

Deutsches Archäologisches Institut · Eurasien-Abteilung
Außenstelle Teheran

Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan

Band 47 · 2015



DIETRICH REIMER VERLAG · BERLIN

IV + 342 Seiten mit 201 Abbildungen, 39 Tabellen und 5 Karten

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ISSN 1434-2758

Redaktion: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Eurasien-Abteilung, Im Dol 2-6, D-14195 Berlin

Gesamtherstellung: Beltz Bad Langensalza GmbH, Am Fliegerhorst 8, D-99947 Bad Langensalza

Kommissionsvertrieb: Dietrich-Reimer-Verlag GmbH, Berliner Straße 53, D-10713 Berlin

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A Survey of Prehistoric Sites in the Meimak District, Ilam Province, Western Iran

By Hojjat Darabi and Ardeshir Javanmardzadeh

Keywords: Western Iran, Ilam, Meimak, Archaeological Survey, Prehistoric Interaction

کلید واژگان غرب ایران، ایلام، میمک، بررسی باستان شناسی، برهم کنش پیش از تاریخی

Introduction

Meimak is located *ca.* 25 km to the west of Saleh Abad town in southwestern area of Ilam Province, western Iran, adjacent to the Iranian-Iraqian border (**Fig. 1**). The district stretched 300 km² in area at an elevation between 320–450 m asl. Geo-morphologically, Meimak is characterized by numerous hilly badlands to the south and gypsum hillocks to the north, both were formed during the Cenozoic period.¹ Moreover, there are many later small river terraces which are being cultivated; however, the district is mainly being used by the local nomads to graze their herds during winter time. In terms of water supply, the main river of Godār Khosh springs from northern mountains and flows to Iraq. Due to the political problems, namely Iraq- Iran war in the 1980s and the ensuing war remains, any archaeological work was avoided until the current survey. In addition, an important reason was seemingly the geomorphological outline of the district which never attracted any archaeologist. Although one can regard the Meimak survey as the first archaeological fieldwork, nearby regions have already been given attention. To the southeast, the Mehrān Plain was firstly surveyed by A.M. Khalilian and then G. Nokandeh in the 1990s.² To the East, the Saleh Abad Plain was investigated by M. Seif Panahi in 2005; the Western area was surveyed by J. Oates.³ In regard of these earliest investigations, the existing lack of archaeological information emphasizes the Meimak district as an important area to identify some clues to understand the prehistoric interactions between the Lowlands of Mesopotamia, Deh Luran and Khuzestan and the Highland Western Iran since Meimak is geographically linking them to each other.

Survey Objectives and Procedures

As mentioned, the Meimak district had not yet been studied until the present survey directed by the first author in the February of 2010, with financial support from the ICHTO⁴ of Ilam Province.⁵ The main aim was to investigate and plot the occurrence and distribution of sites of all periods, *i.e.* to record any ancient remains. The team tried to survey the entire district by walking within two weeks, but the main problem was the hazardous remains of Iraq-Iran war as the district had once been occupied by Iraqi military. Therefore, the team was not allowed to survey the polluted areas of Iranian frontier. Other areas along the Iraqi border were also surveyed by the kindly collaboration of military or under their direct surveillance. The main focus of the survey was laid on the riverbanks along which a higher possibility of ancient occupation could be assumed.

After the registration of the new discovered ancient sites and remains, diagnostic material such as potsherds and stone tools were randomly sampled from the surface to determine the relative chronology. We used Mm as the abbreviated name of Meimak and ensuing numbers indicating the site number. Local names have also been applied in decoding the sites. All in all, the survey resulted in identification 13 sites dating to different times from lower paleolithic to late Islamic period. In terms of archaeological significance, both, the historical and Islamic remains are not as prominent as the prehistoric ones and mainly to identify as nomadic camps. Particularly, a group of prehistoric sites exhibits surface material of such interest that it was thought useful to present here a brief report and to discuss the interaction between Mesopotamia and Western- Southwestern Iran.

¹ Eyvazi 1995.

² Nokandeh 2010.

³ Oates 1966; Oates 1968.

⁴ Iranian Cultural, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization.

⁵ Darabi 2010.

