

Dailaman Cemetery Sites, Alborz Mountains, North Iran

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Introduction

The Dailaman district, Gilan Province, became an important research field of the Tokyo University Iraq-Iran Archaeological Expedition, due to a rather surprising discovery made at an antique shop in Tehran. When the members of the mission were staying in Teheran, while preparing for excavations in the Marv Dasht plain (see this volume), March 1959, they happened to encounter Sasanian cut glasses, which were virtually indistinguishable from the cut glasses in the Shosoin Repository constructed by the Imperial family of Japan in the 8th century AD. This great moment signified the bridging of ancient Persia and Japan among scientific communities interested in the Silk Road (Egami et al. 1963). The members of the expedition were excited to determine the provenance of these cut glasses. The Dailaman highland plateau, Gilan, was identified as the most likely origin (Fig. 1). When they visited the plateau, what astonished them was the large number of looted pits at the ancient graveyards there, which evidently indicated a need for scientific documentation. Moreover, the necessity for research was also evident in contributing to the research of the cultural exchange in the antique periods of Eurasia.

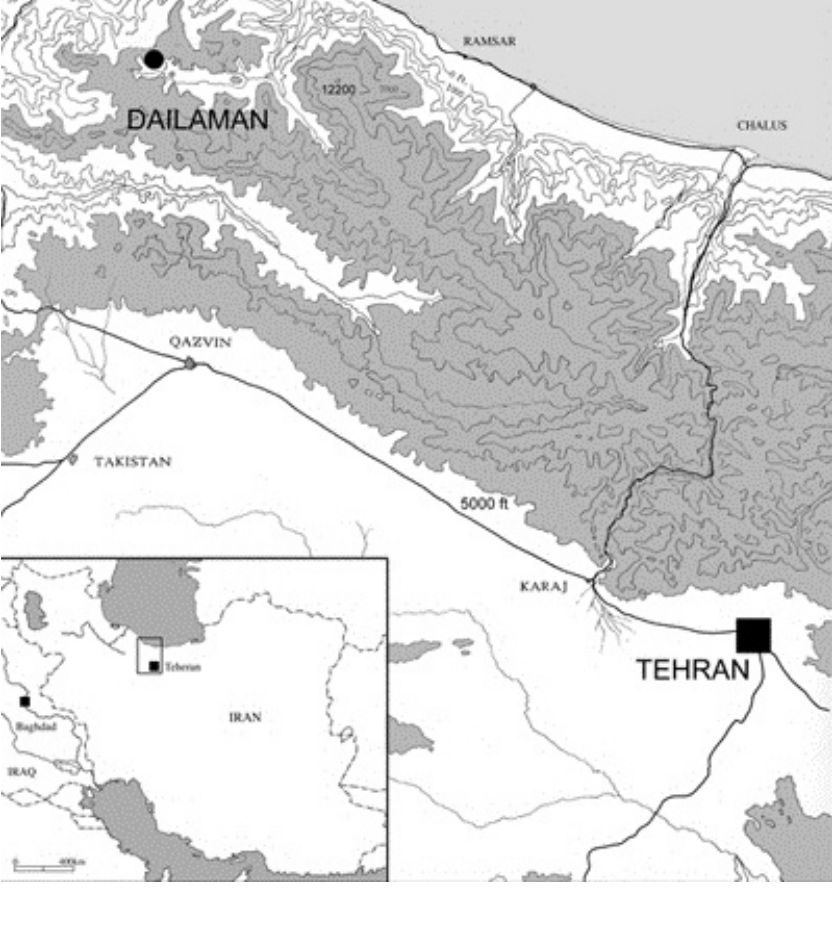


Fig. 1 Map showing the location of the Dailaman district, Gilan, Iran (Nishiaki et al. 2006).

