

SPP-2176: The Iranian Highlands - Resilience and Integration in Premodern Societies

Final Conference

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@Orient-Institut Istanbul

CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS



Keynote Lecture

within the Framework of the SPP 2176:
The Iranian Highlands - Resilience and Integration in Premodern Societies,
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PROFESSOR CLAUDIA GLATZ

University of Glasgow,
School of Humanities,
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**Mountains Re-Imagined: from Topographic Tropes
to Creative Communities and Vibrant Relations.**

Tuesday, 7th of April 6pm

Orient-Institut Istanbul

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Mountains Re-Imagined: from Topographic Tropes to Creative Communities and Vibrant Relations

Mountain environments have tended to be characterised by ancient and modern observers as marginal and precarious, and their human inhabitants as uncivilised, bellicose, and backward. Such socio-political orogeneses can be linked quite unambiguously to lowland state- and boundary-making from Bronze Age Mesopotamia to imperial Rome and China on the one hand, and to ancient and modern versions of environmental determinism and social evolutionism on the other. Recent mountain archaeologies and histories reject such stereotyped representations of mountain lives and environments, focusing efforts on their empirical falsification. While this presents an important step in the development of critical and reflexive mountain-centred research practice, it also unwittingly cements further the very imageries such work aims to challenge, and leaves other, arguably far more interesting and important, stories of upland life untold. In this lecture, I will trace the development and transmission of key mountain tropes from antiquity to the present. Drawing on examples from Southwest Asia and from across the globe, I will explore how the construction of mountain Others shapes archaeological and historical research, bleeds into policy-making, and impacts present-day mountain lifeways, before considering alternative frameworks for the narration of mountain pasts and how they might contribute to addressing the pressing environmental and social issues facing mountain regions today.

Biography

Claudia Glatz is Professor of Archaeology at the University of Glasgow. Her research interests revolve around how human societies organise themselves, especially how political formations such as states and empires develop, are experienced, and resisted at both the landscape scale and through material culture. Mountains and mountain societies present particularly interesting socio-ecological laboratories in this regard and much of her work has focused on highland and transitional highland-lowland regions in Southwest Asia. She is the author of numerous journal articles on Bronze Age Anatolia as well as the monograph *The Making of Empire in Bronze Age Anatolia* (CUP, 2020). To reveal the long-term histories of upland and transitional regions and their human inhabitants, she has carried out archaeological surveys and excavations in the Pontic mountains of Türkiye as part of the Cide Archaeological Project, and in the western Zagros piedmonts of the Kurdistan Region of north-east Iraq, where she directs the ongoing Sirwan Regional Project. Resulting publications include *Kinetic Landscapes: The Cide Archaeological Project 2009-2011 - Surveying the Western Turkish Black Sea Region* (2015, De Gruyter) and *Place, Encounter, and the Making of Communities: The Lower Sirwan/Upper Diyala River Valley from Prehistory to the Iron Age* (2024, Sidestone). She is currently working on a monograph on the long-term history of mountain societies with the working title *Wild Mountains – A Human History*.

Prof. Claudia Glatz
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Conference Schedule

7th

Topics: Keynote and Welcome

17:00	Registration	
18:00	Keynote Lecture: Mountains Re-Imagined	Claudia Glatz
19:30	Reception @ OII	
20:30	Restaurant – Conference Guests Only	

8th

Topic: Mobility and Networks

09:00	Welcome	Programme Committee
09:05	Launch DRP (Data Reference Platform)	Christoph Forster, Miriam Skowronek, Kristina A Franke
09:15	Introduction	Programme Committee
Session 1: Mobility and Networks, Chair: Marjan Mashkour & Stefan Hauser		
09:45	Neolithic Dynamics across Lake Urmia	Judith Thomasky
10:10	Mobile Villages and Dynamic Landscapes	Reinhard Bernbeck, Susan Pollock
10:35	short break	
11:05	Kura-Araxes in Iran	Sepideh Maziar
11:30	PostDoc Lecture: Mobility and Networks	Shelir Amelirad
11:55	Affiliates Impulse Lectures	Coordination Project
12:15	<i>Discussion</i>	
13:15	lunch	
Session 2: Landscapes and Raw Material Regimes, Chair: Sepideh Maziar & Mohammad Masoumian		
14:15	Reconstructing Paleo-Environments	Martin Kehl
14:40	Last Neanderthal and Early Homo Sapiens	Saman Heydari Guran
15:05	Mining Landscapes	Thomas Stöllner
15:30	short break	
16:00	PostDoc Lecture: Raw Material Regimes	Kristina A Franke
16:25	Affiliates Impulse Lectures	Coordination Project
16:45	<i>Discussion</i>	
17:45	End of day 1	

