

# MOUNTAINOUS SANCTUARIES OF ANCIENT ELYMAIS. PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY THE IRANIAN-ITALIAN JOINT EXPEDITION IN KHUZESTAN

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**Abstract:** Preliminary results of the surveys and excavations conducted in the highlands of Khuzestan (ancient Elymais) by the *Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan* are here offered to Rémy Boucharlat for his constant support and help. These point to the existence of two mountainous sanctuaries in the region of the river Karun, at Kal-e Chendar and Qal-e Bardi, which can be compared for their features and importance to the well known terraces discovered at Majid-e Sulayman and Bard-e Nechandeh, but still remained almost unexplored up to now. Both have been located on the ground and surveyed by our expedition with the purpose of creating a geo-referenced, multi-layer and multi-temporal system in which the data acquired on the ground could be integrated with satellite imagery and previous cartography.

**Keywords:** Elymais, mountainous sanctuaries, Hellenistic and Parthian Iran.

Rémy Boucharlat was one of the first with whom the idea of creating a joint Iranian-Italian archaeological expedition working on ancient Elymais was shared, and one of the first who helped this project effectively. The *Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan* was created in 2008, and started research in the Izeh plain (at Hung-e Azhdar, Hung-e Kamalvand and Hung-e Yar-e Alivand) and the valley of Shami<sup>1</sup>. We, the co-directors of the expedition and co-authors of this article, are indebted and grateful to him for his constant support, encouragement and suggestions, and present here some of the preliminary results of the research conducted up to now, in remembrance of the beautiful moments spent together in Iran.

One of the aims of the expedition is to explore the highlands of nowadays Khuzestan, an area corresponding to a great part of ancient Elymais that is still almost unknown to modern scholarship, despite its importance and the interest it raised among the first travellers who entered southwest Iran. It is the region in which a number of ancient rock carvings, dated from the Old-Elamite to the Parthian period, have been progressively recognized<sup>2</sup>, and the presence of very important and reputed sanctuaries reported by ancient Greek and Roman authors. One of the most famous occurrence is that concerning the temple of Bel at which Antiochus III met his death in 187 BC attempting to plunder its treasure (Strabo 16.1.18), while a further temple, that of Artemis-Nanaia, is said to have been endangered by Antiochus IV, successor of the former (Polybius, 31.9). Also mentioned by some authors (Justin, 41.6.8) is a temple of Artemis, called ‘Azara’ by Strabo (16.1.18), which lays somewhere in Elymais and was plundered by a Parthian sovereign — Mithradates I, after his conquest of Susa, according to some scholars<sup>3</sup>. It was also the region where important capitals, not yet located on the ground, like Seleucia on the Edyphon<sup>4</sup>, were founded, and, for all these reasons, one of the areas in which the first explorations started since the mid of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the ruins of ancient monumental structures, interpreted — and, in some cases, even identified in subsequent times — as sanctuaries, remained well visible in the

<sup>1</sup> The expedition, supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Fondazione CRT, operates within a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Centro Scavi di Torino and the RICHT-ICAR. Other institutions involved in the project are the Polytechnic of Torino, the University of Torino and the Ayapir Cultural Heritage NGO.

<sup>2</sup> Vanden Berghe & Schippmann 1985.

<sup>3</sup> This is the common opinion in recent literature (see for instance Nodelman 1960: 87; Hansman 1978: 154; Harmatta 1981: 207), even if other scholars also consider a later time (in particular Nöldeke 1874: 192; Potts 1999: 394-395).

<sup>4</sup> See in particular Hansman 1978.

mountains that are still the homeland of the Bakhtiari people having been often considered as important clues for the identification of the Elymaean temples mentioned in ancient sources.

As a matter of fact, the modern archaeological research, started about 50 years ago by the *Délégation Archéologique Française en Iran* further to an agreement with the *National Iranian Oil Company*, confirmed that very important mountainous sanctuaries actually existed in the highlands of Khuzestan, and that they are characterized by monumental terraces, as the discoveries made at the very famous sites of Majid-e Sulayman and Bard-e Nechandeh clearly attest; even if no evidences were found for identifying the latter with the sanctuaries mentioned above, what emerged from the study of the literary and archaeological records induced — and still induces — to postulate the existence of further monuments and cult places.

This is true indeed, for the surveys and excavations conducted by our expedition allowed us to verify that Majid-e Sulayman and Bard-e Nechandeh are not isolated examples of religious mountainous architecture of the Hellenistic and Parthian periods: similar terraces exist in the same region, at Kal-e Chendar (in the valley of Shami) and Qal-e Bardi (Fig. 1). These will be described below, after having resumed the features of the better known contexts of the former.

