

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE THIRD SEASON
OF EXCAVATION OF THE IRANIAN-ITALIAN
JOINT EXPEDITION IN KHUZESTAN
AT KAL-E CHENDAR, SHAMI (8TH CAMPAIGN, 2015)

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ABSTRACT

This report makes available the preliminary results of the excavation conducted in 2015 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 sanctuary, Parthian sanctuary, Parthian cemetery.

THE *Iranian Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan* resumed excavation at Kal-e Chendar on October-November 2015. 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 (CRAST). 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

Fieldwork at the site started in 2012 with a survey that allowed us to verify the wide extension of the archaeological area (about 50 ha),¹ on the W slope of a gravel fan delimited to the N and S by the beds of two exhausted streams, and to the E by a river, known as Rud-e Shami (FIG. 1). The surveyed area, entirely occupied by cultivated fields, revealed traces of monumental terraces and a cemetery. Terraces once supported buildings made in undressed stones and/or baked bricks, of which almost nothing remains, with the exception of re-used or loose-on-surface stone blocks of masonry, column bases and brick fragments.

Some areas were selected for excavation and the results of our 1st and 2nd seasons² confirmed that buildings of different type, size and technique stood on the terraces recognized at the site. Along with the remains of buildings, also small structures were found that appear to have been made for

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¹ MESSINA, MEHR KIAN 2014; EIDEM 2016.

² The preliminary reports of the 1st and 2nd seasons of excavation (corresponding to the 6th and 7th campaigns of the *Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan*) are published on the previous issues of *Parthica* (BAQHERIAN *et alii* 2016; BUCCI

et alii 2017). The expedition is co-directed by Vito Messina and Jafar Mehr Kian. All the authors of this report were members of the present season. Other members were Mr. Majid Soroush (representative of Khuzestan RICHT) and Mr. Morteza Homayoon (archaeologist) for the Iranian side, Mrs. Cristina Bonfanti (topographer) for the Italian side. The expedition was supported in Izeh by the Ayapir Cultural Heritage NGO.