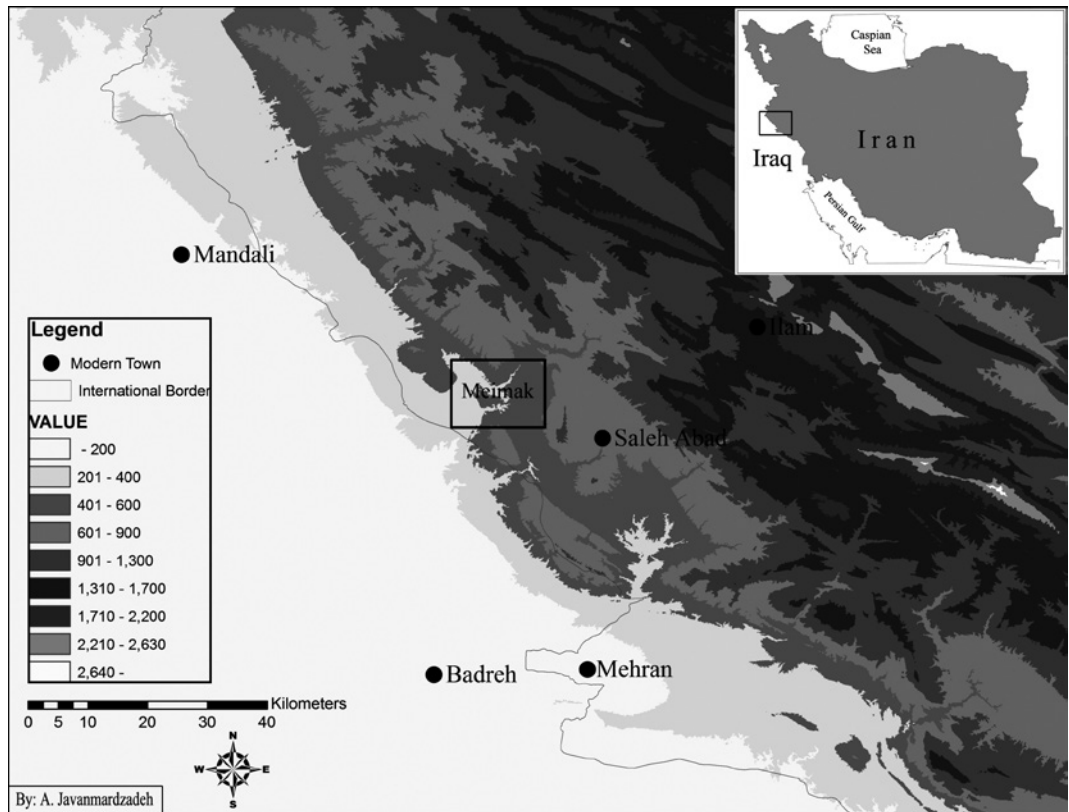


Fig. 1 map showing the geographic location of the Meimak district in Western Iran.

Prehistoric Sites

Five out of 13 sites yielded the prehistoric remains. Of these, two sites contain the paleolithic materials and others date back to a time span between very Late Neolithic and Proto-literate periods (Fig. 2). Thus, the sites are described here on the basis of their cultural periods from older to younger.

Khar Meidan (Mm008): This site (33° 31' 15" N 46° 02' 48" E) lies at the east bank of the Tang-e Tarikeh River over the some hillocks in an area of ca.10 h at an elevation of 425 m (a.s.l; Fig. 3).

Khar Meidan contains an abundant of cherty pebbles scattering over a large area and sometimes were chipped. Different types of chipped stones can be recognized within the pebbles, which were mainly used as core and core-tool or chopping tool. Some other tested pebbles and cortical big flakes are visible indicating on-site tool production. The majority of collected samples are unifacial or bifacial-like choppers, modifying by direct percussion procedure (Fig. 4). The applied technology to produce the tools was primitive striking and some samples are heavily patinated or eroded indicating a long time lasted. At all, choppers, chopping tools and also big flakes can be placed within the industry of early Pleistocene in the old world.⁶ It seems that access to fresh water and raw material had been the main reason to establish the site of Khar Meidan similar to other lower paleolithic sites of Iran.⁷ Although the lack of diagnostic tools such as hand-axe and cleaver could be regarded as the result of sampling error, chopping-tools and core- choppers could techno-typologically place the site within the lower Paleolithic time span.⁸ These tools have been already discovered from different localities such Amar Merdeg in the Mehrān Plain and Pal Barik in the Hulailan Valley.⁹ While west

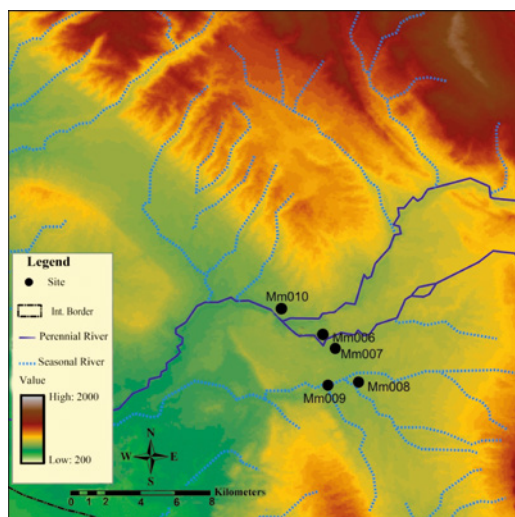


Fig. 2 Map showing the distribution of the discovered prehistoric sites

⁶ Solecki 1985, 103.
⁷ Biglari/Shidrang 2006, 160.
⁸ Bar-Yosef/Goren-Inbar 1993.
⁹ Biglari et al. 2000; Biglari/Shidrang 2006; Mortensen 1993.



Fig. 3 General view of Khar Meidan, looking southeast.

and southwest areas of Iran are assumed as one of the main entrance of hominids into Iran,¹⁰ identification of lower paleolithic sites desire a particular attention.

Tang-e Tarikah (Mm009): Some 300m to the south of gavel road of Shour-e Shirin and before the canyon entrance, numerous chipped stones are scattered over an area about 210x130m (33° 31' 10" N 46° 02' 14" E) on the south flank of a conical hillock at an elevation of 402 m (a.s.l.). Though many cores and chopping-tools were visible on the surface, but the different retouched flakes such as side scraper, double-side scraper, convergent scraper and end-side scraper are more common in the assemblage (**Fig. 5**). Moreover, some collected samples indicated the Levallois technology. So, the presence of various scrapers compare to other tools along with those of Levalloisian suggests a middle paleolithic occupation. However, two burins in the assemblage could also be indicator of upper Paleolithic period.¹¹ Techno-typologically, the collected tools are reminiscent of highlands Paleolithic sites such as Warwasi and Bisotun cave.¹²

Golem Zard (Mm006): This site (33° 32' 58" N 46° 01' 47" E) is located about 400m to the east of the gravel road of Shour-e Shirin and also 350m to the north of the Shour-Ab stream at elevation of 399 m (a.s.l.). Indeed, the site consisted of an area about 120 x 70 m in diameter at the flanks of a hillock. The site surface has been cultivated which resulted in destroying, scattering and removing cultural deposit and materials. The surface materials include high density of potsherds, chipped stone and ground stones. Chipped stone industry is mainly based on the production of flake. Some architectural remains were also visible made from various-sized cobble stones. Nowadays, the site is being occupied by local nomads during the winter.

