Interactions Between Western Iran and Mesopotamia From the 9th-4th Millennia B. C.

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Throughout prehistory, the cultures of Iran and Western Asia differed in important respects. Many of these differences can be attributed to the different geographic and environmental conditions in the two regions. Western Iran is largely a heavily divided mountainous region with difficult access whereas Mesopotamia is relatively flat and open to travel and trade. The early Holocene environment of the Mesopotamian plain was very dynamic and unstable, whereas the major changes in the Zagros involved the spread of cereal grasses and trees. These different environments affected the kinds of cultures and settlements that could occur. Other differences stem from the broader regions of interaction in which each area was involved. Interactions within Mesopotamia occurred between the north and south, while the Zagros was part of a northern and eastern sphere of interaction. These differences are reflected in the general absence of interaction between the Iran and Western Asia during the long period of prehistory.

Keywords: *Western Iran, Mesopotamia, Interaction, Zagros, prehistory*

Introduction

Iran is a largely mountainous country, whereas Mesopotamia is essentially a flat, lowland plane (fig. 1). These topographic differences had a major impact on the ways that cultures developed and interacted in the two regions. Mesopotamia, with its flat surface and major rivers, is open to travel and interaction in a north-south direction from the Persian Gulf to the foothills of the Taurus Mountains. By contrast, Iran confronts this plain with a steeply rising mountain barrier that is penetrated in only a few places by rivers that drain the uplands. The interface between the mountains and Mesopotamian plain is the piedmont, approximately at the 250 mm precipitation isohyet. Behind the mountain barrier one finds a series of mountain ridges that frame level valleys at successively higher elevations. The landscape of western Iran is thus segmented into small parcels, each somewhat isolated from the others. The geographic contrast of the mountain zone that extends along the Zagros and across southern Turkey, with the lowlands of Mesopotamia, is reflected in the character of the cultures which have responded to the potential for interaction in these strikingly different environments.

The differences extend to the climates as well. From north to south, Mesopotamia ranges from semi-arid, to arid steppe to desert whose aridity is narrowly relieved by the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys. Except in north Mesopotamia, rain-fed agriculture is not possible, but the lack of frost in the south allows double cropping with irrigation and the cultivation of dates and other sub-tropical species. Western Iran, on the other hand, with the exception of Khuzistan, enjoys greater precipitation, but shorter growing seasons, and much colder winters so that single crops are the norm. The potential agricultural productivity of the two areas is thus markedly different.

These geographic differences fostered the development of parallel archaeological traditions, but with much greater diversity in Iran. In this short paper I shall compare the cultural succession in western Iran - the region that is identified today with southern Kurdistan, Luristan and Khuzistan - with that of southern Mesopotamia from the time of the earliest settlements to the early third millennium B.C.

Environmental Background to Human Settlement

Climate changes and their impact on the environment affected both Mesopotamia and Western Iran. Following the Late Glacial Maximum (23,000 B.P.) when neither region supported large human populations, climate warming led to changes

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Fig. 1: *Map of Iran and Mesopotamia showing topographic differences. Iran is largely mountainous while Mesopotamia is a relatively flat alluvial plain*

in vegetation and world-wide rise in sea level. The most important effect of global warming was to stimulate the growth of grass and trees in the Zagros (El-Moslimany 1982; El-Moslimany 1986) which, with warmer temperatures, made this region habitable for humans. Numerous caves and rockshelters dating to the Zarzian period were used during this time (Hole 1970; Smith 1986). The Younger Dryas cold interval (13,500-12,000 B.P.), a world-wide event, reintroduced near glacial conditions and interrupted some early attempts at settlement (Moore and Hillman 1992). The cold, dry Younger Dryas was followed by a Climatic Optimum, or early Holocene warming, that brought substantially more favorable conditions to the region than exist today.With more precipitation and longer growing seasons, the region was ripe for agricultural expansion (El-Moslimany 1994) and the herding of goats (Hole 1989b; Hole 1996). At this time we find the oldest villages in the Zagros-Taurus, such as Hallan Çemi (Rosenberg, et al. 1998), Nemrik (Kozlowski 1998b) and M'lefaat (Kozlowski 1994b). Agriculture is not attested at any of these.

