

Excavations at Tepe Chalow, Northern Khorasan, Iran

The Northern Khorasan provincial office of the Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization, Bojnurd, Iran, and the Institute for the Studies of the Civilization of the Aegean and of the Near East of the National Research Council, Rome, Italy, had their joint field season in Tepe Chalow, near Sankhast, Northern Khorasan, Iran (fig. 1), from 9th October to 18th November 2011. Iranian and Italian archaeologists took part in the fieldwork; from the Italian side Francesco Di Filippo, Roberto Dan, Riccardo La Farina participated, from the Iranian one Sa'id Shanjamali and Behzad Ali Talesh besides the authors.

The site of Tepe Chalow is very low and covers an area of more than 40 ha, making it one of the largest, if not the largest, of north-eastern Iran. The surface is covered by a great number of potsherds of the late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze period; often local people found almost intact objects, both of the above-mentioned period and later, these last ones referable to the so-called 'Bactria Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC)', about 2300-1700 BC.

Work began with two 5x5 trenches in the highest part of the site, one of them in a spot with surface pottery of the BMAC period. Both of them revealed layers with polished Grey Ware with incised and relief motives, Black-on-Red Ware similar to the pottery of Tureng Tepe IIA and Shah tepe III of the Gorgan plain sequence and Brown-on-Buff Ware of Hissar IC/IIA type (i. e. Late Hissar I – Early II, Phases F-E transitional and E). The complex can be dated to early – middle 4th millennium BC (Dyson 1992 I: 172, 1992 II: 127; Thornton 2009a: 75-77, 102 table 3.1; Thornton 2009b: 309 table I). Later on more trenches were opened in the western part of the site that also exposed layers of these periods. There a large number of storage jars was found, and specifically one of the trenches revealed a store-room with 7 large storage jars damaged by a fire but *in situ*, still containing a great amount of burned seeds and other botanical remains. Extensive flotation was carried out, both for the content of these jars and for many other samples from the various trenches, giving an abundant amount of palaeobotanical samples.

Evidence of sealings was found in the form of burnt clay chunks with impressions of cords and strings, but no seal impression was found in this trench. However both stone stamp seals with drilled motives and bronze compartmented seals were found in other parts of the site.

At the same time two more trenches were opened in the central part of the site, that revealed a BMAC necropolis and were immediately enlarged to 10x10 m. Other two smaller trenches were excavated in the southern part of the site, and also these contained BMAC graves. In two trial pits it was found that the graveyard has two different layers: the graves of the BMAC are almost at the surface, while the ones of the 4th millennium are 80-150 cm deeper.

In addition 28 small testing pits were dug systematically in the periphery of the site to establish the extension of the archaeological layers, an information instrumental for the protection and the safe-keeping of the archaeological complex, to avoid further damage by agricultural and other economical activities.

The most spectacular results of the first campaign came from the excavations in the BMAC necropolis. 7 BMAC tombs were found in the various trenches, one of them so well-preserved that it was taken away to be exposed in the Bojnurd museum (fig. 2). The graves gave a good amount of materials, both paradigmatic for the BMAC and not so typical, and one of them was particularly significant. In it were found, among other things, a copper/bronze bowl, a tanged bronze dagger, a 6-strands necklace (fig. 3), a very elaborate pin or kohl stick with a large head of alternating black and white stones (fig. 4), a perfect reproduction in marble of a sheep/goat astragalus, other gaming pieces and an object composed by decorated stone triangles originally joined by bronze wires (fig. 5), probably a diadem or a very complex necklace.

Unfortunately there is little evidence of burial structures, due to agricultural activities and erosion. BMAC graves were on the average about 20 cm below the surface. However, it

was possible to reconstruct part of the burial ritual. All the bodies were deposited on the right side, crouched, with the face looking south-eastwards. The grave-goods were at the head and at the feet of the deceased, who always wore at least one bronze bracelet and often had a vase in the hands. Among the grave-goods there was always one cooking pot, blackened by fire, that contained remains of food.