9th

Topics: Landscapes and Raw Material / Regimes / Daily Life and Institutions

09:00	Welcome	Programme Committee
09:05	Patrimonies – Affiliates – Equality Measures Impulse Lectures	Natascha Bagherpour Kashani, Zohreh Poorkarimi
Session 3: Landscapes and Raw Material / Regimes Daily Life and Institutions, Chair: Claudia Glatz & Michael Brown		
09:20	Highsteplands	Andrea Ricci, Silvia Balatti
09:45	Ilkhanid Iran	Birgitt Hoffmann, Lorenz Korn
10:10	short break	
10:40	PostDoc Lecture: Daily Life and Institutions	Mohammad Masoumian
11:05	<i>Discussion</i>	
12:05	lunch	
13:15	Departure @ OII: Historical Sightseeing	

10th

Topic: Daily Life and Institutions

09:00	Welcome	Programme Committee
Session 4: Daily Life and Institutions, Chair: Nolwen Rol & Kristina A Franke		
09:05	Fragile Images: Clay Media in Early Iran	Barbara Helwing
09:30	Resilience of Iron Age Communities	Janoscha Kreppner
09:55	A new Elamite Archive	Walther Sallaberger, Azam Rayat
10:20	short break	
10:50	Institutional Landscapes and Networks	Wouter Henkelman, Kai Kaniuth
11:15	<i>Discussion</i>	
12:15	lunch	
Session 5: Daily Life and Institutions, Chair: Walther Sallaberger & Barbara Helwing		
13:15	Settlement Developments and Transformation of Land Ownership	Stefan Hauser
13:40	Transformation of Institutional Landscapes	Zohreh Zehbari
14:05	short break	
14:35	Parthian Imperial Control and Local Agency	Michael Brown
15:00	<i>Discussion</i>	
16:00	short break	
16:20	Summary	Programme Committee
16:50	The End	

Day 1

Mobility and networks

Neolithic Dynamics across Lake Urmia: Segregation, Integration und Mobilities

By Judith Thomalsky, Akbar Abedi, Marjan Mashkour and Ferran Antolin

German Archaeological Institute

Abstract

NW-Iran and in particular the Lake Urmia basin can be regarded as a transfer region of prehistoric communication routes, located between the Zagros Mountains, the South-Caucasus in the North, the Western Fringe of the Iranian Plateau and SE-Anatolia in the West. The region is rich in mineral and environmental resources and also geo-ecological niches that have attracted people from early prehistoric periods onwards. Exchange and transformed adaptations in cultural practices and materials, are therefore highly expectable. Our researches provided a better understanding in the regional cultural development, in regard of settlement patterns and chronological phases, changes in daily practices and subsistence strategies, as well as innovations in ceramic technology; which places the neolithic groups inhabiting the Lake Urmia Basin in direct connection to the developments in adjacent Northern Mesopotamia. In contrast, postulated linkages to the Zagros Neolithic are less visible. We can divide the local Neolithic development in three distinctive phases, with a possible “finale” around 5400 cal BCE. While the earlier occupation appears more permanent though diverse in socio-economical organization, the following development is characterized by an increase of mobility and seasonal behavior. During the third and latest Neolithic phase, dated between 5800 – 5500 cal BCE, new villages were founded also in formerly un-occupied (?) habitats.

In the course of the socio-cultural development, we can identify particular changes in settlement organization, subsistence strategies and technical innovations, as well as changing patterns in regard of regional interconnectivities. Prominent signals, such as rapid layer accumulation and intensified mobility in 6200 cal BCE, increase in site numbers around 5800 cal BCE, and finally, the “end” of Neolithic villages in 5500/5400 cal BCE, point to far-reaching transformations in social organization and broader human–environment dynamics. As a synthesis, the project presents a refined regional chronology and highlights specific social dynamics as indicators of resilience and local variability beyond overarching trends in socio-economic practices during the neolithization process.

