

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE SECOND SEASON
OF EXCAVATION OF THE IRANIAN-ITALIAN
JOINT EXPEDITION IN KHUZESTAN
AT KAL-E CHENDAR, SHAMI (7TH CAMPAIGN, 2014)

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ABSTRACT

This report makes available the preliminary results of the excavation conducted in 2014 by the *Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan* at Kal-e Chendar, in the valley of Shami (ancient Elymais). The expedition started regular excavation in 2013 and brought to light the remains of buildings of various type, size and technique, almost certainly made for religious purposes on monumental terraces. Family tombs of a wide cemetery were also recognized that must have been used by a wealthy plutocracy.

KEYWORDS: Shami, Elymais, Hellenistic sanctuaries, Parthian sanctuaries, Parthian cemetery.

THE *Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan* started excavation at Kal-e Chendar on October 2013 and resumed fieldwork on September-November 2014.¹ This project falls within a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by Seyyed Mohammad Behesthi for the Research Institute for Cultural Heritage and Tourism of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iranian Center for Archaeological Research (RICHT-ICAR), and Vito Messina for the Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino per il Medio Oriente e l'Asia, or Centro Scavi di Torino (CRAS). Other institutions involved in the project are the Dipartimento di Studi Storici, University of Torino (DSS), and the Dipartimento di Architettura e Design, Polytechnic of Torino (DAD).

INTRODUCTION

The expedition conducts research on the site already investigated in 1936 by the famous explorer Aurel Stein further to the accidental discovery of outstanding antiquities, which are now kept in the Iran Bastan Museum, Tehran.² Stein excavated for few days and identified an ancient sanctuary, considered in the subsequent literature as one of the most reputed religious places of Hellenistic and Parthian Elymais.³ Kal-e Chendar, in the valley of Shami, is about 30 km north of the modern city of Izeh.⁴

The site, first surveyed by our expedition in 2012,⁵ extends at least for about 50 ha on the west slope of a narrow valley, having the shape of a triangle (FIG. 1); this is a gravel fan delimited to the N and S by the beds of two streams, now exhausted, and to the E by a river, known as Rud-e Shami.

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¹ The preliminary report of the 1st season of excavation at Kal-e Chendar (corresponding to the 6th campaign of the *Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan*) is published on the previous issue of *Parthica* (BAQHERIAN *et alii* 2016). The expedition is co-directed by Vito Messina and Jafar Mehr Kian. All the authors of this report were members of the 2nd season (7th

campaign). Other members were Mr. Mojtaba Shokrollai (photographer) and Mrs. Leyla Sharifi (ethnologist), for the Iranian side, Ms. Cristina Bonfanti (topographer), for the Italian side. The expedition is supported in Izeh by the Ayapir Cultural Heritage NGO.

² STEIN 1940, 141-159, plan 10.

³ SHERWIN-WHITE 1984. See also BAQHERIAN *et alii* 2016, 31-34, for further details.

⁴ *Ibidem*, figs. 1-3.

⁵ MESSINA, MEHR KIAN 2014; EIDEM 2016.

