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Redefining the Middle Elamite Territorial Landscape in the Central Zagros Corridor: Four Archaeological Sites from Sahneh, Kermanshah

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Abstract

The city of Sahneh, located 54 kilometers northeast of Kermanshah in the central Zagros passage, plays a crucial role as a strategic crossroads, linking the Iranian central plateau to Mesopotamia and connecting the internal plains of Kermanshah to Hamadan. Archaeological surveys in Sahneh County, conducted in 2003, employed the site survey method, whereby all ancient sites were studied in terms of their geographical location and settlement sequence. This approach provides the necessary data for interpreting the settlement history of the region. As a result of this field research, for the first time, two archaeological sites containing cultural materials from the Middle Elamite period were identified in this area. This discovery significantly extends the cultural domain of the Middle Elamite period in the Zagros toward the east and northeast, indicating that the influence of this civilization extended beyond its known centers in the southwestern provinces of Iran (such as Khuzestan, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Fars, and Bushehr) as far as Kermanshah Province. Given the importance of these findings, further surveys were carried out in 2024 and 2025 to identify Middle Elamite sites in Sahneh. Following this research, two additional sites with Middle Elamite cultural materials were discovered. These findings not only confirm the existence of an active cultural-commercial corridor in this region but also highlight the necessity of revising cultural-geographical maps and historical developments of the Middle Elamite period in the central Zagros. Continued studies and targeted excavations at these sites can clarify the role of this region in the network of cultural interactions between the Iranian Plateau and Mesopotamia and are expected to lead to a fundamental reassessment of current perspectives on the history of this era.

Keywords: Middle Elamite, Sahneh County, Middle Elamite Pottery, Button Base, Central Zagros.

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Introduction

Historical awareness of the Elamite realm dates to the twenty-seventh century BCE, when Enmebaragesi, the semi-legendary king of the First Dynasty of Kish, reportedly launched a military campaign into Elam and acquired spoils from the region (Jacobsen, 1939: 28ff). Between 2600 and 2550 BCE, references in the Sumerian King List note Mesopotamian defeats at the hands of the Elamites, including the capture of a king of Ur (Ibid: 95). Texts from this period further attest to a ruling dynasty at Awan. Around 2550 BCE, a ruler of Kish is said to have subdued Awan and transferred its kingship to Kish, as recorded in the same King List (Majidzadeh, 1991: 6).

The Sumerians designated their eastern neighbor by the logogram kur-NIM ("highland" or "mountain"), and by the late third millennium BCE, the region and its inhabitants were referred to collectively in Sumerian as Elam. The cuneiform sign NIM could denote "high" or "elevated," while the combination kur-ki often simply indicated "land". Akkadian sources similarly used the geographic term Kur-elammatum, "land of Elam," derived from the root elûm. The Babylonians later called the elevated territories east of the Tigris Elamtu (or Elam), understood as "the high country" and possibly also "land of the sunrise," i.e., the east (Amiet, 2002; Potts, 2006: 14). In contrast, the Elamites' own name for their land, as preserved in Mesopotamian records from the 18th century BCE onward, was Haltamti, interpreted as "land of the gods" (Potts, 2006: 17). An early reference to Elam also appears in Genesis 14, which mentions Chedorlaomer, king of Elam, among the eastern rulers of the time.

Tradition records twelve kings in both the Awan and the Simashki dynasties (Schile, 1931: 2). Many scholars place the heartland of Simashki in the northern parts of Khuzestan and the Luristan region, especially near present-day Khorramabad (Majidzadeh, 1991: 9). During parts of the second millennium, Elam appears politically weakened, with much of the Susiana plain and the city of Susa falling under Mesopotamian control. A subsequent local dynasty, the sukkalmahs, ruled from c. 1800 to 1550 BCE. Following their decline, a new phase, termed the Middle Elamite period (c. 1550–1100 BCE), emerged. After 1100 BCE, the archaeological and textual records become sparse, a "dark age" lasting until about 743 BCE, after which the Neo-Elamite period (c. 743–550 BCE) began.

The Middle Elamite period in particular saw a notable expansion of Elamite influence. A significant research gap, however, concerns the precise geographical extent of Elam, especially during this era. Recent archaeological surveys in several western and southwestern Iranian provinces, including Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Fars, Bushehr, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, and Lorestan, have yielded important new data pointing to a broader political and economic sphere than previously recognized. Most

recently, investigations in the eastern reaches of the Central Zagros (Sahneh County) have identified several sites containing rich ceramic assemblages, including classic Middle Elamite button-base vessels. This article presents and documents these sites for the first time. Without doubt, they open a new and promising path for understanding a pivotal era in Iranian history, one that promises to reshape our perception of the great Elamite civilization.

This research was designed and implemented with multiple objectives, rooted in fundamental necessities of archaeology and Elamite studies. The primary objective of this study is the documentation and introduction of four newly discovered archaeological sites from the Middle Elamite period (Tepe Aziz Abad, Tepe Sabz Chagha, Tepe Kureh Khani of Elahieh, and Tepe Mirza Ali) in the Sahneh Plain, which have been identified in this region. Following this documentation, a subsequent aim is the redefinition of the cultural and political territory of the Middle Elamite period; as the significant presence of these sites extends the known boundaries of this civilization to the eastern Central Zagros and substantially increases its sphere of influence. In this regard, the present research undertakes a specialized study of the characteristic pottery from these sites, particularly the Button Base pottery, which, as one of the most crucial cultural datasets, plays a key role in chronology and identifying cultural connections. Ultimately, this study seeks to analyze the strategic role of the Sahneh Plain within the commercial and cultural networks of the second millennium BCE, striving to elucidate the position of this plain as a communicative bridge linking the Iranian Central Plateau, Mesopotamia, and the Zagros. Achieving these objectives will establish a solid foundation for future studies in this geographical and cultural domain.

The execution of this research is essential and imperative from several perspectives. The first and most important necessity is filling the significant research gap concerning the Middle Elamite period in the Central Zagros. These discoveries compel the academic community to reconsider previous historical and archaeological perspectives regarding the territorial extent of Elam and to revise the cultural maps of this civilization. On the other hand, the unique and strategic crossroads geographical location of the Sahneh Plain has transformed it into an interactive hub, the study of which is essential for understanding the cultural, commercial, and political processes of the second millennium BCE. Furthermore, the urgent need to protect the identified sites, which are severely threatened by agricultural activities, urban development, and illicit excavations, necessitates their prompt documentation and study.

Materials and Methods: This research, with a fundamental nature and a descriptive-analytical approach, was conducted at two levels: library studies and field surveys. The library studies were carried out dynamically in two stages, both before and after the field

surveys. In the first stage, the theoretical foundations and background of the research were compiled based on sources related to the Middle Elamite period. In the second stage, the field data were analyzed using comparative studies.

The field data for the research were collected through archaeological surveys in the Sahneh Plain, which consisted of two phases. The first phase was conducted by Yaqub Mohammadifar in 2003. The second phase involved a review and new studies carried out in the same area in 2024-2025. This integrated approach has made it possible to provide a well-documented and comprehensive analysis of the Middle Elamite sites in the Sahneh Plain.

Research Background

Systematic and scientific archaeological studies in Sahneh County began in 2003 with the surveys conducted by Yaqub Mohammadifar (Mohammadifar, 2007). In 2007, the significant site of Sheikhiabad was investigated and excavated as part of a joint project directed by Yaqub Mohammadifar, Abbas Motarjem, Roger Matthews, and Wendy Matthews (Matthews *et al.,* 2013). Furthermore, Nasrin Ganji studied the region during the re-survey and identification project of Sahneh County (Ganji, 2009). In 2024, Saeed Borushan conducted studies on the Middle Elamite pottery of Chogha Sabz in his master's thesis (Borushan, 2025).

History of Elam

The history of Elam is full of complex and obscure points. The existence of historical and research gaps is among the characteristics of this period in Iran's history. In the proposed Table 1, a part of this history has been modeled, demonstrating the difficulties of research in this field.

