



A Critical Review of Excavations and Conservation at the Ziwiye Archaeological Site

Hamid Amanollahi ✉ PhD Candidate, Department of Archaeology, University of Tehran; Expert, General Directorate of Cultural Heritage Sites, Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Tehran, Iran.

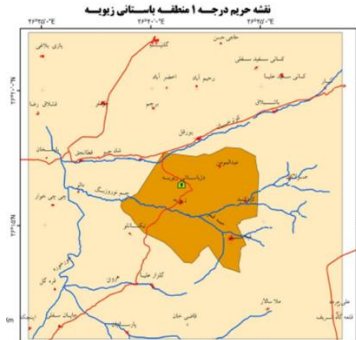
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Figures



The Level 1 Buffer Zone of the Ziwiye Site

Abstract

Ziwiye Fortress is one of the largest and most significant archaeological sites in northwestern Iran, located 55 km southeast of Saqqez in Kurdistan Province and registered as No. 762 on the National Heritage List of Iran. Despite its historical value as a major center of the Mannaeen and Median civilizations, the site has suffered from extensive looting, commercial excavations, and neglect over the past seventy years. This article critically reviews the history of its exploration, from early treasure-hunting activities (1946–1963) to systematic excavations led by Motamedi and Lakpour (1975–2003), as well as conservation efforts during the author's tenure (2007–2009). By analyzing archival records, published reports, and field experiences, the study highlights both the achievements and shortcomings of archaeological and preservation work at Ziwiye. The findings underscore the urgent need for sustainable strategies to protect this invaluable site for future generations.

Introduction

Ziwiye Fortress, situated atop a strategic hill near Saqqez in northwestern Iran, represents one of the most remarkable archaeological sites of the Iron Age in the Zagros region. With an estimated occupation spanning from the ninth century BCE to the early Achaemenid period, Ziwiye has been identified as a key political and military center of the Mannaeen and later Median polities. Archaeological evidence, including its multi-tiered terraces, columned hall, storage facilities, and monumental stairways, attests to the architectural sophistication of its builders. The site first gained global attention in 1947 following the chance discovery of the so-called Ziwiye Treasure, a collection of ivory carvings, gold artifacts, and decorated objects. These finds, many of which were dispersed into museums and private collections, became emblematic of Iron Age art in Iran but also highlighted the destructive consequences of uncontrolled excavations. Commercial digging between 1947 and 1953 severely damaged the architectural integrity of the fortress, erasing much of its stratigraphic and contextual information. Scientific investigations began later under the direction of Nosratollah Motamedi (1975–1979, resumed 1994–1998), followed by excavations led by Simin Lakpour (1999–2003). These campaigns revealed significant architectural remains, including the columned hall with sixteen stone bases, among the earliest examples in Iranian architectural history. Yet, despite these efforts, systematic publication of results has remained limited. Conservation challenges at Ziwiye are manifold: soil erosion, looting, and lack of management have continued to threaten its survival. During the author's directorship of the Ziwiye Cultural Heritage Base (2007–2009), measures such as emergency conservation, architectural stabilization, site documentation, and community outreach were initiated. Nevertheless, institutional neglect and local opposition hindered long-term outcomes. This study seeks to evaluate the legacy of excavations and conservation at Ziwiye, emphasizing both its scholarly significance and the urgent need for integrated preservation strategies.

Methodology

The research employs a descriptive-analytical approach, combining historical documentation, archaeological reports, and the author's field experiences during his directorship of the Ziwiye Cultural Heritage Base. Archival materials—including excavation permits, governmental correspondence, and unpublished reports—were systematically reviewed to reconstruct the history of exploration and conservation at the site. Published works by Motamedi, Lakpour, and other Iranian and international scholars were examined to contextualize the archaeological significance of Ziwiye within Iron Age studies. Additionally, conservation activities carried out between 2007 and 2009 were evaluated through on-site documentation, photographic records, and interviews with specialists. These activities included structural stabilization of the columned hall, soil and erosion management, artifact storage reorganization, and protective interventions. The methodology aimed to provide a holistic review of the interplay between excavation practices, conservation challenges, and heritage management policies. By integrating textual, visual, and experiential data, the study critically assesses the successes and failures of past efforts and offers insights for future preservation planning.

