

EXCAVATIONS AT CHOGHA BONUT: THE EARLIEST VILLAGE IN SUSIANA, IRAN

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The political upheavals in Iran in 1978/79 interrupted the process of momentous discoveries of the beginning of village life in lowland Susiana. The Oriental Institute excavations at Chogha Mish (recently published by the Oriental Institute Publications Office) not only provided a long uninterrupted sequence of prehistoric Susiana, but also yielded evidence of cultures much earlier than what had been previously known, pushing back the date of human occupation on the plain for at least one millennium. The work of Helene Kantor and Pinhas Delougaz at Chogha Mish, the largest early fifth-millennium site, added the Archaic period to the already well-established Susiana prehistoric sequence. The sophistication of the artifacts and architecture of even the earliest phase of the Archaic period showed that there must have been a stage of cultural development antecedent to the successful adaptation of village life in southwestern Iran, but surveys and excavations had failed to reveal such a phase in that region.

As is common in the field of archaeology, it was not until 1976 that evidence for an earlier, formative stage of the Archaic Susiana period was accidentally discovered. In that year, news of the destruction of a small mound, some six kilometers west of Chogha Mish, reached Kantor, who at that time was working at Chogha Mish. Always a passionate guardian of archaeological sites and monuments, Professor Kantor rushed to the site to see a bulldozer razing it to the ground. Overcoming the resistance of the bulldozer operator and the local police, she valiantly stopped the destruction of the mound, two meters of which had already been removed in an attempt to level the plain for a multimillion dollar agribusiness project. Knowing that the destruction would resume as soon as she left the site, Kantor immediately contacted some government officials in Tehran and received a permit to conduct a salvage operation at the site. That site was Chogha Bonut, which was destined to make major contributions to the prehistoric sequence of Susiana, thereby increasing our knowledge of the formative stages of village life in southwestern Iran.



Kantor actually worked at Chogha Bonut for two seasons. She was preparing to return in 1979, when the political upheavals made it clear that she had visited the country for the last time. Events even affected the little village of Qale Khalil, where Kantor's dig house was located. The house was ransacked and all of the expedition's belongings were either robbed or destroyed. The archaeological materials from the salvage dig at Chogha Bonut were, along with the field notes, perhaps the greatest loss.

In 1993 I was assigned the task of finishing Kantor's monumental volume (coauthored by Pinhas Delougaz) on the excavations at Chogha Mish. In the course of preparing the materials for publication and writing and editing the chapters on the prehistoric period, I became even more intrigued by the earliest stage of cultural development in southwestern Iran. From Kantor's report, I knew that Chogha Bonut displayed what she called the "Formative" stage of the lowland Susiana



phase, and that the site might contain an even earlier aceramic phase of the initial colonization of Susiana in the eighth millennium BC. That possibility was too important to ignore, and the only way to find out was to excavate the site again.

Several years after the Iranian revolution, some sporadic archaeological activities took place, performed exclusively by government employees. Even Tehran University's Department and Institute of Archaeology was not able to obtain permits to resume its annual field classes. Under these conditions, there seemed to be no hope for academic staff of an American university to be allowed to work in Iran. When in 1994 I was told by the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization that I would be allowed to conduct an archaeological survey in the summer pasture of the nomadic Qashqaii in northwestern Fars, I became hopeful that I could convince the authorities of the importance of Chogha Bonut and persuade them to allow me to examine the site. Full of hope, I prepared a research design and submitted it to the organization.

Oral approval came in February 1996. Knowing that there was a long way from oral approval to official, written authorization, and aware that I would have to process all archaeological materials in Iran, I left Chicago in March 1996 hoping to be back sometime around the end of summer. I had anticipated spending April and May in the field and the summer months on the materials and data processing. As time passed, my initial optimism turned to dogged determination, and I accepted enough tea from various officials to exceed my tea quota for a decade! In September, I secured the permit and headed for Khuzestan. We were offered two places to stay: the former French headquarters at the magnificent castle at Susa and the Haft Tappeh Guest House some twenty miles southeast of Susa. We chose, of course, the former, as the castle is much better equipped and is very romantic. After the initial preparations were completed, we began work on 26 September.



Save for a few occasions, we did not hire local workers, as the operation was delicate and I was accompanied by enough individuals to take care of various responsibilities. I had with me Mr. Gabriel Nokandeh, Mr. Abbas Moqadam, Mr. Hamidreza Tabrizian, and Mr. Farhard Jafary, four brilliant and eager students of Tehran University. Mr. Hasan Rezvani, Mr. Kargar, Mr. Omrani, and Mr. Farukh-Ahamdi were the four representatives of Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization (see [fig. 1](#)). They were instrumental in the smooth operation of the dig. I thank all of them, particularly Mr. Rezvani.

Though we did not hire local workers, farmers and older villagers from the village of Upper Bonut (only six hundred meters from the site) visited us daily, usually bringing bread, yogurt, melons, cucumbers, or whatever else they were growing. Almost all the older villagers had either worked with Helene Kantor or had known her. Due to some rumors (news travels exceedingly quickly in rural areas), the villagers at first thought that the son of *Daloo* ("old woman" in the local vernacular) had



returned to resume her work-my appearance, long hair, fishing vest, and so on strengthening the rumor-and the fact that I spoke Persian was not convincing in the beginning either. Anyway, after they were convinced that I was not who they thought I was, they were happy to learn that I had indeed been her pupil. On their daily visits to the site, the villagers told us good tales about her, remembering her very sympathetically. That personal touch and the way Helene's work in the region has linked two generations by some fond memories was very special indeed.

