

Tall-i Bakun A, Marv Dasht Plain, Iran

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The research background

The first substantial archaeological investigations conducted by Japanese scientists in the Middle East took place in 1956. They were conducted by the Tokyo University Iraq-Iran Archaeological Expedition, headed by the late Professor Namio Egami. The major aim of this expedition was to excavate the prehistoric mound sites of Telul eth-Thalathat, northern Iraq, from October 1956. On the way to Iraq, in September 1956, the expedition members extended their travel to Iran to visit related prehistoric sites. Then, in Tehran, a generous, unexpected offer was provided by the authorities of the Department of Antiquities and the National Museum of Archaeology, who suggested that “if the Expedition, having come so far from Japan, made excavations even for only a short period of time and brought a part of the excavated objects back to Japan, it would add to the cultural exchange and scientific cooperation between the two countries” (Egami and Masuda 1959: v). The Expedition cordially accepted this generous offer, and carried out small-scale excavations in the Marv Dasht plain, southwestern Iran.

This region was chosen due to a couple of reasons. First, it was one of the rare regions where early farming village sites had been known in Iran at that time (Fig. 1). Extensive investigations by the University of Chicago team in 1932 and 1937, following the sounding by E. Herzfeld's work in 1928, at two mounds of Tall-i Bakun A and B, had yielded rich archaeological records from the Chalcolithic period (Fig. 2). Furthermore, ongoing research by the Belgian archaeologist L. Vanden Berghe in the early 1950s revealed occurrences of even earlier village sites in the same regions. Second, the Marv Dasht plain accommodated the famous Achaemenid capital site, Persepolis. Accordingly, the Japanese expedition, which comprised not only prehistoric archaeologists but also art historians, thought it convenient to conduct additional research at Achaemenid monuments, along with conducting excavations at prehistoric mounds.

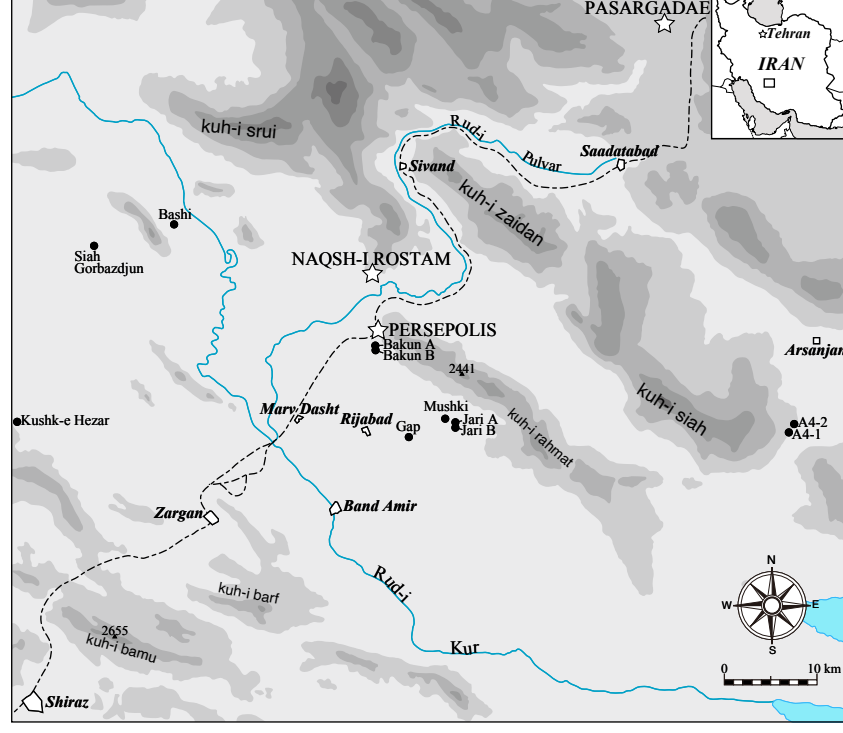


Fig. 1 Map showing the location of Tall-i Bakun A and related sites in the Marv Dasht plain.



Fig. 2 Distant view of Tall-i Bakun A.

The excavations

The sites selected for the Japanese excavations were the twin mounds of Tall-i Bakun, designated as A and B, which are approximately 150 m apart from each other. They are situated approximately 2.5 km south of Persepolis, in the northwest part of the Marv Dasht plain. They lie at an altitude of approximately 1650 m above sea level. Tall-i Bakun A comprises an oval mound of 150 m by 120 m, with a height of 4 to 5 m from the surrounding fields. The excavations were carried out for one week from September 25, 1956, under the direction of Seiichi Masuda.

A trench of 3 m by 10 m was opened at the west-central part of the mound, in a north-south direction (Figs. 3, 4). The excavations reached about 2 m deep from the surface, but did not reach the virgin soil. Four distinct lithological layers were defined from the top. While the upper three layers (I to III) did not yield any architectural remains, Layer IV revealed parts of a rectangular mud-brick wall. The University of Chicago's excavations demonstrated the existence of a large scale building complex, containing numerous cellular rooms, each of which was apparently controlled by a certain administrative system, reflecting the emerging complexity of the society at that time. However, because the excavation area in the Japanese field season was too small, the nature of the Level IV building was not interpreted closely.



Fig. 3 Overview of the 1956 Japanese trench of Tall-i Bakun A.



Fig. 4 The 1956 excavations at Tall-i Bakun A.

Major archaeological finds

The recovered archaeological remains included plenty of painted wares (Nishiaki 2003; Fig. 3), known as Bakun type, and other objects also from this period (Figs. 5, 6). Although the excavators reported their similarities with the Level III pottery assemblage of the University of Chicago's excavations, later studies pointed to more resemblances to earlier assemblages from Levels I and II.

The pottery collection stored at the University of Tokyo has recently been subjected to intensive re-analyses, which have revealed features typical of the early part of the Late Bakun period (Nishiaki 2003; Miki 2015). This estimate matches the radiocarbon chronology of the Bakun period. The latest fieldwork was conducted by Abbas Alizadeh in 2002, who aimed to date the cultural deposits for the main occupation period of this mound through assignments. According to the three radiocarbon dates thus obtained, the main occupations at this mound can be assigned to a period of ca. 4500 to 4300 cal. BC.* *The text is after Nishiaki 2020.



Fig. 5 Chalcolithic stone objects from Tall-i Bakun A, 1956.



Fig. 6 Bakun pottery in situ from Tall-i Bakun A (BKA. P1, Level IV) (Nishiaki 2003).

Further reading

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- Nishiaki, Y. (2003) *Catalogue of Archaeological Materials in the Department of Archaeology of Western Asia. Part 6: Prehistoric Pottery from the Marv Dasht Plain, Iran*. The University Museum, The University of Tokyo, Material Reports No. 51. Tokyo: The University Museum, The University of Tokyo.
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