

# New Finds from a Parthian-Sasanian City near the Persian Gulf: “Korān”

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## Introduction

The fall of the Achaemenid Empire at the hands of Alexander of Macedonia involved destructive consequences for the Province of Fars. As the homeland of the Achaemenids, Fars was of special significance and suffered repeated attacks from Alexander and his successors. The Achaemenid capital and royal palaces were burnt to the ground and those of princely rank were scattered. At the same time the particular geographical position of “Pārs” was an obstacle to the unimpeded power of Alexander and his replacements. Although the northern strip of the province was under the direct rule of the Selucids, historical evidence indicates that in the third century before Christ, regional power-brokers in the south of Pārs gained a relative degree of independence. The complete establishment of local monarchies in the coastal region along the Persian Gulf and its hinterland was accompanied by the minting of various coins. Many and varied examples of these coins have been found and described. These local governments were the defenders of Achaemenid traditions and rituals in the chaotic Selucid era and were an effective limit on their power in the southern regions of Fārs.

Later, in the first centuries of the Islamic era, this region was known as “Jaroom” or “Garmsirāt Fārs” (“tropical Fārs”). The most important part of Garmsirāt in the Sasanid era was “Ardashir Khwareh”, the center of which was the city of Firoozābād. Because of the particular geography of this region, it was a redoubt for the local kings. Mountain ranges that run parallel with the Persian Gulf are a massive natural obstacle that prevents enemies from attacking effectively. Its largest cities were Firoozābād in the northern part, and the Port of Sirāf in the south. The inland cities are hemmed by inaccessible mountains that make access very difficult for attackers. The safest part of Ardashir Khwareh was the region north of Port Sirāf, set amongst these inaccessible peaks. In geographical texts dating from the early centuries after the arrival of Islam, this region, which was the final stop for the trade caravans on the Shirāz-Sirāf route, was known as “Korān”. (Table 1.) Ibn Balkhi about it writes,

“The whole of the fiefs of Irāhstan and Korān are desert. Koran is a fief of Sirāf and extremely hot, so much so that no one can live there in summer except the local people. The formidable heat and lack of flowing water and underground aqueducts (qanats) mean that no army can survive here. This is due to the lack of rainfall in the three or four months of winter so there is no fodder. And in summer, the heat!”

The town of Korān is located in the north eastern heights above Sirāf between the Fāl and Zālemi mountain ranges. The mountain range to the north of Sirāf was also known as Jebāl Jam until the fifth century AH (11th century CE) . (Maps 2 and 3) The Korān region sits at a height of



900 meters above sea level and has a different climate from the port of Sirāf. It is considered to be a “summer quarters” – a kind of Persian “Hill Station”. The existence of fertile land, sufficient water and its particular geographical position means that this region was used as a safe refugee by the local rulers of Fārs in the time period between the fall of the Achaemenids and the Islamic period.

The establishment of local administrations in South Fārs during the Parthian period has been proven by a number of scholars. The minting of coins in this region during the Selucid and Parthian periods confirms this. These regional rulers called themselves Frataraka. The most important feature of these coins is the use of the Aramaic script alongside Zoroastrian signs and symbols. This indicates their adherence to the traditions and rites of a more ancient Iran. Overall, the minting of coins by the Frataraka was an important step towards propagating the faith and politics of Fārs. These coins are from various periods with the first being Selucid and the second group being from the end of the Parthian era. Strabo writes, “The Persians have a king. Some kings pay tribute to other kings and before this they paid tribute to the Macedonian Kings, and today, to the Parthian kings”.

The establishment of local governments in Fārs, before the rise of the Sasanians is confirmed in texts from the Islamic period. The Chronicle of Ardashir Bābākān , and Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh are among the other texts that record this fact. Tabari wrote that at the time of the coming to power of Ardashir, the regional government of the King of Pārs was located “on the shore of the Persian Sea”. In the Chronicle of Ardashir Bābākān the name of the location that Ardashir conquered at the beginning of this reign is given as “Kalālān”, or “Kulālān. Ferdowsi records the name of this region as ‘Kajārān , and all sources are in agreement that the center of government of the local ruler of Pārs, with whom Ardashir went to war, was somewhere along the coastal strip in the Persian Gulf. Ferdowsi and Tabari report it to have been beside the “Sea of Pārs” and the Chronicle of Ardashir Bābākān reports that this place was one of the coastal “rastāghs”, the Sasanian local administrative unit. This region is compatible with an area that the Islamic geographers recorded as being the final halting place for caravans on the route between Shiraz and Sirāf.