Thanks to the generous understanding of the Iranian authorities at the Department of Antiquities and the National Museum of Archaeology, the expedition organized field investigations from the next year. Under the direction of Namio Egami, the excavations in 1960 and 1964 led to the discovery of dozens of ancient graveyards, dating from the Bronze Age to the early Parthian Periods, at six archaeological sites: Ghalekuti I, II, Hassani Mahale, Lasulkan, Noruz Mahale, and Khoramrud (Figs. 2 and 3). These intensive excavations eventually did not yield cut glasses of the Shosoin type. Nevertheless, the tombs produced an enormous amount of archaeological records derived from the Late Bronze Age to the Parthian Period, thereby providing a unique opportunity to investigate changes in the mortuary practices, the ceramic chronology, the evolution of social complexity, and other aspects over this time period. All of these topics were insufficiently understood at that time. The chronological positions of the finds at these sites are summarized in Fig. 3 (Nishiaki et al. 2006).

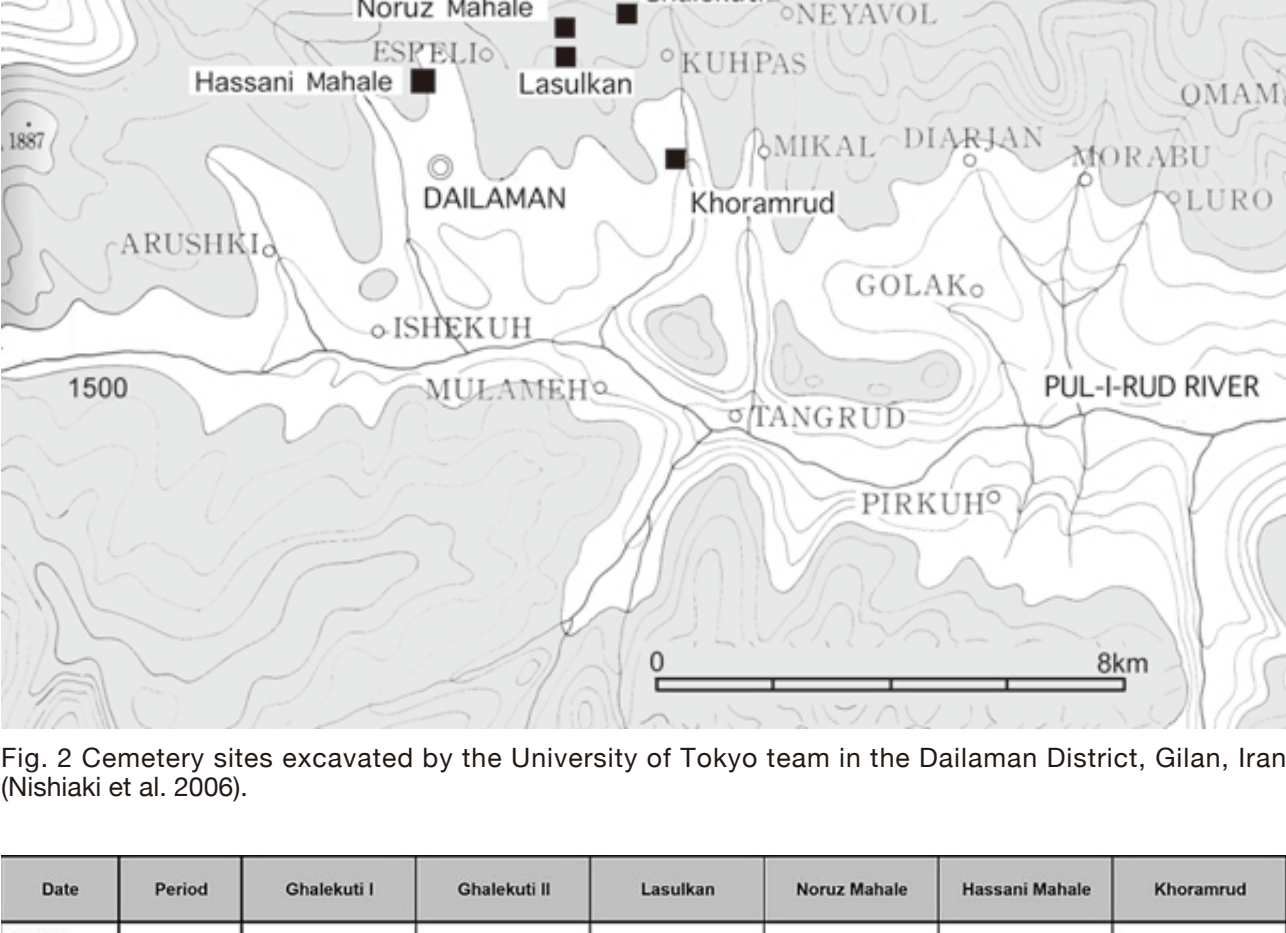


Fig. 2 Cemetery sites excavated by the University of Tokyo team in the Dailaman District, Gilan, Iran (Nishiaki et al. 2006).

Date	Period	Ghalekuti I	Ghalekuti II	Lasulkan	Noruz Mahale	Hassani Mahale	Khoramrud
AD 224							
	Parthia	Tomb 4			Tomb B-I, II, IV, VI Tomb C-I Tomb D-I, III, IV Tomb E-I	Tomb 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8	Tomb I Tomb A-VI
ca. 250 BC							
ca. 331 BC	Post-Achaemenid	Tomb 9	Tomb 2, 5, 6				
ca. 550 BC	Achaemenid	Tomb 5, 9					
	Iron Age III	Area B, Layer I Tomb B-III Tomb C-I					
