

Hamadan – Ecbatana. Field season 2004

The tepe of Hamadan, to be identified with the ancient Ecbatana, the capital of the Median empire, was excavated by Dr. M. R. Sarrāf, of the Iranian Centre for Archaeological Research, who between 1983 and 1999 carried out eleven field seasons (Sarrāf 1989-90, 1996-97, 1997, 1999, 2003, in print).

During these campaigns significant surfaces were excavated and important architectural remains were exposed. The excavator does not define their function and specifies that it is not yet possible to date them (Sarrāf 2003: 274; Sarrāf in print). R. Boucharlat, comparing the published plans with other sites, attributed the structures to the Seleucid or Parthian period (Boucharlat 1998: 184-185), a dating consistent with the available C14 determinations (Sarrāf in print).

Therefore the Iranian Centre for Archaeological Research thought it necessary to excavate a testing trench to determine the stratigraphy of the architecture excavated by Dr. Sarrāf and of the tepe of Ecbatana and proposed the Istituto per lo Studio delle Civiltà dell'Egeo e del Vicino Oriente to take part in this research.

Field went on from 31st October and 30th November 2004 in square AR 40 and the still surviving portion of square AS 40 east of it, determined on the grid fixed by Dr. Sarrāf. The new area lies about 10 m northeast of the north-eastern corner of the Central Area excavation,

Immediately a dump was found, which covered the whole surface of the testing trench. It was brown, loose and contained, among other things, pottery from the Iron 3 period to our days, plastic remains, modern implements of iron and other metals, coins of the Pahlavi period.

In the uppermost part of the excavation was found a very small portion of the corner of a room, whose mudbrick walls were preserved for a maximum height of 30 cm and rested on rounded stones foundations (level 0). The walls and the floors were covered with a white plaster (fig. 1).

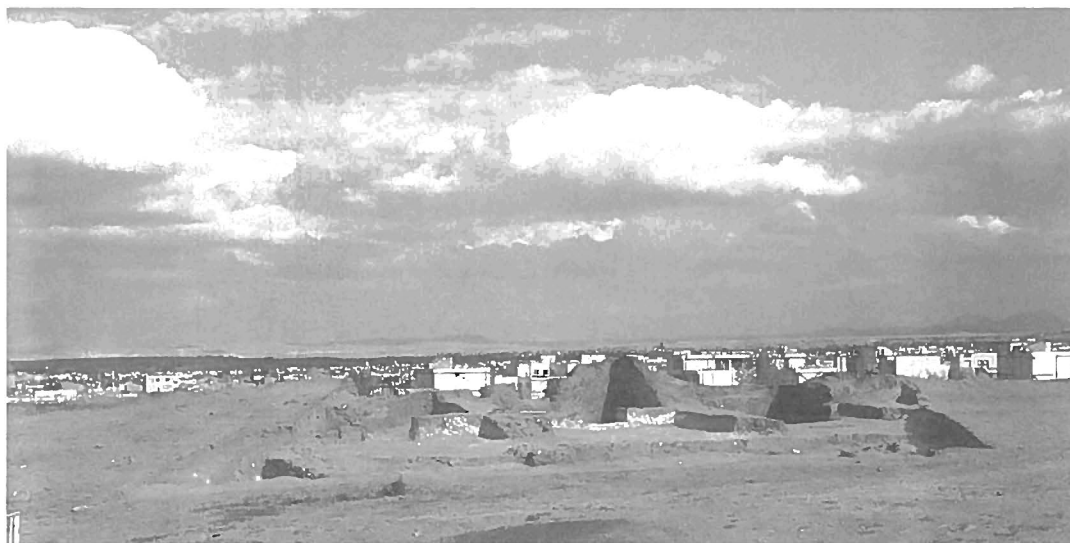


Fig. 1 – Square AR 40. Structural level 1, very recent remains of Pahlavi period.