The ruins of cult terraces made of huge undressed stones are still visible today at the northernmost limits of the modern town of Majid-e Sulayman ('the Mosque of Sulayman'), in an area known as Ser Majid ('the top of the mosque'), a hillock overlooking the modern houses about 1 km south of the Shahid Asyae airport (Fig. 2).

There, monumental terraces lay against a low crest, at an elevation of about 300 m above the sea level (asl). The site is about 1 km west of a stream's bed, which roughly runs north-southward, following the

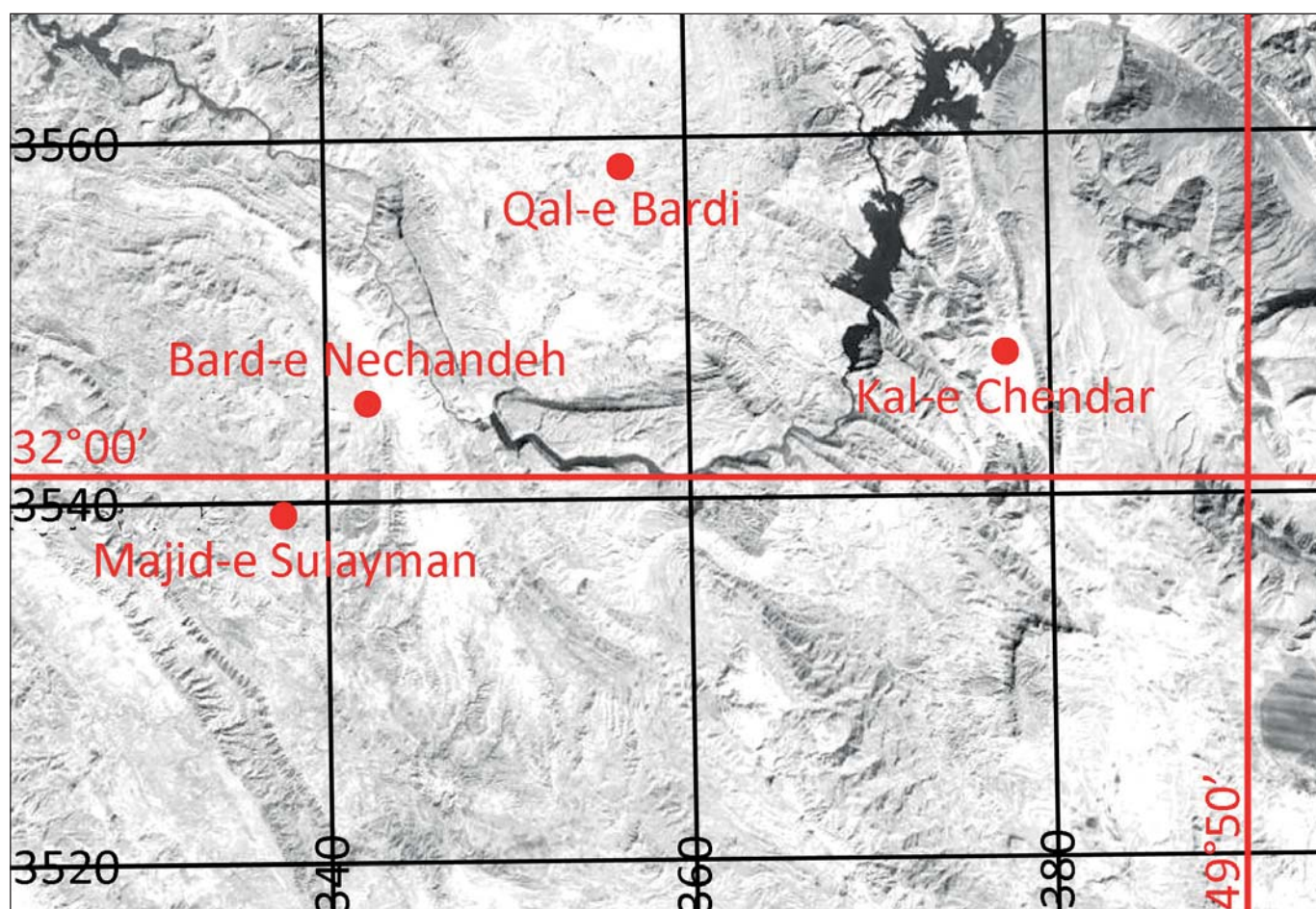


Fig. 1: Highlands of Khuzestan. Location of the known terrace-sanctuaries.