

# Afghan Sistan in the Achaemenid and Hellenistic Periods

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*Smithsonian Institution*

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- 1-2 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

3 The impact of the Achaemenid and Hellenistic Empires on the region of Sistan is well known on the Iranian side of the modern border. Known as Zranka to the Persians and Drangiana to the Greeks, it contained sites such as Dahan-i Ghulaman and Qal'a-i Sam, which have been well studied by Italian scholarly expeditions and more recently by Iranian scholars. But across the border in Afghan Sistan, that time period is almost completely unknown.

4 First a bit about the Helmand Sistan Project, whose results I am reporting. For those of you who attended the previous virtual conference in July, this will be repetitive, for which I apologize.

The Helmand Sistan Project (HSP) conducted the only extensive survey of the lower Helmand Valley in the 1970s and is now producing its results. HSP's survey work has identified a small number of sites from this era (6<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE), and its excavation at the site of Kona Qala II offers the first stratigraphic data. This presentation will focus on what HSP learned about Achaemenid and Hellenistic Sistan periods in this region.

The Project worked in the Helmand Valley between Lashkar Gah and the Hamun Lakes and in adjacent areas from 1971-1979. It was a joint project of the US Smithsonian Institution and the Afghan Institute of Archaeology and was directed by my colleague and coauthor William B Trousdale of the Smithsonian. I was a field archaeologist for two of the seasons. In five field seasons and five additional study seasons, the Project traversed much of the Helmand Valley numerous times, as well as spending a large amount of time in the Sar-o-Tar plain to the east.

5 While our survey area included 40,000 square km and had numerous challenges as far as logistics and site visibility, this was the first and only long term region-wide survey and excavation project ever in Afghan Sistan.

6 In addition to our survey work, we conducted numerous other studies, including an ethnography of the Baluch villages by our Afghan partner Ghulam Rahman Amiri, which was just published last month by Berghahn Books, and intensive study of the long term geology, hydrology, and climate of the region by our geologist John Whitney, available from the US Geological Service.

7 The survey identified almost 200 sites in the Helmand Valley and its environs.

8 We created the first chronology of the region,

9 As I mentioned, the survey took place in the 1970s. Our work stopped with the Soviet invasion of 1979 and has not been resumed because of the continued political instability of the region. This also caused Dr Trousdale to hold up on finalizing the publication, hoping for some additional time to return to the field.

10 But now, Trousdale is 90 years old, I am helping him get this information out into a final field report, into a digital archive containing our notes, plans, and photos for other scholars to use, and into presentations such as this one.

11 Most of you are very familiar with Sistan, so let me get the background out of the way quickly.

The region is bifurcated by the Helmand River, which begins in the Hindu Kush of Eastern Afghanistan and runs through the entire country, emptying into the hamun lakes on the border between Afghanistan and Iran.

In Sistan, the river valley is generally fairly narrow, 2-5 km wide until it reaches the delta emptying into the hamuns.

12 It is surrounded by deserts on most sides, making it an important trade and communication route between eastern Iran, the Indus Valley, and Central Asia.

13 Settlement in the region has been largely shaped by the constant strong winds out of the northwest, which affects the life style of past and present inhabitants and has a negative influence on the preservation of historical remains.

14 The winds have caused deflation of the land and of archaeological sites, and has wreaked havoc with artifacts left on the surface. The best example might be our excavation of a presumed Parthian grave at a site called Cemetery 150. We had the stones outlining a burial, but when we excavated, we discovered we were already below the level of the Parthian burial and found only virgin soil, meters below the ground surface of 2000 years ago. Everything but the heavier stones had been sand blasted away.

15 The river has had an equal, often counteracting, effect. Spring floods are known from historical writing and have known to have buried the river valley and hamuns under a thick layer of mud and sand. The few excavations have produced ancient cultural materials as much as 4 m below the current surface.

16 Historically and archaeologically, Bronze Age settlement is known in the Helmand Valley on both sides of the border, notably at Shahr-i Sohka in Iran.