The importance of the graveyard goes beyond the objects found. Up to now on the Eastern Iranian plateau many luxury objects of the BMAC were found, but this is the first time that a BMAC necropolis was excavated, not only with the luxury object but with the typical pottery too (fig. 6). BMAC originated in Southern Central Asia (Bactria and Margiana, in nowadays Southern Turkmenia, Uzbekistan and Northern Afghanistan), so this fact will shed new lights on the interactions between Iranian Plateau and Central Asia, both before the origin of the BMAC that eventually lead to its appearance, and later on, in the times of the spreading of the BMAC on the Iranian Plateau and in the times of the crisis of urbanization systems in Eastern Iran. This will help us to understand the dynamics of the Dark Ages, extending from the end of 3rd millennium BCE to the beginning of 1st.

The excavations outside the graveyard revealed that the original nucleus of the settlement of Chalow Tepe, in the Chalcolithic period, was in the easternmost part of the site and that later it extended westwards. The acme was reached in early-middle 4th millennium, when typical pottery was found all over the place, and great complexes of large storage jars, found in all the trenches in the western part of the sites on an area covering more than one hectare, show the presence of extensive storage areas. The meaning of such a large complex is still to be studied and understood, but evidently it has significant connections with the type of social structure of the Grey Ware culture of late 4th – early 3rd millennium BCE.

Surface pottery indicates also the presence of residential areas of the BMAC period, of the Early Iron age (both with local Iron Age pottery and with ceramics connected with Central Asia) and of the later phases of the Iron Age. Up to now no traces of Achaemenid period were found.

As already said the pottery found in the excavations of the settlement shows great similarities with the ceramics from Shah Tepe, and Tureng Tepe, both of them in the Gorgan plain. The location of Tepe Chalow, south of the Alborz chain and on the plain at the fringes of the Dasht-e Kavir, would rather have suggested connections with Tepe Hissar. The lack of oases with surface water between Chalow and Hissar (the ones now existing obtain water from qanats and not from springs) explain why the contacts between these two sites were almost absent. Furthermore Chalow lies exactly on an important caravan route that in the Middle Ages connected Nishapur and Gorgan, on the easiest road through the mountains to the Atrak valley and eventually to the Caspian Sea plain. This also facilitated contacts with the region of Gorgan in 4th millennium and previously.

Another of the peculiar aspects of the site of Chalow evidenced in the first campaign is its spatial organization. Chalow is not a mound with a vertical stratigraphy, like most of the sites of Iran, but it is characterized by a horizontal stratigraphy, with the settlement extending in surface through the times and not in height. Furthermore the settlement is characterized by a complex play of settled areas, graveyards and cultivated zones, that often changed through the times, so that it must be studied not like a site in itself, but rather like an oasis, a unit with a series of specialized areas, and the settlements are just one of them.

Further fieldwork in the next years will elucidate the problems presented here and will further evidence the role of the Chalow area and of the whole Northern Khorasan as a key region for the study of the cultural connections between Iran and Central Asia.

