


## Excavations at Tepe Rabat, and Its Ancient Name


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### Abstract

Rabat Tepe, an ancient site in northwestern Iran near the Little Zab River, reveals insights into two distinct periods from the Iron Age. The primary focus of excavations has been on the layers dating back to the first millennium BC. Notable discoveries at Rabat include a striking pebble mosaic pavement, fortified walls, and various decorative bricks. The site's size, architectural remains, and uncovered artifacts point to its significant role during the first millennium BC. Through multiple excavation seasons, researchers have gleaned valuable information about the site's layout and historical eras. Evidence suggests that a thick wall once enclosed the entire area, around 3 meters in width. Artifacts found at Rabat share similarities with those from Qalaichi, a well-known Mannaeen site. While initially attributed to Mannaeen culture, this association is now under debate. Excavations between 2006 and 2008 unearthed inscribed bricks inscribed with Neo-Assyrian cuneiform script. These findings sparked discussions and identified Rabat with ancient cities like Paddir/Šurdira and Hubushkia, although these identifications face significant challenges. Rabat was an independent religious-royal city-state.

**Keywords:** Northwestern Iran; Rabat; Manna; Assure.

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## Introduction

Rabat Tepe is an important archaeological site situated near the city of Sardasht in northwestern Iran, on the bank of the Little Zab River (Fig. 1). The settlement occupies a natural inclined hill, covering an extensive area of over 20 hectares (Fig. 2). The earliest known archaeological investigation in the Sardasht district was carried out in the 1890s by Jacques de Morgan, who documented several ancient sites (de Morgan, 1895). In 1965, Iranian archaeologist Babak Rad visited the Rabat site, building upon the initial studies. Subsequent to these initial investigations, a brief survey was conducted in 1975 under the leadership of Kleiss. This survey identified several sites, including Rabat, and reported the discovery of pottery sherds from the Iron Age at the site (Kleiss, 1977: 141). The site was revisited by Kargar in 1986. Up until that point, most researchers had referred to the large cone-shaped hill near the Rabat (2) site as Tepe Rabat 1, following the identification of the Iron Age mound.

In 2004, a collection of painted glazed bricks obtained through illegal excavations came into the possession of the mayor of Rabat city. Through research and analysis, it was determined that these bricks originated from the Rabat site. The artifacts found were similar to those from Qalaichi and were attributed to the Man-naean culture (Kargar, 2004: 230). With the cooperation of the mayor of Rabat and the West Azarbaijan Cultural Heritage, the first excavation season was conducted in 2005 under the leadership of Bahman Kargar. More recently, Bahman Karegar and Reza Heidari conducted five seasons of excavation at the Rabat II site.

These investigations utilized advanced archaeological techniques, including remote sensing and geophysical surveys, to map the site's features and gain a better understanding of its layout and development during the Iron Age II-III. The team uncovered structures, fortifications, and numerous artifacts, providing valuable insights into the role of the site during the Iron Age.

## Architecture

Based on the stratification and the archaeological findings, Tepe Rabat includes two periods and two cultural layers associated with the Iron Age. Period II corresponds to the transitional phase between the end of the second millennium BC and the beginning of the first millennium BC, commonly referred to as Iron II. This period remains relatively unexcavated and requires further investigation. On the other hand, period I consists of two layers, namely Ia and Ib. Layer Ia is associated with the Iron III age, while layer Ib also belongs to the Iron III age. The majority of excavations conducted thus far have focused on layer Ib, as it is the most extensive and significant layer unearthed to date.

