

Harmonies and Similarities Between Sistan and Turkmenistan during the 3rd Millennium BC.

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During the third millennium BC, Sistan and Southern Turkmenistan had extensive cultural and commercial exchanges. Geographically, these territories are located on the southeastern and northeastern edges of the Iranian Plateau respectively and are considered part of Middle Asia.

Investigations have led to the recognition of the development of urbanism and to the identification of the socio-economic characteristics of large territories in Iran and the Indo-Iranian border regions from the 4th to the 2nd millennia BC. These territories were located between two other great civilizations: Mesopotamia and the Indus valley, together forming a vast area bounded by the Aral Sea in the north and the Makran Sea in the south. The southernmost part of Middle Asia, off the coast of the Makran Sea, is now under water but was probably a suitable place for human communities during the Palaeolithic Era. Lithic Industries, related to the Middle Palaeolithic period, have been identified there and in the southern parts of the Lesbela region on the border between Baluchistan and Sindh, as well as at the southeastern tip of the Baluchistan Highlands; some of them have been attributed to the Pleistocene Era (Sajjadi 2009-2010).

The issue of commercial and cultural relations between Shahr-i Sokhta and distant areas is long and complex. There are many indications that this ancient city was linked not only to Mesopotamia and Ilam, but also to the southern, eastern and northern parts of the Iranian Plateau. In this period, there were extensive relations between Shahr-i Sokhta and the settlements of Southern Turkmenistan, such as Altyn Tepe and Namazga, as well as Mundigak in Afghanistan. During Period II, the emergence of full-time artisans is well documented. The discovery of a large amount of materials such as opal, lapis lazuli and turquoise, along with the relevant tools, is evidence of an active market for these products in the city (Tosi 1974). Alabaster mines have been detected in the Sistan Plain (Tucci 1977), but other semiprecious stones, such as lapis lazuli and opal, were certainly imported. More than 90% of the lapis lazuli and opal found in Shahr-i Sokhta is waste material, indicating the preliminary preparation of small lightweight blocks of semi-precious stones. In fact, the discovery of piles of scrap, chips and semi-finished lapis lazuli, turquoise, onyx and other semiprecious stones in Shahr-i Sokhta and Tepe Hissar, along with diverse tools such as blades and saws, indicates that the site was a centre for the processing of these materials.

In the vast geographical area of Middle Asia, in addition to the Hirmand River Delta, there are at least five other main cultural regions (Fig. 1):

Southern Area No. 1: The main site in this region is Bampur. After the short investigations of Sir Aurel Stein (1937), Beatrice de Cardi began the first new activities in 1965 by excavating two small test trenches in Bampur (de Cardi 1970). Other important archaeological activities in Iranian Baluchistan include the archaeological surveys in Ladiz (Hume 1976), Khas (Maruchek 1975), Sedich (Vita-Finzi - Copeland 1980) and Damen (Tosi 1970), as well as more recent surveys on the Bampur plain (Moradi *et al.* 2014). (Fig. 2).

Eastern Region No. 2: Mundigak is the largest archaeological site in central Afghanistan, located in the vicinity of Kandahar (Casal 1961). It is considered the main site of Region No. 2. The seven identified periods in Mundigak indicate 3,000 years of occupation from the beginning of the 4th millennium to the 2nd millennium BC. During this relatively long period, Mundigak developed from



Fig.1: six Cultural Regions of Middle Asia: 1. The southern region with Bampur as the center; 2. The eastern region with Mundigak as the center; 3. The southeastern region with Mehrgarh as the center; 4. The southern hillsides of the Alborz Mountains with Tepe Hissar as the center; 5. The northern region, Turkmenistan, with Altyn Tepe and Namazga as the main sites; 6. Sistan is not numbered.

