Journal of Inner Asian Art and Archaeology

1/2006

BREPOLS

A Rural Settlement of the Achaemenid Period in Fars*

Alireza Askari Chaverdi
(Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, Shiraz, Iran)
and Pierfrancesco Callieri (University of Bologna, Italy)

When we consider the characteristics of the archaeological evidence for the Achaemenid period in Iran, we must admit that our information is almost completely concentrated on the dynasty and that the everyday life and the material culture of the common people remains largely obscure. This is mainly due to the magnificence of the architectural complexes which the Achaemenid dynasty has left, and which has naturally attracted the attention of scholars since the beginning of scientific archaeological research in Iran.

Among the many obscure aspects of Achaemenid Iran, the information on habitation settlements is indeed limited. We have some important work on settlement patterns in various regions, carried out through surface survey.[1] However, apart from the problems which surface surveys present for the precise definition of the nature and extension of the settlements,[2] the object of these studies is concentrated on the territory and not on the settlements themselves.

Knowledge of the planning and architecture of settlements, be they urban or rural, permanent or temporary, is linked to geophysical investigations or archaeological excavations. The recent geophysic explorations carried out at Pasargadae by an Irano-French team[3] and at Persepolis by the Iranian Parsa-Pasargadae Research Foundation[4] have shown how much evidence completely hidden below the surface can indeed change the comprehensive view that we have of ancient sites.

However, when we examine the knowledge of the architecture of the settlements, we are faced with an almost complete blank. As far as towns are concerned, the *polis* of Persepolis, which in most of the historical sources is distinguished from the Achaemenid Terrace, and which the Macedonian army plundered in 331 BCE immediately on its arrival (Diodorus, XVII. 70), four months before the so-much debated fire lit by Alexander on the Terrace, is largely unknown. Its possible traces were recorded by E. Herzfeld in areas to the north, south and west of the Terrace. The surface surveys he carried out in the latter areas — before the earth works of various kinds which completely altered the original situation — evidenced wide-scale collapsed mud-brick structures, fragments of building materials and potsherds, which Herzfeld interpreted as the area of the proper town of Persepolis[5] and which the later Iranian excavations proved, at least as far as the area to the south of the Terrace, to consist of other palatial buildings.

At Pasargadae, the many buildings which surface prospecting have discovered and which confirm the existence of a town,[6] all remain to be understood in their architectural aspects. Also, in the Achaemenid capital of Susa, the habitation areas remain largely unexplored.[7]

A fortunate exception comes from Sistan, where the site of Dahan-e Gholaman, excavated in the 1960s by the Italian archaeologists of IsMEO and since 2000 by the Iranian Centre for Archaeological Research, has been identified with the Achaemenid *satrap* seat of Zranka. The surface survey, thanks to the exceptionally favourable conditions for the interpretation, has allowed reconstructing the urban layout and even the plan of the habitations.[8] Even though the excavations concentrated mainly in the monumental construction, two private houses, nos. 6 and 7, were brought to light.[9] In fact, this remains the only urban settlement of the Achaemenid period so far known to some extent in Iran.

When we turn to rural settlements of smaller dimensions, the situation is even worse. In fact, the critical review of Ghirshman's excavation of the 1950s carried out by de Miroschedji[10] and until now accepted as valid,[11] despite an unexplained and perhaps careless return to Ghirshman's interpretation,[12] has deprived scholars of one of the few excavated Achaemenid villages. If the structures of the Achaemenid period brought to light at Turang Tepe VA[13] and at Tepe Yahya[14] represent instead remains of fortified settlements, the only "village" until now identified and partly excavated is the one at Baba Jan I.[15]

The recent excavation of a rural settlement in the valley of Bolaghi, not far from Pasargadae, has therefore great value. The valley of Bolaghi (Darre-ye Bolaghi or Tang-e Bolaghi) has been, since 2005, the object of a comprehensive project of rescue excavations exemplarily organized by the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization and by the Parsa-Pasargadae Research Foundation in order to stem the damages caused by a dam built on the Sivand/Polvar River. Within the framework of this project, an Irano-Italian team composed of specialists from the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, the Parsa-Pasargadae Research Foundation, the University of Bologna and the Italian Institute for Africa and the East, and directed by the present authors, has selected for the rescue excavation two sites among those where the preliminary surface survey carried out by the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization had indicated the presence of Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid sherds.

The two sites, indicated in the survey by numbers TB 76 and TB 77, lie on the left bank of the Polvar River. Site TB 76 is

located along the west slope of a hill that borders a side valley to the south of the river, while Site TB 77 is at a distance of 200 m to the south of site TB 76.