Concurrent with these changes, the Persian Gulf was filling rapidly as sea level rose in response to the melting of glaciers. There were two interrelated effects. First, the Gulf penetrated much farther north than today. It's present location is a result of sediment carried by the rivers being deposited at the mouth and creating a delta (Gasche and Paymani 2005; Gasche 2007; Sanlaville 1989). Following the Younger Dryas and until about 6000 BP, the Tigris and Euphrates did not have well-defined channels; rather they broke into many distributaries across the surface of the plain south of modern Baghdad. Because these channels shifted without warning, sites might be left stranded without water. Moreover, the whole region was subject to catastrophic flooding, so that only sites that were elevated would be undisturbed. While it may have been possible to carry out agriculture in Southern Mesopotamia without irrigation during the Climatic Optimum, it was no longer possible when it ended. However, a form of natural irrigation using fields from which the flood water had receded may have been employed (Kouchoukos 1998). Once sea level stopped rising and the plain began to fill with sediment, the rivers adopted channels that were better-defined and settlements could be more stable.

The Climatic Optimum ended around 6000 B.P.

when the weather system that drove it moved south of Mesopotamia (COHMAP 1988) and the climate became similar to that of today. As we shall see, this climate change was a strong shock to the system and resulted in the abandonment of some regions for longer or shorter periods of time (Hole 1994).

The Initial Villages[1] **(fig. 2)**

Agriculture began in the eastern Mediterranean/Southern Anatolia, whereas domestication of goats, sheep and pigs may have originated in the mountains and piedmont of the Zagros-Taurus ranges (Bar-Yosef and Meadow 1995; Cappers and Bottema 2002; Harris 2002; Hole 1996; McCorriston and Hole 1991; Nesbitt 2004; Renfrew 2006; Naderi, Rezaei et al. 2008; Willcox 2004; Zeder 2005; 2006). Because of climate change and the slow spread of native grasses following the Younger Dryas cold episode, cereal agriculture may have been introduced into Iran and Mesopotamia well after its earliest occurrence in the West. Simultaneously with the first agricultural developments in the Levant, there were settlements of advanced hunter-gatherers in the foothills of the Zagros (Hole 1998). The earliest date (8900 B.P.) for an agricultural village in Iran with domestic goats is from the site of Ganj Dareh (Zeder and Hesse 2000). The fact that the site is at an altitude of 1400 m where winters would be very cold and the ground covered with snow, implies transhumant pastoralism where herders moved seasonally between the piedmont and mountain pastures. A still higher and somewhat younger site is Abdul Hosein, at 1860 m, in the Khawa Valley of Luristan (Pullar 1990). It seems unlikely that these sites would have been occupied so early if climate had not been more agreeable then than it is today. The oldest site on the piedmont, where herders may have lived during the winter, is Ali Kosh on the Deh Luran Plain (Hole, et al. 1969). Our date for the Bus Mordeh Phase there is about 500 years later than Ganj Dareh and the people kept sheep as well as goats in the little hamlet (Hole 2000). A promising older site, Chia Sabz, in the Saimarreh valley just northwest of Deh Luran is currently under excavation (pers comm. H. Fazeli 2009). The geography of the piedmont zone is ideal for transhumance and for the development of simple irrigation techniques. It is here that Joan Oates found the site of Tamerkhan, with artifacts like those of Tepe Guran, Ali Kosh and Jarmo (Oates 1968). Farther south, in Khuzistan, there are numerous Neolithic sites, among which Tepe Tula'i (Hole 1974) stands out as a possible seasonal pastoral campsite, and Chogha Bonut, is a small village on the Khuzistan plain (Alizadeh 1997). The Mahidasht surveys of Braidwood (Braidwood and Howe 1960) and later by Levine's team (Levine and McDonald 1977) discovered many pre-ceramic and ceramic Neolithic sites on this mountain plain, which lies within the zone of rain-fed agriculture today. A similar picture is seen in the Hulailan Valley (Mortensen 1972; Mortensen 1975). All of these sites probably date to the 8th millennium B.C.

The evidence shows that by the time pottery was being used - around 6500 B.C. - there are numerous sites in many of the Zagros valleys where there were flowing streams and sufficient rainfall to grow crops. The same is true along the Zagros foothills - that is, in the winter pastures where precipitation is great enough to support rain-fed agriculture and the small streams can be easily diverted to provide supplementary irrigation when needed. While there is ample evidence of small villages in north Mesopotamia (Campbell and Baird 1990; Dittemore 1983; Kozlowski 1994a; Kozlowski 1994b; Kozlowski 1998a; Kozlowski 1998b), there is no evidence of occupation yet in southern Mesopotamia. That changed around 5500 B.C.

