Excavation of Rezvan Tepe in Northeastern Iran, an Iron Age I-II Cemetery

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Compared to the other regions of Iran, its northeast has not received as much attention by archaeologists. This may seem somewhat strange, since, given its favorable geographical conditions and critical geopolitical location, it has been home to important human settlement from the prehistoric period until the present. Among the regions in northern and northeastern Iran which were significant in the Iron Age are Amlash, Khaloraz, Marlik, Talesh and Khorvin. This report concerns what was to a degree a salvage excavation at Tepe Rezvan, one of several Iron-Age hill sites in the Kalpoush region of Semnan Province, located along one of the historic east-west routes of communication. The goal of the study was to establish the structure and history of the site and to excavate in its Iron Age I-II cemetery.

To understand the context for the discussion below, it is important to keep in mind the chronology of the Iron Age in Iran, where Iron Age cultures emerged in a very short time in the middle of the second millennium. There are different schemes for the chronology, which in the first instance has been established with reference to pottery types. Young distinguishes old gray pottery (pottery horizon 1), late gray pottery (pottery horizon 2), and buff pottery (pottery horizon 3). The pottery of Iron Age III is plain and in some cases painted, having replaced the gray pottery of Iron Age I and II. Examples have been found in Hassanlu III and Zivieh (Young 1965, pp. 53–58). Dyson (1965) divides the Iron Age into three periods: Iron Age I (1450–1200 BCE), Iron Age II (1200–800) and Iron Age III (800-500). However, relying on carbon-14 data, Danti (2013) has suggested different dates: Iron Age I (1250–1050), Iron Age II (1050–800), and Iron Age III (800–550).

Generally speaking, the studies on the Iron Age in Iran have been based primarily on work in the northwest, notably in the basin of Lake Urmiya (Kroll 2005), Hassanlu (Dyson 1989), Dinkha Tepe (Muscarella 1974), Haftvan Tepe (Burney 1969) and Guy Tepe (Burton-Brown 1951). Our focus here is Semnan Province, 515,985 km^2 in size, which is traversed by historic routes, including a branch of the famous Silk Road. Its geographical position and several landscape and climate zones supported a rich and varied history of human settlement. Along the northern borders of Semnan Province lie the highlands of the Alborz Mountains, and on the south it is bordered by the great Dasht-e Kavir salt desert. It thus encompasses parts of two geological zones, separated by the "Semnan fault," that of the east-central Alborz and of Central Iran. The northern strip of the province (the route connecting Garmsar, Semnan, Damghan, and Shahrud) is part of the southern slope of the east-central sector of the Alborz.

The larger geographical context here encompasses the Neishabur plain, which connects Afghanistan to Shahrud, and is part of greater Khorasan. Evidence of wares made from lapis lazuli, alabaster and turquoise confirms that exchange along the east-west route through Khorasan to Damghan was active at least since 4000 BCE and on through the Parthian, Sasanian and Islamic eras (Hiebert and Dyson 2002, p. 116). Eastern Iran encompasses mountain borders and barriers, misshapen valleys and huge expanses of deserts (*Cambridge History* 1968, Vol. 1, p. 15). Khorasan is bordered on its northwest by the Gorgan and Atrak River and on the north and northeast by the Kopet Dag mountains and their subsidiary ranges. The Mashhad plain in the northeast is bordered on the north by the Kuh-e Hazar Masjid (Kopet Dag) range and on the south by the Kuh-e Binalud and Kuh-e Shah Jahan mountains. The valleys located between the Koped Dag and the latter ranges are 1000 meters higher than the regions to the north of the Kopet Dag (Hiebert and Dyson 2002, p. 115; Eduljee 2007, p. 9).

Rezvan Tepe is a round hill in the southern part of the green Rezvan valley some 210 km east of Shahrud

Fig. 1. Map of northern Iran, showing location of Rezvan Tepe.

Fig. 2. Rezvan Tepe. Photograph by authors.

city in Semnan Province [Figs. 1, 2]. Its location, some 500 m north of the Sodaghlan road and 3 km east of Hosseinabad village, is 371 0920 N and 5546508 E, at an altitude of 1388 m above sea level. The site, which rises 7.5 m above the surrounding land, is flanked on north and south by springs. It is one of several ancient hilltop sites in the Kalpush/Hosseinabad region which lie along the historic east-west route connecting the three provinces of Semnan, Golestan and Khorasan. This was in part a salvage excavation, anticipating the construction of the Kalpush dam. A careful topographical plan was drawn [Fig. 3]. Some test trenches were excavated to establish the cultural identity of the site and the stratigraphy. One of them, which uncovered a burial, will be described here along with a comparative analysis of its artefacts, the most important of which were several pottery vessels.