Changes in the pronunciation of the name of this region, from Kalālān to Kajārān and Kārān and Korān appears to have been quite a common phenomenon in the south of Iran thanks to the linguistic characteristics of local dialects. Ibn Khordāzbeh was among the first Iranian geographers to mention “Korān” as the name of one of the towns in the area of Ardashir Khwareh. The writer of the fourth century AH (tenth century CE) Hhood alĀlam records Korān as one of the populous towns in the area of Sirāf and Ābadān. Maghdasi, who provides us with unparalleled information on Fārs, records Korān as the last stop on the caravan route between Dārābgerd and Sirāf, and places it within the “hot” region of Fārs. Ibn Balkhi mentions it as the final lodgings house on the Sirāf road. Idrisi considers Korān to be part of the Ardashir Khwareh region, and writes of it, “Among the towns of Ardashir Khwareh is Korān, a small town with stout defenses and much land to it name. There is a green flower there that the local people eat as they might the leaves of beet.” Jaihāni in his Eshkāl alĀlam writes, “In Korān there is a flower that in all the towns of Islam there is not the like of it”. The flower about which Idrisi, Istakhri and Jaihāni write is the beautiful wild flower, the daffodil, which grows on a plain named for them and which is in fact the new name for Korān – “Galedār”, or “place that has flowers.” The flower is still gathered every year and exported to other regions.

Historical evidence indicates that the ancient town of Korān was one of the most important towns of the inland hinterland of the Sirāf coast. In the Parthian and Sasanian periods it was the base of the local princes of Pārs. It conforms to the present day region of “Galedār” which is one of the sub-districts of the district of Mohr in southern Fārs province. It is located about ten farsakhs north-east of the Port of Sirāf. Yaghoob Hamavi, who visited this region at the start of the seventh century AH (thirteen century CE), writes, “Korān is a hamlet 10 farsakhs from Sirāf and Mohammad bin Sa’ad Korāni Adib Akhbāri is in residence there. AbulTayyib alFarahān bin Shirān alKorāni, the minister of Samām aDooleh bin ‘Azaddooleh is from these parts. Abu Eshāgh Korāni, was one of the writers in the secretariat of the court of ‘Azaddooleh Deilami”.

The precise location of this ancient town is even today not clear to researchers and scholars. The earliest archeological investigation in the region was conducted by Sir Marc Aurel Stein. He excavated several kilometers away from the ancient town and found artifacts dating to the period before Islam and concurrent with the era of Sirāf’s greatest prosperity. Stein’s excavations took place in a place called “Haraj” in the eastern part of the old town of Korān. In 1933, Stein traveled the route between Port Tāheri and old Sirāf, passing through the Tavakkoli Gorge and its north-easterly heights, arriving at the Plain of Galedār. There, without noticing the ruins of the old town of Korān, he proceeded from Fāl to Asir and started to excavate at Haraj. Regarding the antiquity of the artifacts on the Plain of Galedār, he writes, “Decorated ceramic artifacts, such as bright blue and green glazed vessels, with relief designs on the surface, are found in significant numbers the region, and are very similar to the artifacts at Sirāf. It is clear that this region was prosperous at the same time that Sirāf flourished”. Stein’s findings are very important because they represent the first serious study of the inland hinterland of Sirāf and include ancient pre-Islamic artifacts. However, because he was little acquainted with the historical texts, he was not able to compare and identify old names for the sites he was studying.

In 1368/1989 following the completion of a study on the inland hinterland of Sirāf and “Old Lārestān”, I turned my attention towards locating the original site of the town of Korān. In the course of this, I came across a manuscript biography called the Biography of Shāh Zandoo (Tazakkoreh ye Shāh Zandoo). This is an altered account of the military expeditions of Seyyed ‘Afifaldin Shāh Zandoo in the fourth and fifth centuries (tenth-eleventh centuries CE) in the hinterland of Sirāf, a zone that old geographical texts call “Irahestan”. Part of the description of an expedition of one of the Arab commanders, by the name of Amir Khoshnām bin Shah Zandoo deals with the area of Korān. “Amir Khoshnām bin Shah Zandoo set out for the hamlet of Fāl. This village of Fāl is at the present time among His Excellency’s holdings, and the previous village there was known as Korān with a Persian “K”. With this in mind, I began my field research in the region and found incontrovertible evidence including epigraphic evidence from tombstones of the Islamic period cemetery of the town of Korān.

It should be mentioned that the graveyard of Islamic Korān is today in a farm field between the present town of Galedar and the village of Asir (Map 2). Among the proliferation of stone inscriptions scattered over this extensive farm, two pieces were found that date to the ninth century AH (fifteenth century CE). The two names carved into these inscriptions both have the suffix “Kārāni. The first is named to Maghsood bin Kārāni and the other is to Mohammad bin Ghotbaldin Kārāni (figs 4 and 5).