The stone tools in all the sites along the Zagros are typologically and technically part of the Mlefatian and post-Mlefatian Agro-Standard industry, as defined by Stefan Kozlowski (Kozlowski 1998a:153) . Here we find use of the pressure flaked, conical core technique to produce small, regular

1.Some years ago I edited a volume, **The Archaeology of Western Iran**, in which the main focus was Iran itself (Hole 1987a). In this volume I divided the prehistoric periods into the Initial Village, Early Village and Late Village periods, encompassing the time from the first settlements to the end of the fifth millennium. We referred to the subsequent fourth millennium developments as the Uruk period (Johnson 1987) and the Era of Primary State Formation (Wright 1987). In this brief paper I have chosen to use the terms Neolithic to refer to the Early Villages, and Chalcolithic to refer to the Late Village and Uruk periods because these terms are more widely understood in the broader Mesopotamian region.

blades. This contrasts with a Levantine tradition of big arrowheads and naviform cores that penetrated across the lowland steppe into northern Mesopotamia. The Iran-Iraq lithic tradition exists into the Caucasus and across parts of Central Asia: in other words, a spread through the mountain zones. We can see, therefore, that from earliest times, the Zagros is part of a different interaction sphere from Mesopotamia.

Late Neolithic/Chalcolithic

The first substantial occupations in central Mesopotamia occur at the site of Tell es-Sawwan where a village on the banks of the Tigris revealed a number of large, multi-room houses and pottery decorated with dark matt paint on a buff

