

## The Iranian-Italian archaeological mission: Season 2012. The identification of cultural areas

The Northern Khorasan Provincial Office of the Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHHTO) and the Institute for the Studies of the Civilization of the Aegean and of the Near East had their second joint field season from 6<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> December 2012. This year the aim of the research was to determine the cultural areas of Khorasan from Chalcolithic to the Iron Age. The regions specifically taken into exam were the province (*ostan*) of Northern Khorasan and the counties (*shahrestan*) of Nishapur, Sabzevar, Joveyn and Joghatay, in the province of Khorasan Razavi (fig. 1). The original aim was to include in the research also the district (*bakhsh*) of Meyamey, county of Shahrud, in the province of Semnan but it was not possible to do it because of difficulties connected with the change of director in the Iranian Center for Archaeological Research, therefore there are absolutely no data about this area. Documentation about this region will be gathered in the spring of 2013.



Fig. 1 – Northeastern Iran: the provinces, the cities and the archaeological sites quoted in the text. Squares indicate the provincial capitals; dots, proportional to the population, the other cities; lozenges the archaeological sites.

61 sites were visited (fig. 2), including those already seen in 2009 and 2010. All of them were already known and filed in the archives of the various Provincial Offices of the ICHHTO, therefore fieldwork was not a proper archaeological exploration of the region, the only aim of the research was to gather information on the cultural sequence. No pottery was taken away from the sites, the significant fragments were just examined and left in place. The majority of the sites visited during the survey is located in the province of Northern Khorasan, because in this region archaeological research has been much more exhaustive and detailed than in other provinces.

The upper Atrek valley between Quchan and Shirvan, that presently is divided between Northern Khorasan and Khorasan Razavi, was not included because the area was already studied by the University of Turin in 1976-78 and data are known (Venco Ricciardi 1980; Biscione 1981; Kohl, Biscione, Ingraham 1982: 8-11, 18).

From the distribution of the significant pottery classes it was possible to define in Khorasan, from the Chalcolithic to the Early Iron Age, the borders of the Namazga and Yaz depe cultures on one side and those of Hissar-Gorgan and Archaic Dahistan on the other. Specifically it was clear that from the beginning of the Chalcolithic period down to the early Bronze Age (approximately from 4500 to 2300/2200 BC) the border between the two cultures (fig. 3) was near Shirvan: east of this town was found only pottery of the Namazga I-V periods, a few kilometers west the Atrek valley becomes very narrow and beyond this bottleneck there is no trace of Namazga pottery. The area of diffusion of the Namazga culture included also the regions of Mashhad, Nishapur (Hiebert Dyson, 2002: 113-121) and Sabzevar (Vahdati, Francfort *et al.* 1389/2010-11: 24-25, 27-28). South of these cities the Dasht-e Kavir desert marked the limit of the diffusion. In Turkmenia the Namazga culture occupied the northern piedmont of the Kopet-Dagh range and the delta of the river Tejen, extending to the Kara-Kum desert.

The Gorgan-Hissar Culture covered the middle Atrek Valley, especially in the areas where it is wider, the Gorgan plain from the Kara-Kum desert to the Alborz range and, south of it, the Jajarm and Esfarayen counties (Vahdati 2010: 23; Vahdati 2011: 184) and the oases from Shahrud to Tehran. In Early Bronze Age it expanded also into Southwestern Turkmenia, in the Sumbar valley and in the westernmost part of the piedmont.

Unfortunately no Chalcolithic – Early Bronze sites are known in the counties of Joveyn and Joghatay and in the Meyamey oasis, so it is not possible to ascertain which culture was spread in these areas.

This distribution of cultures remained static for more than 2000 years until the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age, when the appearance of the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC, about 2200-1800/1700) changed the panorama. BMAC, that has its roots in the preceding periods of the Namazga culture, occupied a territory much larger than the preceding area, expanding into new regions either with its typical set of prestige objects or with prestige objects and pottery. The set can be found almost in every site of eastern Iran still settled after 2200 BC, for instance at Tepe Hissar, Shahdad, Tureng Tepe and Jiroft; the diffusion of the typical pottery is much more limited but more significant and it involves also sites along the Iran-Afghanistan border and in Pakistan.

In Khorasan BMAC includes the areas already part of the Namazga culture (fig. 4), like the regions of Nishapur (Hiebert, Dyson 2002: 121-22; Labbaf 1379/2003) and Sabzevar (Vahdati, Francfort *et al.* 1389/2010-2011: 26, 28-29); areas previously undetermined, i. e. the counties of Joveyn and Joghatay, and zones previously of the Hissar-Gorgan culture, namely the counties of Esfarayen and Jajarm (Vahdati 2010: 23; Vahdati 2011: 184) and the Atrek valley from Shirvan to the area west of Bojnurd. The southern limit of the diffusion of BMAC proper in Khorasan seems to be the Dasht-e Kavir desert, excepted a necropolis near

