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Re-assessment of the Location of the Land of Aratta

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Abstract

The name "Aratta" and the name of its ruler, "the Lord of Aratta," are both mentioned in Sumerian literary and epic texts. In these texts, "the Lord of Aratta" and two important Sumerian kings—Enmerkar, who founded Uruk, and Lugalbanda, who succeeded him—were the main players in the events that took place in "the land of Aratta." One of the most significant places in Sumerian literature was this land, which was unexpectedly referred to as legendary by a small number of scholars who believe the land of Aratta does not exist. Due to the scarcity of essential materials like stone, metals, and wood in Mesopotamia, the metal and stone wealth of Aratta was extremely valuable to the Sumerian society. Other academics have challenged this theory in light of new archaeological discoveries and suggested alternative hypotheses based on their own research findings. The land of Aratta is likely situated in a region located east of Mesopotamia, as mentioned in a number of studies. This article aims to suggest that Aratta could be identified with the area of Shahdad in Kerman Province, while many alternative suggestions were made without consideration of Iranian archaeology.

Keywords: Aratta, Uruk, Shahdad, Water, Enki.

Article Type: Research Article

Introduction

Aratta, now recognized as the world's oldest (known) civilization (Kramer 1952), is a land that appears in Sumerian myths concerning Enmerkar and Lugalbanda, two early and possibly mythical kings of Uruk who are also mentioned in the Sumerian king list. The Sumerian King List names Enmerkar, "who founded Uruk," as well as Lugalbanda and Gilgamesh as kings of the "First Dynasty of Uruk," (Selz, 2020: 169). The location and role of Aratta's land in trade, ritual, and religious ceremonies is mentioned in Aratta's story. In the present paper, the focus is placed on the strong evidence that the Shahdad site should be considered as a serious contender for the location of Aratta. In fact, Shahdad serves as an intermediary site at the desert's edge. First and foremost, it should be determined which locations Shahdad should have linked together and when. The Bronze Age sites in southeastern Iran, the Indus Valley, Central Asia, the southern part of the Oman Sea and the Persian Gulf, and sites in southwestern Iran and Mesopotamia are the most important areas around Shahdad in the third millennium BCE) (Figure.1). According to archaeological evidence, Shahdad is very different from other areas when the sites of these areas are compared. This difference is primarily due to differences in the agricultural potential of the regions at the issue, which is less noticeable in Shahdad due to unfavorable weather conditions. Before delving into this topic, it's worth recalling the story of Aratta, which is found in Sumerian inscriptions. The collection of multiple evidences to confirm the authenticity of this place mentioned in Sumerian inscriptions is discussed in this research.

Research History

Over half a century has passed since Samuel Noah Kramer's publication of the Sumerian epic text commonly referred to as Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta (Kramer 1952). Nearly two decades

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ago, Potts (2004) provided a concise summary of the different views of several academics regarding the location of the land of Aratta (Table. 1).

Although Unger had previously suggested that Aratta could lay near Shuruppak in Mesopotamia (Unger, 1932:140), the balance of opinion after Kramer's publication swung decisively in the direction of Iran (Edzard *et al*. 1977: 17; Vallat 1993: 18). Kramer himself originally sought Aratta in Laristan (Kramer, 1952: 3), though he later suggested that Aratta was to be placed somewhere near the Caspian Sea (Kramer, 1963: 42). Sjöberg tentatively identified Aratta with Takht-e Suleiman (Sjöberg, 1960: 61), and was followed in this by M. Lambert (Lambert, 1972: 70, n. 6). E.I. Gordon proposed a location "somewhere in the Sanandaj area" (Gordon, 1967: 72, n. 9). As shown in Table 1, Herrmann sought Aratta to the south or southeast of the Caspian Sea (Herrmann, 1968: 54), while Wilcke placed Aratta to the north or northeast of Anshan (Wilcke, 1969: 39, Potts, 2004: 1). Despite the fact that Majidzadeh had originally suggested Shahdad as a potential option for Aratta (Majidzadeh, 1976: 113), after the Jiroft excavations, he had a different perspective on the sites around the Halil River (Majidzadeh, 2002: 3-13).