The native inhabitants of this area retain the names of Korān and Kārān in their historical memory. Although they don't know anything about the place and its original site, in poems recited during the Ta'aziyeh performances in the month of Moharam, Korān, Fāl and Sirāf are mentioned as names of towns where the people rose up in support of Imam Hussein at the time of 'Āshourā. These poems are the only memory the people of the area have of the old city of Korān, which evidence indicates, spread from north to south along the length of the Galedār Plain from the Parthian period into the Islamic era. It became evident during the field research that the artifacts and the existing ruins of this town, which are distributed across the broad plain among green fields, gradually over the course of history spread down from north to south. The Islamic cemetery was the final southerly point of development of the town of Korān.

So, in order to find artifacts from pre-Islamic periods, I turned my attention to the northern part of the Galedār Plain. There, at place called "Tomb-e Bot," unique finds were made. A Parthian-Sasanian palace and temple were found that completely confirm evidence and documents attesting to the existence of "Korān" in the pre-Islamic era (Map 2). The ancient site of Tomb-e Bot is in the northerly most part of the Galedār Plain and is located running alongside the Islamic period graveyard of Korān. It is of about one hectare in extent and is now an agricultural field. It is hemmed in by mountainous high ground. On the site there are the remains of three geometric stone capitals, three other stone capitals with faunal elements, one half stone pillar and one stone eagle's head. It is probable that there are other artifacts in the locality that are still scattered and unidentified. Examples of column bases from this site have been reused by some of the locals as decorative elements in their own residences. Moreover, the remains of several stone tombstones that are very similar to those found at Sirāf and possibly pre-Islamic ossuaries, can be seen in this locality. The farmers of the region have unknowingly destroyed a great many of the fine stone artifacts in the course of their agricultural activities. Pieces of them are scattered around the site. Among the artifacts are a stone bust and a stone bird's head that possess particular characteristics that may have great importance for advancing research at the site.

The statue is a complete stone bust made of limestone (Fig. 6). It is about 30 centimeters tall. The left hand side of the face is less damaged than the other parts. The right eye is lost, although the left eye, which is all but intact, has fine relief lines that demonstrate the original quality of the statue. The nose of the figure is broad and the mouth is half open. The bottom of the bust has been cut round and the cut area forms the base of the statue. The hair on the head is wavy/frizzy and hangs in two plats down both sides. It appears that the upper part of the bust once sported a circular crown. A necklace is visible around the neck of the bust and in the middle of this a large pendant is set. Large bead-like earrings hang from the ears. The statue has an open-collared pleated tunic, the sides of which are extremely damaged.

By archeological standards in the southern area of Iran, the statue is unique and the structure of the face and its adornment evokes the composite Greek-Iranian style of the Parthian period. This statue bears some similarity to the face of one of the local rulers of Pārs, the image of whom has been found hammered into a coin. This example is one of the coins belonging to the second phase of local governments of Pārs, probably dating to the early centuries AD. On the reverse of this example, the image of an eagle is etched, which is a traditional sign on Iran flags. The coins of local rulers of Fārs also bear the eagle sign.



The stone eagle statue that was found at Korān has characteristics that make a Parthian attribution probable. The head of the bird is carved from limestone and is 29 centimeters around the neck. The feet of the bird has been carved with broken diagonal lines and its general form evokes an eagle in a state of watchfulness. Although this statue has been eroded with the passage of time, the fineness and harmony of its production are still evident. (Fig. 7)

Three capitals with a two-headed animal form are visible at the Tomb-e Bot site. (Figs. 8 and 9) The upper part of the figure with the heads of the animals has been destroyed. The heights of the three are 103, 107 and 106 centimeters. The slot for the roof beams is formed by the back of the animal which provides a rectangular socket. A line of ribbon decoration representing a palm branch is visible on each of the two capitals. The bottom part of it is a carving of the foot of an animal in a state of knelling, which is drawn in parallel. In both of the two capitals, the high quality of stone carving in pre-Islamic Iran can be seen. The other stone capital that was found at the site is very abraded and has a different form from the others. Its bottom part shows the body of an animal in a knelling pose, and the upper part has the bust of a human head form mounted on the body of the animal. The details of this cannot be made out because of extensive erosion. (Fig. 10)

Three cubic rectangular capitals were also found at the Tomb-e Bot site (Figs. 11 and 12), which are similar to the capitals at Persepolis, although they do not have the finesse and aesthetic appeal of those. The heights of these three capitals are different and it appears that each of them was used in a different building. Two sets of flowers woven together in a scroll can be seen on both sides of them, which are decorated with eight fluted or vertical corrugations. The decoration of the lower portion is an exact repetition of the upper part. One of the capitals has greater fineness and care in design, and has suffered less abrasion than the other two. The height of this capital is 120 centimeters and its scrollwork and ridged corrugations are intact. The lower portion of these capitals is composed of circular rolled scroll elements that have a circumference of 37 cm and a diameter of 8 cm. A hole 13 centimeters deep with dimensions of 2x3 cm is set into the flat surfaces at the top and the bottom. These are the places where the capital was connected to other components of the building.

