

## CHOGHÂZANBIL A LARGE TEMPLE FOR GOD

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Site of King Untash Napirisha's Ziggurat, Chogha Zanbil,  
25 miles south-east of Susa, c 1250 BC

The large Choghazanbil temple is one of the three ancient monuments in Iran which have been registered in the Index of World Heritage. The [Elamites](#) built this temple approximately 1250 BCE and it resembles the architecture employed in the Egyptian pyramids and Mayan temples.

The king, his queen and the crown prince accompanied by his courtiers approach ziggurat mounted on royal chariots. While a large congregation of common people are watching the procession, they disembark from their chariots and enter the ziggurat precincts from the royal gate. Inside the ziggurat Shaten, the chief priest pours water on the king's hands by a pitcher. The ceremony commences with the musicians playing religious melodies by harp, lute and flute. The animals chosen for sacrifice are killed in 14 platforms built like short headless pyramids beside the temple of In-Shushinak. Then the king and his companions ascend to the second floor of the building by stairs. Here the king pours a special syrup on the altar for the intended god and accompanied by the chief priest and a small number of his attendants he ascends to the third floor. In the third floor some of his attendants remain and only the chief priest and his close associates ascend to the fourth floor. In this floor the close associates remain and the king, accompanied only by the chief priest, ascends the main temple of the ziggurat in the fifth floor.

The Choghazanbil ziggurat (building by Dur-Untash) is the only surviving ziggurat in Iran and is one of the most important remnants of the Elamite civilization. The Elamite citizens were a nation who lived in Iran about 2500 years BCE and succeeded to announce their existence at Awan (now called Shoushtar, a town in Khuzestan Province). According to the chronicles of the Old Testament, an ancient king named Kedor Laomer in Elam succeeded to extend his domain as far as Palestine (Genesis, Chapter 14). The significance of the scientific and cultural achievements of Elamites and their influence on other civilizations can be better understood when we learn that the first wheeled pitcher (the first wheeled roller) was apparently invented by human beings at Elam. On the other hand the first arched roof and its covering which is a very important technique in architecture was invented by the Elamite and

used in the mausoleum of Tepti-ahar around 1360 BCE (unearthed in the excavations made at Haft Tappeh) nearly 1,500 years before such arches were used by the Romans.

### Geographical Situation

Choghazanbil is located in Khuzestan Province 30 km southwest of Shusha (Susa), the famous capital of Elam at a close distance from Dez river which is one of the branches of the large Karun river. This temple and the town bearing the same name has been built on a natural earth mound because of overlooking at the adjacent plains. When the sky was clear the two important Elamite cities i.e. Shusha and Shoushtar (Āwān) were visible from that elevation.

Since long time ago because of flowing of branches of Dez and Karun rivers and the region's proximity to Shusha and trade routes and to Mesopotamia, that region had gained special significance. King Untash-Gal diverted the Karkheh river water through a canal to Choghazanbil which canal still survives.

### Similarity

The old and original name of this town and its ziggurat was called Dur-Untash which according to the inscriptions discovered at the foundations of the ruined building in that town derived its name from Untash-Gal, the Elamite king (1275-1240 BCE) who was the founder of that town. This name has been repeatedly mentioned in Elamite and Assyrian inscriptions. The word 'Dur' in the Akkadian and Elamite languages means a town or an enclosed and distinct region. Ziggurat in Sumerian language means ascending to heaven and has its root in the Elamite word Zagrātu. Anyhow, the highest story of the ziggurat temple was called Kukunnu or Kizzum which at times that nomination was ascribed to all the stories of that temple. But nowadays the temple is called Choghazanbil which means a hill-like basket (Zanbil), because in the Dezfouli or Lori dialect Chogha means a hill.

### History of Investigation and Excavations

Based on a contract signed with Nassereddin Shah, the Qajar king, with France, a French archaeologist team was sent to Khuzestan in the year 1895. But this team had based its headquarters in Shusha. However, in 1935, Brown, a New Zealand citizen who was seeking for traces of oil, while flying over that region was surprised to spot a huge earthen pile. In the same period, one of the geologists of the oil company had discovered an inscribed brick which referred to Choghazanbil and took it to the French archaeological team in Shusha. Thus the Iranian government permitted R. de Mecquenem, the representative of Louvre Museum in Paris and head of the French archaeological team in Shusha, to excavate the Choghazanbil area for a period of 5 years. De Mecquenem started his investigation and identification in the years 1936 to 1939, but the main excavation was commenced by R. Ghirshman in the year 1951.

Until 1962 Ghirshman succeeded to perform nine stages of consecutive excavations with 150 workers and in a period of 34 months he removed 200 thousand sq. meters of earth from the site by wagons and rail and succeeded to unearth the ziggurat from the depth of the earth.

