

## TALL-E BAKUN

ABBAS ALIZADEH

After I returned in September 1991 to Chicago from Cambridge, Massachusetts, I began preparing for publication the results of 1937 season of excavations at Tall-e Bakun, one of the first sites excavated by the Oriental Institute in Iran. Tall-e Bakun consists of two mounds, designated as Tall-e Bakun A and B by the original excavators, the latter being the earlier. Tall-e Bakun A is located in the fertile Marv Dasht plain of Fars province, near Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of the Persian Achaemenids (fig. 1). The site was excavated for two seasons in 1932 and 1937 by Alexander Langsdorff and Donald E. McCown.

Tall-e Bakun A is one the few sites in the Near East that was excavated in the 1930s with the then newly developed techniques of stratigraphic control. The precision of the excavators in retrieving data and their remarkable ability in stratigraphy resulted in meticulously recorded evidence which has enabled me to analyze and reconstruct various aspects of this late prehistoric community.

Excavations of 1932 revealed a large area in the northern sector of the mound (see *Tall-I-Bakun A: Season of 1932*, A. Langsdorff and D. E. McCown, Oriental Institute Publications 59). Here, a series of contiguous buildings was discovered (fig. 2). Four occupational levels were reported; Level I is the earliest, Level III is the best preserved and most extensively excavated, and Level IV is the latest. The evidence from the initial phase of the settlement consists of a 15 cm thick layer of ash, kilns, fireplaces, hard burned floors, and postholes. Most of Level I seems to have been leveled and used during Level II as foundation for buildings. However, the state of preservation was bad and only a few wall fragments and floors were discovered in Level II. But the presence of ashy layers and at least one kiln indicates industrial activities in this phase as well.

Level III contained a complex of buildings consisting of rectangular houses with walls in common. In general, the buildings of Level III suggest a planned architectural layout; they are oriented northeast-southwest with nicely aligned and carefully abutted common walls (fig. 2). Some of these houses were furnished with storage areas containing large jars and other vessels still intact. Traces of red and yellow paint were found on some walls. Level III also produced most of the artifacts, including many clay sealings (fig. 3).