On the Edges of the Iranian Highlands: Mobility and Raw Material Procurement in the Varamin Plain and Gird-i Begum

Reinhard Bernbeck and Susan Pollock; contributions by Jana Eger, Malte Loetz and Nolwen Rol (Freie Universität Berlin)
Freie Universität Berlin; CEZA (Eger)

Abstract

The project “Mobile Villages and Dynamic Landscapes” adopts a comparative approach to strategies of resilience, examining two distinct highland regions, the Varamin Plain in the northern Central Plateau of Iran and Gird-i Begum in the Shahrizor Plain of Iraqi Kurdistan. We focus on forms and temporalities of mobility and resource procurement as part of socioeconomic and communicative strategies in the two regions from the late Neolithic through the Early Bronze Age. Our results point to 1) distinct forms of mobility and connections to place in the two regions, and 2) variable degrees of diversity in resource procurement over time as well as marked shifts in the directions and extent of socioeconomic connections. The crises that seem to have occurred in both regions in the Early Bronze Age, following millennia of continuous settlement, led to a stark reduction in or even complete absence of settled occupation that lasted for many centuries.

Negotiating change and continuity: Exploring Social Resilience in the Kura-Araxes culture in the Urmia Plain, Iran

Sepideh Maziar¹, Hossein Davoudi², Arash Sharifi³, Homa Fathi⁴, Fatemeh Azadeh Mohaseb⁵, Stephanie Keiner⁶, Régis Debruyne⁷, Reza Heydari⁸, Marjan Mashkour⁹

Abstract

This study explores the resilience of the Kura-Araxes communities in the Urmia Plain of Northwestern Iran through the lens of social resilience theory. While archaeological applications of resilience have traditionally emphasized ecological stability and environmental response, this paper foregrounds the social dimensions of resilience—particularly agency, collective adaptation, and the transmission of cultural identity. Using four interrelated forms of capital—environmental, cultural, social, and economic—through interdisciplinary approaches, this research investigates how Kura-Araxes groups negotiated environmental stressors, mobility, and social integration between 2900–2450 BCE. By analyzing environmental conditions, resource management, spatial organization, and community practices in four Kura-Araxes settlements, namely Tappeh Balu, Gijlar, Goey, and Haftavan Tepe, the study argues that Kura-Araxes resilience was not simply reactive but strategically adaptive, shaped by long-term knowledge networks and cultural cohesion. The findings contribute to broader debates in archaeology on how communities maintain continuity, manage change, and construct durable lifeways across a dynamic and often challenging landscape.

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Ravansar as a Gateway: Long-Term Connectivity and Cultural Continuity in the Hawraman Corridor

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Abstract

This study examines Ravansar as a pivotal gateway within the long-distance mobility networks of the Hawraman region. Situated between the Mahidasht plain of Kermanshah and the rugged Hawraman Mountains, Ravansar has functioned for millennia as a vital conduit linking the Iranian Plateau with Mesopotamia. Recent surveys along the Ravansar–Paveh corridor identified seven ancient fortresses—predominantly Parthian—underscoring the highly structured nature of this transit route. Central to this landscape is Tepe Mousaei, a major multi-period tepe with a sequence spanning the Neolithic to the Islamic era. Identified by Karen Radner as Nikur, the Neo-Assyrian capital of Parsua, the site's prominence continued into the Parthian period. Our analysis of Parthian ceramics from Tepe Mousaei reveals striking affinities with Qal'eh Yazdegerd, reinforcing Ravansar's role as a key node in Arsacid territorial organization.

Furthermore, the local rock-cut tomb, featuring a depiction of Ahura Mazda, highlights the corridor's symbolic and political significance. By tracing the Shamiyan road through the Shushmi crossing toward Halabja, this research demonstrates how Ravansar emerged as a dynamic gateway, where fortifications, material culture, and monuments converged to shape long-term connectivity between the Iranian highlands and the Mesopotamian lowlands.

Day 1

Landscapes and raw material regimes

Reconstructing paleoenvironments of highland societies in Iran from sedimentary records of Holocene climate change and landscape evolution

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Babak Rafiei-Alavi (co-PI), Independent researcher (babak.rafi@akdn.org)

Reza Safaierad (PostDoc, second phase), Department of Geography, University of Koblenz (safaierad@uni-koblenz.de)

Abstract

Holocene climate change and landscape evolution have affected the living environments of premodern societies in the Iranian Highlands. Our subproject aimed at establishing new sedimentary archives to identify events or phases of change in the under-researched transition area from the Central Zagros Mountains to the internal basins of the Iranian Highlands. Despite long delays, we could extract a series of sediment cores from lakes, wetlands and playa settings, which are currently under investigation. The prepaper describes our activities in the SPP2176 and discusses several new findings related to the topics of our project. We present an updated review on Holocene climate change showing that evidence on the occurrence of rapid climate changes correlating with RCC events at 8.2 ka and 4.2 ka is increasing. In addition, new evidence on the climatic conditions during the Early Holocene (dry or wet?) and on hydroclimatic changes during the Little Ice Age is discussed. Finally, we also refer to a geoarchaeological case study from the Lower Zayandeh-Rud plain, where we try to reconstruct paleoenvironments of newly discovered Bronze Age sites.

