University of Sistan and Baluchestan

Iranian Journal of Archaeological Studies

Print ISSN: 2251-743X Online ISSN: 2676-2919

Archaeological Sciences Research Centre

A New Perspective on the Archaeology of the Khorasan Region during the Iron Age

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Received: 07/ 01/ 2021; Received in Revised form: 27/ 04/ 2021; Accepted: 21/ 05/ 2021; Published: 20/ 06/ 2021

Abstract

Khorasan's Iron Age differs significantly from the Iron Age elements found in western Iran. In terms of cultural aspects and life structures, this encompasses two distinct cultures known as Yaz and Dahistan in classic classifications. Such definitions, which Russian archaeologists introduced to archaeological literature, have been heavily criticized. This is because the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, 550-300 BCE, and 330-217 BCE, which corresponded with the Medes, Achaemenid, and Seleucid Empires, were overlooked. Accordingly, the primary goal of the research was to investigate the political positions of the aforementioned empires in the region during the Iron Age. However, data collected about the Achaemenid and Hellenistic eras, as well as documented sources, have frequently mentioned the Satraps of these two empires in northeast Iran. The majority of cultural material on this region has been introduced based on the first millennium BCE, but this study took a political sociology approach to present new suggestions in the chronology of Khorasan's Iron Age. Having said that, social developments in Khorasan from the Late Bronze Age to the establishment of ruling dynasties have been overlooked. According to chronology, the pre-Median, Median, post-Median, Achaemenid, and Seleucid eras all fall within the Iron Age period, and it is suggested that they be included in the region's political history

Keywords: Khorasan's Iron Age, Political Sociology, Post-Medes, Achaemenid Empire, Seleucid Empire

Article Type: Research Article

Introduction

In terms of archeological studies and a classical division, there are two very distinct cultures in the early years of the Iron Age in Western Central Asia and Northeastern Iran: Dahistan (Lecomte 2005) is spread across the eastern strip of Caspian Sea, Gorgan Plain and Northwestern Khorasan Province. The other culture is known as Yaz, and it was discovered through excavations at Yaz-depe (Masson 1959). In addition to southern settlements in Turkmenistan in the north of Afghanistan, evidence of this culture can also be found in eastern parts of Khorasan (Basafa & Hedayati, 2020; Vahdati 2018; Rezaei *et al*. 2018). This cultural difference distinguishes Gorgan Plain and Western Khorasan from culture of eastern Khorasan, which is characterized by Yaz culture (Bulawka 2011). It must be pointed out, due to Lack of archaeological studies in Khorasan, Central Asian archeological terms have inevitably been used. Taking into account local cultural traditions as well as shared and separate origins appears to be especially important. Therefore, Russian archaeologist s believe that during the Early Iron Age, a new culture characterized by hand-made painted pottery emerged in southern Turkmenistan and northern Afghanistan (Kohl 1984: 194). According to archaeologists' primary studies on Great Khorasan's Iron Age over the past decades, the Yaz I culture coincides with the Early Iron Age, i.e., 1400-1000 BCE (Lhuillier 2013: 208), and its subsequent periods, i.e., Yaz II, coincides with 1000-500 BCE and Yaz III, with 550-300 BCE (Lyonnet & Fontugne 2021). Purposive research in the Khorasan region of Iran has recently

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DOI: 10.22111/IJAS.2021.6844

Publisher: University of Sistan and Baluchestan

revealed that the emergence of Iron Age cultures occurred prior to 1400 BCE and immediately after the decline of urbanization in 1500 BCE, coinciding with the end of Bactria Margiana Archaeological Complex. The use of the term "Yaz" to denote cultures emerging between 550 and 217 BCE is an important point to keep in mind, as it is also the most significant challenge in this study. The reason for this is that the period from 550 to 330 BCE corresponds to the Achaemenid Empire and the period from 330 to 217 BCE to the Seleucid dynasty (Cattani & Genito 1998: 75; Sadjadi 2004: 165). The interesting point is that in archaeological excavations, cultural aspects of the Achaemenid Empire have been repeatedly reported with their distinctive characteristics (Lyonnet & Fontugne 2021). Dahistan, which now includes Gorgan Plain, (Lecomte 2005: 461) arose in Meshed Misrian plain, an alluvial plain with very advanced architecture characterized by various irrigation techniques and canals (Askarov, 1999). Additionally, that culture has been discovered near the current cities of Kizil Arvat, Bami, Beurme, and the Sumbar River basin (Guptar 1979: 223). According to C 14 dating, this culture began in the middle of the second millennium BCE and lasted until the 9th or 8th centuries BCE, a span of 700 years (Kohl 1984: 200). Some also believe that Dahistan culture lasted from 1300 to 500 BCE (Lecomte 2007: 200, table). According to a recent study, the history of Dahistan culture in the north and northwest of Khorasan dates from 1500 to 500 BCE (Vahdati 2018; Vahdati 2015: 45). Before the Iron Age, this culture's settlements primarily spanned a single period and lacked cultural continuity. Gorgan Plain and the northeast of Iran are excellent places to learn about the origins and ancestors of Dahistan culture (Vahdati 2015: 47). Dahistan's settlements are all built on virgin soil, which makes the transition from previous periods to Dahistan difficult. However, at the end of the second millennium, there was a cultural classification in Gorgan Plain's main settlements, such as Shah Tepe and Tureng Tepe, which coincided with the establishment of Dahistan culture. This study did not seek to answer difficult and complex questions about the chronology of the Iron Age, but rather to present theories about the significance of the Medes, Achaemenid, and Seleucid Empires in cultural geography and to propose the use of political sociology in chronological classification of the subject under study.