These artifacts were made with stone quarried near the site of Tomb-e Bot itself and are of a type of limestone. In the northern part, at the start of the high land that surrounds the site, worked stone can be found which, very probably, was used for making the capitals and statues. The architectural and masonry style recalls the highly developed methods employed in Archemenid architecture, although those found here are of lower quality and precision than the statues at Persepolis. The main reason for this lower quality of workmanship is the more porous and friable stone employed, sourced from the surrounding mountains. Although scientific excavations have not been carried out in this region, it can be guessed that other ancient remains and artifacts lie buried in this area. That which is available to us allows us to surmise that the site of Tomb-e Bot had an administrative-religious function, and may have been an administrative base for the local rulers of Pārs. As far as historical texts from the pre-Islamic period go, they confirm the existence of a local government in the inland hinterland of Sirāf. At the same time, no prominent pre-Islamic architectural remains have been found in the inland hinterland of Sirāf. Also, a contrast and comparison of the information provided by Islamic period geographers and historians, supported by recent archeological finds, has proven the existence of the ancient town of Korān in the northern area of the present day Galedār Plain. It

can be ventured that the place that Tabari, the Chronicle of Ardashir Bābākān and the Shāhnāme refer to variously as Kālālān, Kalārān and Kojārān, conforms to the area known in the Islamic period as Korān. In plain speak, the above written sources confirm the location of this area in the inland hinterland of the Persian Gulf and the port of Sirāf. According to these written sources, Ardashir Bābākān, founder of the Sasanian Dynasty, went to war with a local king in this area at the start of his reign and brought him to heel. Tabari write,

“On the shores of the Persian Sea was a monarch by the name of “Estwaz” whom his people worshiped. Ardashir defeated him and cleaved him in half with his sword, killed his followers and carried off his treasures, which were in his hiding places.

Ardashir’s attack on the region of Korān was done with the intention of gaining complete control of the routes through the inland hinterland of Sirāf, and so, gain access to the significant financial resources accruing from the sea trade. In the first centuries AD, Sirāf was one of the more important harbours in the east that helped sustain the economic prosperity of the local rulers in Fārs. This group of local governments gained most of their fiscal income from sea trade and the taxes they could impose on ships. This state of affairs continued through the first centuries of the Islamic period. Thus, the areas of the inland hinterland of Sirāf, especially the region of Korān, possessed a great deal of importance for local rulers.

This site may have been selected as a political base for several reasons. The most important of these include:

1. Because the Korān region was situated in the inaccessible range of mountains running parallel with the Persian Gulf, it offered sufficient security for the local administration. The region was extremely hot in summer and because the routes through the mountains were very difficult, it was very little subjected to external attack.
2. The Korān area was also a residence of the port of Sirāf because it offered much more clement climatic conditions in the hot season. The administration and merchants living in Sirāf would decamp to Korān to escape the oppressive heat of the summer. In this way, Korān may have functioned as a “hill station” or “summer retreat”, for those living at Sirāf, a function that it has in fact continued to serve into the contemporary era.
3. The Korān area is located on the trade route from Sirāf into the interior of Iran, and was the first halting place for trade caravans heading for Istakhr so had strategic importance.
4. The social and economic connection between Korān and Sirāf continued in the centuries following the Arab conquest and even today echoes of this symbiotic relationship survive. The intertwined economic and political relationship of these two regions was of such a degree that the prosperity of both was intimately linked. Based on archeological evidence, Aurel Stein writes about these two regions:

The Galedār region has artifacts and buildings that go back to the era of greatest prosperity of Sirāf in the centuries before the arrival of Islam. For this reason, the prosperity of this region is concurrent with the flourishing of Port Sirāf and the architectural and artistic characteristics found there are the same as those seen in Sirāf.

The importance and prosperity of Korān continued into the early centuries of the Islamic period, and according to recent evidence uncovered, it was considered one of the centers of





Zoroastrianism until the fourth century AH (tenth century AD). The prosperity of this region reached its height during the reign of 'Azadollah Deilami, concurrent with the development of Sirāf Port. During this era, religious and secular scholars from the region were in evidence at the court of Āl Buyeh. Korān, as the first halting place on the caravan route between Sirāf and Shirāz, possessed particular importance. Almost every geographer from the fourth century to the sixth (tenth to twelfth centuries AD) confirms this fact. (Refer to Table 1 and Figs. 11 and 12). With the decline of Sirāf in the fifth and sixth centuries AH (eleventh and twelfth CE), Korān also gradually fell into decline, and henceforth ceased to leave a mark on the economy of the region. The settlement expanded south and was eventually relocated to the region of Fāl. The last historical signs of this ancient town date to the seventh century AH (eleventh century CE) and after this, the name "Korān" receded into the shadow of the rising village of Fāl, located several kilometers south of the old town. The name was largely wiped from memory and only remained on a few old tombstone inscriptions.