## Pebble Mosaic Pavement

The most remarkable discovery made during the excavation at Rabat is a pebble mosaic pavement. The pavement features a design consisting of concentric circles enclosed within squares or rectangles. The construction technique employed at the site involved the use of small boulders and cobbles to create intricate and concentric circle patterns. Each circle was spaced approximate-

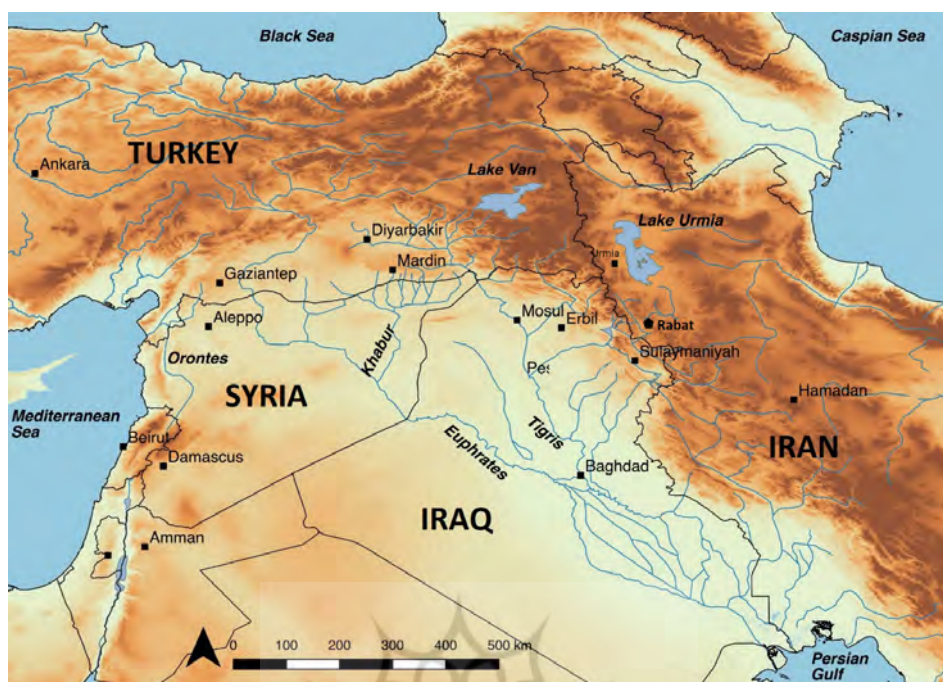


Fig. 1. Location of Tepe Rabat in Northwestern Iran (Base of Map; Radner, 2017: 11)

ly 10 cm apart and consisted of smaller stones. The central area of the circles was constructed using larger stones. Additionally, the gaps between the larger circles were filled with the same boulders, resulting in cluster designs. The arrangement of the pebbles is slightly irregular, with the sides of the squares or rectangles measuring between 1.50 and 1.80 meters in length. To outline the pattern, a row of bricks measuring 34×34×8 cm and 38×38×10 cm was placed around the circles. The bricks were initially set in clay, and the space inside the brick outline was then filled with small boulders and cobbles. The stones used in this construction were readily available in abundance from the nearby Zab River and surrounding areas (Fig. 3).

It is worth noting that in some cases, the circles are not complete due to the presence of a row of bricks passing

through the middle. As a result, these incomplete circles resemble semi-circles. Moreover, discernible rows of bricks are evident on the brick surfaces, indicating the presence of a brick platform that likely served a religious function. Although the architecture of Rabat is unique and no similar structure has been reported from any ancient site, the Gordion (Rose, 2017) and Ziyaret Tepe (Matney *et al.*, 215) pavements bear some similarities to Rabat in certain aspects.

Ia: Adjacent to the Ib pavement in the central part of the hill, an additional pavement is situated, distinguished by its primitive construction methods and notable differences in quality and typology, bearing no resemblance to the preceding type (Fig. 4). Evident signs of destruction are observed in select locations, suggesting the presence of fragments from a stone structure dating to more recent



Fig. 2. Tepe Rabat, View from North (Ebrahimipour *et al*, 2020: 209)



Fig. 3a. Pebble Mosaic Pavement, Tepe Rabat

periods. On the pavement, remnants of a stone structure measuring 1.35 meters in width and 1.30 centimeters in length have been discovered. The structure comprises a single row of rubble stones, fragmented stones, and brick fragments. Adjacent to these fragments, six pots were uncovered on the pavement surface, demonstrating

potential for restoration. Furthermore, traces of burn marks and 20 small clay beads (with diameters ranging from 4 to 6 cm) were detected on a section of the stone surface. These clay beads were densely positioned in proximity to a jar and a smaller clay container (Fig. 5).