The relative chronology is based on the comparison of collected potsherds with those published from adjacent areas. The surface samples resemble to both Samarra/Ubaid 0 and Ubaid 2-4 in Mesopotamia, Archaic Susiana

III in Khuzestan and CMT in the Deh Luran plain.¹³ The Early Ubaid (Ubaid I-II) wares are stylistically painted with geometric lines and bands in black or brown colors on the buff slip. They are finely sand-tempered and decorated on the both interior and exterior, the most common ornament comprising a group of thick horizontal or diagonal bands outside or on the rime along with dots as filler. Hatched

¹³ Oats 1968, Pl. 7; Perkins 1949, Fig. 11.14; Hole 1977; Delougaz/Kantor 1996.

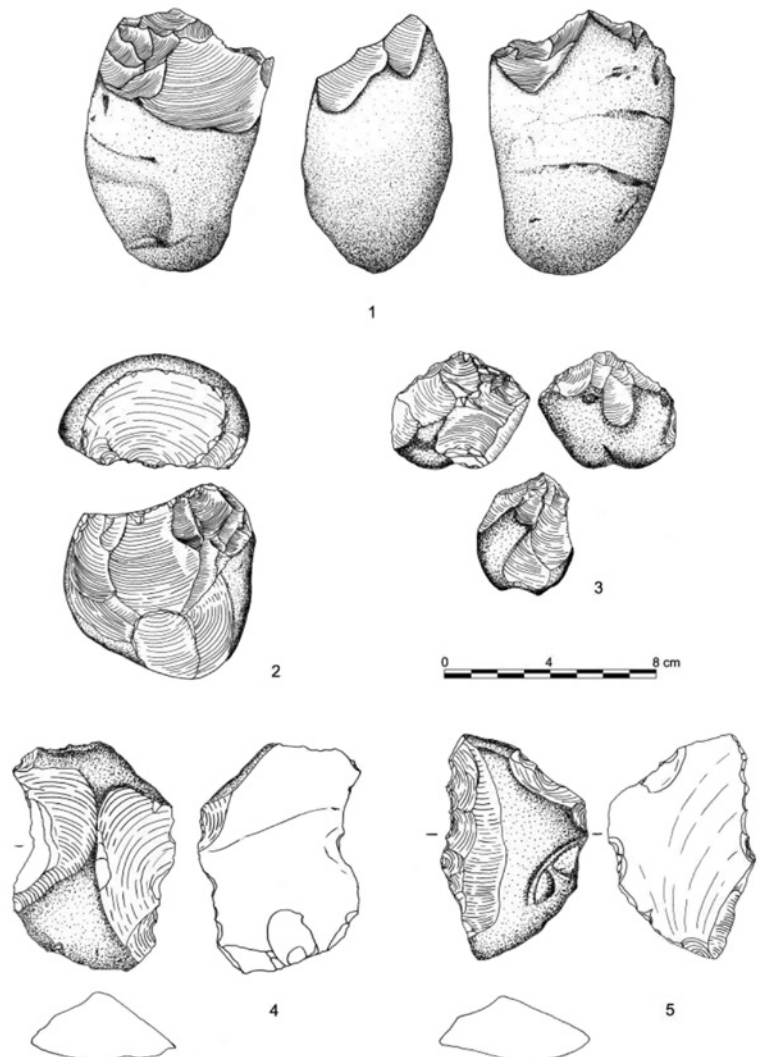


Fig. 4 Selected tools from Khar Meidan (1. Chopping tool; 2-3. Flake core; 4-5. Retouched flake).

¹⁰ Rolland 2001.

¹¹ Debenath/ Dibble 1994,96.

¹² Dibble/ Holdaway 1993; Dibble 1984.



Fig. 5 Selected stone tools from Tangeh Tarikheh (1. Borer; 2. Levallois flake; 3. Side scraper; 4. Burin; 5. Blade; 6. Levallois point).

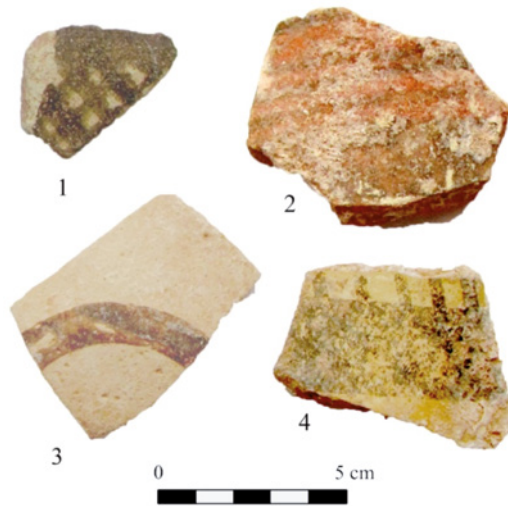


Fig. 6 Ubaid 2-4 samples from Golem Zard

triangles and rows of lozenge are also visible. But, the Ubaid 2-4 sherds are decorated with black, brown and occasionally reddish brown in color on the greenish buff and reddish buff slip. Sometimes, outside is heavily painted. However, the most prominent indicator is a thick band on the shoulder or on the rim.¹⁴ Common decorations comprised of horizontal, vertical and diagonal bands and lines, hatched triangles and wavy lines (Figs. 6-7).

Garr-e Chega (Mm007): Perhaps the most interesting of the prehistoric sites is Garr-e Chega (33° 32' 06" N 46° 02' 07" E) lying a kilometer to the east of the gravel road of Tang-e Tarikheh with an area some 170x130m in diameter. It rises to a height of about 10m and is surrounded by cultivated fields at an elevation of 395m (a.s.l; Fig. 8). Some illegal pits are visible on the summit of the mound, while there are two gullies in the west and east sides. These pits and gullies damaged the site, though the nomadic people usually use the north side as seasonal campsite.

