

History of Tehran from 6,000 B.C. to the Iron Age



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Introduction

Archaeologically, it is important to know the earliest settlements of ancient Tehran and search when the first farmers settled in such a supra capital city and to know when they have established the first villages. Probably, such questions have always come to mind of many citizens of Tehran. Before the emergence of modern Tehran, the city of Rayy was the heartland of Tehran which was established around 639-645 AD. However, the main question is to know the background of Tehran in the earlier times. From the archaeological point of view and travellers' records, we know that before the emergence of Islam, during the Sasanian period, regions such as Chaltarkhan close the Qarchak city or the ancient site of Qaleheh Eiraj close to Varamin were the main cities and modern Tehran could be considering as a periphery region containing local communities (Treptow 2007). Therefore, the centrality of Tehran

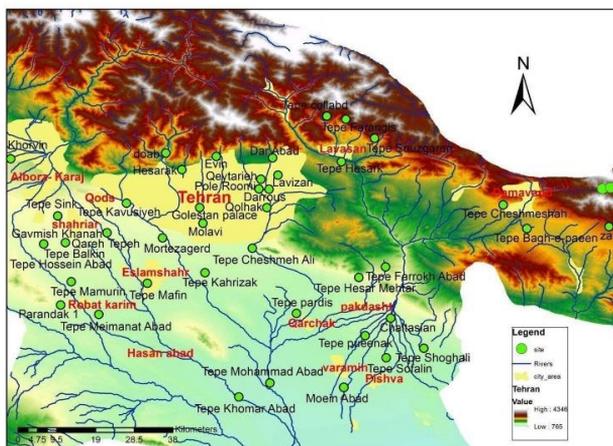


through the time and space is one of the mysterious Neolithic aspects of the history of Tehran. This paper aims to address how and when such mobility and social complexity occurred through the time and space.

Background of early farmers of Tehran plain

Based on the current information, the first farmers came to the Tehran plain around 8,000 years ago and have settled approximately in the areas with elevation of 900 m above sea level. Areas from Pishva in the east to the regions of ancient Rayy in the central part and further areas in the west were optimal regions for agricultural rural communities (Figure 1). The Tehran plain surrounded by the Alborz mountain at the north, the great Kavir desert at the east and south can be characterised with an arid to severe semiarid climate, with temperature fluctuations from 50 °C in summer to below 0 °C in winter. Although several rivers from the Alborz mountain are permanent in the mountainous areas, most of them are semi-permanent in the lower altitudes. At present, most of ancient sites have covered with alluvial layers indicating that alluvial plains have had active role in ancient agricultural societies. Most of such alluvial plains have started from sixth millennium B.C., demonstrating that while annual alluvial activities have prepared optimal lands for agriculture, natural hazards have always been the cause of destruction of early villages in the region (Figure 2).

Investigations on such paleo-landscape reveals that the first farmers probably came to Tehran around 4,000 years later from the Zagros region, who started pre cultivation practice. Archaeological information documents that from 10,500 years ago, the hunter-gatherer societies of Caspian Sea left caves and settled in the open area, starts to cultivates plants. Findings also show that in the western parts of Iran (Matthews and Fazeli Nashli 2013), the early farmers have cultivated their agriculture lands around 11,000 years ago, much earlier than the societies of the Tehran plain. No doubt the southern regions of Alborz mountain and Tehran plain was occupied by the hunter-gatherer groups before sixth millennium B.C.; However, the region was not suitable for early farmers until much later period. As we will see in the second stage of agricultural expansion in Iran, these early cultivators became familiar with irrigation systems and settled the area for cultivation.



Prehistoric sites of Tehran

Figure 1.





Figure2. Alluvial have had critical roles on the shaping of early villages in Iran and also the plains such as Tehran

Therefore, we should assume that the first farmers came to the Tehran plain with a full Neolithic background with the domesticated animals such as pig, goat, sheep and cattle and settled in the villages which looked like the modern recent rural areas with suitable irrigation systems. Although, we do not know the exact dates of early farmer migrated to the Tehran plain but more or less they probably came to Tehran around ca. 8,000 A.D.