Keywords:

Lake sediments, Holocene, Rapid climate change, Central Highlands

Human Resilience to Pleistocene Environmental Stress at Bawa Yawan Rockshelter, Central Zagros Highlands during Middle to Epipalaeolithic periods

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Abstract

Extensive evidence demonstrates that human populations have faced environmental challenges since the earliest stages of their evolution. Over time, these pressures have played a key role in shaping adaptive strategies and resilience, enabling populations to survive, innovate, and expand across a wide range of environments. This article presents the results of archaeological investigations at Bawa Yawan Rockshelter in the central Zagros. Using a multidisciplinary approach, it examines long-term demographic and behavioural changes in human populations over approximately 80,000 to 13,000 years in response to climatic conditions.

Evidence from Bawa Yawan indicates that occupation of the site expanded considerably during temperate periods and declined significantly during colder phases, at times possibly leading to the abandonment of the area. This pattern is observed across all three periods: the Middle Palaeolithic, Upper Palaeolithic, and Epipalaeolithic. In line with these demographic fluctuations, changes in subsistence strategies are also evident.

Keywords: Zagros Mountains, Human Resilience, Pleistocene Environmental Stress, Bawa Yawan Rockshelter, Neanderthals, Homo sapiens.

The Iranian highlands: Mining regions of the Central Plateau between resilient and vulnerable societal and economic strategies

SPP 2176: The Iranian highlands: Mining regions of the Central Plateau between resilient and precarious societal and economic strategies (STO-458_25-1_2)

Thomas Stöllner

In collaboration with Abolfazl Aali, Nicole Boenke, Hossein Davoudi, Kristina Franke, Benoît Mille, Iman Mostafapour, Nima Nezafati, Mark Pollard, Hande Özyarkent, Fabian Schapals, Hamed Zifar

Abstract

This study represents a summary of the SPP2776 project “The Iranian highlands: Mining regions of the Central Plateau between resilient and precarious societal and economic strategies” analyzed prehistoric and antique mining regions of the Central Iranian Plateau under the aspect of their resilience and vulnerability from the Early Metal Age to the Early Islamic Period.

Geologically, the area lies within the Tethys–Eurasian Metallurgical Belt, featuring polymetallic ore deposits (copper, silver, lead, iron and others) and extensive rock salt deposits. Methodologically, the project combines 25 years of fieldwork, 3D surveys, archaeobotanical, zooarchaeological and isotopic analyses, as well as geochemical provenance studies. The results reveal two contrasting economic systems: a seasonal ‘miner-herder’ mode, based in Veshnaveh on surface fire-setting techniques, mobile livestock rearing and local wood procurement; and an intensive, state-controlled approach, evident in the deeper layers of Shakin and the large-scale salt mining at Douzlakh, which relied on complex infrastructure, (qanat) irrigation and horticulture subsistence and permanent settlements. Both systems were dependent on the availability of water and fuel, with environmental crises and mining accidents leading to abrupt interruptions in production. The recent research results highlight that sustainable resource use and flexible social structures are key to long-term stability in the Iranian highlands. But at the same time mining practices have endangered communities involved by extractivistic behaviours when expanding extraction and commercial trading. Future research should examine the impacts of climate change and conduct a more in-depth analysis of trade networks at both regional and global levels.

Keywords: Mining, extractivism, salt, copper, silver/lead, subsistence, mobility, irrigation, miner-herder practices.

Tracing Iranian Copper - Metal Exchange Between the Iranian Highlands and Mesopotamia

Kristina A Franke

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Abstract

The Iranian Highlands are among the most mineral-rich regions, particularly with regard to metal deposits. However, the region's involvement in ancient long-distance metal exchange still raises many unanswered questions. Which parts of neighbouring Mesopotamia were metal trading partners, to which degree and at which time? Did Iranian copper enter Mesopotamia via Susa in the south or was the Diyala region a connecting region or did both regions have importance at the same or at different times? To which degree and in which manner was southern Iranian copper traded and how did this influence the metal trade on the Iranian highlands? And what happened to the metal trade on the Iranian highlands when Mesopotamia shifted their metal trade towards the Gulf region?