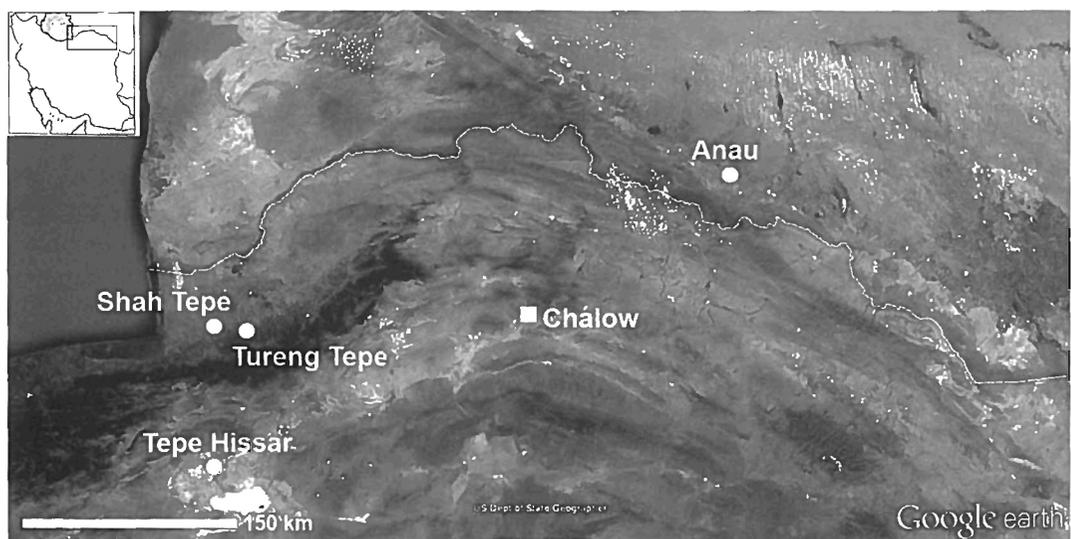


Fig. 1. The location of Chalow and of the other relevant sites.



Fig. 2. Grave 3 during the excavation.

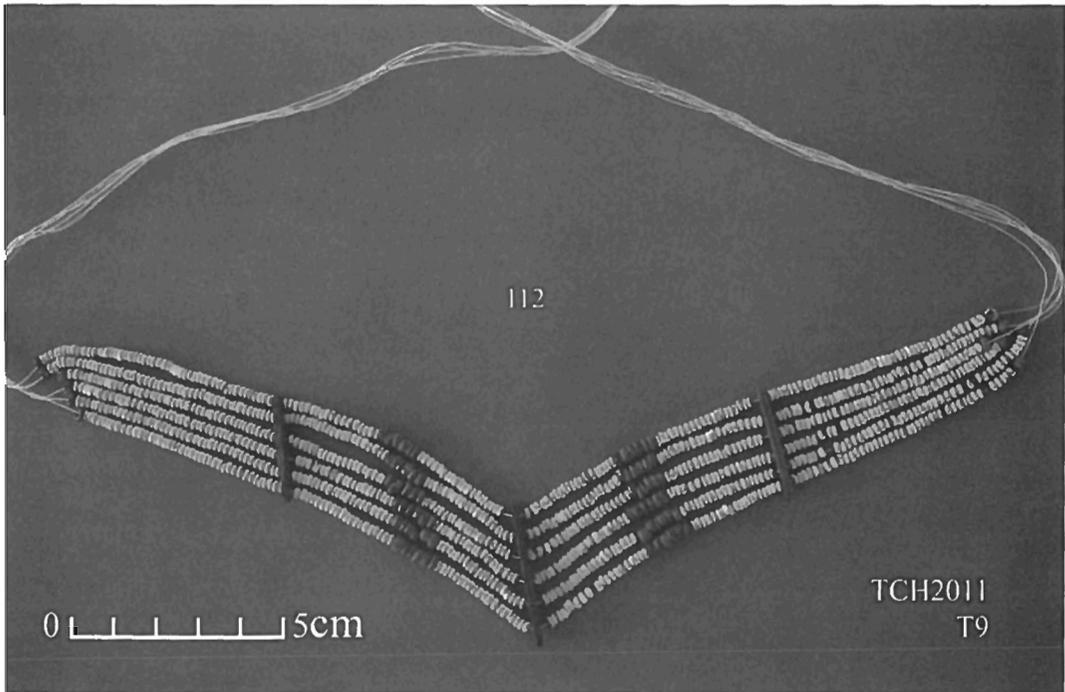


Fig. 3. The necklace from Grave 1 Trench 9.