The Middle Elamite Period (c. 1500–1100 BCE)

The Middle Elamite period is not only one of the most important and brilliant chapters in the history of ancient Elam but also in the history of Iran. As Vallat (2017: 77) mentions, this period can be considered the era of the consolidation of "Elamization" and the formation of a centralized, independent power with a distinct identity. Álvarez-Mon has introduced this era as a golden age of art (Álvarez-Mon, 2020: 182).

After a long period during which Elamite rulers governed under the title of sukkalmah (Grand Regent) and with the epithet "sukkalmah of Elam and Shimashki," by the middle of the second millennium BCE, the ancient title "King of Anshan and Susa" (in Akkadian, King of Susa and Anshan) reappeared in royal inscriptions (Mofidi-Nasrabadi, 2018: 232; Vallat, 2017: 77; Stolper, 2010: 73; Potts, 2006: 293). This change was not merely a lexical substitution but indicated a transformation in Elamite political

Table 1: Comparative Chronology Table of Susa, Fars, the Central Iranian Plateau, and Mesopotamia (Alizadeh, 2010: 361).

Date BC	Susiana	Fars	Central Plateau	Mesopotamia
1000–500	Late Elamite	Shogha/Teimuran	Iron II/III	Neo-Babylonian
1500–1000	Mid-Elamite	Kaftari/Qale	Iron I	Kassite
1900–1550	Old Elamite (Sukkalmah)	Kaftari	Late Bronze	Old Babylonian
2100–1900	Old Elamite (Shimashki)	Kaftari		Isin/Larsa
2350–2100	Old Elamite (Awan)	Hiatus	Middle Bronze	Akkadian, Ur III
2600–2350	? (Early Dynastic)	Hiatus		Early Dynastic
3000-2600	Proto-Elamite	Late Banesh	Early Bronze	
3900–3000	Susa II (Uruk)	Lapui/Early Banesh		Uruk
4000–3900	Terminal Susa I	Lapui	Late Plateau	Terminal Ubaid
4500–4000	Late Susiana 2 (Susa I)	Bakun A		Ubaid 4
4800–4500	Late Susiana 1	Tall Gap/Bakun B2		
5400–4800	Late Middle Susiana	Bakun B2	Middle Plateau (Cheshmeh Ali)	Ubaid 3
5600–5400	Early Middle Susiana	Bakun B1	Early Plateau	Ubaid 2
5800–5600	Early Susiana	Jari B	Archaic Plateau	Ubaid 1
6100–5800	Archaic Susiana 3			Ubaid 0
6300–6100	Archaic Susiana 2	Mushki		Hassuna
6500–6300	Archaic Susiana 1			
6700–6500	Archaic Susiana 0	Arsanjan Cave Site		Jarmo

thought. The revival of this title, which implied simultaneous sovereignty over the two main territories of Elam, Susa in the Susiana plain and Anshan in the mountainous region of Fars, was significant.

The KidinuidS (Middle Elamite I, c. 1500–1400 BCE): This dynasty, which included six rulers such as Kidinu, Tan-Ruhurater II, Shalla, Inshushinak-shar-ilani, Tepti-Ahar (Potts, 2006: 299-301), and Igi-hatet, who was identified based on brick inscriptions from Tepe Deh-e Now and likely ruled before Kidinu (Mofidi-Nasrabadi, 2018: 233), served as a connecting bridge between the period of the sukkalmahs and Elam's golden age. The main feature of this period was the beginning of the process of "Elamization" in Susiana. The rulers of this dynasty abandoned the title of sukkalmah and connected themselves to the ancient tradition of the kingdom of Susa and Anshan (Vallat, 2017: 77). Furthermore, by using the title "Servant of Kiririsha", Kidinu and Tepti-Ahar, after a long interval, promoted the pantheon of the Iranian plateau deities in Susiana (Vallat, 2017: 77). However, they still used the Akkadian language in their inscriptions, and their familial relationships and precise succession are not entirely clear (Mofidi-Nasrabadi, 2018: 233; Vallat, 2017: 77; Stolper, 2010: 74-75). Important evidence from this period has been reported from Susa and Haft Tepe.

The IgihalkidS (Middle Elamite II, c. 1400–1200 BCE): This dynasty represents the peak of power and the crystallization of Elamite identity. Our understanding of this dynasty has been completely transformed thanks to new discoveries. Contrary to the previous belief that there were seven kings, we now know that ten kings from the house of Igihalki ruled in two royal lines within this dynasty (Vallat, 2017: 79). Key documents such as the "Berlin Letter" (a letter in Akkadian in which an Elamite king, probably Shutruk-Nahhunte I, claims rule over Babylon by citing the marriages of Elamite kings

to Kassite princesses) and fragments of a statue in the Louvre Museum have led to a fundamental revision of the chronology and genealogy of this house (Vallat, 2017: 79; Mofidi-Nasrabadi, 2018: 234-235). The first line included Igihalki, Pahir-ishshan son of Igihalki, Kiddin-Hutran I, and Untash-Napirisha sons of Pahir-ishshan. The second line included Attar-kittah son of Igihalki, Humban-numena, Untash-Napirisha, Napirisha-Untash, and Kiddin-Hutran III (Potts, 2006: 323).

The pinnacle of this period was the reign of Untash-Napirisha (c. 1340–1300 BCE). His signature action was the foundation of the religious and political city of Chogha Zanbil (Dur-Untash), (Álvarez-Mon, 2020: 232; Vallat, 2017: 80). The construction of this massive ziggurat was not merely an architectural achievement but a powerful statement in line with the policies of Elamization. This structure was dedicated not solely to Inshushinak (the patron god of Susa), but jointly to Napirisha (the chief god of Anshan) and Inshushinak, with Napirisha mentioned in the primary position (Stolper, 2010: 81; Vallat, 2017: 80; Álvarez-Mon, 2020: 182; Mofidi-Nasrabadi, 2018: 241). This change clearly indicates the precedence of the Iranian plateau Elamite component over the Susian component in the divine hierarchy and, consequently, in the political sphere. In this complex, temples were built for almost all the main gods of the Elamite pantheon, indicating a policy of religious integration and the cultural dominance of the Elamite confederation over Susiana (Vallat, 2017: 80-81; Potts, 2006: 331 & 345). Although the end of Igihalkid rule is unclear, the conflict between Kiddin-Hutran III and the Kassite kings towards the end of the Igihalkid dynasty (Stolper, 2010: 82-83; Vallat, 2017: 81) shows that their good relations, which were based on political marriage, had soured in the later part of this era.

The Shutrukid Dynasty (Middle Elamite III, c. 1210–1100 BCE): This dynasty brought Elam to the peak of its military power and territorial influence. The founder of this dynasty, Shutruk-Nahhunte I, citing familial ties with Kassite kings (the same argument found in the Berlin Letter), claimed sovereignty over Babylon (Potts, 2006: 359; Mofidi-Nasrabadi, 2018: 236; Vallat, 2017: 82; Álvarez-Mon, 2012: 752). He organized numerous wars against Mesopotamia and attacked important cities such as Akkad, Babylon, and Eshnunna. The countless spoils he brought to Susa from these campaigns included the most famous Mesopotamian documents, namely the stele of Hammurabi's law code and the Victory Stele of Naram-Sin (Potts, 2006: 359-364; Vallat, 2017: 82; Álvarez-Mon, 2020: 182; Mofidi-Nasrabadi, 2018: 236). According to sources, in 1158 BCE, after expelling Zababa-shuma-iddina, Shutruk-Nahhunte placed his eldest son, Kutir-Nahhunte, on the throne of Babylon (Potts, 2006: 364-365; Vallat, 2017: 82).

His successors, especially Shilhak-Inshushinak, continued this policy and displayed the glory and grandeur of Elam through numerous military campaigns and massive

construction projects. In his inscriptions, Shilhak-Inshushinak refers to the construction or restoration of twenty temples in Susa and Elam (Potts, 2006: 367-368; Vallat, 2017: 82).

However, the reign of the last king of this dynasty, Hutelutush-Inshushinak, coincided with the emergence of a powerful kingdom in Babylon. He was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar I (1126-1104 BCE) and Susa was captured by the Babylonians (Stolper, 2010: 89-90; Vallat, 2017: 82-83). This defeat marked the beginning of the decline of Elam's power, and afterward, this civilization disappeared from the regional political scene for several centuries (Vallat, 2017: 83).