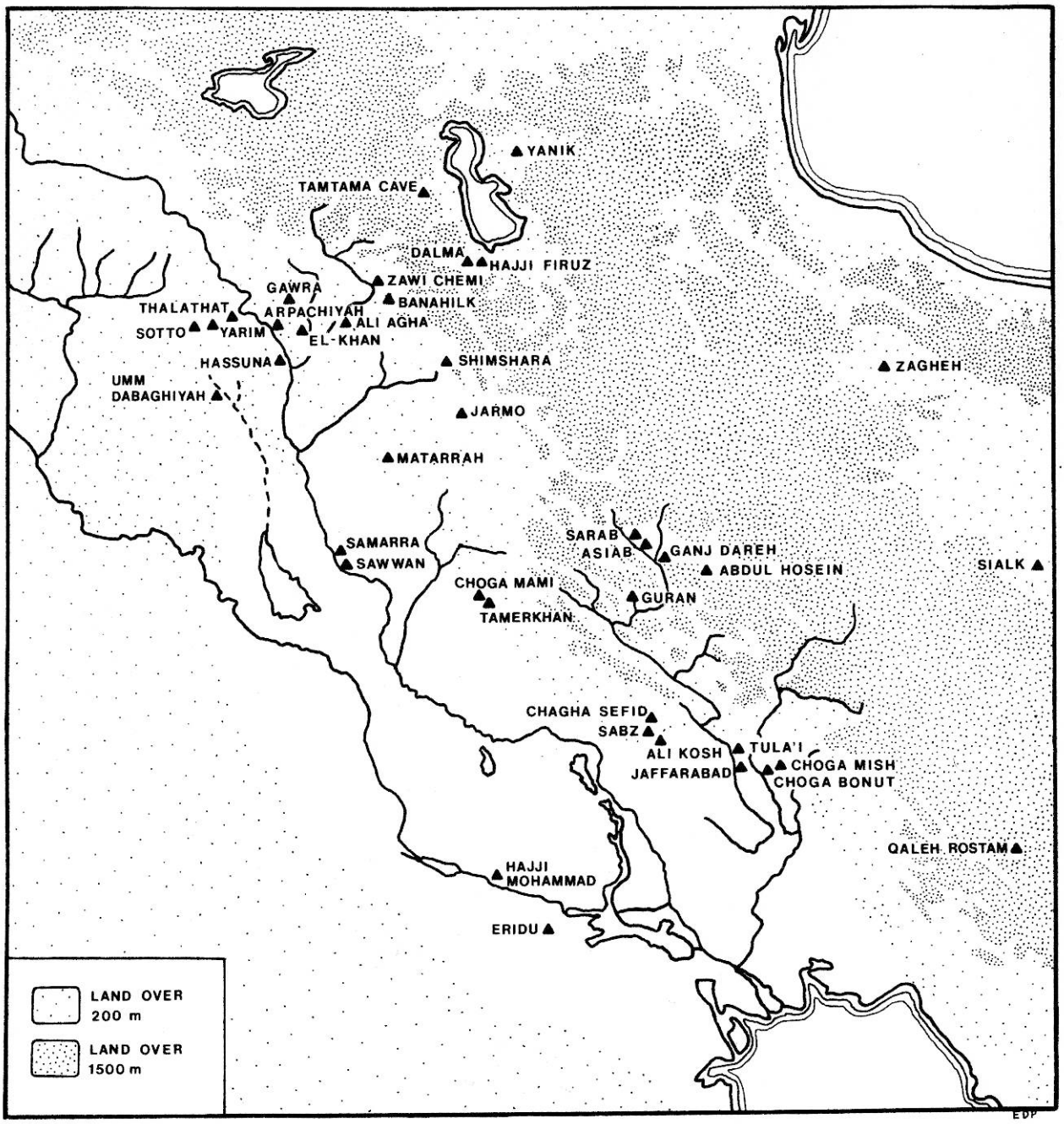


Fig. 2: *Selected Neolithic sites in Western Iran and Mesopotamia (After: Voigt 1983: Figure 2).*

background. Farther south at Mandali, on the border with Iran, Joan Oates excavated Choga Mami, a village contemporary with Tell es-Sawwan, where she found a possible irrigation canal (Helbaek 1972; Oates 1969). This illustrates the differences between Mesopotamia and Iran. Except in northern Mesopotamia and against the foothills of the Zagros, it is necessary to irrigate crops in Mesopotamia, a practice not needed in the wetter Zagros or along the upper piedmont (Oates and Oates 1976). Irrigation imposed quite different labor requirements than did rain-fed farming or seasonal transhumance with sheep and goat herds, a difference reflected in the sizes of the houses.

With irrigation, agriculture is twice as productive as rain-fed crops, and farmers responded to this advantage by seeking new land to cultivate. One place where they moved is Deh Luran where we discovered the remains of an immigrant group at the site of Chagha Sefid (Hole 1977). The newcomers brought new pottery styles and techniques, along with irrigation, and founded the Black on Buff ceramic tradition - derived from the Samarran - that was to dominate this region until the end of the fifth millennium. Other sites with similar ceramics include Jaffarabad and Choga Mish in Khuzistan (Delougaz and Kantor 1996; Dollfus 1971). Most importantly, however, this period marks the initial settlement of southern Mesopotamia where the same pottery is found at the base of Tell Oueili, a site situated in a marshy area on the rising flood plain (Huot 1989; Huot 1991).

At Oueili, this early ceramic has been called Ubaid 0, to signify that it is now regarded as the foundation of the long Ubaid tradition. In fact, one can trace a succession of this ceramic back through the Samarran and into the Hassunan of northern Mesopotamia. While Hassunan and Samarran pottery was being made in Mesopotamia, sites in Iran, such as Hajji Firuz, Sarab, Guran, Ali Kosh and Chogha Gavaneh (Abdi 1999; Hole, et al. 1969; McDonald 1979; Mortensen 1963; Voigt 1983), maintained their own regionally distinctive ceramic traditions. These local traditions that developed independent trajectories of change were then impacted by the spread of a variant of the black-on-buff wares that arose out of the Samarran and its derived Ubaid styles. On the piedmont, the Samarran Transitional irrigation agriculturalists moved into suitable plains where there were seasonal flood regimes permitting easy irrigation. Among these were the plains of Mandali, Deh Luran and Khuzistan (Alizadeh 2004; Alizadeh, Kouchoukos et al. 2004). The more productive agriculture engendered by irrigation gave rise to larger villages, and gave impetus to the separation of transhumant herding. After this time it is likely that some herders began to live entirely apart from the piedmont villages, living in transitory camps in the mountain valleys. That transhumance may have had even older roots is suggested by the site of Tula'i in Khuzistan (Hole 1974) and traces of early ceramics in rock shelters and caves in the mountain valleys (Mortensen 1972), as well as by the necessity to move herds seasonally to fresh pastures (Abdi 2002; Abdi 2003; Mashkour and Abdi 2002).