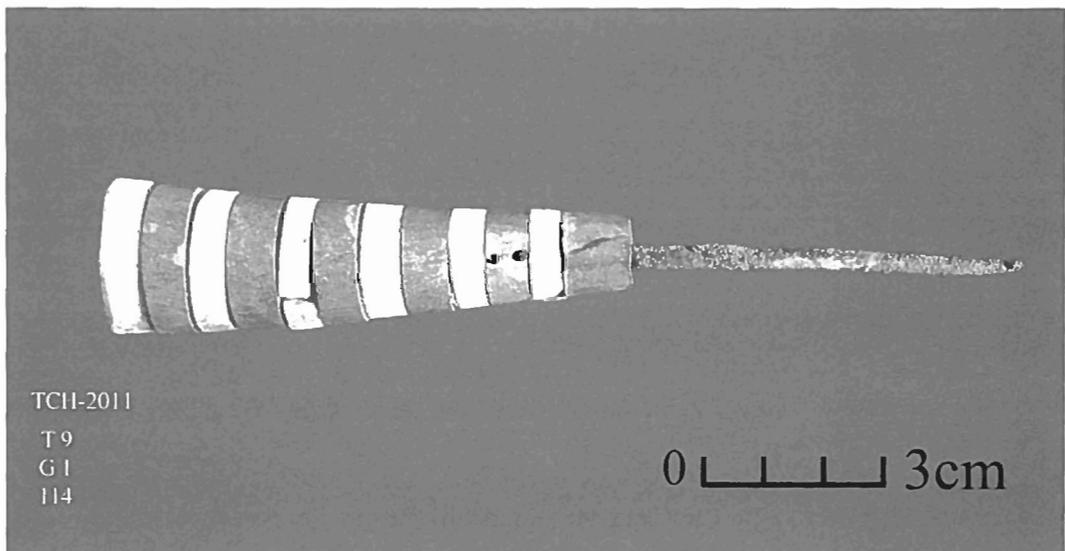
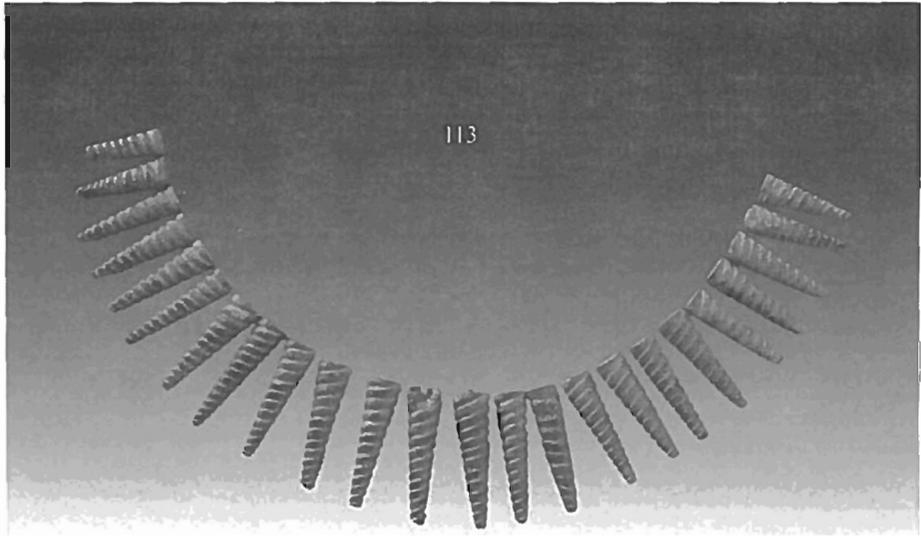


Fig. 4. The pin/kohlstick from Grave 1 Trench 9.



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Fig. 5. The diadem/necklace from Grave 1 Trench 9.

