

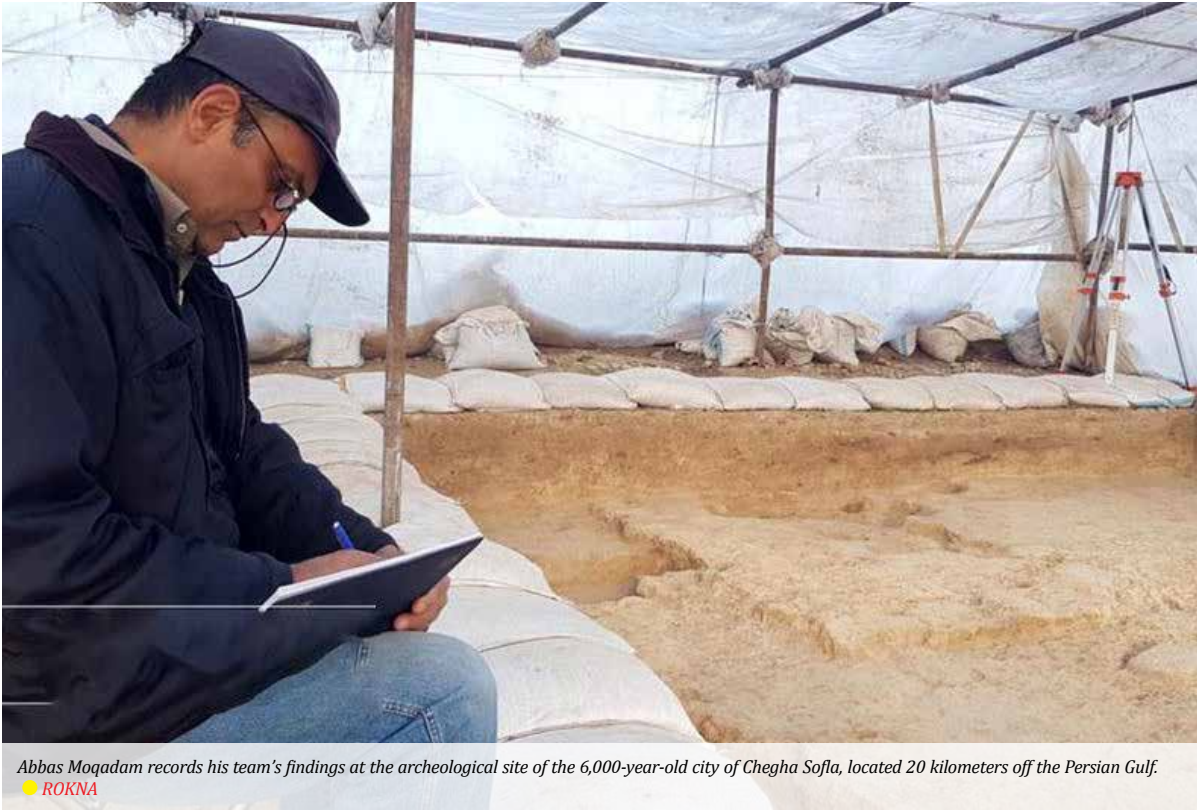
Archaeological digs at 6,000-year-old city of Chegha Sofla Unveiling Persian Gulf’s ancient roots

PERSPECTIVE

For years, some neighboring countries have tried to pass off a fabricated name for the Persian Gulf, even as excavations in Chegha Sofla, in the Zuhreh Plain, bring to light the direct influence of Iranian history and civilization on the region. The findings from this ancient city — the most compelling evidence yet of the Persian Gulf’s connection to Iran — spell out how, over millennia, places like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Occupied Palestine, and Mesopotamia fell under the sway of Iran’s 6,000-year-old civilization. So far, archaeologists have only dug up a handful of the 5,000 ancient graves at the site.

UAE’s cultural echoes 3,000 years on

Archaeologists at Chegha Sofla have come across stelae (carved stones) depicting two goats facing each other. Three thousand years later, this motif turned up as two Arabian oryx antelopes on the graves of Al Ain. Abbas Moqadam, head of the Chegha Sofla excavation, told Iran newspaper: “The UAE claimed at UNESCO that the Al Ain cemetery had a rich cultural background and had it listed as a world heritage site. But the stelae at Chegha Sofla date back over three thousand years before the images at Al Ain. The Al Ain graves show two oryxes facing each other, but in Chegha Sofla, it’s two goats.” Moqadam added, “The difference is that here in Chegha Sofla, the two goats are in a religious setting, while there in the Al Ain cemetery, they’re on a grave. So, we’re dealing with a deeply rooted tradition in the ancient region, and this tradition and civilization clearly stem from somewhere. There are no other reports. So, we have the oldest depiction at Chegha Sofla, which points to its role as the cradle of the region’s civilization.”



