

SHAMI
Kal-e Chendar



Shami, Kal-e Chendar

Research of the Iranian-Italian
Joint Expedition in Khuzestan

Edited by
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I was shown to my surprise and delight
the bronze statue of a life-size man...

Marc Aurel Stein



IRANIAN-ITALIAN JOINT EXPEDITION IN KHUZESTAN

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORTS 2

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Foreword and Acknowledgements

This report makes available the results of the research conducted between 2012 and 2018 by the *Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan* at Kal-e Chendar, in the valley of Shami, about 30 km north of present-day Izeh. Our project aimed to shed new light on one of the most intriguing religious complexes of Hellenistic and Parthian Iran, located in highland Khuzestan, the heart of ancient Elymais. Identified thanks to the accidental discovery of statues and statues' fragments in 1935, the site of Kal-e Chendar was briefly investigated by Sir Marc Aurel Stein, one of the most famous explorers of Inner Asia, and Bahman Karimi, inspector of the Iranian Antiquities Service, early in 1936, to fall into oblivion for many decades despite the importance of the discoveries there made. Based on an interdisciplinary approach, our research tried to acquire new information on materiality and on the archaeological context systematically, to put forward hypotheses on function, chronology and meaning of the complex.

Our expedition operated within the frame of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by Dr. Seyyed Mohammad Beheshti for the Research Organization of Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (RICHT) and for the Iranian Center for Archaeological Research (ICAR), and by Prof. Vito Messina for the Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino per il Medio Oriente e l'Asia (CRAST) and the University of Torino (UniTo). Other institutions involved in the project were the Dipartimento di Architettura e Design (Department of Architecture and Design, DAD), Polytechnic of Torino (PoliTo), the Dipartimento di Studi Storici (Department of Historical Studies), the Dipartimento di Chimica (Department of Chemistry) and the Dipartimento di Scienze della Terra (Department of Earth Sciences), UniTo. The expedition was supported in Khuzestan by the Ayapir Cultural Heritage NGO.

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Co-directors were Mr. Jafar Mehr Kian (RICHT-ICAR) and Prof. Vito Messina (CRAST-UniTo).

Members of the survey and excavation campaigns were Mr. Yalireza Baqherian (ICAR), Mr. Mhoammad Reza Baqherian (RICHT Gilan), Mr. Ali Berouzi (RICHT Khuzestan), Mr. Mehdi Faraji (RICHT Khuzestan), Mr. Morteza Homayoon (ICAR), Dr. Mana Rohuani Rankouhi (ICAR), Mrs. Leyla Sharifi, Mr. Mojtaba Shokrollai, Mr. Majid Soroush (RICHT Khuzestan) and Mr. Fraydoun Taghmasevi (RICHT Khuzestan), in alphabetical order for the Iranian side; Dr. Cristina Bonfanti (DAD), Dr. Ilaria Bucci (CRAST-UniTo), Dr. Alessandra Cellerino (CRAST-UniTo), Dr. Enrico Foietta (CRAST-UniTo) and Dr. Francesca Giusto (CRAST-UniTo), in alphabetical order for the Italian side.

Our joint expedition also worked at Hung-e Azhdar, one of the small valleys limiting the plain of Izeh at the feet of the Bakthiari chain, and in other areas of Elymais, especially addressing ancient settlement patterns and rock carvings of Parthian date. Preliminary and final reports of our previous research are published in the *Journal Parthica* and in several miscellaneous volumes and international congress proceedings. As agreed in the MoU, reports were first published in Iran. We started our activity in Khuzestan in 2008 and we could visit preliminarily Kal-e Chendar for the first time in 2009. Survey at the site started in 2012, during the 5th campaign of our expedition. Excavation campaigns have been conducted jointly during three seasons in 2013, 2014, and 2015. Fieldwork was conducted by the Iranian team solely, independently and beyond the common schedule, in 2016. Research on materials was conducted from 2016 to 2018. The coronavirus pandemic led to an interruption of our work in the period from 2019 to 2021. Fortunately, we could resume our activity to finalize this report in 2022, when Mr. Mehr Kian could join Prof. Messina in Torino to interpret the archaeological data so far processed.

