

New Perspectives from the Proto-Elamite Horizon in the Center of the Iranian Plateau

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Abstract

Archaeologists define the Proto-Elamite phenomenon by the appearance of Proto-Elamite writing, the first form of local writing in Iran on tablets in many cases together with specific types of other management tools and pottery, over a vast geographical territory across the Iranian plateau. Different explanations have been offered to account for this spread and the shift from a Mesopotamian-oriented culture during the earlier period (Late Uruk) to a predominantly Iranian-oriented culture during the late fourth and early third millennium BCE. However, up to now, most of these explanations have been concentrated on the recovered material culture from Fars in the southern part of the plateau and Khuzestan in the southwest. New discoveries from sites on the northern fringes of the plateau depict a fresh and more complete picture of this enigmatic phenomenon. The new excavations and surveys conducted in the settlements that contain the material culture of this horizon have significantly added to our knowledge about the formation and spreading processes of this horizon. Cultural material recently recovered from these sites have extended the Proto-Elamite territory even further, have changed our understanding of the relationships among them and the potential ways this cultural horizon was shaped and diffused. In this paper, we present some of the newly discovered evidence from these sites including but not limited to: Sofalin, Shoghali, Ozbaki, Gholi Darvish and compare them with our older understanding of the presence of this cultural horizon in the center and northern parts of the Iranian plateau.

Keywords: Proto-Elamite, Cultural Material, Sofalin; Shoghali, Central Iranian Plateau.

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Introduction

Scholars define the Proto-Elamite archaeological phenomenon by the appearance of Proto-Elamite writing, the first form of *local* writing on tablets, in many cases together with specific types of other management/administrative- control tools, over a vast geographical territory across the Iranian plateau (Fig 1).



Fig. 1 Location of Proto-Elamite Settlements Across the Iranian Plateau

Different explanations have been offered to account for this spread and shift from a Mesopotamian-oriented culture during the earlier period (Late Uruk-Susa II) to a predominantly native culture during the late fourth and early third millennium B.C. (Dittmann, 1986: 76-85). However, up to now most of these explanations have overwhelmingly concentrated on the recovered material culture from Fars on the southern part of the plateau and Khuzestan on the southwest (Potts, 1999). New discoveries from the sites on the northern fringes of the plateau depict a fresh perspective of this enigmatic phenomenon. The new

excavations and surveys conducted in the settlements that contain the material culture of this horizon, although limited, nevertheless have added to our knowledge about certain aspects of the formation and spreading processes of this archaeological horizon. Cultural material recently recovered from these sites have extended the Proto-Elamite territory even further, have changed our understanding of the relationships among these settlements and the potential ways this cultural horizon was shaped and diffused. Here, we briefly present some of the newly discovered evidence from few locations and discuss them in relation to our older understanding of the presence of this cultural horizon in the center and northern parts of the Iranian plateau.

New Perspectives from Tape Sofalin and Shoghali

Glyptic Material

One of the most important new finds with regard to the Proto-Elamite horizon is Tape Sofalin and its twin settlement Tape Shoghali (Fig 2).



Fig 2 Satellite Image of Tape Sofalin and Tape Shoghali

These two tapes are located on the north-central portion of the Central Iranian plateau and in the eastern part of the Ray plain. The Ray plain is a semi-arid fertile zone and is surrounded by the Alborz Mountains in the north. These two sites are located some 10 km. east of the modern city of Varamin now part of Tehran's rapidly growing urban sprawl. They are also located about 15 km. south of Khorassan Road, the major millennia old, east-west trade route, between Mesopotamia, the Iranian plateau, and the Central Asia.

The excavations at Sofalin have indicated that the chronology of the site encompasses a broad span of time from the fifth millennium up to the first millennium BC (Iron age III), and that only a few meters of the site's elevation consist of occupational debris, the lower core being a vast natural hill (Hessari 2006; 2007; 2011).

