

What Do We Talk about when We Talk about “Proto-Elamite” in the Iranian Highlands?

BARBARA HELWING*

Preamble

There are many more likely places for unexpected encounters with friends than the summit of Nemrud Dağı in the lonesome Eastern Taurus ranges in Turkey. But it was exactly there that I bumped into Susan and Reinhard one summer evening 20 years ago – one party descending, the other ascending. Catching up on things, I told them that I had just accepted a new position with the German Archaeological Institute to focus on Iran – a country I had never visited until this moment. Susan shared her fond memories of the country and assured me that the mountains would be breathtaking and the landscapes gorgeous – of course, she was right. Since then, despite all her activities and interests, I always relate Susan's work first and foremost with Iran. The following contribution thus also scrutinizes a very Iranian topic, the historiography of the term “proto-Elamite”.

Introduction

The term “proto-Elamite” is today widely and interchangeably used to describe a reconstructed language, a set of material culture, an art style, or a full cultural entity thriving in Iran around the turn of the 4th to 3rd millennium BCE. This blurry use of the term conceals the much narrower and more precise meaning it had carried in the beginning when it strictly denoted a script (for an overview, see [Englund](#)

2006). The term has undergone considerable change and re-definition since its first use. I intend here to revisit the changes in use and understanding of the term and the concept proto-Elamite in an attempt to trace the moment when layers of meaning were added to a term that was in the beginning meant to be strictly linguistic. I will begin with recalling the original definition of the term “proto-Elamite” as it was introduced in Susa, before following subsequent changes and uses of the term for discoveries far away from Susa in the Iranian highlands. Among these, Roman Ghirshman's characterization of his findings from Tappe Sialk IV on the Iranian plateau ([Ghirshman 1938](#)) were of high significance as these investigations had set the stage for a first model of highland – lowland dichotomy playing out between Susa and Sialk. This extended the concept of an ethnic and linguistic dualism described first by Vincent Scheil ([Scheil 1901](#), vii), a dualistic model later refined by Pierre Amiet in the 1980s ([Amiet 1986](#)). At that time, the usage of the term proto-Elamite and the concept adjoined to it in discussing the early urban highland sites had already undergone profound changes due to new investigations in Susa and new discoveries in various highland sites as well as changing perspectives on the social and economic history behind the term. All these developments unfolded in lockstep and indirectly continued to reflect upon the understanding of the highland sites, as they still do today.

* Vorderasiatisches Museum SMB PK, Berlin (Germany)

The original term “proto-Elamite” defined in Susa

The term proto-Elamite was introduced in the early 20th century by Vincent Scheil, the epigraphist of the Susa Mission, to describe clay tablets with an “archaic” writing found during the excavations on the acropolis of Susa (Scheil 1905; for a full new edition, see Dahl 2019). Scheil had previously argued that two different languages were present in the corpus of Susa texts, one element he referred to as Semitic and Susian, and the second a distinctive local one that he first called Anzanite to acknowledge the dualism of the Royal titles that acknowledged the land of Susa and Anzan (Anshan) (Scheil 1901, vii–viii). It was this “Anzanite” script that he renamed proto-Elamite in 1905.

Scheil related proto-Elamite writing to the same origin as Sumerian but thought about a long-term independent development of this script. In his words, this script was: “*employée anciennement dans un milieu moins cultivé, et pour ainsi dire, sur la périphérie du monde civilisé, l’écriture proto-élamite se sera schématisée plus lentement en écriture conventionnelle*” (Scheil 1905, 61).

Introducing the chapter on the newly discovered script, Scheil emphasized the multi-cultural character of the population of Elam (talking about the different “*racés et langues*” existing in Elam: Scheil 1905, 59), and he had no problem to conceptualize one writing system adopted by people speaking different languages. By calling this new script “proto-Elamite” he meant to emphasize the potential continuity with the later Elamite language. But in Scheil’s perspective the term remained reserved purely for the script.

Although Scheil had been very explicit on his definition, the term proto-Elamite was adopted by other scholars with different meaning. It rapidly became to denote a chronological period and next, as the term carries a

people in its name, also a coherent population and political system; among the first such uses was Roman Ghirshman’s report on the Tappe Sialk excavations published in 1938 (Ghirshman 1938). A second “early adopter” of the term was Donald McCown, who integrated the results from Sialk into his synthesis on the early cultures of Iran (McCown 1942, 442).

Proto-Elamite tablets in Tappe Sialk and a different reading of “proto-Elamite”

Roman Ghirshman’s excavations at Tappe Sialk in the 1930s were among the first systematic excavations in a multi-period mound site on the Central Plateau of Iran and resulted in a first chronological scheme for the pre- and protohistoric occupation of the highlands of Iran (Ghirshman 1938; 1939; for a summary, see Helwing 2010). Ghirshman roughly distinguished six main phases sorted into three packages: Sialk I–II represented the earliest, Late Neolithic occupation on the North Mound; Sialk III and IV referred to late 5th to late 4th millennium BCE Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age levels on the South Mound, and the South Mound was finally capped by massive Iron Age buildings in Sialk V to VI. The site remains a cornerstone of chronology and culture history in that region.