We are particularly glad that the results of our work are published in open access. The history of research, the results of our survey from archaeological, geological, topographical, and environmental points of view, the results of excavation and archaeological and archaeometric studies on materiality are addressed in selected chapters, signed by different authors, which share the same bibliography at the end of the volume. We didn't follow particular rules of transliteration for names originally expressed in Persian, rather preferring to use the most frequent occurrences in relevant literature.

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J.M.K., V.M.

Introduction

Vito Messina

When the complex of Kal-e Chendar was perchance discovered in the valley of Shami, almost ninety years ago, it was clear that something remarkable had just come to light in the highlands of Khuzestan. A place in the Bakhtiari mountains, literally in the middle of nowhere, had become –and still is– the only known site throughout Iran where bronze statues larger than life size of Hellenistic and Parthian date had been found. The Shami valley is not far from present-day Izeh and it is thus located in the piedmont of ancient Elymais, a region and a political entity often mentioned in literary sources. This raised the interest of local people and governors, of the Iranian Antiquities Service, of famous explorers of the time, and, in the end, of a wide audience; an interest that remained surrounded by a mysterious aura in the following decades, up to very recent times. Indeed, except for cursory (although influential) research, conducted in the immediacy of the event, which made the name of Shami almost legendary among scholars, the site fell into oblivion, probably due to its remoteness, and nothing was acquired, but ephemeral information, to understand its archaeological context. This gave the way to our research project.

The remoteness of the site appeared, and is still seen, as an incoherence when the high standard and the chronology of the fragmentary statues there found are considered. These findings parallel examples coming from major centers of production of the ancient world, and date to a period in which an increased propensity to connectivity was effectively experienced from the Mediterranean to the Indian Subcontinent and China, and from Central Asia to Africa. Thus, even if appearing as a place in the middle of nowhere, the site of Kal-e Chendar must have been in connection with other, less remote, places.

Although traceable in more ancient times thanks to information in historical records and to material evidence (especially dating from the Achaemenid period onward), the connective propensity of different regions was incredibly enhanced by the implementation of a network system of land and water routes that reached high effectiveness at the turn of the Christian Era. The lands of Asia were of crucial importance in such a network, even if some areas, such as alluvia, revealed a higher inclination to connectivity thanks to their geomorphological setting and the presence of waterways. Despite an unfavorable geomorphology, the Iranian Plateau seems to have been integrated into this connective network, as the presence of major cities such as Laodikeia-Media, Antioch-Persis, Apamea-Rhagae and Seleucia-Hedyphon –alas almost unexplored or not yet located on the ground, but mentioned in ancient literary sources– seems to show. Known archaeological records also testify that some regions of the Plateau could have bridged Mesopotamia to Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent, benefiting in the last case from a key-position for the access to the Persian Gulf.

However, it appears that not all the Plateau benefited from the presence of overland routes that worked effectively: the connectedness of some mountainous areas is less evident than that of other contexts, and settlement patterns seem rather characterized in the mountains by sites or monuments sparsely located in quite inaccessible environments.¹ Such is the case of Kal-e Chendar and of other places of highland Elymais, in which complexes often of religious type have been recognized. The statues found at Kal-e Chendar were soon rightly interpreted as offerings made in a religious milieu, even if nothing more could be added on the complex itself, almost completely archaeologically unknown: thus, for Kal-e Chendar, remoteness and religious relevance seem to pair. The same characteristic was evidenced for two sites of the same area, systematically explored some decades after the discovery of Kal-e Chendar and identified as sanctuaries: Bard-e Neshandeh and Majid-e Sulayman.

¹ See Messina 2020 on this topic.

Excavated by Roman Ghirshman between 1964 and 1967 (the former), and between 1967 and 1972 (the latter), these two sites allowed archaeologists to identify for the first time a peculiar type of religious complex: that of the terraced sanctuary. The one explored at Bard-e Neshandeh is composed by a fortified (?) small residence on a low hillock and two adjacent cult terraces of monumental size.² The religious complex embodied a lower and upper terrace. Both terraces, monumentalized in Hellenistic and Parthian times, have buttressed retaining walls and access stairways: small buildings interpreted as temples once stood on the terraces' top.³ The sanctuary overlooking the modern town of Majid-e Sulayman is known in relevant literature since the 19th century.⁴ The site extends over an area of less than 2 hectares and embodies six adjacent cult terraces of different size.⁵ The largest terrace displays an impressive façade, characterized by a buttressed retaining wall made of undressed stone blocks, with a monumental stairway giving access to the terrace's top, similar to those of Bard-e Neshandeh. According to Ghirshman, a first terrace, dated to the Achaemenid period, was repeatedly widened in subsequent times to reach its monumental setting. Buildings and podia of reduced size, often found at their foundation level, once stood on the terraces.⁶ The sanctuary remained in use up to the Sasanian time, when the buildings on the terraces have been further reduced in size.