The special connection between Susa as possibly the major center for the Proto-Elamite culture where the largest number of administrative tools such as tablets, seals and sealing have been recovered (Dahl 2005; 2009) and Sofalin proves to be curious. Tape Sofalin and Susa are the only two Proto-Elamite settlements that contain objects depicting the whole evolutionary range of documenting techniques. Administrative objects in Sofalin include large number of tokens, clay balls, sealed bulla, numerical tablets, numerous sealing, including door sealing and window sealing (Fig 3), and many tablets with proto-Elamite writings on them (Fig 4).



Fig. 3 Examples of Door and Window Sealing Recovered from Tape Sofalin.





Fig. 4 Examples of Proto-Elamite Tablets Recovered from Tape Sofalin

This is a significant fact and shows that the idea of the record keeping was being practiced in Sofalin contemporary to Susa or at least not much later than the start of the new trend in Susa. The potential paths and mechanisms that facilitated this relatively fast paced communication remains to be investigated, but most possibly the mobile segment of the population had a role in this process. In his proposed complementary model of the state formation process in southwestern Iran to that of Wright and Johnson (1975), Alizadeh claims that only a non-urban polity could be the most likely production force capable of presiding over interregional trade during this time (Alizadeh, 2010). As an explanation for the vast spread of the Proto-Elamite administrative tablets on the Iranian plateau he asserts that, “If the general similarities in material culture of western Iran and central Mesopotamia are taken as indicating a pattern of interregional tribal alliances, such alliances then provided a mechanism through which Proto-Elamite administrative tablets could be widely distributed” (Alizadeh, 2010: 371-372). In a similar line of argument, Boehmer believes that a portion of cultural indicators such as

different clay balls, cylinder seals, which have been found in Uruk, were sent from Susa/ the ancient Elam area (Boehmer, 1999: 115-17).

Among other lines of evidence, the sealing from Sofalin shows a close affinity with Susa. This fact regarding the distance and the existence of many other settlements between the two that do not contain this trait is peculiar. A large number of glyptic scenes from Sofalin exactly parallel sealing from Susa II and Susa III levels. The cylinder seals from Sofalin bear a variety of motifs including simple geometric to highly naturalistic representation of animals and humans (Fig 5).



Fig. 5 Examples of Sealing Recovered from Tape Sofalin with both Geometric and Naturalistic Impressions

A good example of this affinity is a sealing depicting the so-called scene of “Master of Animals”. In this scene, the two main types of central figures are represented as: “Lion-man” and “Bull-man”. A lion and a monkey with their heads attached to the arms and torsos of a human are shown as well. The Master of animal holds a stick in the left hand and a Scepter possibly a symbol of ritual power in the right hand (Hessari, in press). Stylistically, this seal is related to a large number of classic Proto-Elamite Style seal impressions in Susa (e.g. Amiet, 1980: pl 37).

Burials

Burials in Tape Sofalin and Shoghali as another category of cultural remains add to our knowledge about the prevalent practices related to the treatment of the dead during the proto-Elamite horizon. So far, two jar burials and three pit graves have been discovered in Sofalin (Hessari and Awarkish, in press) (Image 6).



Fig. 6 Jar Burials Recovered from Tape Sofalin

Also three jar burials were recently excavated in Shoghali. Similar band painted carinated jars that discovered in Shoghali (Image 7) were used for burials in the nearby settlement of Arisman (Vatandoust et al., 2011:70).



Fig. 7 Carinated Band Painted Jar used for a Burial in Tape Shoghali.

Comparable to Sialk and Arisman, these jars in Sofalin and Shoghali were always used to bury children and were covered with a plain bowl functioning as a lid for the jar. The plain jars, resemble at least four similar jar burials from the contemporary levels in Tape Ozbaki (Majidzadeh, 2001: 141) as well as level IV2 in Sialk (Girshman, 1938: 11). Three infant jar burials were recovered in the TUV section of Malyan along with an infant, a child and an adult buried in a pit grave (Nicholas, 1990: 50-51). Among these settlements, this burial practice is performed with a certain degree of diversity. For example, a jar was used to burry an adult in Arisman and this exhibits an exception to the prevalent pattern of burying infants and children in these jars. Also all the three-jar burials in Shoghali were topped with animal burials and that is an unprecedented practice in any other Proto-Elamite settlement.