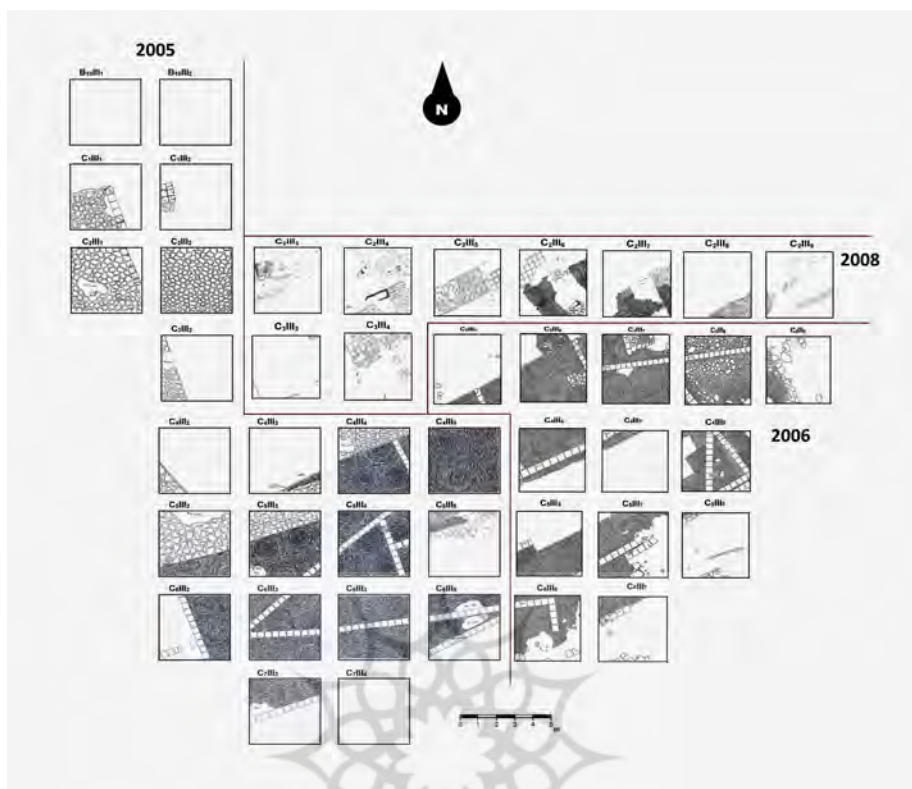


Fig. 3b. Pebble Mosaic Pavement, Tepe Rabat. Drawing by B. Khanmohamadi

Considering the collective findings within the central portion of the hill, including an abundance of food storage vessels, associated architectural structures, as well as ovens and partially-fired beads, it is plausible to infer that this particular area served as architectural spaces for food storage and storage warehouses during period Ia.

### Fortification Wall

During the course of excavation, remnants of the fortification wall surrounding the site have been uncovered in various sections. In the initial excavation season, a portion of the wall measuring 3 meters in width was unearthed in the northern part of the site. Subsequently,

in the fourth excavation season of 2014, additional remnants of the fortification wall were found in the southern area. In the excavated sections, the fence exhibits a width of 3 meters, with large stones utilized on the sides of the wall. The gaps between these stones are filled with smaller stones and debris, while traces of mud mortar are also evident.

Adjacent to the older wall, another wall measuring 2.50 meters in width is present, featuring buttresses in select areas. Although significant portions of this wall have been lost or destroyed, remaining traces indicate that it was constructed directly above the previous wall, with a relatively short time interval between them. Structurally, the upper wall closely



Fig. 4. Ia Pavement

resembles the lower wall, with the primary distinction being the incorporation of broken brick fragments mixed with rubble and crushed stone in its central sections. The exposed length of the lower fence amounts to approximately 16.85 meters (Fig. 6). Additionally, a small support structure, resembling a half bastion, measuring 120 cm in length and 50 cm in width, is situated in the eastern part of the wall, providing reinforcement. The remaining sections of the wall feature a stone ridge. Considering evidence obtained from the southeastern and southwestern portions of the site, it is likely that a wall with a thickness of approximately 3 meters once encircled the entire area. It is evident that the wall underwent reconstruction at various points in time.