Among Ghirshman’s many discoveries at Tappe Sialk and associated with layers of phase IV in Sialk were the first proto-Elamite tablets ever documented outside of the Susiana lowlands (discussed in Dahl et al. 2013, 357). Layers of period Sialk IV were uncovered on the South Mound of Sialk in two large and adjoined trenches, trenches I and II, where they clearly overlay older period III layers. These earlier layers formed a substantial package of about 9 m thickness, counting from the level of the plain. The next period IV lay immediately underneath Iron Age buildings, assigned to period V. The construction of these buildings had most likely required razing the upper part of the level IV architecture and had therefore caused immense destruction

to the underlying period IV architecture. Ghirshman (1938, 35) distinguished two sub-periods in level IV: a lower level IV1 on top of period III, from 9.00 to 10.52 m (above plain level), with standing architecture that he identified as *pisé* walls; and an upper level IV2 that extended from 10.52 to 11.25 m but was razed in its upper part. The main difference of period IV from the preceding period III was a change in ceramic manufacture, from painted to unpainted wares (Ghirshman 1938, 61). As Ghirshman further observed, the whole package of IV was separated from the earlier period III by a thick ash layer (Ghirshman 1938, 58).

To Ghirshman, the radical shift from the painted wares of Sialk III to undecorated ceramics manifest in IV was most conspicuous. The new plain ware seemed to be associated with inscribed tablets that he identified as proto-Elamite (Ghirshman 1938, 66), and with cylinder seals. There were only a few pottery vessels (from burials 1, 2) whose painted decoration he identified as “*rares preuves de survivance*” from period III (Ghirshman 1938, 61), while all other cultural materials appeared new and foreign to him.

Ghirshman thus emphasized the apparent discontinuity from the preceding period III. To him, the period IV material represented a “new civilization” that he related to the then so-called “*couche intermédiaire*” in Susa, Warka III and Jemdet Nasr (Ghirshman 1938, 66, 82), with only the script called “proto-Elamite”. In following Scheil’s argument that this semi-pictographic script ought to be later than the appearance of writing in Mesopotamia, Ghirshman furthermore developed the hypothesis that the tablets originated from a warehouse in an “outpost of the Elamite civilization” distant from the homeland (Ghirshman 1938, 66). This new civilization would be responsible for introducing script and cylinder seals in the highlands, and these people also would have used jewelry originating from Mesopotamian workshops (Ghirshman 1938,

68–69) – erroneously, he referred to the much later materials from Ur for comparisons. While Ghirshman was first careful to not confound archaeological materials and an ancient script, he nevertheless maintained an underlying concept of linguistic and ethnic proto-Elamite identity.

This concept became even more manifest in Ghirshman’s first resumé chapter where he detailed his perspective on the potential mode of culture change through the arrival of a new population. He called Sialk III an autochthonous civilization, as opposed to Sialk IV as derived from SW Iran and comparable to Susa “*couche intermédiaire*”. Through a direct comparison of the ceramics from the Susa intermediary subphases with Sialk, he concluded that the “arrival” of the new civilization in the highlands occurred later than its first appearance in Susa and therefore should have its origins there. According to this concept, the occupation of the highlands would have proceeded gradually and moved from the edges of the plateau towards the interior (Ghirshman 1938, 83–84).

For Ghirshman, the new civilization would have established itself through violent force (visible from ash layers separating Sialk III and IV, see Ghirshman 1938, 84), but remained foreign in the highlands and in Susa. He correlated the end of Sialk III with Uruk IV, Sialk IV1 with Susa “*couche intermédiaire b*” and Jemdet Nasr, and IV2 to Ur SIS 4–5, Kish Y cemetery, and Asmar. Regarding the script, Ghirshman (1938, 86) followed Scheil’s concept of an Anzanite script (Scheil 1901, vii); in this concept Scheil argued that the Susa texts appear to be later than the earliest Uruk texts as they use different signs, reflecting a strong Elamite influence on the script.

In the final synthesis of the Sialk report, Ghirshman concluded that the autochthonous highland cultures of Sialk I–III succumbed to exterior forces from SW Iran and Mesopotamia at the end of the 4th millennium

BCE (Ghirshman 1938, 100–01). At about the same time, the site of Hesar would have seen a gradual “infiltration” from the Turkmen steppes by people using grey ware, and in northern Mesopotamia (East Tigris) formed new ceramic complexes like Gawra VIIIA, Ninevite 5, Billa in an aftermath to the highland cultures influencing Mesopotamia. But the only direct influence acknowledged by Ghirshman was the one between Sialk in the highlands and Susa, and indirectly Uruk resp. Jemdet Nasr.

