

The Iranian Expedition: Chogha Mish Excavations

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The selection of Chogha Mish for excavation is directly related to the most significant turning-point in the cultural history of mankind, the emergence of the earliest higher civilizations in relatively small, though not yet precisely defined, areas of the Near East. In Mesopotamia the period when this took place is characterized by a number of new cultural features among which the crucial one is the invention of writing. Consequently this period has been named by P. Delougaz the Protoliterate period. The transition from an illiterate to a literate society is a complex phenomenon, the archeological evidence for which has so far been gleaned from only a few sites. In addition to Mesopotamia proper, western Khuzestan appeared a very promising area for fruitful investigation of such problems. Accordingly, P. Delougaz in 1946 applied for and obtained a concession for excavations in Khuzestan. Circumstances beyond his control prevented him from going out at that time. Instead his prospective collaborator, Dr. D. McCown, dug for two seasons at Tal-i-Ghasir. During a survey of ancient irrigation in 1960 Dr. R. McC. Adams noticed Protoliterate pottery on the surface of Chogha Mish and reported this to his colleagues. Following the Archaeological Reconnaissance Expedition directed by Delougaz in the autumn of 1961 we made a preliminary excavation at Chogha Mish to test its potentialities (November 6–December 18, 1961). Two longer seasons followed (February 5–June 27, 1963 and November 5, 1965–April 5, 1966).

Chogha Mish is the largest pre-Sasanian site in its area, covering over forty acres. It consists of two parts, the high mound, comprising about one-fifth of the total area and rising



Left, a Protoliterate tablet (Chogha Mish II-432 A + B) impressed with numerals and a cylinder seal showing a seated man with a jar in front of him, ca. 3400 B.C.

Right, unbaked clay impression (Chogha Mish II-394 A) of a cylinder seal showing two men with bulls and vessels, ca. 3400 B.C.

some 25 meters above the plain, and the lower terrace, which rises to eight or ten meters above the surrounding fields.

During the three seasons over thirty soundings and large areas were dug at strategic locations. In almost every place we found, usually immediately below the surface, building remains of the Protoliterate period, consisting of private dwellings as well as of more imposing structures. Especially worth mentioning are a circular building about eleven meters in diameter in Trench V and remains of a solid mud brick platform with projecting "towers" in the northwestern terrace. Below the Protoliterate levels on both the high mound and terrace are thick deposits from the earlier, prehistoric, settlements.

The finds were many and diversified. Pottery has been recovered in truly prodigious quantities. A large proportion of the prehistoric pottery has painted decoration and is of high artistic quality. From the different types of prehistoric pottery, which are distinctive for successive phases, we have already learned that Chogha Mish was a town of extraordinary size in early prehistoric times, and also that its first settlement is earlier than any other yet recorded

in this area. Among the Protoliterate pottery vessels especially worth mentioning are two unique ritual vases, the one decorated in relief with snakes biting goats, the other incised with representational and geometric motifs. However, the finds of the Protoliterate period which contribute more than any others to the understanding of the most complex facets of Protoliterate civilization are the ancient cylinder seal impressions on unbaked clay. These are of various types ranging from tablets and hollow clay balls enclosing tokens to sealings for jars and packages. Like modern envelopes, most of these were made to be "opened" on arrival and hence are usually found as small fragments, many of which are needed to establish the complete seal designs.

The subjects represented on the hundreds of seal impressions are greatly varied. They include animals, monsters, and humans engaged in various activities. For example, we have discovered the earliest orchestra known, playing at a banquet, and a good number of representations witnessing to an elaborate military establishment and its campaigns.

Unfortunately our last season in the field was interrupted just when Chogha Mish was yield-

ing its most spectacular results. Since then the Iranian Expedition at Chogha Mish has not worked in the field. We have concentrated on the processing for publication of the materials in Chicago, including objects on loan from the Tehran Museum. This work includes the drawing of pottery and small objects, the decipherment and drawing of palimpsest-like seal impressions, and photography. For the latter we are largely indebted to Mr. E. M. Peterson, the husband of one of our devoted volunteer docents. We have now progressed to the point where we expect to finish an extensive preliminary report by the end of the summer of 1968. Meanwhile three short reports have appeared in print, two in Oriental Institute annual reports to members for 1962/63 and 1965/66 and in the journal *Iran* for 1967. We have also had opportunities to report on the progress and results of the Chogha Mish excavations before a number of scholarly bodies: American Oriental Society (New York, April, 1964), Rencontre assyriologique internationale (Paris, July, 1964), International Congress of Orientalists (Ann Arbor, 1965), Archaeological Institute of America (Los Angeles, March, 1968), International Congress of Iranian Art and Archaeology (Tehran, April, 1968).

In the brief time available in the summer of 1967 we arranged an exhibit of the Chogha Mish finds, including some of the important vessels from the third season skillfully restored by Mr. Robert Hanson, the preparator of the Oriental Institute Museum.

The results so far obtained on the site are of such importance that it is imperative to continue excavating there. The recent organization of a Joint Iranian Expedition (Oriental Institute, University of California at Los Angeles, Institute of Archaeology, University of Tehran) by P. Delougaz assures the continuation of the work. The Joint Expedition will profit by the fact that grants from the Ford Foundation archeological traineeship program will enable qualified students to share in the field work. The permit for excavation has already been applied for and we hope to renew excavations at the beginning of 1969.