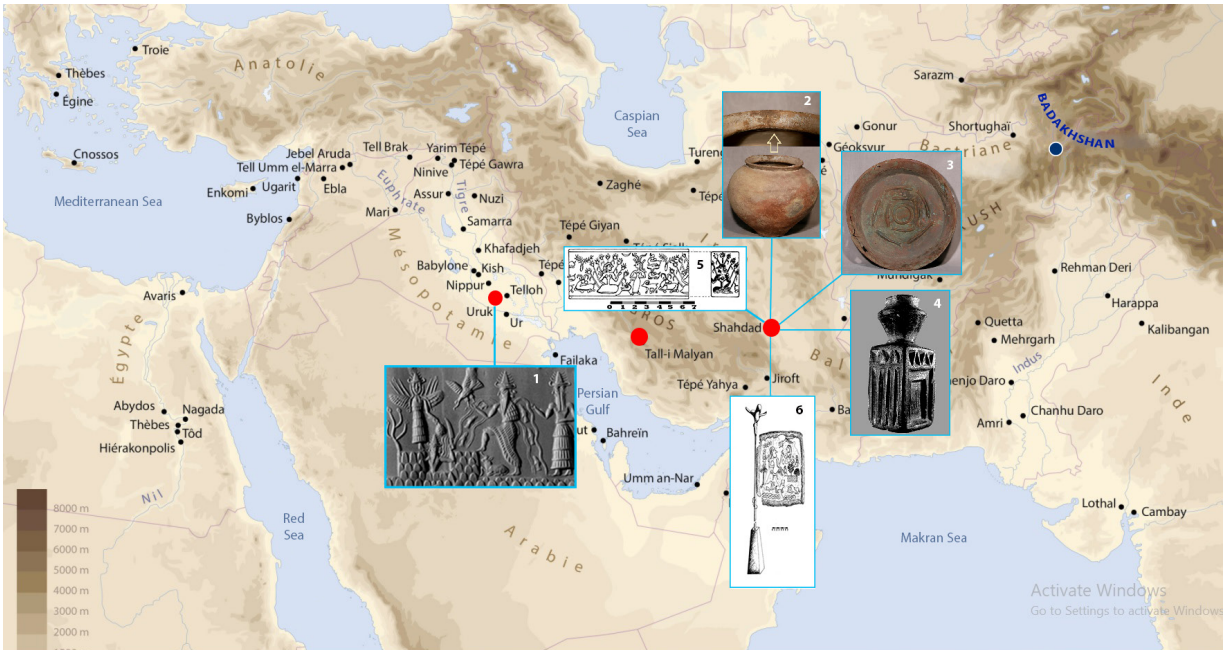


Figure. 1: *The present figure is a geographical map showing Shahdad site as possible location of Aratta's land and its connection to the southern Part of Mesopotamia through Tall-i-Malyan (Modified from source: Casanova. 2019, 303, figure. 1).*

Table. 1: *Possible location of the land of Aratta according to various scholar's opinions*

Scholars	Opinions	Reference
Unger	Shuruppak in Mesopotamia	(Unger, 1932: 140)
Kramer	Laristan in Iran	(Kramer, 1952: 3)
Kramer	Near the Caspian Sea in Iran	(Kramer, 1963: 42)
Sjoberg; followed by Lambert	Takht-e Suleiman in Iran	(Sjoberg ,1960: 61) (Lambert, 1972: 70, n. 6)
Gordon	"Somewhere in the Sanandaj area" Iran	(Gordon, 1967: 72, n.9)
Herrmann	South or Southeast of the Caspian Sea in Iran	(Herrmann, 1968: 54)
Wilcke	North or northeast of Anshan in Iran	(Wilcke, 1969:39)
Hansman	Shahr-i-Sokhta in Iran	(Hansman, 1972: 118, n. 97)
Majidzadeh	Shahdad in Iran	(Majidzadeh, 1976: 113)