History of research

Before a study on the socio-economic components of ancient Tehran, it is interesting to know that when archaeologists searched the early history of the region. During 1930s, Erich F. Schmidt, a German archaeologist, came to Hissar close to Damgahan to investigate Chalcolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages of Iran. Instead, based on his excellent results of his excavations in the north-eastern Iran, he decided to demonstrate the origin of Tepe Hissar material



culture in the ancient Rayy (Schmidt 1936, 937). Therefore, he aimed to excavate the well-known archaeological site of Tepe Cheshmeh-Ali (Schmidt 1937). The archaeological site of Cheshmeh-Ali is located on the southern slopes of the Alborz mountains which are now parts of modern Tehran, a small prehistoric village which became the Islamic city of Rayy in later antiquity. The Rayy expedition started with two explicit goals: (1) to obtain a sequence of prehistoric and historic period material in Persia; and (2) to collect a large sample of the famous glazed ceramics known to come from the ancient site of Rayy.

The 1934 season lasted from March 25 until November 1, employing a professional staff of nine and between 100 and 200 local workmen. He identified three distinct periods at Cheshmeh-Ali. The top two metres contained Islamic cultural material, whilst the middle levels contained a Parthian temple with 500 coins dating to the first century B.C. The lower Neolithic and Chalcolithic levels were divided into three sub phases (Schmidt 1936, 47): the earliest of which were represented by crude, handmade ceramics painted with simple geometric designs; the second sub phase contained red pottery wares; and the final Chalcolithic level was defined by the introduction of wheel-made ceramics (Schmidt 1936, 47).

After a long time, in 1997, I studied the dynamics involved in the successful transformation of simple egalitarian societies to more complex hierarchical ones (Fazeli Nashli 2001). The research methodology involved with the excavation of Tepe Cheshmeh-Ali



and detailed analysis of inter- and intra-settlement patterns, craft specialisation, funerary practices and the exchange of goods during the Late Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods in one sample area within the central plateau - the Tehran plain. In 2001, a five-year project was defined jointly by Professor Robin Coningham from Durham University in order to fully understand the socio-economic transformation of the Tehran plain from the early Holocene to the later historical period with the excavation of Tepe Pardis and systematic settlement survey. The main advantage of excavations in Tepe Pardis was the discovery of the fact that oldest ceramic workshops dated the earliest phases of the fifth millennium B.C. (Fazeli Nashli et al. 2010).

While the above multidisciplinary archaeological research on the Tehran plain provides excellent data to evaluate the growth of cultural complexity within the region, excavations of Tepe Choghali and Tepe Sofalin which was carried out by Morteza Hessari have provided magnificent data to study of fourth millennium Chalcolithic era and Early Bronze Age in the region (Dahl et al 2012). Specifically, the Proto-Elamite tablets of Tepe Sofalin discovery is one of the earliest written scripts from the northern central Iranian plateau consisting of both numerical and ideographic signs.

The late Neolithic period

Back to our question related to the early people came to Tehran, they settled as farmers and herders of animals and established early villages. It seems the past decade's archaeological research within the region have resulted numbers of prehistoric villages within the Tehran plain. As mentioned above, earliest villages of Tehran are located around the Rayy region such as Cheshmeh-Ali, Tepe Pardis, Sadeghabadi, Moein Abad and also an area such as Moulavi close to the modern bazar of Tehran (Esmaeili Jelodar 2018). While alluvial plains of Tehran have provided favourite places for early farmers to settle in the southern parts of Tehran in the Neolithic period, northern Tehran was occupied much later period around 3,000 years ago, with different settlement pattern from sixth to first millennium B.C. The reason of such difference was that the north of Tehran was not a suitable place for simple agriculture activities during the prehistoric times and the hilly flanks characteristics and the flow of water in the sharp valleys did not allow the first farmers to use surface waters for irrigation. In the southern Tehran, the flow of surface water was rather slow permitting the villagers of Tehran to access directly the water of the rivers for irrigation with a fresh soil for cultivation.