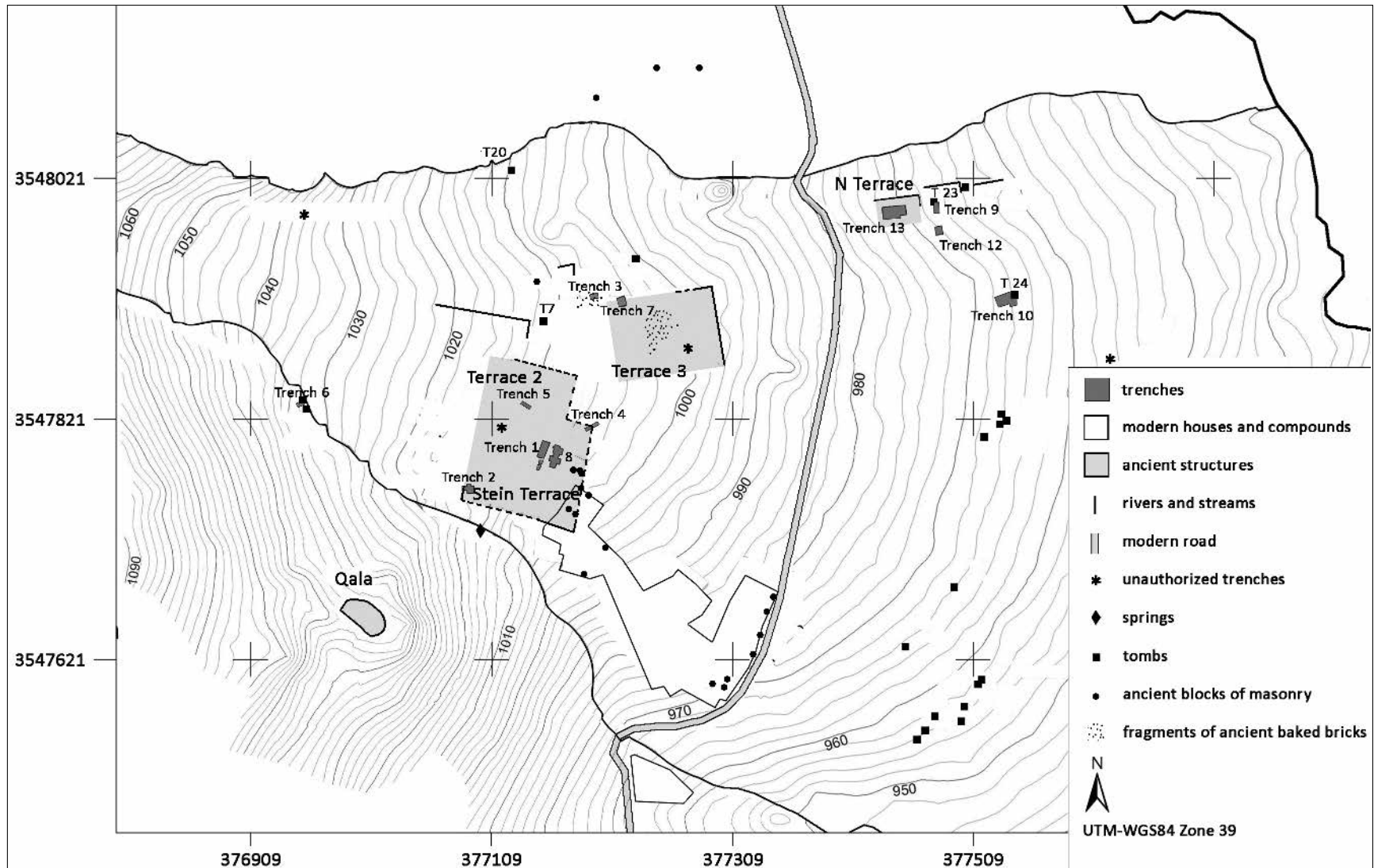


FIG. 1. Kal-e Chendar. Contour map of the surveyed area (scale 1:5000) and location of the excavated trenches and tombs. Elaborated by V. Messina and C. Bonfanti.

religious purposes. At least at a given moment, a cemetery, of which only few tombs have been recognized up to now, occupied the areas surrounding the terraces, thus implying that the religious and funerary functions were here strictly interrelated. The structures unearthed appear to be dated to the Hellenistic and Parthian periods quite confidently, notwithstanding that archaeological materials are very rare both on surface and in strata. No evidence was found of occupations that pre-date this range, but 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: that the area was known since prehistoric times is revealed by the wide occurrence, especially on surface, of lithic objects, particularly blades.

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

As already reported,³ excavation at Kal-e Chendar is difficult, because of the characteristics of the soil, deposits and ground morphology, and re-using of building materials, particularly stones: the most recent interventions obliterate the preceding almost completely, 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 and rarely occurring.

In the 1st and 2nd seasons eight trenches were opened in different points of the surveyed area (Trenches 1-8); tombs, unfortunately heavily pillaged, were also excavated with the purpose of recovering what remained of their archaeological context. Excavation was resumed this year in one of the preceding trenches (Trench 8) and in the areas of two tombs (T23 and T24): here two new trenches were opened (Trenches 9 and 10) for verifying the possible connections of the tombs with other ancient structures. Further trenches were also opened at other places: one (Trench 12) not far from Trench 9, in the same area of T23, the other (Trench 13) on a terrace further to the W, which we called the 'N Terrace', built for regularizing the ground in proximity of the exhausted stream joining the Rud-e Shami in the N part of the site. A trench was also opened in the area W of the Stein Terrace, not far from a cluster of stones that seemed what remained of ancient structures (Trench 11): excavation did not reveal archaeological remains, however, and the trench was covered.

Trench 8

Trench 8 is located in the central part of the so-called Stein Terrace, less than 10 m E of Trench 1.⁴ An area of 9 × 4 m approximately E-W oriented was opened in 2014 and resumed in the present season. During the 2014 excavation a large N-S wall (SU7) was found in the middle of the trench, thus the latter was widened up to about 12 m to the N and 6 m to the S for a total length of about 23 m, with the aim of better understanding the layout of the unearthed structure. In this area, the surface gently slopes to the E and S. Further enlargements of the trench led to the irregular layout of the excavated area, whose width ranges from about 4 to 9.5 m, especially in its N sector (FIG. 2).

The wall SU7 lies directly under the surface, its top having been reached at a depth of 20-40 cm.⁵ It is made of undressed irregular stones: only few of them are roughly squared. The E and W façades are well defined, having been made of stones regularly aligned and usually bigger than those in the wall's texture. The latter consists of various-sized stones irregularly arranged and mixed with soil. The part of the wall exposed during the 2014 and 2015 seasons is 22.88 m long. Starting from the N limit of the trench, SU7 is well preserved for 19.73 m (FIG. 3), being severely damaged further to the S.

³ BUCCI *et alii* 2017, 11-12.

⁴ For the excavations conducted in the area of Trench 1 in 2013 and 2014, see BAQHERIAN *et alii* 2016, 75-76, figs. 6-8, and BUCCI *et alii* 2017, 12, figs. 2-4.

⁵ The top elevations of SU7 vary from 1004.873 to 1003.693 m asl from N to S.