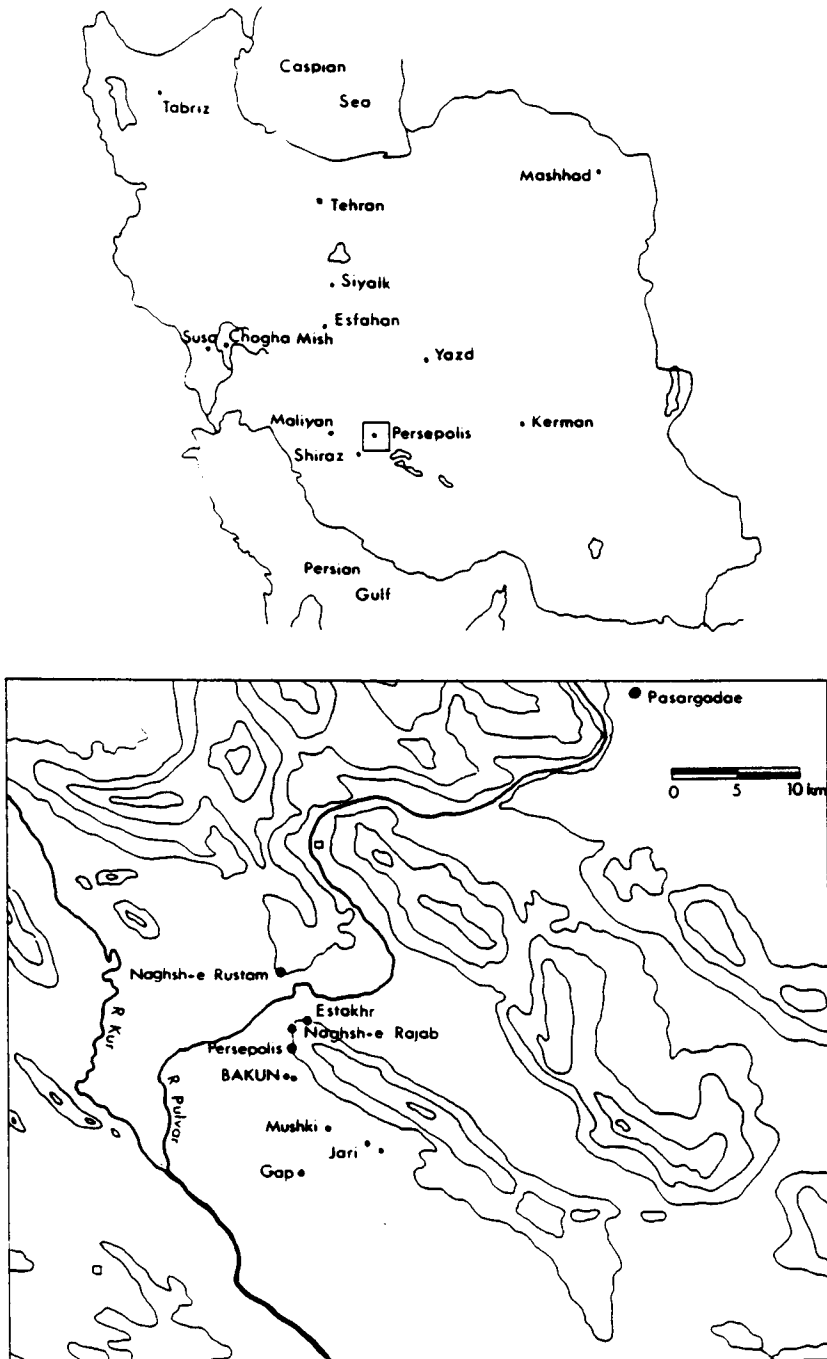