Test trench A7, eventually measuring 5 x 5 m, was excavated on the southern slope of the hill, where it is bordered by a dirt road. At a depth of 60 cm agricultural soil was reached, and an earthenware crock found which had sandy gray temper containing lime and had been poorly baked. Three more vessels were then found, two of them gray pottery bowls, one of those spouted. In the northwest corner of the trench was spindle whorl and another earthenware bowl. To the north of the assemblage of pots a human skeleton rested in a depression [Figs. 4, 5, 6, next page]. This led us to extend the initial trench, anticipating the dam construction which will affect the hill to the north.

The skeleton was found at a depth of 1 meter and had significantly deteriorated due to the moisture of the soil. The grave pit, which was a simple hole, measured 140 cm x 50 cm. Traces of ashes could be seen on the skeleton. The body was laid horizontally in a compact fetal position on the right side along a northwest-southeast line, its fully retracted legs and knees close to each other and the heels drawn up close to the pelvis [Fig. 7]. The right arm was retracted, with the hand drawn up to shoulder level. There is evidence of head injury. Small bumps can be seen on the brow, the nose was small, but its angle impossible to determine. The tip of the chin protrudes and is rounded, but the mandible is delicate. The no. 3 molar, with slightly diagonal wear, was preserved. The incisors have diag-

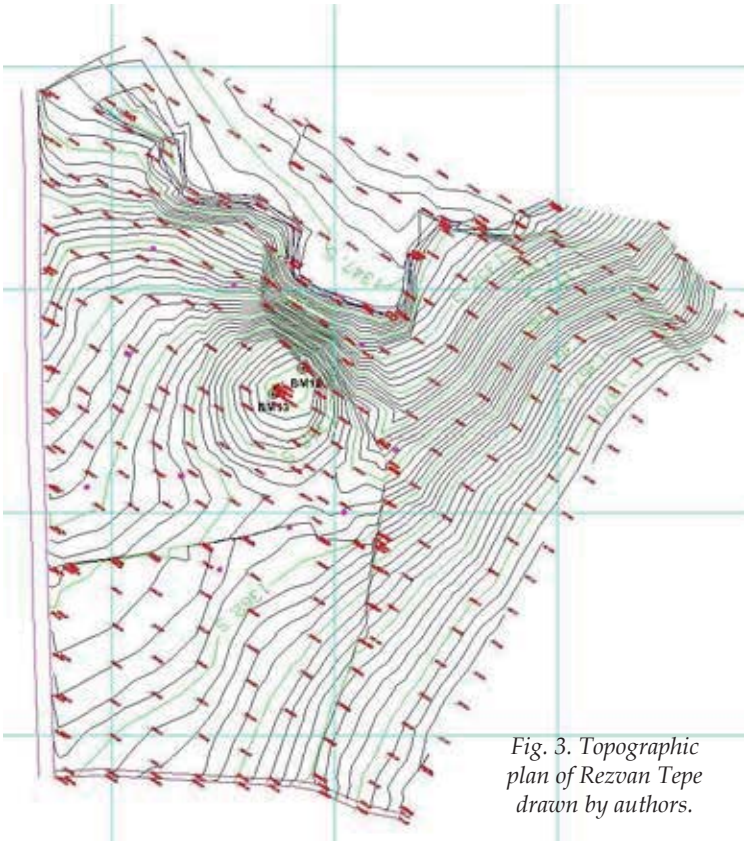
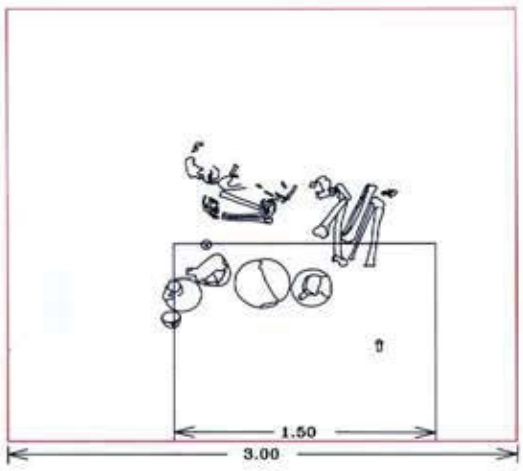


Fig. 3. Topographic plan of Rezvan Tepe drawn by authors.



onal wear and are perfectly healthy. The upper edge of the pupil is sharp; fusing of the cranium bones had begun. The humeral bones are short and thick, but the ulna and radius bones delicate. The femurs are short and solid, but somewhat curved. The hip bone is large and the sciatica angle is open. The maximum length of the femur is ca. 420 mm and the tibia 340 mm. We calculated the person's height to have been 157 cm. The body is that of a female, approximately 25–30 years old.