Below the above-mentioned fragment of room, always under the garbage dump, were found the remains of a lower structural level formed by 5 rooms and a courtyard (level 1). The floors and the walls, which had foundations of rounded stones, were covered by a white plaster. On the floors were found coins of Pahlavi period and in the filling, among all kind of modern refuses, was unearthed an ostrakon of Islamic period (fig. 2). It is a fragment of a magical bowl, with an inscription 15 lines long in Aramaic characters, which most probably is to be attributed to the numerous Jewish population of Hamadan, the city of Esther.

Under level 1 a large number of bread-ovens (*tanurs*) were found, 12 in total, which constitute level 2. The largest of the *tanurs* had a mouth diameter of 80 cm and was 78 cm deep. Another had a square mudbrick frame around the mouth.

The eastern and southern parts of the excavation were heavily disturbed by a very large hole excavated for the foundations of level 1, while the other part was less disturbed. All over the excavation contemporary remains (plastic fragments, Pahlavi coins, batteries and so on) were found.

In this period the excavated area was most probably an open space.

Level 3 was composed by two adjacent floors and one more *tanur* which rested on one of them. The floor in this point was slightly concave and paved with flat stones and baked bricks, which clearly were a base for the oven.

This level was associated with mixed pottery of various periods, the latest being very recent, and the excavated area was an open space. The south-western and southern parts of the excavation were still disturbed by foundations and by the refuse pit on which rested level 1.

Below level 3 the remains of other three floors were found and a poorly preserved structure in the southern part of the excavation. The main wall was oriented E-W, was coated in parts with straw and clay (*kahgel*) and white plaster and contained vaulted niches. A small mudbrick structure, which also contained a little vaulted niche, abutted the southern face of the main wall, which in the easternmost part was bonded to a second wall, oriented approximately north-south. The structures were heavily damaged by the pit, filled with refuses, reaching down from the upper levels.

The structure and the floors constituted level 4. The southern part of the excavation was heavily disturbed by the foundations and by the above-mentioned pit, therefore the floors south of the main wall were probably destroyed. Also in this period the greatest part of the area was open.

The surface of the excavation was then reduced and the activity continued with two testing trenches, one 2.5x3 m in the north-western corner of the excavation and the other, 2.5x7 m, in the north-eastern one. The southern part of this testing trench was still disturbed by the pit descending from the previous periods, with modern refuses, plastic remains and so on. Among these late refuses was found a headless terracotta figurine, possibly dating back to the Parthian period (fig. 3). The bottom of the pit was soon reached and under it were found the remains of level 5, which was formed by a wall oriented approximately northwest – southeast, whose upper part was destroyed by the modern hole with garbage dump. The south-western face of the wall was coated with white plaster and showed the corner of another wall which entered the section. A floor which abutted the two walls was equally white-plastered and was heavily destroyed by the modern hole. The wall, which was formed by three courses of mudbricks measuring 42x42x10 cm, could be attributed to the Sasanian period on the basis of the associated pottery.

The wall constituting level 5 partly rested on a lower one and jutted out about 40 cm. Also this lower wall, which constituted level 6, was formed by 3 courses of mudbricks 43x43x8 cm. In the northern part of the excavation a platform, formed by one or two rows of mudbricks