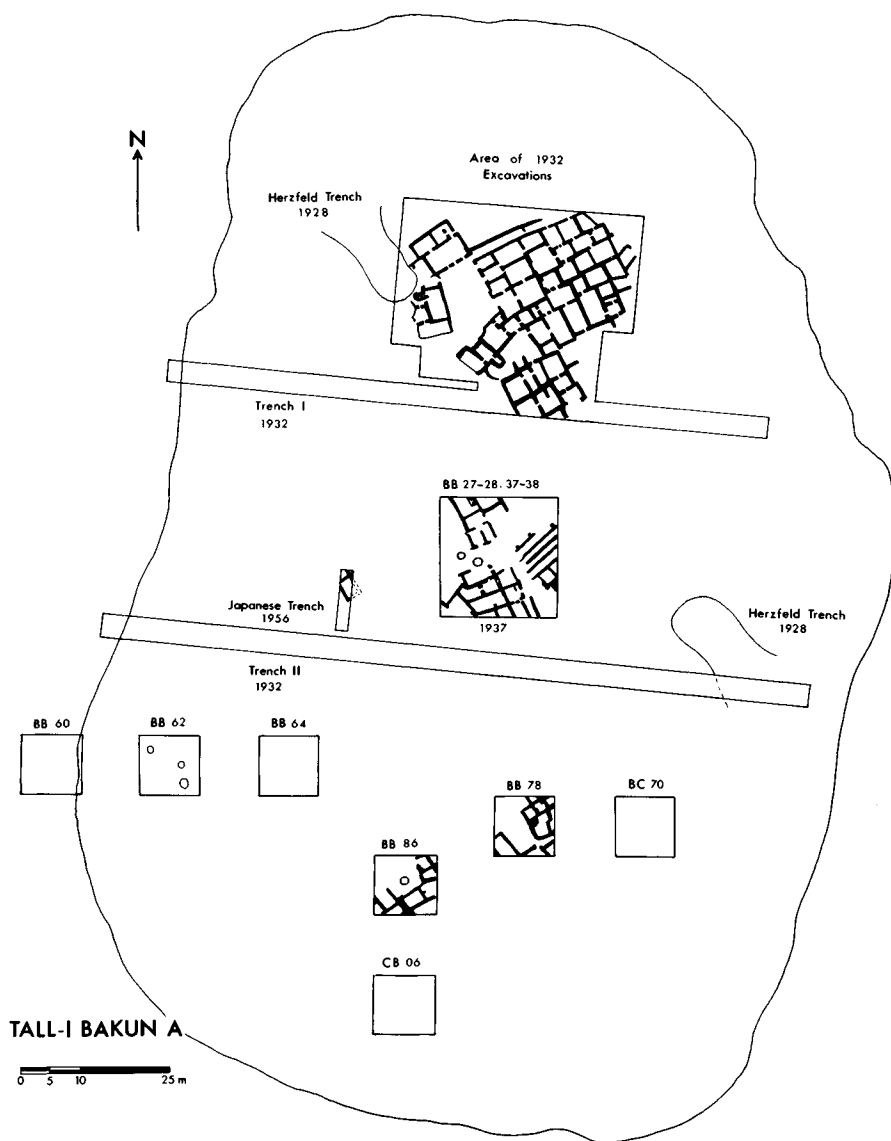