These conjectures are unsupported by any evidence from Iranian archaeology and can only be inferred from references to names like "lapis lazuli" in Sumerian epics, the area's mountainous terrain, or its location east of Mesopotamia. To choose between Shuruppak and Aratta requires demonstrating relations between that city and Uruk or proving a significant role of that city in animal husbandry. Shuruppak, like Uruk, is a Sumerian city and is known from archaeological evidence to have been a significant urban center during the Jemdet Nasr period, i.e. the date of the texts under discussion. No equivalent evidence is available for Aratta, the location of which is still controversial. Membership of both Uruk and Shuruppak in a league of Sumerian cities, well documented for the Ur III period, can be traced back as early as the Early Dynastic period. This league functioned on an administrative level. Since that league was a Sumerian institution, it necessarily excluded Aratta. On the other hand, the tradition of an intimate relation between Uruk and Aratta—as sister cities under the patronage of Inanna and as rivals for a position of leadership—is well known from Sumerian literature. The traditional date for this period of close relationships is the reign of Enmerkar, second ruler of the first dynasty of Uruk. Most chronologies assign the first dynasty of Uruk to the Early Dynastic II period, considerably later than the time range of the archaic texts from Uruk and Jemdet Nasr. The literary tradition, however, associates the continuing contest between Enmerkar and the ruler of Aratta with the invention of writing and thus dates it to an era approximately contemporary with or before the archaic Uruk texts (Green, 1980: 17).

In looking for livestock interests for the city KUR+ RU, the object is to explain its special connection with this small corpus of texts which appear to be herding reports. Shuruppak, in the middle of the alluvial plain, is not obviously any better suited to herding than the immediate vicinity of Uruk itself. Domestic animals are not outstanding among the Early Dynastic texts from Shuruppak, although there are small groups of documents dealing with asses and with sheep and goats. Aratta's approximate location in the mountains to the east of Mesopotamia places it in an area mostly suitable for pastoralism. There is also some weak literary evidence for herding as a traditional part of the economy of Aratta. A final hint possibly useful for identify the location of Aratta is the subscript of text no. 21, which is unique in not including any professional title. It reads EN-LAMXKURKUR+ RU-KA,98 perhaps to be understood as "the Lord of Aratta." (Green, 1980: 17).

Archaeologists became aware of Sir Aurel Stein's first surface survey in the Lut plain region in 1937 after he left the edge of the Indian Plateau and traveled through Baluchestan and Kerman (Yule ,1998: 2). However, the extensive archaeological fieldworks carried out in the area came after this survey. Under the direction of Ahmad Mostofi, researchers from Tehran University's Institute of Geography identified the location of Shahdad during one of these fieldwork campaigns in 1967. The location of the site is close to Dasht-i-Lut in Kerman's northwest. When conducting the desired geographic surveys, the research team from the Geographical Institute of the University of Tehran in Shahdad discovered surface pottery fragments in a location called Chale Takab, which is not too far from contemporary Shahdad. The collected samples were given to the General Directorate of Archaeology and Popular Culture at that time. The first excavation formally began two years later, in 1969, when Dasht-i-Lut's archaeological department was established under the direction of Ali Hakemi (Hakemi 1997). The archaeological team of Dasht-i-Lut discovered during its initial research that the ancient Khabis civilization, now known as Shahdad, had spread out up to a distance of 7 kilometers from the modern city of Shahdad. The Takab Plain, which is 5 kilometers east of Shahdad, is where the majority of the archaeological work of the Dasht-i-Lut group was concentrated, as well as the vicinity of a sizable ancient cemetery that was situated between two parallel hills and the Takab plain's alluvial paths. The aforementioned area, which typically included the cemetery, was selected as the archaeological team's permanent and primary workplace (Hakemi, 2006: 241) A significant number of domestic architectural structures and facilities for metallurgy were also uncovered over the years and as the studies continued. The small area for metallurgy discovered provided the initial proof of industrial production. According to Ali Hakemi, the site's size in the third millennium BCE) was between 100 and 150 hectares (Salvatori & Vidale 1982). Ancient civilizations' vestiges in Takab's eastern region have spread as far east as present-day Shahdad. It appears that the lack of water and other basic necessities forced the inhabitants of the area to move away

from their homes, going westward to reach more fertile and water-rich regions. Shahdad's placement of stratification levels next to one another rather than one on top of the other is explained by this gradual change in emplacements. Consequently, the monuments in the west of the region are more recent than those in the east (Hakemi & Sajjadi, 1988: 143). Finally, until 1977, the excavations remained active in the area for eight seasons (Kaboli 1995). Numerous data samples and numerous prehistoric artifacts of pottery, metal, and stone were discovered during extensive studies of the Dasht-i-Lut area, which is located east of Shahdad.

