

Archaeologists warn of growing damage to Tall-e Zahhak

Iranica Desk

The ancient Zahhak Mound, known also as Tall-e Zahhak, in Fasa, Fars Province, is rapidly deteriorating. Farmland has been ploughed up to the very edge of the archaeological hill, landowners are reportedly removing soil from the site to enrich their own fields, and traces of illegal treasure hunters have been observed.

The renowned Tall-e Zahhak is considered one of Iran's most significant prehistoric and historic archaeological sites, holding exceptional value for historical and archaeological research. Archaeological evidence indicates that the site dates back to the third and fourth millennia BCE. During the Middle Elamite period, a ziggurat was constructed there, underscoring the site's importance in the study of ancient civilizations. In the Achaemenid era, the site became a major strategic and administrative center of the Persian Empire. Numerous archaeological investigations have identified Tall-e Zahhak as the location of the ancient city of Fasa during Achaemenid times, giving it a distinguished place in Iranian history, ISNA wrote.

The site once consisted of fortified walls and defensive moats and remained inhabited until the early Islamic centuries. However, after the development of the modern city of Fasa several kilometers away, the ancient settlement gradually declined and fell into



● ISNA

obscurity. Tall-e Zahhak is widely regarded as a national symbol and a defining element of Fasa's historical identity, deeply intertwined with the beliefs and traditions of local communities.

Agricultural expansion within the site's protected zone now poses a severe threat to the ancient monument. Farmers have allegedly been removing soil from the mound and adding it to their own lands, slowly eroding the nationally significant site. Deep ploughing around the mound has further endangered its archaeological layers. Farmland now surrounds the entire area and has become one of the greatest challenges facing the monument. Siavash Arya, a cultural heritage

expert, stated that landowners are using soil taken from Tall-e Zahhak in their fields and that the site has been subjected to repeated encroachments.

Another major concern is the daily passage of motorcyclists across the archaeological hill, effectively turning the ancient site into a motocross track. Experts say authorities must intervene immediately to prevent further damage. Uncontrolled and illegal construction within the protected perimeter of the site, ongoing for more than a decade in violation of cultural heritage regulations, has also become a serious threat to the preservation of the monument. Illegal excavations carried out by traffickers in historical artifacts

— driven by fantasies of hidden treasure — represent yet another danger to the site. Experts stress that such treasure myths have no archaeological basis.

In addition, sheep grazing and the accumulation of animal waste have created conditions favorable to rodents and other burrowing animals, which damage and disturb archaeological layers and destroy important site features. Experts are calling for grazing to be banned within the site and its buffer zone.

Researchers note that Tall-e Zahhak originally consisted of several surrounding mounds and covered a vast area. Unfortunately, most of the smaller satellite mounds have been completely destroyed

over recent decades due to soil extraction by farmers, with only small remnants surviving around the main mound. Portions of the ancient moat can still be seen among the surrounding agricultural lands. Experts warn that Tall-e Zahhak is now among the most endangered archaeological sites in both Fars Province and Iran as a whole. They caution that continued neglect could lead to a fate similar to that of other heavily damaged heritage sites, including Tappeh Hesar in Damghan.

Heritage advocates say the most urgent measure now required from Iran's Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts is the immediate fencing of the site to prevent further encroachment

and uncontrolled grazing. They also stress the need for the rapid legal demarcation of the site's boundaries and protected buffer zone so that future archaeological research may continue and the hidden dimensions of the ancient settlement can still be uncovered. Tall-e Zahhak is among the archaeological hills identified by the Belgian archaeologist Louis Vanden Berghe as one of the most important and valuable historical-period sites of the first millennium BCE in his work *Archaeology of Iran*. Evidence suggests that the deeper layers buried beneath the present plain date back to periods even earlier than the first millennium BCE.

An irrigation pipeline crossing directly over the archaeological mound further illustrates the site's ongoing deterioration.

During the Qajar era, Tall-e Zahhak once stood approximately 25 meters high and measured between 130 and 140 meters across. Today, however, due to destruction, erosion, and encroachment by landowners, the mound has been significantly reduced in size, with its height now measuring less than 15 meters.

