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The Religious Complex at Shami. Preliminary Report on the Research of the Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan at Kal-e Chendar

The Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan started fieldwork at Kal-e Chendar, valley of Shami (Iranian Khuzestan). The site, investigated in 1936 by Aurel Stein and never visited again, was one of the most important sanctuaries of Hellenistic and Parthian Elymais. This is the report on the first season of excavation.

1. Introduction

In 2013, the Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzistan started its 1st season of excavation (6th campaign) at Kal-e Chendar (**fig. 1**), in the Valley of Shami. This project falls in the frame of a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Research Centre of the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization (RICHT-ICAR) and the Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino per il Medio Oriente e l'Asia (CST).¹

The Valley of Shami extends about 30 km north of the modern city of Izeh (Iranian Khuzestan). The site of Kal-e Chendar, located in its northern part, was investigated in 1936 by Marc Aurel Stein, the famous Hungarian-British explorer, who during one of his

1 Other institutions involved in the project, as partners of the CST, are the Dipartimento di Architettura e Design, Polytechnic of Torino (DAD), and the Dipartimento di Studi Storici, University of Torino (DSS). In Izeh, the Expedition has been supported by the Ayapir Cultural Heritage NGO. Members of the Expedition were Mr. Jafar Mehrkian, Mr. Alireza Bagherian and Mrs. Mana Rohani, for the Iranian side, Mr. Vito Messina, Mrs. Alessandra Cellerino, Mr. Enrico Foietta and Mrs. Ilaria Bucci, for the Italian side. The Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan does thank Mr. Jalil Golshan, Siamak Sarlak, and Mrs. Susan Cheragchi for their constant and precious support; in Izeh, Mr. Darvishpour, Qasemi, Mohammad Hassan Jafari, Gholam Reza and Hamid Bouzarjoumeri, Shahpur Kiani, Gheisar Saidipur, Mrs. Dehbanipour, Mr. Gaestouni and all the kind people of Izeh; in Kal-e Chendar, Mr. Ibrahim Baqheri.

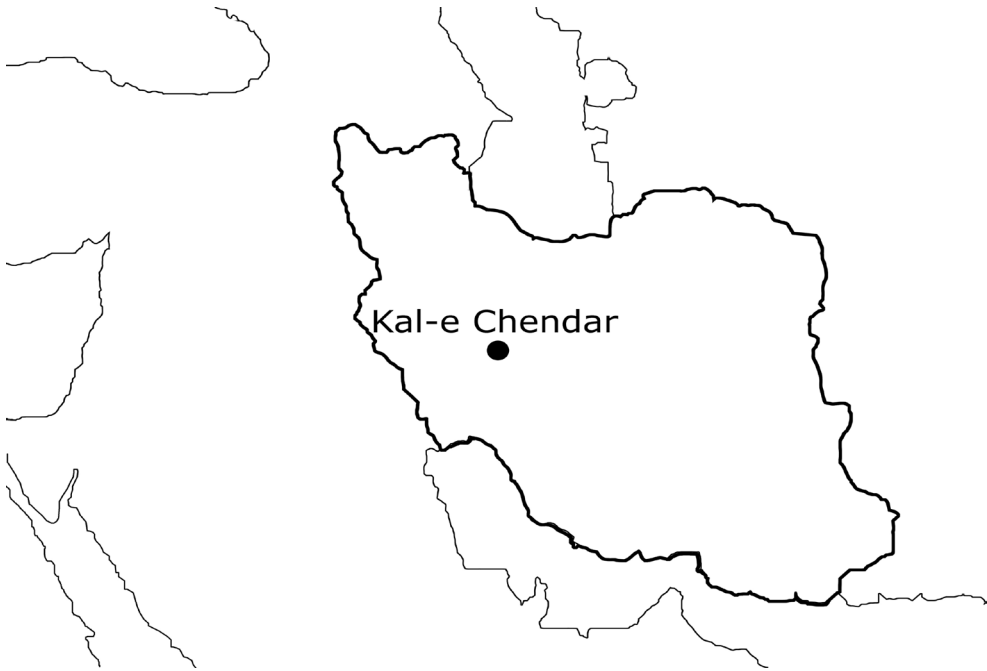


Fig. 1. Map of Iran and location of Kal-e Chendar.

last journeys through Inner Asia decided to remain a few days in the village after he was informed of the accidental recovering of ancient marble statues, broken into fragments, and a well preserved and known bronze statue, portraying a nobleman in Parthian dress, now in the Iran Bastan Museum, Tehran (Cumont 1939; Kawami 1987: 59–64, 169–174; Mathiesen 1992: 165–168; Curtis 1993).