Based on what has been mentioned, Middle Elam, over a period of approximately 400 years, testifies to the geographical expansion of Middle Elamite culture. In addition to this expansion, the artistic quality of the artifacts undoubtedly serves as another testament to its power and flourishing economy. During this era, Elam possessed a distinct political and cultural identity, independent of Mesopotamia. The revival of the title "King of Anshan and Susa" (Susa and Anshan), the gradual replacement of the Akkadian language with Elamite in official texts, and the promotion of the Elamite pantheon in Susiana all bear witness to this identity transformation. Massive architectural projects like Chogha Zanbil not only indicate economic and artistic prosperity but also represented a centralized political ideology.

The Natural and Historical Landscape of the Sahneh Plains: A Stable Hub in the Eastern Corridor of the Central Zagros

Sahneh County, located 54 kilometers northeast of Kermanshah, lies in a key, transitional area of the Central Zagros. This geographical position has made it a vital crossroads, connecting the Iranian central plateau to Mesopotamia and the internal plains of Kermanshah towards Hamadan. The core of this landscape is formed by two fertile intermountain plains: The Chamchamal Plain and the Dinavar Plain, situated at an altitude between 1250 and 1400 meters above sea level, nestled among the high mountains of the Zagros.

To the north, the "Amroleh" highlands form the natural border between Sahneh – Kangavar and Asadabad. Further on, Mount "Dalakhani" constitutes the border between Sahneh – Sonqor. In the northeast, the "Baz Ab" (Baz Aw) highlands mark the border between Sahneh and Kangavar. The southern border between Harsin and Sahneh is formed by three mountain ranges: "Qalicheh", "Hasan Bagheh", and "Shiz". The "Tash Darian" mountains also form the limit between Sahneh and Nahavand. In the western part, the "Kuseh" (Kuh-e Siah), "Hajar", and "Hacheh" highlands form the border between Sahneh – Kamyaran. In its northwest, the "Zaran", "Kandubeh", and "Hareh" highlands are located.

The Dinavar and Chamchamal plains are separated by the "Bowalin" mountain range. To the north of the Chamchamal Plain lies Mount "Paru". This natural structure has not only created visual beauty but has also laid the foundation for a stable ecosystem and an inherent defensive system.

The permanent rivers in this land are the Gamasiab River (in the Chamchamal Plain) and the Dinavar River (in the Dinavar Plain). Along with a dense network of tributaries (such as Kangarsheh, Sar Avisi Ri, Dinavar Aw, Bazarju, Dinavar Ju, and others) and karstic gushing springs (like Sarab-e Sheikhiabad and Sarab-e Barnaj), they not only irrigate the agricultural lands but also act as natural communication corridors (considering that most of the identified sites are located along the rivers). These reliable water resources, combined with highly fertile alluvial soils, have laid the foundation for a flourishing agricultural economy based on dry farming of cereals and irrigated horticulture, with a history dating back at least to the Chalcolithic period (Mohammadifar, 2003). It is highly likely that this high environmental resilience has been the main reason for attracting and sustaining human populations over millennia.

Sahneh's pivotal location made it an unavoidable communication hub. This region witnessed two major historical arteries: the north-south axis, which was the ancient road from Hamadan to Kermanshah (this route continued within the road network from Kermanshah to Khuzestan), and the east-west axis (the Great Khorasan Road), which connected the Iranian Plateau to Mesopotamia via the Gamasiab Valley. Given the natural geography of the Zagros, modern roads largely follow the paths of ancient ones (Fig. 1), (Alden *et al.,* 1982: Fig. 4). Historical sources from the early Islamic centuries, including Estakhri, explicitly mention the route from "Hamadan to Dinavar" and its importance regarding fruit and cultivation (Estakhri, 1989: 163-164). The dynamism of these trade networks is clearly evident in the remains of historic caravanserais, including the Bid-e Sorkh Caravanserai (Sah-18) and the Kang Caravanserai (Sah-36), as well as magnificent bridges like the Pol-e Alasht with an inscription from the period of Badr ibn Hasanuyeh. These structures were not merely facilitators of travel but also symbols of governmental investment in the security and prosperity of these routes.

Economic prosperity has always required security, and this is where Sahneh's unique characteristic reveals itself. The region's topography naturally forms a defensive system. Impassable mountains function like the walls of a natural fortress, and strategic gorges, particularly the "Tang-e Dinavar," which narrows to less than a hundred zar (a unit of length) at points, act as chokeholds whose control meant commanding all regional traffic and trade. The inhabitants of this land, with a deep understanding of this geopolitics, complemented this natural advantage by constructing fortresses. Marwan Castle in Kanduleh (Sah-49) with its panoramic view of the plain, Kang Castle (Sah-37) with its steep slopes and deep precipices, and lookout posts like Giri Dastgerd Castle

(Sah-11) all bear witness to an integrated and intelligent defensive network. These defensive positions not only protected the inhabitants from foreign invasion but also enabled local rulers, such as the Kurdish Hasanuyid dynasty who made Sarmaj Castle their headquarters, to dominate the wealth and power derived from controlling the roads.

This rare combination of sustainable resources and a strong defensive-communicative position has led to long-term cultural flourishing and remarkable settlement continuity. Archaeological data records an almost uninterrupted cultural sequence from the Paleolithic period, through significant Chalcolithic settlements (such as Tepe Azizabad with its slash-rim pottery), a period of prosperity in the historical era (with Parthian and Sasanian sites like Tepe Abiarik and the large Tepe Mal-e Amiri), to its peak in the Islamic centuries with the emergence of major cities like Dinavar, referred to by the title "Māh al-Kūfa" in historical texts (Bal'ami, 2001, Vol. 3: 515) mentions this title in the Tarikh-nama of Tabari), and Sultanabad in the Chamchamal plain.

Consequently, the Sahneh plain should be considered a living historical landscape where layers of nature, history, economy, and defense are interwoven. This is not merely a geographical area, but a stable "civilizational system" where rivers have become roads, mountains have turned into defensive walls, and the plains have transformed into a granary that has sustained successive civilizations. This inseparable bond between the land and its people has made Sahneh one of the enduring archaeological and historical heartlands in the core of the eastern Central Zagros.

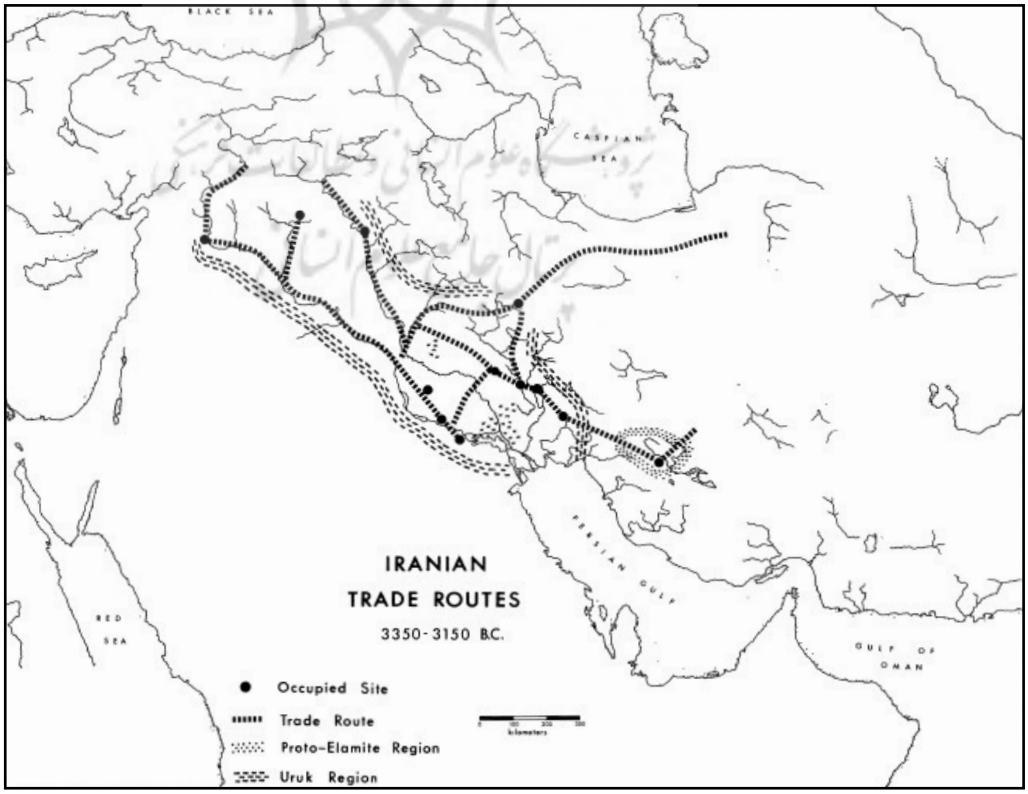

Fig. 1: Map of trade and communication routes of the Uruk period (Alden *et al.*, 1982: Fig. 4).