Of the two, Site TB 76 offers evidence of having been a larger settlement, extending over an area of about one hectare, with several rough surfacing structural features mainly constructed with large rock boulders and abundant potsherds (Fig. 1). Two study and excavation campaigns were carried out in February–March and October–November 2005.[16] Whereas the preliminary report of the second season, as also the study of pottery, are still in preparation, some preliminary reflections on the Site TB 76 are proposed here as a homage to Professor David Bivar, who has opened up many paths in the study of the archaeology of Ancient Iran and to whom we owe the most sincere gratitude.

Archaeological activity at the site started with a comprehensive surface survey with the multiple aims of making a general plan with levels, recording all the emerging remains, establishing a topographical grid, and carrying out the collection of the surface sherds. It was felt necessary to understand the nature and function of the outcropping structures and their relationship with the surface sherds and, in terms of dating, to define the nature and chronology of the site. Most of the outcropping structures were in fact of a poor nature, and the archaeologists who had carried out the preliminary survey had used the term "temporary settlement," suggesting an occupation linked to nomadic life.

The same basic questions applied to the site as a whole, and excavation appeared therefore particularly necessary, with a two-fold aim, topographic and stratigraphic. Accordingly, the strategy adopted was designed to cover both aspects. Three trenches were excavated, measuring 5 x 5 m each: Trench 1 in the middle of the north part of the site, at mid slope, Trench 2 and Trench 3 in the south part of the site; Trench 3 was subsequently extended to 10 x 10 m.

The evidence brought to light by the excavations confirmed the suppositions provided by the surface survey — that is, the existence of an important settlement at Site TB 76. The chronological horizon of the Achaemenid to post-Achaemenid periods suggested by the surface survey was on the one hand confirmed, and on the other extended by the existence of a well-defined prehistoric occupation not evident from the surface sherds.

While the latter has been brought to light only in a limited area in Trench 1, and will not be illustrated in the present contribution, clear evidence of a settlement at Site TB 76 comes from the Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid periods, which have been fully attested in all the three trenches.

In Trench 1 and Trench 2 the main architectural features are two walls built with a base course of large stones and probably *chineh* or mud-brick elevation, each of them having an approximate NW–SE orientation parallel to the slope of the plain, which may have been used as fencing walls of the inhabited areas. This hypothesis seems confirmed by the evidence in Trench 3, excavated at a higher level on the slope behind Trench 2: here, part of the courtyard of a house and of the adjacent rooms have been brought to light, in a sequence of six stratigraphic phases representing the various occupation surfaces and destruction episodes. That the house was of not small dimensions is shown by the fact the courtyard measured 7 m (N–S) x more than 7 m (E–W).

The earliest anthropic evidence in Trench 3 is represented by a series of deposits below the lowest floor level, representing Phase 6 in the stratigraphic sequence. No structures associated with these layers have been found, but the ceramic evidence, as far as the preliminary examination of pottery and the lack of a reliable reference sequence for this period allows, seems to belong to the Achaemenid period. The virgin soil could not be reached due to lack of time.

The first structural period (Phase 5) is represented by a long wall in very regular stone masonry using large stones laid with accuracy (Fig. 2): this wall remained in use for all the sequence, with two later reconstructions, and represented the SE limit of the habitation. Starting from this phase, the main area of the excavated trench represents an open courtyard, as shown by the dump pits dug into its occupation surfaces.

During the second structural period (Phase 4), the area within the boundary of the perimeter wall is occupied by a series of structures in a rather poor masonry of clay and small stones, badly preserved in their collapsed shape up to the extent that it is not possible to reconstruct their original dimensions (Fig. 3). That the life of the house, however, was not poor, is shown by a copper pin with nicely decorated head, by a folded lead sheet, perhaps a talisman, by a stone loom weight, and by a cylindrical stone base which was found inserted in one of the floors, used for some sort of craft activity (Fig. 4).