This paper will explore these questions in relation to different time units on the hand of geochemical data in addition to lead isotope analyses of copper metals from Mesopotamia and Iran. Here, we employ two largely uninterpreted analytical corpora from Mesopotamia (Hauptmann and Pernicka 200) and Susa (Tallon 1987), which are based on XRF, NAA (Mesopotamia) and EPMA (Susa) data, in addition to LIA (e.g. Begemann and Schmitt-Strecker 2009) in addition to more recently provided data.

Begemann, Friedrich and Sigrid Schmitt-Strecker. 2009. „Über das frühe Kupfer Mesopotamiens.“ *Iranica Antiqua* 44, DOI: 10.2143/IA.44.0.2034374.

Hauptmann, Harald and Ernst Pernicka (eds.). 2003. *Die Metallindustrie in Mesopotamien von den Anfängen bis zum 2. Jahrtausend v.Chr.*, VML, Germany.

Tallon, Françoise. 1987. *Métallurgie susienne I. De la fondation de Suse au XVIIIe siècle avant J.-C.*, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, France.

Day 2

**Landscapes and raw material regimes/
Daily life and institution**

Dynamics of Highland Seclusion: Archaeological, Historical and Environmental Perspectives from Kohgiluyeh (Southwest Iran)

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Abstract

This contribution offers an integrated overview of the research carried out to date by our team in the southern Zagros region of Kohgiluyeh (Southwest Iran). A selection of the results of the HighStepLands and CrossHighlands projects are presented, re-evaluated and integrated. To this end, we introduce the concept of seclusion, a term borrowed from the social sciences, and apply it to the archaeological and historical analysis of our study region. By examining and discussing key aspects of Kohgiluyeh's regional occupational dynamics, including the impact of physical geography on intra- and interregional human mobility, settlement patterns and natural resource use, socio-cultural connectivity, and the management of agricultural policies and imperial institutional control, we situate the Kohgiluyeh region within the broader landscape and historical context of the Iranian southern Zagros. Our studies suggest that the physical characteristics of the landscape, the locally available resources, together with socio-cultural factors and economic prerogatives of the institutions involved at different times and scales in resource management and control, generated fluctuating conditions of seclusion. These factors significantly shaped both the internal and external interactions of the past communities living in the region.

Keywords: Iranian Highlands; Resources; Socio-cultural connectivity; Institutions; Seclusion.

Tracking Mongol Presence in Iran: Seasonal Routes of Migration and Building Activities

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Lorenz Korn, University of Bamberg <lorenz.korn@uni-bamberg.de>

Project nos. HO 1173/8-1, KO 2130/12-1, under the umbrella of the DFG priority program 2176 „Iranian Highlands“

Abstract

The rule of the Ilkhanid dynasty (1256–1335) has been characterized through particular features of nomadic culture due to the Mongol origins of the dynasty. Solid evidence is visible in the mobility of the ruling house, the army and other parts of the elite. However, adaptation to sedentary forms of organization is clearly visible, not least in the investment that the Ilkhans and their followers made in urban architecture and the founding of new urban centers. The pious foundation of the Ilkhanid vizier Rashid al-Din Fazlullah in Tabriz forms a highly important case of urban development and allocation of resources, for which a document of prime importance exists in the foundation deed dated 709 Hijra/1309–10 CE. The present project has resumed earlier research on the history and topography of the so-called Rab'-i Rashidi. Besides, it also explores the variegated history of the foundation and its site for the periods after the Ilkhanids. Parallel, archaeological exploration of the site has been conducted and has yielded rich material, of which some parts go back to the foundational period. Remnants of hydraulic installations, however patchy, appear to match evidence from the written sources. These materials offer themselves for considerations on questions of resilience and change. A large body of documentation, including most of the standing architectural remains, must be attributed to post-Ilkhanid periods. The fortification of the site under Shah Abbas I probably also included construction of the massive tower that dominates the area. The concurrence of written sources with archaeological evidence offers a unique opportunity not only to cross-check evidence but also to re-consider the perspectives of both archaeological and historical research and the critical reading of their respective sources.