Significance of Study

The classic classification of cultural periods in prehistoric Iran has unfortunately caused disagreements for decades among researchers who study cultural subjects of eastern Iran and Central Asian countries, specifically, whether the Iron Age existed or did not exist in these areas, as well as when it began (Talaei 2004:166; also see Vahdati 2020: 166). In studies on prehistoric periods in western Iran, however, Frank Hole presented a new classification based on sociological changes that coincided with the classical classification based on changes in materials consumed by communities. His classification was based on sociological changes. Iron Age is also one of the most contentious cultural periods in Iran and neighboring regions, prompting researchers to propose a new age for human community known as Iron Age due to changes in cultural materials in the middle of the second millennium BCE. Some attribute such changes to the inflow of Aryan tribes (Talaei 2004), while others attribute them to the continuation of the previous period (Late Bronze Age) (Askarov 1999), and there has yet to be an agreement on such changes and the analysis of changes in this time period. Thus, based on research conducted over the last decade on settlements attributed to the Iron Age in Khorasan and northeast Iran, an attempt was made to bridge the research gap regarding the period's beginning and determine whether or not the Iron Age existed in eastern Iran. Furthermore, because sociological and political changes have been overlooked in studying the said period, it was attempted to consider those changes in Iron Age culture for the study of said period. Finally, regardless of the classic classification, it was attempted to present a new classification based on political sociology for the mid-second millennium BCE to the end of the historic period, taking into account the changes after the decline of urbanization.

Research Questions

Can this period be classified as Iron Age in eastern Iran without taking into account the political events that occurred in the empires formed in the first millennium BCE? Assuming that the periods 1500-500 BCE and 1500-300 BCE are considered approximate dates for Dahistan's and Yaz's Iron Age cultures, respectively, what was the political position of the Medes, Achaemenid, and Seleucid Empires during these periods?

Khorasan Prior to the First Half of the Second Millennium BCE (1500 BCE)

A civilization known as BMAC emerged in Central Asia in the second half of the third millennium BCE (Sarianidi 1998: 35). Its chronology ranges from around 2250 to 1700 BCE (Lyonnet *et al*. 2020), and its salient feature is the creation of dignity, which is derived from burial textures in their dispersion area (Hiebert & Lemberg-Karlovsky 1992). Archaeological studies in northeastern Iran and Central Asia show that between 1800 and 1700 BCE, and during the Final or Late Bronze Age, urban settlements collapsed or experienced a state of crisis (Luneau 2020). As a result, cities shrank in size and some were abandoned, and rapidly growing Iron Age cultures (Yaz and Dahistan) emerged. The new cultures arose along water resources and were heavily reliant on them (Khlopina 2015). Some researchers believe that, like the Bronze Age, Central Asia in the Iron Age was divided into two extended areas, one of which was inhabited by Steppes who relied on an economy based on animal husbandry and the other area was inhabited by peoples who had developed advanced agriculture (Kuzmina 2007). The collapse of urban cities at the end of the Bronze Age suggests that this occurred in western Central Asia and eastern Iran (Luneau 2019: 275). Altyn Depe, a significant urban site in Central Asia, was deserted, and the other significant sites, Namazga, plummeted in size and population (Vahdati 2015: 44). There is a settlement gap in Gorgan Plain and Damghan at sites like Tepe Hissar, Shah Tepe, and Tureng Tepe. The studies conducted in Tepe Hissar revealed that the settlements were reused or used as cemeteries in the early first millennium BCE (Roustaei and Koohi Gilvan 2007).

