



Efforts underway to protect 6,000-year-old site in Behbahan

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The Director General of the Registration Office of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts has called for ceding the residential lands to the ministry to facilitate the relocation of human settlements positioned on historical hills.

Alireza Izadi announced the decision to relocate a village situated on the 6,000-year-old site of Chega Sofla in Behbahan, Khuzestan Province, adding efforts to secure global recognition for this valuable city are a priority for the Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Ministry.

Historical significance

The ancient city of Chega Sofla serves as a critical piece of evidence for the historical connection of the Persian Gulf to Iranians. Archaeologists have uncovered findings during these excavations that indicate that Occupied Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Mesopotamia were influenced by Iranian civilization in subsequent millennia. They consider the discoveries at Chega Sofla to be significant clues to understanding history.

Challenges in relocation

The relocation of the village, situated on Chega Sofla site dating back to the 4th millennium BCE, was previously considered during former President Hassan Rouhani's administration. Is'haq Jahangiri, his vice president,

urgently wrote a letter to the then governor of Khuzestan Province, the Housing and Urban Development Foundation, and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, requesting the relocation of the village located on the ancient site of Chega Sofla.

Prior to this, hundreds of archaeologists had also called for the protection of Chega Sofla. However, this initiative did not come to fruition during Rouhani's presidency. Ezzatollah Zarghami, the cultural heritage minister in the subsequent government, noted that while such agreements are not uncommon, the reality on the ground is quite different. He referred to his trip to Ilam Province, where there has been an archaeological site for which replacement land has been designated for the relocation of a nearby village for the past 30 years. Although the locals are open to relocating, they have one condition: they want homes built for them before they move. Zarghami asked, "With what money?"

The deputy head of Khuzestan Province's Cultural Heritage Organization also stated that the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts has no funds to purchase the residential properties of Chega Sofla village.

However, Izadi stated that the ministry intends to relocate the village situated on Chega Sofla ancient city. He considers cooperation from other agencies to be essential for achieving this goal.

According to him, the ministry is particularly focused on the Seventh Economic Development Plan and the property rights clause included within it.

"I hope this issue will be addressed in the plan, allowing the ministry to have access to land designated for residential use. This way, when the ministry requests a property owner to relocate their home, it can provide them with alternative land."

Importance of preserving Chega Sofla

Why is it necessary for the village to be relocated in the wake of the use of a faked name for the Persian Gulf by certain neighboring countries? Why should the 6,000-year-old city of Chega Sofla be transformed into a museum site?

Archaeologists have discovered the world's first brick cemetery at Chega Sofla, a ceremonial site that has the potential to reshape the narrative of urbanization along the shores of the Persian Gulf. What lies between its cemetery and temple is even more significant than its remarkable brick architecture.

Abbas Moqadam, the head of the archaeological team carried out excavations at Chega Sofla, considers this site to be a key to the history of the region. He noted that archaeologists have found stelae (rock carvings) depicting two goats facing each other. These images were later represented as two Arabian gazelles in the Al Ain Cemetery, three thousand

years later.

"The UAE claimed at UNESCO that the cultural roots of the Al Ain Cemetery are rich and registered it as a World Heritage Site. However, the rock carvings of Chega Sofla are over 3,000 years older than those found at the Al Ain Cemetery. On the graves of Al Ain Cemetery, two Arabian gazelles (*oryxes*) stand facing each other, while at Chega Sofla, there are two goats."

Archaeologists have discovered figurines in the eastern and western regions of the Arabian Peninsula that reveal the influence of Chega Sofla. The rock carvings at Chega Sofla also have ancient connections to findings in Hazor, located in occupied Palestine. The stelae uncovered in Hazor date back to the Bronze Age, around 1200 BCE, while the stelae from Chega Sofla are 3,800 years older.

The discovery of historical roots of civilization at Chega Sofla does not stop here. Moqadam noted that in the Uruk culture of Mesopotamia, there is a ceremonial cup known as the Warka vase, which features ritualistic motifs such as offerings to the temple. We found a cup that is identical in form and made of pottery. Those familiar with Mesopotamian art recognize the significant influence Chega Sofla had on the Warka vase. In fact, the Chega Sofla Cup is 700 years older than the Warka vase.

Moqadam compared the findings from Chega Sofla with contemporary sites in Mesopotamia, such as Ubaid and

Ur, among others, adding this comparison demonstrates the extreme richness of the burial sites in Chega Sofla.

"We are dealing with a prosperous city that had extensive connections with various regions of the world at that time. In the village in question, there are 15 to 20 families residing, but nearly 40 houses exist, most of which are abandoned," he noted.

Future considerations

The archaeological team, led by Moqadam, presented a relocation plan for the village in 2018. He explained, "based on the plan, an entire village, including houses and rural land, will be constructed outside the boundaries of Chega Sofla".

Moqadam, who recently visited Chega Sofla site with a delegation from the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, questioned why the Ministry agreed to create drainage systems along the edges of its roadways if it is pursuing global registration and the relocation of the village.

According to him, the improvement of the village's drainage systems was a plan initiated during Zarghami's tenure as minister; however, the establishment of new infrastructure indicates the village's commitment to its current location. We must wait and see what the new minister's plan is for preserving the extraordinary history of Chega Sofla, located 25 kilometers from the Persian Gulf.