The oldest irrigated village was found in Tepe Pardis which means that when the early farmers came to Tehran, they were familiar how to use simple irrigation systems to irrigate their farmlands. Tepe Pardis is located in the Qarchak city while some



other sites such as Cheshmeh-Ali are located close the permanent spring waters (Maghsoudi et al. 2012, Gillmore et al. 2009). The size of most of these early villages was between two and four hectares where 500 to 1000 peoples could live on there. Archaeologically, such communities can be characterised as regional communities, manifested by the presence of buff wares. These buff potteries are distributed in many Neolithic villages of Qazvin, Tehran and Kashan plains demonstrating the interconnections among people during the sixth millennium B.C. in the north central Iran. Zooarchaeological evidence indicates that the societies of the Tehran plain used combination of growing wheat and barley and herding animals such as pig, cattle, sheep and goat. Among these, breeding domesticated cattle (*Bos taurus*) was one of the most important activities of early farmers within the Tehran plain. By the use of domestic cattle, the Neolithic societies were able to access wide range of resources including meat, dairy, clothes, and traction force (Benjamin et al. 2016). Then, the emergence of other resources such as goat and sheep products caused a fast increase in population during the fifth millennium B.C. in the whole region of the Iranian north central plateau. As we will see in this paper, in the fifth millennium B.C., the Tehran plain became more complex and as Benjamin et al. have mentioned, horn cattle became a central part of agro-pastoral economies across Eurasia which supported the development of complex societies during the fifth millennium B.C.



The Chalcolithic period and the globalisation of Cheshmeh-Ali/Sialk II culture during the fifth millennium B.C.

During the fifth millennium B.C., societies of the Tehran plain can be characterised as non-centralised networks of small-sized agricultural villages. A ‘Transitional Chalcolithic’ has been given to a long time-span, almost a millennium, bridging the Neolithic to the Chalcolithic periods. Although the Neolithic societies established subsistence economy, the Chalcolithic societies have provided the foundation of political economy with the indicators of long-distance exchange and trade, increasingly complex ritual activities including social differentiation in mortuary practices, standardised craft production, early metallurgy, and the use of innovative production techniques such as mineral-tempered and wheel-thrown pottery. The Cheshmeh-Ali/Sialk II cultures with their local characteristics for pre-modern societies have extended in wide ranges of Iran from the north central Iran to the north-eastern of Iran during the fifth millennium B.C. (Vidale et al. 2018).

Chronologically, the Chalcolithic period has started in the last quarters of sixth millennium B.C. known as Cheshmeh-Ali/Sialk II culture which can be distinguished by the production of very fine painted potteries (Figure 3 and Figure 4). Aesthetically, the standard painted potteries of Cheshmeh-Ali culture including painted animals, plants and geometric designs emphasised how such local culture absorbed on a large cultural component. Gordon Childe has characterised one of the main features of early urban societies is



the emerging and separation of industrial section from the domestic spaces (Childe 1950). Such initial progress has been achieved in societies of Tehran plain in Tepe Pardis with 400 m² of ceramic workshops back to the early fifth millennium B.C. At Tepe Pardis, numbers of ceramic craft products were found one of which is a clay potter's wheel. Such technological innovations are a context of more societal developments during the fourth millennium B.C. (Fazeli Nashli et al 2010).



Figure 3. An example of Cheshmeh-Ali/Sialk II pottery types from Tepe Pardis, storage jars (above) and potteries were found in the ceramic workshops



Figure 4. Another example of pottery works from Cheshmeh-Ali/Sialk II culture

Mortuary practice from sites such as Cheshmeh-Ali and Tepe Pardis and the pattern of burial graves (Figure 5) of the adults and children and men and women is not only valuable to address life after death and social inequality during the fifth millennium B.C., but also signals the long distance of the communities of east Iran and even Persian Gulf with the communities of the Tehran plain. At Cheshmeh-Ali, Schmidt's team recovered remains of 174 burials, of which 34 belonged to the prehistoric period (Fazeli Nashli and Gustavel forthcoming). The bodies were buried below the ground surface, inside or outside of houses within the village rather than in a cemetery during the fifth millennium B.C. The people of Cheshmeh-Ali wrapped the body in cloth shrouds or mats and usually the body was covered with red ochre. Archaeologically, it is still too far to know that such local and non-local goods were imported simply from the long distance sources or were made by the fifth millennium societies lived in the Tehran plain.