The close relationship of this ancient town with the sea trade, together with recent archeological finds, provide a good platform for further historical and archeological research in this important region. The acquisition of further historical documents and evidence will help us identify the huge importance oceanic trade had throughout the history of ancient Iran and into the first centuries of the Islamic period. In this investigation, the archeological and historical finds in the town of Korān, should not be ignored. It is one of the most important areas of the inland hinterland of Persian Gulf Coast.

More targeted research in the region should enable us to provide answers to the following fundamental questions:

1. In the great invasion of Alexander, and during the period of his immediate successors, which regions were able to remain political and economic redoubts, defending and preserving Iranian beliefs and traditions? Did the areas of the inland hinterland along the Persian Gulf Coast play a role in the continuity of this historic socio-cultural tradition; and, what might have been the degree of their influence?
2. In the second period of the Parthian State, beginning in the first century CE, what was the state of oceanic trade in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean area? What was the role Sirāf and its inland hinterland had in sustaining the presence of Iranians in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean?
3. What was the reason that Ardashir Bābākān selected Firoozābād to be his first capital, and what role did revenue from sea trade have in the rise of the Sasanian Dynasty and the endurance of its rule?
4. What degree of connection was there between internal political developments in greater Iran, and changes along the routes passing through the inland areas of the Persian Gulf Coast region; and, what role was played by local powerbrokers in these changes?
5. In considering the pre-Islamic history of Iran, has enough attention been paid to the critical role of the Persian Gulf and ports along its coast; and, in reviewing this important period in the economic history of Iran, what share did sea trade have in it?



To answer these important questions, a review of the history of Iran before the arrival of Islam appears necessary. New archeological findings and an expansion of field research activities are important. The development of the specific research area of historical studies of the sea trade and coastal regions is of particular importance. To attain these objectives, it is recommended that the Center for “Iranology” set up an independent unit for the study and research of the Persian Gulf Coastal Region and the Indian Ocean Basin. This could sponsor and supervise new archeological and field research concerning a little understood branch of Iran’s history. The main aim of this research would be to clarify the historical role Iran played in sea trade in the east, and identify important regions along the coast and in the inland hinterland in order to gauge the influence of the various areas in the socio-economic development of Iran throughout its several thousand year history. This is something that has not yet been done as fully and deservingly as it should be.

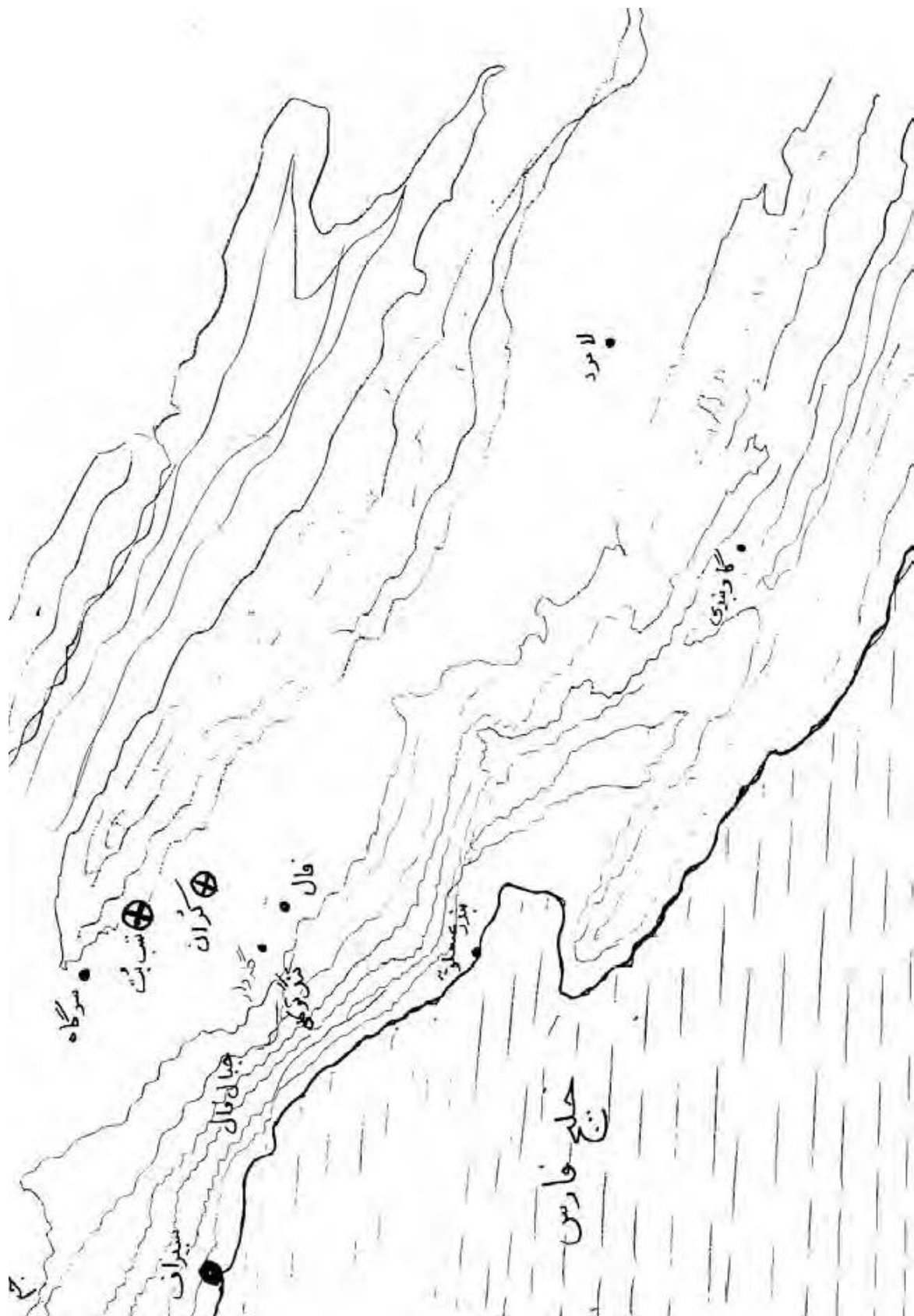
*Table 1. The Caravan Route from Shiraz to Sirāf in the Eleventh Century CE.*