Existence and Chronological Challenges of the Iron Age in Northeast of Iran with an Emphasis on Khorasan

Cultural and structural changes occurred during the Iron Age. Iron was used very rarely in the early years (Iron Age I) and many excavation sites have not reported its material manifestation. However, during the Iron Age II and III, iron and metal objects were commonly used (Medvedskaya 2004: 115). The chronological analysis of the period indicates that, as in many prehistoric periods, pottery played an important role; and in eastern Iran, this was also the case. In addition to metal, plows with iron blades were widely used in farming lands during this period. As a result, agricultural crops grew in number and variety (Talaei 2007: 38). Some archaeologists in the last decade maintained that because iron in the Iron Age was very limitedly used for jewelry, and the climax of using iron was in the early first millennium BCE, they considered the final half of the second millennium BCE to be the continuation of the Late Bronze Age (Danti 2013; Rafiei Alavi 2010). Some researchers believe that the Iron Age did not exist in northeast Iran because some tribes from Central Asia attacked Iran, causing the northeastern parts of Iran to miss out on the Iron Age (Talaei 2004: 166).

Yaz and Dahistan were also identified with specific changes in cultural materials and certain features based on the chronology of the Iron Age in Iran that is based on settlements found in northwest Iran, and it was discovered that iron was not used in Iron Age I (Askarov 1999). The cultural divide between eastern and western Central Asia became more pronounced in the second half of the second millennium BCE(1500 BCE). As a result, the Dahistan developed in western and northwestern Khorasan, extending to the southwest of Turkmenistan and Gorgan Plain (west bank of Atrak River). Furthermore, on the eastern side, in the Margiana delta , as well as to the north of Afghanistan, the basins of the Kashafrud River and the eastern Atrak River (upper part), Yaz culture arose with its primitive handmade pottery (Basafa and Davari 2021; Vahdati 2015:45; Mazari Moghaddam 2016). However, there was no settlement in areas of Dahistan plains until the early years of 1500 BCE in the western part. On the other hand, in the eastern part, some settlements were extended uninterruptedly from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age, or the settlements of the early Iron Age were established in the same region and in communities, characterized by handmade buff ware with geometric patterns (Basafa 2017), which, unlike the Iron Age of Iran, had some continuity with the period preceding it in terms of material culture (Khlopin 2015).

Khorasan's Iron Age cultures, which are inextricably linked to Central Asian culture and chronology, have revealed in the last decade that Yaz and Dahistan cultures can be identified during this period (Basafa and Davari 2021). Although Yaz culture is notable for its handmade pottery with very basic geometric patterns, traces of very

advanced pottery created with tools, as well as other forms of pottery at the Late Bronze Age, can be found in the period's stratigraphy. Additionally, this period demonstrates the continuity of the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, as well as very advanced forms of pottery dating back to the Bronze Age (Askarov 1999: 420). All of this occurred while the majority of researchers believe that climate change forced the abandonment of the Late Bronze Age's largest settlements in northeastern Iran and southern Turkmenistan. They also believe that these settlements were occupied during a dark cultural period in the early first millennium BCE (Luneau 2019). It should be noted that the majority of these regions, particularly the mountains of Gorgan Plain, southern Turkmenistan, and Khorasan, including the eastern mountains of Alborz, Kopet Dag, or Ala Dag, have not been investigated, yielding no information about the cultures and continuity of settlements in the above said mountains. Furthermore, researchers' hypotheses about the abandonment of settlements in the Late Bronze Age have not been tested.

Discussion and Analysis

Some researchers believe that environmental and climatic changes caused the collapse of sophisticated urban settlements at the end of the Bronze Age, while others assert that the Aryan conquest of Iran was the catalyst for the emergence of a new culture in the Iron Age in eastern Iran (Talaei 2004). According to research conducted in Turkmenistan and Khorasan, some Iron Age settlements, distinguished by their artifacts, cultural materials, and fundamental lifestyle, were the continuation of the advanced culture of the Late Bronze Age. Despite this, no adequate analysis of the emergence of pottery in the early Iron Age (fundamental handmade pottery), the cause of the collapse of Late Bronze Age settlements, or other social, political, and economic aspects has been presented. Researchers working in this field have only presented two exogenous and endogenous theories. Yet, how this process took place is still the most important archaeological issue in eastern Iran, stretching from Central Asia to the eastern borders of the Indus Valley.