Industrial Activities

The latest excavation season in Tape Shoghali has revealed an area of metallurgical activities with at least three connected workshops (Image 8).



Fig. 8 Some Details of the Pyrotechnical Installations Recovered in Tape Shoghali.

The furnaces in these workshops are equipped with vents and pieces of molds, litharge cakes or sulfide monoxide and slags have been found in the area. Beveled rim bowls and flat trays were also present in this context. The details of these workshops are under study but the preliminary results show that silver was separated from lead sulfides through the cupellation

process. Whether these metallurgical workshops were a structure integrated among a domestic area similar to Arisman, or were an isolated industrial quarter separated from the domestic living areas identical to the contemporary Hesar metallurgical quarter, remains to be investigated.

Perspectives from Tape Hesar

Keeping in mind the strategic location, the size and the frequency of administrative tools, it would not be illogical to say that Sofalin along with its twin settlement Shoghali were a center/ hub of all other settlements on the center of the Iranian plateau where the proto-Elamite culture was communicated to. These settlements included but possibly were not limited to: Sialk, Arisman, Ozbaki, Gholi Darvish and Tape Hesar.

Tape Hesar, located just few kilometers from Sofalin, Arisman and Sialk along the major Khorasan road, is traditionally not included in the proto-Elamite cultural sphere. This is despite the fact that there are several types of artifacts recovered from Hesar II contexts that can be related to the administrative practices. Dyson has dated Hesar II contexts to the early third millennium BCE. This phase is contemporaneous to Sialk IV2, Susa IIIA (Acropole I: 16-15B), Malyan Middle Banesh, Yahya IVC2, and possibly the termination of Godin VI/V levels. Twelve samples from this phase in Hesar provide an average range of 3040-2930 cal. BCE (Dyson, 1987: 650).

There are several types of artifacts recovered from Hesar II contexts that

can be related to administrative and trade practices. These objects include cylinder seals, counters or tokens (in conical or pyramidal shapes), jar stoppers and clay labels or tablet blanks.

Rare jar stoppers occur in Middle Hesār II. Balls, ellipses and bicones have been found from early, middle and late Hesār II contexts. Three complete, and one broken cylinder seals have been recovered from the occupational debris of Hesār II. An inscribed tag (or label), and a number of tablet blanks were found during the 1976 re-study project. The clay tag or label with three non-Proto-Elamite signs or symbols (two signs and one digit running right to left along the long side) was found below a buttressed stairway structure. This tag is pierced on top by a longitudinal hole, sealed twice with a stamp, and pinched once in the lower right hand corner. This object has been associated with a stylized anthropomorphic figurine, clay cones and a copper slag concentration (Dyson, 1989: 659).

A second find that included five pillow shaped tablet blanks, along with two fragments of impressed bullae, was made on the floor of a storeroom just north of the buttressed stairway. The floor of this storeroom has been covered with sherds, brick fragments, animal bones, and a copper smelting slag, fragments of clay molds, and vitrified furnace linings, as well as clay tokens.

A third find consisting of three fragmentary pillow-shaped tablet blanks was made in a stratum capping the top of the north wall and corridor

of the buttressed stairway structures. These three tablets were associated with two stylized anthropomorphic genderless clay figurines (Dyson, 1989: 659). The two groups of tablet blanks are related to the late phase of the stairway and belong to the Middle Hesār II period (Dyson, 1989: 659).

Esmaeel Yaghmayee has also excavated some glyptic materials during his 1995 campaign (Image 9).

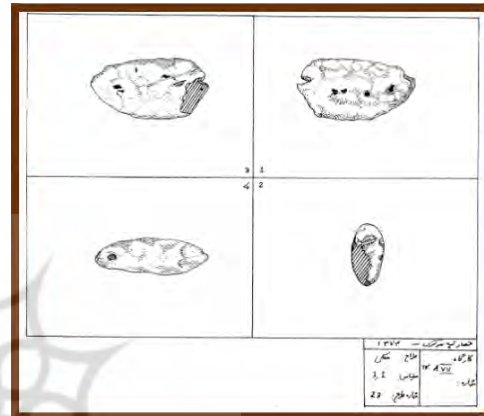


Fig. 9 Potential Glyptic Objects Recovered in Tape Hesar During the 1995 Excavation Campaign.

