



Sassanian Settlements in the Qara Chai River Basin, Tafresh County, Markazi Province

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ABSTRACT

The central part of Tafresh is a mountainous area surrounded by mountains. Since this area is next to the north-south highway that passes through the edge of the central desert of Iran, it has been of interest in different historical periods and has had a special position. In the Sassanid period, this area was a part of the Jebal state, and the roads connecting the south, southwest, and west of Iran to the north and northeast passed through this area. This area has been relatively safe due to its mountainous nature. During this period, many forts were built to protect the roads that passed through this area. In the survey of this area, 35 settlements belonging to the Sassanid period on the side of the routes and the banks of the Qara Chai River were identified. The study of the surface pottery and the architectural evidence of these sites indicate that in the Sassanid period, this area had cultural connections with the south, southwest, north, northwest, and northeast regions. In this article, firstly, the importance of archaeological surveys as an efficient tool for reconstructing the historical background of Tafresh County has been discussed. In the following, the sites identified and the pottery and architectural finds obtained from them have been analyzed.

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Introduction

Tafresh County, located in the Markazi province, is located in the Abkamar catchment area at a height of 1900 meters above sea level, and is surrounded by the central mountain range of Iran from the east, south, and west, and ends with a steep slope to the water-filled valley of Qara Chai. Tafresh is limited from the north, Kharazan Mountains, Siah Kuh Kaboran, from the east, the slopes of Sine Astan and Sorkhan mountains, from the south, the mountains of Noghereh Kamar and Kolahe, and from the west, the slopes of Rafsa Mountain and Do Baradaran Mountain. In this part, there is no permanent river and the only flowing river is Qara Chai. From the point of view of topography, the slope of the land is from the south to the center and from the center to the northwest. Regarding political divisions, Kuh Panah district is considered part of Tafresh, but geographically, it is a part of Farahan Plain. Its mountain refuges and settlements have a close relationship with other Tafresh areas regarding surface data and so on. In this article, I have also surveyed the Kuh Panah as part of Tafresh (Fig. 1-2, 7).

For the first time in 1909, Abdul Hossein Ayati (1870-1953) discussed the excavation at Tos Nowzar Castle in the book "Hegoi Irani" (First Human Flight) and described it (Ayati, 1942: 80-81). This city, like other parts of the central province, was investigated late. Wolfram Kleiss surveyed the Fire Temple of Novis and its nearby area (Qala Novis) in Barzeh Valley and the old road from Qahan to Tos Nowzar and Tafresh in 1994 (Kleiss, 1999). For the first time, the upper part of Tafresh (including the Farahan part) was surveyed in 1997, and parts of Ashtian County in 2000 by Pourbakhshandeh (1997, 1999). In 2007,

the author surveyed this area to identify the archaeological sites and artifacts, as well as to fill the gap in archaeological research and in line with the preparation of the archaeological map of the country, which has identified about 100 settlements and some of its results have been published (Nourallahi, 2007-2008; 2012; 2016; 2018; 2020a,b; 2022; Nourallahi & Aliloo, 2016).

Methodology

Considering the high altitude of the region and its mountainous nature, different methods have been used in the investigation of Tafresh County. The methodology consists of random and organic surveys, using a local guide in inaccessible mountainous areas and old roads, and surveying smoother parts such as Kuh Pinah village and the banks of the Qara Chai River. The method of collecting data from the sites was done randomly. Pottery was collected from almost all surface parts. In this research, two methods of documentary study and reference to existing historical and geographical sources have been used regarding exploration and field surveys.

Discussion

During this survey project, the following sites were found: Gandom Kuh Castle (Fig. 3), Qala Kohne Darbar, Gaver Qala Zerjin, Gaver Qala Jurqin, Qiz Qala (Sultan Mahmud Castle), Tepe Upper Qala Kohloo, Tos Nowzar Castle, Kharazan Castle, Jalair Castle, Qala Omar Kandej, Tepe Abra dar, Tepe Sarabadan, Tape Ghabrestan Sarband, Tape Sefidab, Tepe Qabrestan Sefidab, Tape Kangran, Tepe Shahrab A, Qiz Korpe Si (Pol Dokhtar) and Mill-e Koreh (guide shaft) (Fig. 4), Narenj Qala Jeftan, Upper Qala Gabri Heftian, Qala Babalar, Khalachan Castle.