Bard-e Neshandeh and Majid-e Sulayman are not isolated cases. A terraced sanctuary was also identified at Qal'e-ye Bardi (or Tall-e Badr), about 18 km northeast of Bard-e Neshandeh. The site, occasionally visited in the 20th century, is still unexcavated and has been preliminarily surveyed in 2009 and 2015 by our expedition.⁷ There, the remains of an ancient cult terrace, overlooking an exhausted streambed, lie north of an ancient fortress (known as Qal'e-ye Lit) built on a hillock. The terrace has buttressed retaining walls made of stone blocks and a monumental stairway. On its top, the ruins of ancient structures of small size can be clearly seen.⁸ The complex, basing on the analogies it shows with the former two terraced sanctuaries, can be dated to the Parthian age. In addition to these occurrences, the presence of other similar monuments yet to be discovered is more than probable.

Our research reveals that the complex of Kal-e Chendar shares many features with the formers –first the presence of monumental terraces, then the adaptation of architecture to landform– and that it can be understood as a religious place, even if it is of a particular type, as the following chapters will unfold. Terraces are thus the prominent parts of ancient sanctuaries mostly dated to the Hellenistic and Parthian periods. Another feature these complexes share is that they have been built in remote and quite unsettled areas.

The sanctuary of Bard-e Neshandeh is located on a small plain at an altitude of 680 m above the sea level (asl) approximately, and at the feet of a low mountain range. The area, arid and desolate, has revealed no evidence of ancient settlements, but overground trajectories in east-west directions, which likely testify to the presence of ancient overground routes, are clearly recognizable. The complex of Majid-e Sulayman lies against a low mountain crest at an elevation of about 300 m asl and, basing on the known evidence, it seems that terraces were built in a rather isolated area. The site of Qal'e-ye Bardi is in an area in which table-topped hillocks and mesa-like buttes alternate with wide corridors that allow movements in almost all directions, at the same altitude of Bard-e Neshandeh, but there are no visible traces of settlements in the area. The complex of Kal-e Chendar is likewise in a remote place, at the end of a valley unsettled and uneasy to reach.

² The fortified residence, called castle, is a building with a central rectangular hall or courtyard surrounded by large rooms, dated to the early Islamic period; however, more ancient phases of occupation of unclear type appear be dated back to Sasanian and Parthian ages. An extremely small settlement is mentioned by Ghirshman cursorily, but it is hardly recognizable on the ground (Ghirshman 1976, 9-11, fig. 2).

³ Ghirshman 1976, 13-51. The terraces extend for more than 10,000 m², the structures they supported no more than 950 m².

⁴ The place of the sanctuary is locally called Ser Majid, and it is known at least since the mid-19th century, as it has been mentioned by Henry Rawlinson and Austen Henry Layard (Rawlinson 1839, 84-86; Layard 1846, 61-62). But see also, in later times Siroux 1938, 157-159, and Stein 1940, 162-163.

⁵ Ghirshman 1976, 55-146.

⁶ The structures built on the terraces cover an area of c. 970 m², the surface available on the terraces extends little less than 16,000 m².

⁷ Three uncommented pictures were published by Ghirshman 1976, pl. CXXXI-CXXXIII. An image showing the terrace, seen from a qala, was published by Keal 1971, 58 (above). No description of the structures was published. The entry 'Qal'e-ye Bardi (Tall-e Badr)' can also be found in the Encyclopaedia Iranica, vol. II:3, 297-301, s.v. 'Archaeology, iii. Seleucid and Parthian', by K. Schippmann. The first map was published by Messina 2015, 200-201, fig. 14, followed by a report on our preliminary survey (Messina 2018).

⁸ Ancient structures cover an area of around 1,000 m² or little more, the terrace extends for at least 16,000 m² as far as one can see.