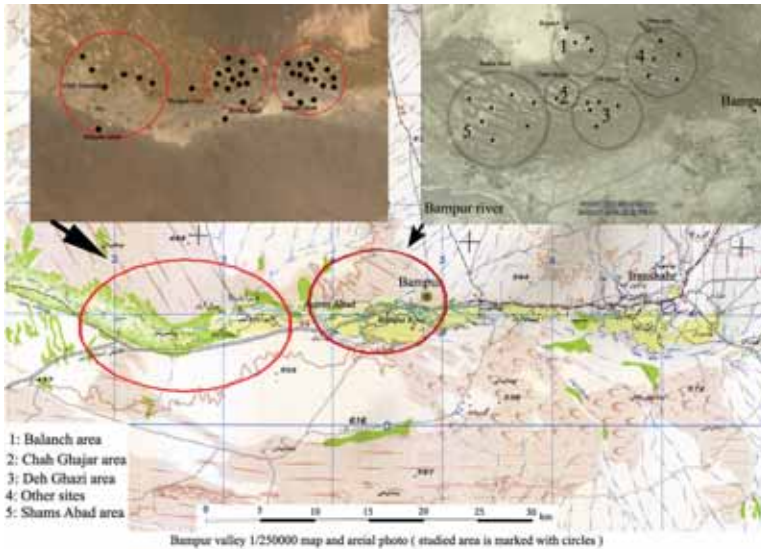


Fig. 2: Bampur valley.

a small village in Periods I-III into a large city in Periods IV-V and was then abandoned during the Iron Age. The layers of all phases are found on Hill A, but residential houses and public structures were also established around the main site (Fig. 3).

Southeastern Region No. 3, with Mehrgarh as the main site. This prehistoric site is located in the Quetta valley in Pakistani Baluchistan. Mehrgarh was occupied from the Neolithic to the end of the Bronze Age. Here, starting with the earliest layers of pre-pottery, the evolution of an economy based on agriculture can be seen. In these layers, whose architectural remains are limited to square houses built with mud bricks, there are traces of wild animals together with a small amount of bones of semi-domesticated goats. Other traces of this period are seen in the graves of the early 7th millennium BC (Jarrige - Lechavallier 1979).

Area No. 4: the hillsides of the Alborz Mountains with Tepe Hissar as the centre. The two main cultural regions (which can be divided into smaller sections) are located in the northeastern and eastern regions of Iran. They host the remains of the most ancient urban civilizations in eastern Iran in sites of 10 to 12 hectares with populations of 2,000 to 3,000, a number that fluctuated over the years. In the semiarid oasis of Damqan the only notable site is Tepe Hissar, which at the end of the 4th millennium BC was about 12 hectares, while in the hot plains of

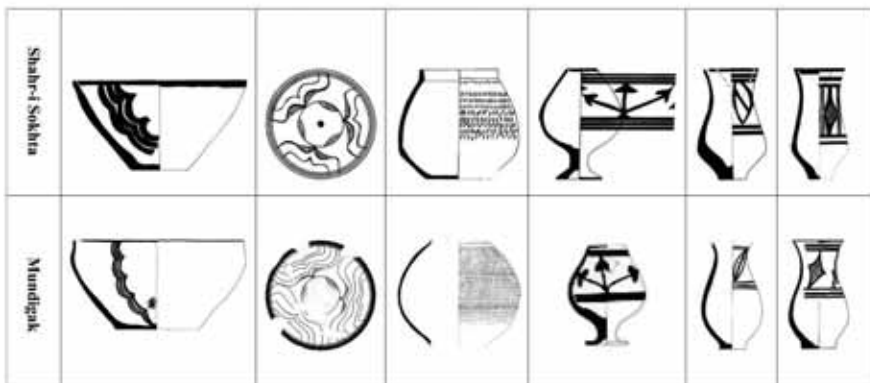


Fig. 3: painted pottery from Shahr-i Sokhta and Mundigak.

Gorgan near the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, Turang Tepe was the main settlement.

Area No. 5 is in Southern Turkmenistan, with Altyn Tepe as the main site.