| Istakhri  | Maghdasi   | Ibn Huqal   | Ibn Balkhi   | Idrisi   |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| Shiraz<br>↓<br>Kofreh<br>↓<br>Nakhaz<br>↓<br>Kavār<br>↓<br>Dasht-e Shurāb<br>↓<br>Khān Āzad Mard<br>↓<br>Kirand<br>↓<br>May<br>↓<br>Āzar Kān<br>↓<br>Korān<br>↓ | Shiraz<br>↓<br>Kofreh<br>↓<br>-<br>↓<br>Kavār<br>↓<br>Bi Āb Shurāb<br>↓<br>-<br>↓<br>Rikān<br>↓<br>Mah<br>↓<br>Kirand<br>↓<br>Barzarā<br>↓ | Shiraz<br>↓<br>Kofreh<br>↓<br>Nakhaz<br>↓<br>Kavār<br>↓<br>Dasht-e Shurāb<br>↓<br>Khān Āzad Mard<br>↓<br>Kirand<br>↓<br>May<br>↓<br>Āzar Kān<br>↓<br>Korān<br>↓ | Shiraz<br>↓<br>Kofreh<br>↓<br>-<br>↓<br>Kavār<br>↓<br>Samikān<br>↓<br>Harak<br>↓<br>Kārzin<br>↓<br>Lāghar<br>↓<br>Korān<br>↓<br>-<br>↓ | Shiraz<br>↓<br>Kofrat<br>↓<br>Nakhaz<br>↓<br>Kavār<br>↓<br>Dasht-e Shurāb<br>↓<br>Khān<br>↓<br>Kirand<br>↓<br>Māy<br>↓<br>Rās ol’Aqabeh<br>↓<br>Khān bar |

