

Chogha Mish

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In the annual reports on Chogha Mish there has often been occasion to refer to the continuity of cultural development there over long periods of time. This continuity becomes ever more apparent in the on-going analysis of the finds, among which pottery stands out as the commonest and most frequently replaced category. It is thus a particularly important guide to cultural changes. The comparison of the sequence at Chogha Mish with the finds from other excavations and surveys in the Susiana plain (central Khuzestan) shows the homogeneity of the area's culture.

Chogha Mish was occupied at an early stage of man's existence in the Susiana plain, the Archaic Susiana period, which probably began around 6000 B.C. The pottery of its first phase already has designs in which reserved areas are as important as the painted elements. This method of composition often reappears in later Susiana periods. The Close-line ware of the final phase of the Archaic Susiana period provides prototypes for the pottery of the following periods. For example, bell-shaped bowls densely covered with parallel lines are the ancestors of Early Susiana bowls of the same shape (Fig. 1); however, the Early Susiana potters, skilled as they were, no longer had an interest in keeping each stroke distinct from its neighbor, so that they partially coalesce (Fig. 2). A standard Close-line pattern consisting of opposed diagonal bands, either solid or crosshatched, separated by crosshatched triangles (Fig. 3) recurs as a frequent motif on Early Susiana bowls and jars; also the shape of the latter is derived from Close-line ancestors (Fig. 4). Another motif that can be traced directly from Close-line to Early Susiana pottery begins as an apparently abstract pattern, a row of paired vertical strokes linked by bent ones (Fig. 5). In the Early Susiana period, each pair of lines has amalgamated into a single one differentiated into a head, shoulders, and lower body (Fig. 6). The design now looks like a row of human beings with linked arms. The Middle Susiana period brings still more naturalistic renderings of the motif, as on a sherd from Tepe Khazineh excavated by a French expedition many years ago (Fig. 7). In such versions the motif has been interpreted by some archaeologists as dancers.

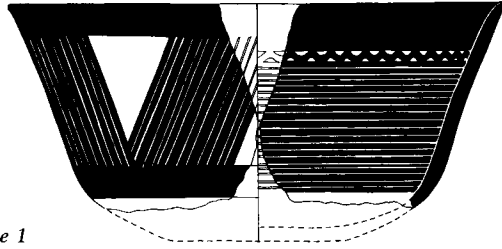


Figure 1

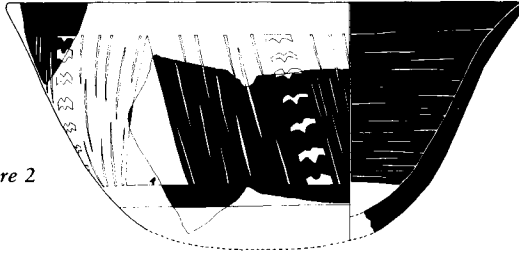


Figure 2

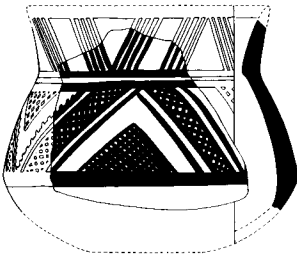


Figure 3

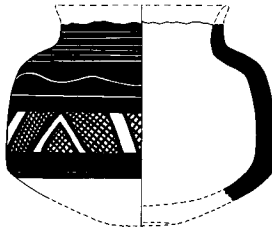


Figure 4

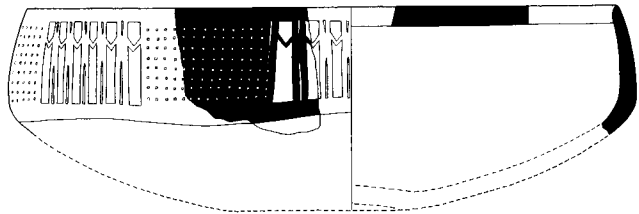


Figure 5

Another long sequence of patterns indicative of a continuous cultural tradition begins with a small fragment from the base of a Close-line bowl where the circular field was divided by crossing lines. Such simple patterns were the germ of circular designs appearing on Early Susiana pottery (Fig. 8). These in turn were the prototypes for the circular designs which proliferated in many varieties in the following Middle