Abbas Moqadam records his team's findings at the archeological site of the 6,000-year-old city of Chegha Sofla, located 20 kilometers off the Persian Gulf. ● ROKNA

Impact on history of Hazor, Occupied Palestine

Archaeologists have also stumbled upon figurines in both the eastern and western parts of the Arabian Peninsula, showing Chegha Sofla’s influence. The stelae unearthed at Chegha Sofla tie in with ancient finds at Hazor, in Occupied Palestine, dating to the Bronze Age (around 1200 BCE). The Chegha Sofla stelae go back 3,800 years earlier than those at Hazor. But the story doesn’t end there. Moqadam explained, “In the Uruk culture of Mesopotamia, there’s a ritual stone vessel called the ‘Warka Vase’ with ceremonial scenes like offerings to a temple. We dug up an identical vessel, made of pottery, at Chegha Sofla. Anyone familiar with Mesopotamian art knows how much the Warka Vase drew on Chegha Sofla’s influence. The Chegha Sofla vessel predates the Warka Vase by 700 years.” Moqadam lined up the grave goods at Chegha Sofla against those from contemporary Mesopotamian sites like Ubaid and

Ur. He said, “This comparison shows that Chegha Sofla’s grave goods are extremely rich, pointing to a wealthy city with broad connections across the ancient world. These people could bring in marble from eastern Iran, metals from the east and the central plateau, decorative stones from Afghanistan, and obsidian from Lake Van in Turkey. But Mesopotamian graves are poor — mostly pottery. For the first time, archaeologists in the fifth millennium BCE are face to face with such an abundance of grave goods.”

Window into ancient Persian Gulf

Chegha Sofla lies just 20 kilometers from the Persian Gulf. Moqadam believes the city opens a window onto how ancient the Persian Gulf is. Before archaeologists cracked the code of Chegha Sofla’s mysterious world by entering its brick tombs, only a few scraps of the Persian Gulf’s history had been brought to light. The oldest finds linked to the Persian Gulf were a handful of Paleolithic caves in Hormozgan and a

few small fifth-millennium BCE sites in Bushehr, most of them inland, with only one or two right on the coast. In historical times, the Elamite city of Liyan and, later, the Islamic port of Siraf were excavated on the Persian Gulf’s shores. Moqadam said, “The cities of Susa and Chegha Sofla are the two most important prehistoric cities, but where is Chegha Sofla? Right next to the Persian Gulf.” He described the Susa excavations as compromised, focused on pulling out artifacts, but said, “Chegha Sofla is being excavated to international standards.” The French excavated Susa and carried off many of its artifacts.

Chegha Sofla’s case for World Heritage status

Chegha Sofla checks off at least four or five of UNESCO’s 10 criteria for World Heritage listing. One is evidence of “a masterpiece of human creative genius,” which archaeologists have tracked down in Chegha Sofla’s 6,000-year-old cemetery and sanctuary. Moqadam calls Chegha Sofla one of the rarest ritual sites from

the fifth millennium BCE. The site’s components are set out in an orderly fashion, with unique symbolism in the arrangement of graves, sanctuary, and pottery. He sees Chegha Sofla as a unique example of a lost civilization and tradition — another UNESCO criterion. “For the first time at Chegha Sofla, we’re confronted with precisely designed graves with partitioned chambers,” Moqadam said. This feature had never turned up in previous digs. In the 6,000-year-old cemetery, ossuaries were worked into the burial architecture. People set aside their ancestors’ bones in these ossuaries out of respect, and later burials took the place of the previous ones. Archaeologists have identified nearly 5,000 graves at the site, but the major discoveries so far come out of just 10 of them — leaving 4,990 graves still untouched.

Bringing Persian Gulf history back into spotlight

Everything about this site calls for turning Chegha Sofla into a museum as soon as possible — a destination for both domestic and interna-

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tional tourists to get to the bottom of the region’s history and see for themselves that those countries pushing a fake name for the Persian Gulf themselves owe a debt to Iran’s great civilization. In 2018, the excavation team, led by Abbas Moqadam, put forward a plan to relocate the village sitting atop the site and convert the site into a museum, submitting it to Iran’s Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts and the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development. “The plan is to build a new village, with all its houses and farmland, outside the Chegha Sofla area.” The team insists that villagers settle down nearby so they can cash in on the tourism boom. He said, “The plan takes into account all existing homes and land. We believe a new village should be designed with the region’s needs and Chegha Sofla’s future tourism appeal in mind.” The high number of tourists flocking to see Khatoun — the 6,000-year-old woman from Chegha Sofla, now housed in the Shush Castle Museum — shows the strong interest in visiting Chegha Sofla. Moqadam believes, however, that moving the villagers outside the Zuhreh Plain would bring about social consequences and that locals shouldn’t be cut off from their roots. The team has reviewed the area for the new village and confirmed it lacks historical or cultural remains. They’ve even laid out rules for the height and boundaries of new houses, so the view of Chegha Sofla won’t be marred. Moqadam says, “If officials sign off on the plan, the next step will be to focus on the architecture of the new village and its harmony with Chegha Sofla.” According to him, this architecture could turn the new village into one of the region’s attractions, closely tied to Chegha Sofla’s rich history. Moqadam, who has gone to great lengths to protect Chegha Sofla and highlight its significance, says, “The plan is written so that no rights of the villagers fall by the wayside.” If the authorities give the green light to the archaeological team’s plan, the new Chegha Sofla village could become the first purpose-built settlement focused on cultural heritage and welcoming tourists. The villagers could carve out a new livelihood through eco-tourism alongside farming, holding on to both their name and their bread. After all, these villagers are the original custodians of the oldest city that ties the Persian Gulf to Iran as far back as 4,000 BCE.

The article first appeared in the Persian-language newspaper Iran.



Graves found at the Chegha Sofla archeological site ● CAMBRIDGE



Vessels found at the Chegha Sofla archeological site ● CAMBRIDGE