Keywords

Ilkhanid Period, Tabriz, mobility, waqf, religious architecture, fortification, water installations

Mohammad Masoumian, Abstract for the presentation in Istanbul

Methodological Framework: Survey in the Zagros Highland Context

Abstract:

Archaeological survey in the mountainous landscapes of the Iranian Zagros cannot rely on the same assumptions that have historically structured site identification in lowland or mound-dominated regions. In areas such as the Mariwan region of the northern Zagros, settlement formation, preservation, and visibility are fundamentally shaped by steep topography, slope instability, and active geomorphological processes, including erosion, colluviation, and downslope material displacement. These processes frequently redistribute archaeological materials beyond their primary contexts and generate low-density and spatially diffuse surface signatures that do not conform to conventional expectations of nucleated site morphology.

Within this environmental setting, settlement patterns tend to appear not as compact high-density mounded sites but as dispersed occupations situated along slopes, ridgelines, terraces, and valley margins. Many of these reflect seasonal, transient, or functionally specialised forms of landscape use. Low artefact density, therefore, cannot be equated with low intensity of occupation. Traditional threshold-based approaches to site identification that were developed for geomorphologically stable plains risk systematically underrepresent highland settlement by dismissing diffuse distributions as background scatter.

In response to these conditions, the Mariwan Archaeological Survey adopted an adaptive, full-coverage pedestrian strategy calibrated to the geomorphological realities of the Zagros highlands. Instead of applying fixed density thresholds, site identification relied on a multi-criteria framework integrating ceramic and lithic scatters, architectural traces, stone features, vegetation anomalies, microspatial clustering, and local topographic logic. Diffuse artefact distributions were treated as potentially meaningful cultural signals rather than automatically excluded as secondary displacement.

Remote sensing data, including CORONA and KH 9 imagery, were used primarily for route planning and terrain assessment. In the Zagros context, dense vegetation, rugged relief, and micro topographic complexity limit the independent detection of archaeological features from imagery alone. Systematic pedestrian verification across slopes, valley edges, and upland corridors, therefore, remained the principal means of site recognition.

This approach enabled the documentation of a wide spectrum of archaeological loci, including fortified upland sites, jar burial cemeteries situated on slopes, caves, seasonal camps, and low-density activity zones that would likely remain undetected under conventional survey protocols. More broadly, the MAS results indicate that the apparent sparsity of settlement in Zagros highland landscapes may reflect methodological constraints

rather than genuine demographic marginality. Archaeological visibility in the highlands is thus not only a function of past human presence but also of the analytical frameworks through which that presence is defined and recognised.

Keywords: Zagros highlands, mountain archaeology, settlement visibility, adaptive survey, colluviation, low-density occupation, archaeological visibility, site detection methodology.

Day 3

Daily life and institution

Fragile Images: Clay Media in Early Iran - the materiality and imagery of administrative practices in the Late Chalcolithic to Early Bronze Age (FRIMCLAY)

Interim Report

By Marziyeh Zarekhalili^a, Helen Gries^b and Barbara Helwing^c, in collaboration with Rouhollah Yousefi Zoshk^d, Tehran, and Clélia Paladre, Paris

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Abstract

The project investigates the formation and functioning of early institutionalized political and economic systems in Iran from the late mid-4th to early 3rd millennium BCE by adopting a practice-oriented perspective on administrative tools, with the aim to reconstruct the development and role of institutional authority over time. The chronological scope covers the initial spread of administrative technique associated with centralized institutional control during the Late Chalcolithic, and the subsequent adaptation of these systems in the Early Bronze Age, when a network of central places emerged in the highlands of Iran. The study is based on administrative materials used to control the movement of goods, raw materials, and labor, including sealings, early scripts, and seals. Our approach reconstructs the practices that underpinned institutional authority and their development over time in response to social, spatial, and economic pressures, revealing the interplay between centralized authority and local agency. By examining the implementation of administration practices as the primary tool of institutionalized control, systems established at individual sites can be studied and compared and differences in access, hierarchies, and materials administered can be made visible. By mapping interactions across the lowlands and highlands, the study provides insight into the mechanisms of exchange, the selective adoption of institutional practices, and regional variation in responses to early administrative systems. Ultimately, the data allow to determine the degree of corporate or exclusionary political-economic strategies and to trace differences between sites as well as changes through time.

Changes in Iron Age Settlement Patterns in the Iranian Northern Zagros under the Pressure from Assyrian Imperial Expansion

Florian Janoscha Kreppner¹, Mohammad Masoumian¹, Samran Asiabani¹, Karl Müller¹

¹ Institut für Altorientalistik und Vorderasiatische Archäologie, Universität Münster, Germany.