Interregional Interaction

The Zagros valleys varied in their isolation from Mesopotamian influences. The valleys on natural routes between Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau, especially when they were fertile and had perennial rivers, had potential for interregional contacts, as well as self-sufficiency in food production. On the other hand, the valleys in the heart of Luristan, lacking easy routes and featuring relatively small, often waterless plains, were as isolated in prehistory as they were until recently. The ceramics in these two contrasting regions tell the story. The large, well-watered Mahidasht, along the major route (the Khorasan High Road), enjoyed considerable settlement from the earliest times, yet the ceramics retained a distinctly local character. Moreover, in contrast to Mesopotamia, where the Ubaid tradition showed little regional variation, the Mahidasht received at least two quite different ceramic intrusions during the fifth millennium. One of these is a particularly widespread style first identified at Dalma Tepe in the Solduz Valley near Lake Urmia (Henrickson and Vidali 1987). Dalma style pottery has been found in many sites in the High Road valleys, associated with Ubaid-derived ceramics. The fact that the Dalma wares are always associated with local ceramic styles suggests diffusion rather than movement of people (Tonoike 2009). What is remarkable is how widely spread this

characteristic pottery is - from Kangavar to Lake Urmia. A second "intrusion" is Halaf-derived pottery, a style and technique of manufacture whose primary distribution is Northern Mesopotamia. As with Dalma, examples of this ware are found with local black-on-buff ceramics. Moreover, this so-called J-ware is found exclusively along the High Road valleys (Levine and McDonald 1977; Levine and Young 1986). Neither of these exogenous types - Dalma and J-Ware - is found in Luristan. In fact, one might compare their distribution to that of modern Kurdistan, whose population has traditionally been transhumant from the northern piedmont to the higher valleys. One might speculate, therefore, that some of these ceramics were carried by nomads who had trading relations in the villages (Tonoike 2009). Conversely, the only place outside the mountains where either of these exogenous wares has been found in the lowland is in the piedmont. Again, the evidence suggests that there was little, if any, interaction with Mesopotamia proper, despite substantial north-south interaction within the mountain-piedmont zone.

The role of geography is thus quite clear. Ceramics follow natural routes of travel, between lowland and highland, as well as north and south through the mountain valleys. The pattern is broken in the less tractable terrain of Luristan, essentially south and east of the High Road, which lacks easy routes in any direction. As one would predict, the ceramics, while displaying some recognizable similarities with the Ubaid, have purely local characteristics and the region did not receive the external inputs found in the High Road valleys (Hole 2007).

The Khuzistan plain was a major center of prehistory in western Iran because of its favorable geographic situation. Lying at the base of the Zagros this largely flat land was coursed by a number of perennial rivers. Equally important, rainfall on the northern part of the plain was sufficiently high to allow rain-fed agriculture, and there were easily diverted sources of water to permit irrigation if rainfall was deficient. Apart from its agricultural potential, the plain was also excellent winter pasture for transhumant herders. It is understandable, therefore, that settlements in Khuzistan were numerous and that some grew to great size. Perhaps uniquely among the fertile regions of Western Iran, the Khuzistan plain was continuously settled, although it also suffered periods of decline and loss of population.

Ceramics from the several sites excavated by French and American archaeologists run a course essentially parallel to the Ubaid. Interestingly, southern Mesopotamia lay just across an expanded Gulf, seemingly within easy reach by small boat (Baeteman, Dupin et al. 2005: Figure. 50). In fact, Ubaid sailors traveled out from lower Mesopotamia into the Gulf, leaving characteristic pottery along the coasts of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates (Oates, et al. 1977); however, actual Ubaid pottery did not reach Khuzistan or other parts of Iran. This suggests that connections were tenuous, but that enough interaction occurred to foster similarities in the ceramics.

A characteristic of the large sites in Southern Mesopotamia is the temple built on a platform. Excavations at the legendary site of Eridu uncovered a number of temples built successively over the years in ever larger form (Safar, et al. 1981). Some of these sites had large cemeteries in which pots were placed with the deceased (Hole 1989a). In the third millennium these temple platforms developed into ziggurats. During the late fifth millennium, Khuzistan gave rise to a large settlement that we know as Susa. Here, the base of a temple platform - a truncated step pyramid - was partly exposed by Jacques de Morgan early in the 20th century and later by Jean Perrot and Denis Canal in the 1970s (Canal 1978; Mecquenem 1943). Their work, along with that of Steve and Gache atop the platform, makes convincing evidence for an elaborate temple that was rebuilt following destruction, and later destroyed again (Steve and Gasche 1971).