	Iron Age II		Tomb 4	Tomb IV/7			
	Iron Age I	Tomb A-I, II, III, IV, VI, VII, VIII Tomb B-III Tomb C-I, II, IV Tomb 1, 27, 6, 7, 8, 9		Tomb Va, Vb Stone-circle II			
ca. 1450 BC							
	Bronze Age				Area D, Layer II		

Fig. 3 Provisional chronology of the archaeological remains recovered at the Dailaman sites (Nishiaki et al. 2006).

Ghalekuti I (1960, 1964)

This is one of the most extensive cemetery complexes known to date. It is located about 1 km northwest of Kuhpas, a small hamlet, approximately 4 km east of the Dailaman Village. The ancient graveyard at this site extends across a small plateau of some 600 m by 300 m, which is cut by gullies and wadis to four parts. These were designated Ghalekuti IV, I, II, and III. Ghalekuti I extends for 200 m in the north-south direction (NS), and 100 m in the east-west direction (EW). The expedition recorded a total of 243 looted tombs before the excavations were conducted (Fig. 4; Fukai and Ikeda 1971: 6). Eight trenches were opened in parts of the less looted areas, Areas A to H. They exposed a total of 27 tombs, which covered almost all of the periods from the Iron Age to the Parthian period, providing a chronological standard for the other tombs (Fig. 3–5). The important discoveries included tombs of the Early Iron Age, whose burial practices and funerary goods indicated a connection to North Eurasian cultural traditions (Egami et al. 1966). Beside tombs, some stone constructions and occupational debris were recovered in Layer 1 of Area B, suggesting the existence of a small hamlet, also of the Iron Age.

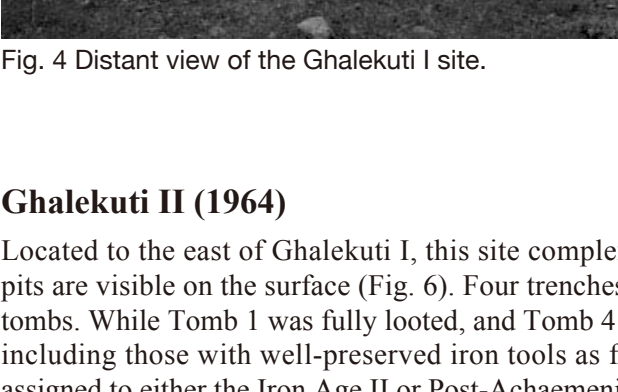


Fig. 4 Distant view of the Ghalekuti I site.