Abstract:

This study examines continuities and discontinuities in material signatures and settlement dynamics during Assyrian expansion into the highland regions of the northern Zagros Mountains in western Iran. Using comparative survey datasets from Mariwan, Baneh–Sardasht, and Piranshahr, and applying a fractal box-counting analysis of settlement distributions, the study quantifies changes in spatial organisation between the Early Iron Age (c. 1250-800) and Late Iron Age (c. 800-330 BCE).

The results demonstrate that settlement responses were neither uniform nor directionally consistent. Instead, each basin followed a distinct trajectory shaped by local topography, accessibility, and historically contingent frontier dynamics. The most pronounced transformation occurs in the Mariwan basin, where settlement patterns shift toward a more space-filling configuration characterised by fine-scale infilling. In contrast, Baneh–Sardasht and Piranshahr display stronger spatial concentration within relatively stable regional envelopes.

These divergences indicate that highland settlement systems reorganised internally in response to broader geopolitical conditions rather than undergoing uniform or externally imposed restructuring. From a resilience perspective, this pattern reflects adaptive spatial reconfiguration, in which communities adjusted land-use strategies, dispersal patterns, and corridor engagement without losing structural continuity.

Crucially, these spatial transformations occur alongside the persistence of local ceramic traditions and the absence of standardised Neo-Assyrian material culture. This combination suggests that imperial influence operated through selective connectivity and spatial restructuring rather than direct cultural imposition.

More broadly, the northern Zagros case demonstrates that the absence of imperial material signatures, when embedded within patterned spatial change, constitutes a meaningful archaeological signal. Highland borderlands thus emerge as arenas of negotiated adaptation, where imperial entanglement reshapes settlement organisation without producing uniform material outcomes.

Keywords:

Northern Zagros; Iron Age; Settlement Organisation; Neo-Assyrian Frontier; Fractal Analysis; Spatial Reorganisation; Highland Resilience

Life in the Zagros Mountains around 1100 BCE: Resilience Strategies in the Middle Elamite Kingdom

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Abstract

The Middle Elamite highlands represent one of the less-studied yet significant regions of the Elamite kingdom. In 2009, a group of cuneiform clay tablets was discovered near the ruins of Goshtaspi in the province of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad in southwestern Iran. For the first time, texts emerged, which do not originate from the major royal centers but from the highlands, specifically from the important passage known as the Iranian Gate. In the remote areas of the Zagros, particularly in the region of Goshtāspi, ancient Manlari, situated between the major centers of Anšan and Susa, a local settlement developed with its administrative and social structures during the 12th–11th centuries BCE. This settlement maintained connections with the royal centers while retaining its own economic and administrative organization.

The topographical setting of this region, between fertile valleys, pastures, and mountain paths, led to a distinct form of organization, adaptation, and economic diversification.

These new written sources from Goshtāspi provide insights into daily routines, resource management, and the networks linking the local community with supra-regional institutions. These sources reveal the balance between dependence and autonomy that was characteristic of the organizations of highland communities within the Elamite state and proved their resilience.

The paper aims to present the key features of this settlement, from material culture to administrative practices, and to highlight their significance for understanding Elamite provincial systems. It discusses how ecological conditions, institutional strategies, and social interactions contributed to the resilience of the local community. From this perspective, Goshtaspi is not merely a peripheral area but an active component of the late Middle Elamite world, whose economy and administration provided crucial support for the stability of the Elamite state.