Yaz culture was also integrated with local aspects in Khorasan and Central Asia, resulting in new cultures such as Khost culture and Amirabad culture in Uzbekistan (Fergana Valley), and Tilia/ Kochuk culture in southern Uzbekistan and northern Afghanistan. In Baluchistan plateau and Indus Valley, after the downfall of Harappa civilization, it continued in the Bronze Age in a limited scope as a diversity of local cultures including Gandhara grave culture/ Swat culture in the north of central and northwest of Pakistan, Banu red painted Pottery culture in Punjab in northern India and eastern Pakistan, Pirak hand-made painted pottery in the center of Pakistan's Baluchistan, as well as other local forms from the Iron Age to the establishment of Achaemenid Empire (see Vahdati 2020: 174). Some researchers believe that the patterned handmade pottery found throughout Great Khorasan is not a unified whole, indicating the existence of independent, and in some cases very different, cultural communities (Lhuilier 2013; Vahdati 2020: 190). It should be noted that, according to the Bisotun Inscription, which dates from the Achaemenid Empire, the aforementioned regions and cultures can be regarded as the ethnic characteristics stated by Darius the Great in this inscription (Kent 1953; Jafari 2015: 53). Given this, as well as the chronology of the above said cultures, particularly Yaz and Dahistan, the Medes, Achaemenid, and Seleucid Empires have been overlooked. Thus, despite historic inscriptions and books published by various historians that have repeatedly mentioned eastern Iran or Achaemenid Satraps and Seleucid Aparxis, the term "Iron Age" is still used. Hence, it is necessary to reconsider the classic classification of the Iron Age by considering political and sociological changes that coincided with the dynasties in the early historic period (Table 1).

Khorasan During Medes

Despite the scarcity of documented sources on the existence of empires in the Iranian Plateau and its eastern regions during the first millennium BCE, Assyrian calendars are extremely useful. Due to the importance of the Great Khorasan Road (Majidzadeh 1982) and Assyrian trade ties with other regions, three distant Median SHAHAKS, known as PARTAKO, were mentioned in Esarhaddon's era (630 BCE) (Luckenbill 1927: 222; See Jafari 2015: 53). PARTO, a land to the south of the Caspian Sea, is also mentioned, the boundaries of which, as one of the Achaemenid Empire's significant northern Satraps, are not clearly defined (Mohammadifar 2008: 20). The terms "border" and "border inhabitants" were

Table .1:*The classification of Khorasan's cultural periods from the decline of urbanization to the advent of Islamic era*

Period	Starting Date (Approximate)	Ending Date (Approximate)	Description
Decline of urbanization	1700 BCE	1500 BCE	From the abandonment of large urban sites to the establishment and emergence of primary components of Dahistan and Yaz cultures
Pre-Median period	1500 BCE	9th century BCE	From the primary establishment of the components of Dahistan and Yaz, as well as local cultures (*Shahak* or political-tribal structure) to prior to the Median union with tribes
From the establishment to the consolidation of the Median government (Medes I period)	9th century BCE	7th century BCE	From the Median union with tribes to the consolidation and recognition in Assyrian texts
Post-Median period (Medes II period)	7th century BCE	550 BCE	From the consolidation and recognition in Assyrian texts to the downfall of kingdom by the Achaemenid
Achaemenid period	547 or 539 BCE	330 or 327 BCE	From the conquest of the northeastern Iranian borders by Cyrus the Great and after the conquest of Lydia and prior to the conquest of Babylon to the downfall of the Achaemenid kingdom by Alexander
Hellenistic period	330 or 327 BCE	248 BCE	From Alexander the Great invasion of Iran to the end of the Seleucid Empire and the uprising of Arsaces I of Parthia

first used in the early years of the Median union's establishment and independence from neighboring powers. According to texts, upon the establishment of Median dynasty, there were tribes known as Parthia to the east of the Median rule, which limited their political scope (Kaviani Pouya 2015: 46). According to Ammianus Marcellinus, from Cyaxares onwards, Median territory was linked to the Caspian Sea from the north. This indicates that the Medes had established borders, and Parthia was the Median dynasty's borderline (Diakonoff 2014: 328). Ptolemy considered the Charindas River in Hyrcan to be the beginning of the Median dynasty's eastern border (Markwart 2004: 35). Thus, regions to the east of Hyrcan, such as the Gorgan and Atrak Valleys in Khorasan, the Kopet Dag slopes in Turkmenistan, and the Tejen Valley, must have belonged to the Medes prior to the Achaemenid Empire (Diakonoff 2007: 213). From a linguistic standpoint, the expansion of the Median realms to this region beyond Hyrcan's eastern borders can also be confirmed (Kaviani Pouya & Daghmachi 2014: 171). The reason for this is that the term "Baxtar," which appears in the Bisotun Inscription as "Bāxtriš" and is presented as one of the Achaemenid imperial states (Kent 1953: 141; Wu 2017: 260–261), is a term derived from the Median language whose correct form in the Persian language is "Bāxc/sī" (see Kaviani Pouya 2015: 50; Manuel Cook 2006: 26; Zarshenas 2001: 185). All of these measures, as well as the marking of the eastern borders of the Medes to Khorasan, were implemented after Cyaxares. Prior to his reign, during the reigns of Deioces and Phraortes, the Median realm had not yet reached Khorasan. The eastern parts of Iran can be called the post-Median period from the reign of Deioces to the rule of Cyaxares, and the Median period's dominance, from the region of Cyaxares to the end of the Median period in eastern Iran, can be called the Median era. Thus, at the same time with the Median period in eastern Iran, the following three periods can be considered for the region: pre-Median era, (from the end of the transition period in 1500 BCE to the advent of Deioces's reign), the establishment of the government (9th century BCE to 7th century BCE, coinciding with the Median union with neighboring tribes), and the Median era (from the rule of Deioces, i.e., the 7th century BCE, to the end of the Median era).