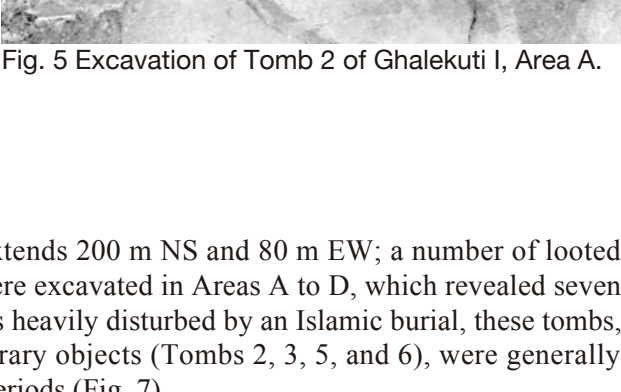


Fig. 5 Excavation of Tomb 2 of Ghalekuti I, Area A.

Ghalekuti II (1964)

Located to the east of Ghalekuti I, this site complex extends 200 m NS and 80 m EW; a number of looted pits are visible on the surface (Fig. 6). Four trenches were excavated in Areas A to D, which revealed seven tombs. While Tomb 1 was fully looted, and Tomb 4 was heavily disturbed by an Islamic burial, these tombs, including those with well-preserved iron tools as funerary objects (Tombs 2, 3, 5, and 6), were generally assigned to either the Iron Age II or Post-Achaemenid periods (Fig. 7).

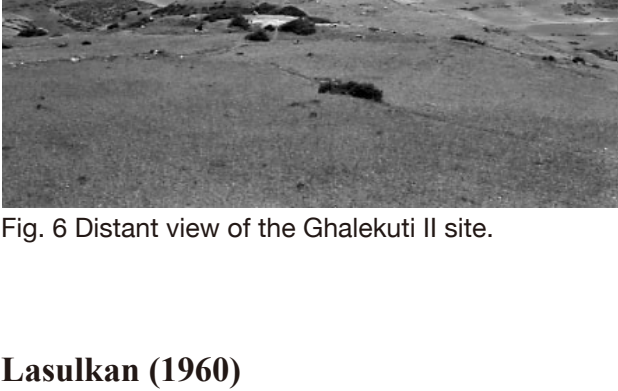


Fig. 6 Distant view of the Ghalekuti II site.

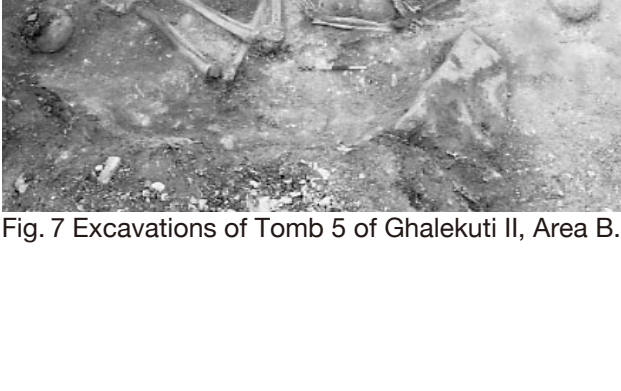


Fig. 7 Excavations of Tomb 5 of Ghalekuti II, Area B.

Lasulkan (1960)

This is an area defined at the eastern slope of a hamlet, Espeli, situated about 2 km northeast of the Dailaman Village (Fig. 8). Two trenches, A and B, were opened. This site is characterized by a series of "stone circles," which represent stone constructions arranged in a circular form, about 5 m in diameter. Nearly twenty such constructions were recorded on the surface, among which four examples (Stone-circles 1 to IV) were excavated. As a result, they were regarded to constitute parts of Iron Age tombs that encircled burial chambers (Egami et al. 1966: 78; Egami and Ikeda 1963). Beside these Iron Age tombs that dominated archaeological remains of this site (Fig. 9), the excavators identified a "pre-ceramic" layer underneath, reportedly containing flint "cores" and "flakes" (Eagmi et al. 1965: 82–85). These were interpreted as evidence that this high mountainous region, over 2,000 m above sea level, was already being exploited by a human group prior to the Pottery Neolithic period. However, a later reanalysis of the recovered flint specimens demonstrated that all these flints were actually naturally fractured geofacts (Nishiaki 2009).

