University of
Sistan and Baluchestan

Iranian Journal of Archaeological Studies

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

Archaeological Sciences
Research Centre

Mokhtarabad: a Solitaire Large Late Chalcolithic-Early Bronze Age Site in the Dasht-e Lut and its Implication for Understanding the Communication Networks

Nasir Eskandari

Department of Archaeology, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran
E- mail: Nasir.eskandari@ut.ac.ir

Received: 04/ 01/ 2021; Received in Revised from: 10/ 04/ 2021; Accepted: 17/ 05/ 2021; Published: 20/ 06/ 2021

Abstract

Dasht-e Lut (western edge of the Lut desert) presented an urbanized desertic landscape in the early Bronze Age. Previous investigations on the large early Bronze Age site of Shahdad, fully justified its definition as an advanced early urban center. In 2011, a reconnaissance archaeological survey was carried out along the western edge of the Lut Desert resulting in identification of 87 sites. During the survey, a large site (ca. 70 ha) was discovered at Mokhtarabad. This paper is intended to introduce the site and to bring to light its importance for the communication and trade network during Bronze Age in the Middle East.

Keywords: Southeastern Iran, Dasht-e Lut, Bronze Age, Mokhtarabad, Trade

ArticleType: Short Article

Introduction

The idea of a highly dynamic trade network in the 3rd millennium BCE in the South-west Asia, what has been labeled as the "Middle Asian Interaction Sphere" or MAIS (Possehl 2007), remains quite credible. Unfortunately, MAIS is still poorly defined not only in terms of precise chronological scenarios and synchronicity, but also of cultural actors, given the fact that entire regions of the southeastern Iranian Plateau are still completely unexplored (Eskandari *et al.* 2021). Moreover, recent evidence and studies have re-examined the role of long-distance trade, as in the crucial case of the eastern lapis lazuli routes, now more convincingly described mainly in terms of regional phenomena (Vidale and Lazzari 2017). In this short paper, I am aimed to emphasis on the important communication role of the natural corridor of western edge of the Lut Desert as an active chain of the MAIS. In this regards, this article presents the recently identified site of Mokhtarabad and discusses the 3rd millennium BCE urban landscape of Dasht-e Lut from a spatial perspective (Figure. 1).

Dasht-e Lut: Research Background

Dasht-e Lut is located between eastern flank of Kerman mountains and the western fringes of (Paleo-Lake) Lut desert to the east. In 1968, during a general geographical reconnaissance of the Lut depression, the Early Bronze Age site of Shahdad was identified. Excavations lead by Ali Hakemi of the Archaeological Service of Iran began in the following year and continued until 1978 (Hakemi 1997). The work concentered on a necropolis in which 383 graves were cleared including many with spectacular grave goods, including impressive human statuettes, elaborate metal objects such as a bronze standard, numerous stone and ceramic containers and ornamental finds. Hakemi also did some excavations in the east of the site, Operation D, which he identified as an industrial area of the urban center of Shahdad. Overall, excavations in necropolis and industrial area provided evidence for local craft activities and cross-regional contact. Excavations at Shahdad site resumed under direction of Mr. Kaboli for four seasons in 1990s (Kaboli 1997, 2001, 2002). The work of Kaboli was concentrated

© The Author(S).
DOI: 10.22111/IJAS.2021.6862
Publisher: University of Sistan and Baluchestan