With the first Sialk monograph published in 1938, the site became a firm key point of the prehistoric scenery in the highlands of Iran and Ghirshman’s confident phasing remains valid in rough outlines until today. In his later, more generalistic, writings in the 1960s (Ghirshman 1964), Ghirshman maintained his interpretation of Sialk IV as an outpost of early Elamite, but became increasingly more concrete about the violent dynamics of culture change from Sialk III to IV that he then interpreted as a clear militaristic conquest of Sialk by powers based in Susiana, driven most likely by a quest to control the sources of copper and the long-distance trade routes.

From the Sialk excavations (1933–1937) to the Iranian Revolution (1979)

With the publication of Ghirshman’s excavation monograph in 1938, the concept of “proto-Elamite” had thus shifted from a strictly linguistic category to a model of a coherent and self-identified (in the sense of population group with a political agenda; Barth 1969), and Sialk IV was then set as a highland key-site representing this cultural entity. This reading dominated the archaeological discourse until the 1980s.

In 1942, Donald McCown (1942, 442–43), in summarizing his fundamental cross-dating study, wrote: “*The presence at Tepe Sialk of a settlement which shows close identity with the*

remains of Susa C makes it clear that the region later called ‘Elam’ must have exercised considerable control over other parts of Iran. Sialk may have been the site of a proto-Elamite trading station or a caravan post; at any rate it must have been settled in part and controlled by people from the center of the proto-Elamite culture. This implies control of routes from the proto-Elamite region to Sialk by forceful or diplomatic means.” In McCown’s later publications (1949), the term proto-Elamite had become a standardized shorthand to describe sets of material culture, including ceramics etc.

The term was also adopted by Louis Le Breton in his posthumously published study of Susiana chronology (Le Breton 1957, 103–14) to describe the cylinder seal impressions on the proto-Elamite tablets from Susa. As he referred to the very tablets where these seals were impressed, calling this seal style proto-Elamite as well appears like a natural extension of the concept – and strictly described the seal style (see also Pittman 2006).

Nevertheless, by about 1960, the term had transformed into a household name for all material remains from the time period of proto-Elamite tablets (Porada 1965), and the term inevitably came with the baggage of an ethnic and political domination attached. Tappe Sialk figured as the key highland site occupied by proto-Elamite force, as stated by Georgina Herrmann in her discussion of the long-distance network evident in the distribution of lapislazuli from Afghan sources: “[...] *disaster overtook the last settlement of Sialk III, which was sacked. On its ashes rose a new town so closely connected with Susa that it is likely that Sialk was occupied as a trading outpost of Susa. The links between Susa C and Sialk IV are extremely strong, both producing identical pottery, cylinder seals and, most significantly, Proto-Elamite tablets. This is the only time that a plateau site is under the direct influence of the south, and it must infer a strong ruler in Susa with a pressing need to establish a far-flung outpost.*” (Herrmann 1968, 37).

From the 1960s onwards, a surge of new field work in Iran yielded ever more evidence for assemblages with proto-Elamite texts and sealings, as well as material culture comparable with Susa III, not only in Susa proper but in different and widely distant parts of Iran, often associated with materials of local traditions, or with select pottery with polychrome decoration and Jemdet Nasr affinities. Most important were the discoveries from Godin Tappe (VI/V) (Young 1969; Young and Levine 1974; Young 1986), Malyan (Middle Banesh) (Nicholas 1990; Sumner 2003; Stolper 1985), and Tappe Yahya (IVC) (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1971; Damerow and Englund 1989), that all yielded written clay tablets. Besides parallels in material culture, all these sites hinted at a gap in the local sequence or an abrupt transition, from a locally based painted pottery tradition to one with plain ware in shapes comparable to the Susa II/III corpus, and this transition warranted investigation. The findings also necessitated further study into the nature of what then was labelled the proto-Elamite "phenomenon". Different from the previous concepts of a linguistic or ethnic category, in the new concept, the term "proto-Elamite" designated a specific shared archaeological culture relating to a moment of early state formation in Iran (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1978, 116).

Regarding the transition phase, for example, Harvey Weiss and Cuyler Young (Weiss and Young 1975) attributed the earlier, Uruk IV- or Susa II-period influence on Godin Tappe (then V, now VI) to the "merchants of Susa" who would have controlled lapis lazuli trade along the Great Khorasan Road. Carl C. Lamberg-Karlovsky proposed more differentiated models that allowed for non-uniform processes in the various places and regions involved. In his own excavation at Tappe Yahya, level IVC allowed the spatial differentiation of areas with domestic local ceramics distinct from a warehouse type building with proto-Elamite tablets and seals

(Lamberg-Karlovsky 1976, 37), indicating contemporaneity of different assemblages due to functional or social differences.