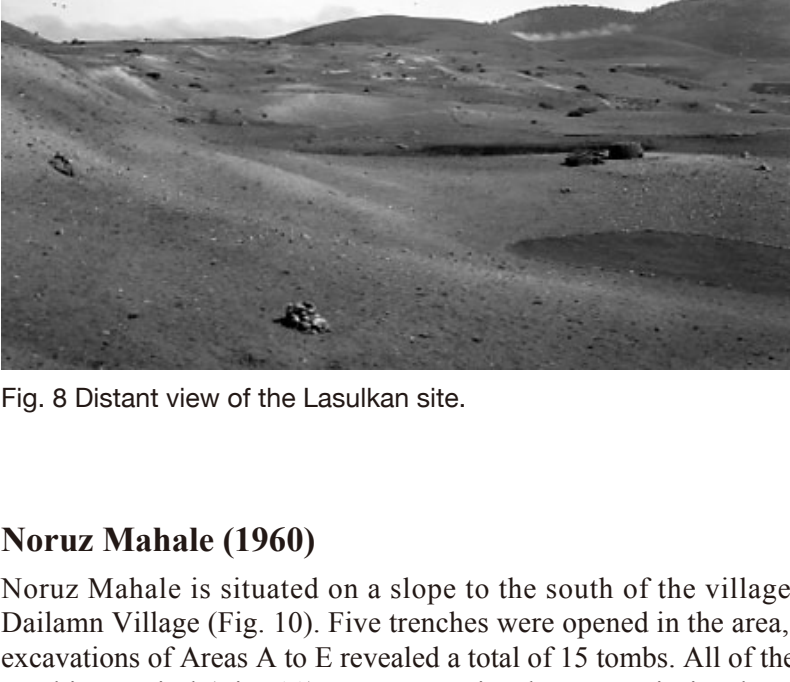


Fig. 8 Distant view of the Lasulkan site.

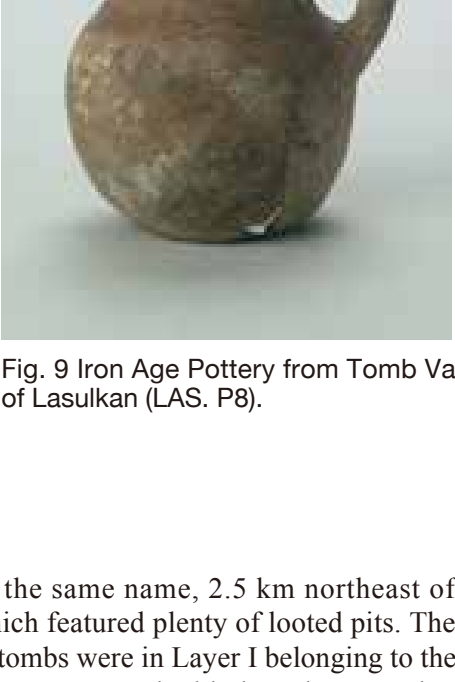


Fig. 9 Iron Age Pottery from Tomb Va of Lasulkan (LAS. P8).

Noruz Mahale (1960)

Noruz Mahale is situated on a slope to the south of the village of the same name, 2.5 km northeast of Dailamn Village (Fig. 10). Five trenches were opened in the area, which featured plenty of looted pits. The excavations of Areas A to E revealed a total of 15 tombs. All of these tombs were in Layer I belonging to the Parthian period (Fig. 11). Up to ten circular or semi-circular pits were unearthed below these tombs, however. Those pits had a diameter of 1.5 to 2 m, and a depth of nearly 1 m. The excavators regarded these pits as storage pits rather than tombs or residential structures (Egami et al. 1966: 349). The associated remains included not only pottery and lithic artifacts, but also faunal remains, including fish bones. These comprise the Layer II assemblage, which has been assigned to the Late Bronze Age (Arimatsu 2005).