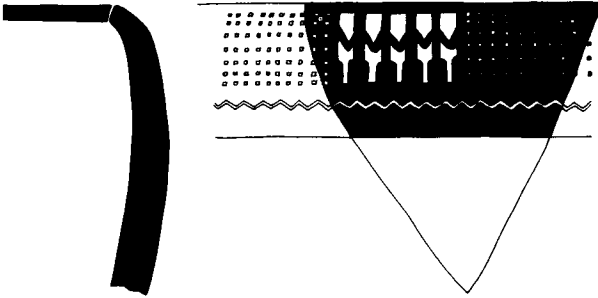


Figure 6



Figure 7

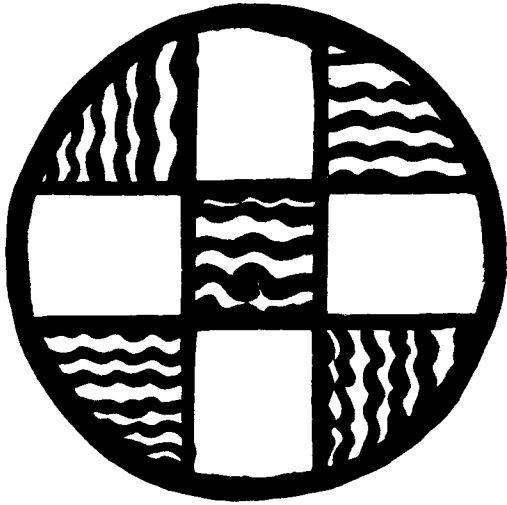


Figure 8

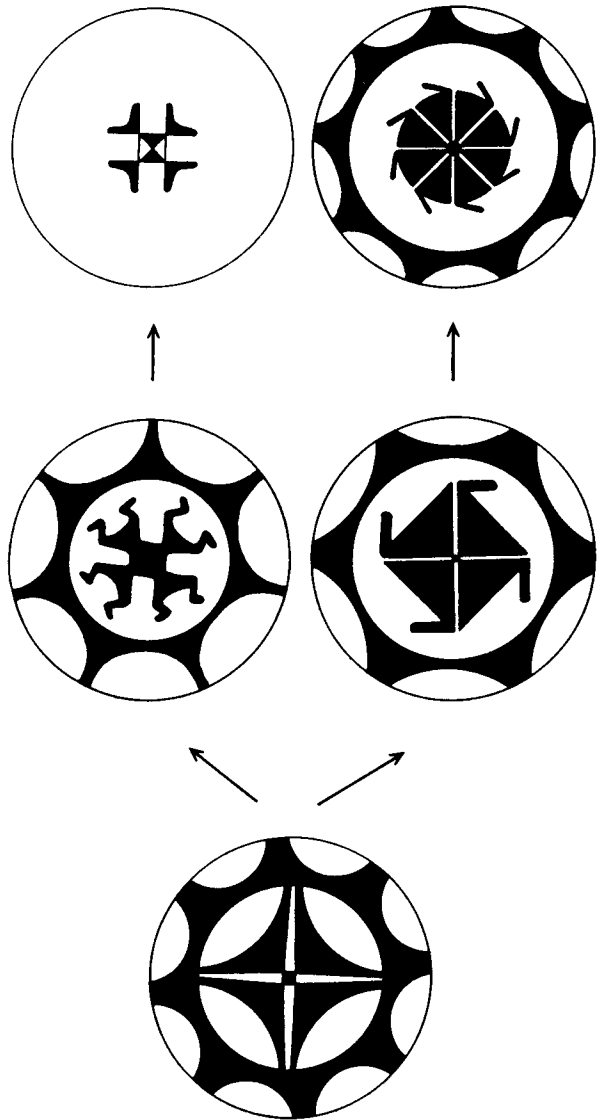


Figure 9, *Quadrant Patterns*

Susiana 1 phase (Fig. 9). Normally the central design was surrounded by a cusped border. By Middle Susiana 3 such designs had been simplified and sometimes transmuted. The central part of the pattern is reduced to a detached motif,