Architectural remains, visible on the surface, indicate stone-built alignments. A large number of different sherds could be found and many stone tools are also visible. The preliminary analysis shows that chipped stone industry is based on flake production as the result of using punch technique. Moreover, two grinding stones were discovered. Different types of potsherds including simple and painted samples of buff and red wares, soft buff or red ware and many other samples of grey or purple in color were found. The most common decoration is geometric motifs in black or brown color on the both exterior and interior sides. The soft wares,

¹⁴ Henrickson 1983; Jasim 1985; Perkins 1949, 76.

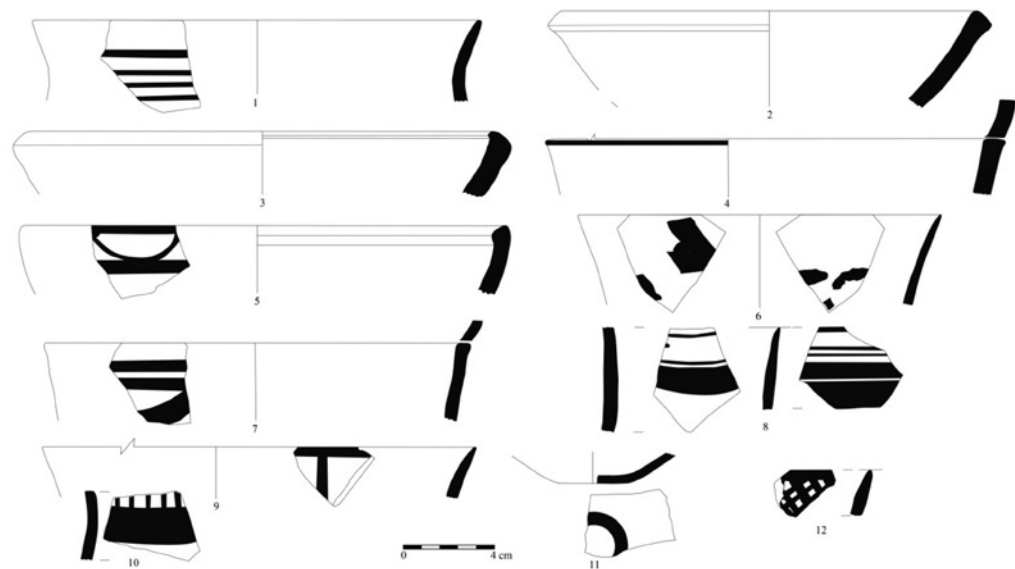


Fig. 7 Drawings of the collected sherds of Ubaid 2-4 (nos. 1-12) from Golem Zard



Fig. 8 General View of Garr-e Chega, looking south



Fig. 9 Samples of the Samarran wares from Garr-e Chega

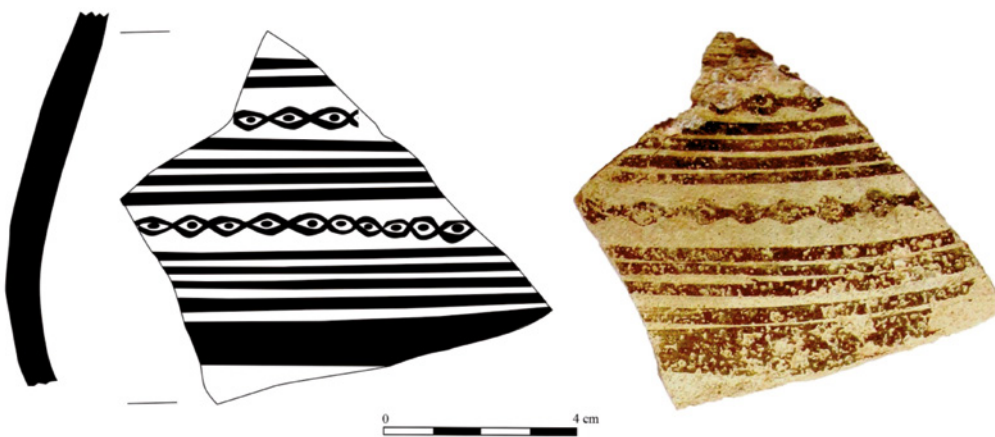


Fig. 10 CMT/Ubaid 0 sherd from the site

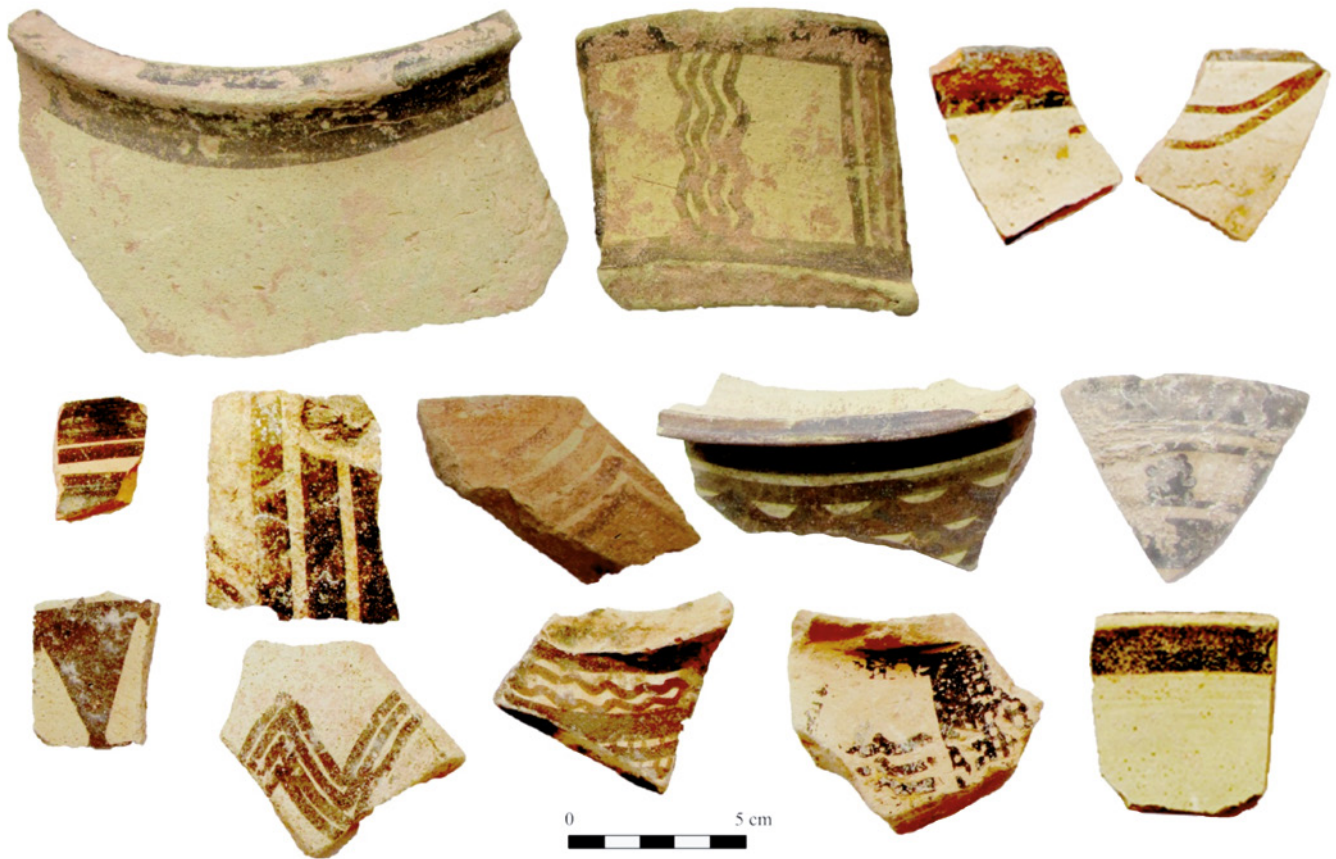


Fig. 11 Some Ubaid 2–4 sherds from Garr-e Chega

as another type, are more concentrated on the west part, while the fine painted buff wares are more seen on the site's summit.

The surface potsherds of Garr-e Chega suggest an occupation, which could be lasted from Samarra/Ubaid 0 to Ubaid 4 (the 6th to late 5th millennium B.C). As the result of the survey, some samples are attributed to Samarra culture with decorations comprising a cluster of geometric motifs such as horizontal and diagonal bands, chevrons and hatched triangles (**Figs. 9 and 12**) resembling to those from Chogha Mami and Serik in nearby Mandali.¹⁵ It should be noted that Samarran sherds have been known as Sefid Phase and Archaic Susiana in the Deh Luran and Susa Plains respectively.¹⁶ One sherd is also reminiscent of Ubaid 1/CMT type from Chogha Mami¹⁷ painted by diagonal black bands on the both sides (**Fig. 10**). However, a close similarity between Samarran/ Ubaid 0 and the CMT/Ubaid 1 wares makes it difficult to distinguish them easily.