Chogha Bonut is probably the oldest lowland village in southwestern Iran (see [map](#)). It is a small mound; in its truncated and artificially rounded state, it has a diameter of about fifty meters and is five meters high ([fig. 2](#)). From Helene Kantor's excavations, we knew that the site was perhaps first occupied sometime in the eighth millennium BC, before the invention of pottery. The site continued to be occupied for much of the seventh millennium BC, until the beginning of the Archaic 1 period (the earliest period at Chogha Mish, some five kilometers to the east), when it was deserted for at least one millennium. Then, sometime in the fifth millennium (Late Middle Susiana), it was reoccupied and remained inhabited into the early fourth millennium (Late Susiana 2), when it was deserted once again. Except for Ali Kosh located in the Deh Luran plain north of Susiana, all very early aceramic Neolithic sites in Iran are located in the Zagros mountains. These early aceramic sites are informative about the beginning of village life in southwestern Iran, but almost all of these villages were occupied after the domestication of some species of cereals and animals had already been well under way.

Some scholars believe that southwestern Iran, particularly the highland, was cold, dry, and mostly uninhabited between 11000 and 9000 BC, and that the domestication of animals and particularly cereals took place not in the mid-altitude of the Zagros mountains but in the oases of the Levant, Jordan, and Syria. When this sudden spell of cold and dry weather gradually came to an end by 8000 BC, the uninhabited regions of the Near East were colonized by groups of people who were already practicing a mixed economy of food producing and food gathering. If this were the case, then one would expect to find such sites in warmer areas of lower latitudes more suitable for practicing agriculture than higher altitudes.

Our special interest in Chogha Bonut was its aceramic deposit that would make it unique among the early sites in large alluvial plains in Iran. Since the Archaic and later periods were known from Chogha Mish and Tuleii, northwest of Chogha Mish, we were eager to reach the basal levels during our excavations. This proved to be a difficult task, as Chogha Bonut has been bulldozed and churned up twice. In addition, two seasons of excavations by Kantor had produced a large amount of debris that had been dumped over the slopes of the mound, but the exact location was unknown to us. Finally, eighteen years of rain and trampling by farmers, pastoralists, and their animals made it difficult to distinguish, without excavation, the disturbed and undisturbed areas of the mound.

At the base of the mound, we tested three areas and, though all showed signs of heavy disturbance, we decided that the eastern sector of the mound with its numerous ashy lenses visible right above the surrounding plain would be the best spot to reach the lowest levels. In our 5 x 5 m trench area we reached undisturbed layers after removing about one meter of bulldozed debris ([fig. 3](#)). From the beginning we encountered aceramic layers accumulated in an area that seemed to have been an open court. Here we found successive surfaces with layers of alternating ash and clay. These surfaces were primarily furnished with round- and oval-shaped hearths, and most contained fire-cracked rocks ([fig. 4](#)) very typical of fire pits of the early Neolithic period. We found no solid architecture, but the presence of fragments of straw-tempered mudbrick indicated to us that mudbrick architecture existed elsewhere in the mound. We excavated this area to virgin soil that was only 80 cm below modern surface, a surprisingly small accumulation of sediment in at least 9,000 years, especially compared to the Iranian central plateau.

Since we opened our trench at the lowest possible slope of the mound, it could not give us a profile of the stratigraphy of Chogha Bonut from the aceramic phase to the beginning of the Archaic 1 phase. To develop this profile, we opened a stratigraphic trench one meter south of our main trench, and excavated it to virgin soil. It was here that we found several classes of pottery not previously known in Susiana.

The most numerous artifacts at Bonut, as was expected, were flint tools and stone objects. The lithic industry at Bonut is advanced and the presence of various high-quality flint cores, not found locally, indicate some sort of regional exchange. Although we did not find complete stone vessels and bracelets, the fragments we found illustrate the skill and sophistication of the early inhabitants of the Susiana plain.

The bones and carbonized seeds that we collected from every layer and feature comprise the most precious and potentially more informative material. The bones were never in good condition and they were often covered with a thick layer of salt crystals. We retrieved the seeds by dry sieving at the site and flotation in the camp. Much of what we need to know about the economy and the way of life of the early colonizers of the Susiana plain would be found in these materials once they have been processed and analyzed. Since anything archaeological, even though bones and seeds are not considered artifacts, can only leave the country by the special permission of the Council of Ministers, I am now in the process of securing permits to send them to the specialists. Once the materials are here and the results are in, we may be able to open a new chapter in the cultural evolution of southwestern Iran and shed more light on the processes of domestication of plants and animals.

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Abbas Alizadeh, an Oriental Institute Research Associate since 1991, recently edited Chogha Mish Volume 1: The First Five Seasons. He has been in Iran, working on the excavations at Chogha Bonut, since early 1996 and will soon be returning to Chicago.

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