It must be observed that in some environments, such as mountainous areas, the presence of ancient settlements is more difficult to detect than in other contexts, such as alluvia. This said, it must be also stressed that the traces left by large ancient settlements, though of low visibility, would have been probably recognized, at least in part, by the excavations and surveys that have been conducted over the years in the areas of the sanctuaries.⁹ However, the fact that they were built in areas lacking large settlements did not make these religious complexes completely unreachable. Although isolated, some terraced sanctuaries (Bard-e Neshandeh, Majid-e Sulayman and Qal'e-ye Bardi) seem to have been placed along trajectories that developed in a network. Such a mountainous network was not as extended and ramified as in alluvia, but it could have worked quite effectively in these environments.

Our research shows that, unlike the other known terraced sanctuaries, the complex of Kal-e Chendar was not central in such a network, rather appearing as the destination of a road branching from a main north-south trajectory. This gives the impression that the main reason to travel to the place of Kal-e Chendar was indeed to exclusively reach the religious complex there located. This gives great relevance to the site. Indeed, if the other terraced sanctuaries, given their location into a network, can be also considered as regional landmarks, the complex of Kal-e Chendar can be seen as a unicum. As proposed in some of the forthcoming chapters, Bard-e Neshandeh, Majid-e Sulayman and Qal'e-ye Bardi marked the nodes of a road system that bridged the lowlands to the highlands and gave access to the Plateau. As such, given the existence of small fortresses adjacent to the terraces, the former sanctuaries were likely also meant to contribute to the control of the territory. They can be thus understood as multifunctional places: as religious complexes, as network landmarks and as outposts to control intermountain roads. Although likewise multifunctional, the complex of Kal-e Chendar has revealed peculiar features.

The results of our research also point to the international ambition of the complex and to the international attitude of the people once frequenting it. Some architectural features of the structures unearthed and several occurrences in the material evidence that has come to light reveal the receptivity of global trends and their adaptation to the local milieu. Global receptivity and adaptation are also witnessed by the dedication of statues, as some of them, because of their quality and size, surely portrayed prominent rulers, reproducing widespread prototypes, and this corroborates the importance and prestige once attached to the complex.

Along with other peculiarities, such an international environment clearly distinguishes Kal-e Chendar from the other terraced sanctuaries of the region and seems to have found some echo in historical records. A further peculiarity of the complex is that religious and funerary function counterbalanced, thus indicating a particular type of sanctuary. Unlike the other sanctuaries of highland Elymais, it seems that at Kal-e Chendar funerary practices had some effects on the cult(s) there performed. Material evidence testifies to the heavy destruction and abandonment of the complex, most probably in the Sasanian period: if, as it seems, such a destruction is related to the religious and funerary values of the place, further relevance is given to the understanding of this counterbalancing from a religious historical perspective.

When the extension of the site is considered, one can see that the complex of Kal-e Chendar is far bigger than a simple sanctuary: monumental terraces, a cemeterial area and small fortresses, built to guard them, marked the landscape of a wide area, and seem to have been part of a large compound. The identification of ruined ancient buildings on the top of the mountains surrounding the Shami valley, in a place known as Char Qal'eh, corroborates such an assumption: a place probably used as an outpost or as a fortress from a given time was in connection with the complex of Kal-e Chendar.

⁹ Basing on what is known of settlement patterns in mountainous regions, it can be deemed that large settlements were more probably located in intermountain valleys, which offered space, resources, and land to be caught for feeding; such is the case of the Izeh plain, where the large ancient city of Mal-e Mir (present-day Izeh) was situated. Sparse settlements of small size –far less detectable– could have been rather placed in other environments, such as rock slopes, hillocks, colluvial fans, and (in general) all places with lithosols or emerging bedrock.

Dealing with the hard legibility of the archaeological context, our experience shows that excavation strategies are uneasy to define in a site like Kal-e Chendar due to different reasons, among which ground conformation, geomorphology and anthropization. Along with risks of other type, such as environmental decay, looting of antiquities and natural hazards, the latter factor endangers the archaeological context deeply. Thus, any future archaeological research should foresee strategies of community engagement that involve local dwellers as community-based stakeholders, to protect the site from all possible risks and to help in the definition of conservation and valorization activities. Future research will surely improve our understanding of such a complex thanks to additional material evidence and to the potential finding of new dedicational contexts. However, an aspect of pivotal importance, which far exceed the relevance of the complex in which it was identified, demand to be more thoroughly investigated: the interference of religious and funerary functions.