The earliest layers of this site date back to the Early Copper Age, and are of the Namazga I type, characterized by Painted Monochrome Ware with large triangular patterns. The Middle Copper Age is characterized by the Yalangach-type pottery found at Anau, a type of Painted Ware with parallel lines below the neck of the vessels, along with anthropomorphic figurines and wall paintings. The Late Copper Age is distinguished by Geoksyur Painted and Polychrome Ware. From this period, a defensive mud brick wall, several rectangular towers, and a significant number of sitting female figurines with large oval eyes have been found.

Sistan Area: The remains of Shahr-i Sokhta have shown that the city was the most important settlement in the area and it was the region's main centre of social, political, economic, and cultural activity during the 3rd millennium BC. The presence of salt layers has helped to preserve the archaeological remains and the organic materials. Among these materials there were the remains of ropes, baskets and rugs, wooden objects, paints, textiles and hair, along with pottery and stone and metal artefacts. These remains are all indicative of the fact that this site was a focal point for the preparation and distribution of raw materials and objects made for domestic use and export. These were made from imported materials such as lapis lazuli and turquoise, as well as from locally mined commodities such as copper, diorite and marble.

From about 3550 to 2300 BC¹, for more than one thousand years, Shahr-i Sokhta functioned as the capital of a vast region stretching from Kandahar to the coast of the Makran Sea. It established relations with other sites and ancient cities of the 3rd millennium BC to the east, west, north and south, and was the capital and the center of the cultural area of Hirmand. Shahr-i Sokhta was not

1. This date is based on the new chronology of Shahr-i Sokhta (see Ascalone - Moradi - Sajjadi - Vecchio in press)..

just an isolated city: it had cultural and commercial connections with settlements in nearby regions and it established relations with far-away lands. The Hirmand River Culture expanded its sphere of influence in the Protohistorical period, but is too limited to be called a Trans Regional power. It had relations with the cultures of Middle Asia such as Harappa in the east, Elam, Mesopotamia and the western Iranian Plateau.

Relations between Shahr-i Sokhta and southern Turkmenistan can be seen in various ways, especially the production of beads, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, metal artefacts and particularly pottery vessels from both regions. Quetta Ware is one of the most prominent signs of the relations between Shahr-i Sokhta and areas Nos. 3 and 5, i.e. Pakistani Baluchistan and southern Turkmenistan.

This type of pottery appears in the domains of the Hirmand and Arghandab rivers, as well as in the layers of Mundigak III, Shahr-i Sokhta I and Namazga III in Southern Turkmenistan, dated to about 3500-3000 BC. This pottery is the logical continuation of Namazga I-II pottery during the Middle and Early Eneolithic. The first sample of Quetta Ware in Mundigak III is Buff pottery with triangle motifs that are joined to each other to form bow-tie motifs. The presence of Quetta Ware in the lower layers of Shahr-i Sokhta is the reflection of the earliest phases of this pottery, but the later influences of Southern Turkmenistan cannot be ignored. (Fig.4)

In Mundigak and the Quetta plain this kind of pottery was wheel-made, but it was handmade in Shahr-i Sokhta I, as in Geoksyur. This kind of pottery was first identified by Professor Pigott in the Quetta Valley in Pakistan, and Masson subsequently found Namazga III Buff Ware similar to it. Later, its presence at Shahr-i Sokhta confirmed Masson's theory regarding the origin of this pottery. Quetta Ware expanded to the Delta of the Hirmand River, along the Arghandab River in Mundigak III and Southern Turkmenistan (Namazga III, about 3500-3000 BC).































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Fig. 4: comparison of painted pottery motives from Shahr-i Sokhta and Turkmenistan (Sarianidi 1983).

The similarities of the pottery motifs seen in Southern Turkmenistan sites along the Copet Dagh (such as the Murghab and Tejen Deltas) and the Sistan plain are not limited to geometric designs, but also include zoomorphic motifs, although to a lesser extent (Fig. 5).