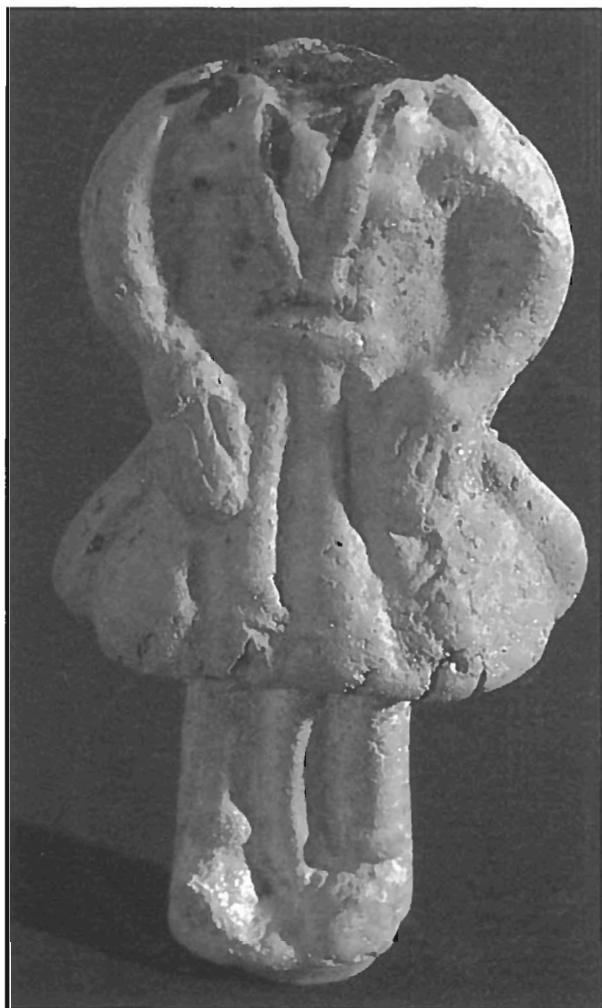


Fig. 3 – Figurine possibly of Parthian period.

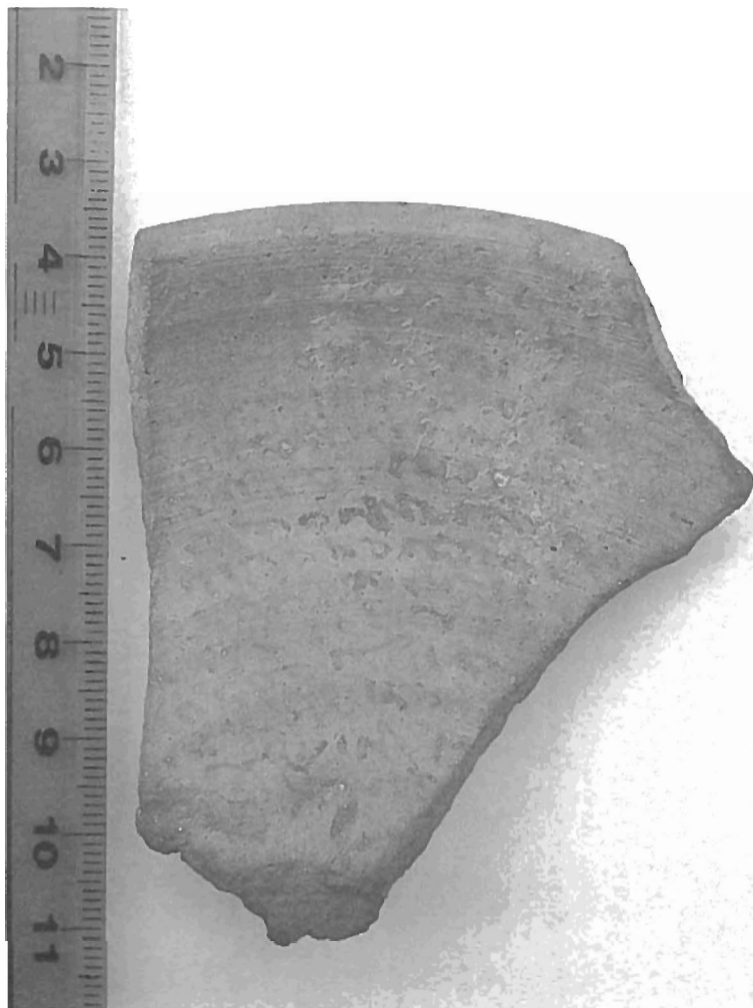


Fig. 2 – Ostrakon, fragment of a magical bowl with Aramaic inscription.