Figure 1. Map indicating the location of Tall-e Bakun A in Fars



**Figure 2. Various areas of excavations at Tall-e Bakun A**

The majority of the sealings found in the northern area were door sealings. They were used to protect rooms and their contents from unauthorized entry (fig. 4). The door sealings from Bakun are so far the earliest examples of this administrative technique in the ancient Near East. A study of these sealings and an analysis of their spatial distribution in the five buildings of Level III (fig. 5) are expected to contribute to the understanding of the historical



Figure 3. Samples of sealings from Tall-e Bakun A

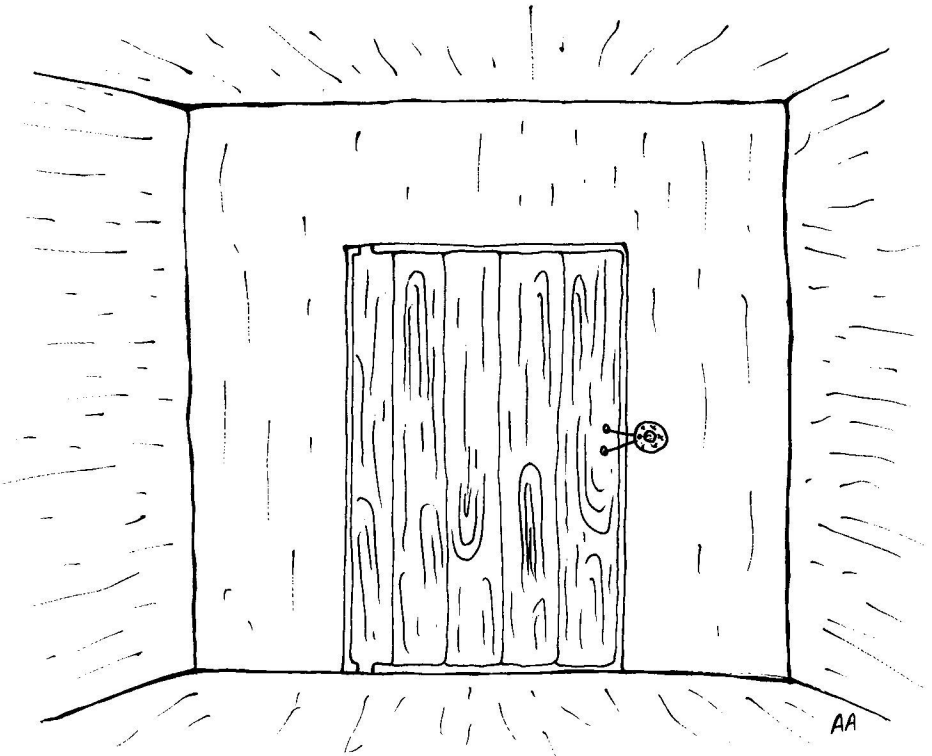
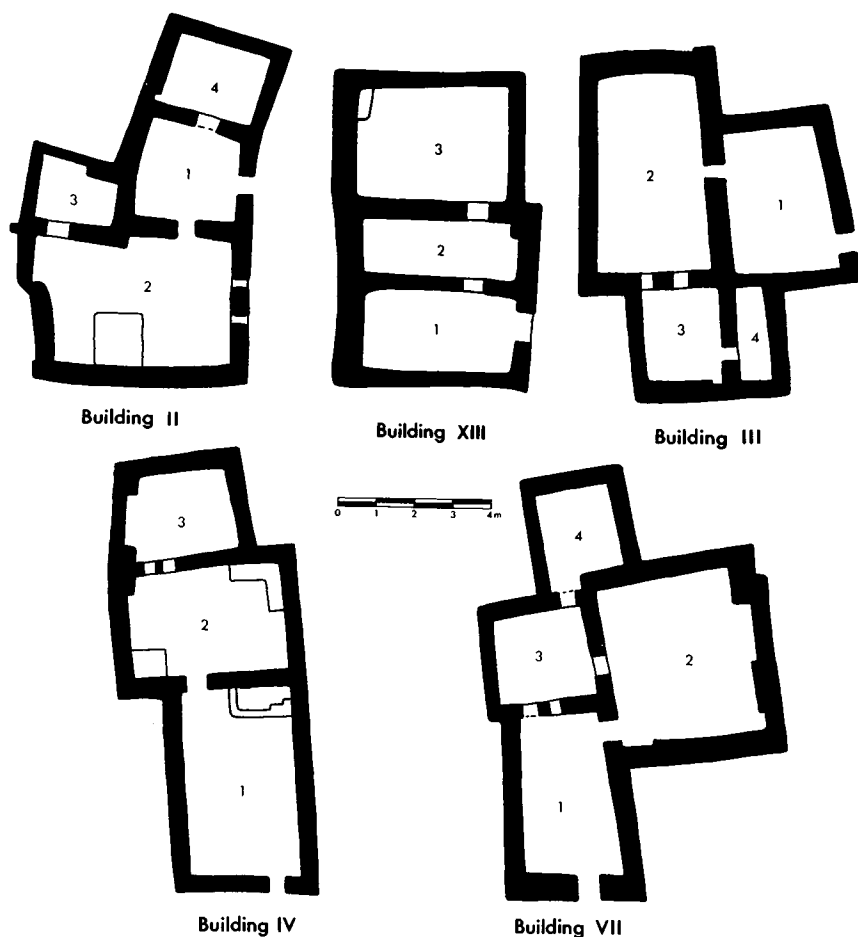


Figure 4. Hypothetical reconstruction of a warehouse with door sealing



**Figure 5. Top plans of the buildings that contained sealings**

development of the precursors of the later urban societies, when the practice of sealing doors proliferated throughout the ancient Near East.

Excavations at Bakun also brought to light a highly sophisticated painted pottery. The painted pottery at Bakun is arguably the highest manifestation of prehistoric ceramic art. It exhibits mastery in the organic relationship between the shape of a vessel and the design. The artist employed a vast repertoire of designs and created a harmonic relationship between the painted and unpainted areas of the vessel (fig. 6).

Important additional information about the site came with the results of the second season of excavations in 1937. Unlike the work of the 1932 season, which was concentrated in one large area, eleven 10 m squares were opened in the central, southeastern, and southwestern areas of the mound (fig. 2).



**Figure 6. Samples of painted vessels from Tall-e Bakun A**

Only the central and southern areas contained architecture; other squares yielded only kilns of various sizes surrounded by thick layers of debris and ash.