All the new discoveries warranted new interpretations for the evidence at hand. To account for the apparent rapid cultural replacement, concepts such as colonists, migrants, merchants or other potential models were proposed. Basically, all these models sought to define a common point of origin for the rapidly spreading network of proto-Elamite sites, and most searched in the lowlands and more precisely in Susiana, or in the highlands of Fars, like Timothy F. Potts who considered Middle Banesh Malyan the center of proto-Elamite power (T. F. Potts 1994).

Only few voices were raised against this overall consensus (with minor differences) of a lowland-based polity colonizing the highlands for whatever reason. Clare Goff (Goff 1971, 145) had quite rightly emphasized the local character of late 4th millennium BCE survey assemblages from western Lorestan and insisted that the "buff ware aspect" (which relates to the painted Chalcolithic wares) was a highland development. And from the late 1970s onwards, Pierre Amiet (Amiet 1979) proposed his powerful dualistic model of alternating and complementary highland-lowland power balance. Parallel to Lamberg-Karlovsky's use of the term (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1978), Amiet considered proto-Elamite a "culture" representing the Iranian equivalent of Jemdet Nasr and definitely without Mesopotamian roots (Amiet 1979, 196–97), as demonstrated best by continuities in seal iconography.

Re-reading Ghirshman: Pierre Amiet's take on proto-Elamite Sialk

In a detail study devoted to Sialk (Amiet 1985), Pierre Amiet pointed out earlier, and different, connections between the highland site and the lowlands. Based on the diaries and documentation from Ghirshman's expedition and the synoptical plans provided by the

architect André Hardy after the completion of the work, Amiet carefully reconstructed the development of the excavations in detail, achieving a more differentiated reading. By meticulously following the progress of excavation that began in 1933 in slope soundings I and II of the South Mound, and in 1934 was extended towards the interior in what was called prolongation – *prolongée* – of the original soundings, he managed to correlate the various steps in the sounding and the prolongation trench and identified materials comprised within the older, Sialk III, levels as potentially relating to earlier, Uruk VII-affine assemblages. He also identified a period of abandonment between subphases IV1 and IV2, a period of time he saw better represented at Godin Tappe and Chogha Mish; in Amiet's view, only the upper subphase IV2, the phase that had revealed the only proto-Elamite text, could be properly called proto-Elamite.

Amiet concluded by proposing a new model of a drawn-out contact phase between the highlands and the lowlands: even before a regular occurrence of Uruk-affine material was felt during the time necessary to build up the 1.8 m of deposit in periods Sialk III5–7, occasional contacts/presences of Uruk-related materials had occurred over an extended time; these presences would have contributed to a modification of the local – Sialk III – culture that were visible in the “mixed” character of Sialk IV burial inventories (unpainted ceramics in shapes known from painted Sialk III; Sialk III painted wares together with Uruk-affine plain wares) reflecting on-going acculturation. Amiet rated the proto-Elamite occupation of the highlands as the genuine apogee of a refined version of the older local highland traditions, a genuine highland culture independent from Mesopotamia, although potentially triggered by contacts. In a next step, this highland culture would have expanded to the lowlands and ultimately also comprised the Susiana plain. This model picked up on the original idea of Scheil and formalized a concept of

highland-lowland dichotomy first introduced for the 2nd millennium BCE Elamite period as a theme of alternating power centers (Amiet 1979) and that he extended now back into the 4th millennium BCE (Amiet 1986).

After the revolution: time to think

The Iranian revolution 1979 and the subsequent Iraq-Iran War interrupted research in Iran at a moment when after a decade of intensive fieldwork, scholarly debate had reached a previously unexperienced level of theoretical understanding. The forced idleness offered time to think and important articles were published in the years to follow, most of them obviously conceived before access to country and materials was banned (as acknowledged directly in Amiet 1979). To name just one example, John Alden's 1982 discussion of the growth and decline of proto-Elamite political and economic hegemony in Fars, in which he emphasized the importance of control over long-distance trade as a basis for the growth of proto-Elamite centers in the highlands, received numerous differentiated comments (Alden 1982), and a general agreement on a trade network was established. As stated by Yousef Majidzadeh, “*the only probable explanation for the appearance of the proto-Elamite cultural elements at Godin V and at Sialk IV would be that these two cities were simply marketing centres for the Susian well-developed technology and its products, and it was through these commercial contacts that the reported proto-Elamite pottery, clay tablets, and cylinder seals reached these centers*” (Majidzadeh 1982, 69).

Although research in Iran had come to a halt since 1980 and the Iranian data were not updated anymore, the known evidence was integrated into wider debates and informed, among others, the emerging debate on world systems. In the well-known “Uruk world system” model proposed by Guillermo Algaze (Algaze 1993), Tappe Sialk (phase IV1) appears as a clear Uruk outpost –

one of many moments in the debate when the chronology of the later 4th millennium BCE became a bit blurred.