The geographical location of the four Middle Elamite sites in the Sahneh Plain

The geographical positions of Tepe Azizabad in the Tang, Tepe Sabz Chagha, Tepe Kureh Khani of Elahieh, and Tepe Mirza Ali (Fig. 2) are as follows.

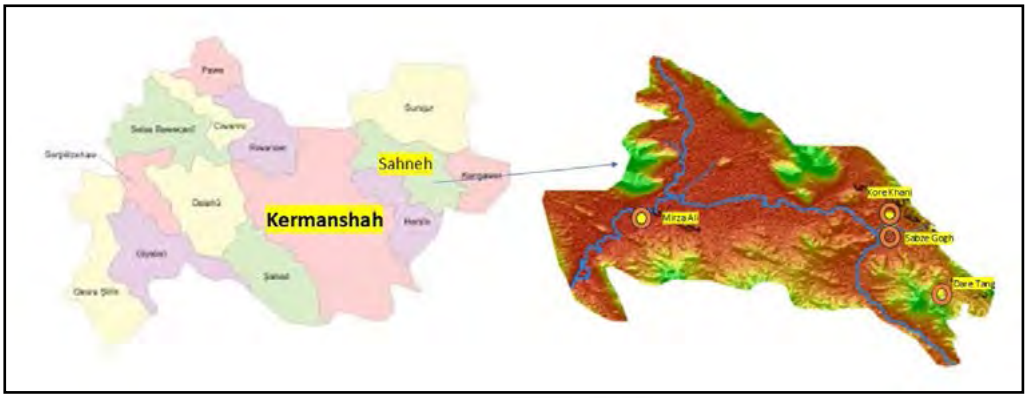

Fig. 2: The geographical positions of Tepe Azizabad in the Tang, Tepe Sabz Chagha, Tepe Kureh Khani of Elahieh, and Tepe Mirza Ali (Authors. 2025).

Tepe Azizabad in the Tang (Fig. 3)

This mound is located at the entrance gateway to the Sahneh Plain. The main road from Kangavar to Sahneh passes approximately 2.5 kilometers north of this mound. Its area, determined through precise mapping, is 2,820 square meters. In recent years, cultivation on the surface and slopes of the mound has caused significant damage to it. The UTM coordinates of the mound's center are: X: 751321, Y: 3813976, with an altitude of 1325 meters above sea level. The height of the mound from the surrounding ground level is 4 meters on the northern side and between 2 to 2.5 meters on the southern side. During the survey of the surface and slopes of the mound, a variety of pottery types from the Chalcolithic period, the Middle Elamite period, and the Middle Islamic centuries were observed (Mohammadifar, 2003).

Tepe Sabz Chagha (Fig. 4)

It is located in the southern lands of the city, approximately 2 kilometers south of Sahneh. This valuable mound, situated within the lands of the Foundation of the Dispossessed, has been under cultivation for decades. Fortunately, in recent years, through the follow-up by the Sahneh Cultural Heritage Department, agricultural activities on the mound have been prevented. Sabz Chagha has a significant area, which, after proper mapping, is determined to be 21,073 square meters, with a height of five and a half meters from the surrounding ground level. The coordinates of the center of the mound are X: 744634, Y: 3817748. A variety of pottery types from the Middle Chalcolithic period, the Middle Elamite period, and the Parthian period were observed at this mound.

Fig. 3: Topography of Tepe Azizabad (Satellite imagery: Google Earth; map prepared by: Milad Yadegari, 2025).

Fig. 4: Topography of Tepe Sabz Chagha (Satellite imagery: Google Earth; map prepared by: Milad Yadegari, 2025).

Tepe Kureh Khani of Elahieh (Fig. 5)

This mound is located in the south of Sahneh city and is almost connected to the city. Its exact area is 5,697 square meters. The UTM coordinates of the mound's center are X: 744411, Y: 3818564, with an altitude of 1339 meters above sea level. It is situated 200 meters from the southern side of the Elahieh township and is locally known as Tepe Kureh Khani. Due to its proximity to agricultural lands and the Sakhtman village, the mound has suffered extensive destruction over the past few decades. During the

surface survey, pottery samples from the Chalcolithic period, the Middle Elamite period (button-base pottery), the Iron Age (III), the Parthian period, and the Middle and Late Islamic centuries were observed.

Fig. 5: Topography of Tepe Kureh Khani of Elahieh (Satellite imagery: Google Earth; map prepared by: Milad Yadegari, 2025).

Tepe Mirza Ali (Fig. 6)

Mirza Ali is a relatively small mound located on the southern bank of the Gamasiab River, adjacent to a village of the same name. This site is situated approximately 30 kilometers away from the Kureh Khani and Sabz Chagha mounds. Its area is 3,102 square meters, with the center coordinates being X: 724233, Y: 3805211. During the surface survey, a variety of Elamite button-base pottery and possibly Achaemenid pottery were observed (Mohammadifar, 2003).

Middle Elamite Pottery

To better understand the ceramic data from the four Middle Elamite sites in the Sahneh Plain, a general overview of Middle Elamite pottery will first be presented. Then, the diagnostic ceramic data from the four sites will be provided and compared with those from key Elamite sites.

Pottery, as one of the most important archaeological materials, holds significant value not only from technical and functional perspectives but also from the standpoint of artistic aesthetics and sociological analyses. Therefore, since the very beginning of pottery making, this handmade product has played a determining role in the relative chronology and identification of sites as cultural and key evidence. Among these, the

Fig. 6: Topography of Tepe Mirza Ali of Elahieh (Satellite imagery: Google Earth; map prepared by: Milad Yadegari, 2025).

Elamite civilization, as one of the most important civilizations of Iran and the ancient world, despite its recognized importance, still faces a shortage of modern and extensive research in the field of pottery studies.

Understanding Elamite pottery is particularly important from two perspectives: first, comprehending the "cultural realm of the Elamite civilization," and second, explaining the extent of this civilization's influence. Current evidence shows that the range of cultural presence and even probable political dominance of Elam during the Middle period was much wider than previously thought (Mohammadifar et al., 2017; Allahpoor, et al., 2025). Therefore, the examination and analysis of pottery data can play a key role in clarifying various dimensions of this ancient civilization, from its cultural boundaries to the extent of its political influence.

Based on archaeological findings from key sites such as Susa (Gasche, 1973), Haft Tepe (Negahban, 1993), and Chogha Zanbil (Ghirshman, 1994), the pottery of this period can be classified into the following main groups based on formal and functional characteristics.

Plain and Everyday Vessels

This category constitutes the most common and diverse group of Middle Elamite pottery and includes standard forms used for various purposes such as storage, cooking, and serving food. Among the most characteristic vessels of this type are:

Jars: Found in various forms such as arrow-shaped, piriform (with a pointed base), narrow-mouthed with an elongated neck, and jars with handles (Gasche, 1973:

77-81, 91, 117, 123; Negahban, 1993: 158; Mofidi-Nasrabadi, 2012: Plates 110-112; Ghirshman, 1994: 271).

Large Clay Storage Jar (Khormeh): These large storage vessels were predominantly made in two forms: wide-mouthed and narrow-mouthed. A notable example is the wide-mouthed jar with a hole in its base (Mofidi-Nasrabadi, 2012: Plate 122; Gasche, 1973: 143; Ghirshman, 1994: 271).

