead a series of reconnaissances to this highland valley and another called Galehdar and investigate the remains in the valleys and the caravan routes connecting them with the port.

The route to Jam was, in the modern sense, better than an improved road; the merchants had created an early expressway. We found stretches of carefully paved roadbed, post houses with cisterns at regular intervals, and small caravanserais. Even with these conveniences the mountains are quite formidable. The great British agent and traveler, Sir Arnold Wilson, described his trip from Jam to the coast as the worst he could remember; the track "... was atrocious: only once did we pass a tiny spring: the rock was so hot that one could not put one's bare hand upon it. I had to walk all the way up, some 2,000 feet and down some 5,000 feet." And yet it was across this route that all of the ancient port's fruit and vegetables came, that the expensive Chinese porcelains and other exotic goods came to Shiraz and southern Iran, and that the Sirafi merchants themselves endured so they could spend a quiet cool summer in these pleasant little valleys.

The settlements which we found in the valleys themselves bespeak these activities. We saw farmstands and fortified centers for crops and caravans and larger settlements which, in their turn, may have held "pleasure domes" for the merchants whom one contemporary geographer described as "noted for their voluptuousness and lack of serious thought." It is interesting to note that "Jam" might have the meaning of a wine cup and that the largest Sirafi site is called "Bid (or Bod-e Khwar" or "wine-drinking". These same ruins also had a glass factory, perhaps for the manufacture of the delicate jars used for the perfumes and rosewater for which southern Fars Province is famous. The routes and sites beyond these valleys to the north did seem distinctly more pedestrian and practical.

The valley of Dezhgah lies two days by donkeyback further into the mountains and here lay more surprises. This valley, like Jam and Galehdar, is a small "pocket" valley, but here it was defended by three high mounds with Islamic materials. The mound of Dowlatabad produced several pieces of Chinese Celadon ware and prehistoric pottery identical to the Middle Susiana wares in Khuzistan. Several prehistoric sites were found in the Dezhgah valley and the Galehdar valley, where they had been first noted by Sir Aurel Stein. The Jam valley, by way of contrast, produced only seemingly early Neolithic flints. The valley of Dezhgah was filled with ancient remains of great variety and, from the high pass leading into the valley, one is aware of a vast mosaic of these valleys tucked into the folds of the mountains leading all the way back to Farrashband and Kazerun.

I had spent over five months exploring southern Iran as an "eccentric" American archeologist. In August I shifted gears to more normal archeological activity, excavation. This work took me to an ancient site in Syria, a part of the massive program of excavation in the upper Euphrates River valley, the Tabqa Reservoir Project. I was field director for the excavations on Tell es-Sweyhat under the general direction of Mr. Thomas Holland.

Tell es-Sweyhat was discovered by Tom and myself last year during a brief survey; it suddenly stood out in the late afternoon light dominating a high terrace of the river valley in the center of a basin formed by the high cliffs of the plateau of the Syrian desert. The mound yielded a wide variety of ceramics indicating a long occupation, while a double line of defensive walls suggested an important center marginal to the desert and the lower river flood plain. An extensive system of irrigation canals showed a sophisticated and intensive development of the region, a region also marginal to the known Hellenistic and earlier trade routes. The situation was intriguing.

The first season of excavations aimed at a comprehensive series of soundings testing the sequence of occupations and the general character of this ancient town. The surface of the mound is covered with lines of stone wall foundations of both buildings and the defensive wall of the periphery. Trenches were placed on the summit, 15 meters above the level of the plain, and on the northern and southern terraces. The stone foundations were found to be Late Iron Age and Hellenistic. The area II on the top of the mound uncovered fine Hellenistic wares and two deep grain storage pits. When these pits had been cleared, the area was made into a deep sounding, eventually reaching a depth of about 6 meters. At least three distinct architectural phases of mud-brick construction were found. Below these levels, a solid mud layer above a small room with possible rafter holes suggests that this lowest phase could be preserved to roof height. These levels appear to represent a continuous occupation from the Early Bronze through the Late Bronze periods.

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On the periphery of the mound, the terraces produced mud-brick walls below the stone foundations, provisionally dated to the Middle Bronze period. In area III the lowest floors, immediately above virgin soil, showed massive destruction with collapsed charred roofing beams in the debris. In area IV, as in III, a massive mud-brick enceinte wall defended the mound, but again this defense, over 6 meters thick, does not seem to have been sufficient. In the closing days of this season's excavations, area IV revealed a series of storerooms set against the defensive wall. These rooms were thoroughly burnt and, while excitement ran high that tablets would be found amidst the ash and red-burnt wall plaster, we had to remain content with piles of massive storage jars, some of which were decorated with delightful incised animals and other motifs.

With the early Islamic period, the idea of a heavily fortified mound seems to have been at length abandoned. Instead we found several large villages scattered around the mound, covered with beautiful glazed sherds, including pieces of the famous Raqqa wares presumably produced in that city, less than 100 kilometers on down the Euphrates valley. Thus the interesting aspects of the region and the site have increased with excavation; and our excitement is now bound in a race to find the means to return before the rising waters of the Tabqa reservoir claim a final victory over Tell es-Sweyhat and its region. But then perhaps some eccentric American archeologist will conduct an underwater archeological survey, or maybe even excavations.

Donald Whitcomb is a Ph. D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology of the University of Chicago. In addition to the year of surveying reported here, he has spent 4-1/2 years in Iran in the Peace Corps and participating in other archeological activities. He is now writing his dissertation on cultural development in the early Islamic period of southern Iran.

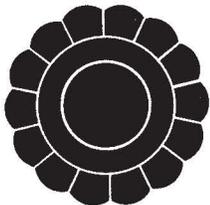
Mrs. Carolyn Livingood invites you to attend the Volunteer Guide Program's First Mondays. Here is the schedule for the first of next year:

On Monday, January 7th, Dr. I. J. Gelb will talk on the "Social and Economic History of the Ancient Near East."

On Monday, February 3rd, Dr. Hans G. Gutterbock will talk on the Hittite and Neo-Hittite Empires.

These talks will be held in Breasted Hall of the Oriental Institute at 1:00 p.m. on the days indicated.

RESERVATIONS STILL AVAIL-
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