17 Our project has previously published on an otherwise unknown Early Iron Age culture in Sar-o-Tar.

18 But the first clear historical mention of the region is from the Bisitun inscription of Darius I ca. 516 BCE, which calls it the province of Zranka. Alexander of Macedon's campaigns into Afghanistan passing through in 327 BCE, after which it became a province of the Seleucid Empire. The political fortunes of succeeding two centuries are complex, until control of Sistan was assumed by the Parthians in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. One clear marker is the migration of the Saka people from beyond the Hindu Kush, who gave the region its name (Sakastan/Sistan), though it was likely ruled by a series of Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek dynasties.

19 While ours has been the most extensive project in Afghan Sistan, we are not the first to identify Achaemenid and Hellenistic sites in the region. Aurel Stein's work in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century identified such important sites as Kuh-I Khwaja, for which Achaemenid/Hellenistic presence is disputed. Roman Ghirshman, of the French DAFA mission of the 1930s, excavated at Nad-I Ali and identified an Achaemenid stratum there. Walter Fairervis surveyed north of the Helmand Valley in 1951 but found little from this period. German scholar Klaus Fischer surveyed in the 1960s but also mostly in the northern part of Sistan. Also in the 1960s, Umberto Scerrato and other Italian scholars excavated what appears to be the Achaemenid regional capital at Dahan-I Ghulaman and several other sites in Iranian Sistan.

20 The first modern survey along the Helmand was conducted by Norman Hammond for a month in 1966. His pottery was identified with the assistance of David Stronach, with as many as 18 of his 45 documented sites having either Achaemenid or Hellenistic remains.

21 George Dales reexcavated Nad-I Ali in 1968 and confirmed the existence of both periods at the site.

22 More recently, Mark Abramiuk conducted a survey from Lashkar Gah to Khan Nashin in 2011 while he was there with the US army, revisiting many of Hammond's sites and identifying others.

23 Excavations at Dahan-I Ghulaman resumed in 2000 under SMS Sajjadi and have been ongoing since then. Field surveys in Iranian Sistan have produced over 100 other Achaemenid and/or Hellenistic sites and reanalysis of previously excavated material has increased our knowledge exponentially.

My hope here was to incorporate these other sources of information to provide a broad picture of settlement from the 6<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE in Afghan Sistan. The results may be disappointing to you.

24 The reason is simple. The Helmand Valley is difficult place to identify archaeological sites, particularly from earlier periods. While the strong Sistani winds deflate the landscape, the river, at least prior to the building of modern dams, adds alluvium the river valley during the annual floods. Pre-Islamic levels of multiperiod sites may be beneath the surface, or even below the current water table. We discovered this at Kona Qala II, of which I will speak more later,

where we found preislamic cultural materials as much as 4 m below the modern river valley surface. Dales conducted a similar experiment at the base of Sorkh Dagh, with similar results.

It is likely that many Hellenistic and Achaemenid sites exist in the valley but are buried by silt and by later occupation. This is apparently less of a problem in Iranian Sistan, where the river has not regularly flowed for several millennia, and which has produced a large number of Bronze Age and Achaemenid sites in recent surveys. But on the Afghan side of the border, the preislamic sites to be found today are along the bluffs overlooking the valley or in areas where the river no longer flows. A good example would be the Malakhan plain area, near the modern village by that name. We found 17 small sites along a large canal dating to Parthian/Sasanian times, and the massive site of Qala-I Sirak. It is clear this area has not hosted the major Helmand channel since the Parthian period.

25 But elsewhere in the valley, the only visible remains are the largest tepes, some of them noted by 19<sup>th</sup> century European visitors and documented by the Hammond and Abramiuk surveys as well as by us. Even sites assumed to have presence from this period from historical records, like Bust/Qala Bist at the confluence of the Helmand and Arghandab rivers, have produced only scraps of evidence.