Investigating the Unexplored Heartland

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Abstract

This paper presents the current results of the sub-project *The Unexplored Heartland: Institutional Landscapes and Networks in Eastern Fārs* within the Collaborative Research Programme SPP 2176 Iranian Highlands. *Unexplored Heartland* examines the spatial articulation of imperial governance and resilience in eastern Fars, a historically central yet comparatively understudied corridor linking the Marvdašt basin with the eastern satrapies. Rather than a peripheral transit zone, Eastern Fars region is approached as a structurally significant interface between imperial core and eastern territories in the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods. Designed to integrate original archaeological fieldwork with philological analysis, the project underwent a methodological reconfiguration that shifted its focus towards the systematic recovery, consolidation, and spatial integration of existing datasets. Drawing on unpublished survey material from Fasa, Dārāb, Jahrom, and Khafr districts, the project assembled a standardised corpus of over 900 archaeological sites and c. 10,000 artefacts, primarily ceramics, embedded within a GIS-based regional research archive. This corpus enables a diachronic reconstruction of settlement dynamics from the Palaeolithic to the Islamic period. The concept of an “institutional landscape” serves a heuristic framework to correlate settlement distributions, infrastructural features, and administrative organisation. Archaeological patterns indicate sustained occupation of the corridor with shifting central nodes, particularly pronounced in the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods. Philological analysis of the Persepolis Fortification Archive, supplemented by later sources, demonstrates that eastern Fars formed part of a coherent imperial system of communication, control, and redistribution, extending across the eastern flank of the heartland. The final stage of the project, currently underway, consists of a formalised network analysis of textual relationships, aimed at modelling administrative connectivity and corridor structures. Even at this stage, the integrated evidence suggests that eastern Fars functioned as a durable zone of institutional resilience, maintaining its strategic significance across successive imperial configurations.

Dynamics of Development and Transformations of Ownership in Western Fars: The Bozpar Valley (Bushehr Region, Iran)

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Abstract

Within the framework of the SPP 2176 The Iranian Highlands, the project “Dynamics of Development and Transformations of Ownership in Western Fars: The Bozpar Valley (Bushehr Region, Iran),” conducted an in-depth study of a remote valley in the Zagros mountains. It considered the Bozpar Valley as a case study, analysing archaeological and geoarchaeological evidence relating to resource management practices, institutions, and daily life within a marginal high-valley context. The project examined integrated hydraulic systems, monumental architecture, and transformations of the anthropogenic landscape between Late Antiquity and the early Islamic period. The Bozpar case is considered here as a specific, but for the Sasanian period typical example through which to reflect critically upon strategies of territorial and resource appropriation and upon local institutional organisation.

Keywords: Bozpar Valley; Sasanian period; Iranian Highlands; hydraulic strategies; institutions; landscape archaeology.

Transformation of Institutional Landscapes at Dehqaed, Southern Iran

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Abstract

Dehqaed is a city-site consisting of 36 *tappehs* (mounds) densely distributed over an area of approximately 9.8 km². It is situated in the north-central part of Bushehr Province, near the southern Zagros Highlands, where parts of the site were first occupied during the Late Chalcolithic period and remained inhabited until the Early Islamic era. Its emergence as a large urban settlement is particularly evident during the Sasanian and the transitional Late Sasanian to Early Islamic periods. Although Dehqaed was previously regarded primarily as a ritual center, our current research demonstrates that it also fulfilled significant economic and administrative functions. These include industrial activities such as glass production, a milling system associated with advanced agricultural practices, interregional trade, and defensive roles. In addition, recent evidence suggests the presence of Christian communities at the site, an issue that merits further scholarly attention.

By employing a bottom-up approach, this study emphasizes the long-term processes of landscape transformation that shaped Dehqaed over time. It aims to examine the institutional developments at Dehqaed and, through the application of resilience theory in the context of political alteration, to analyze how the inhabitants responded to challenges and maintained the resilience of their community. Dehqaed experienced the significant period of the Arab Muslim conquest, and given its role during the Sasanian period, particularly its ritual functions, the site provides a valuable case for investigating whether and how the local society remained resilient in the face of political change. A comprehensive analysis of ceramics, architectural remains, and other material evidence reveals a pattern of sustained continuity in both material culture and ritual practices, indicating that there is no clear archaeological evidence for rapid Islamization at the site.

Keywords: Borazjan, Dehqaed, Sasanian, Persian Gulf, Southern Zagros, Resilience theory, Institution.

Parthian Imperial Control and Local Agency in the Central Zagros Highlands

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Abstract

This study examines how political authority, mobility, and social institutions were configured in the central Zagros highlands during the early Parthian period (2nd-1st centuries BCE). Drawing on excavations at the fortified complex of Rabana–Merquly and surveys of roads and fortifications in the Hawraman Mountains, it reconstructs a connected highland landscape structured by selective mobility and strategic control. The evidence shows that fortified centres functioned as multifunctional nodes integrating military garrisons, administrative oversight, ritual practice, and dynastic representation. Rather than a marginal hinterland, the central Zagros emerges as an active arena in which local agency and imperial ambitions were negotiated within clear environmental constraints.

Keywords: Parthian; central Zagros; Rabana–Merquly; Hawraman; Anahita; dynastic cult