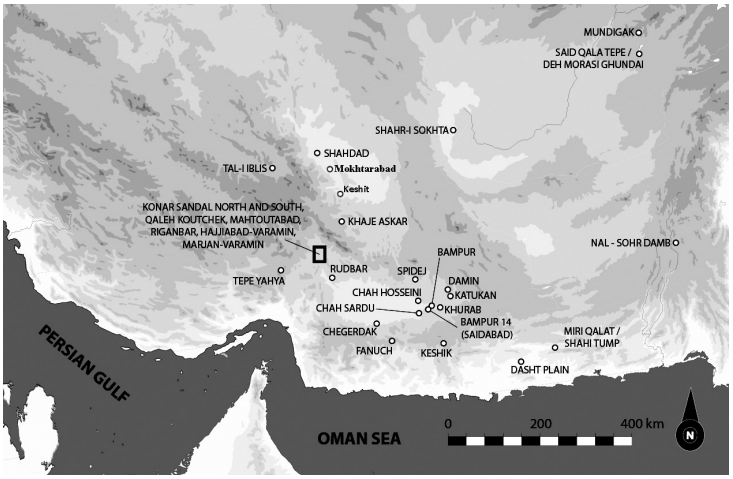


Figure. 1: *Geographical Location of Mokhtarabad in the Lut area and the most important contemporary sites in the 3rd millennium BCE*

in the residential areas of the site. His work in the northern part of the site uncovered two architectural complexes. One of them located 800 m north of the cemetery A has been named the farmers's area and 300 m to the east, second complex named Jewelry`s area was identified. These two complexes of residential area greatly increase our understanding of the layout of the Bronze Age urban center of Shahdad (Eskandari 2019). In 2010s, a three-year field project conducted on the Dasht-e Lut by the author in 2012, 2013 and 2016. The project was structured around three main research agendas: an extensive archaeological survey along the western edge of Lut desert, stratigraphic excavations of two prehistoric multi-period sites (Eskandari 2017), and the test excavations and surface survey at 3rd millennium BCE urban center of Shahdad (Eskandari *et al.* 2021).

Mokhtarabad: A large Solitaire Early Bronze Age Center

The site of Mokhtarabad situated 16 km south of the site of Shahdad on the western fringe of Dashte-Lut. The site is located 1 km to the west of modern village of Mokhtarabad, on the northern bank of a river that originated from western mountains of Andohjerd. Like site of Shahdad, it is also covered extensively with sand. Surface ceramics indicate that the site was occupied during the 4th and 3rd millennia BCE. Dispersal of surface materials suggests that the site was approximately 70 ha. 1000 m north-south and 700 m west-east (Figures. 2, 3). Scattered ceramics across the surface of the site, and are particularly dense in the western part of the site. The dense and contiguous scatter of surface materials shows that mostly probably the site was occupied across the full extent of the scatter. The collected ceramics indicate that the site can be assigned to the fourth and third millennia BCE (Figure. 4); there is no evidence for subsequent occupation. Except less than 3 ha in eastern part, the site has been occupied in 3rd millennium BCE. there are several mounds across the site, especially in western part, which stand several meters higher than their surroundings suggesting the presence of architectural remains. By doing an intensive surface walking survey, we could identify a cemetery in the southeastern part of the site. In fact, because of the wind erosion some of burials are visible on the surface (Figure. 5). The exposure of the graves on the surface, which would have originally been at least one or two meters below the level of the site, indicate that there has been extensive deflation of cultural deposits due to extreme wind erosion. Generally, we can say this center is a smaller version of two other large Bronze Age sites of Shahdad and Keshit (Eskandari *et al.* 2014) that is placed between them.



Figure. 2: *General view of the surface of Mokhtarabad*



Figure. 3: *Density of cultural materials on the surface of Mokhtarabad*



Figure. 4: *A collection of the surface ceramics of Mokhtarabad*

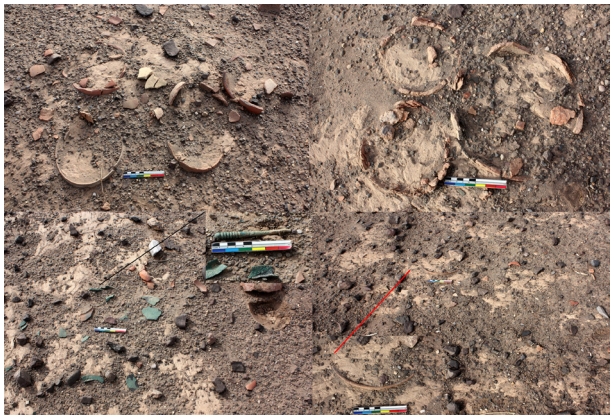


Figure. 5: *The graves on the surface of Mokhtarabad attesting the extreme wind erosion in the Lut area. The arrows indicate the magnified objects.*