Fig. 4. Plan of the excavated grave drawn by authors.

Fig. 5. The excavated grave from the south. Photograph by authors.

Fig. 6 (above). The excavated grave from the east. Photograph by authors.

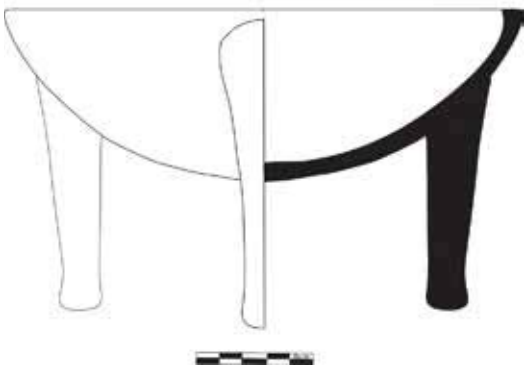
The artefacts and comparative evidence for dating

The Kalpush region and Rezvan Tepe are located on the border of Semnan and Gorgan. The objects found in this region are similar to those of the Iron Age found in the Gorgan plain by Bouchalart and Lecomte (1987). The evidence for dating Rezvan Tepe, its gray pottery, points to Iron Age I and II. Grey wares discovered in the grave at Rezvan Tepe include a vessel with a handle, a long neck and spherical body [Fig. 8, next page], a tripod dish [Fig. 9], a spouted vessel [Fig. 10], a small crock [Fig. 11] and a spindle whorl. These vessels are wheel-made and fully baked. They are simple wares; decoration is confined to some burnishing on the surface. One of the most important aspects of Iron Age pottery technology in Iran is an unprecedented increase in the quantity of grey wares, which have more strength than other types. This may explain their widespread use (Tala'i 2008, p. 94). Burnished decoration was common in the northeastern region of the Iranian plateau in the third millennium BCE for both grey and black pottery. The replacement of polished gray pottery by painted wares marked a new stage in the development of cultural traditions and the beginning of the late period of the Iron Age (Tala'i 2004, p. 36).

Narrow-mouthed pitchers [Fig. 8], with or without handles, are common to all regions during the Iron Age. They vary in some details of their shapes, but the ones most similar to the example in Rezvan Tepe were found in Khorvin and Qeitarieh.

Legged dishes are more widespread in northern Iran and in the northern part of the Iranian plateau. They

Fig. 7. The skeleton. Photograph by authors.



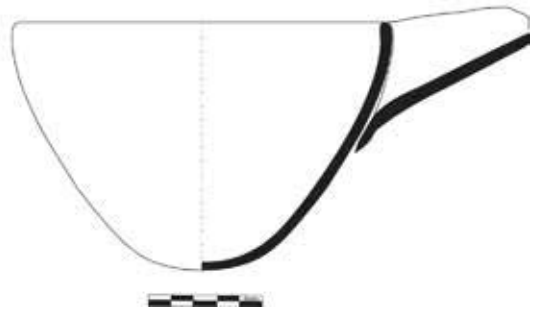


Fig. 8 (top left). The vessel with long neck and spherical body.

Fig. 9 (top right). The tripod dish.

Fig. 10 (bottom left). The spouted vessel.

Fig. 11 (borrom right). The small crock.

Photographs and drawings by authors.

have been found in Khorvin (Vanden Bergh 1964, Pl. XIV, nos.105-119), Qeitarieh (Kambakhsh Fard 1991, Fig. 99, Nos. 907, 921, 220, 296, 409), Sialk A (Ghirshman 1939, Vol. 2, Pl. IV, Nos. 4, 6; Pl. XLIII, S523a) and Jeiran Tepe (Majīd'zādah 2003, Figs. 12 and 13). The tripod dish [Fig. 9] found at Rezvan Tepe must date to the Iron Age and is similar to one found on the Gorgon plain.