Khorasan During the Achaemenid Empire

In the Bisotun Inscription, an eastern Satrap

known as “Parthovah” is mentioned, parts of which correspond to Khorasan; Herodotus refers to its people as “Parthavi,” and Strabo and Aryan refer to their territory as “Parthavia” (Sheldon 2008: 66; Jafari 2015: 53). According to historical texts, after conquering Lydia and Urartu, and even before conquering Babylon, Cyrus the Great moved toward east, and the Hyercan (Vercan) yielded without any conflict (Cyropaedia IV, 1-2), and then he moved toward Balkh and Khwarazm to establish security at the eastern borders. Thus, territories of Median, Parthian, Hyrcania, Khwarazm, and Balkh, as well as parts of Scythian lands, fell to Cyrus the Great and were annexed to the kingdom of Persia (Hintz 2006: 110-111) Cyrus had little difficulty conquering this region because Medes had previously conquered it, as had other parts of the Median territories (Jafari 2015: 53). The names of 23 Achaemenid states and Satraps are mentioned in the Bisotun Inscription (Malvan 2008: 472), with half of the Satraps located in the Achaemenid Empire’s eastern region. The Achaemenid Empire’s eastern borders can be extended to the Hindu Kush Mountains in western India and to Seyhun in northern Central Asia (Wu 2020: 599). Sogdia is mentioned as an Achaemenid Satrap in Darius and Xerxes inscriptions, frequently alongside Balkh, Khwarazm, and Herat (Barnett 1957: 68-70). In Darius’ inscription, the inhabitants of the seventh Achaemenid Satrap (Figure. 1), with Haraiv (Herat) as its capital, are mentioned alongside Arachosia and Gandhara (Kiani 2005: 8).

Khorasan During the Seleucid Empire

The Seleucid state's Aparxis, as well as Balkh as the state's most important political base under Antiochus III, should not be considered in the eastern borders of the Iranian Plateau. The reason for this is that, recently, outside of Iran's current eastern borders, in the Ai-Khanoum and Algh Tepe sites, frequent examples of Achaemenid (Figures. 2-3) and Hellenistic pottery (Figures. 4-5) have been identified and classified (Lhuillier & Bendezu-Sarmiento 2018). The conquest of Satraps in eastern Iran was crucial for Alexander in bringing down the Achaemenid Empire. Despite opposition, the eastern regions and Central Asia were annexed to the new Macedonian state, and after Alexander's early death, a new era of wars and chaos began in these regions, this time by Alexander's successors and Greek barracks (Jafari 2015: 55). Once Seleucus established his power in eastern and central Iran, Satraps in central Asia were also annexed to the Seleucid Empire, and the Greek colonies established during Alexander's reign became the Seleucid Empire's stronghold in the region. Gaur Qala, Afrasiab, Khujand, Tarmaz Takht Sangin, Tappeh Dinestan, Amshi Tappeh, Tappeh Nimlik, Delbarjan, Taxila, and Ai-Khanoum were among such settlements. A cursory examination of historical sources from the time reveals that Seleucid kings in Central Asia were constantly exacerbated by revolutions and turmoil, reflecting people's discontent with the presence of strangers in their lands (Dani & Bernard 1994:



Figure. 1: *Map of Achaemenid satrapies (After: O'Brien & Patrick Karl 2002)*

70-73). Diodotus, the Greek ruler appointed by the Seleucid to rule over eastern states, established an independent kingdom, and Andragoras, the Parthian ruler delegated by the Seleucid, declared his power by minting independent coins. After a while, Andragoras was defeated in the war by Arsaces, the new emerging Parthian king, and the Greek-Balkhian government became obedient to the Parthian king during Mithridates I of Parthia's reign (171-138 BCE). Although the Greeks' political dominance in Central Asia did not last long, the cultural influence known as Hellenistic persisted right after the end of Parthian rule and remained in the region for some time after their downfall. All historical sites associated with Greek-Baxtar culture that have been identified thus far are located outside of current Iranian borders (see Jafari 2015: 55). However, as comparative studies show, primary Seleucid culture signs can be traced in pottery found at Takhchar Abad Site in Birjand (Dana *et al*. 2018; 2015), Dasht-e Rashtkhar in Mashhad, and even Seh Tapeh Site in Neyshabur (Basafa & Rezaei 2019) (Figure. 5).