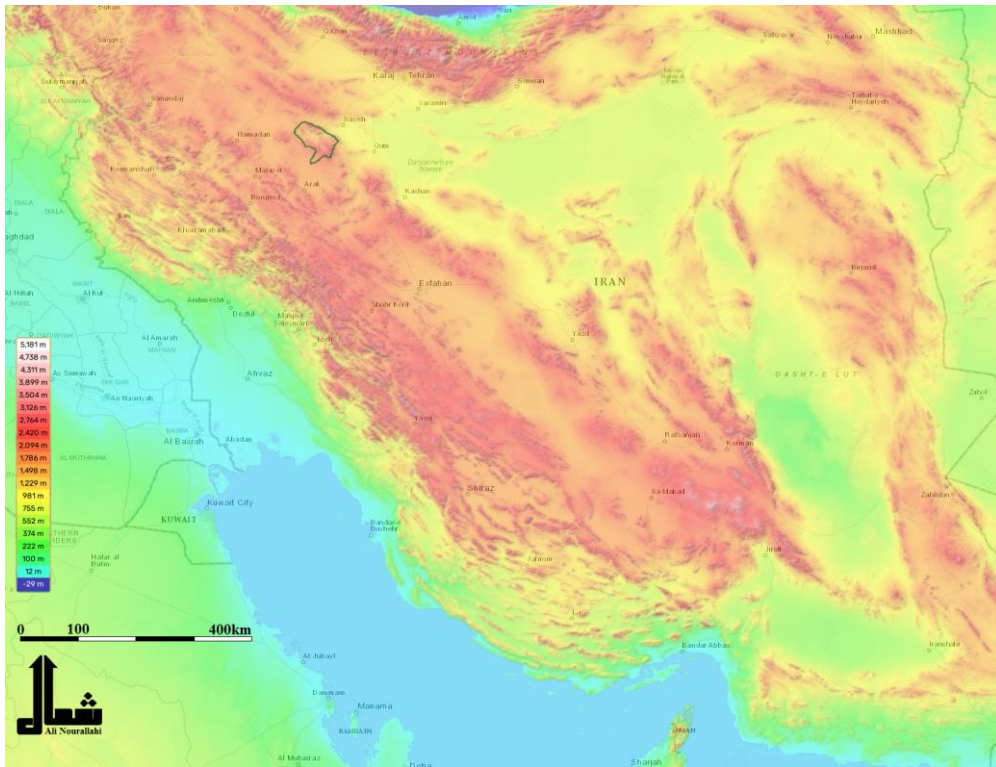


Figure 1: Geographical location of Tafresh County (by author).



Figure 2: A view of the Tafresh central part (by author).



Figure 3: Remains of the Gandom Kuh Castle walls (by author).



Figure 4: A view of the Mill-e Koreh (guide shaft) (by author).

Other monuments

Other monuments related to the Sassanid period were investigated and identified, which include the following ones: Fire Temple of Novis, Qala Novis, Desert Castle, Koboran Castle, Three-Ghosh Bazarjan Castle, Tepe Tejareh, works of the southern edge of Qara Chai (Frismaneh site), Darbar site, Ahe Castle (Abradar), Dizj site, Dokhtar Tararan castle, Hasheh site, and Qezel Qash site. The initial construction of these castles is probably related to the Sassanid period or later, according to the few architectural evidences (stone carcass immersed in half-pounded plaster mortar). According to their location, some of them have been restored and used many times in the later periods until the middle of the Qajar period.

Pottery

The Sasanian pottery of Tafresh cannot be easily distinguished from the pottery of the period before and after it. This shows the continuity of pottery tradition and methods. In terms of form, pottery includes jars, pitchers and tubular containers, tangs, pots, plates, bowls, and glasses. In total, there are three types of motifs with motifs of combed, zigzag, wavy and crossed, stamped, rope, and in some cases, tree, flower, and wheat ear on pottery inspired by nature are shaved before firing (Fig. 5). Most of this pottery has a thin clay glaze. They are divided into glazed and plain (with a thin clay glaze). Glazed pottery has a green glaze and a turquoise glaze, which is boiled and most of the

glaze has fallen due to the low quality of the glaze. The pottery paste ranges from buff to brick red. It has a chamote of soft sand, sand, and crushed straw and is sufficiently baked (Fig. 6).