Stein opened a small trench and brought to light the remains of a rectangular enclosure of unclear purpose, built on stone foundations, a rectangular baked brick altar, and several stone bases, which appeared to be related to ancient statues now lost (Stein 1940: 141–159). Both the structures and findings seem what remain of an ancient sanctuary, and the high quality of the sculpture's fragments recovered indicate that it must be one of the most reputed religious places of ancient Elymais, at least in the Hellenistic and Parthian periods (Sherwin-White 1984).

Despite the importance of the site and findings, no further research was systematically carried out after Stein's fieldwork terminated. Indeed a village was built in the area and both surveys and excavations appeared hindered by the presence of modern houses.

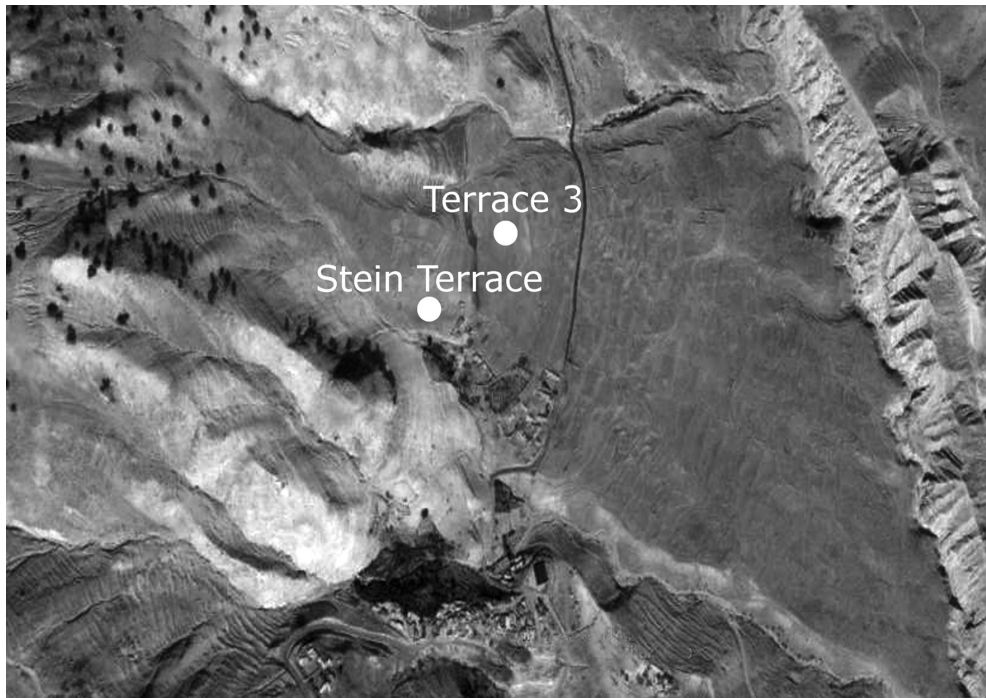


Fig. 2. The site of Kal-e Chendar after the survey of the Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan. Satellite image: WW2 scene, 2012 (© Digital Globe).

2. Survey at Kal-e Chendar

Given the high interest of the site, the Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan carried out preliminary surveys at Kal-e Chendar in 2011 and 2012 (Messina/Mehr Kian 2014), after having examined the documents of Aurel Stein preserved in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and National Library, London, and identified the area investigated in 1936, which was only roughly sketched and published (Stein 1940).

The survey, conducted by GPS locator over an area of about 0.34 km², allowed to recognize that the archaeological site extends at least for 50 ha on the western slope of a narrow valley and has the shape of a triangle with its narrower vertex to the west, being apparently delimited on the north and south by the beds of two streams, now dried up, flowing west-eastwards into a small river flowing north-southward, and delimiting the site on its eastern side: the so-called Rud-e Shami.

The valley slope approximately ranges from 920 to 1040 m ASL. To the south, a hill rising up to ca. 1070 m ASL supports the remains of a very small fort (qala) of about 210 m².

The surveyed slope revealed traces of ancient structures made in undressed stones that can be identified as wide terraces progressively allowing the ascent to the highest terrace: the latter extends for about 4,600 m², having an irregular quadrangular shape and overlooking the southern stream: its central part must correspond to the area investigated by Stein. The south-east corner of this terrace is now occupied by one of the eight modern houses built along the southern stream and partially overlapping the archaeological site. Cultivated fields extend over the rest of the slope and are delimited by low enclosures made in undressed irregular stones, which are sometimes superimposed on the remains of more ancient walls.