The similarities between the cultural materials of the deltas of Hamun, Tejen and Murghab are not limited to pottery: figurines, metal objects, seals, beads, burial practices and so on are also considered points of contact. The chronological distribution of alabaster artefacts in Shahr-i Sokhta shows a significant percentage have been found in the graves of Periods I and II. This probably indicates that the production of such objects was particularly intense during these periods. Period III accounts for just 12% of the alabaster artefacts, with more than 90% of the graves having only one alabaster object and only 10% of graves having two, three or four items. The statistics for alabaster objects found in Shahr-i Sokhta show that during the first half of the 3rd millennium BC this site was one of the main sources of this material on the Eastern Iranian Plateau. Shahr-i Sokhta's alabaster items were distributed not only in the markets of neighboring areas, but were also exported to distant regions such as Susa, Mesopotamia and the Southern coasts of the Persian Gulf. Aside from Susa and Mesopotamia, such objects have been found in Central Asia in Ulugh Tepe, Altyn Tepe, Geoksyur, Mundigak, Southern Bactria, Quetta and the Makran Sea. According to the available data, the distribution of alabaster objects was equally distributed in the graves of male and female individuals. More than 75% of the alabaster vessels were found in the graves of Periods I and II, which means that production of such vessels peaked during the first half of the 3rd millennium BC. The production of conical bowls stopped during Period III and was replaced by cylindrical mortars (Figs. 6-8).

Among the objects found at Shahr-i Sokhta, figurines have a special place. The figurines of Shahr-i Sokhta are made of unfired clay, terracotta, stone, metal, and wood. Clay figurines could be made quickly by hand. Clay pieces smaller than the size of a fist were quickly shaped with one hand and parts of the human body or animal were shaped by the other hand. Usually figurines were not decorated, although some decorated ones have also been found. The figurines

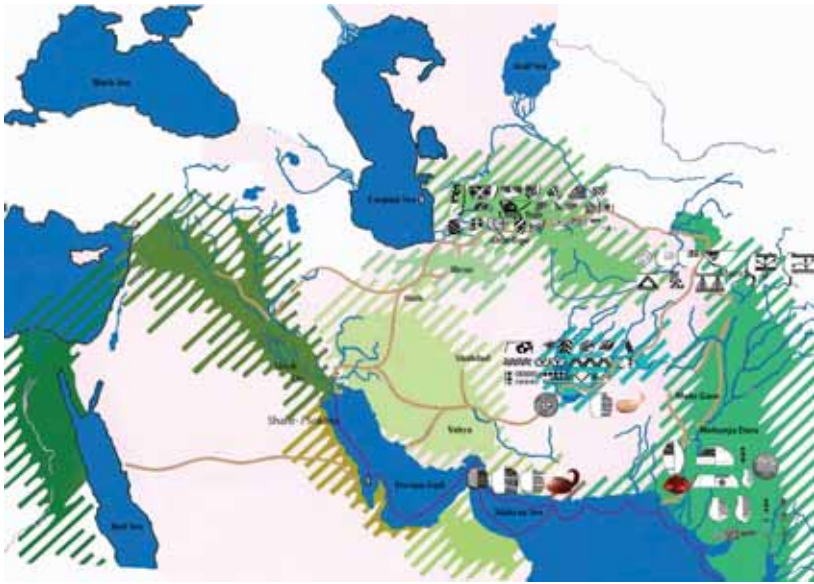


Fig. 5: pottery shape and motives from six areas of Middle Asia.