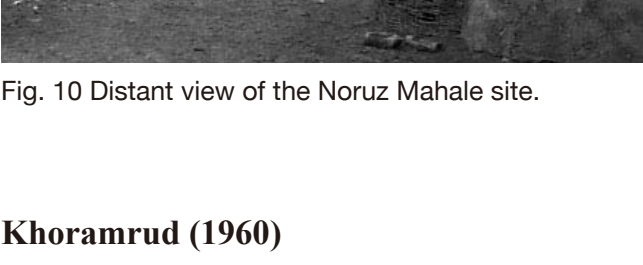


Fig. 10 Distant view of the Noruz Mahale site.



Fig. 11 Late Parthian Pottery from Tomb B-I of Noruz Mahale (NZ. P3)

Khoramrud (1960)

Khoramrud is situated about 4 km east of Dailaman Village, 2 km downstream of the valley that runs through the east of the Ghalekuti site complex (Fig. 12). It is situated on a slope to the north of the small hamlet of Khoramrud (Egami et al. 1966). Two areas were excavated, designated Areas A and B, from the west; 17 tombs were recovered in Area A, numbered Tombs A-I to XV (Fig. 13). All of these were found to be heavily looted, yielding few identifiable objects. On the other hand, Area B contained no tombs. However, one unlooted tomb, Tomb I, was recovered between Areas A and B. In either case, the identified funerary objects indicate a Parthian age for this cemetery complex (Fig. 3).

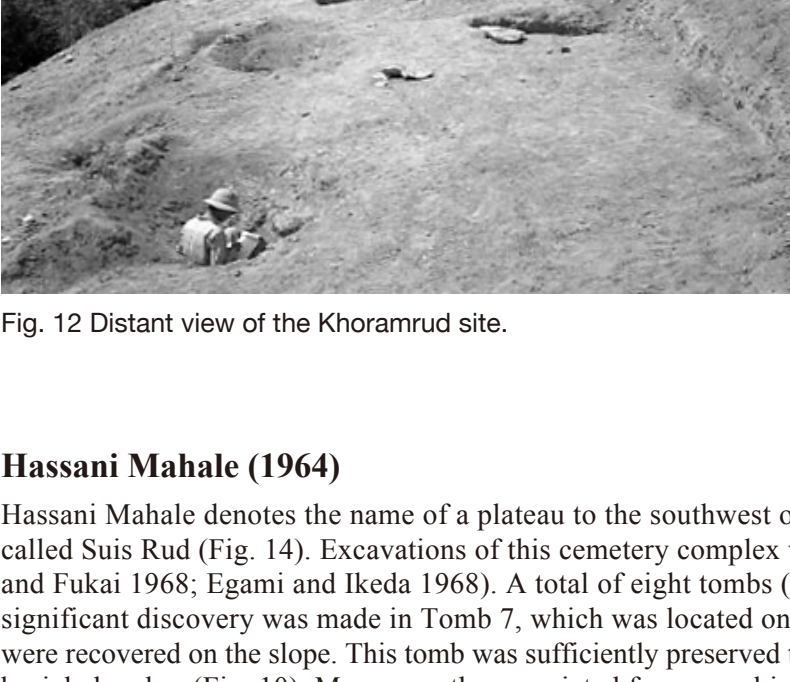


Fig. 12 Distant view of the Khoramrud site.