Unfortunately, not much information of these materials has been published. Apparently some may have specific signs on them. These finds certainly need to be further studied.

Conclusion

During the last centuries of the fourth millennium BCE, these proto-Elamite settlements on the Iranian central plateau were vibrant communities housing craftsmen most possibly involved in the production of luxury metal goods. In Tape Hesar, the ceramic making tradition during this horizon was a local one with no signs of influence from the lowland trends (visible in the neighboring site of Sialk,

Sofalin and Arisman), However, the recovered administrative objects although very few, suggest the adoption and usage of typical management tools and techniques during the Proto-Elamite horizon. It is important to keep in mind that in contrast to existing models that have tried to explain the proto-Elamite archaeological phenomenon, we cannot make assumptions about the existence of consistent and synchronized patterns of change and repetition in all Proto-Elamite settlements. Therefore, although portions of the material culture during this horizon were similar, they were nonetheless incorporated into local communities and their practices in distinct ways. Each settlement had its own process of selectively adopting the new trends.

The closer investigation of the nature of the interactions and relations among the Proto-Elamite settlements on the center of the Iranian plateau and also the nature of the interaction between them and other major settlements in Khuzestan and Fars will shed considerable light on multiple problems connected with the emergence and disappearance of this phenomenon. Among these specifically Tape Sofalin and Shoghali contain an interrupted sequence of late fourth and third millennium BCE occupations. Also the remains recovered from them illustrate a surprising sophistication in the use of proto-Elamite economic and numerical tablets, as well as cylindrical seal impressions. The existence of a full picture of all evolutionary stages of administrative techniques and the

presence of industrial activities together with their strategic locations along a millennia old east west trade route adds a significant piece to the proto-Elamite puzzle. We hope our continued work in the future will answer many of the present questions and depict a clearer picture of the daily life, inter-and intra- settlement interactions and relations during the late fourth and the early third millennium BCE in this geographic location.

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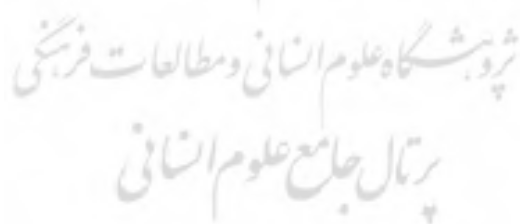
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منظر جدید درباره افق فرهنگی آغازیلامی در مرکز فلات ایران

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چکیده

پدیده آغازیلامی با ظهور و استفاده از نخستین نگارش بومی ایرانی روی گل‌نوشته‌ها در کنار برخی ابزارهای مدیریتی دیگر و سفال‌های شاخص توسط باستان‌شناسان برای این مرحله در محدوده جغرافیایی فلات ایران تبیین شده است. این مرحله زمانی که از اواخر هزاره چهارم پیش از میلاد شروع می‌شود با مرحله زمانی شوش ۲ یا اروک جدید در بین‌النهرین متفاوت است و دارای شاخص‌های مستقل خود است. یافته‌های جدید این دوره از کاوش و بررسی‌های انجام‌شده در شمال مرکزی فلات ایران، تصویر جدیدی در بررسی نظام‌مندی ابزارهای فرهنگی این دوره جدید ارائه می‌دهد؛ چراکه یافته‌های به‌دست‌آمده از محوطه‌های سفالین، شغالی، قلی درویش و ازبکی، مستندات جدیدی در خصوص شکل‌گیری و گسترش افق فرهنگ آغازیلامی در شمال مرکز فلات ایران مهیا ساخته است.

واژه‌های کلیدی: آغازیلامی، مواد فرهنگی، سفالین، شغالی، مرکز فلات ایران.

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