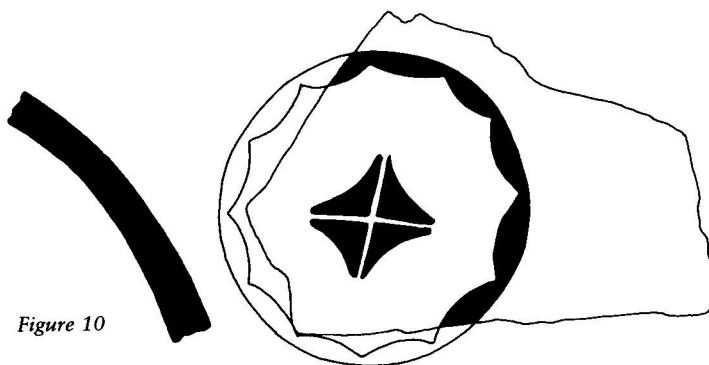


Figure 10



Figure 11

floating in the middle of a scalloped-circle frame (Fig. 10). The origin of the latter can be explained by the interaction between positive and negative parts of designs which was characteristic for the Susiana tradition of decorative art. The scalloped circle develops when the negative, reserved areas of the cusped border are made positive. In the final phase of the Susiana tradition, Late Susiana, dating to the first half of the fourth millennium B.C., the last descendants of this long tradition of circular designs can be found, as on a bowl from Susa (Fig. 11).

The pottery designs from Chogha Mish testify to a continuous cultural tradition spanning over two thousand years.

This unbroken development in the Susiana plain contrasts with the situation in various other parts of the ancient Near East where more abrupt changes in culture appear. Clear though the Susiana ceramic tradition is becoming, major difficulties arise when we try to guess at the social and political realities reflected by the archaeological remains. Does the continuity in the ceramic tradition reflect a continuous occupation of the Susiana plain by people of the same general ethnic character and speaking the same language? It seems almost impossible to believe that during such a long stretch of time there were no interactions between sedentary and nomadic groups, no incursions of new groups and conflicts with earlier inhabitants. We can only assume that the indigenous Susiana culture was strong enough to impose itself upon newcomers.

The archaeological evidence demonstrates the growing size and complexity of the settlement at Chogha Mish throughout most of the Susiana period. The fairly limited occupation of the Archaic phases was followed by increasingly larger Early and Middle Susiana settlements. Middle Susiana 3 brought the peak of the prehistoric settlement; the entire mound of sixteen hectares appears to have been occupied. The combined evidence from the finds at Chogha Mish and the small site of Chogha Banut six kilometers to the west indicates a pronounced difference between the simple structures of Chogha Banut and a building of more monumental character at Chogha Mish. Such distinctions in architecture must reflect a considerable degree of social stratification. Chogha Mish was not a village but the preeminent town in its area and very likely the major settlement in the entire plain. But its fortunes changed. There appears to be a brief gap in the occupation at Chogha Mish at the end of the Middle Susiana period and in the last Susiana period the settlement is limited to the northern third of the site. The specific events reflected in these changes in occupation patterns remain unknown although it is certain that the paramount position was now taken over by a settlement first founded in the Late Susiana period, Susa, which was to remain as the capital city of the region for many centuries.

The appearance in the Susiana plain in the second part of the fourth millennium B.C. of the Protoliterate civilization current in southern Mesopotamia ended the long indigenous tradition, but we still have much to learn concerning the transitional period and the possible contributions of the Susiana tradition to later developments. The fortunes of Chogha Mish revived; it was the main town of its area in the Protoliterate period.