Aratta's Tale

The poem "Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta" is written on a twelve-column clay tablet. This tablet is kept in Istanbul's East Museum and was translated by Samuel Kramer in 1946 (Kramer 1952). The "Matter of Aratta" is the somewhat anachronistic term used for a group of four narrative poems in Sumerian language, dealing with the various ways in which King Enmerkar, the legendary ruler of Unug—the Sumerian name for Uruk (biblical Erech, now Warka)—won supremacy over the faraway, fabulous, and fabulously rich legendary city of Aratta (Vanstiphout, 2003:1).

The most important story is about Enmerkar and his successor, Lugalbanda, on the one hand, and the ruler of Aratta, whose name is unknown at one point and mentioned as "In Su Kush Siranna" at the next. Samuel Kramer published a text containing over 600 lines from twenty tablets and fragments in 1952, which are now housed in the Museum of the Ancient East in Istanbul and the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia. Kramer's document on Aratta is perhaps the best and most authoritative, as other sources have attempted to distort the material in some way as needed. As a result, the following is the Sumerian story content:

Once upon a time, Enmerkar, son of the sun-god, Utu, having determined to make a vassal state of Aratta, implores his sister, Inanna, the powerful Sumerian goddess of love and war, to see to it that the people of Aratta bring gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and precious stones and build for him various shrines and temples, particularly the Abzu, the sea temple of Enki, in Eridu (Kramer, 1963: 270).

The important point is that in most of the sources, the main characters of this epic are people such as Enmerkar, the ruler of Erakh, Lugalbanda, the son and successor of Enmerkar (2750-2600 BCE) (McIntosh, 2005: 350), on the other hand, Ensukushsiranna, the ruler of Aratta, and Inanna, the Sumerian goddess. (Vanstiphout 2003; Kramer 1963; Potts 2004; Muscarella 2001; Steinkeller 2013). Unfortunately, in these sources, the role of the god Enki, for whom Enmerkar intended to build a temple, is ignored in this epic.

Although Enki (Akkadian Ea) did not enjoy supreme authority, he was one of the most venerated gods, and his original shrine at Eridu was revered long after the city it served had been abandoned. Enki was the most intelligent of the gods and well disposed toward humanity, often finding ways to protect or aid them against the violent wrath of Enlil. As the god controlling the freshwater, Abzu, that lay beneath the Earth, the source of rivers, springs, marshes, and rain, he was the essence of the water upon which Mesopotamia depended for life and was portrayed with the Tigris and Euphrates flowing from his shoulders, full of fish (Figure 1. no.1). In the Abzu dwelt a great number of creatures that served him, including giants and great fishes (McIntosh, 2005: 211).

Therefore, Enki (Akkadian Ea) was god of the subterranean freshwater ocean (Abzu) and was especially associated with wisdom, magic and incantations, and with the arts and crafts of civilization (Richards, 2000:75). Enki's most important cult center was the E-abzu (Abzu House') at Eridu. As a provider of fresh water and a creator god (see creation) and determiner of destinies, Enki was always seen as favorable to mankind (Richards 2000:75).

Of course, there are many stories about Enki, the god of Eridu, and Inanna, the goddess of Erakh, one of which is the myth of the transfer of arts and civilization from Eridu to Erakh (Kramar, 1963: 116). These ties between Eridu and Erakh eventually drew Enmerkar's attention to the building and decoration of Enki's temple. Inanna, heeding Enmerkar's plea, advises him to seek out a suitable herald to cross the imposing mountains of Anshan and assures him that the people of Aratta will submit to him and carry out the building operations he desires. Enmerkar selects his herald and sends him to the *en* of Aratta with a message containing a threat to destroy and make desolate his city unless he and his people bring down silver and gold and build and decorate Enki's

temple. To further impress him, Enmerkar instructs his herald to repeat to him the "spell of Enki/' which relates how the god Enki had put an end to man's "golden age" under Enlil's universal sway over the earth and its inhabitants (Kramer, 1963: 270).