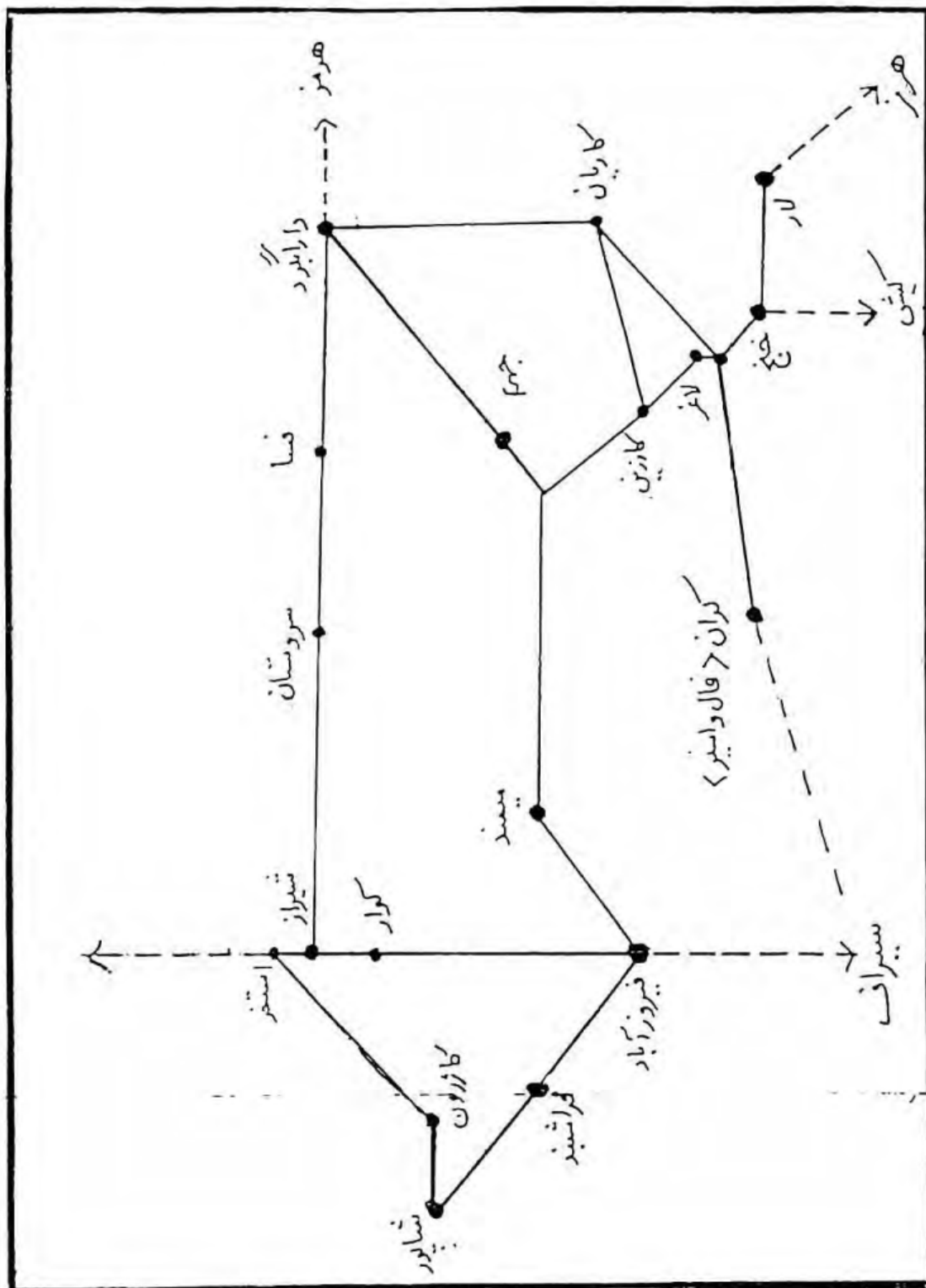




|                   |                   |                   |                 |                               |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| Jam<br>↓<br>Sirāf | Jam<br>↓<br>Sirāf | Jam<br>↓<br>Sirāf | -<br>↓<br>Sirāf | Kānat<br>↓<br>-<br>↓<br>Sirāf |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|