The associated cemetery is particularly interesting in that the burials were accompanied by ceramics, some of which are among the treasures of world art (Hole 1992). Although sherds of similar vessels have been found on the surface of many sites in Khuzistan, they represent the finest vessels of the time and a set of three - a beaker, a bowl, and a small

jar - may have been buried with each body. Painting on some of the vessels gives clues to the rituals of the time, and there are carved seals from Susa that depict individuals performing them. In combination with the depictions on the pots, one can infer that there was a priesthood who used pots similar to those in the burials in their libation ceremonies (Hole 1983). It is likely that similar rituals were performed in Southern Mesopotamia, but neither the ceramics nor seals from those sites reveal them. In fact, only in Iran do the late fifth millennium ceramics display elaborate naturalistic motifs. Interestingly, in the Saimarreh and Hulailan valleys, sherds of Susa beakers, identical to those found as whole vessels in the cemetery at Susa, have been found (Vanden Berghe 1973, 1975). This shows that there were connections between the two areas, perhaps via transhumant pastoralists.This suggestion is bolstered by the finding of large, late fifth millennium cemetery sites, Hakalan and Parchineh. These occur in the lowest Zagros valleys, but settlements associated with them have not been found, implying that these represent burial places of seasonally mobile pastoralists (Henrickson 1985; Henrickson 1986; Vanden Berghe 1973; Vanden Berghe 1975).

Throughout the fifth and fourth millennia Luristan sustained small numbers of permanent villages in favorable valleys, the best of which was the Khoramabad Valley, one of the few with a permanent river and on a minor east-west route. The distribution of ceramics in the mountain valleys suggests that connections were stronger with the upland valleys than with Mesopotamia, a fact that accords with the idea that transhumance played an important role in settlement and the distribution of pottery (Hole 2007).

At the end of the fifth millennium there was a drastic decline in settlement in the Zagros and in Khuzistan, with many sites and even some valleys abandoned (Abdi 2003; Hole 1994; Johnson 1987; Wright 1987). I have suggested that a shift in climate, which reduced precipitation, may have been responsible. This occurred at the end of the painted Ubaid and Susiana ceramic traditions, and ushered in periods when plain wares dominated (Hole 1994). Unfortunately, we know relatively less about the fourth millennium than of the fifth, possibly reflecting a dearth of sites rather than archaeological avoidance. I do not imply that the entire region was devoid of sites; rather that so far relatively little evidence of settlement has been discovered. This problem is worsened by the fact that we also lack an excellent series of dates and that, with calibration, the "fourth millennium" in conventional radiocarbon dates, stretches to well over 1000 years (Hole 1987b; Hole 1987c; Voigt 1987; Voigt and Dyson 1992). Considering that this is the era commonly referred to the Uruk, widely considered to lie at the base of Sumerian civilization, it is a deplorable and perplexing situation.

Late Chalcolithic/Early Bronze Age (fig .3)

By the end of the fourth millennium, during the Late Uruk period, typical Mesopotamian-style Uruk ceramics are found in Godin Tepe, a site on the Khorasan Road, with access to the plateau. Weiss and Young suggest that it was a trading entrepot, one of a number of similar sites scattered from the upper Euphrates to the Zagros (Weiss and Young 1975). Middle to Late Uruk ceramics have also been found at many sites where the preponderant ceramics are in local styles. Abdi reports a large Uruk center on the Mehran Plain, but the site has not been excavated (Abdi 2001:248). Again, as we saw with the earlier Chalcolithic wares, the strongest connections for these seem to be the highland valleys (Goff 1971). We also find, for the first time, evidence that caves were used by people bearing Uruk ceramics, presumably as temporary camps of transhumant herders (Hole 2007; Hole and Flannery 1967; Wright, et al. 1975). The layers of dung ash in these sites also speak to the use of such caves for lengthy periods.

The Uruk period in Mesopotamia is well known for having produced the first evidence of writing, the first cities, and to have sent forth "colonies" into northern Mesopotamia and Anatolia (Algaze 1993; Rothman 2001). The purpose of these outlying settlements has been much debated, but trade for metal, wool and other products may have been an important factor. Although some of the settlements, such as Habuba Kabira on the Euphrates essentially duplicated a town that one might have seen in Southern Mesopotamia, most of the so-called Uruk



Fig. 3: *Selected Chalcolithic sites in Iran and Mesopotamia.*

sites in the north merely have some of the ubiquitous beveled rim bowls and perhaps a few other typical forms, alongside a majority of locally made wares (Algaze 1989). The situation in Northern Mesopotamia now appears as more of an internal development than once thought. The recent excavations at Tell Hamoukar and Tell Brak in northern Syria show developments of similar complexity to those of the south (Gibson and Maktash 2000; Lawler 2006; Reichel 2002; Oates et al. 2007) So far comparable developments have not been reported in Iran, with the implication that the Uruk phenomenon had only local effect in Iran.