Bowls: These vessels were made in various sizes and depths, ranging from shallow, conical bowls to deep bowls with a button base (Gasche, 1973: 57-67; Mofidi-Nasrabadi, 2012: Plate 110; Negahban, 1993: 167 & 139-143; Ghirshman, 1994: 329).

Cups and Goblets: Their distinctive forms include cups with a wide, elongated rim, a crescent-shaped body tapering inwards, and an elongated everted lip; wide-bellied cups with a straight neck; and tall-stemmed goblets with a crescent-shaped body and a simple, inverted rim (Gasche, 1973: 77- 117; DE Miroschedji, 1981: 57; Negahban, 1993: 134-135).

Pyxides (Hoqqe): These small, round vessels, which are present in all phases of the Middle Elamite period, often feature a prominent, rounded lid (Ghirshman, 1996: 325). The presence of this secure lid reinforces the hypothesis that they were used for storing valuable or volatile substances such as perfumes, scented oils, or cosmetics (Negahban, 1993: 145).

Painted Pottery: This less numerous group is decorated with colored motifs (primarily in brown and red on a yellow or buff background). The designs are generally geometric (parallel bands, zigzags, triangles) and basketry-style. It is important to emphasize that these motifs could be applied to any of the forms mentioned above (even button-based goblets), (Mofidi-Nasrabadi, 2012: pl. 117; Gasche, 1973: 117; Negahban, 1993: 144-145).

Vessels with Special Function

This category includes forms that had a function beyond purely everyday use. The most prominent example is the “high-footed basins”. These vessels consist of a small basin on a tall stand and are found primarily in phases II and III of the Middle Elamite period (Ghirshman, 1994: 331; Gasche, 1973: 113). Their unusual form and their discovery in temples indicate a specific and probably ritual function.

Button-Based Vessels

This form is among the most famous and distinctive ceramic productions of the Elamites, which is also observed among the previously introduced pottery groups. The “button base” is a formal design feature on the base of these vessels that provided them with stability and gave them a symbolic appearance. One prominent type of button-

based vessel is the button-based goblets (cup-beakers), which have been reported at various sites such as Susa, Haft Tepe, and Chogha Zanbil (Gasche, 1973:93-97; DE Miroschedji, 1981: 59; Negahban, 1993: 134 & 159; Ghirshman, 1994: 269). These goblets are divided into two main types: short and tall. They appear to have had a ritual, ceremonial function, or were used for serving specific beverages. The production of these vessels continued from the 14th century BC until possibly the late 8th century BC, but over time they became taller, narrower, and more coarsely made (Alvarez–Mon, 2020: 280).

Table 2. Middle Elamite Ceramic Typology - Compiled from (Gasche, 1973; Negahban, 1993; Ghirshman, 1994).

Period	Vessel Form	Diagnostic Forms
Middle Elamite I	**Jugs/Pitchers**	Arrow-shaped with elongated neck and band-shaped rim, narrow fish-mouth spout, handled with pointed base, tall base, small round
	Bowls	Conical, carinated body, shallow with crescent-shaped body, deep with crescent-shaped body, with multiple holes
	Storage Jars	Wide mouth with crescent-shaped body and hole in base, wide mouth with straight body and ring base
	Goblets	Tall stem with crescent-shaped body, wide elongated mouth with angular lower body
	Trays	Flanged with simple thick rim, crescent-shaped body with rounded rim, elongated mouth with bevelled sharp rim
	Button-Based Goblets	Tall with wide, globular body, short with crescent-shaped body and elongated button base
	Painted	Handled jug with parallel band motif, narrow-mouthed jug with band and triangle motifs
Middle Elamite II	**Jugs/Pitchers**	Arrow-shaped with short neck, narrow fish-mouth spout, round with short neck, narrow mouth with neck
	Bowls	Conical, carinated body, shallow with simple rim, tall base with globular body
	Storage Jars	Narrow mouth with ring base, wide mouth with flanged body and hole in base
	High-Stand Basins	Tall stand with small basin on top
	Trays	Flanged with slightly rounded rim, crescent-shaped body with everted rim
	Goblets	Wide elongated mouth with angular lower body, tall stem with crescent-shaped body
	Button-Based Goblets	Tall with crescent-shaped body and elongated button base, short with globular body
	Painted	Handled jug with zigzag and geometric motifs, narrow-mouthed jug with parallel and wavy band motifs
Middle Elamite III	**Jugs/Pitchers**	Arrow-shaped with elongated neck, narrow mouth with concave neck, long elongated neck with cut-off base
	Pots	Crescent-shaped body with short neck and everted rim
	Bowls	Conical with simple or bevelled rim, tall shallow base
	Storage Jars	Narrow mouth with band-shaped rim, wide mouth with crescent-shaped body and hole in base
	High-Stand Basins	Tall stand with small basin on top
	Trays	Crescent-shaped body with bevelled rim, stepped rounded rim, sharp everted rim
	Goblets	Carinated body with simple rim
	Button-Based Goblets	Tall with long concave neck, short with globular body and elongated button base

Elamite pottery from the four Elamite sites in Sahneh

From the four sites of Aliabad, Sabz Choga, Kureh Khani, and Mirza Vali, a total of 42 pottery sherds were examined. This assemblage comprises 14 rim fragments, 16 bases, 7 body sherds, and 3 basal fragments. From a technological perspective, the pottery displays a color range extending from light buff to dark buff, red, and includes one black-colored rim sherd.

The ceramic pastes are relatively well-levigated and tempered with sandy mineral inclusions. The vessels were produced using a fast wheel, indicating advanced wheel-throwing techniques. Decorative elements are limited in number, and two main techniques—painting and relief decoration—were applied to the exterior surfaces of the vessels. With the exception of a few samples, most of the ceramics were fired at an appropriate temperature.

It is noteworthy that the button bases and their associated basal fragments, from a chronological perspective, belong to the Middle Elamite period. These examples are fully comparable with materials from key Middle Elamite sites, including Susa, Choga Zanbil, and Haft Tepe. Detailed photographs, drawings, and technical specifications of the pottery assemblage are presented in Figures 7–10 and Tables 3–6 in the appendix.