Time to think allowed also for a critical revision of the term proto-Elamite from the perspective of Susa: as elaborated by Dan Potts (D. T. Potts 1999, 43, 45), there is not a single good reason to assume linguistic continuity with the later Elamite, neither is there one to assume an ethnic formation behind the material culture subsumed under the term. Even if used in a restrictive way for the script only, the name “proto-Elamite” is misleading, and Dan Potts (D. T. Potts 1999, 81–82) therefore suggested to rename the script “Susa III-script” (most recently discussed by Dahl et al. 2013).

As is so often the case, however, established shorthands are hard to overcome. Even without an ethnic or linguistic connotation, the label “proto-Elamite” continues in use to denote the beginning of the Early Bronze Age in south and central Iran. Over the last twenty years, some new evidence on this period has emerged and I conclude with a brief look at these new findings.

Renewed works in Sialk and beyond and their impact

When the Sialk Reconsideration Project began its work in 2001 (Malek Shahmirzadi 2002; Nokandeh 2002), part of the task was to establish a connection with the previous Ghirshman work. Cutting back the profiles of Ghirshman’s trench I did not reveal any well-preserved contexts or materials for the Sialk IV levels beyond what was known since the 1938 report but allowed to sample for radiocarbon dating, confirming the dating of Sialk IV in the centuries from 3350 to 3100 BCE (Pollard et al. 2013, 30, Tab. 1). It also confirmed Amiet’s observation that a long-lasting phase of Uruk contact must have existed

in the preceding phases of Sialk III6–7, reflected in the occurrence of cylinder seals in late Sialk III.

New work in neighboring sites today has added further detail to the isolated observations from Sialk. Arisman, 60 km to the SE of Sialk, has a parallel occupation of late Sialk III and Sialk IV levels, but arranged in a horizontal stratigraphy (Vatandoust et al. 2011; Chegini et al. 2011). The Sialk IV-related part of the site, area C, site has been radiocarbon dated to 3350–3000 BCE (Görsdorf 2011). In the outskirts of Qom city, the site of Qoli Darvish has recently produced an important sequence of five levels (Qoli Darvish II5–1) directly above natural soil, also covering the last three centuries of the 4th millennium BCE with important details: a whole set of administrative technology is attested in the form of seals and sealings, fragments of numerical and numero-ideographic tablets, and a clay ball with token (Alizadeh et al. 2013).

Other sites deserve mention as well: Tappe Shoghali and Tappe Sofalin, although not yet reliably published, yielded a wealth of administrative data including tablets of the later proto-Elamite period (Hessari and Yousefi Zoshk 2013; Dahl et al. 2012). An occupation comparable to Sialk IV is also attested at Tappe Ozbaki through pithos graves and a singular proto-Elamite tablet (Majidzadeh 1389H; Vallat 2003). And the site of Meymanatabad, close to Tehran, has produced more evidence for Uruk-influence within an otherwise mostly Sialk III assemblage (Yousefi Zoshk et al. 2015).

As a result of these more recent works, Tappe Sialk IV has lost its uniqueness as isolated outpost of a potentially alien culture on the Western Iranian Plateau; there are more such sites, like Arisman and Qoli Darvish, some of which are better preserved than the relevant levels at Sialk. The rich archives from Sofalin and the deep sequences from Qoli Darvish and

Meymanatabad also tell us how much information we miss – the picture is much more complex today than it appeared 20 years ago.

New paradigms emerging

This review has demonstrated a continuous development in our understanding of the beginning of the Early Bronze Age in highland Iran, and of the shifting meaning of the term proto-Elamite. At the highland type site of Tappe Sialk, this period is represented by the 2-phase occupation of Sialk IV1–2 and a preceding late Sialk III occupation with sparse but present signs of contact with the greater Uruk World. Recent fieldwork in highland Iran has provided more evidence for highland-lowland contacts as a drawn-out process: In Meymanatabad, Uruk influence is found in a Late Chalcolithic, Sialk III-like assemblage. A single real token found in Arisman also comes from the Late Chalcolithic area B (Helwing 2011, 269, Fig. 44 no. 358), found together with Sialk III-akin material. And as previously demonstrated, there are more and more signs for technological continuity in pottery making and copper cooking (Helwing 2013). Considered together, all this evidence indicates today a continuous change rather than a radical shift.

The highland sites of the late 4th millennium BCE – Sialk IV, Arisman, Qoli Darvish and others – share a tendency to centralize population in few isolated centers. Surveys have revealed a largely empty landscape around the major Sialk IV sites, marking a radical shift from the preceding period when smaller villages dotted the landscape whose populations the emerging centers seem to have absorbed (Helwing 2013). The town dwellers now cluster within the confines of the central site and live in by now much more standardized domestic quarters.