26 So, though Hammond's survey lists 18 Achaemenid and/or Hellenistic sites, that may be based on the evidence of only one or two sherds from each site. A good example of this would be the site of Zindan, surveyed by both Hammond and Abramiuk. Zindan is a modest sized mound 110 m in diameter near modern Darwishan. It is topped with several late structures surrounded by a rectangular enclosure wall of unknown date. Their complete collections amount to 30 sherds for Hammond and 40 for Abramiuk, for which only 3 or 4 might date to these periods. Were there an Achaemenid and Hellenistic levels inside that mound? If so, how extensive was it? Or are these just a few random sherds moved by the river or by later passers-by.

The Helmand Sistan project survey found only a small number of sites from these centuries in our work, 9 Achaemenid and 7 Hellenistic, some of which were previously identified by Hammond.

27 Part of that was deliberate. Rather than focus on the Helmand Valley, we spent three of our five field seasons surveying and excavating in the Sar-o-Tar basin, occupied only sporadically with intensive canal irrigation. Sar-o-Tar has an occupation gap between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, thus skips the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods entirely. It was only in our first season, 1971, that we did survey work along the Helmand Valley, which produced most of our results. The fifth season, 1975, was spent excavating two sites. Sehyak appears to be slightly later, early Parthian. Kona Qala II is the only site with stratified pre-Islamic levels, including Achaemenid and Hellenistic.

28 Kona Qala II (there is also a Kona Qala I), known as Lat Qala in Ball's Gazetteer, is a small conical mound 75 m in diameter and 14 m in height. It sits on a very low plateau on the south

edge of the Helmand Valley near the modern town of Rudbar. We were first attracted to it because of the bits of painted pottery on the surface. Atop the mound is a post-Timurid fortress, whose makers seem to have flattened the top of the mound to create level ground for their construction.

29 In 1975, we dug two trenches through the site to attempt to get a handle on its stratigraphy.

30 On the northwest side, Trench A was chosen because of a visible water channel running through the area. We hoped this would allow us to get to pristine earlier levels sooner after clearing out all the more recent debris from the channel. Unfortunately, the channel was only the latest of many earlier channels. After several weeks of successive clearing operation, and after finding a Timurid sherd 8 m below the surface, we gave up this trench as a lost cause.

31 Trench B, on the east side became the sole focus of our effort. That trench ran 40 m in length and 4 m in width across much of the flattened top of the mound, down its steep slope and into the plain at the base of the mound. We divided the excavation into 6 different components, with A,B,and C on the top of the mound, D and E along the steep slope and F at the base.

Kona Qala had stratified remains that we could identify from Sasanian, Parthian, Hellenistic, and Achaemenid periods.

32 We also found numerous sherds in fill dating to the Bronze Age, such as this partial Harappan jar, and pottery from the Early Iron Age, parallel to that from sites we explored extensively in Sar-o-Tar. The amount of pre-Achaemenid pottery convinces us that there are earlier layers beneath the bottom of our excavation, which in some places extended as much as 5.5 m below the current top of the mound, thus making this site crucial for establishing a ceramic chronology.

33 The structure of core of the mound is unclear as we did not excavate it to its base, but it should be apparent from what we discovered in sectors D and E along its slope that much of the mound is built on a platform of mudbrick and pakhsa, extensively reconstructed and rebuilt over many centuries. This is not surprising for a site that was probably used over the course of 3000 years. We could do little to connect occupation levels to specific construction events of the mound

34 other than to indicate that its initial construction took place prior to the Achaemenid period, which we identify with strata C3 and A5 of the mound. The subsequent Hellenistic period is likely represented by levels C2 and A4. Note that the blank areas at the base of sector C were the result of the architect being unable to complete his balk drawings before we left the site.

35 In the Achaemenid levels we found rims of carinated bowls, string cut bases, numerous sherds with white and buff slips, and fine bowls in lighter colored wares.

36 Many of these sherds migrated upward into fills and later strata. And, honestly, I'm not sure how rigorous we were in separating our finds between stratigraphic levels, so that there may have been leakage between them.

37 Our Hellenistic levels in areas A and C contained less rigidly carinated bowls, cups with incurved rims, fishplate pieces, radial hand burnished bowls, and much more in the way of red and red slipped wares than the preceding period though there are numerous sherds that reflect the Achaemenid period in this stratum.