Figure 5. Semiprecious beads were found in the Transitional Chalcolithic layers of Tepe Pardis ca. 4800BC

The fourth millennium B.C. and the development of parallel complex societies

During the fourth millennium B.C., the communities of the Iranian central plateau developed parallel with other communities of south-western Iran (Susa 2 period), Ali Abad culture in the eastern part (southern Zagros) and Lapuei and Panesh in the Fars region. However, the pathway of powers and hierarchy was different region by region in Iran during the fourth millennium B.C. Chronologically, the fourth millennium B.C. can be divided into two main phases of Sialk III culture and proto-Elamite period with the following characteristics: 1) full time specialisation of copper and ceramics; 2) large parts of neighbouring Chalcolithic

sites of the Tehran plain such as Tepe Ghabristan and Arisman used specifically for large scale copper alloy production; 3) socio-economic interconnection with Mesopotamia (the Uruk Phenomenon), central Zagros and south-western Iran (Susa 2 period); and 4) the subject of Iranian' feature, beginning of proto-Elamite writing system. The country of Iran is served as one of the early heartlands of metallurgy and copper production in ancient Near East.

Iran had central role in technological copper development by the indigenous society with major advantages of copper, silver, and gold production during the fourth millennium B.C. Nezafati and Hessari (2016) reported that the inhabitants of Tepe Shoghali used and made silver products ca. 3350±20 B.C. indicating that the Tehran plain was one of the main centres of status goods during the second half of the fourth millennium B.C (Figure 6). Numbers of sites related to the fourth millennium B.C. have been identified within the Tehran plain. Although the excavated sites are very limited, the societies of the Tehran plain were faced with the rise of important craft goods (Vidale et al. 2018).

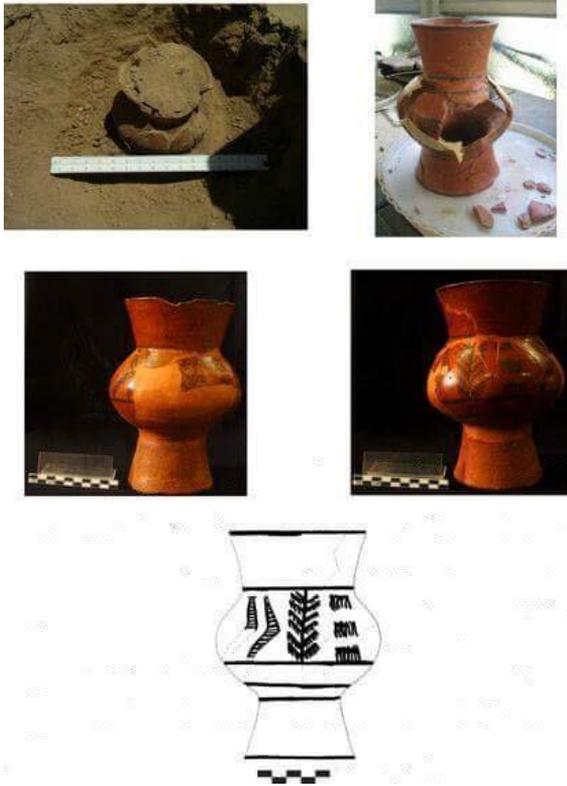


Figure 6: Different views of a fine painted large/medium jar from Tepe Shoghali (Hessari and Nezafati 2017)

Early Bronze Age in the Tehran plain

While there was fully active long-distance trade in the central plateau of Iran during the fifth and the first half of fourth millennium B.C., the excavations in Tepe Sofalin and Shoghali have provided a particularly clear illustration of cultural interaction and proto-Elamite trade routes in the second half of fourth and early third millennia between the Iranian central plateau and the more densely populated settlements on the alluvial plains of Khuzestan. Iran became important during the end of fourth millennium B.C.

with the so-called Proto-Elamite culture, which has been hailed as “arguably the first indigenous civilisation on the Iranian Plateau” as well as “one of the most fascinating, albeit elusive, eras in Iranian archaeology” (Fazeli Nashli et al. 2013). Tepe Sofalin is located 35 km south-east of Tehran on the Rayy Plain (Hessari and Yousefi Zoshk 2012, Dahl et al. 2012) and the excavators have recorded significant numbers of Proto-Elamite tablets (Figure 8) and large quantities of clay sealings, tablet blanks, clay tokens, figurines, bevelled-rim bowls and painted pottery (Fazeli Nashli et al. 2013).