At least three subsequent terraces have been identified. The most impressive of the ancient structures is the south wall of the upper terrace, which appears to be more than 90 m long and, at some points, up to 3 m high. Its façade has collapsed, probably in ancient times, but it is possible to see that its lower part is made by a row of huge irregular stones, onto which cut stones of smaller size are arranged in courses. In the area of its southeast corner, which has been used as foundation for a modern house, squared and rounded ancient column bases have been recognized, while ancient stone blocks of masonry have been re-used in the walls of modern houses. The latter findings are particularly important for they testify to the fact that a monumental building was risen on the top of the upper terrace, at about 1015 m ASL, and confirm the preliminary results of Stein's research.

However, the possibility that many other ancient elements, re-cut or broken on purpose, were used during the building of modern houses and field enclosures cannot be ruled out. These are indeed surely recognizable when they are in a quite good state of preservation, because of their size, which as a rule is larger than the other stones used in the courses of the walls, and polished surface, but become almost undistinguishable where they are broken into small pieces or re-cut. It is no surprise that the site, during the ages, was used as an emerging quarry of easy-access stone materials.

Further to the N of the upper terrace, which we called the «Stein Terrace» (**figs. 3–4**), a smaller squared terrace of about 56 x 60 m, Terrace 2, can be clearly seen both from the satellite image of the site and on the ground. About 110 m north-east of Terrace 2, the corner of a third terrace, Terrace 3 (**fig. 2**), still emerges from the present ground level, as well as its well preserved eastern façade, which seems to be built following the same technique of the Stein Terrace; it is slightly differently oriented, for it follows the natural conformation of the ground. The preserved surface of Terrace 3 is about 9 m lower than that of the other terraces; it revealed the presence of a wide number of baked bricks fragments. The terrace's size cannot be determined, for its southern and western fronts are unknown.

Remains of other structures of unclear purpose have been even identified in the northernmost part of the valley slope and east of the modern road, as well as a number of tombs of different types. The latter, located on the whole area surrounding the terraces, are underground saddle-roofed chambers built in undressed stones.



Fig. 3. The Stein Terrace from the south (© CST and RICHT-ICAR).

In the upper part of the Kal-e Chendar slope, a very small valley was supplied by a spring now dried: this is known as «Chesmeye Sar-e Murd» (the spring flowing in the Murd plain); it can be reached by a well preserved stone-paved road running from the Stein Terrace to the spring itself via two large terraces. The road continues up to the mountain cliffs that rise west of Kal-e Chendar, known as Bileva peaks.

A survey has been conducted also on this area: here, at an elevation of about 1709 m ASL, archaeological remains have been marked at 32°04'03.1" N, 049°40'50.2" E. In this area, huge walls made in undressed stones still emerge from the present ground level. These walls appear to be related to one great fort (qala) or, maybe, a complex of small fortresses that overlooks the Shami valley and offers a view to the Susan plain: it is remarkable that the area is known as «Char Qala» (the four fortresses). On the road that reaches the Char Qala area, a rock grave (Bard-e Gawri) has been recognized: this is a small chamber carved into a boulder having a polished façade and a small square opening, once blocked by a flat stone cut on purpose, now lost.



Fig. 4. Trench 1 from the north
(© CST and RICHT-ICAR).

3. Excavations at Kal-e Chendar

Six trenches have been opened during the 1st season of excavation (6th campaign): four on the top of the Stein Terrace, one at the feet of Terrace 2, one west of the south stream bed. These have been named <Trench 1>, <Trench 2>, <Trench 3>, <Trench 4>, <Trench 5> and <Trench 6>. Trench 1 (**fig. 4**) is located in the centre of the Stein Terrace, in an area that could be identified, approximately, as the area already investigated by Stein. Trench 2 is located at the south-west corner of the terrace, in a point that seems to correspond to the ancient enclosure of the terrace itself. Trench 3 (**fig. 5**) is north-east of Terrace 2, not far from its NE corner. Trench 4 crosses the presumed NE wall of the Stein Terrace. Trench 5 is at the terrace's presumed NW corner. Trench 6 is on the other bank of the south stream.