The structures of this phase are partly destroyed and completely covered by the soil accumulation above which the following structural period starts (Phase 3). The quality of the structures is again that of rather good stone-walled structures, probably the base for a *chineh* or mud-brick elevation (Fig. 5). Despite the fact that only approximately one quarter of it has been brought to light, the plan of the house of this phase is quite clear, with a large courtyard and at least two rooms on the northeast side of the latter and a room on the southwest side; the southeast wing was probably occupied by a verandah, if the function of a circular base of stones at the center between the two side walls, partly buried under one of the floors, is indeed that of a pillar base. It is under this verandah, or in any case in this wing, that two large pottery storage jars, found in the first season, were inserted into a pit cut into the floor level and into the existing mud and stones structures: in order to fix the jars in place, two low walls were built for retaining the earth and stones deposited around the jars up to shoulder level. One of two jars was quite intact; the shape is comparable to the jars of the Achaemenid period from Takht-e Jamshid and Pasargadae (Fig. 6). Its cleaning and restoration have revealed

several incised motifs (Fig. 7). A second important chronological indicator is offered by a bronze three-tanged arrowhead of Achaemenid type. A few grinding stones and the presence of many fragments of large well-built storage jars in the dump pits dug in the open courtyard also point to the use of the house for some relevant economic activity. On a later occupation surface in this area, slightly sinking at the centre of the area, a limestone base of truncated-conical shape, possibly used for craft activities was found turned on one side.

The last structural period (Phase 2) sees a reuse of some of the earlier structures, which are rebuilt in a much simpler masonry of large diorite stones from the hill at the back of the site, irregularly laid, and represent a lower course of *chineh* structures associated with regular floor levels. As regards the plan, this phase is the best represented in the excavation (Fig. 8). The presence of many dump pits in the area of the courtyard continues from the preceding phase. Noteworthy is the find of the fragmentary base of an alabaster vessel.

Above the last occupation surface of Phase 2, the area begins with thick soil accumulations coming from the impending hill slope, bringing with them potsherds and other materials: this phenomenon is confirmed by the presence of sherds of the chalcolithic Bakun A ware and by a typically Achaemenid three-tanged copper arrowhead of the same type brought to light in Phase 3. This does not stop life in the habitation, and even the surface of one of the latest of these accumulations has the aspect of an occupation surface.

The final accumulation of deposits coming from the slope of the hill is rich in material, mostly corroded, but with no occupation surfaces in evidence.

As a general observation, the topographical position of the site at the foot of a hill, just where a stream from the valley meets the plain, has characterized all the stratigraphy, from the lowest phases on, with the transportation of potsherds. Therefore, the presence of potsherds in a secondary position must be kept in mind when the study of the pottery brings a final evaluation. Nevertheless, the presence of definite floor levels and of a clear structural sequence offers a strong basis for the interpretation of the stratigraphy.

As for pottery, the red ware, grey ware, whitish ware, as well as sherds with black-painted decoration which seem to be similar to those from the Tall-e Takht of Pasargadae, suggest for the whole sequence a time span from the Achaemenid through the post-Achaemenid periods;[17] no sherds of apparent Sasanian date have been recovered, while sherds of the Islamic periods are very scarce, even on the surface.

A programme of geophysical exploration, in part already carried out by the Parsa-Pasargadae Research Foundation, will, it is hoped, throw light on the actual extension of the built-up settlement. The agreement reached between the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization and the Iranian Ministry of Energy to delay filling the artificial lake on which the Sivand Dam depends will make a third excavation season possible; it will concentrate on the excavation of the remaining portion of the house.

For now, the architectural evidence brought to light, despite the small excavated area, suggests the existence of a rural settlement at Site TB 76, with a preliminary date of the Achaemenid period and a probable continuation into the post-Achaemenid period. The fact that Site TB 76 occupies the slope between the hill and the plain, higher than the latter, shows that the site must have been linked to the exploitation of the fertile plain of the valley and, indeed, a stretch of the network of canals, which the Irano-French team of the Tang-e Bolaghi project has shown to correspond with the structures traditionally interpreted as the "Imperial Road," departs from the main line in the valley to reach our site.

The existence of a house of sizable dimensions, where the presence of large storage jars is attested throughout its life, does not fit well with the definition of "temporary settlement" which the preliminary surface survey of the site carried out by the ICHTO had proposed. The find of a loom weight, of several stone implements such as grinding stones, and of two stone cylindrical bases with clear marks of working on their upper surfaces, point to the existence of a settlement in which some sort of craft activity was carried out. The presence of some ornaments, of bronze arrowheads and of the fragmented alabaster vessel also give an indication as to the standard of living in the house.

Until now there has been no definite proof to exclude the likelihood that the house was used for some form of seasonal occupation; but if the craft activity documented can be linked to agriculture, then the possibility that we have a nomadic settlement would be strongly reduced, in favour of a permanent settlement.

Notes

* The authors wish to thank Dr. Masoud Azarnoush, Director of the Iranian Centre for Archaeological Research (ICAR), for permission to publish this paper.