## Town and its Temple

According to the records found during the archeological excavations, this region was populated from Shusha-A era upward (around 3800 BCE) but it was only during the reign of Untash-Gal (1275-1240 BCE) that construction work began in the area and Choghazanbil became famous. Untash-Gal had built a town with a circular wall fortification and in the center of the town he had raised the multistory temple and ziggurat now known as Choghazanbil ziggurat. In a tablet left by that Elamite king which explaining his object in building the town and the ziggurat, Untash-Gal says: "I have built this Kukunnu, made of enameled brick silver and gold colors and marble and white obsidian stones, and have dedicated it to Humban and In-Shushinak gods."

Based on surviving records, the money for construction of that town and temple was not procured from military victories and plunder or from collection of tributes and taxes but through trade with other regions. It was thus that Choghazanbil became the religious capital of that time and the main residence of Untash-Gal. The outer fortification of the town is a circular rampart 1300 m in length and 900 m in width which forms the defense wall of the town. This fortification had only one gate at the eastern wing. Inside that fortification there was a second fortification which was nearly square each wing varying between 400 to 450 m in length and was called Temenous or the sacred city. In between these two fortifications and at the eastern wing the king's palace was located. The second square fortification exactly faced north, south, east and west and this shows the careful architecture used by the Elamite architects to make best use of sunshine in the winter season and profit from the local winds and shadow in summer. Inside the second fortification a third circular fence 200 m in length and 160 m in width was built. The diameter of the fence was 3 m wide and 1 m high and it was designed to stop water from penetrating into the ziggurat. Each wing of the main ziggurat which was a regular square was built inside the third fortification and was 102.2 m in length. The wings faced exactly towards north, south, east and west.

## The Original Ziggurat Building

Originally a large square temple had been built at the present location of the ziggurat made of unbaked brick. The length of each wing of the original temple was about 100 m. That temple was a single story building and gates installed at each wing. The gates opened to a central court which was built on a lower elevation. The court must have been a place of religious rites performed in open air. From the court one door led to the left Shabestan (a place of prayer and nocturnal stay) which was called Siyan in the Elamite tongue. This Shabestan was reserved only for prominent dignitaries including the royal family and priests. From the center of the court a door opened to the right Shabestan which was designed for the common people. Untash-Gal decided to convert the single story square temple into a multistory ziggurat. For this reason he assigned a vast number of laborers, ass drivers, brick makers, masons and tile makers as well as irrigation specialists and architects along with many scribes to build the ziggurat. The scribes were instructed to inscribe his intended texts on the tiles used in the ziggurat.

The water and earth needed for preparation of unbaked brick was provided from the site, but the workers needed wood to bake the bricks and since little wood was available in the area, groups of laborers were dispatched to Lorestan mountains to fetch the needed wood. The stories of the tower are not based on horizontal design where columns are mounted on each other. On the contrary the building was built on a vertical design i.e. to say each of the walls of the stories was raised from the ground. In fact each story was built inside another story and the collection of the stories formed a giant telescope. In order to convert the temple into ziggurat, first square columns with 35 x 35 m dimensions and 40 m height were built in the center of the court by unbaked bricks which in fact formed the foundation of the temple that stood on top of the ziggurat at the fifth floor. After that three other circles i.e. the fourth, third

and second floors were raised around the foundation all rising from the ground floor in the court. Then the masons coated inside of the rooms in the court with unbaked and baked bricks and thus the first story of the ziggurat was completed.

This method of architecture i.e. construction of a religious building at the top of a platform was favored by the residents of Mesopotamia since the Ubaid period about 3500 years before the birth of Christ. But the first ziggurat was constructed during the reign of Ur-Nammu who founded the third Ur Dynasty in Sumer around 2100 BCE

Herodotus, the Greek historiographer, who visited Babylon in the year 460 BCE, thus describes its ziggurat. "It is a tower on the other side of which another tower rises, then the third and fourth and continues to eight towers. Access to these stories is made by spiral stairs dug around the tower. The temple sits at the highest platform of the tower and inside the temple a large golden bed and table is placed. During the night, no one is allowed to sleep in that temple except a maid chosen by God. Nowadays only the first and second stories have remained intact and a part of the third story of the building and the height of the building is approximately 25 m. But studies have revealed that the original ziggurat was in 5 stories with approximately 52.6 m height. The first floor was 8 m high, the second, third and fourth were 11.6 m high and the fifth floor was 9.8 m high. The building material was composed of unbaked bricks with a layer of tiles. The dimension of the unbaked bricks was 10 x 40 x 40 cm and that of the baked bricks was 10 x 35 x 35.