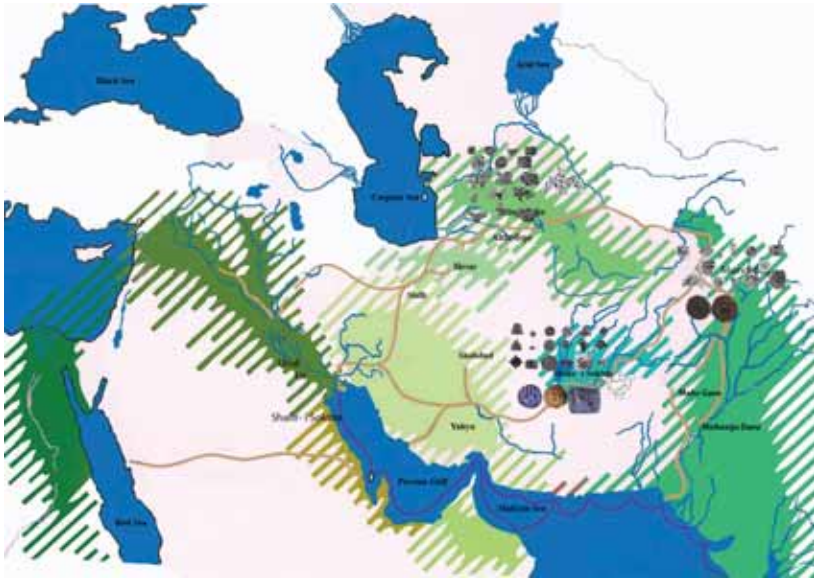


Fig. 6: seals from six areas of Middle Asia.



Fig. 7: alabaster items; 1-8. Shahr-i Sokhta; 9-16. Altyn depe.

were decorated using wooden or bone tools, and in some exceptional cases, clay spangles or bands were attached. Among the animals, humpback cattle, pigs and dogs are easily identifiable, as well as hyenas, leopards, rams, camels, and birds.

Anthropomorphic figurines are composed of male and female groups. Female figurines are found in two different positions: sitting with their legs stretched out and standing.

Male figurines are mostly in a standing position. Their hanging or open arms and their highlighted muscles are interesting. According to anthropological studies, the male individuals of Shahr-i Sokhta are classified as tall humans, but the figurines also present them as relatively muscular and strong.

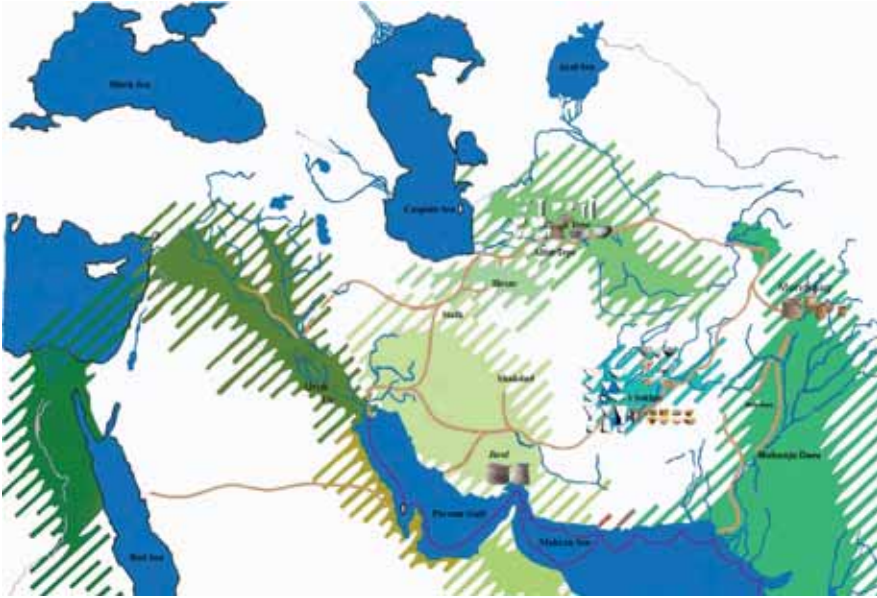


Fig. 8: alabaster items from six areas of Middle Asia.

A significant number of administrative objects have been found at Shahr-i Sokhta, including seals and seal impressions, jar stoppers, clay counting balls and triangular and round computing discs. The presence of ropes indicates their use for sealing stores or storage containers. Seal impressions on smaller vessels with very small volumes are also found in the form of round clay disks. Seal motifs are often geometric and have circular, rectangular, or square shapes, but there are also plant, animal and bird motifs (Figs. 9-10).