38 We found only one stratified sherd of the Dipinta Storica Sistana painted ware in situ, in level A4, but numerous other ones in fill above these levels. While originally assumed to be Achaemenid, in my conversations with Giulio Maresca, our next speaker, he suggests reanalysis of them leads to a Hellenistic date instead. We cannot contribute much to this discussion other than to report that we have numerous sherds of this distinctive style at Kona Qala.

39 During our first season in the field, we surveyed Khwaja Kanur, 10 km south of Lashkar Gah on an eastern bluff overlooking the confluence of the Helmand and Arghandab rivers. Our visit there was prompted by being shown a collection of objects purportedly from the site, amassed by an American agricultural engineer working for a development project based in Lashkar Gah who hired locals to loot the site of its contents. But, despite the wealth of objects we were shown, we only found a recent grave of a prominent imam on the slopes of that hill, called Sultan Baba Ziyarat by M. Klingott of Klaus Fischer's team in his visit in 1970. Since it was a common practice to place stones and other objects on these holy burials, we assume that the objects in fact came from somewhere else.

40 These included a few architectural fragments made of baked ceramic

41 and some Hellenistic figurines and pottery.

42 But the 5,000 objects in the engineer's collection purportedly from this site were very rich, including numerous human figurines,

43 almost 4,000 ceramic figurines of animals, mostly horses,

44 and architectural fragments. You will be pleased to know that the looter was identified before he left the country and almost all of the objects taken away by the Afghan antiquities authorities to the National Museum in Kabul. Where they are today I do not know.

45 If they do not come from Khwaja Kanur—and we found no evidence of a Hellenistic public building on the hilltop—where did they come from? Mokhatar is located just to the northeast of modern Lashkar Gah. Though it is outside our survey area, we did visit it and discovered additional western-style architectural fragments such as fluted column drums and bases, architrave vegetation, and several horse and rider figurines. Though we did not study the site thoroughly, we believe this to be the Hellenistic shrine that provided the material found at

Khawaja Kanur, and provides further evidence of substantial Hellenistic presence in the Qala-i Bist area.

46 Outside of this single site, we have, like Hammond, Abramiuk, and other researchers before us in Afghan Sistan, only small collections of sherds from these periods at any site. Our preliminary analysis of the ceramics add only five potential Achaemenid sites and four Hellenistic ones to the list identified by other researchers. We were generously allowed by Hammond and Abramiuk to reexamine their sherd collections. In some but not all cases, we could confirm their identification of Hellenistic/Achaemenid pottery and have added a couple of sites to the list after reviewing Abramiuk's photos. But note, in these cases we are working just from photos and can reach only tentative conclusions.

This is also true in the case of our own pottery, only some of which had been drawn, described and photographed by 1979. They were left at a US foreign aid base in Lashkar Gah or at Kabul Museum at the close of our project, both of which were badly damaged during the succeeding wars. To the best of our knowledge, those ceramics are now gone. All we have left for many sites are the initial field photographs and drawings, and nothing at all for some sites. The color photos shown here come from a small portion of our material that was exported to the Smithsonian, where they currently reside awaiting processing then repatriation to Afghanistan. Not all of these were studied before the closure of the museum due to the coronavirus.

47 In short, we can best provide a pair of provisional maps to other scholars with our current best guesses as to the settlement pattern for these two periods in Afghan Sistan.

What does this tell us about the overall settlement pattern of Sistan in the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods?

The Afghan finds raise questions about the route of the Helmand in these periods. While there is extensive settlement at the end of the Rud-i Biyaban in Iranian Sistan, no survey along that dry channel—Fairservis, Dales, or ours—has found anything similar on the Afghan side. Very little can be documented before the Parthian period. We, and many others, long assumed that this was the main channel of the river at that time, but the disparity of finds raises questions about that. I don't have answer.

Also, we have uncovered no new Dahan-I Ghulaman for either period, no extensive site that we can call an urban or administrative center.