Figure 8. An example of Proto-Elamite tablet from Tepe Sofalin

Both sites represent domestic spaces and ceramics and metals workshops (industrial section) with the administrative

artifacts. The form and content of these tablets are entirely consistent with that of the standard and late proto-Elamite tablets from Susa. The majority of the inscribed objects from Tepe Sofalin are very fragmentary, and they document the existence of a developed administration and bookkeeping system. However, only a limited number of tablet-content categories are currently present. Some of the contents are related to the workers and many others deal with cattle, sheep, and goat. The seals on the tablets from Tepe Sofalin are very similar to those found at Susa as well.

The Middle Bronze Age of the Iranian central plateau

Archaeological evidence demonstrates that from 3,500 B.C. onwards, numbers of sites have been collapsed in the north central plateau. However, the zenith of such failure becomes more highlights during the ends of fourth millennium B.C. and early third millennium B.C. (ca. 2,900 to 2,800 B.C.). In another point of view, the central plateau lost its importance for a millennium. In our recent paper (Vidale et al. 2018), we have proposed numbers of internal and external factors that show true urban revolution have never occurred in the central plateau and the nature of hierarchy system not only was not look likes Mesopotamian urban systems but also became more mysterious for scholars. We assumed that the limitation of agricultural lands and the nature of hydraulic systems in the Tehran plain did not allow the emergence of large urban centres during the third millennium B.C. Importantly, due to the

strict ecological circumscription, the communities of farmers and herders probably have preferred to choose a life style based on their traditional social values and ethics rather to choose a high level socio-political life style. Although we need further investigations to demonstrate the collapse of early urban sites in the north central Iran, some preliminary studies have been done on paleo-environmental instabilities in the north central Iran that caused the disappearance of prehistoric settlements in the Tehran plain (for more information, see Schmidt et al. 2011).

The phenomenon of Iranian cultural uniformity and ‘Iranisation’ of Iran

Archaeological evidence reveals that around 2,100 B.C., the Iranian population reappeared in the north central plateau. Although there is no reliable information about the reappearance of Tehran plain population during the second millennium B.C. so far, we know that the population of the other regions such Qazvin, Qum, and Kashan were occupied with the well-known pottery type of grey ware (Pollard et al 2013). From ca. 1,700 B.C., the population of the Tehran plain spread from southern to the northern of Tehran as small villages to the cemetery sites. The Iron Age is defined by the manufacturing of highly burnished dark grey ware with a variety of new forms occurred in many settlements of the central plateau, north and northeast of Iran. As Mousavi pointed out, increasing social complexity of Iron Age in the northwest of Iran was due to the outcomes of a series of changes occurred in the Bronze Age



(Mousavi 2008). The majority of ceramics includes grey/dark grey or red/orange found in the cemetery (Mousavi 2013) and residential sites.

Iron Age in the Tehran plain is well documented within the Qeytariyeh, Tepe Pardis (Figure 10 and 11), Pishva, Cheshmeh-Ali, Tepe Golestan and Khorvin. Among the above sites, Kambakhsh Fard excavated a total of 148 trenches (5×5 m) at Qetariyeh and recorded 350 individual graves and recorded more than 2,000 objects from the individual graves (Kambakhsh Fard 1991). Tepe Pardis excavation (Fazeli et al 2007) revealed 36 individual and communal graves in some of which several animal including cow and horse were buried. Tepe Pardis is the only Iron Age cemetery in the central plateau and north of Iran that has strong absolute dating chronology. The dates of the Iron Age Cemetery are very consistent, starting between ca. 1,603 and 1,470 B.C. and ending between ca. 1,406 and 1,298 B.C.