The apparent standardization and uniformity of material culture over wide distances remains a phenomenon that requires further

research: does it reflect real life patterns or is it the result of selective publication preferences? We have already seen that for sites on the very outskirts of the Early Bronze Age network, such as Yahya and Shahr-e Sukhte, it seems that only very limited (albeit significant) proto-Elamite markers are present in otherwise local assemblages, and the same seems to be true for Sialk IV, Arisman C and Qoli Darvish. A careful re-study of the ceramic assemblages may contribute to a more differentiated understanding of the ‘nature’ of the relevant occupations, as has been aptly demonstrated by Benjamin Mutin for the Yahya IVC assemblage with its numerous parallels in the Indo-Iranian borderlands (Mutin 2013).

Our brief glimpse here at the Early Bronze Age “proto-Elamite” occupation in the highlands clearly indicates that no simple or one-sided model can account for the complex patterns described. On the one hand, the adoption of an early urban model of living happened throughout the highland sites at more or less the same moment in time and with comparable standardization. The end of occupation seems also to have ended roughly simultaneously in most sites, as no uninterruptedly succeeding occupation is attested on the Iranian plateau sites. But we do not yet know if these settlements succumbed to unsuitable environmental conditions in the 3rd millennium BCE, or if their populations shifted to other locations or other ways of life for other reasons.

Conclusion

This brief journey through the history of the term proto-Elamite has taken us from its original linguistic definition to concepts of cultural or ethnic self-identification in relation to cultural, economic or political elite control. As the archaeological record by now better supports gradual models of continuous change and adoption of new cultural feats, earlier models that emphasize political dominance of one single center over

this enormous landscape lose their basis; the obvious pattern today appears much more like a widely-stretched network in which the nodes remained in close connection to each other, possibly in a sort of elite network. Such a network would allow for a cultural development in distant places in lockstep through selective elite exchange of information, inspired by competition and emulation of models from elsewhere. “Proto-Elamite” may indeed have been the vanguard of such a nascent network formation that surely existed later in the mid 3rd millennium BCE between Mesopotamia, Eastern Iran and Central Asia, as pointed

out by Carl Lamberg-Karlovsky (1978, 119). In this sense, proto-Elamite refers to a series of local centers adopting and experimenting with new social and craft techniques borrowed from the urban lowland cultures with whom they were in contact through travelers, merchants and the like.

New fieldwork in Early Bronze Age sites in the Iranian highlands is truly needed before we can achieve a better understanding of the dynamics behind the formation of these early settlements and towns. We can only hope that such a problem-oriented research will one day again become possible.