Enki was the god of wisdom, and it was primarily he who organized the earth in accordance with the decisions of Enlil, who only made the general plans. The actual details and executions were left to Enki, the resourceful, skillful, handy, and wise. We learn much about Enki from the myth "Enki and the World Order; The Organization of the Earth and its Cultural Processes" (Kramer, 1963: 171-73), which provides a detailed account of Enki's creative activities in instituting the natural and cultural phenomena essential to civilization. This myth serves as a vivid illustration of the Sumerians' superficial notions about nature and its mysteries. Nowhere is there an attempt to get at the fundamental origins of either the natural or cultural processes; all are ascribed to Enki's creative efforts usually by merely stating what amounts to "Enki did it." Where the creative technique is mentioned at all, it consists of the god's word and command, nothing more (Kramer, 1963: 122).

This is how the epic's text continues. “The herald, after traversing seven mountains, arrives at Aratta, duly repeats his master's words to its *en*, and asks for his answer. The latter, however, refuses to yield to Enmerkar, claiming that he is Inanna's protege and that she had brought him to Aratta as its ruler. Thereupon, the herald informs him that Enmerkar had brought Inanna to Erech and had made her queen of its temple, Eanna, and that the goddess had promised Enmerkar that Aratta would submit to him. The en of Aratta is stunned by this news. He composes an answer for the herald to take back to his king in which he admonishes Enmerkar for resorting to arms and says that he prefers a "contest," that is, a fight between two selected champions. He goes on to say that, since Inanna has become his enemy, he is ready to submit to Enmerkar only if he will send him large quantities of grain. The herald returns to Erech posthaste and delivers the message to Enmerkar in the courtyard of the assembly hall” (Kramer, 1963: 270).

Discourse on Possible Location of Aratta

Two texts related to Aratta in the Sumerian inscriptions mentioned in the preceding sections refer to various kinds of semi-precious stones (Kramer, 1963: 269, 272). It is interesting to note that Shahdad's archaeological site contains evidence of extensive carnelian production, which is typical of semi-precious stone production (Salvatori and Vidale 1982). In the second part of Aratta's tale, on arrival, the herald piles up the grain in the courtyard and delivers his message. The people, delighted with the grain, are ready to present Enmerkar with the desired carnelian (nothing seems to be said of the lapis lazuli) and to have the "elders" build his "pure house" for him (Kramer, 1963: 271).

It is necessary to consider the route that the messenger of Enmerkar and Lugalbanda, who are mentioned in two different texts, choses. Although in the text where Lugal banda travels to Aratta as the messenger of Enmerkar, it also mentions that it reached from the Anshan shoulders to the Anshan heads, the messenger and Lugalbanda entered the land of Aratta separately after passing the seven mountains (Kramer, 1963: 271-273). Out of the many peaks that can be seen there, about seven stand out as being significantly higher than the other peaks in this region. On the route from Anshan to Shahdad, it is obvious that the height difference between Anshan and its eastern points is crucial (Figure. 2). On the other hand, it's possible that the meaning of the phrase "seven mountains" refers to the distance to be traveled as well as the number of mountains in the way. This would indicate the mountains' continuity and the abundance of peaks along the route.

The fact that people demand the best art from their elites in front of the extremely valuable gift of Enmerkar, namely grains, speaks to the skill of the elders of the land of Aratta in the field of architecture. Of course, as was already stated, this was the populace's response rather than that of Aratta's ruler, who continued to oppose Enmerkar. As a result, in addition to the material objects mentioned above, Enmerkar may have required the ability and expertise of Aratta's elite architects. But an important question that can be connected to the building of a temple for Inanna is that concerning what the relationship is between the grains given as gifts by Enmerkar, the carnelian stones given as gifts from the people of Aratta, and the artwork created by Aratta architects.

It is important to emphasize that Shahdad's unfavorable climate led to the production of unique style of potteries. It is possible to distinguish between two major groups of Jars from the Takab

III period, which is dated to the middle of the third millennium BCE. Water appears to have been stored in one group of jars with a narrow rim, whereas food and agricultural products may have been kept in another group of jars with a wider rim and a smaller percentage. Jars with a wider rim make it simpler to store and collect grain, just as a narrow rim makes it simpler to store and collect water (Fazeli *et. al* 2012: 87-90). However, a large number of jars with narrow rims also reveals Shahdad's lack of access to water resources. This issue is so crucial that the words "Sixty ka of fresh rain" (Figure. 1 no. 2) were written on the edge of one of the containers (Hakemi, 1997: 67).

significant role in social inequality. However, if this society had different agricultural conditions, perhaps the situation would be different. A system like this, however, does not exist in Shahdad.