In general, the Sassanid pottery of Tafresh has close similarities with the pottery of northern Iran and southern Caspian Sea in terms of form and decoration (cf. [Lecomte, 1987](#); [Trinkaus, 1986](#); [Kiani, 1982](#); [Priestman, 2013](#)). This issue may be because this area has been conquered and invaded many times by the Tapurs (Deylamians) ([Qomi, 1982: 33-34](#)). However, the Sassanid pottery obtained from this area is comparable and similar in terms of decorations to the pottery of the Khorhe area ([Rahbar, 2003](#)), Khomein ([Shirzad 2010](#)), Mahalat, Komijan, Delijan, and Lake Miqan area ([Shirzad, 2007](#); [Darabi et al., 2009](#); [Alaei, 2017](#)), south Iran (Abu Nasr Palace) ([Whitcomb, 1985](#); [Kennt, 2004](#)), North West Iran (Takht-e Suleiman) ([Schnyder, 1975](#)), West Iran (Yazdgerd Castle) ([Keall & Keall, 1981](#)), and South West Iran ([Wenke, 1975-76](#); [Kennt, 2004](#)). These similarities can be justified considering the cultural connections and the fact that the Tafresh area is next to the north-center and south highway that passes through the edge of the desert plain and the Qom region. In addition, the central areas of Iran (today's Markazi Province) were very important in the Sassanid period and almost all roads passed through this area.



Figure 5: Pottery sherd with a tree trunk pattern (by author).