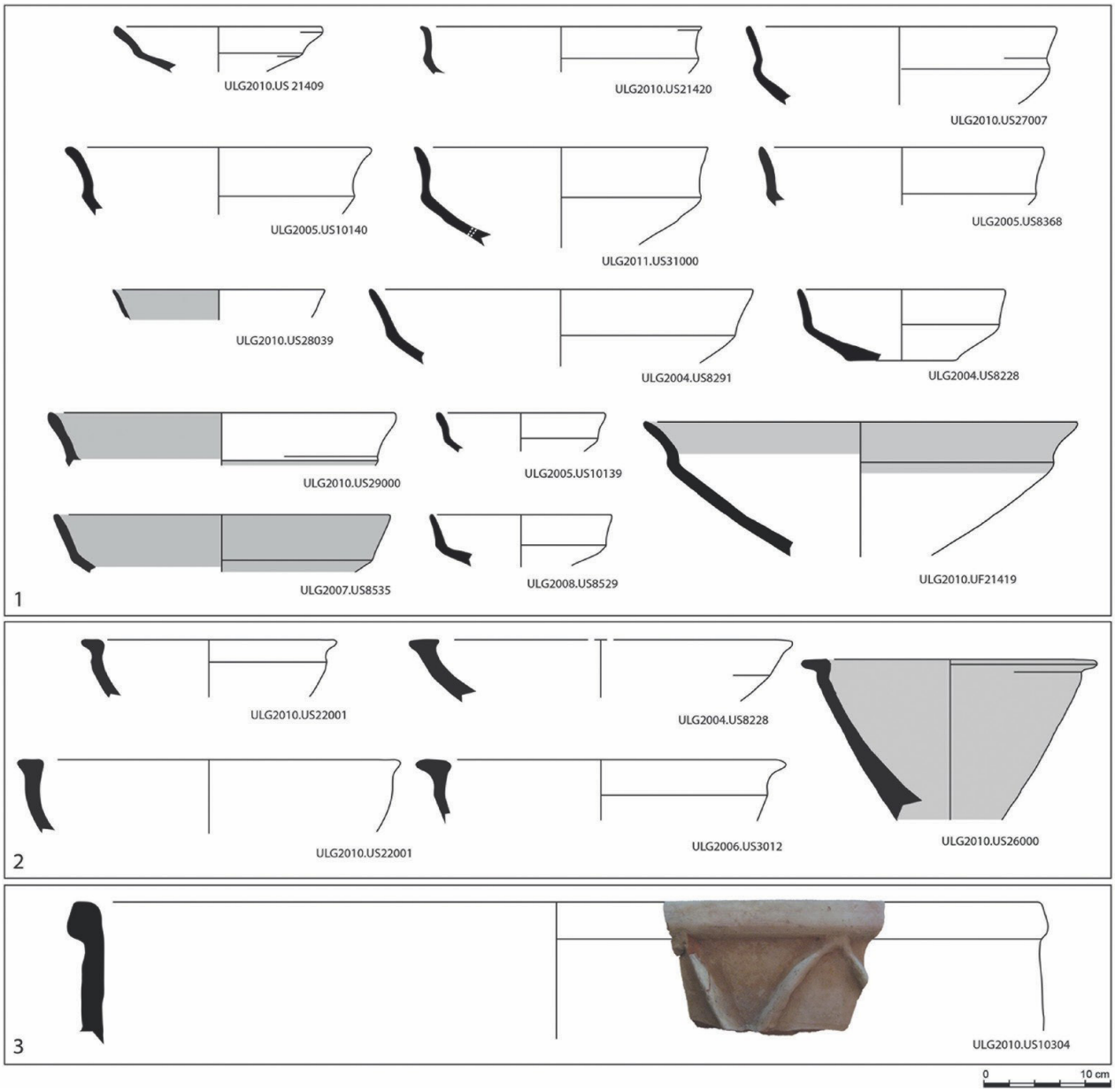


Figure. 2: *Some Achaemenid Potsherds of Ulugh Depe (After: Lhuillier & Bendezu-Sarmiento 2018: 341)*