Fig. 4 –The excavation area at the end of the fieldwork seen from the lower part of the tepe. The deepest part is the Eastern testing trench.

according to the places, was brought to light. This level also, the lowest exposed in the eastern testing trench, is of Sasanian period (fig. 4).

In the western testing trench the upper layers had still pottery of the Islamic period, then under the bottom of a hole marked by stone slabs, undisturbed horizontal levels were reached, whose pottery was Sasanian and earlier. Lower down a structure of one course of mudbricks was found, whose absolute height was about the same of the wall of level 6 in the eastern testing trench. The filling under the mudbrick structure was very rich in charcoal, ashes and bones, evidence of a garbage dump

Lower down in the north-western corner of the testing pit was unearthed part of a plastered wall oriented southwest-northeast, which entered the excavation for about 30 cm. In this field season the wall was exposed to a height of 90 cm and neither floors nor foundations were reached. The wall evidently descends further down.

A *pisé* wall oriented southeast-northwest was found in the south-western corner of the excavation, and in this case too the wall was not exposed for its total height. Further down, besides the garbage dump of Sasanian period, were exposed undamaged deposits whose latest pottery was Parthian. The excavation ended soon after having reached these Parthian deposits.

Summing up the evidence hitherto gathered in squares AR 40 – AS 40, the earliest deposits reached go back to the Parthian period. In Sasanian age two building levels (6 and 5) were erected and a pit was excavated into the Parthian deposits. Immediately over these

remains there are very recent structures (level 4). It is not probable that in this period a large amount of archaeological deposits was eliminated all over the tepe (the architecture exposed by Dr. Sarrāf is always close to the surface), therefore the excavation area was abandoned in late Sasanian period. Built areas, however, were not very far because in the excavation were found pottery and tiles of Seljuk, Ilkhanid, Timurid, Safavid and Qājār period. The area was settled again in Pahlavi period, with the poor buildings of a slums district (level 4) and slightly later in the excavated surface a large number of tanurs were built (levels 3 and 2). Soon after large holes were dug down to the Sasanian levels, in which all kind of contemporary refuse were dumped. On the holes was built level 1, which later was used as a garbage dump, then level 0 was erected, the zone became again a garbage dump and finally in 1971 the Iranian government acquired and protected the archaeological area and demolished the slums.

In this first season of excavation the architecture exposed by Dr. Sarrāf was not reached yet. The deepest points of the testing trenches are about 2.60 and 1.77 m under the maximum height of the structures of the Central Area but no trace was found of the structures that, according to the reconstructed plans (e. g. Sarrāf 1996-97: fig. 26; Boucharlat 1998: fig. 2), should have been found in the excavated areas. As it is not plausible that such a regular and modular architecture ended just a few metres away from the central excavation (Dr. Sarrāf found the same system on a large area), it is probable that in squares AR 40-AS 40 the upper part of the architectural remains was destroyed in Sasanian or in late Parthian period. On the basis of the presence in the western testing trench of Parthian levels at the depth of -3.40 m, which were disturbed by a pit of Sasanian period, it is also possible to indicate the late Parthian period as the *terminus ante quem* for the architecture excavated by Dr. Sarrāf. This agrees both with the datation proposed by Boucharlat (1998: 185) and with the C¹⁴ datings (Sarrāf in print).

The results of the fieldwork allow us also to suggest some other elements for the chronology of the tepe of Ecbatana. Up to now the earliest pottery found in the excavation (in mixed context, see above) or on the surface can be assigned to Iron III period. It is reasonable to believe that, if some earlier pottery existed in the deepest layer of Ecbatana, some evidence would have been found on surface and among unstratified materials.

Therefore it is likely that the first settlement of the future tepe of Ecbatana dates back to Iron III, which includes the Median period. It is even possible that the foundation of the site is connected with the rise of the Median state and with the need of a capital not connected with the previous political entities.

Further researches will clarify the questions mentioned above and will give new data on the history of the city of Ecbatana.

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