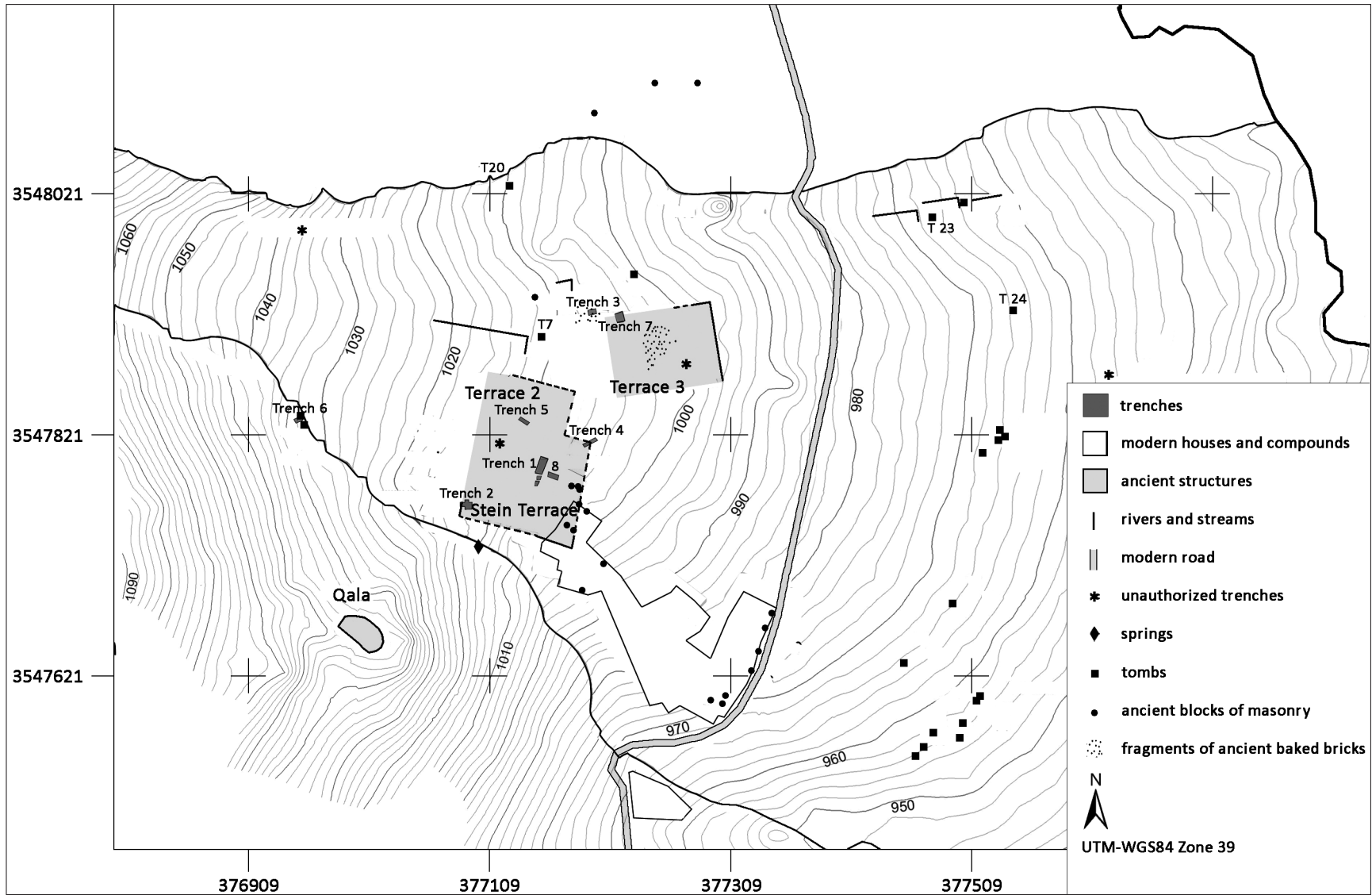


FIG. 1. Kal-e Chendar. Contour map of the surveyed area (scale 1:5000) and location of the excavated trenches and tombs. Elaborated by C. Bonfanti.

The surveyed area, entirely occupied by cultivated fields, revealed traces of monumental terraces built in undressed stones and placed at different elevations, following the natural slope of the valley. These were built with the purpose of supporting buildings made in undressed stones and/or baked bricks. Of these buildings almost nothing remains, with the exception of re-used or loose-on-surface stone blocks of masonry, column bases and brick fragments: their decayed walls and columns must have stood in ruin for a long period, having been progressively plundered over the centuries, and the wide extension of the terraces that supported them leads one to suppose that they must have been large buildings or even complexes of buildings.

Some areas were selected for excavation and our interest was drawn particularly by what remained of the terraces. The results of our 1st season of excavation confirmed what was preliminarily noticed by Stein: that buildings of different type, size and technique stood on the terraces recognized at the site. It seems that, along with monumental buildings laid on foundation platforms made in undressed stones, also small structures existed that were made for religious purposes. In any case, the religious complex at Kal-e Chendar appears to have been of a particular type: at least at a given moment, a cemetery, of which only few tombs have been recognized in the first two seasons, occupied the areas surrounding the terraces, thus implying that the religious and funerary functions were here strictly interrelated.

Despite the scanty findings, the structures unearthed appear to be dated to the Hellenistic and Parthian periods quite confidently. No evidence was discovered of occupations that pre-date these periods, for the structures found insist on natural deposits lacking of archaeological records almost directly. However, the possibility that the site was known, and in some way frequented, even before the most recent periods identified must be taken into account seriously. In Elymais the frequentation of sites having attained particular significance – in this case religious – is usually attested far before their use in the Hellenistic and Parthian periods. That the area was known since pre-historic times is at last revealed by the wide occurrence, even on surface, of lithic objects, particularly blades (FIG. 4).

The importance of the religious complex of Kal-e Chendar is revealed by the presence of fortresses guarding the site from different accesses: ruined massive walls of ancient fortresses and small qalas were recognized during our survey at different points, like the peaks of Bilevah, overlooking the site from the W, and two hillocks rising to the S. In any case, the sanctuary and cemetery at Kal-e Chendar were located in a very suggestive mountainous landscape, in which architectures or other features actually seem meaningless out of their natural background.

EXCAVATION AT KAL-E CHENDAR

Excavation at Kal-e Chendar is difficult, and the site's stratigraphy hardly comprehensible, because of the characteristics of the soil, deposits and ground morphology. The soil, a lithosol consisting of partially weathered rock fragments, is everywhere mixed with rubble of different sizes and other debris, which are the result of the progressive decay of the stones and boulders that can be found everywhere in the valley. The abundance of these decayed materials makes the detection and understanding of strata uneasy. However, the main problem for the definition of a sequence of archaeological layers is created by the low stratigraphic accumulation, characteristic of mountainous sites, and caused by soil flotation and repeated human interventions: these did not seem to have originated the progressive deposit of layers and architectural remains, characteristic of structures built in mud-bricks, for building materials, namely stones, are here continuously re-used, and the most recent intervention obliterates the preceding almost completely.

The result of this process is that, in the excavated areas, no more than 2 m separate the surface from layers of natural deposits lacking of archaeological records, and stratigraphy is extremely compressed in favour of the more recent phase of occupation, with materials of different dates incoherently mixed in the same disturbed layers.

In the 1st season six trenches were opened in different points of the surveyed area (Trenches 1-6). Excavation was resumed only in two of them (Trenches 1 and 3), while other trenches were opened