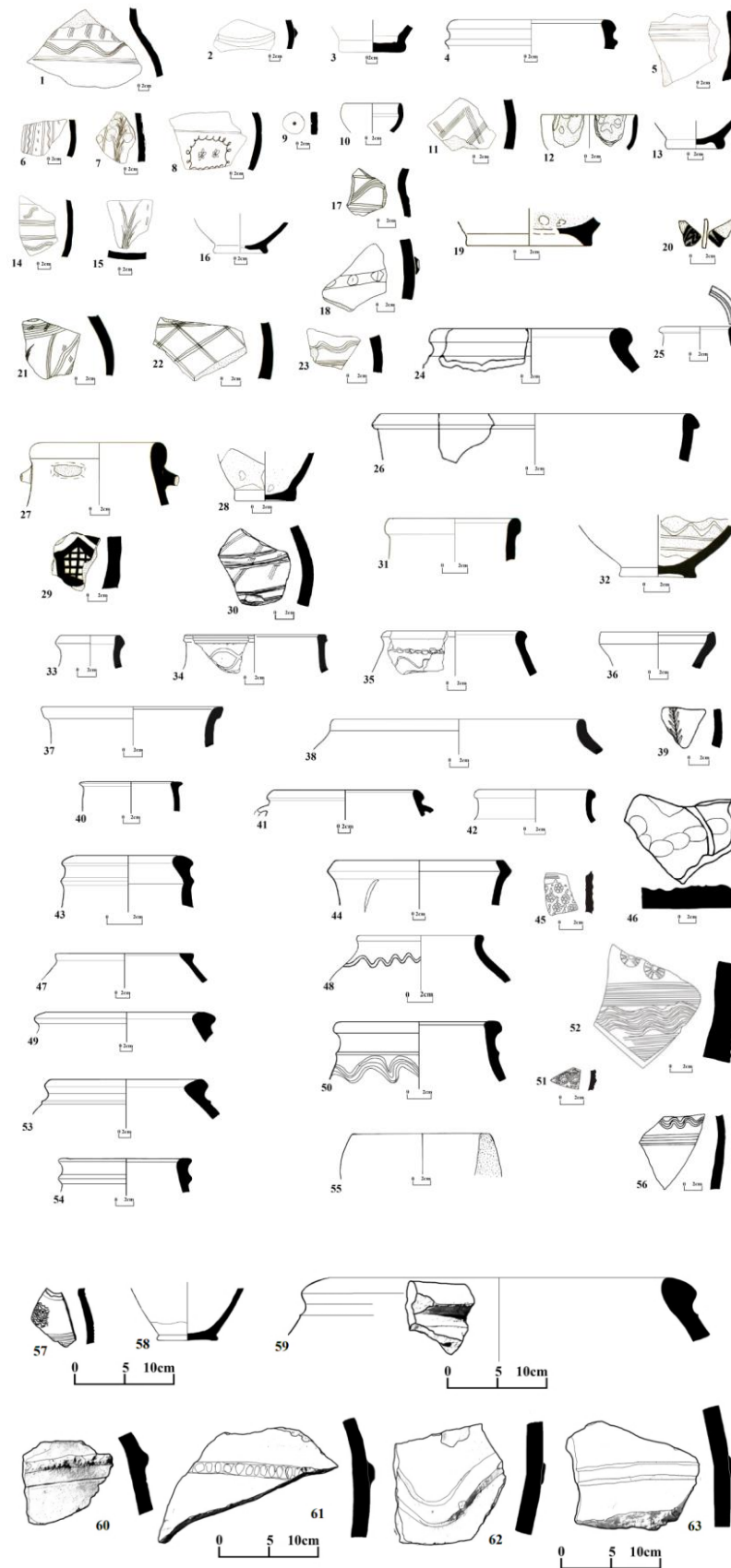


Figure 6: Design of Sassanian pottery of Tafresh (design by author).

Architecture

Tos Nowzar Castle, Gandom Kuh, Seh Gosh Castle, Bazarjan, Jalair, the remains of Frismaneh buildings (2.5 km south of the village and the southern bank of Qara Chai), Ahe Castle (Abrahdar), Sarabadan area, Qiz Qala (Sultan Mahmud Castle), Lower Kohloo, Qala Kohne Darbar, Khorazan Castle, Gavor Qala Juraqin, Gavor Qala Zarjin, Upper Qala Kohloo, Narenj Qala, Jaftan Castle, Babalar Castle, Mill and Qiz Korpe Si Koreh, Sas Fern Qiya Castle, Fire Temple of Novis, Novis Castle, Kaboran Castle, Qala Biyaban has

architectural and data from different historical periods. In the construction of these castles, the materials of local surroundings are used as rubble, semi-cast plaster, brick, and clay. Rubble and semi-crushed plaster were used in the construction of the castles of Gandom Kuh, Qiz Qala, Gavor Qala Juraqin, Qaver, and Upper Qala Kohloo. These castles have several sections, to meet the needs of the castle dwellers in normal conditions and in times of need. Since these castles were built on rocky heights and rough terrain, the architects followed the shape of the land for strength and effective defense.