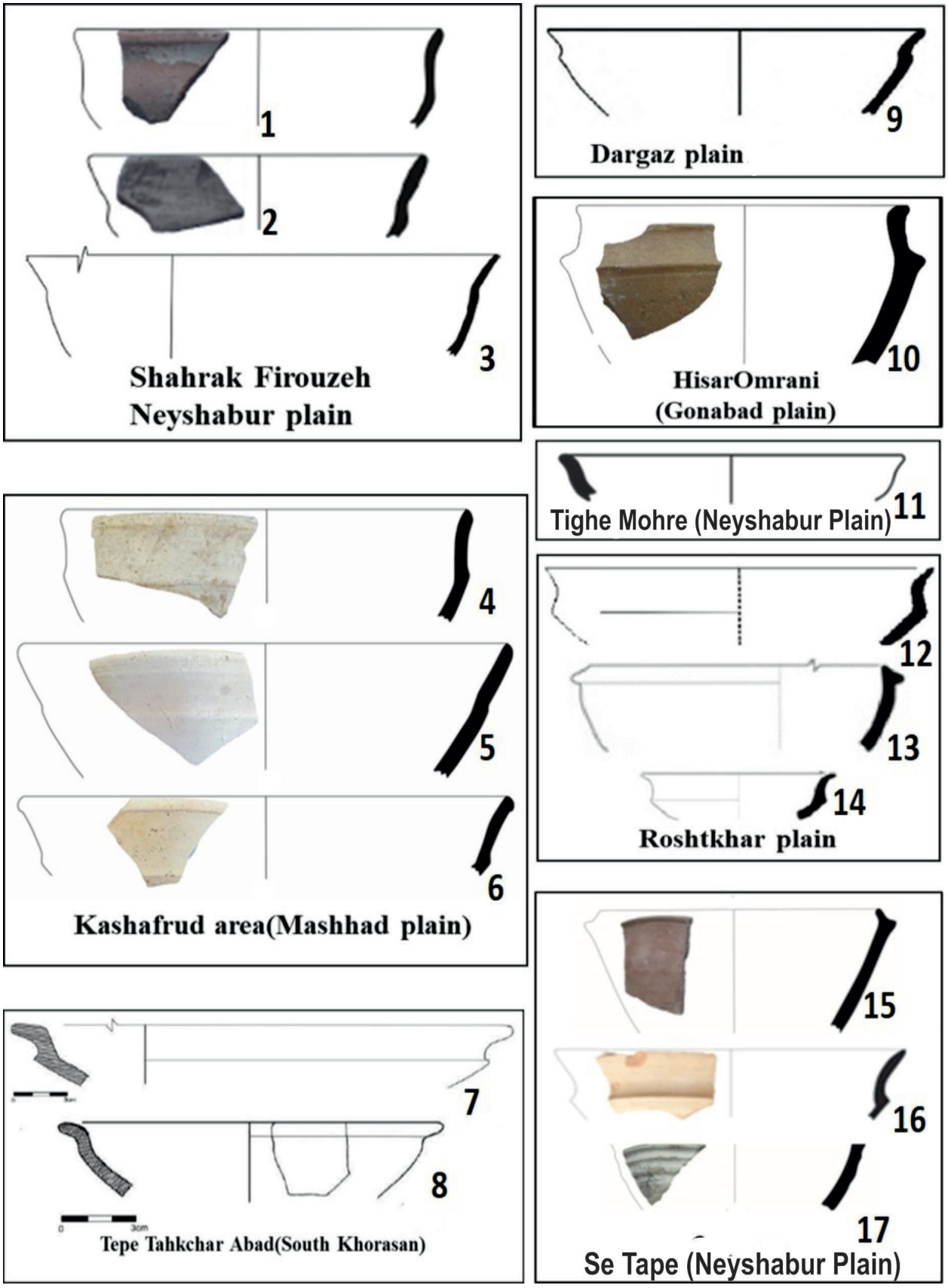


***Figure. 3**: Some Achaemenid Potsherds of Khorasan*

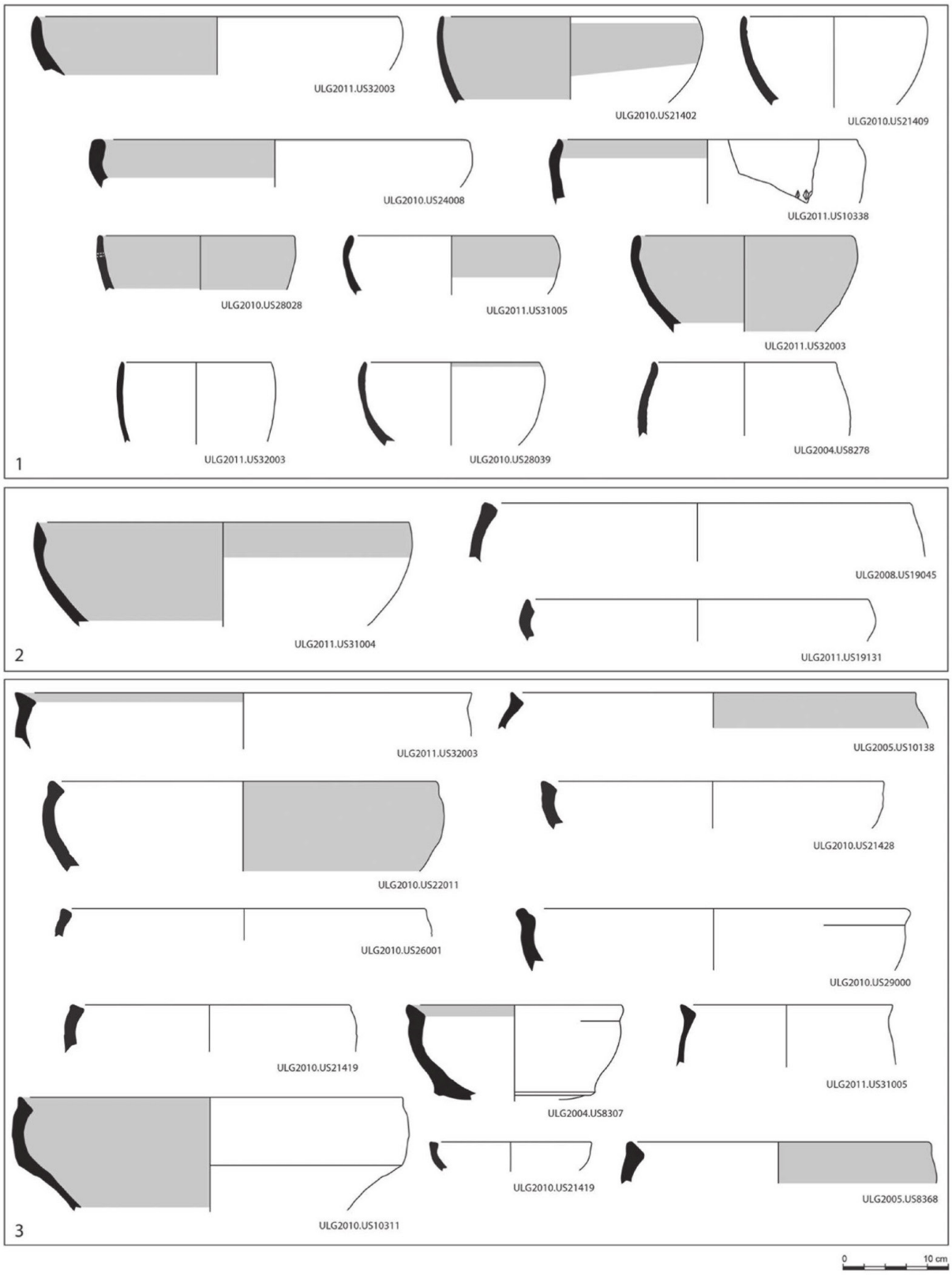


Figure. 4: *Sample of Hellenic (Seleucid) pottery in the Ulugh Depe of Turkmenistan (After: Lhuillier & Bendezu-Sarmiento 2018: 342-343)*



Figure. 5: *Sample of Hellenic (Seleucid) pottery of Khorasan settlements in Iran (After: Basafa & Davari 2021; Dana 2018)*

Conclusion

The culture and history of eastern Iran, particularly Khorasan, have not been depicted clearly from the decline of urbanization to the end of the historic period. This has caused controversy among researchers. This significant period, which coincided with the Median, Achaemenid, and Seleucid Empires, has gone unnoticed or received insufficient attention due to a lack of concentration of archaeological activities in eastern Iran. However, from the Medes period onwards, eastern parts of Iran have been plentifully mentioned in documented sources, with studies focusing on bridging the gaps in the region's studies. Based on current archaeological studies, it is now clear that the Iranians in eastern Iran, regardless of social structure, were ruled by dynasties such as the Medes, Achaemenid, and Seleucid Empires in the first millennium BCE. They did, however, have their own cultures and certain elements, the most important conventional document of which is the Ancient Persian inscription in the stairs of Persepolis' Apadana Palace. Finally, it is proposed that, using current knowledge, a classification based on political sociology be proposed for Khorasan for the first millennium BCE. Accordingly, the period from approximately 1500 BCE, when the primary components of the Iron Age were established, to the 9th century BCE can be classified as pre-Median, and the period from the 9th century BCE to the 7th century BCE can be labeled as the consolidation of the Median government. The following changes to the emergence of the Achaemenid can also be referred to as post-Median period. The Achaemenid period (coinciding with Cyrus the Great's reign and conquest of the eastern borders) lasted from approximately 547-539 to 330 BCE, and the Hellenistic period from 327 or 330 to 248 BCE.

Acknowledgment

The authors of this contribution would like to thank the referees for their valuable comments which helped to improve the manuscript.We would also like to express our sincere gratitude to the University of Neyshabur for supporting us financially under the project entitled: Investigation and analysis of Khorasan Iron Age.

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