### Wall Piers

In the southern part of the hill and near the fortification wall, four wall piers have been discovered (Fig. 7). These piers are square in shape and are positioned at the four corners, with a distance of less than 2 meters between them. The dimensions of these wall piers measure approximately 2 meters, and they are constructed using larger stones as the main structure, filled in with smaller stones and mud mortar. On two of the piers, the remains of two rows of mud bricks can be observed, although they are heavily damaged. Based on the location of these wall piers in relation to the surrounding fortification wall and the level at which they are found, it appears that they belong to a more recent period.



Fig. 5. Clay Beads and Jar on The Stone Pavement Surface

### Bricks

The tradition of utilizing glazed terracotta bricks as ornamental features originated in southern Iran during the 13th century BC. The early application of glaze in architectural ornamentation is particularly evident in Iran, specifically at Choga Zanbil and the Middle Elamite temple of Inshushinak (Cook, 2004: 59). These bricks were embellished with decorative paintings on one of their external surfaces and were glazed for installation on walls (Razmjoo *et al.*, 2004). At the Median site of Baba Jan, a collection of monochrome painted tile-shaped bricks was excavated (Goff, 1969, 128f.). Additional examples have been discovered at various Iron Age sites such as Ziwiye, Hasanlu (Razmjoo, 2004), and Boukan (Hassanzadeh, 2006). Moreover, glazed bricks and tiles from

the later second millennium have also been identified at Ashur and Dur-Kurigalzu (Read and Finke, 2014). The utilization of glazed bricks reached its zenith during the Achaemenid period, both in terms of technique and design. Glazed friezes initially emerged at Susa, possibly under the guidance of designers and engineers commissioned by Darius, serving as decorative elements for newly constructed royal palaces (Razmjoo *et al.*, 2004). The bricks found in Rabat represent the most notable architectural decorative elements of the site. These bricks were carefully crafted through a variety of baking methods and sculpted into diverse shapes (Fig. 8).

The bricks found in Rabat include non-decorative bricks and painted and glazed decorative bricks of different



Fig. 6. The Remaining Sections of the Fortification Wall in the Southern Area of the Site

types such as square bricks, half bricks, quarter bricks, thin bricks, formed brick molds, and glazed tiles (Kargar and Binandeh, 2009; Hejebri Nobari and Afifi, 2009: 56; Afifi and Heidari, 2010: 159). At Tepe Rabat, a variety of glazed materials have been unearthed, including ordinary glazed bricks, serrated glazed bricks, stair-shaped glazed bricks, and glazed doornails. These glazed elements were discovered to be applied on red clay-based bodies. The vibrant palette of the glazes consisted of green, white, turquoise, and yellow colors, occasionally separated by black or dark green glazes. opacifiers used in the green, white and turquoise glazes of Tepe Rabat had various proportions of Ca/Sb and Na/Sb atomic ratios (Holakooei *et al.*, 2016).

Furthermore, in addition to glazed bricks, Rabat bricks also exhibit decorative images akin to those found at Qalaic-hi (Binandeh *et al.*, 2017). These glazed brick tiles themselves are artifacts that would have adorned the walls of temple structures. One can envision the walls of a room embellished with the intricate painted patterns adorning these bricks.

#### Glazed Clay Pegs

There are small ceramic decorative whorl-shaped bosses, some convex and some flat. These bosses have holes in the middle and are fastened to walls using metal nails. On average, they have a diameter of about 10 centimeters, with holes in the center where, in some cases, iron pins can be seen. These wall bosses





Fig. 7. Wall Piers in the Southern Part of the Hill

are glazed and decorated with rosettes. This particular type of boss is commonly found in the Rabat archaeological site (Heidari, 2007: 210; Hejebri Nobari and Afifi, 2009: 53; Kargar and Binandeh, 2009: 118).

### Small Finds

During the 2009 excavations, a number of small objects were discovered, including a seal and a seal impression (Fig. 9). The seal is cone-shaped and made of glass paste, measuring approximately 2 cm in length. It features an engraved geometric pattern on the lower part and has a hole on the upper part, presumably for hanging.