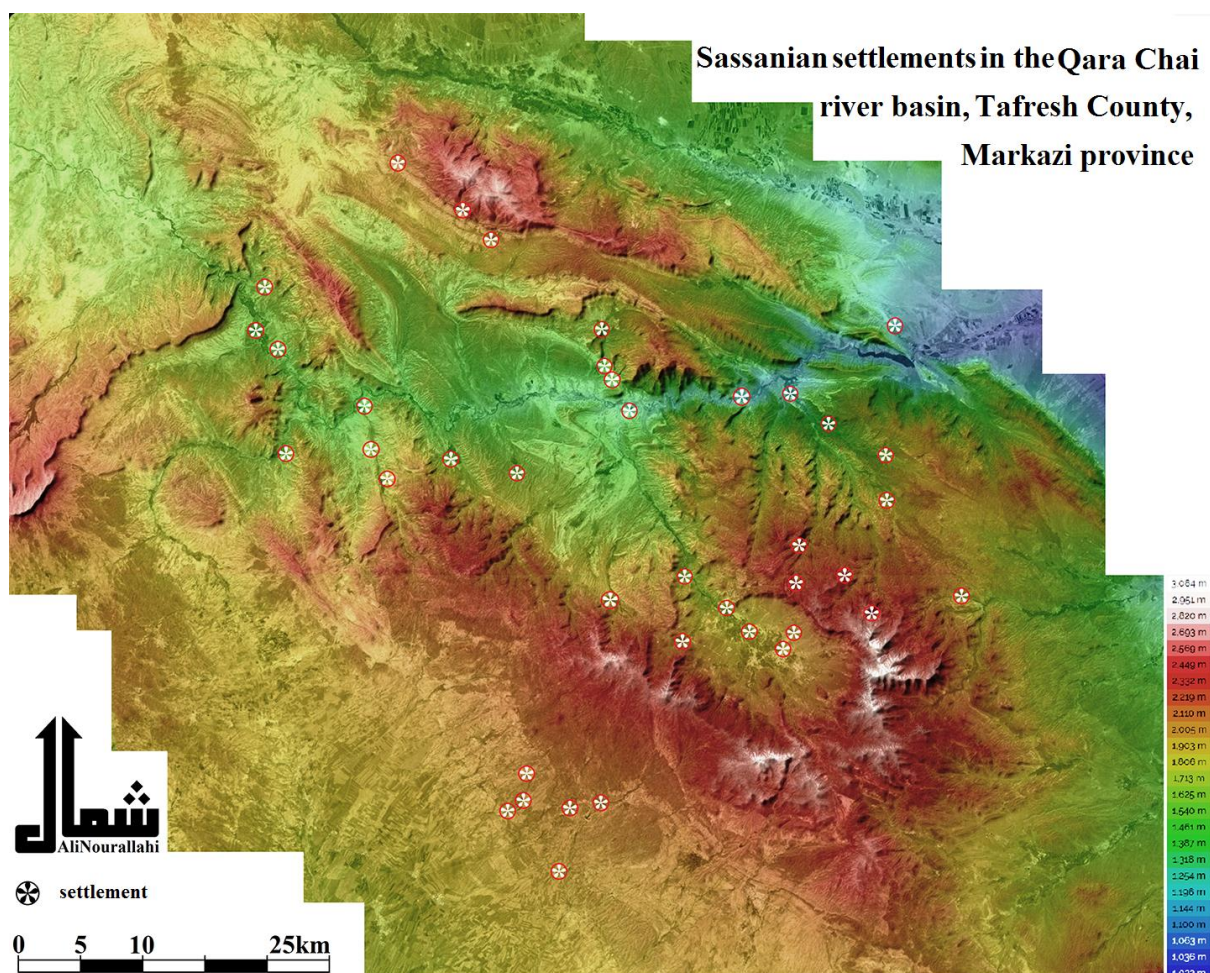


Figure 7: Distribution of Sassanian settlements in Tafresh County (by author).

Conclusion

In two sites located in the study area, plum pottery was found, which is related to the Middle Chalcolithic. This shows that in prehistoric times, immigrant groups passed through this region to reach the southern

regions, but they did not stay in this valley. One of the reasons may be the high altitude and severe cold of the region. For this reason, we are faced with the absence of prehistoric settlements in this area. While in the neighboring cities like Saveh and Komijan,

which have a lower altitude and have more suitable conditions for attracting nomad populations in prehistoric times, many settlements have been identified. Perhaps the peak of the importance of Tafresh can be considered during the Parthian period and especially the Sassanid period. In this period, Tafresh played the role of a communication link between the northern states to the central, southern, northeastern, and southwestern regions. Furthermore, due to its impassability and inaccessibility, this region is often immune from attacks and is considered a safe haven for rebels, dissidents from the central government, and Arabs invading Iran, as well as religious groups (such as Zoroastrians and Shiites). The numerous military forts that were built on the mountains of Gojeh, Tos Nowzar, and two brothers, show the strategic and military importance of this region in the Parthian and Sassanid periods, which continued until the middle of the Safavid dynasty and to some extent the Qajar dynasty. These forts were probably reused by rebel groups in the post-Sasanian era. Lower Kohloo Castle (Qiz Qala or Sultan Mahmud Castle) and Upper Kohloo Qala mound are among these castles, some of which are still standing. These castles indicate many crises that existed in different historical periods of Iran.

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