As we saw in the epic text of Enmerkar, the most important issue that makes Enmerkar to pay attention to the land of Aratta was the existence of gold, silver, lapis lazuli and semi-precious stones in that land for the construction of various shrines and temples, especially Abzu, the sea temple of Enki and Eridu. The use of Aratta architects in the building of this shrine has also been taken into consideration. Even the Aratta people ask their elites to construct a beautiful and holy house for Enmerkar after seeing

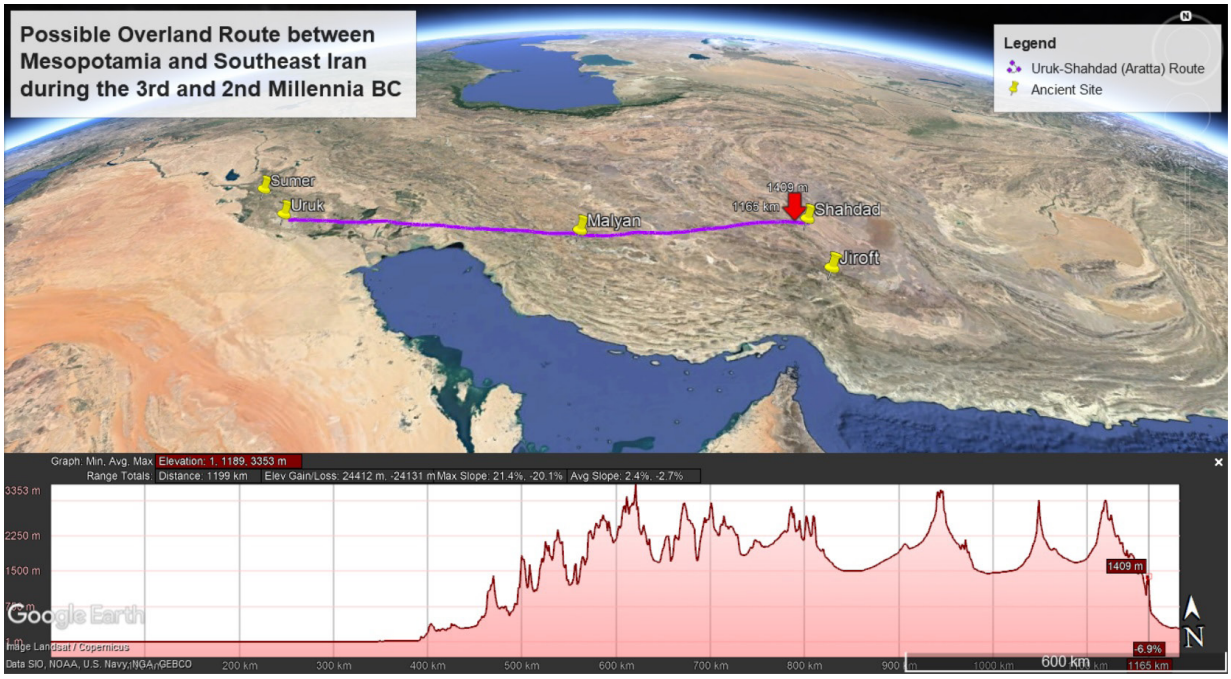


Figure. 2: *Showing Possible Overland Route between Uruk in Southern Mesopotamia and Aratta (Shahdad) in Southeast Iran (Depicted from Google Earth, 22/03/2022).*

To understand that in this situation, the people are the ones who make the majority of the decisions regarding the relationship with Mesopotamia, it is necessary to recall the story of Aratta, particularly the gifts that the people of Aratta sent to Enmerkar in exchange for grain. In fact, despite the opposition of the Aratta ruler, it is the people who send semi-precious stones such as carnelian to Enmerkar. Therefore, it can be assumed that the community's decision-making process in Shahdad is better when the people are involved than when the rulers are responsible for it. The availability of suitable land and water resources would only be provided to a select few in this system, which can play a

his grain, which undoubtedly refers to the shrine that Enmerkar had in mind. On the other hand, if one considers the requirements of the parties, they will see that Enmerkar provided them with the grain that the people of Shahdad required, and in exchange, they heeded Enmerkar's request that they construct and embellish the shrine. Therefore, it is clear that Aratta was not rich in grain, which Erech had in surplus—hence, perhaps, the readiness on the part of its people to yield to Erech in spite of the wishes of their ruler (Kramer, 1963: 274).