Ubaid 2–4 is represented by black or brown geometric motifs on the buff to greenish and

reddish buff wares. A human motif is also observed which already reported from southern Mesopotamia.¹⁸ Most popular Ubaid-related motives are thick horizontal bands on the outside or on the rime and birds painted between thick bands and hatched lines. The common Ubaidian paints are limited by two horizontal bands on the upper part of exterior side (**Figs. 11–12**). Of interest is the presence of two sherds which are techno-typologically identical with what is known as Dalma- Ubaid in the Highland Western Iran. These samples are differentiated from Mesopotamian motifs by the light red with buff slip dominated in the Central Zagros. In addition to these findings, a clay nail was found (**Fig. 13**). Such clay was used during Ubaid 2–4 in Mesopotamia.¹⁹

Godar Khosh (Mm010): The single site which contained the remains of late 4th to perhaps early 3rd millennium BC is called Godar Khosh (33° 32' 58" N 46° 00' 53" E) lying on the north bank of the Godar Khosh river covering an area about 150x170 m at an elevation of 363 m (a.s.l; **Fig. 14**). The site is delimited by a deep gully to the north.

¹⁵ Oates 1968, Pl. 7.

¹⁶ Delougaz/Kantor 1996; Hole 1977.

¹⁷ Oates 1968, Pl. 8, 12.3.5; Hole 1977, Pl. 40.

¹⁸ Perkins 1949, 85, no.14.

¹⁹ Mc Adams/Nissen 1972, 210.



Fig. 12 Drawings of the Samarran (nos.1-4) and Ubaid 2-4 (5-17) wares from Garr-e Chega

A large number of different materials such as sherds, architecture, chipped stone and stone implements are visible on the surface. Stone walls are apparently recognized *in situ*. Buff and red wares are the main types of surface assemblage each was made by both wheel and hand. Of importance, is the high presence of beveled rim bowl (BRB) which could be found in many areas of Iran.²⁰ Other diagnostic shapes are spouted, nose-lugged jars, everted, up-righted and carinated vessels and sometimes decoration of applique cord with finger impression and

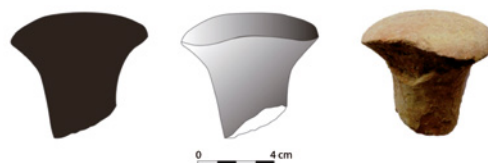


Fig. 13 A clay nail from Garr-e Chega

²⁰ Potts 2009.