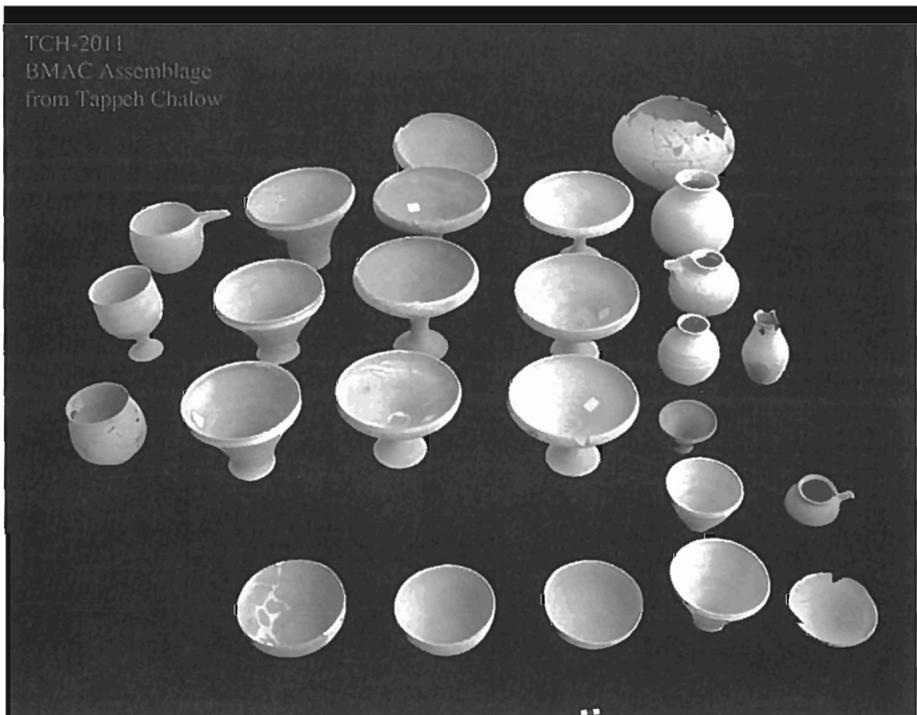


Fig. 6. Pottery from the BMAC necropolis.

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¹ Il *corpus* delle iscrizioni vascolari costituisce un'eccezione, poiché raccoglie tutte le iscrizioni appartenenti a questa tipologia indipendentemente dal sito di provenienza: *Corpus delle iscrizioni vascolari in lineare B*, A. Sacconi (ed.), Roma 1974 (Incunabula Graeca, LVII).

² In tabella sono indicate solo le edizioni in traslitterazione più recenti.

³ *Corpus of Mycenaean Inscriptions from Knossos*, J. Chadwick, L. Godart, J. T. Killen, J.-P. Olivier, A. Sacconi, I. A. Sakellarakis (ed.), 4 vols, Cambridge – Roma 1986-1998 (Incunabula Graeca, LXXXVIII:1-4).

⁴ *The Knossos Tablets. Fifth Edition. A Transliteration* by J. T. Killen and J.-P. Olivier, Salamanca 1989 (*Minos Supl.*, 11).

⁵ Un corpus dei documenti in lineare B di Pilo è attualmente in preparazione a cura di L. Godart e J.-P. Olivier (vedi le comunicazioni dei due autori in *Études mycéniennes 2010. Actes du XIIIe colloque international sur les textes égéens*, Sèvres, Paris, Nanterre, 20-23 septembre 2010, P. Carlier et al. (ed.), Pisa-Roma 2012 [Biblioteca di « Pasiphae », 10]).

⁶ *The Pylos Tablets Transcribed. Part I: Texts and Notes*, E. L. Bennett, Jr., J.-P. Olivier (ed.), Roma 1973 (Incunabula Graeca, LI); *The Pylos Tablets Transcribed. Part II: Hands, Concordances, Indices*, E. L. Bennett, Jr., J.-P. Olivier (ed.), Roma 1976 (Incunabula Graeca, LIX).

⁷ *Thèbes. Fouilles de la Cadmée. III. Corpus des documents d'archives en linéaire B de Thèbes (1-433)*, V. L. Aravantinos, L. Godart, A. Sacconi (ed.), Pisa – Roma 2002 (Biblioteca di « Pasiphae », 3).

⁸ *Thèbes. Fouilles de la Cadmée. IV. Les textes de Thèbes (1-433). Translittération et tableaux des scribes*, V. L. Aravantinos, M. Del Frego, L. Godart, A. Sacconi (ed.), Pisa – Roma 2005 (Biblioteca di « Pasiphae », 4).

⁹ *Corpus delle iscrizioni in lineare B di Micene*, A. Sacconi (ed.), Roma 1974 (Incunabula Graeca, LVIII).

¹⁰ *The Tablets and Nodules in Linear B from Tiryns, Thebes and Mycenae. A Revised Transliteration* by J. L. Melena and J.-P. Olivier (ed.), Salamanca 1991 (*Minos Supl.*, 12).