### Stairs

The stairs in Choghazanbil are exceptional in shape because contrary to the ziggurats built in the Mesopotamia where access to the temple on the top of the building was made through a single spiral or straight stairs rising from the ground to upper floors, in Choghazanbil access was made in several stages from inside the building through a roofed stair which resembled a tunnel. Access to the first floor was made through four gates but only a single stair led the visitor to the second floor.

Considering the height of each floor and the numerous steps which were slightly sloppy, the Elamite architect had used two innovations: Firstly, the visitors had to ascend the stairs in three stages. Thus a pedestrian was able to rest at the stations built in the stairs. Secondly, in order to allow the visitor to watch the area around the temple, the architect had resorted to a second innovation and had removed the roof of the rest stations. It was perhaps for this reason that professor Mallowan who visited the ziggurat said all the ziggurats which have been formerly unearthed in Mesopotamia need to be excavated again.

Around Choghazanbil ziggurat the remains of three royal palaces, several family vaults and a private house have been discovered. In one of the palaces on the last layers of bricks a thick coat of asphalt has been laid. Meanwhile in order to lead the rainwater to the surrounding areas from the ziggurat, cavities have been dug in the bricks and drain pipes have been installed and coated with tar. In one of the palaces a bath containing a shallow basin was spotted on the floor which is led to outside through a culvert.

### Images and decorations of the ziggurat

One of the features of Elamite art is use of animal horn to adorn the building and other artworks. In the Elamite tongue the horn was called Husa. In one of the oldest pictures of the Shusa temple at Louvre relating to the second part of the fourth millennium BCE the decorative and religious application of these horns are shown. In the Choghazanbil ziggurat also giant horns made of bronze ornamented the building. Meanwhile the wooden doors of the prayer niche is decorated with pipe-like glasses in black and white colors resembling

mosaic which demonstrates the advancement made by the Elamite citizens in the fabrication of glass.

What doubles the beauty of the ziggurat is the use of enameled tiles with white and black glass enamels and deep green, blue and azure brick enamels which renders special gaiety to the building. The Elamites were the first to invent the enameled tile in the Middle East. Approximately 350 years later during the reign of Tukulti-Ninurtall the Second (890-884 BCE) the Assyrians discovered that art. At the two sides of the stairs in the ziggurat, statues of animals were raised which were supposed to guard the temple. A most important statue was the fabulous Griffin which is an imaginary beast with an eagle's head and a lion's body. This was an Elamite invention and was unknown to the Sumerians.

#### Inscriptions

On the brick facing of the ziggurat starting from the lowest point to the highest point between each 10 layers of bricks, there is one layer of inscribed bricks. The text of the inscriptions on these bricks are brief and nearly similar. They mention the name of the founder of the building, his genealogy and title, to which god the building is dedicated and damn those who decide to destroy the building. R.P. Steve, a connoisseur of ancient inscriptions among Ghirshman's excavation group, has translated more than six thousands of these tablets written in Elamite and Akkadian languages. What is important about these inscriptions is that with the exception of those found in Choghazanbil none of the brick or stone inscriptions mention the name of gods and this further demonstrates the significance of the ancient tablets.

#### Choghazanbil's Religion and the Ziggurat

According to the brick inscriptions in Choghazanbil, Untash-Gal had built temples for nearly 19 Elamite and Babylonian gods. By collecting the local deities in the building, Untash-Gal converted it into an important religious site. This Elamite capital is very similar to Mecca before the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula where different gods of various tribes were assembled. Untash-Gal built temples for Ishne-Karab, Kiririsha, Pinikir, Manzat, Inanna, Belit and Shiashum goddesses and gods like Napratep, Nabu, Humban, Sunkir Rishara and Kilah Supir and wedded deities such as Hishmitik and Ruhuratir, Shinmut and Inuru, Adad and Shala and Shushmushi and Beit at Choghazanbil.

One of the important ceremonies at Choghazanbil was to honor the god Shimit which was held on May 8 each year. In this ceremony known as the Tuga festival, a fat cow was sacrificed to the god. The Elamite used to observe another ceremony called Gushum held at the beginning of fall where a fattened sheep was sacrificed at the temples of Pinikir and Kiririsha. Although a number of burnt human skeletons and bones have been discovered in the tombs in Choghazanbil, since this is the first proof of burning of human beings in Elam, one cannot be sure of such traditions in Elam.

The successors of Untash Gal transferred all the valuable relics of Choghazanbil to Shusa and gradually the town and ziggurat ceased their significance. Eventually in the eighth attack to Elam by Ashur Banipal, the Assyrian king, in the year 640 BCE this town was destroyed and abandoned for ever although traces of existence of Achaemenid and Parthian shepherds or later Iranian farmers have broken the silence of that ancient temple.

source:

<http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Archaeology/Elamite/choghazanbil.htm>