While in earlier period the Iron Age of the central Iranian plateau has been defined as nomadic pastoralist without centralized organization but Sajjad Alibaigi and Shokouh Khosravi has recently defined these societies as well organized political structure with administrative institutions (2014). Wiew of such assumption can be seen from the clay surface impression of a rolling cylinder seal from Tepe Golestan (Figure 9) shows two naked men with long hair or scarves shown swinging two trajectory of agricultural activity and nomad pastoralism have had main role in the economy of the central plateau during the second



millennium BC. Same seal impression was also found in Tepe Sofali (Ma'murin) is located in the village of Ma'murin by Mehrkian (Mehrkian 1999) support ownership and complexity of the central plateau during the Iron Age.



Figure 9. The pottery with seal impressions from Tepe Golestan (Alibaigi and Khosravi 2014)

The seal and brick works has provided archaeological information about the ownership, agricultural activities, socio-economic hierarchies, cultural interactions and ideological components between the society of the central plateau and its neighbours during the Iron Age (Mousavi 2013, Mucheshi and Talai 2012, Alibaigi and Khosravi 2014). A number of 28 seals (two of which belongs to cemetery A and 26 belong to the cemetery B) from Tepe Sialk, eight seals from Tepe Sarm, few samples from Khurvin, Tepe Mamurin and Sagzabad and finally 19 seals from Marlik are identified. Bricks with impression and bowls found in Shamshirgah sites (40 samples), Sialk (10 samples) and Qoli Darvish (10 samples) are other examples. The majority of seals impression from Marlik and Mamurin indicates the influences of international style

on the society of Iron Age during the second millennium B.C. However, the influences of Middle Assyrian iconography are also visible on the seals and brick works address the degree of socio-political components with a regional and interregional context.



Figure 10: Potteries found in the cemeteries of Tepe Pardis belonging to the second millennium B.C.

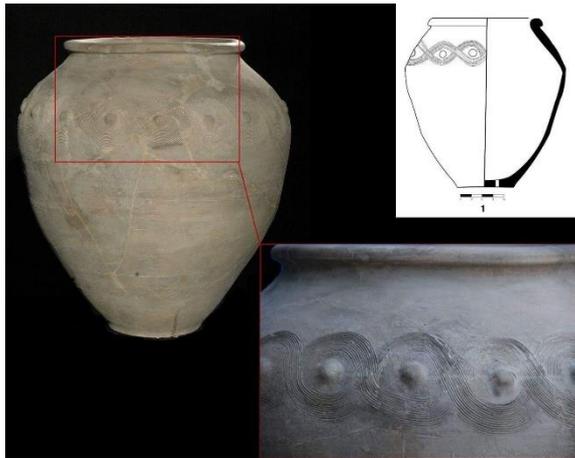


Figure 11: Another example of large storage jar which was decorated with women breast was found the graves of Tepe Pardis second millennium B.C.

Although it is not clear exactly what was happened in Tehran during the Achaemenes period, Tehran became an important region during the Parthian and Sasanian period afterward. Beyond the archaeological point of view, we know that Tehran was limited because its environmental capacity was not suitable for accumulation of large population. During the late fourth millennium B.C., most probably the environmental fluctuation caused the collapse of early state societies of Tehran and now Tehran is faced with such hazard again. Tehran without water, trees, natural landscape and resources will die again as was in the past. However, the scale of disaster of ancient times cannot be compared with the modern Tehran. It is also necessary to mention that the communities of Tehran have to learn how to protect their ancient monuments and protect their archaeological sites in the best possible way. Multi-disciplinary research programs and multinational teams should be determined for such salvage approaches and I hope in near future

we will see the consequences of such scientific decisions. Most of ancient sites are now under the destruction even excavated sites which was also planned for site-museum such as Tepe Pardis is one of this example (Figure 12). After the excavations, all aspects of reservation and preservation has been considered by excavator but the site again was looted and destroyed by the people.



Figure 12. The craft areas of Tepe Pardis after excavation (2005) which was completely destroyed again in recent years

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