The similarities between Shahr-i Sokhta and the neighboring territories, especially Areas 2 and 5, are not limited to the remains of materials, but also include grave goods and tools, reflecting the social status of individuals. Various kinds of food and gifts, such as bracelets, necklaces, anklets and so on, were deposited in the graves. Structurally, aside from the simple pit graves that are common throughout the ancient world, there are similarities concerning several other grave shapes between Shahr-i Sokhta and other areas in Middle Asia. The most notable are catacombs, which are common throughout Central Asia, and were used in Shahr-i Sokhta for family burials of tribal leaders. This type of grave



Fig. 9: anthropomorphic figurines from Shahr-i Sokhta and Central Asia.

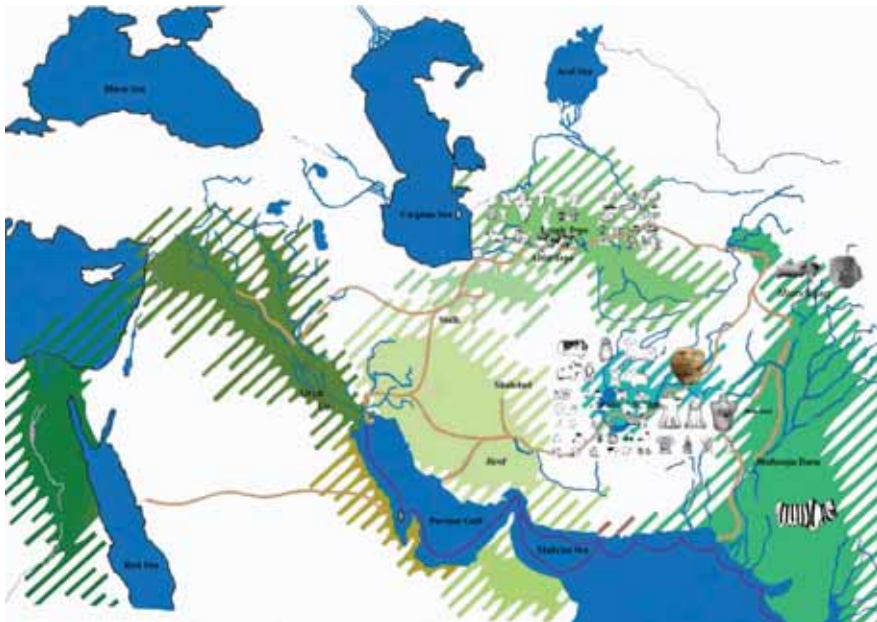


Fig. 10: clay figurines from six areas of Middle Asia.

was used in Middle Asia from the late 3rd millennium BC onwards.

Other types of shared graves were collective, circular and probably roofed. The most prominent example in Shahr-i Sokhta is Grave 1003, with 12 human skulls placed beside the grave wall and one complete skeleton of a 45-year-old man in the centre, along with a complete skeleton of a dog and the skulls of two other dogs, (Piperno - Salvatori 2007). It is one of the oldest graves in the site that shows the immigration of people from Southern Turkmenistan to Shahr-i Sokhta. It seems that this tomb was repeatedly opened to put other corpses in it (Fig. 11).

As mentioned before, relations between Sistan and Southern Turkmenistan were not limited to cultural materials or the exchange of objects and products, but there are also signs of shared intellectual and religious beliefs. One of these examples is the presence of game boards in both societies, the presence of such entertainment revealing a kind of wellbeing and comfort. One example is a wooden board with dice and gaming pieces found in Grave 731 of Shahr-i Sokhta (Fig. 12).

Another example, similar to Shahr-i Sokhta's game board was found among the recycled objects of Jiroft, in the form of a board made of chlorite but without the related pieces. An object similar to these game boards, made of bones and ivory, was found in the cemetery of Gonour Tepe (Fig. 13).

Such games and other types of entertainment have traditionally been prevalent in the ancient world. Besides the examples mentioned, game boards and relative gaming pieces and dice have been found in Mehgarreh, Enkomi in Cyprus (1580 BC), Harappa and Mohenjodaro. A wooden "chess" box and pieces belonging to the Egyptian architect Kha and his wife, dated to the 18th Egyptian Dynasty (15th and 16th centuries BC), was found in Deyr al Madineh, and game boxes were found in Ak Hur.

