

NEAF Grant-in-Aid Report

A travel to southwestern Iran: the Kingdom of Elymais

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Introduction

The reconstruction of history in Ancient Iran is far from simple, with many questions yet unresolved. One of the most problematic and less addressed research fields is the study of those kingdoms that developed in southwestern Iran along the Zagros mountain range – characterized by a complex geography of narrow gorges and incised valleys – in the shadow of the Arsacid reign.

In this geographical context (now the mountainous part of the Khuzestan and the Kohgiluyeh u Buyer Ahmad provinces) and historical framework (the Parthian period), a small reign, widely known during antiquity by the name *Elymais*, was formed. In reality, while Classical sources speak of *Elymais*, Mesopotamian authors speak of *Elam*, suggesting that this kingdom – so often overlooked in the academic world – was probably heir to the centuries-old Elamite kingship and culture.

Research Background

From the 17th century AD onwards, a number of European travellers were astonished to report news of significant ancient monuments throughout southwestern Iran. Since then, the diverse geography of highlands and lowlands has seen archaeological works being primarily directed towards lowland areas, leaving the mountainous Elymaean strongholds poorly understood to this day. A more direct approach to the study of Elymaean archaeology concerns not so much the lowlands and their urban centre (Susiana and its main city Susa, which had a strong Greek and Parthian influence) but rather the desert and desolate wastelands of this rough territory between the Zagros Mountains where sites were developed with major rock reliefs, such as Tang-e Botan, Tang-e Sarvak, Hung-e Azhdar, or religious architecture, such as Bard-e Neshandeh, Masjed-e Soleyman and Shami



Figure 1 – Elymaean relief of Hung-e Azhdar, Izeh (Khuzestan, Iran).

In brief, the kingdom of Elymais had its nucleus of origin in the desolate areas of the Bakhtiari Mountains, where in alternating phases of history it expanded its sphere of influence by dominating the nearby and fertile plain of Susiana and its centre, the ancient city of Susa, and would then promptly retreated in case of need or danger. Furthermore, it was precisely in these relatively inaccessible areas that Elymaeans seemed to feel safest, and in all likelihood this led them to build their richest and most important sanctuaries and areas of worship here.

Research Trip

No much is known about the archaeological sites of Elymais, mainly due to their geographical position within the Zagros mountains. My research trip enabled me to personally view these sites – not only the well known but also the forgotten and unknown ones – and the excavation material of some of these at close hand, with particular emphasis on the statuary.

I began with the area of Shimbar (ca. 150 km NW of Ahwaz, capital of Khuzestan), one of the most isolated, inaccessible and least known regions of Khuzestan. I was searching for the important rock relief of Tang-e Botan, but the only guides that I had at my disposal were geographic maps dating back to the '70s¹. Since 1975, there has been no travel by Western scholars to this area, or if there has been then no articles have since been published. I had to stop with my interpreter and driver in each Bakhtiari village of the surrounding area in order to find some locals who could lead us to the site. Finally, in a small little village, we met an elderly hunter with whom we spent two days with the promise of showing me the “Faces of the Mountains”. The first day, after a one-hour-climb on dangerous mountain trails overlooking the valley, he showed me an inscription – probably never published – but unfortunately not the relief that I was looking for. The next day our climbing was even harder (about 2 and a half hours) up to an altitude of 2,500 m. This time, our guide was armed with a rifle due to the high risk of bear attacks. However, again I was not brought to the place that I was hoping for. On the way back to the village, he assured me that he would take me to Tang-e Botan the next day, but my time and my trust had run out. The encounter with Tang-e Botan will therefore be postponed to the next expedition.

The following day, I visited the far more well known sites of Bard-e Neshandeh and Masjed-e Soleyman, excavated by Roman Ghirshman (the only scholar who had the chance to work on these places) in the 60s and 70s. Here, at last, after years of studies, I had the possibility to obtain primary data (pictures) for my thesis. With great dismay, though, I have noticed that these archaeological sites have been left to decay without adequate security services against intruders and looters (in the case of Bard-e Neshandeh such services are completely absent and the site's surface is covered in pits caused by illegal excavations!).



Figure 2 – Me with my Bakhtiari guide in Shimbar (Khuzestan, Iran).

with enormous potential (statement to extend to the whole Khuzestan). In this case, I have to thank Prof Vito Messina (co-director of the mission) who gave me a clear view of the situation *in situ* and opportunity to take

The day after, I went back to the core of the Zagros mountains, but this time to Izeh (about 125 kilometres east of Ahwaz), where I had the chance to see – not without some difficulties – some of the most important Elymaean rock reliefs, i.e. the sites of Hung-e Azhdar, Hung-e Yaralivand and Hung-e Kamalvand. From here, we headed then to the village of Shami (about 20 km NW of Izeh) where an Iranian-Italian joint expedition has been working for several years, a site which is providing incredible discoveries in a little known area (it was only investigated by Sir Aurel Stein in 1936) but

¹ Vanden Berghe 1983.

some novel photos of the area. Unexpectedly, I also got bitten here by a stray dog, gave me the opportunity to test the excellent Iranian public hospital system.

Over the following days, I went to the south of Ahwaz looking for the sites which Hansman (1978) believed to be the still undiscovered Seleucia-on-the-Hedyphon. First, I found Ja Nishin (no one there knew the site under this name, only a local farmer), the site is enormous and on the surface it is full of pottery from Seleucid, Parthian and early Islamic period. Afterwards, I tried to find Tell Tandy but this was problematic because it borders with a military air base, and the police stopped us on our way there. Before this though, I found a new place with some ruins where a member of the only family living there took me to another site in the middle of nowhere, where – I was told – locals go at night looking for gold. Once there, I found lots of pottery (same of Ja Nishin), Elymaean coins and a coffin (?). Much like the other, the site is huge and in all likelihood unknown.

I spent my last days visiting the cities of Shustar, Shush (Susa) and Dezful and the museums of Susa and Tehran. In particular, at the National Museum of Iran in Tehran, the personnel were extremely accommodating and supportive. They gave me free access to the building where I could speak and discuss with the archivists of every section; as well as providing me with a CD with the pictures of all the unedited material I was interested in.

Every stage of this unique research trip throughout the Elymaean territory in Khuzestan gave me an opportunity to view, find and in some cases discover sites and material pertinent to my PhD work. I happily returned to Australia with a lot of work to do!

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