Adjacent to the seal, a complete seal impression was found on a piece of pottery. It appears that there were other impression seals in close proximity, al-

though they were broken and missing. The circular seal impression has a diameter of about 3 cm. The depiction on the seal impression portrays a standing figure wearing a long dress and raising one hand. The details of the head and face are not well-preserved. On the front of the chest and hand, a five-pointed star can be observed, and below the star, there is a possible depiction of an eagle. The main image is surrounded by a circular frame adorned with a geometric pattern. This particular posture, characterized by standing and raising the hand as a sign of respect, is observed in New Assyrian seals (Radner, 2012a: 688, Fig. 2). Additionally, the eagle pattern found on the Hasanlu bowl resembles the eagle pattern seen on these seals. It also bears resemblance to the Rock-Cut Tombs of Qizqapan, depicting two men, flanking

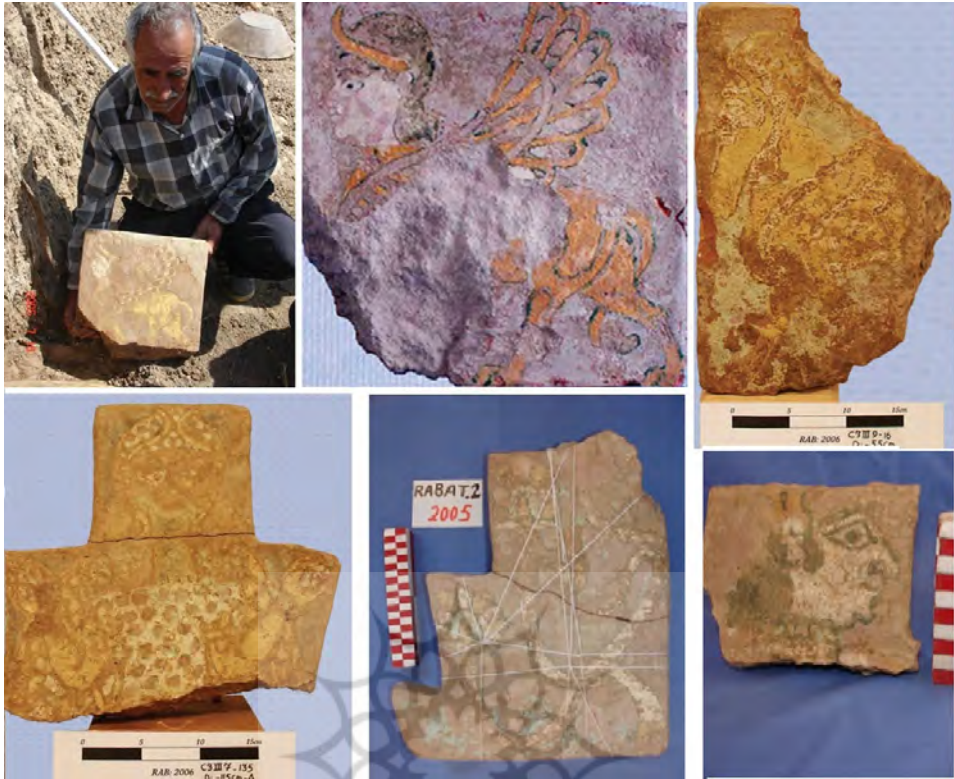


Fig. 8. Glazed Tiles and Bricks

a stepped altar topped by a semicircle. A diminutive glazed earthenware plaque measuring approximately 2.3 cm in diameter, featuring a central perforation that appears to have been fastened to an unknown object. Complementing these discoveries are a petite bronze ring and a minuscule bronze earring, both of which are recurrently found in numerous archaeological sites dating back to the first millennium BC (Fig. 10).