Fig. 14 General view of Godār Khosh, looking east

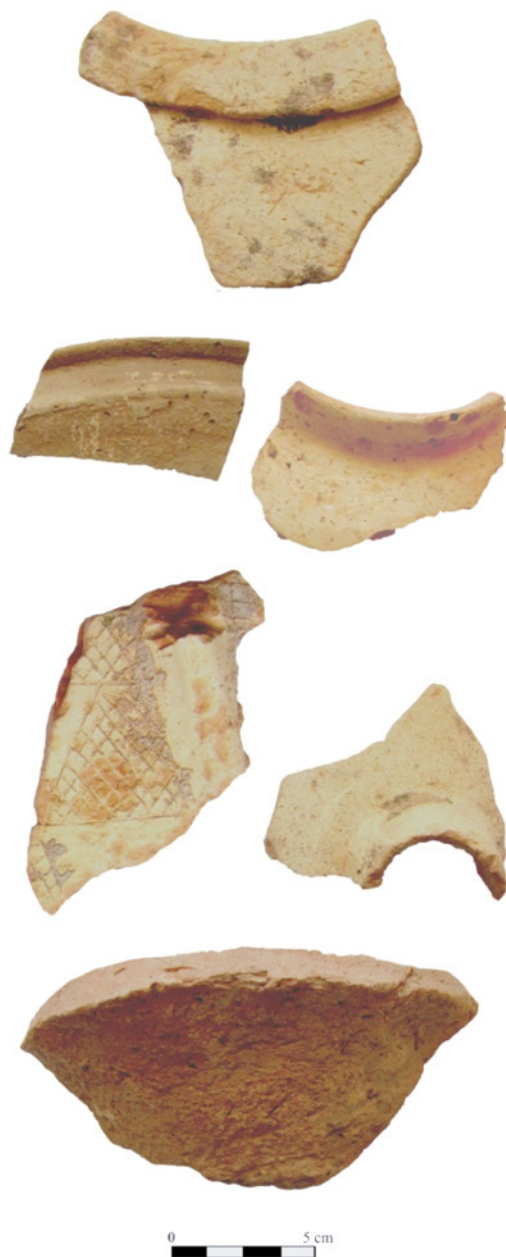


Fig. 15 Samples of collected sherds from Godar Khosh

curved hatches are also occurred (**Figs. 15–16**). These all indicate a time span from the second half of the 4th millennium BC onward and have so far been found in different sites such as Godin V,²¹ Farukhabad²² and Susa plain.²³ Therefore, a time period around the late 4th millennium BC is suggested for the site, coinciding with what is known as Late Uruk/ Jamdet Nasr in Mesopotamia.

Conclusions

The prehistoric remains of the Meimak district are not so enough that obtain much detailed discussion. The survey indicates a long gap of time between the upper paleolithic and late Neolithic in the area, though this might have resulted from sampling error or limitation. Achievements, however, support an interaction between southern Mesopotamia and Western Iran. The Ubaid 1/CMT period is discovered in the Deh Luran Plain coinciding with some changes in subsistence and growth of population, which are assumed as the result of people migration from Mandali to the Deh Luran in the mid-6th millennium BC.²⁴ The recent data from Meimak indicated an eastward influence of CMT culture into higher lands in western Iran though very little is still known in this regard. Moreover, we need to mention that recent investigations by the authors in the Mehrān Plain, to the south east of Mandali, have yielded much more information on the prehistoric Mesopotamian cultures of Samarran and CMT through the Jemdet Nasr (**Figs. 17–18**). Although mineralogical and

²¹ Badler 2002.

²² Wright 1981.

²³ Delougaz/ Kantor 1996.

²⁴ Hole 1977.

Nu.	Site	Description	Cultural Period	Reference
1	Mm006	Buff, Common, Mixed, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Wilkinson/Monahan/Tucker 1996
2	Mm006	Buff, Fine, sand, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Wilkinson/Monahan/Tucker 1996
3	Mm006	Red, Common, Sand, slip	Ubaid 2-4	Wilkinson/Monahan/Tucker 1996
4	Mm006	Buff, Common, Mixed, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Wilkinson/Monahan/Tucker 1996
5	Mm006	Greenish buff, Common, Sand, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Wilkinson/Monahan/Tucker 1996, 27
6	Mm006	Buff, Fine, sand	Ubaid 2-4	Perkins 1949 Fig. 1
7	Mm006	Buff, Common, Sand, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Wilkinson/Monahan/Tucker 1996, 27
8	Mm006	Red, Fine, sand	Ubaid 2-4	Perkins 1949 Fig. 11
9	Mm006	Buff, Fine, sand, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	-
10	Mm006	Buff, Common, Sand, Int.Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Oates/Oates 1968 Pl: VII
11	Mm006	Buff, Fine, sand, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Perkins 1949 Fig. 11
12	Mm006	Buff, Common, Sand, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Perkins 1949, 83, Fig. 10.26
13	Mm006	Buff, Common, Sand, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Perkins 1949 Fig. 11