References

- Alden, John R. 1982. “Trade and Politics in Proto-Elamite Iran.” *Current Anthropology* 23: 613–40.
- Algabe, Guillermo. 1993. *The Uruk World System. The Dynamics of Expansion of Early Mesopotamian Civilization*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Alizadeh, Abbas, Shirin Aqhili, and Siamak Sarlak. 2013. “Highland-Lowland Interaction in the Late 4th and Early 3rd Millennium BCE: The Evidence from Qoli Darwiš, Iranian Central Plateau.” *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan* 45: 149–68.
- Amiet, Pierre. 1979. “Archaeological Discontinuity and Ethnic Duality in Elam.” *Antiquity* 53: 195–204. DOI: [10.1017/S0003598X00042526](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00042526).
- Amiet, Pierre. 1985. “La période IV de Tépé Sialk reconsidérée.” In *De l’Indus aux Balkans. Recueil à la mémoire de Jean Deshayes*, edited by Jean-Louis Huot, Marguerite Yon, and Yves Calvet, 293–312. Paris: Maison de L’Orient.
- Amiet, Pierre. 1986. *L’âge des échanges inter-Iraniens. 3500–1700 avant J.C.* Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux.
- Barth, Fredrik. 1969. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Chegini, Naser N., Hamid Fahimi, and Barbara Helwing. 2011. “Excavations at Arisman, Area C.” In *Early Mining and Metallurgy on the Western Central Iranian Plateau. Report on the First Five Years of Research of the Joint Iranian-German Research Project*, edited by Abdolrasool Vatandoust, Hermann Parzinger, and Barbara Helwing, 40–68. *Archäologie in Iran und Turan* 9. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern.
- Dahl, Jacob L. 2019. *Tablettes et Fragments Proto-Élamites*. Textes Cunéiformes 32. Paris: éditions Khéops.
- Dahl, Jacob L., Morteza Hessari, and Rouhollah Yousefi Zoshk. 2012. “The Proto-Elamite Tablets from Tape Sofalin.” *Iranian Journal of Archaeological Studies* 2 (1): 57–73.
- Dahl, Jacob L., Cameron A. Petrie, and Daniel T. Potts. 2013. “Chronological Parameters of the Earliest Writing System in Iran.” In *Ancient Iran and Its Neighbours. Local Developments and Long-Range Interactions in the Fourth Millennium BC*, edited by Cameron A. Petrie, 353–78. BIPS Archaeological Monographs Series 3. Oxford and Oakville: Oxbow Books.
- Damerow, Peter, and Robert K. Englund. 1989. *The Proto-Elamite Texts from Tepe Yahya*. BASPR 39. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Englund, Robert K. 2006. "Proto-Elamisch." In *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie 11*, edited by Michael P. Streck, 11–26. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Ghirshman, Roman. 1938. *Fouilles de Sialk, Près de Kashan 1933, 1934, 1937 (I)*. Paris: Geuthner.
- Ghirshman, Roman. 1939. *Fouilles de Sialk, Près de Kashan 1933, 1934, 1937 (II)*. Paris: Geuthner.
- Ghirshman, Roman. 1964. *Iran. Protoiranier, Meder, Achämeniden*. Universum der Kunst 5. München: Verlag C. H. Beck.
- Goff, Clare L. 1971. "Luristan before the Iron Age." *Iran* 9: 131–52. DOI: [10.2307/4300443](https://doi.org/10.2307/4300443).
- Görsdorf, Jochen. 2011. "Radiocarbon Dating." In *Early Mining and Metallurgy on the Western Central Iranian Plateau. Report on the First Five Years of Research of the Joint Iranian-German Research Project*, edited by Abdolrasool Vatandoust, Hermann Parzinger, and Barbara Helwing, 370–73. Archäologie in Iran und Turan 9. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern.
- Helwing, Barbara. 2010. "Sialk, Tepe." In *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie 12*, edited by Michael P. Streck, 433–37. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Helwing, Barbara. 2011. "The Small Finds from Arisman." In *Early Mining and Metallurgy on the Western Central Iranian Plateau. Report on the First Five Years of Research of the Joint Iranian-German Research Project*, edited by Abdolrasool Vatandoust, Hermann Parzinger, and Barbara Helwing, 254–327. Archäologie in Iran und Turan 9. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern.
- Helwing, Barbara. 2013. "Some Thoughts on the Mode of Culture Change in the Fourth-Millennium BC Iranian Highlands." In *Ancient Iran and Its Neighbours. Local Developments and Long-Range Interactions in the Fourth Millennium BC*, edited by Cameron A. Petrie, 93–105. BIPS Archaeological Monographs Series 3. Oxford and Oakville: Oxbow Books.
- Herrmann, Georgina. 1968. "Lapis Lazuli: The Early Phases of Its Trade." *Iraq* 30: 21–57. DOI: [10.2307/4199836](https://doi.org/10.2307/4199836).
- Hessari, Morteza, and Rouhollah Yousefi Zoshk. 2013. "New Evidences on Emergence of Complex Societies in the Central Iranian Plateau." In *Susa and Elam. Archaeological, Philological, Historical and Geographical Perspectives. Proceedings of the International Congress Held at Ghent University, December 14-17, 2009*, edited by Jan Tavernier and Katrien de Graef, 27–42. Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse 58. Leiden: Brill.
- Lamberg-Karlovsky, Carl C. 1971. "The Proto-Elamite Settlement at Tepe Yahya." *Iran* 9: 87–96. DOI: [10.2307/4300440](https://doi.org/10.2307/4300440).
- Lamberg-Karlovsky, Carl C. 1976. "The Third Millennium of Tappeh Yahya: A Preliminary Statement." In *Proceedings of the IVth Annual Symposium on Archaeological Research in Iran, 3rd-8th November 1975*, edited by Firouz Bagherzadeh, 71–84. Tehran: ICAR.
- Lamberg-Karlovsky, Carl C. 1978. "The Proto-Elamites on the Iranian Plateau." *Antiquity* 52: 114–20. DOI: [10.1017/S0003598X00071933](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00071933).
- Le Breton, Louis. 1957. "The Early Periods at Susa. Mesopotamian Relations." *Iraq* 19: 79–124. DOI: [10.2307/4199623](https://doi.org/10.2307/4199623).
- Majidzadeh, Yousef. 1389H [1969/1970]. *Kawoshha-ye mohavate-ye bastani-ye Ozbaki. Jeld-e awal: honar va me'mari*. Tehran: Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism General Office of Tehran Province. (In Persian)
- Majidzadeh, Yousef. 1982. "Lapis Lazuli and the Great Khorasan Road." *Paléorient* 8 (1): 59–69. DOI: [10.3406/paleo.1982.4309](https://doi.org/10.3406/paleo.1982.4309).
- Malek Shahmirzadi, Sadegh. 2002. *The Ziggurat of Sialk*. Sialk Reconsideration Project, First Report. Tehran: ICHO.
- McCown, Donald E. 1942. "The Material Culture of Early Iran." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1: 424–49.
- McCown, Donald E. 1949. "The Iranian Project." in Perkins, Ann L. "Archaeological News." *American Journal of Archaeology* 53 (1): 54 [36–57]. DOI: [10.2307/501213](https://doi.org/10.2307/501213).
- Mutin, Benjamin. 2013. *The proto-Elamite Settlement and Its Neighbors: Tepe Yahya, period IVC*. ASPR Monograph Series. Oxford, Oakville: Oxbow Books.