### Pottery Sherds

The Tepe Rabat ceramics are mostly in the range of buff to dark buff colors, with a very limited number of ceramics leaning towards red and gray. They are often undecorated and have a simple

and smooth surface, with a considerable number of them being delicate. The only existing decoration on some of them includes incised patterns such as parallel horizontal lines, parallel vertical lines, extended zigzag lines, stepped patterns, extended corded patterns, and occasionally impressed patterns. The study of the obtained ceramics has shown that most of them belong to the simple buff ceramic tradition of the Iron Age III and are comparable to the ceramics from the nearby sites of Ziwiye, Qalaic-hi, and Hasanlu. Except for a few cases, all the ceramics were wheel-made and made using mineral clay, and they have undergone appropriate and sufficient firing. Most of the ceramics have a thin



Fig. 9. Seal Impression and Glass Paste Seal

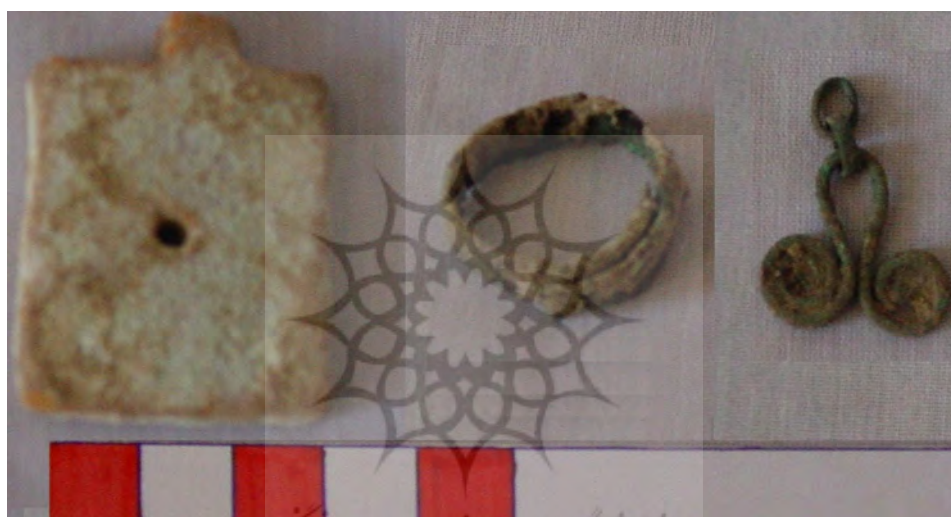


Fig. 10. Small Finds

clay slip, with the more delicate samples having a polished or burnished surface. Among them, a ceramic rhyton was also found, although its upper part is broken and lost, while its body and lower part are intact.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The size, architectural evidence, and artifacts discovered at the Rabat site in northwestern Iran indicate its significant importance during the first millennium BC. Despite only a small portion of

the site being excavated relative to its size, the five excavation seasons have provided valuable information about its layout and various historical periods. Regrettably, the site has suffered extensive damage due to construction activities and illegal excavations over the past few decades, making its identification more challenging. Nearly all the excavation operations display signs of destruction. It appears that prior to gaining recognition in the field of archaeology, antique dealers had offered engraved glazed bricks

from Rabat in the antique market, falsely labeling them as Qalaichi objects. Apart from a pebble mosaic pavement and some pottery, the majority of movable artifacts were not discovered *in situ*.

There are two distinct periods at the Rabat site, with the earlier period identified through stratigraphic excavation but not yet extensively excavated. The majority of excavations have focused on the layers dating to the first millennium BC. A noteworthy feature of the site is the presence of a unique pebble pavement, which has not been reported elsewhere, and may have origins in Gordion and pebble mosaic pavements have been reported at some Neo-Assyrian sites, such as Tille Hoyuk (Blaylock, 2009: 134-138) and Arslan Tash (Thureau-Dangin *et al.*, 1931: 43-44). This wide pavement exhibits rows of bricks in various sections. Interestingly, there is a central area within the pavement that lacks any form of paving and appears to be completely absent. The primary challenge lies in understanding the architectural purpose and function of this structure. Given the extensive nature of the pavement and the absence of evidence such as column bases or wall remnants, it is likely that this structure was an uncovered courtyard. Another intriguing aspect is the abundance of engraved glazed bricks, tiles, and decorative elements containing mythological imagery found on or near the pavement, but not in their original positions.