Trench 1 measures 6 x 8 m east-westwards, having the shape of a T. Its south-west corner is located at 32°03'34.9" N, 049°41'54.9" E. On the surface, traces of mechanic cultivation were clearly visible: excavation revealed that cultivated soil reaches a depth of about 30 cm. Below it, a layer of deposits, containing very few potsherds and baked brick fragments (SU 3) covered the remains of a structure made of undressed stones (SU 4). The latter appears to be a wall or the foundation (?) of a wall, measuring at least 8 m in length and 1 m in width, and is built by stones roughly cut or re-cut on purpose, as is shown at least by two fragments



Fig. 5. Trench 3 from the east (© CST and RICHT-ICAR).

having a regular rectangular shape. As far as it is possible to see at present, SU 4 is a retaining wall almost perfectly oriented to the north, which contains a filling of stones and rubble extending beyond the western limits of the excavated area. It appears to have been laid on a layer of rubble (SU 8), which has been reached at about 1.2 m below the present surface and includes huge stones and boulders. The latter hindered the continuation of the excavation: for this reason, SU 8 has been excavated only on a limited area of 1.5 x 2 m for about 80 cm in depth. No potsherds have been found in this layer. Excavation was suspended at about 2 m below the surface

Trench 2 measures 6 x 5 m. Its south-west corner is located at 32°03'33.8" N, 049°41'52.6" E. In this point, the surface is about 2 m deeper than the surface of Trench 1. Just below the surface, a huge structure has been unearthed. It is made of undressed roughly cut stones that appear to have been disposed, at least, on 7 rows and seem to retain a filling of rubble. These rows could be interpreted as a huge retaining wall, approximately oriented to the NE, measuring at least 3.8 m in width and extending for more than 5 m in length. Given that this wall is very close to the supposedly identified corner of the Stein Terrace, it could be stressed that these rows are what remain of the terrace west wall and that two huge boulders still in their position at the west limit of the trench could be part of the terrace west façade.

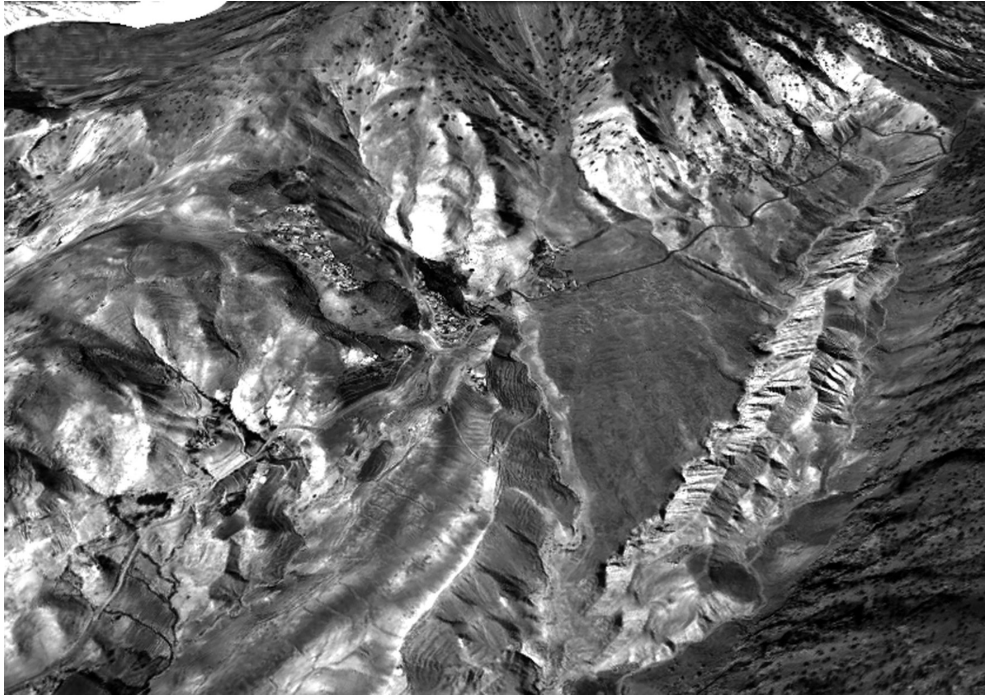


Fig. 6. Digital Elevation Model of the Kal-e Chendar slope elaborated by Aster-GDEM data (© CST and RICT-ICAR).

In any case, the upper rows of this structure appear to be partly loose and decayed. Excavation in depth, hindered by the presence of rubble and stones over all the exposed area, has been stopped at about 50 cm below the surface. It must be remarked that no potsherds have been found in Trench 2.