Table 9 Description of fig. 7 sherds

No.	Site	Description	Cultural Period	Reference
1	Mm007	Buff, Common, Sand, Slip	CMT/ A.S.III	Oates/Oates 1968, Pl: VII, VIII
2	Mm007	Greenish buff, Common, sand, Slip	CMT/ A.S.III	Oates/Oates 1968, Pl: VII, VIII
3	Mm007	Greenish buff, Common, sand, Slip	CMT/ A.S.III	Oates/Oates 1968, Pl: VII, VIII
4	Mm007	Buff, Common, Sand, Slip	CMT/ A.S.III	Oates/Oates 1968, Pl: VII, VIII
5	Mm007	Buff, Fine, Sand, Slip	Ubaid 3	-
6	Mm007	Buff, Fine, sand	Ubaid 2-4	Mallowa/Cruikshank 1935, 55, Fig. 33.2
7	Mm007	Reddish Buff, Common, Sand, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Wilkinson/Konahan/Tucker 1996, 27
8	Mm007	Buff, Fine, sand	Ubaid 3/ MS	Delougaz/Kantor 1996 pl. 190
9	Mm007	Greenish buff, Fine, sand, Slip	Ubaid 3/ LMS	Degoulaz/Kantor 1996 pl. 169H
10	Mm007	Buff, Fine, Sand, Slip	Ubaid 2-3/ MS	Perkins 1949 Fig. 11, No. 27
11	Mm007	Buff, Fine, sand, Slip	Ubaid 4	-
12	Mm007	Buff, Common, Sand, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Perkins 1949, 83, Fig. 10.26
13	Mm007	Buff, Fine, Sand, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Wilkinson/Monahan/Tucker 1996, 27
14	Mm007	Greenish buff, Fine, sand, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Perkins 1949 Fig. 10.21
15	Mm007	Reddish buff, Fine, Sand, Slip	Ubaid 2-4	Perkins 1949 Fig. 10.21
16	Mm007	Buff, Common, Sand, Slip	Ubaid 2/ EMS	Delougaz/Kantor 1996 pl. 59N
17	Mm007	Red, Coarse, Grit, Slip	Ubaid 2-3	Jasim 1985, 254:10; Wilkinson/Monahan/Tucker 1996, 27

Table 10 Description of fig. 12 sherds

Nu.	Site	Description	Cultural Period	Parallel
1	Mm010	Buff, Coarse, Mixed, Slip	Proto-Literate	Delougaz/Kantor 1996 pl. 83
2	Mm010	Light Grey, Coarse, Grit, Slip	Proto-Literate	Delougaz/Kantor 1996 pl. 86
3	Mm010	Buff, Coarse, Mixed, Slip	Proto-Literate	Delougaz/Kantor 1996 pl. 83
4	Mm010	Buff, Common, Sand, Slip	Proto-Literate	Delougaz/Kantor 1996
5	Mm010	Buff, Common, Sand, Slip	Proto-Literate	Delougaz/Kantor 1996 pl. 83
6	Mm010	Buff, Common, Sand, Slip	Proto-Literate	Delougaz/Kantor 1996
7	Mm010	Buff, Common, Sand, Slip	Proto-Literate	Nokandeh 2010, 506 Fig. 11

Table 11 Description of fig. 15 sherds

microprobe analyses have shown that the Samarran wares are in fabric and paint closely related to the Ubaid,²⁵ higher proportion of later Ubaid remains have been discovered in the Iranian sites. Thus, closer interactions are attested between Mesopotamia and Western

Iran during the later Ubaid period.²⁶ Regarding to the geographical position of Meimak between these two regions, new Ubaid-related findings deserve more attention. The Central Zagros Middle Chalcolithic - Mesopotamian Ubaid interaction has already been

²⁵ Blackham 1996.

²⁶ Abdi 2003; Henrickson 1985.

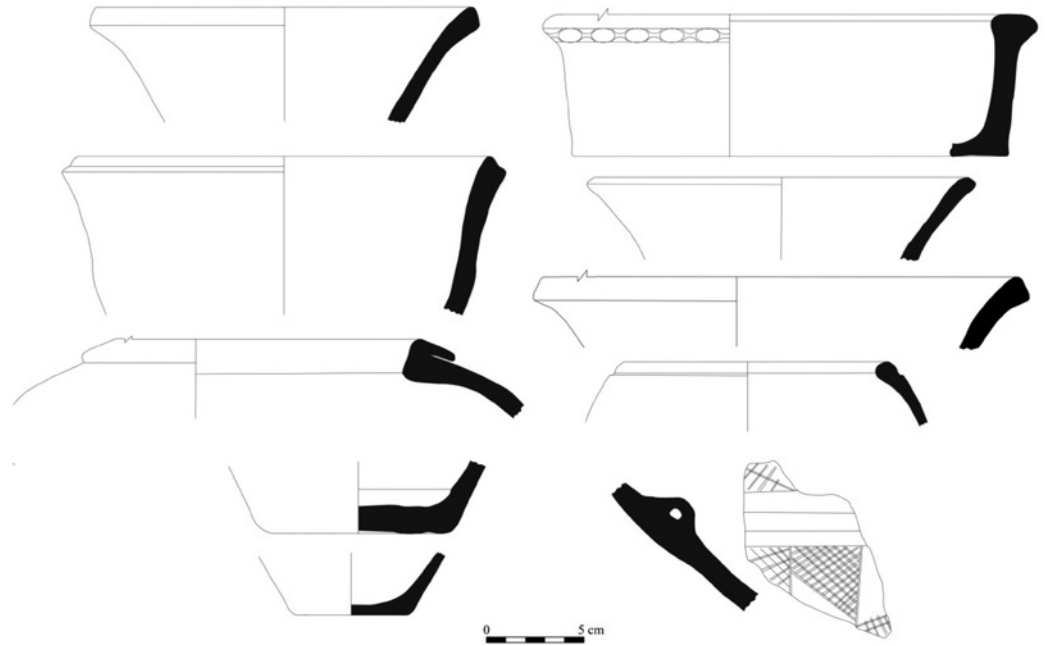


Fig. 16 Drawings of some collected sherds from Godar Khosh.