Spouted wares [Fig. 10] and those with vertical handles are commonly found in Khorvin (Vanden Bergh 1964, Pl.VI, Nos. 30-34), Qeitarieh (Kambakhsh Fard 1991, Fig. 105, No. 1146), Sialk B with differences in the details (Ghirshman 1939, Vol. 2, Pl. XVII; Pl. LXXIII, S926, S928; Pl. LX, S619; Pl. LXII, S772a,c), Marlik (Negahban 1996, Vol. 2, Fig. 28, Nos. 610, 614) and Jeiran Tepe (Majīd'zādah 2003, Figs. 12, 13). The spouted vessel is comparable to ones found at Hesar Tepe (Roustāei 2007-2008, p. 82).

The small crock [Fig. 11] began to disintegrate on exposure to air; its shape is comparable to that designated as A from Haftavan IV (Tala'i 2007, p. 119).

These comparisons then suggest that the vessels found at Rezvan Tepe date to the late second millennium and the early first millennium BCE, dating which coincides with that advanced by Young in his well-known paper. By his criteria, most of the pottery found at Rezvan Tepe falls into the early and late gray pottery horizons (Young 1965, Figs. 11, 13). Furthermore, he offers dates based on a comparative typology of pottery for the graveyards in Khorvin and Sialk A and B that are in some ways similar to what has been found at Rezvan Tepe. He claims Khorvin started in the 15th century BCE and ended after 1000 BCE. He also suggests that Sialk A

started at the end of the 14th - beginning of the 13th century BCE and ended around 1050 to 1000 BCE (Young 1965, pp. 82-83, Fig 14).

There are similarities between this grave and others found at sites in northern Iran which are also simple without any architectural structure. The simple pit graves in this area compare with simple oval-shaped ones in the Kalouraz cemetery (Khalatbary 1992, p. 87). Other examples are a pit grave discovered in Jamshid Abad, Gilan (Fallahian 2003, p. 218), graves at Gohar Tepe, Mazandaran (Mahfrozi 2007), and in Halimehjan and Lame Zaminshahran. Pit graves have been discovered in the Iron Age layers of Yanik Tepe in Azarbaijan (Tala'i 1998, p. 62); others of the Iron Age III and II strata at Gian Tepe in Nahavand have been reported as simple and oval-shaped. Further analogues are the graves of Khorvin in Pishva, Varamin and Qeitariyeh, Tehran, which have been described as having the simple from of shallow pit. There are some simple hole-like graves from the Iron Age layer in Sagzabad located in Qazvin plain; also at Sialk A and Jeiran Tepe. Finally, we would note the similarity of this burial to those found at Teimouran Tepe in Fars Province (Overlaet 1997, p. 26, Fig. 12). Other possible comparisons are the graves found at Dinkha Tepe, Godin Tepe, Gian Tepe and Bardbal.

In contrast, the graves in Marlik are like small rooms with stone-faced walls, and in Sialk B there are boulders around or on the graves. Even if the positioning of the bodies is similar to what is found in the pit graves, and individual burial is common, at Sialk B there are numerous instances of a second or multiple burials in the same grave. Except at Sialk B, the bodies are usually placed in the graves on one side with legs drawn up in a fetal position (Vanden Berghe 1959/2000, pp. 122, 133; Kambakhsh Fard 1991, pp. 41–47; Majīd'zādah 2003, pp. 46–47; Negahban, 1996, Vol. 1, pp. 13–16).

The general characteristics of the graves aside, it is difficult to establish clear groupings of Iron Age burials in this region, as their features (including topography, construction, direction and position of the artefacts) tend to follow local traditions. Cemeteries located outside of settlements, such as seems to be the case with Rezvan Tepe, may contain the bodies of a particular local or tribal group from the region. One can, of course differentiate burials according the presumed wealth of the deceased (Kambakhsh Fard 1998, p. 14). More study is needed before we can begin to generalize about the religious beliefs possibly evidenced in the local burial customs. The location of the site on a major east-west route (Fahimi 2002, p. 10) makes it likely that what we find here is evidence left by groups which had migrated into the region.

While we have some confidence that the Rezvan Tepe site can be dated to Iron Age I and II, approximately the second half of the second millennium to the early first millennium BCE, we must emphasize that this conclusion is based on limited evidence. A great deal more must be learned before we can begin to flesh out a picture of the lives of the people who lived and died there.

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