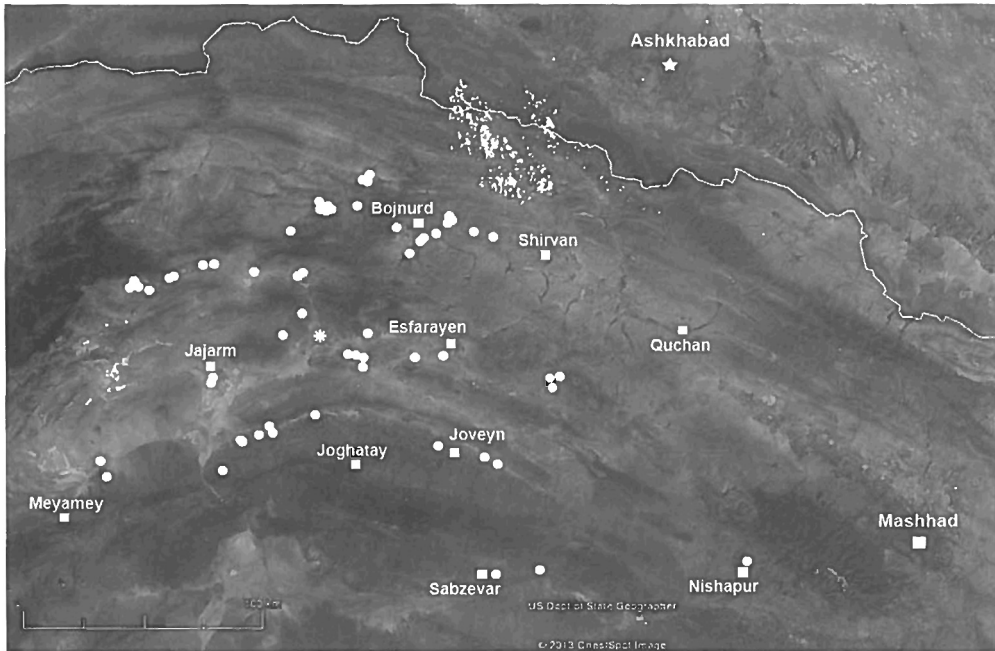


Fig. 2 – The sites visited in 2009-2012 by the Iranian-Italian Mission. The asterisk indicates the site of Tepe Chalow, excavated in 2011, and the squares, proportional to the population, mark the main cities.



Fig. 3 – The cultural areas of northeastern Iran in the Chalcolithic (about 4500 – 2800 BC) and in the Early Bronze Age (2800-2300/2200 BC). Squares indicate the provincial capitals; dots, proportional to the population, the other cities; lozenges the archaeological sites. Dotted lines mark the uncertain borders.

the village of Razeh, east-south-east of the city of Birjand, Southern Khorasan (S. Yusufi, personal communication; not shown in figure 4).

The area of diffusion of the Gorgan-Hissar culture remained approximately the same, it just shrank a little on its eastern side because the border shifted west, as already said. North of the Alborz range it stretched from the Sumbar Valley in South-eastern Turkmenia to the south-eastern shores of the Caspian sea; south of the Alborz the oases from Shahrud to Tehran were the in the area of distribution of the Gorgan-Hissar culture. Also in this period nothing is known about the oasis of Meyamey.

Around 1800/1700, with the Late Bronze Age, both BMAC and the Gorgan – Hissar culture came to an end. BMAC was followed without any break by the Takhirbay period, whose pottery is very similar to the previous one, while the Gorgan – Hissar culture seems to disappear. This state of things continued for the whole of the Late Bronze, until 1400/1300 BC. With the beginning of the Early Iron Age the picture is again clear and we can follow it with the data of our survey.

Also during the Early Iron Age only two cultures are present in Khorasan: Yaz depe I culture (about 1400 – 1000 BC), characterized by the presence of handmade painted pottery, and the culture of the Archaic Dahistan (approximately 1300 – 650 BC) with its Grey Ware, that is the direct continuation of the Gorgan – Hissar culture.

Yaz depe I pottery was found more or less all over the area of distribution of the Namazga culture and of the BMAC (fig. 5), including the Atrek valley almost to Bojnurd, the Nishapur (Hiebert, Dyson 2002: 128) and the Esfarayen counties, plus the eastern part of the Jajarm county (Vahdati 2010: 23; Vahdati 2011: 184). The Archaic Dahistan pottery is present in part of the area of distribution of the Gorgan-Hissar culture, specifically in the Gorgan plain, in the Atrek valley to the former border between the Namazga and the Gorgan – Hissar cultures, in the Esfarayen county, in the northern and eastern part of that of Jajarm and in the ancient delta of the Atrek river in present-day Turkmenia, the ancient Dahistan that gave the name to the culture. There are no data for the area of Meyamey and for the counties of Sabzevar, Joghatay and Joveyn, so it is not possible to draw exactly the southern borders of the cultural areas. The fact that fieldwork carried out in the areas of Tepe Hissar and Shahrud did not show any trace of Early Iron Age sites and the presence in the Tehran oasis of Iron Age grey pottery deriving from the one of the Gorgan – Hissar culture, but not Archaic Dahistan, suggest that possibly this last culture did not extend south of the Alborz range.

There is a peculiarity in the distribution of cultures in the Early Iron Age: a small area of superimposition exists, namely the Esfarayen county, the north-easternmost part of the Jajarm county and the area between Bojnurd and the former Namazga and Gorgan – Hissar border. There have been found sites with both Yaz and Archaic Dahistan pottery. This never happened before and shows clearly that Northern Khorasan was a significant interference area. It is to be remarked that in this province Late Iron Age pottery (Tureng Tepe IV) was found all over the diffusion area of the Archaic Dahistan.

The cultural borders evidenced since the beginning of the Chalcolithic period were extraordinarily constant. Basically they remained the same for a timespan of 3,500 years, with the exception of a shift of a few dozen kilometers in the Middle Bronze with the explosion of the BMAC phenomenon. This remarkable fact shows clearly the strength and the depth of the cultural complexes of North-Eastern Iran.



Fig. 4 – The cultural areas of northeastern Iran in the BMAC period (2300/2200 – 1800/1700 BC). Squares indicate the provincial capitals; dots, proportional to the population, the other cities; lozenges the archaeological sites. Dotted lines mark the uncertain borders.



Fig. 5 – The cultural areas of northeastern Iran in the Early Iron Age (1400 – 1000 BC). Squares indicate the provincial capitals; dots, proportional to the population, the other cities. Dotted lines mark the uncertain borders.

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