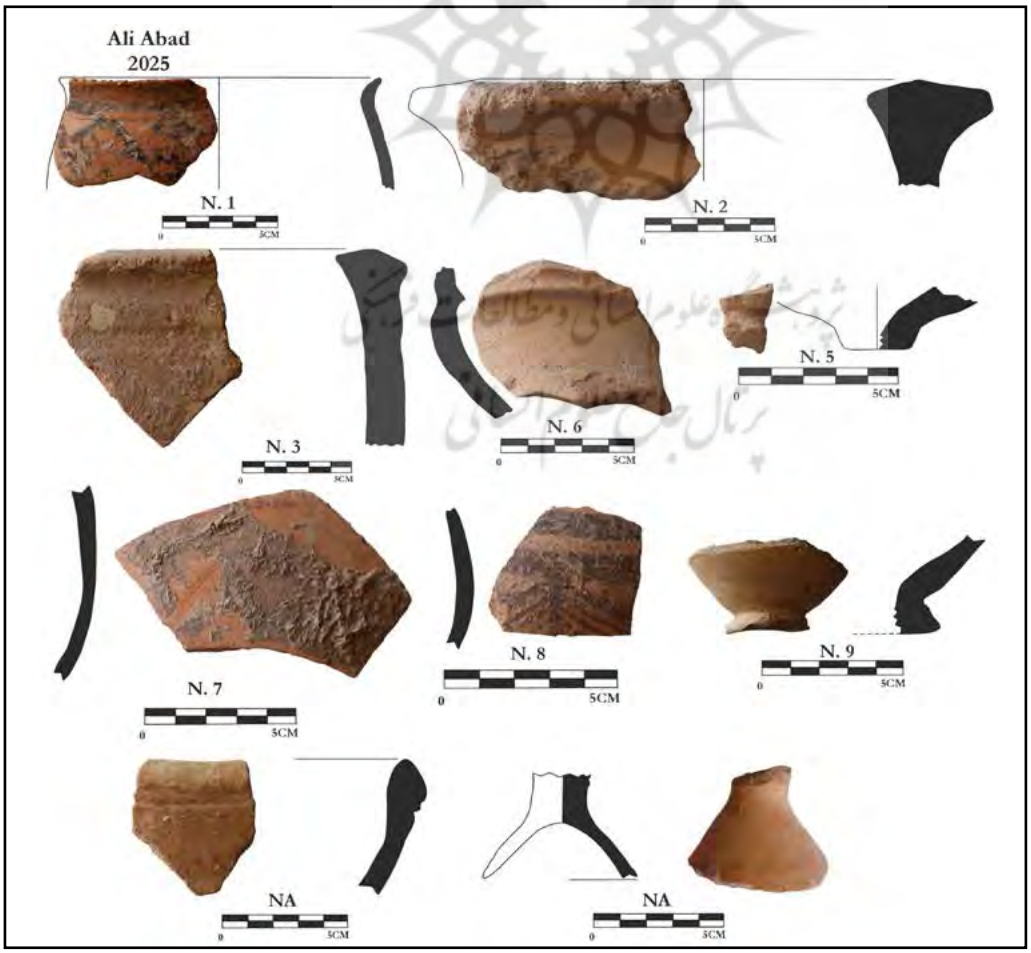

Fig. 7: Pottery from the Aliabad site in Sahneh (Authors, 2025).

Table 3. Technical specifications of pottery from the Aliabad site in Sahneh (Authors, 2025).

Piece No.	Sherd type	Manufacturing Technique	Firing Degree	Temper (Inclusions)	Construction Quality	Paste Color	Interior Surface Color	Exterior Surface Color	Decoration Technique	Decoration Location	Motif Type	Reference Source
1	Rim	Wheel Made	Adequate	Mineral	Medium	Red	Red	Red	Paint	Exterior	Geometric	
2	Rim	Wheel Made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	
3	Rim	Wheel Made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Red	Red	Thick beige slip	*	*	*	
5	Base	Wheel Made	Inadequate	Mineral	Medium	Smoked	Red	Red	*	*	*	Gasche, 1973: 97, A XII:26
6	Body Sherd	Wheel Made	Adequate	Mineral	Medium	Red	Red	Red	Relief decoration-Paint	Exterior	Geometric band motif	
7	Body Sherd	Wheel Made	Adequate	Mineral	Medium	Red	Red	Red	Paint	Exterior	Geometric	
8	Body Sherd	Wheel Made	Adequate	Mineral	Medium	Red	Red	Red	Paint	Exterior	Geometric	
9	Base	Wheel Made	Inadequate	Organic-Mineral	Coarse	Smoked	Green	Green	*	*	*	Nourouzi, 2016: 129, Fig. 4-10:10
NA1	Rim	Wheel Made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Red	Red	Red	Incised decoration	Exterior	Geometric	
NA2	Foot Sherd	Wheel Made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Red	Red	Red	*	*	*	

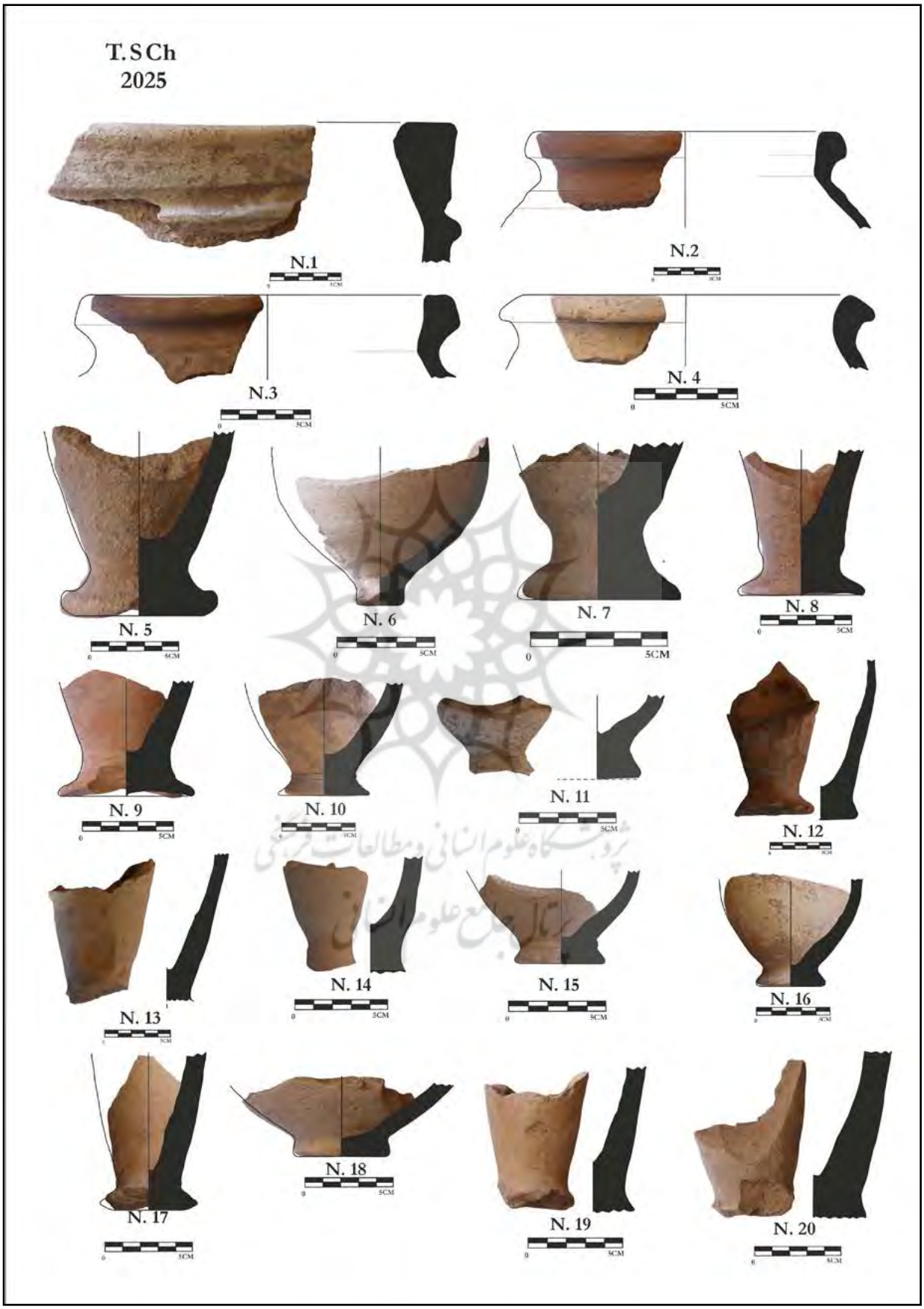

Fig. 8: Pottery from the Sabz Choga site (Authors, 2025).

Table 4. Technical specifications of pottery from the Sabz Choga site in Sahneh (Authors, 2025).