Map 2





Figures 4 & 5





Figure 6



Figure 7

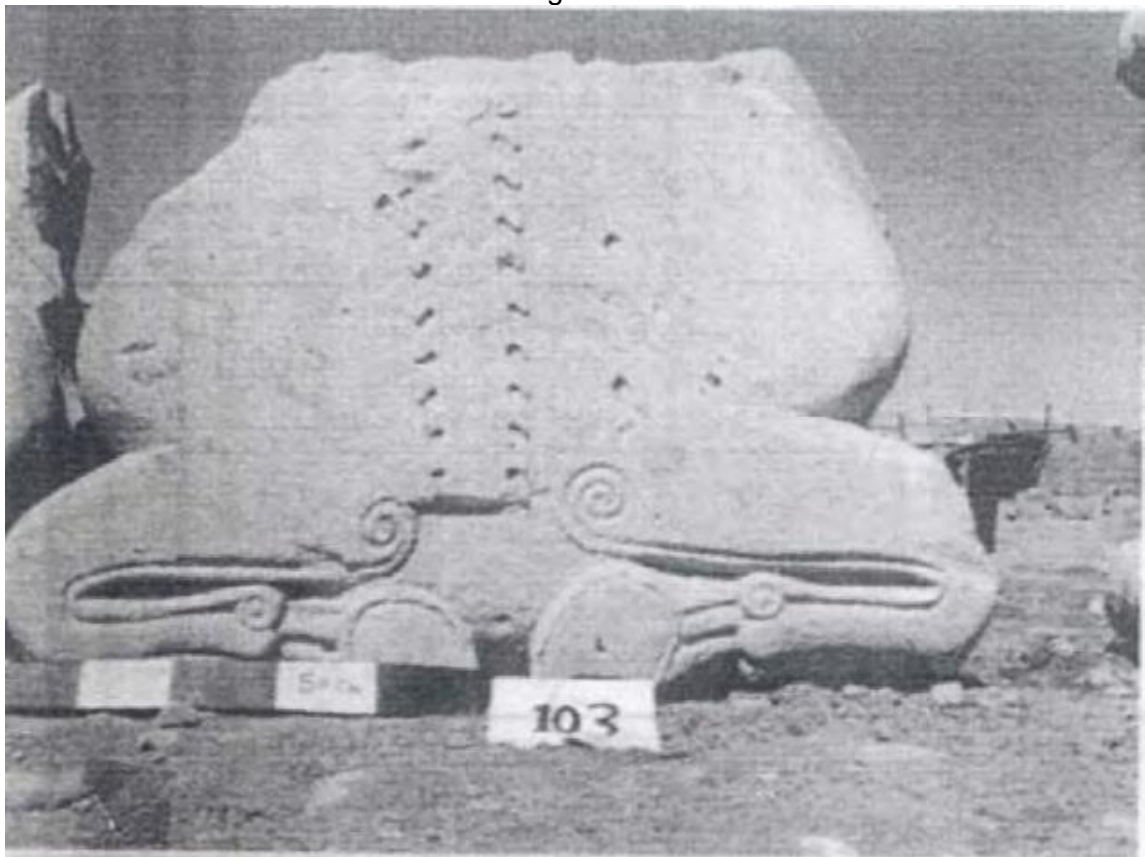


Figure 8





Figure 9



Figure 10





Figure 11



Figure 12

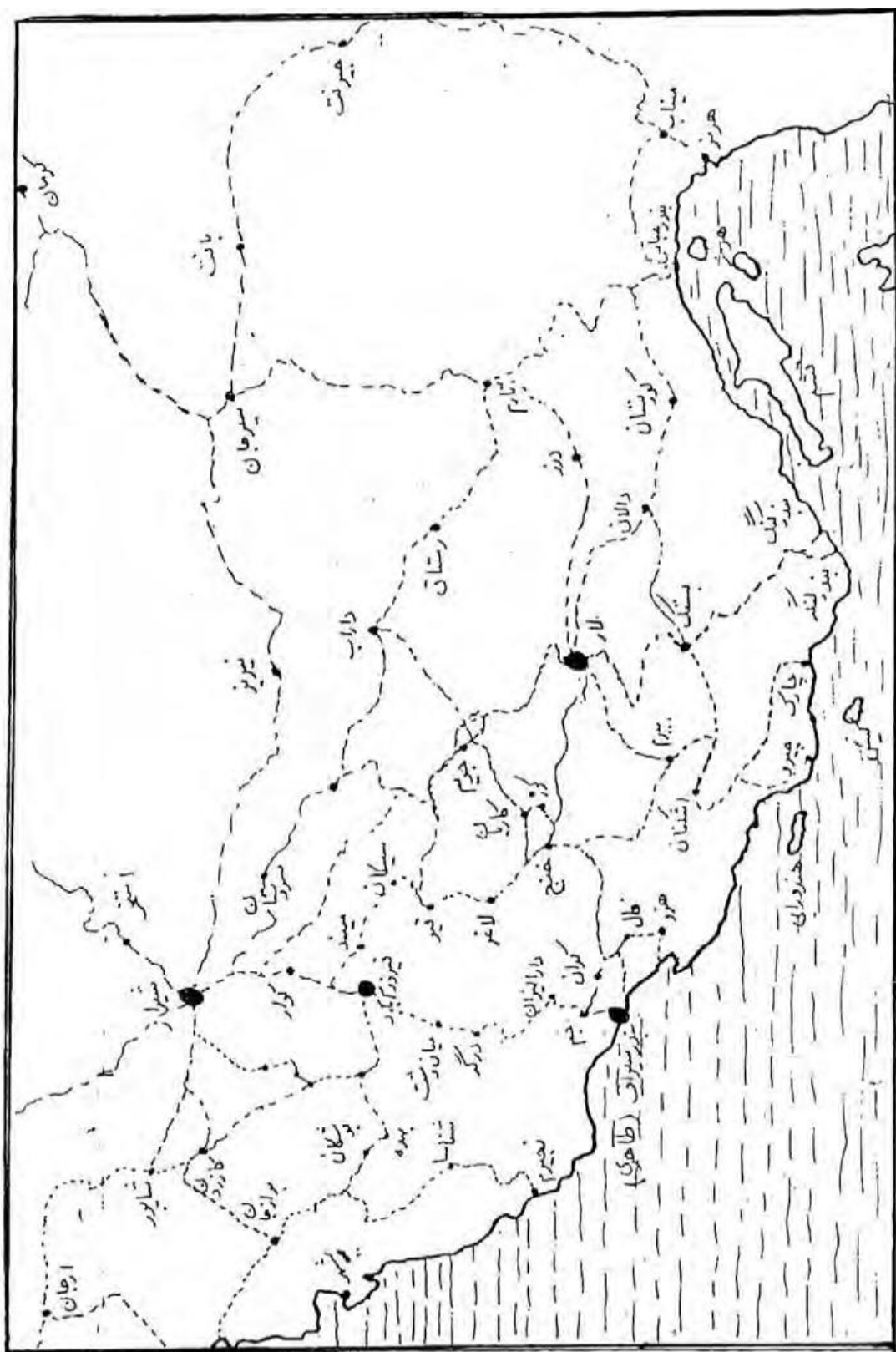


Figure 13