

Konar Sandal’s ancient story awaits rediscovery



Iranica Desk

Archaeological excavations at Konar Sandal in Kerman Province — one of the largest Bronze Age sites in Iran and a remarkable example of early urbanization in the country — have once again come to a halt due to a lack of funding. The renewed suspension comes after excavations had only recently resumed following a 17-year break. Nader Alidadi Soleimani, head of the Heritage Registration and Archaeology Department at the Kerman Province’s Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization, confirmed the pause in an interview with ISNA, stating that no archaeological excavations are currently being carried out anywhere in Kerman Province. “Our most recent excavation project was related to the ancient site of Jiroft, known as Konar Sandal,” he explained. “From 2001 to 2007, six excavation seasons were completed at this site, but afterward, the work was suspended for 17 years. In 2023, excavation permits were re-issued, and two additional excavation seasons were conducted.” The provincial budget for 2025 includes a specific allocation intended to continue the archaeological work at Konar Sandal. “We hope that excavations at this significant site will resume soon,” he said. “However, at the moment, I cannot say for certain that this will happen. Until the funds are officially allocat-

ed, it will not be possible to begin the next phase of work.”

Research goals and findings

Explaining the objectives of the excavations, Soleimani said that Konar Sandal is one of Iran’s largest Bronze Age archaeological sites and a key example of early urbanization. “Based on findings from the six previous excavation seasons, we have determined that the earliest settlement in this city dates back to the beginning of the third millennium BCE and continued until the end of that same millennium,” he noted. He emphasized that each new excavation season has the potential to yield fresh insights based on earlier discoveries, helping researchers gain a deeper understanding of this vast archaeological complex. “Therefore,” he added, “the primary goal of these excavations is research-oriented — to expand our knowledge and comprehension of this important site.” Speaking about last year’s excavation results, Soleimani explained that significant architectural remains were unearthed in the southern part of the site, near Konar Sandal South. “We also uncovered several artifacts, the most significant of which were seals impressed on clay,” he said. “These discoveries are particularly valuable because they shed light on aspects of the region’s cultural and economic structure, as



well as its system of trade and exchange during that era.” The archaeologist also highlighted the importance of Jiroft in archaeological studies, noting that southeastern Iran holds a special place in the country’s ancient history. “The presence of the Halilrud River and the fertile plains surrounding it led to the formation of human settlements in prehistoric times,” he explained. “By the beginning of the third millennium BCE, the first cities had emerged in this region. Jiroft was among the most significant of these urban centers, with Konar Sandal at its heart, located in the middle of the Halilrud plain.” He described Jiroft as “a prosperous and thriving city,” adding that archaeological findings indicate its inhabitants lived in comfort and were part of a highly skilled and artistic society.

Evidence of a rich civilization

Soleimani added that the beautifully crafted chlorite stone artifacts, now housed in the Jiroft Museum, the Kerman Museum, and the National Museum of Iran in Tehran, are powerful evidence of the region’s rich and sophisticated culture. “Alongside these,” he noted, “the pottery industry, copper-smelting furnaces, and metalworking are among the other defining features of this ancient civilization.” He explained that due to limited funding, archaeological efforts have so far remained largely concentrated on the Konar Sandal site. “However,” he continued, “the Old City of Jiroft was also excavated from late 2024 until April 2025. This site belongs to the Islamic period, and previous excavations were carried out there between 2001 and 2008 under the

supervision of Hamideh Choubak from the Research Institute of Cultural Heritage.” Discussing the findings from the latest excavations at the Old City of Jiroft, Soleimani explained that the work was mainly conducted in an area where the remains of a mosque had previously been discovered. “This new excavation season led to the identification of additional sections of the same mosque,” he said. “For example, part of the mosque’s courtyard extending northward was uncovered, which has enhanced our understanding of the structure and layout of the city’s Grand Mosque. In fact, the nature of this excavation was primarily research-oriented.” He noted that the building was first identified in the 2000s during earlier excavations of the Old City of Jiroft.

“Several excavation seasons were carried out at the site,” Soleimani added, “and it was determined that the mosque consisted of multiple courtyards and arcades. Based on both archaeological evidence and historical sources, this structure can indeed be identified as Jiroft’s Grand Mosque.”

Expanding on the architectural details of the mosque, Soleimani said the structure includes a single minaret, stucco-decorated mihrabs — at least two or three of which belong to different historical periods — a courtyard, brickwork, and a washhouse (ablution area). “Water channels supplying the washhouse were also discovered next to the mosque,” he added. “In addition, areas surrounding the mosque have been identified, including a stone-paved passageway leading to the building and parts of the adjacent urban fabric.” He emphasized that the Old City of Jiroft still requires extensive archaeological investigation. “If funding is secured,” he noted, “excavations at the site will continue.” Regarding the age of the Grand Mosque, Soleimani said, “The mosque’s original core likely dates back to the fourth century AH (10th century CE). It flourished and expanded during later periods, maintaining its importance as a central place of worship.” “Unfortunately, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, unauthorized dig-

ging took place in Jiroft,” he said. “Fortunately, those activities were eventually brought under control. However, even today, traces of illegal digging and damage caused by looters can still be seen in many archaeological sites, which is deeply concerning. This past spring, such incidents occurred again in Jiroft, but they were quickly contained, and we hope the situation has now been fully stabilized.”

Kerman’s vast archaeological landscape

Soleimani further described the rich archaeological landscape of Kerman Province, noting that more than 2,000 ancient mounds and sites have been identified in the Jiroft region alone. “This area forms part of the Halilrud cultural zone, which encompasses over 2,000 archaeological sites dating to various prehistoric and historic periods of Iran,” he explained. “The Jiroft Civilization is an integral component of this broader cultural landscape.” He added, “If we take the entire Kerman Province into account, the total number of archaeological sites is even higher — about 2,500 to 3,000 sites in all. The Halilrud cultural zone itself includes eight southern cities of Kerman Province — Rudbar, Faryab, Anbarabad, and Manujan, among others — all of which are extraordinarily rich in historical and archaeological heritage.”

Zanjan strengthens role as Iran’s metal handicrafts hub

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Zanjan has established itself as Iran’s leading center for metal handicrafts, producing around 7,000 tons of various copperware and jewelry annually, according to Seyyed Mikaeil Mousavi, Director General of the province’s Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization. Highlighting Zanjan’s significant potential in the handicrafts sector,

Mousavi noted that the city has been designated as a World City of Filigree (Malileh), with an annual production of about four tons of silver products, ranging from jewelry to tableware, according to chtn.ir. He added that Zanjan’s traditional art of knife-making, a craft with deep historical roots in the region, continues to be one of the province’s most renowned handicrafts. “We are now

moving toward making this traditional art more practical and have prioritized training programs in this regard,” Mousavi explained. Addressing the importance of expanding export markets and promoting local handicrafts, Mousavi emphasized the need to establish export and sales networks within the province, given the high capabilities of local artisans and producers. “To enhance both do-

mestic and international sales, export-oriented initiatives centered on Zanjani producers and artists must be developed,” he said. The official further noted that out of the 299 recognized branches of handicrafts in Iran, 55 are active in Zanjan Province. Currently, around 12,000 people are engaged in the province’s handicrafts sector, reflecting its remarkable capacity and potential for growth.