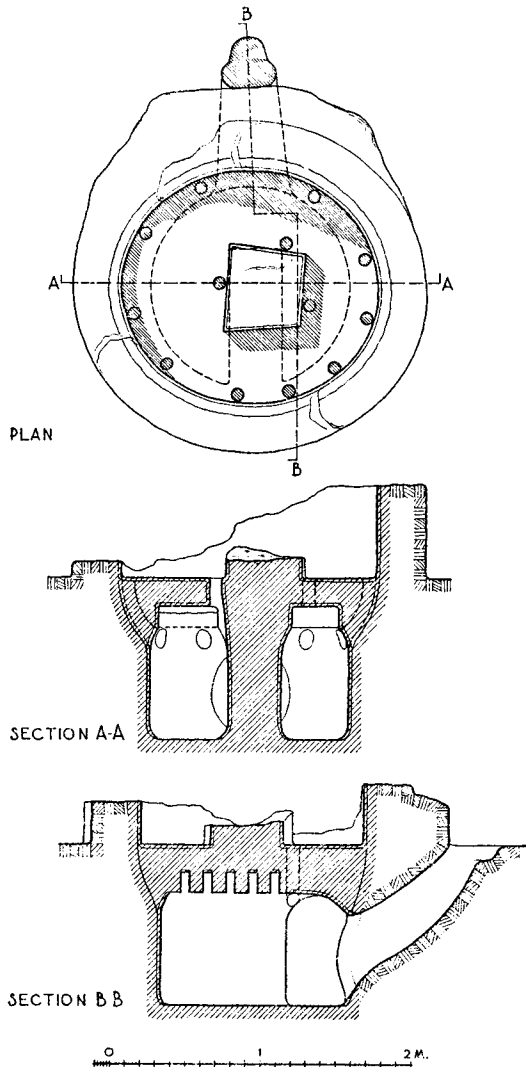
The central area consists of four contiguous 10 m squares. Although several buildings were discovered at the northeast corner of this area, even here most of the exposed area is devoid of architecture (fig. 7). These buildings demonstrate at least three different architectural phases. Since the lowest level rests on sterile soil and as such is the earliest, the architecture in this area can fill in the gap in architectural levels I and II of the northern area that was excavated in 1932. To the south of these buildings, and almost at the center of the mound, several well-constructed kilns were discovered (fig. 8). The open space in this and other areas was filled with layers of ash and soot.



**Figure 7. Three pottery kilns in the central area, looking to the north**

In the northern area the architecture was predominantly domestic in contrast to the central and southern areas which seem to have been the loci for manufacturing goods. The results of the 1937 season provide evidence of craft production in the central and southern parts of the site. Products produced include copper tools, pottery, carved stone and bone ornaments, and possibly cloth. Moreover, various imported materials provide important evidence of trade with distant regions such as Anatolia (obsidian), the Persian Gulf (sea shells), Central Iranian Plateau (copper ore), and northeastern Iran (turquoise and lapis lazuli).

The different types of architecture, their location, and the spatial and temporal distribution of artifacts in various buildings provide evidence to reconstruct intrasite settlement and industrial activities patterns. For example, the contrast at Bakun between the northern quarter and central and southern quarters indicates that some activities were spatially segregated. The central and southern parts were the location of craft and industrial production. The northern quarter was residential. However, some buildings in the northern quarter, namely Buildings II-IV, VII, and XIII also contained door sealings as well as sealings of movable objects, such as jars, bales, and bags (fig. 5). The presence in these buildings of sealings suggests that they were not merely residential but were the loci of administrative activities.



**Figure 8. Top plan and section of a pottery kiln at Tall-e Bakun A**

The combined archaeological materials from both seasons provide important evidence of an incipient administration and control of the flow of goods in a late prehistoric context. The results of the second season with important unpublished lines of evidence from the first season will appear as a volume in the Oriental Institute's series Oriental Institute Publications in the near future.