[1] A. Alizadeh, "Some Observations Based on the Nomadic Character of Fars Prehistoric Development," in *Yeki bud, yeki nabud. Essays in the Archaeology of Iran in Honor of William M. Sumner*, eds. N.F. Miller and K. Abdi (Los Angeles: University of California, 2003), 83-97; K. Maurer Trinkaus, "Pre-Islamic Settlement and Land Use in Damghan, Northeast Iran," *Iranica Antiqua* XVIII (1983), 119-44; P. de Miroschedji, "Observations dans les couches néo-élamites au nord-ouest du tell de la Ville Royale à Suse," *Cahiers de la Délégation archéologique française en Iran* 12 (1981), 143-67; W.M. Sumner, "Achaemenid Settlement in the Persepolis Plain," *American Journal of Archaeology* 90 (1986), 3-31; R.J. Wenke, "Imperial Investments and Agricultural Developments in Parthian and Sasanian Khuzestan: 150 BC to AD 640," *Mesopotamia* 15-16 (1976), 31-221.

[2] C. Haselgrove, M. Millett, and I. Smith, eds. *Archaeology from the Ploughsoil: Studies in the Collection and Interpretation of Field Survey Data* (Sheffield: Department of Archaeology and Prehistory, University of Sheffield, 1985).

[3] R. Boucharlat, "Le Zendan de Pasargades: de la tour "solitaire" à un ensemble architectural. Données archéologiques récentes," *A Persian Perspective. Essays in Memory of Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg*, eds. W. Henkelman and A. Kuhrt (Achaemenid History, XIII, Leiden: Brill, 2003), 79-99; R. Boucharlat and Ch. Benech, "Organisation et aménagement de l'espace à Pasargades: reconnaissances archéologiques de surface, 1999-2002," *Arta*, 2002.001, Achemenet (Novembre 2002), 1-41.

[4] K. Mohammadkhani, "Archaeogeophysic with the Method of Magnetometry at Persepolis," *Parsa. Annual Report of the Research Foundation of Parsa-Pasargadae* I/1 (2004), 24 (English), 151-53 (Persian).

[5] E. Herzfeld, "Rapport sur l'état actuel des ruines de Persépolis et propositions pour leur conservation," *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* I (1929-30), 32.

[6] Boucharlat and Benech, "Organisation et aménagement de l'espace à Pasargades," 39.

[7] R. Boucharlat, "Continuités à Suse au 1er millénaire av. J.-C," in *Achaemenid History* VIII: *Continuity and Change*, eds. H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, A. Kuhrt and M.C. Root, (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut vor het Nabije Oosten, 1990, 1994), 219.

[8] U. Scerrato, "Excavations at Dahan-i Ghulaman (Seistan-Iran). First Preliminary Report (1962-1963)," *East and West* 16 (1966), 9-30; B. Genito, "Dahan-i Ghulaman. Una città achemenide tra centro e periferia dell'impero," *Oriens Antiquus* 25 (1986), 287-317; G. Gnoli, "Dahan-e Ḡolāmān," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* VI (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1993), 582-85; S.M.S. Sajjadi and F. Saber Moghaddam, "Peintures et gravures murales découvertes à Dahan-e Gholāmān, Sistān," *Studia Iranica* 33 (2004), 285-96.

[9] U. Scerrato, "Excavations at Dahan-i Ghulaman (Seistan-Iran)," 23-25.

[10] P. de Miroschedji, "Observations dans les couches néo-élamites au nord-ouest du tell de la Ville Royale à Suse," 149.

[11] R. Boucharlat, "Suse et la Susiane à l'époque achéménide. Données archéologiques," in *Achaemenid History IV: Centre and Periphery*, eds. H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and A. Kuhrt (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut vor het Nabije Oosten, 1990), 154.

[12] J. Curtis, "Archaeology of the Achaemenid Empire," in *Forgotten Empire. The World of Ancient Persia*, eds. J. Curtis and N. Tallis (London: The British Museum, 2005), 38.

[13] J. Deshayes, "Les niveaux de l'âge du Fer à Tureng Tépé," *Akten des VII. internationalen Kongresses für Iranische Kunst und Archäologie, München 7.-10. September 1976* (*AMI* Erg. 6, 1976), 29-34.

[14] C.C. Lamberg-Karlovsky and P. Magee, "The Iron Age Platforms at Tepe Yahya," *Iranica Antiqua* XXXIV (1999), 49-51.

[15] C. Goff, "Excavations at Baba Jan. The Architecture and Pottery of Level I," *Iran* 23 (1985),1-20.

[16] A. Askari Chaverdi and P. Callieri, "Tang-e Bolaghi, Site 76. First Season Excavation (Esfand 1383). Preliminary Report (Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization – University of Bologna, Italy)," *Darre-ye Bolaghi. Preliminary Reports 2005* (Tehran: ICAR, in press).