48 If there is one, it is most likely to be found in the lower levels of Bust/Qala-i Bist. My coauthor published long ago an Achaemenid weight found at the site. The existence of a large shrine like Mokhatar in close proximity supports the idea that Bust is the major urban center of Sistan, as is the fact that it is mentioned in numerous written records: It is likely Bustic in Zarathrustran writings, Beste in Pliny's Natural History, and Biyt of Isodore of Charax. But, given our experience elsewhere, it will take a multi-decade excavation at the site to give us a

reasonable understanding of its dimensions and function in the first millennium BCE. That is not likely to happen soon.

49 At the other end of the Sistan basin, we have Nad-i Ali. If Benseval and Francfort's contention that this 30 m high platform was constructed in the Bronze Age is correct, then the Achaemenid and Hellenistic occupation on top of the mound are secondary, which supports our belief that there are numerous earlier mounds, like Kona Qala II, along the Helmand that may have been constructed as early as the Bronze Age and were reoccupied in later centuries.

50 These tepes, which likely stood above the flood waters in ancient times as they do now, will need to be explored one by one through intensive excavation to untangle their complex histories as little will be determined by surface survey. That will be the next step, and I hope someone listening to this presentation will be one of the people to launch this project.

51 OTHER RESOURCES





# Afghan Sistan in the Achaemenid and Hellenistic Periods

**Mitchell Allen and William B. Trousdale**

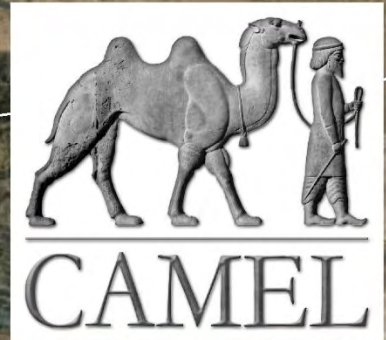
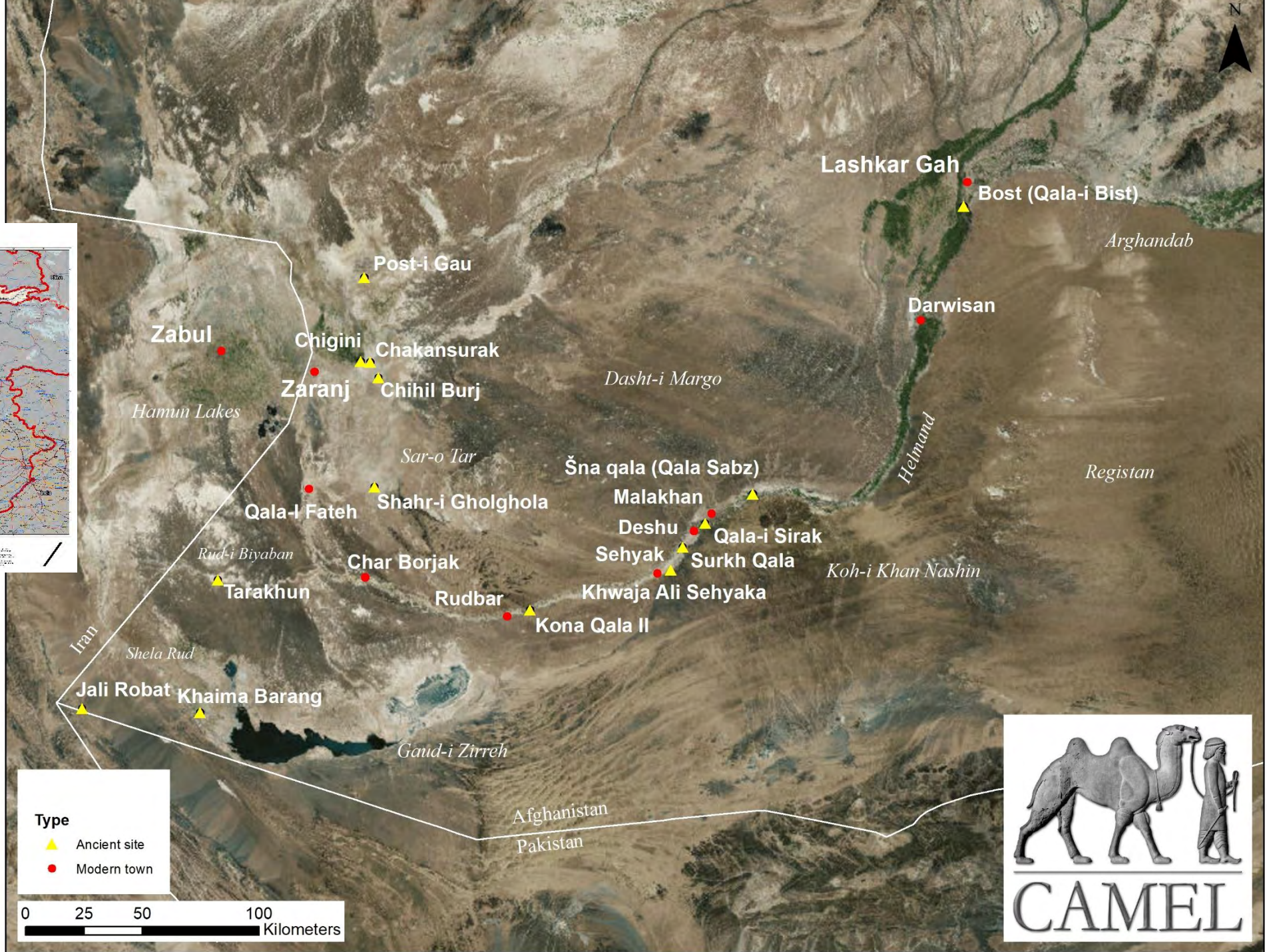
*Smithsonian Institution, USA*