The Late Uruk follows the termination of the Climatic Optimum and there is reason to think that social upheaval at the time may have been induced in part by subsequent climate changes (Kouchoukos 1998; Weiss 2000). Because there is such widespread abandonment and decline in settlement, some have wondered whether many people from failed farms on the plain embarked on a life as pastoral nomads to take advantage of the pastures in the Zagros (Wright 1987). There is little evidence as yet to bear on this question, but early "Uruk" sites like Kunji Cave are suggestive of seasonal herders' camps. It is noteworthy, however, that many of sites in the Zagros valleys and Khuzistan either were abandoned or reduced in size during the late fourth-early third millennium. During these troubled times there was an incursion into the central Zagros of pottery derived from the northern Yanik culture. Transcaucasian gray wares are found in Godin III and other sites in the higher valleys (Levine and

Young 1987). The implication of this incursion is that, as we have seen previously, interactions in Western Iran seem more likely to take place through the mountain region than with the lowlands.

The development of metallurgy on the Iranian Plateau, whose source of native copper was exploited in the Neolithic, has yet to be fully understood. However, a number of sites dating to the late fifth millennium, including Tepe Sialk, Tepe Giyan, She Gabi, Susa and the smelting center at Arisman attest to the growing importance of copper trade (Levine and Hamlin 1974; Piggot 1999; Piggott and Lechtman 2003; Piggot 2004; Pernicke, Adam et al. in press) Despite the apparent abundance of copper on the plateau there is no evidence that it was imported into Mesopotamia (Moorey 1999:243).

Following the Uruk there is a brief reappearance of painted ceramics in lower Mesopotamia in a style known as Jemdet Nasr, after the eponymous site. Its counterparts in the Zagros are variously known as ED I and Proto-Elamite, depending on the region. Susa is at the border between the Proto-Elamite of the Southern Zagros and the Jemdet Nasr of lower Mesopotamia (Emberling, et al. 2002; Henrickson 1986; Wright 1987), but for the most part, third millennium ceramics are unpainted.In Mesopotamia, substantial sites, some with temples, are of this age, but in Iran, the only traces in the mountains are mostly likely graves of nomadic people. One such burial ground, in Kunji Cave is dated 27-2600 B.C., and in the lower Zagros valleys there are other cemeteries and settlements (Goff, 1971; Herzfeld 1929-30; Schmidt, et al. 1989; Trane 2001). The third millennium deserves full treatment on its own and I shall not pursue it further here.

Concluding Remarks

The central theme of this paper is the importance of geography on the development and interactions of cultures. There is much more that could be said on each of the topics I have raised. Let me just reiterate a few points. First, Western Iran and Mesopotamia are vastly different geographic regions, despite being adjacent and sharing overall patterns of weather. The Mesopotamian plain joins the Zagros through a transitional zone known as the piedmont where much of the cultural interaction took place. It is abundantly clear that throughout prehistory, each region followed a distinctly different path. Of the two regions, Western Iran is by far the most diverse, a fact owing largely to its topographic diversity and the nature of routes through the stair-case steps of the mountain ranges. During prehistory there were several major climatic events that impacted cultures. Following the Late Glacial Maximum, as the earth warmed and the glaciers melted, sea level rose, eventually more than 100 m. The impact on the hydrology of the Tigris-Euphrates floodplain was dramatic. As sea level was rising, the Younger Dryas suddenly brought cold and aridity that sharply restricted human occupation. That was followed by the Climatic Optimum that brought greater precipitation and warmer temperatures and allowed the rapid and extensive settlement of farmers and herders. The end of this benign period saw the demise of the late fifth millennium cultures and a lengthy period thereafter during which we have few archaeological remains. Finally another period of aridity at the end of the fourth millennium may have led to stresses in the early cities of Southern Mesopotamia and settlements in Western Iran. Throughout all these events, the two regions remained relatively isolated from one another, a situation that held until much later when imperial powers were able to embrace both territories.

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