Piece No.	Sherd type	Manufacturing Technique	Firing Degree	Temper (Inclusions)	Construction Quality	Paste Color	Interior Surface Color	Exterior Surface Color	Decoration Technique	Decoration Location	Motif Type	Reference Source
1	Rim	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Buff	Buff	Buff	Relief decoration	Exterior	Geometric band motif	Mofidi, 124; 1:H. T. 05-3-513; Mofidi, 124:4: H. T. 05-3-15: Mofidi, 124: 3: H. T. 05-4-8
2	Rim	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Red	Red	Red	Relief decoration	Exterior	Geometric band motif	Norouzi, 2016:129; pic. 4-2:10
3	Rim	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Red	Red	Red	Relief decoration	Exterior	Geometric band motif	
4	Rim	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	
5	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Red	Red	Thick beige slip	*	*	*	Ghirshman, 1994: 331; T.Ch.Z. 41; Nowruzi, 2016: 124; Figure 4-2, 7; Gasche, H. 1973: 67, AX:2
6	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Medium	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	
7	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Inadequate	Mineral	Coarse	Smoked	Green	Green	*	*	*	Gasche,1973:93. AX:18, 19
8	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Red	Red	Red	*	*	*	Ghirshman, 1994: 331; T.Ch.Z. 52; Gasche, H. 1973: 93, AX:18, 19
9	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Red	Red	Red	*	*	*	Gasche, 1973:93. AX:18, 19
10	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	Gasche, 1973:97. AX:17
11	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Medium	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	Girshman, 1994:269; T. Ch. Z. 321
12	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Inadequate	Mineral	Coarse	Smoked	Red	Red	*	*	*	Ghirshman, 1994: 331; T.Ch.Z. 41; Nowruzi, 2016: 124; Figure 4-2, 7; Gasche, H. 1973: 67, AX:2

13	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	Gasche, 1973:67. AX:2
14	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Red	Red	Thick beige slip	*	*	*	Ghirshman, 1994: 331; T.Ch.Z. 41; Nowruzi, 2016: 124; Figure 4-2, 7
15	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Medium	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	
16	Base	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Medium	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	Gasche, 1973:99. AXIII:27
17	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	Ghirshman, 1994: 331; T.Ch.Z. 41; Nowruzi, 2016: 124; Figure 4-2, 7; Gasche, H. 1973: 67, AX:2
18	Base	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Medium	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	
19	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	Ghirshman, 1994: 331; T.Ch.Z. 41; Nowruzi, 2016: 124; Figure 4-2, 7; Gasche, H. 1973: 67, AX:2
20	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	Nowruzi, 2016: 124; Figure 4-2, 7; Ghirshman, 1994: 331; T.Ch.Z. 41

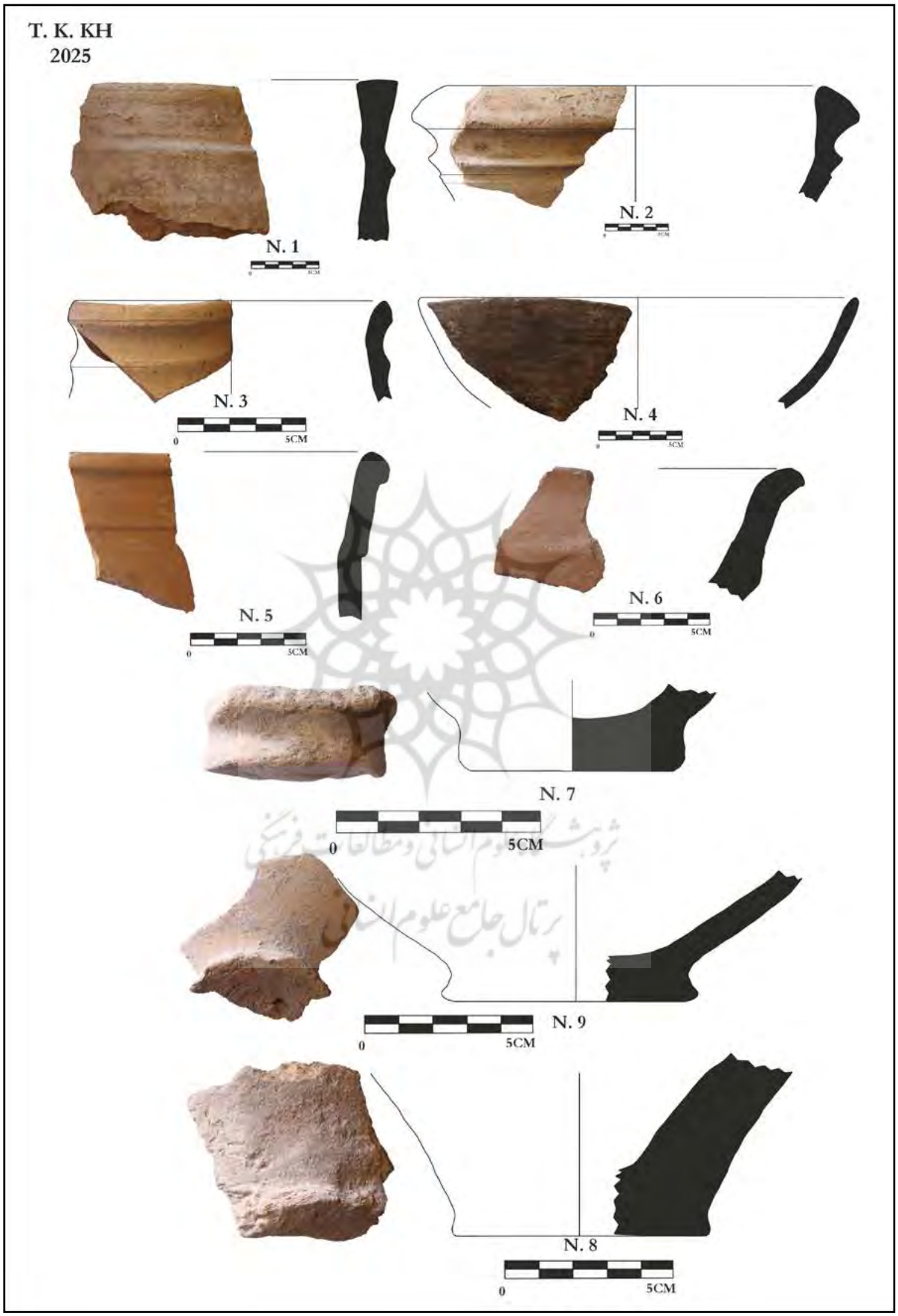

Fig. 9: Pottery from the Kureh Khani site (Authors, 2025).

Table 5: Technical specifications of pottery from the Kureh Khani site (Authors, 2025).

Piece No.	Sherd type	Manufacturing Technique	Firing Degree	Temper (Inclusions)	Construction Quality	Paste Color	Interior Surface Color	Exterior Surface Color	Decoration Technique	Decoration Location	Motif Type	Reference Source
1	Rim	Wheel Made	Adequate	Organic-Mineral	Coarse	Red	Thick beige slip	Thick beige slip	Relief decoration	Exterior	Geometric band motif	Mofidi, 125: 2: H. T, 05-1-27
2	Rim	Wheel Made	Adequate	Organic-Mineral	Coarse	Red	Thick beige slip	Thick beige slip	Relief decoration	Exterior	Geometric band motif	Nourouzi, 2016: 129; Figs. 4-10, 5; 145; Fig. 4-16
3	Rim	Wheel Made	Adequate	Organic-Mineral	Medium	Red	Thick beige slip	Thick beige slip	Relief decoration	Exterior	Geometric band motif	Nourouzi, 2016: 129; Figs. 4-10
4	Rim	Wheel Made	Adequate	Mineral	Medium	Black	Black	Black	Burnished	Exterior	Cross-hatching	Nourouzi, 2016: 226; Fig. 4-61
5	Rim	Wheel Made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Red	Red	Red	Incised decoration	Exterior	Geometric	
6	Rim	Wheel Made	Inadequate	Organic-Mineral	Coarse	Smoked	Red	Red	*	*	*	
7	Base	Wheel Made	Adequate	Organic-Mineral	Coarse	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	
8	Base	Wheel Made	Adequate	Organic-Mineral	Coarse	Pinkish-Buff	Thick beige slip	Thick beige slip	*	*	*	Mofidi. 119: 4: H. T. 05-5-550
9	Base	Wheel Made	Adequate	Organic-Mineral	Medium	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	Mofidi, 123: 4: H. T, 05-11-554