The architectural elements and decorative features discovered at the site suggest a potential connection to structures that likely occupied the central area of the cruciform structure. The presence of glazed crenellations and ornamental

stair-shaped bricks indicates that these elements may have taken the form of upright panels. Additionally, various platforms and altars resembling those found at Qalaichi (Kargar *et al.*, 2021) and Satu Qala (van Soldt *et al.*, 2013: 232, Fig. 10) have been uncovered in different sections of the missing structure.

Following the aforementioned layer, notable alterations occurred within a relatively brief temporal span. Certain areas display remnants of an architectural structure, potentially resembling a substantial wall constructed using stone rubble. Adjacent to these features, fragments of a brick structure can occasionally be observed. Furthermore, during the latest excavation season, an additional pavement characterized by a new and simplistic design was uncovered in close proximity to the preceding pavements. This newly discovered layer, denoted as Ia, exhibits distinct dissimilarities in terms of form and quality compared to the preceding layer. Additionally, occasional traces of an oven have been identified within this context. The jar vessels recovered from this layer are attributed to this specific chronological phase (Ia).

During the excavation campaigns conducted in both the northern and southern sectors of the site, remnants of a fortification wall have been uncovered, providing evidence of a substantial defensive barrier encompassing this significant center. Although the precise location of the entrance gate remains undetermined, the topographical analysis suggests that it likely resides in the southern region of the hill, characterized by a gentler slope compared to other directions.

The findings obtained thus far from the five seasons of excavation at the Rabat site primarily pertain to architectural structures and their associated decorations. These discoveries strongly indicate that, at the very least, the excavated portion of the site belonged to a sizable religious complex.

After the initial excavations, discussions arose regarding the identification of the ancient city to which this site belonged. Initially, excavators voiced in various press releases that this site may be the ruins of Musasir. It should be noted that Musasir is located in a buffer land. The Urartian inscriptions of Mergeh-Karvan, Kil-e-Shin, and Topzawa, which refer to Musasir, are situated in the corridor between Rwanuz and Oshnovyeh. It is reasonable to search for Musasir between these two areas. Most researchers believe that Musasir to have been located in the area of modern Rawanduz (Boehmer, 1973; Levine, 1974; Parpola and Porter, 2001: Pl.4; Radner, 2012b: 244). Furthermore, the previous hypothesis suggesting a connection between Rabat and Musasir has been refuted (Radner, 2012b: 252).

The excavations conducted between 2006 and 2008 yielded the discovery of five inscribed bricks. Among these, three bricks contain clearly legible cuneiform signs, while the signs on the remaining two are poorly preserved. All inscriptions are written in Neo-Assyrian cuneiform script. One of the inscriptions mentions the Mesopotamian gods Bel and Nabu. Additionally, one of the bricks preserves signs that possibly represent the phrase “[King(?) of the city of Arz]iz[u]”, while the other brick bears the inscription of the name Ata or Ada. Unfortunately, the

surface of the two other bricks has been damaged due to thin glaze, rendering the signs unreadable (Heidari, 2010: 150), after the discovery of these bricks, other suggestions were made, and identified this site with the ancient city of Paddir/Šurdira (Heidari, 2010: 150). Moreover, Reade and Finkel also addressed this topic in an article (Reade and Finkel, 2014). While the reading Arzizu in Brick B may suggest that Arzizu was the ancient name of Rabat, it is also possible that Ata’s capital-city was somewhere nearby in the region and that he also controlled Rabat (Read and Finkel, 2014: 593). In 880 BC., the king of Assyria made reference to Arzizu during his campaign against the Zamua, which is now identified as modern Sulaimaniyah. Based on this mention, Arzizu was located in close proximity to Zamua.

According to historical records, Paddir served as the capital of Allabria from as early as 842 BCE. It is noted that Paddir was mentioned alongside Karalla during the reign of Sargon II, particularly in 716 BCE (Fuchs, 1994: 453). During the time of Ashurbanipal, the town was under the control of Manna.