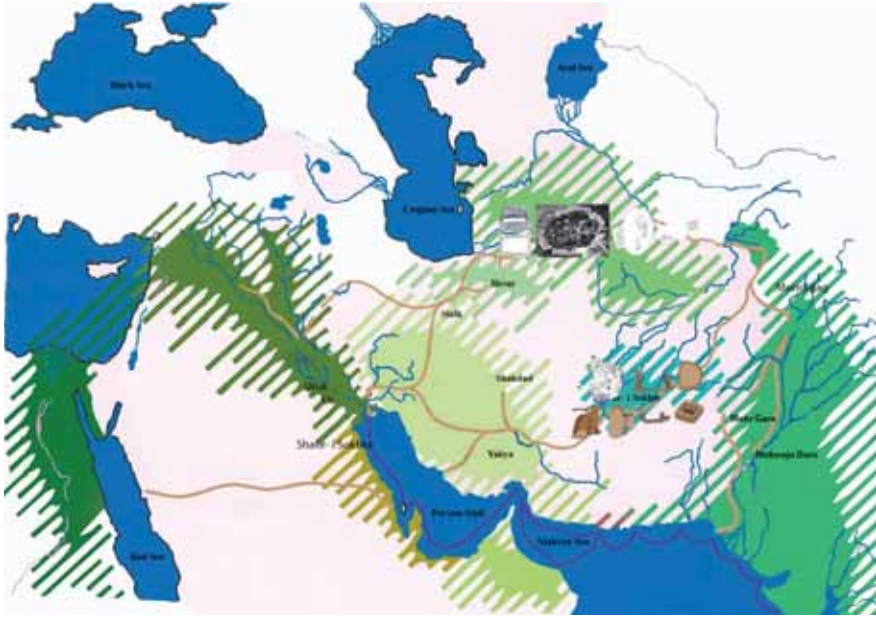


Fig. 11: grave structures from Shahr-i Sokhta and Central Asia.



Fig. 12: wooden game board from Shahr-i Sokhta.

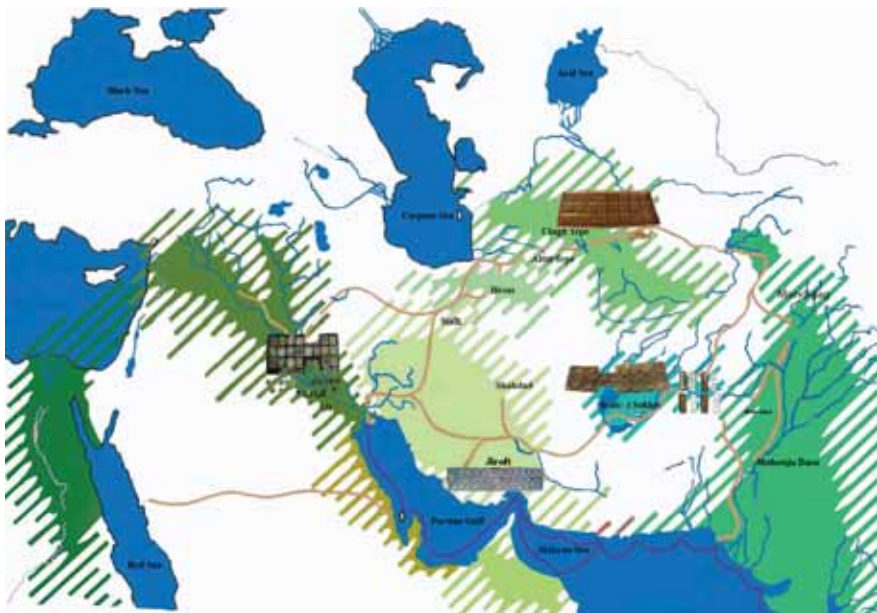


Fig. 13: game boards from Middle East.

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