Concluding Remarks

Recent reconnaissance survey along the western edge of Dasht-e Lut indicated that there are three large centers along with the western edge of the Lut Desert, respectively from north to south, Shahdad, Mokhtarabad and Keshit. What stands out in term of site distribution is that neither of these sites appear to have satellite sites (except a few small hilltop occupations around the site of Shahdad). Dasht-e Lut definitely has a very interesting and unexpected pattern- site distribution is strange, by Near Eastern standards. These results suggest that both ecological factors and the natural landscape had a major influence in generating this distinctive spatial pattern on the west of Dasht-e Lut, but the functional basis was also a main factor. In the west of Lut, the water sources did not pass the across the entire length of the plain, in fact there are some sources that originated in the western mountains and after passing the narrow width of the plain ended in the oasis that was the Lut desert. Thus there was not available water to develop agricultural lands along the whole extent of the western edge of Lut desert. Therefore it is obvious that the ecological factors seem to have been played a fundamental role in determining this unusual settlement pattern. Indeed, this spatial pattern distribution of the large Bronze Age urban centers without satellite sites_ seems to be an adaptive strategy responding to the natural landscape of Lut area. By having an overview look at the location of these three urban centers along the natural corridor of western edge of Dasht-e Lut and the distances separating them, it seems reasonable to suggest that their strategic position permitted them to control the trade networks. In fact, they should belong to the same unbroken chain of caravan trade stations that could control the movements of goods and raw materials in 3rd millennium BCE. This north-south western corridor of Dasht-e Lut even today is the main transit route for connecting South-East of Iran (In particular Kerman and Hormozgan Provinces) to Great Khorasan.

References

Eskandari, N. 2017. Excavations at The Prehistoric Sites of Tepe Dehno and Tepe East Dehno, Shahdad, Southeastern Iran, *Iranian Journal of Archaeological Studies* 7, 1-20.

Eskandari, N. 2019. Regional Patterns of Early Bronze Age Urbanization in the Southeastern Iran. New Discoveries on the Western Fringe of Dasht-e Lut. In: J.-W. Meyer, E. Vila, M. Mashkour, M. Casanova and R. Vallet (eds.). *The Iranian Plateau during the Bronze Age. Development of Urbanisation, Production and Trade,* Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, Jean Pouilloux, Lyon, 201-216.

Eskandari, N; M. Shafiee; A. Abedi & M. Javadi. 2014. Keshit: an Early Bronze Age Urban Center on the Western Edge of the Lut Desert, South-Eastern Iran, *Journal of Antiquity*, Vol. 341, Project gallery.

Eskandari, N.; K. A. Niknami & M. Vidale. 2021. The Bronze Age Center of Shahdad, South-East Iran: "Hollow" vs. Nucleated Early Urban Processes. *East and West,* Vol. 61. p. 31-46.

Hakemi A. 1997. S*hahdad: Archaeological Excavations of a Bronze Age Center in Iran*. Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, Centro scavi e ricerche archeologiche, Reports and Memoirs 27. Rome.

Kaboli M. A. 1997. Report of the 10th Season of Excavation at the Ancient Site of Shahdad, *Gozaresh-ha-ye Bastan Shenasi*, (In Persian), AR, Bd. 1, Tehran: 87–124.

Kaboli M. A. 2001. Report of the Twelfth Season of Excavation at the Ancient Site of Shahdad, *Pajoheshnameh*, (In Persian), ICHTO: 239–266.

Kaboli M.A. 2002. The Report of the Eleventh Season of Excavation at the Ancient Shahdad, *Pajoheshnameh*, (In Persian), Tehran: 181–141.

Possehl, G. L. 2007. The Middle Asian Interaction Sphere. Trade and Contact in the 3rd Millennium BC. *Expedition*, 49, 1, 40-42.

Vidale, M., & A. Lazzari (eds.). 2017. *Lapis Lazuli Bead Making at Shahr-i Sokhta. Interpreting craft production in a urban community of the 3rd millennium BC., Serie Orientale Roma* N.S. 6. Antilia, Treviso.