Discussion

1. Historical Significance of Ziwiye

Ziwiye's importance lies not only in its architecture but also in its role as a political and military stronghold of the Mannaeen kingdom. Assyrian annals of the ninth–eighth centuries BCE reference fortresses such as Zibia (interpreted as Ziwiye) as centers of resistance against Assyrian expansion. The site's position overlooking the Zagros foothills underscores its strategic role in regional geopolitics.

2. Looting and Commercial Excavations (1947–1963)

The discovery of the Ziwiye Treasure initiated widespread looting, resulting in the removal of thousands of artifacts without proper documentation. Excavations conducted under commercial permits prioritized artifact extraction over scientific analysis, leading to the loss of vital contextual information. As a result, while Ziwiye artifacts contributed significantly to the understanding of Iron Age art, their decontextualized nature undermined their archaeological value.

3. Scientific Excavations under Motamedi (1975–1979, 1994–1998)

Motamedi's excavations marked the first systematic approach to the site. His team uncovered the monumental stairways, multiple terraces, storage rooms, and the columned hall with its distinctive stone bases. These findings provided insights into the architectural and ceremonial functions of the fortress. However, disruptions caused by the 1979 Revolution halted progress, and limited publication of findings restricted scholarly access to the data.

4. Excavations under Simin Lakpour (1999–2003)

Lakpour's campaigns focused on extensive stratigraphic excavations across 5,000 square meters. The team recovered significant architectural remains and artifacts, including decorated pottery, tools, and ornaments. Yet, similar to earlier projects, limited dissemination of findings has hindered broader academic engagement. The lack of comprehensive final reports remains a challenge for reconstructing the site's occupational history.

5. Conservation Challenges

By the early 2000s, Ziwiye faced critical conservation issues: erosion of mudbrick structures, structural instability, and inadequate site management. Looting and vandalism persisted due to insufficient security. Local environmental conditions, including seasonal rains, further accelerated decay.

6. Author's Directorship of the Ziwiye Cultural Heritage Base (2007–2009)

During the author's tenure, efforts were made to professionalize site management. Four major initiatives were undertaken:

1. Infrastructure and Equipment: Establishment of laboratory facilities, acquisition of vehicles, and improvements to administrative buildings.
2. Research and Protection: Emergency stabilization of the columned hall, soil sieving to recover overlooked artifacts, and cataloging of finds.
3. Conservation and Restoration: Stabilization of walls, reconstruction using traditional mudbrick techniques, water management systems, and protective coverings.
4. Education and Outreach: Development of educational brochures, multimedia materials, and engagement with local communities to raise awareness of the site's importance.

These initiatives, though significant, faced resistance from local authorities and colleagues, limiting their long-term impact.

7. Heritage Management and Institutional Challenges

The case of Ziwiye reflects broader challenges in Iranian heritage management: insufficient funding, lack of inter-institutional cooperation, and political rivalries. The author documents instances of sabotage, lack of collaboration, and bureaucratic inertia that ultimately hindered sustainable progress.

8. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

The history of Ziwiye demonstrates the necessity of integrated approaches that combine archaeology, conservation, community engagement, and sustainable tourism. The site's potential for heritage tourism, if properly managed, could generate resources for ongoing preservation while enhancing public awareness.

Conclusion

Ziwiye Fortress embodies both the grandeur of ancient Iranian civilizations and the vulnerabilities of cultural heritage under neglect. Over seventy years, the site has experienced cycles of looting, fragmented excavations, and insufficient conservation. While the efforts of Motamedi and Lakpour advanced knowledge of Ziwiye's architecture and artifacts, limited publication curtailed their impact. More recent conservation programs have sought to stabilize and protect the site, yet institutional challenges and lack of sustained commitment remain major obstacles. The study highlights that preserving Ziwiye requires a holistic strategy integrating archaeological research, conservation science, heritage management, and community involvement. Raising public awareness and fostering inter-agency cooperation are critical steps toward ensuring the long-term protection of this invaluable site. As a cultural and historical symbol of the Mannaeen and Median legacies, Ziwiye demands both national and international attention. Its preservation will not only safeguard Iran's ancient heritage but also serve as a foundation for future scholarship and cultural tourism.