Tall-e Zahhak was officially registered as a national heritage site on September 15, 1932, making it one of the earliest nationally registered historical monuments in Iran — an indication of its exceptional historical and archaeological significance.

Kar Bafi tradition finds new life in Varzaneh

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In the mud-brick homes of Varzaneh, a desert town in Iran's central Isfahan Province, the centuries-old art of Kar Bafi — a traditional cotton weaving craft — is finding new life once again. Rooted in the cotton-growing lands of eastern Isfahan, Kar Bafi is far more than a textile technique. For generations, it has formed part of the identity and livelihood of local women, who transformed the white cotton harvested from nearby fields into handwoven cloths rich in beauty and tradition, according to IRNA. Among the veteran artisans preserving the craft is Fatemeh Heydari, an elderly weaver whose workshop remains active despite the hardships facing the industry. The shelves of her home are lined with traditional woven tablecloths, reflecting decades of effort to keep the art alive and prevent it from fading into obscurity.

Heydari, who began weaving at the age of 14, says the craft has shaped both her life and the spirit of her town. Even now, she continues her work with remarkable dedication despite growing concerns over the declining quality of raw materials and the disappearance of natural dyes.

"In the past, Kar Bafi relied on high-quality cotton fibers and natural dyes that ensured durability," she said. "But years of drought and the drying up of cotton fields have made it increasingly difficult to source good materials, affecting the quality of the fabrics."



She added that environmental changes have also altered the nature of dyes and fibers, undermining both the authenticity of the craft and customer confidence.

For Heydari, Kar Bafi is more than a profession. Having spent her childhood beside weaving pits and spinning bobbins, she considers the craft inseparable from her life. She has even set aside one of her handmade cloths for use as her own burial shroud.

Yet the future of Kar Bafi does not rest solely with aging masters. A younger generation of artisans is working to revive the craft through innovation, combining heritage craft with modern clothing and practical products.

Zahra Rahmati, a 40-year-old artisan and clothing producer, is among those helping reshape the future of Kar Bafi. After training at vocational centers in Varzaneh and apprenticing under veteran weavers, she established her own workshop



equipped with modern looms. "I didn't want to limit handwoven fabrics to towels or tablecloths," Rahmati said. "Now I use them in clothing, vests, trousers, bags, and other products." She believes combining tradition with creativity is essential for the craft's survival. While older generations learned entirely through hands-on apprenticeship, she says modern training has become increasingly theoretical.



● IRNA

and synthetic materials instead of the hand-prepared cotton once common in Varzaneh.

Like many traditional crafts in Iran, Kar Bafi has suffered from shrinking markets and changing consumer habits. For years, production was largely limited to traditional tablecloths, reducing commercial demand. But artisans say the introduction of wearable and decorative products has begun attracting younger customers once again.

Still, economic pressures remain severe. "With people's purchasing power declining, Kar Bafi alone cannot provide a strong income," Rahmati said, adding that most sales occur at exhibitions or in areas frequented by tourists. "When foreign tourists visited the region, sales were much better because they appreciated natural handwoven fabrics."

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Ahmad Shahbazi, a local cultural heritage expert, said Kar Bafi was once practiced in nearly every household in the region, producing fabrics used for clothing, bedding, bread cloths, and other household textiles.

However, the arrival of cheaper factory-made fabrics gradually pushed the local weaving art to the margins.

"Only a few active workshops remain today, and the number of veteran artisans has declined dramatically," Shahbazi said. "Some of the older masters have passed away in recent years, and the number of active practitioners can now be counted on one hand."

Despite these challenges, around 30 to 40 people have received basic Kar Bafi training in recent years, with roughly 15 to 20 continuing to work actively in the field.

Shahbazi believes the revival of the market is crucial for the survival of the craft.

"If there is a strong market for these products, production will increase and younger generations will have greater motivation to learn and continue the tradition," he said.

Located 105 kilometers south-east of Isfahan, Varzaneh has long been known for Kar Bafi, also called Sofreh Bafi, one of the simplest forms of cotton weaving in Iran. Traditionally, the fabrics were used for bread cloths, bridal bundles, white chadors, night coverings, and burial shrouds — preserving a living connection between the people of the desert town and their cultural heritage.