- Nicholas, Ilene M. 1990. *The Proto-Elamite Settlement at TUV; Malyan Excavation Report 1*. University Museum Monographs 69. Philadelphia: University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology University of Pennsylvania.
- Nokandeh, Jebraïl. 2002. “Gozaresh-e Layeh Negari-e Boresh-e Alef Dar Tappeh-e Jonoubi-Ye Sialk.” In *The Ziggurat of Sialk*, edited by S. Malek Shahmirzadi, 55–84. Sialk Reconsideration Project, First Report. Tehran: ICHO. (In Persian)
- Pittman, Holly. 2006. “Proto-Elamische Kunstperiode.” In *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie. Bd. 11*, edited by Michael P. Streck, 26–34. Berlin, New York: de Gruyter.
- Pollard, A. Mark, Hassan Fazeli Nashli, Hadi Davoudi, Siamak Sarlak, Barbara Helwing, and Fariba Saeidi Anaraki. 2013. “A New Radiocarbon Chronology for the North Central Plateau of Iran from the Late Neolithic to the Iron Age.” *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan* 45: 27–50.
- Porada, Edith. 1965. *Ancient Iran: The Art of Pre-Islamic Times*. Art of the World: A Series of Regional Histories of the Visual Arts 16. London: Methuen.
- Potts, Daniel T. 1999. *The Archaeology of Elam. Formation and Transformation of an Ancient Iranian State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Potts, Timothy F. 1994. *Mesopotamia and the East. An Archaeological and Historical Study of Foreign Relations ca. 3400/2000 BC*. Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology.
- Scheil, Vincent. 1901. *Textes Élamites-Anzanites*. MDP 3. Paris: Ernst Leroux.
- Scheil, Vincent. 1905. *Documents archaïques en écriture proto-Élamite*. MDP 6. Paris: P. Geuthner.
- Stolper, Matthew W. 1985. “Proto-Elamite Texts from Tall-i Malyan.” *Kadmos* 24 (1): 1–12. DOI: [10.1515/kadm.1985.24.1-2.1](https://doi.org/10.1515/kadm.1985.24.1-2.1).
- Sumner, William M. 2003. *Early Urban Life in the Land of Anshan: Excavations at Tal-e Malyan in the Highlands of Iran*. Malyan Excavation Reports 3. University Museum Monograph 117. Philadelphia, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.
- Vallat, François. 2003. “Un fragment de tablette Proto-Élamite découvert à Ozbaki, au nord-ouest de Téhéran.” *Akkadica* 124: 229–31.
- Vatandoust, Abdolrasool, Hermann Parzinger, and Barbara Helwing, eds. 2011. *Early Mining and Metallurgy on the Western Central Iranian Plateau. Report on the First Five Years of Research of the Joint Iranian-German Research Project*. AIT 9. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern.
- Weiss, Harvey, and Theodor Cuyler Young Jr. 1975. “The Merchants of Susa: Godin V and Plateau-Lowland Relations in the Late Fourth Millennium B.C.” *Iran* 13: 1–17.
- Young, Cuyler Theodore Jr. 1969. *Excavations at Godin Tepe: First Progress Report: First Progress Report*. ROM Art and Archaeology Division Occasional Paper 17. Toronto: ROM.
- Young, Cuyler Theodore Jr. 1986. “Godin Tepe Period VI/V and Central Western Iran at the End of the Fourth Millennium.” In *Ĝamdat Nasr. Period or Regional Style? Papers given at a Symposium Held in Tübingen, November 1983*, edited by Uwe Finkbeiner and Wolfgang Röllig, 212–28. Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients, Reihe B, Geisteswissenschaften 62. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert.
- Young, Cuyler Theodore Jr., and Louis D. Levine. 1974. *Excavations of the Godin Project: Second Progress Report*. ROM Art and Archaeology Division Occasional Paper 26. Toronto: ROM.
- Yousefi Zoshk, Rouhollah, Kh. Beik Mohammadi, Majid Zeighami, S. Baghizadeh, M. Golcheh, H. Ahmadpour, J. Miri, et al. 2015. “Meymanat Abad Tepe: An Important Site in Late Fourth Millennium BC in Iranian Central Plateau.” *Archaeology* 4 (1): 13–21. DOI: [10.5923/j.archaeology.20150401.02](https://doi.org/10.5923/j.archaeology.20150401.02).