[17] In the publication of the only extensive excavation in the area of Pasargadae (D. Stronach, *Pasargadae. A Report on the Excavations Conducted by the British Institute of Persian Studies* [Oxford: University Press, 1978]) there is unfortunately no properly stratigraphic sequence and pottery is usually defined "Achaemenian or post-Achaemenian"; cf. E. Haerinck, *La céramique en Iran pendant la période parthe* (*Iranica Antiqua*, Supplément II, Gent: 1983), 233. Therefore, a clear-cut distinction between the two periods is at the moment problematic.

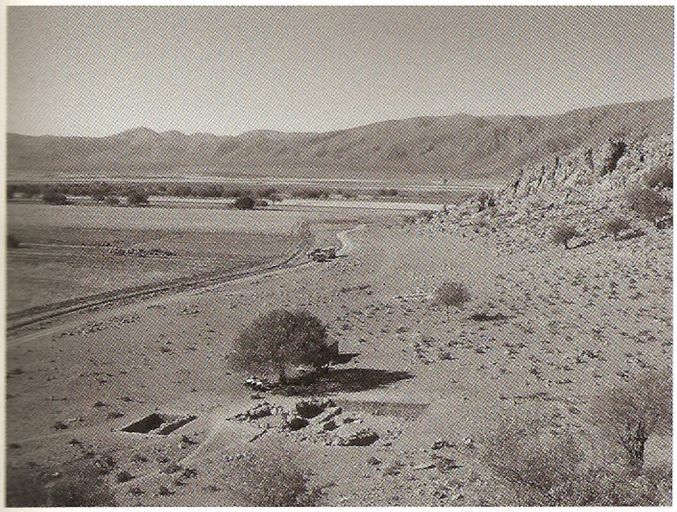

Fig. 1. Tang-e Bolaghi, Site 76, general view (Photo ICAR-University of Bologna).

Fig. 2. Wall SU 54 of Phase 5 (Photo ICAR-University of Bologna).

Fig. 3. Earth and stones structures of Phase 4, and stones structures of Phase 2 (Photo ICAR-University of Bologna).

Fig. 4. A cylindrical limestone base, Inv. TB 76 no. 32 (Photo ICAR-University of Bologna).

Fig. 5. The excavated part of the house of Phase 3 (Photo ICAR-University of Bologna).

Fig. 6. A red ware storage jar, Inv. TB 76 no. 18 (Photo ICAR-University of Bologna).

Fig. 7. Incised motifs on the storage jar (Photo ICAR-University of Bologna).

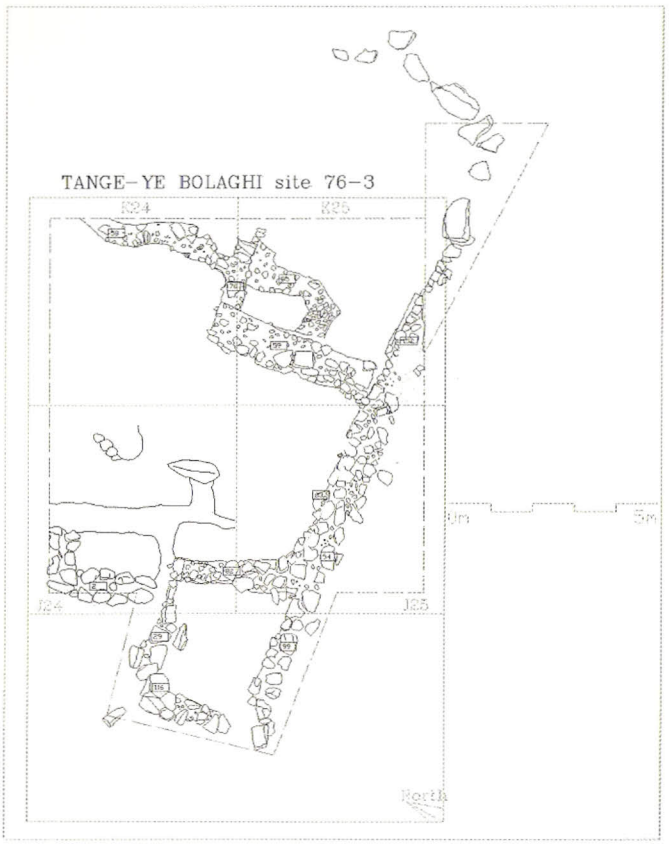

Fig. 8. Plan of Trench TB 76-3, showing the structures of Phase 2 (Drawing ICAR-University of Bologna).