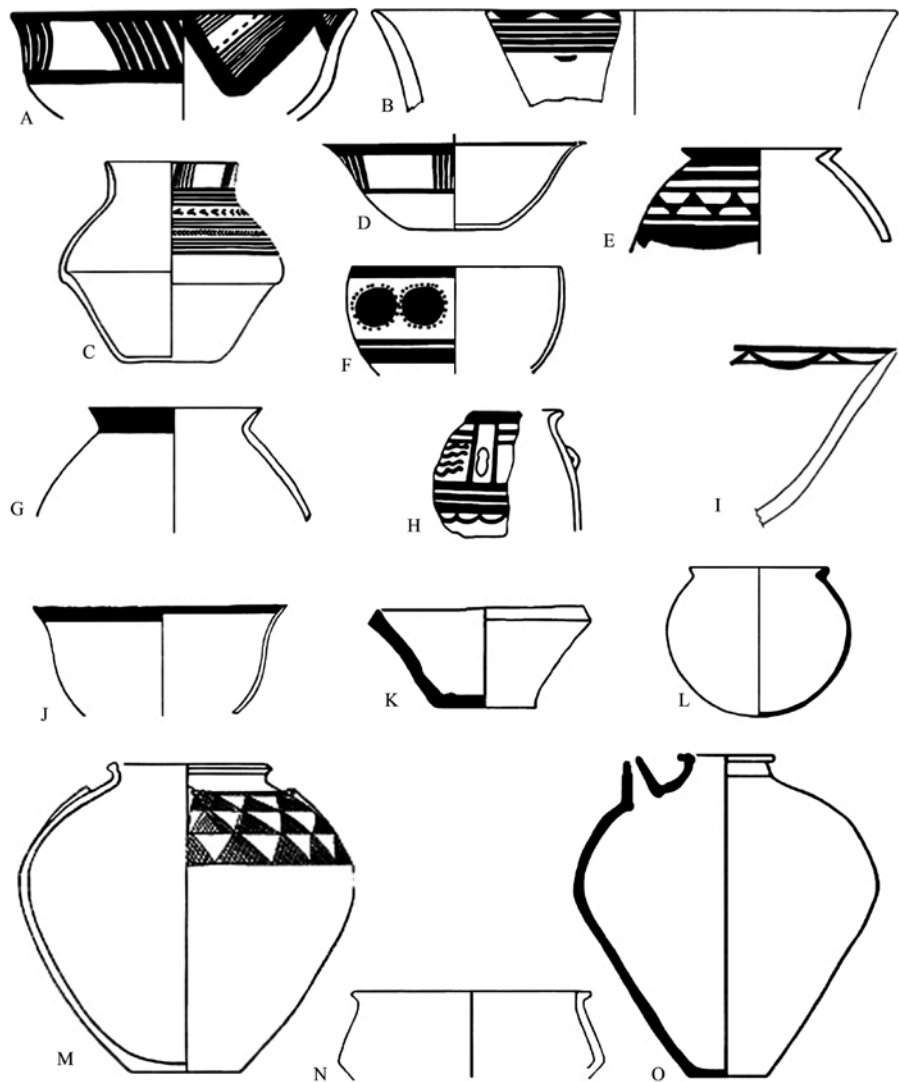


Fig. 17 Mesopotamian pottery parallels from Samarra (A-B), Cogha Mami(C), Ubaid II-IV (D-J) and Proto-Literature (K-O). (A: Beilinski 1987; B: Calvet 1987; C: Hout 1996; D, I: Safar 1981; E-H, J: Jasim 1985; K, O: Mattews 2002; L: Van Dreil 2002; M: Badler 2002), N: Gut 2002)

discussed.²⁷ This coincided with the beginning of specialized pastoralism in the highland during the 5th millennium BC.²⁸ Moreover, the pastoralism is supposed as an adaptive strategy to the environment.²⁹ If so, we can imagine continues patterns of this life kind from even the prehistoric times to the present. Therefore, the roles that nomads played in the prehistoric interactions are quite envisaged especially as they are still living up in the Meimak. Lastly, the discovered data from Garr-e Chega suggest the longest archaeological sequence ever established from the 6th to the late 4th millennium BC in the region. In addition, the environmental setting around the site suggests even earlier Neolithic deposits which might have been covered by later occupations. If so, further investigation such as excavation is required to find out a whole sequence of prehistoric occupation at the Meimak district.

²⁷ Henrickson 1985; Abdi 2003.

²⁸ Gilbert 1983; Henrickson 1985a-b; 1986; Abdi 2002; 2003.

²⁹ Hole 2010.

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Acknowledgments

We thank to ICHTO members of Ilam Province for their helps to get the survey permission and financial support. We are also grateful to Prof. S. Pollock and Prof. J. Oates for their very useful comments. Archaeological finds have been drawn by N. Niazi.

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Summary

In February of 2010, an archaeological survey of the Meimak District in Ilam Province, Western Iran, was carried out and resulted in identifying 13 archaeological sites which date back to a long time spanning from early Paleolithic to the late Islamic era. This paper deals with the prehistoric finds coming from the survey. Apart from two Paleolithic sites, others indicated the interactions between Deh Luran and Susiana

plains and Mesopotamian cultures over prehistoric times. On the basis of discovered data, however, prehistoric relationship between Mesopotamia and Western Iran is emphasized. Meimak could be supposed as a buffer zoon for the prehistoric cultures of Khuzestan, Highland Zagros and Mesopotamia.

چکیده

در فوریه سال 2010 میلادی یک بررسی باستان شناسی در ناحیه میمک استان ایلام، غرب ایران، به انجام رسید و در نتیجه 13 محوطه باستانی شناسایی شدند. این محوطه ها بازه زمانی طولانی از پارینه سنگی قدیم تا دوره اسلامی نو را در بر می گیرند. این نوشتار با داده های پیش از تاریخی این بررسی سروکار دارد. جدا از دو محوطه پارینه سنگی، باقی محوطه ها از برهم کنش فرهنگی میان دهلران، دشت شوشان و فرهنگ های میانرودان طی دوره های پیش از تاریخ حکایت می کنند. بر پایه داده های به دست آمده از این بررسی، تأکید بر ارتباط میان غرب ایران و میانرودان طی دوره های پیش از تاریخ است. به هر ترتیب میمک می تواند به عنوان یک منطقه حایل میان فرهنگ های پیش از تاریخی خوزستان، بلندی های زاگرس و میانرودان قلمداد گردد.