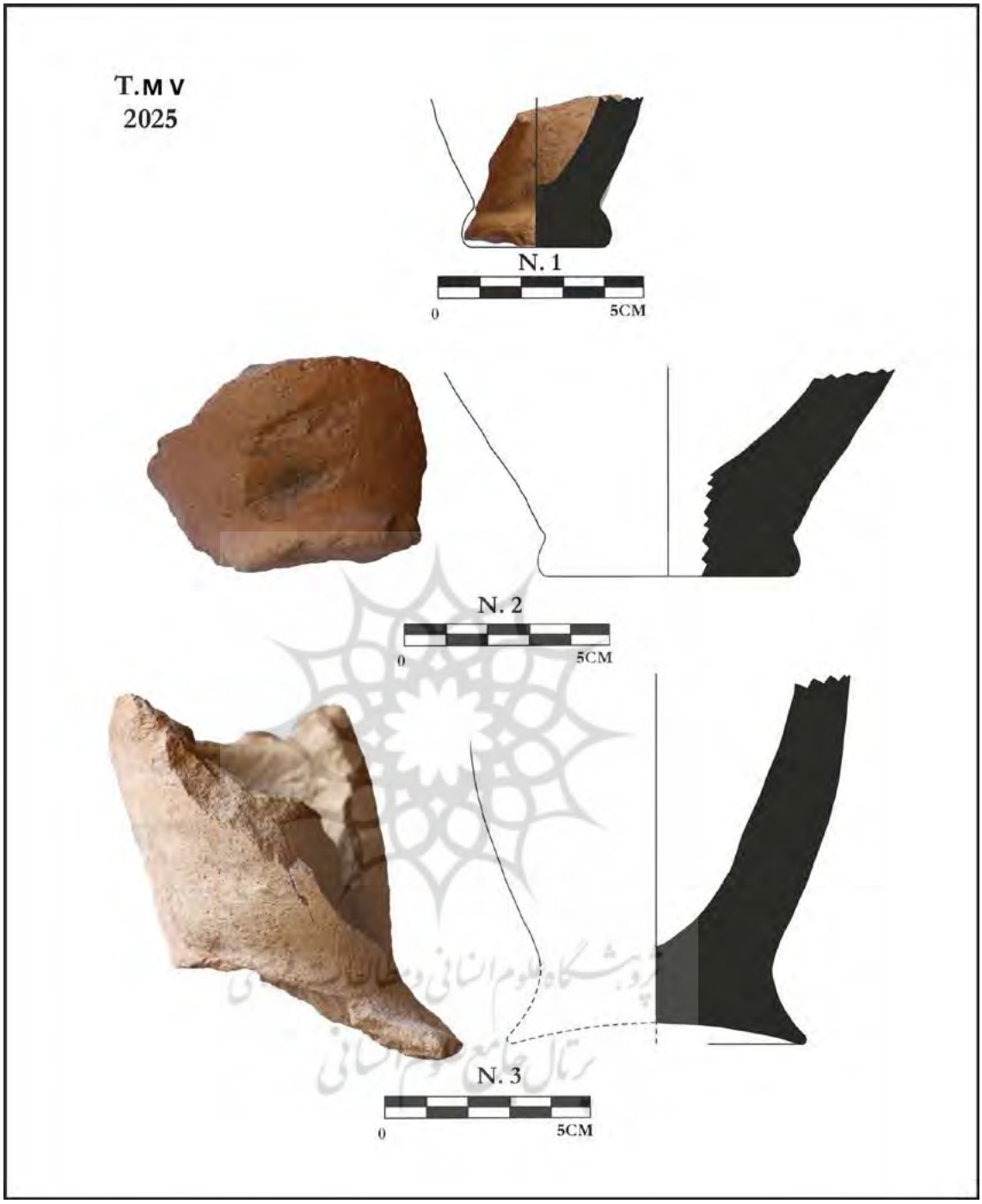

Fig. 10: Pottery from the Mirza Vali site (Authors, 2025).

Table 6: Technical specifications of pottery from the Mirza Vali site (Authors, 2025).

Piece No.	Sherd type	Manufacturing Technique	Firing Degree	Temper (Inclusions)	Construction Quality	Paste Color	Interior Surface Color	Exterior Surface Color	Decoration Technique	Decoration Location	Motif Type	Reference Source
1	Base	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	Mofidi, 123: 5: H. T, 05-11-768
2	Base	Wheel-made	Inadequate	Mineral	Coarse	Smoked	Red	Red	*	*	*	Mofidi, 123: 5: H. T, 05-11-768
3	Foot Sherd	Wheel-made	Adequate	Mineral	Coarse	Buff	Buff	Buff	*	*	*	Girshman, 1994:331; T. Ch. Z. 52

Conclusion

This study focuses on button-base pottery in the Sahneh Plain, representing the first comprehensive and systematic investigation of this ceramic type in the region. The findings reveal a significant gap in our understanding of the cultural connections between the Central Zagros and the Elamite civilization.

A comparison of the Sahneh Plain ceramics with similar specimens from other regions highlights the unique characteristics of this pottery and underscores the cultural diversity within the Zagros area. The results deepen our understanding of the role this important intermountain plain played in trade networks and cultural exchanges during the second millennium BCE. Furthermore, this research can serve as a model for similar studies in other archaeological regions.

Due to its strategic location on the geographical borders of the Central Zagros and its position along communication routes between the civilizations of Elam, Mesopotamia, and the Iranian Plateau, this plain functioned as a key hub for commercial and cultural exchange. Undoubtedly, continued research in this area will help determine whether these button-base vessels were pr oduced locally or represent a trans-regional phenomenon. If the pottery is determined to be non-local, it could suggest the existence of extensive trade networks and connections with advanced centers such as Susa and Chogha Zanbil.

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Author Contributions

Y. Mohammadifar contributed 60% and S. Borshan 40% to the research and writing of this Article.

Conflict of Interest

In adherence to ethical publication standards, the authors affirm that there are no conflicts of interest, either personal or financial, that could have influenced the content or conclusions presented in this research.

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چکیده

شهر صحنه، واقع‌در ۵۴ کیلومتری شمال-شرق کرمانشاه، در گذرگاه زاگرس‌مرکزی قرار دارد. این موقعیت جغرافیایی، آن‌را به چهارراهی حیاتی تبدیل کرده که پیونددهندهٔ فلات‌مرکزی ایران به بین‌النهرین و دشت‌های داخلی کرمانشاه به‌سمت همدان است. بررسی‌های باستان‌شناسی سال ۱۳۸۲ در شهرستان صحنه که براساس روش بررسی مکان‌نگاری انجام شده است، محوطه‌های مهم و کلیدی کشف گردید. در این روش بررسی، تمام مکان‌های باستانی از نظر موقعیت و دوره‌هایی که مشمول آن‌ها است، مدنظر است. این روش نیازهای اطلاعاتی را که برای تفسیر تاریخی زیستگاه لازم است، برآورده می سازد. درنتیجه این پژوهش‌های میدانی، برای نخستین‌بار، دو محوطهٔ باستانی حاوی مواد فرهنگی مربوط به دورهٔ ایلام میانه در این منطقه شناسایی شد. این کشف، قلمرو فرهنگی دورهٔ ایلام میانه در زاگرس را به‌سمت شرق و شمال‌شرق به‌طور قابل‌توجهی گسترش می‌دهد و نشان می‌دهد که نفوذ این تمدن فراتر از کانون‌های شناخته‌شدهٔ آن در استان‌های جنوب‌غربی ایران (مانند: خوزستان، کهگیلویه‌وبویراحمد، فارس و بوشهر) تا استان کرمانشاه امتداد داشته است. با توجه به اهمیت این یافته‌ها، بررسی‌های بیشتری در سال‌های ۱۴۰۳ و ۱۴۰۴هـ.ش. برای شناسایی محوطه‌های ایلام میانه در شهر صحنه انجام شد. در پی این تحقیقات، دو محوطهٔ دیگر با مواد فرهنگی ایلام میانه شناسایی شد. این یافته‌ها نه‌تنها وجود یک کریدور فعال فرهنگی-تجاری در این منطقه را تأیید می‌کند، بلکه بر لزوم بازنگری در نقشه‌های فرهنگی- جغرافیایی و تحولات تاریخی دورهٔ ایلام میانه در زاگرس‌مرکزی تأکید دارد. ادامهٔ مطالعات و کاوش‌های هدفمند در این محوطه‌ها می‌تواند نقش این منطقه در شبکهٔ تعاملات فرهنگی بین فلات ایران و بین‌النهرین را روشن ساخته و انتظار می‌رود منجر به بازاندیشی اساسی در دیدگاه‌های کنونی نسبت به تاریخ این دوران شود.

کلیدواژگان: ایلام میانی، شهرستان صحنه، سفال ایلام میانی، پایه دکمه‌ای، زاگرس‌مرکزی.

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