In historical times Eridu belonged to Enki, god of the waters; numerous fish bones found on the floor of the shrine—to be interpreted as offerings or the

remains of ritual meals—suggest it was dedicated to him from the outset (McIntosh, 2005: 199). Several metal and pottery plates from Shahdad were found with decorations depicting fishes spinning around their bottoms (Figure. 1, no. 3), possibly denoting the Mesopotamian rain god (Enki) (Hakemi 1997). A similar association is assumed between other prehistoric shrines and the deities historically associated with their city, notably the shrines in the Kullaba and Eanna districts of Uruk with An and Inanna (McIntosh, 2005: 199).

Both Kaboli (1986) and Hakemi (1997) cite examples of stone vessels that resemble houses and have a vessel resting on top of them as supporting documentation (Figure. 1, no. 4). Although they present this replica as a representation of the rain god, it makes more sense that it represents the collection of rainwater given Shahdad's scarcity of water resources. On one of the cylindrical marble seals (Figure. 1, no. 5), which, according to Hakemi, depicts the goddess of vegetation sitting on knees with her body encircled by wheat ears in the shape of a halo, is another significant piece of evidence that may indicate Enki's presence in Shahdad (Hakmi, 1971: 87). These motifs may serve as further evidence to demonstrate that the Shahdad people were aware of the fertility god, known to Mesopotamians as Enki (Espak, 2010: 113), if the aforementioned assumption about the land of Aratta and its relationship to Mesopotamia is accurate. It might be possible to infer that the god Abu is the same god Enki who played the part of the young god Abu after the plant sprouted from his head (Jordan, 2004: 2).

According to Talmon's description of Enki, "since the name of Enki is mentioned as the role of water in the fertility of the earth and fertilizing it, it can be inferred that he does not fight with anyone" (Talmon, 1992: 415), but rather tries to meet people's needs. Enki's presence in Aratta is therefore suggested as someone who wanted to end the conflict between Enmerkar and the ruler of Aratta. Therefore, the Enmerkar epic describes how Enki served as a mediator to end the aforesaid conflict. Vogelzang states the following in relation to Enki: "In the myths of the Near East, Enki has served as an advisor. When things are at their worst, he always offers solutions " (Vogelzang, 1989: 66). As a result, it shouldn't be too far-fetched to consider the possibility of scenes with fertility themes that are comparable to those in Mesopotamia.

One of the most significant items found from Shahdad is the so-called “Shahdad Standard”, where a similar iconography likely portraying the God of Waters can be observed (Figure. 1, no. 6). It is a squared metal piece, 23.4 in 23.4 centimeters in size, mounted on a 128-centimeter metal axle, which the flag can turn over it (it is considered as the oldest known flag). An eagle with opened wings, which is in a landing position, can be seen on top of the axle. A picture of a god perched on a chair can be seen on the flag. A carving of three women, each holding a pot toward the goddess, is placed in front of the aforementioned god. Making such images on a special object may be an indication of the people's appeal to the God of Waters, especially in light of Shahdad's climate and the fact that the land of Aratta was undeveloped agriculturally and lacked suitable environmental conditions.

Conclusion

Understanding the Shahdad's environment is very helpful in comprehending the epic tale of Enmerkar, which first revealed Aratta's fragile environment. This is demonstrated by the fact that Enmerkar provided grain assistance to the Aratta people in return for their assistance in sending semiprecious stones and stone masons to Mesopotamia. The fact that the grains sent by Enmerkar are crammed into the warehouses of Aratta land, as well as the discovery of an abundance of jars with a wide rim, support the theory that these kinds of jars are used to store the grains sent by Enmerkar. Due to Jiroft's suitable environmental conditions, which negate the need for the grains sent by Enmerkar, Jiroft is now off the list of potential candidates for Aratta. Shahdad's harsh environment is also suggested by the ancient artifacts that have been found there, some of which were discussed in this article and are related to water and rain; this strengthens the argument that Shahdad is the location of the Aratta.

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