

The Multidisciplinary International Archaeological Project in Shahr-i Sokhta (MAIPS)

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The idea of conducting an international multidisciplinary study project with interdisciplinary implications at the site of Shahr-i Sokhta emerged from three distinct yet complementary priorities. In the first place, given the tradition of research in the settlement in Sistan, there was perceived to be a need for scientific continuity with the pioneering and effective studies conducted by the Italian archaeological mission headed by M. Tosi in the late 1960s and 1970s. This tradition was reprised by the Iranian Archaeological Mission headed by S.M.S. Sajjadi, who began a new season of field work and scientific research in 1997. These multifaceted studies helped, and indeed, are still helping, to shed new light on the proto-urban cultures of Iranian Sistan. In the second place, there was a desire to enrich the decades-old tradition of studies with the new evidence emerging from the most recent discoveries in the areas neighbouring Sistan (especially Jiroft). Specifically, the aim was to create a new research laboratory that would go beyond the investigations at Shahr-i Sokhta in order to include the broader historic perspective, looking at the evolution – and involution – of the major civilisations of the Near East in a geographical framework comprising the Persian Gulf, Central Asia and the valley of the Indus. The study of the data

gathered at Shahr-i Sokhta, be they archaeological, archaeozoological, palaeo-environmental or anthropological, represents the initial objective of a process that began with the acquisition of local information and then expanded to the adjacent regions. It should be remembered that the civilisations of these regions (Oxus, Jiroft and Indus) followed the same pattern of growth throughout the 3rd millennium BC, followed by rapid and simultaneous collapse in the first half of the 2nd millennium BC. Shahr-i Sokhta thus provides a wealth of data that are comparable with those of neighbouring areas, and in the same way it represents a laboratory and a key vantage point from which to reconstruct in greater detail the historical dynamics affecting the Near East and Southern Asia as an integrated cultural system. For the project therefore, Shahr-i Sokhta represents a central node in the transmission and dissemination of a variety of cultural phenomena that are believed to have generated forms of hybridisation in a complicated interactive and integrated system linking Oxus, Jiroft and Indus, naturally without forgetting the role played by Baluchistan and Makran from the late 4th to the early 2nd millennium BC.

On the basis of this broader perspective, the University of the Salento has provided and continues to provide an extra interface between the tradition of multidisciplinary studies and technological innovation, fundamental for maintaining the dynamic exchange of knowledge with our Iranian colleagues. Following this two-track approach, embracing both tradition and innovation, the research laboratories of Ancient Topography and Photogrammetry (headed by Prof. Giuseppe Ceraudo), Archaeobotany (headed by Prof. Girolamo Fiorentino), Archaeozoology (headed by Prof. Jacopo De Grossi Mazzorin and Prof. Claudia Minniti) and Physical Anthropology (headed by Prof. Pier Francesco Fabbri) represent the driving force for the development of research in accordance with the agreements signed with the Iranian authorities. These activities performed by the Department of Cultural Heritage are supplemented with research conducted by universities and international research institutes designed to help fulfil our objectives. These studies have also helped to ensure the systematic nature of the project, specifically by means of geophysical prospections (as documented in this

volume), parasitological studies, archaeometric studies and isotopic analyses, which will be the object of subsequent publications.

This volume presents the work of the first two research campaigns, which were performed in two separate periods in 2017. In the conviction that work in the field and on the materials cannot proceed without publication of the research performed, the project envisages a further “preliminary” publication in 2021 (describing the excavations and research conducted during the 2018 and 2019 campaigns) and a “definitive” publication in 2023 (which will include the work performed in 2020 and 2021). At this point I should emphasise that from the first year of our project, as guests of the Iranian Archaeological Mission, the sharing of knowledge based on the use and dissemination of scientific data has been our priority. The focus has been on sharing new results and new historical interpretations based on what has been discovered with the international scientific community. At the time of writing there have been 29 scientific publications, 21 conferences and one special day of studies on Shahr-i Sokhta in Munich, during the last International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East (ICAANE 11). In line with the indications of RICHT and ICAR, and with what has been achieved by the Iranian Archaeological Mission, the intensity of scientific production is set to continue undiminished in the next few years, especially regarding the studies of Shahr-i Sokhta.

In concluding this brief note on the principles underlying the project of the University of the Salento, I would like to extend the concept of sharing to include its more philosophical meaning, not limited to mere scientific data. The success of all these studies, confirmed by their publication, depends on the sharing of the daily work load with the Iranian research group headed by Mansur Sajjadi. Performing everyday tasks, engaging in scientific debate and tackling and solving problems together undoubtedly constitute the best way to achieve our common objectives. It is clear to both the current author and all the participants in the project that our shared values represent the first step towards the success of our work and, at the same time, an indispensable precondition for demonstrating, by means of actions rather than words, that obsolete mental and cultural approaches

have been abandoned. The other contributions to this volume exclusively concern the campaigns conducted from 28.01 to 06.02 and from 28.10 to 17.12 in 2017. In addition to the presentation of the excavation activities conducted by the present author, there are studies focusing on individual classes of artefact, some discovered during the excavation campaigns conducted by the Archaeological Iranian Mission from 1997 to 2015 and kindly made available for publication by Mansur Sajjadi. Specifically, the study by Alberto Potenza on bone utensils represents the basis for more extensive future research which lends itself to doctoral theses, while the paper by Silvia Festuccia on the alabasters of Area 33, found in closed and well-defined contexts, which is supported by petrographic analyses, opens up new avenues of research on the use of this material. The topographical studies are presented by Giuseppe Ceraudo, who enriches the detailed and general topography at the start of the volume with the work performed by his team (Paola Guacci and Veronica Ferrari), which involves processing and interpreting the data from the site and from satellite images. The palaeoenvironmental studies are presented by Girolamo Fiorentino, with the help of Ignazio Minervini and Claudia Minniti, respectively responsible for archaeobotanical and archaeozoological studies aimed at reconstructing the flora and fauna of the regional context of Shahr-i Sokhta. The preliminary anthropological data were processed by Pier Francesco Fabbri (with the help of Giorgia Vincenti), with whom the current author presents, on the basis of what has been determined so far, conservative considerations regarding the demographics and development of the settlement from the late 4th to the early 2nd millennia BC.

To summarise, Tradition, Innovation and Sharing are the main principles inspiring our project, which aims in the near future to increase the volume of data by excavating various sectors of the settlement and studying its materials. Our scientific debate will be centred on issues of topography (the recognition and measurement of specific sectors of the settlement's layout), chronology (in terms of both absolute chronology and the creation of an internal framework of reference that can facilitate comparison with the sequences of neighbouring regions) and history (the causes and drivers of the growth and collapse of the

settlement within the broader historical framework including Oxus, Jiroft and Indus and the dynamics of cultural contact and integration). The work that awaits us in the next few years, together with our Iranian colleagues, will require great commitment, but we remain as convinced as we were at the very start that we can contribute, in some small measure, to the understanding of the settlement and its history.