In 882 BC., during Assurbanipal campaign, he mentioned several cities, including Shurda. However, as noted by Reade and Finkel, the excavated layer of Rabat does not correspond to that time period and is actually over a century later. In a recent the location of Shurda has been proposed to be in the Rawanduz district (Marf, 2022: 111). The location of Allabria has been identified in the modern Kurdistan province, specifically in the vicinity of Sanandaj and Marivan. (Saeedyan, 2019; Levine, 1977: 145; Brown,

1979: 17; Parpola and Porter, 2001: Pl.11) Therefore, the suggestion that Rabat could be identified with Allabria lacks logical coherence.

It seems that Rabat did not belong to the Mannaeen kingdom, and there is no mention of a Mannaeen city located west of Izirtu in this district in the Assyrian sources (Saeedyan and Qolizadeh, 2019). However, it is worth noting that one of the researchers initially attributed Rabat to the Mannaeen kingdom before the site was excavated (Kargar, 2004). However, upon analyzing the findings, it becomes evident that Rabat is larger than Qalaichi, which is identified as the Mannaeen capital. Furthermore, while the Qalaichi stele bears an Aramaic inscription, the inscribed bricks found at Rabat are written in Neo-Assyrian cuneiform script. Based on these observations, it is more probable that Rabat was an independent religious - royal city-state.

Recently, there has been a proposal to identify the Rabat site as Hubushkia. Saeedyan and Qolizadeh have presented their ideas on the placement of Hubushkia in a detailed article. The authors examined historical geography and Assyrian sources and suggest that Hubushkia was situated near the upper sources of the Zab River, southwest of Lake Urmia, and along the route to the Ashur region in northwest Iran. Based on the size, type of findings, and the location of Rabat, they argue that it is highly likely to be the ancient Hubushkia (Saeedyan and Qolizadeh, 2019). While the authors of the mentioned article correctly associate Hubushkia with the vicinity of Musasir, it is important to note that the geographical location of Rabat is relatively distant from Musasir. There are better alterna-

tives that can be suggested for the location of Hubushkia. Hubushkia was situated to the south of Urartu and Gilzanu, and to the east of Musasir. The Urartian fortress of Gerd-i Sureh, as documented by Kleiss (1976), is found near the strait that separates the Ushno-Solduz region from the Piranshahr district. The southernmost known Urartian site is located west of Hasanlu, and no Urartian site has been reported in Piranshahr (Binandeh, 2019). Hubushkia was also mentioned by Sargon II during his eighth campaign;

Ianzû, king of Nairî, came to meet me from Hubushkia, his royal city, a distance of 4 bêru, and kissed my feet. His tribute, —horses broken to the yoke, cattle and sheep, I received from him in Hubushkia, his city.

Following the destruction of Uaias, Sargon proceeded to Nairi where he encountered Ianzu, approximately 4 beru away from Hubushkia. This area was in close proximity to Musasir. The Tamrchin Pass, which connects the northern region of Iraq, is situated in modern Piranshahr. It is likely that this area in the Little Zab basin corresponds to Hubushkia (Reade, 1978: 140, Molazadeh, 2018: 50).

Most researchers have identified Gilzano as Hasanlu (Reade, 1979: 175). If we accept that Rabat is Hubushkia, then we would expect Musasir to be located in the southern part to the west, and Gilzano in the southern part to the east of the Rabat. However, this arrangement does not seem logical. Additionally, it should be noted that the distance between Rabat and the Piranshahr region is relatively large, making it unreasonable to consider them as the same region. In our opinion, Hubush-

kia is located in the Piranshahr district, where we find big sites such as Shinabad and Pesveh from the 1st millennium BC.

As previously stated, most of the identifications for Rabat site are debatable and hypothesis must be treated with great caution. The quantity and variety of artifacts obtained show that Rabat was an independent religious-royal city-state. Certainly, the Little Zab Basin was

home to various small kingdoms. This site, which was very important in the Iron Age, and was very close to Assyria, is most likely mentioned in Assyrian texts. To which ancient city does this site correspond? Presently, an exact answer eludes us, necessitating the continuation of archaeological studies and excavations. Undoubtedly, this challenge will persist among researchers.

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