Trench 3 is roughly rectangular, measuring 2.5 x 7 m and oriented to the east. It is located at 32°03'39.2" N, 049°41'56.4" E. Here a complex structure made of baked bricks has been unearthed immediately below the surface and partially below a modern retaining wall of undressed stones. This structure, which is oriented to the E and is preceded on its east side by a paved baked brick floor (measuring 2.5 x >1.8 m), is a rectangle measuring 2.5 x 1.8 m. It has been partially destroyed, probably in modern times, by the opening of an unauthorized trench of irregular shape. Indeed, the courses of bricks alternating in its masonry have been broken for reaching the layers below them. The latter have been cleaned and revealed the presence of cut stones incoherently disposed below part of the structure: it is still unclear whether the structure was built over this layer of loose stones or the latter have been thrown in the unauthorized trench and pushed below the bricks in order to fill the trench itself. In the filling of the trench and the disturbed layer on the paved floor, several baked bricks fragments have been found and, among them, 5 complete baked bricks having the shape of a

column segment: these are of two sizes, the bigger measuring 34 x 35 x 30 x 8 cm (35 being the radius), the smaller measuring 30 x 32 x 29 x 6 cm (32 being the radius). The function of the whole structure is still unclear and needs to be more accurately investigated, but it could be supposed that it must have been a kind of platform that supported another structure (an altar?). Bricks of two sizes have been recognized in their original position: the standard is a square brick measuring 36 x 36 x 8 cm, but even some rectangular samples measuring 36 x 16 x 8 cm have been found. Very few potsherds have been found in the surface layer covering the paved floor: these are in common ware and seem to be generally dated to the Parthian period.

Trench 4 is a narrow rectangle, measuring 1 x 10 m. It has been opened across the presumed NE wall of the Stein Terrace and its NW corner is located at 32°03'35.5" N, 49°41'56.4" E. Only the surface layer has been removed in order to clarify the position of some huge stones that appeared to be part of ancient wall masonry. These have been cleaned and seem to be in their original position, being aligned at least on 3 with the purpose of retaining the terrace filling: the latter is composed of rubble and soil. No potsherds have been found.

Trench 5 is a rectangle measuring 3 x 10 m, roughly oriented to the east. Its NE corner is located at 32°03'36.0" N, 49°41'54.6" E. It follows the same orientation of a modern retaining wall, which could have been built over the remains of a more ancient structure. The surface layer revealed the presence of few potsherds and, among others, many fragments of a big storage jar decorated with a ribbing. Given that no old structures have been discovered during the present fieldwork, excavation stopped at 50 cm below the surface.

Trench 6 has been opened on the place of a tomb already identified during the survey conducted in 2012 (5th campaign) and named T9. It is located at 32°3'40.10"N, 49°41'57.90"E and is a chamber of 4.5 x 2.4 m, made in undressed stones and roughly oriented to the east, which has been partially excavated by an unauthorized trench opened in modern times. Part of the collapsed saddle (?) roof has been removed and half of the chamber has been plundered. The remaining part has been excavated by the present expedition, starting from the surface, by removing the remaining part of the roof, which was instable and endangered the whole structure. Below this debris filling, a floor made in cut and flat stones has been reached. On the chamber's N wall, a rectangular low bench, made following the same technique of the floor, has been discovered. It has been broken by the trench that also destroyed the roof; its top is at about 20 cm over the floor. The chamber must have been at least 2 m high and, given the present sloping surface, it could be assumed that part of the chamber itself, likely its façade, now lost, emerged from the ancient ground level, and could be seen when arriving in the area: this area seems to have been part of one of the cemeteries surrounding the terraces complex. In any case, this type of chamber can be interpreted as a kind of family tomb.

All the trenches have been covered after the end of the excavation.

4. Conclusions

Even if cleared to a limited extent, the structures unearthed by our expedition attest that stone and baked brick buildings stood on the top of the recognized terraces, and seem to show that the present surface, used for cultivation purposes, approximates the ancient ground level, being coincident in some points. Archaeological stratification was indeed hindered by the continuous re-use of the stone blocks employed in ancient masonries, and, as a consequence, even layers containing ancient objects and materials did not accumulate during the centuries.

Despite the fact that our excavations provided indirect indication on the presence of buildings on all the terraces, it may be supposed that not all them were built for cult purposes: given that loose-on-surface ancient blocks of masonry and architectural decorations were found only nearby the Stein Terrace, it would not be surprising to discover, in the future, that only the latter supported a monumental building, like a temple, while less monumental structures made in baked bricks, like small altars, could have been built random, in many other points of the site.

In any case, the building size and monumental setting that can be inferred from the data acquired on the Stein Terrace's top and other points lead to assume that the sanctuary at Kal-e Chendar could have rivalled those at Majid-e Sulayman and Bard-e Nechandeh.

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