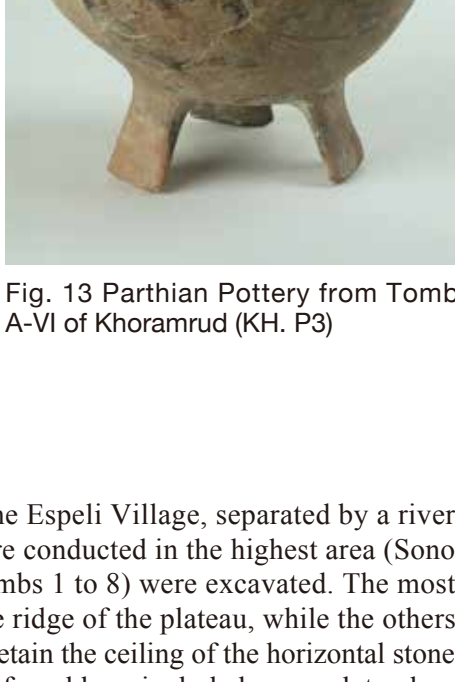


Fig. 13 Parthian Pottery from Tomb A-VI of Khoramrud (KH. P3)

Hassani Mahale (1964)

Hassani Mahale denotes the name of a plateau to the southwest of the Espeli Village, separated by a river called Suis Rud (Fig. 14). Excavations of this cemetery complex were conducted in the highest area (Sono and Fukai 1968; Egami and Ikeda 1968). A total of eight tombs (Tombs 1 to 8) were excavated. The most significant discovery was made in Tomb 7, which was located on the ridge of the plateau, while the others were recovered on the slope. This tomb was sufficiently preserved to retain the ceiling of the horizontal stone burial chamber (Fig. 10). Moreover, the associated funerary objects found here included a complete glass cup with applied decorations (Fig. 15). As the first example of this kind of cup ever recovered through scientific excavations in a Sasanian context, this vessel has served as an important reference point for tracing the development of glass cup production in the antique period. All of the other tombs from this site belong to the Parthian period.*

*The text is after Nishiaki 2020.

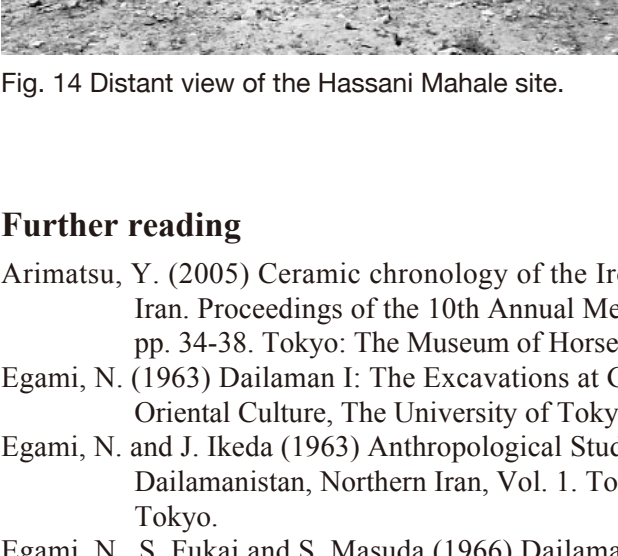


Fig. 14 Distant view of the Hassani Mahale site.

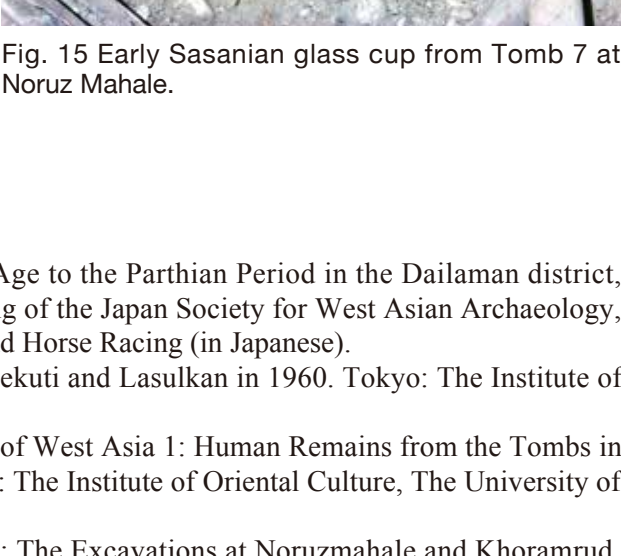


Fig. 15 Early Sasanian glass cup from Tomb 7 at Noruz Mahale.

Further reading

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