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- Unpublished images from Marc Abramiuk, Norman Hammond, University of Pennsylvania Museum, Peabody Museum Archives. **Please do not post, copy, or distribute without permission.**
- Expertise and advice from Giulio Maresca

# Sistan, Afghanistan



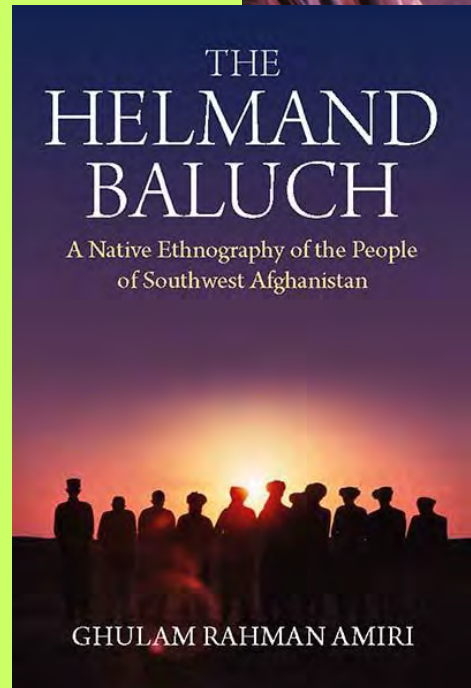
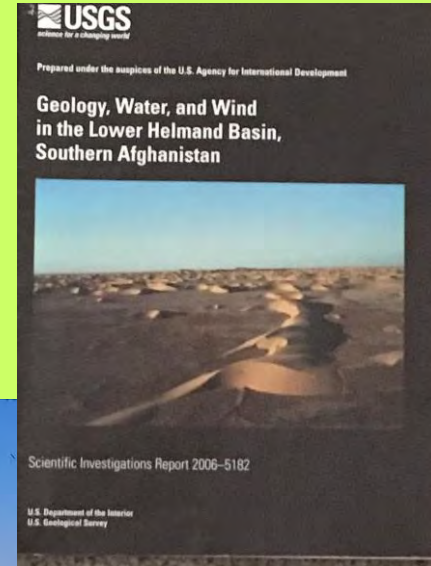
# The Helmand-Sistan Project, 1971-79



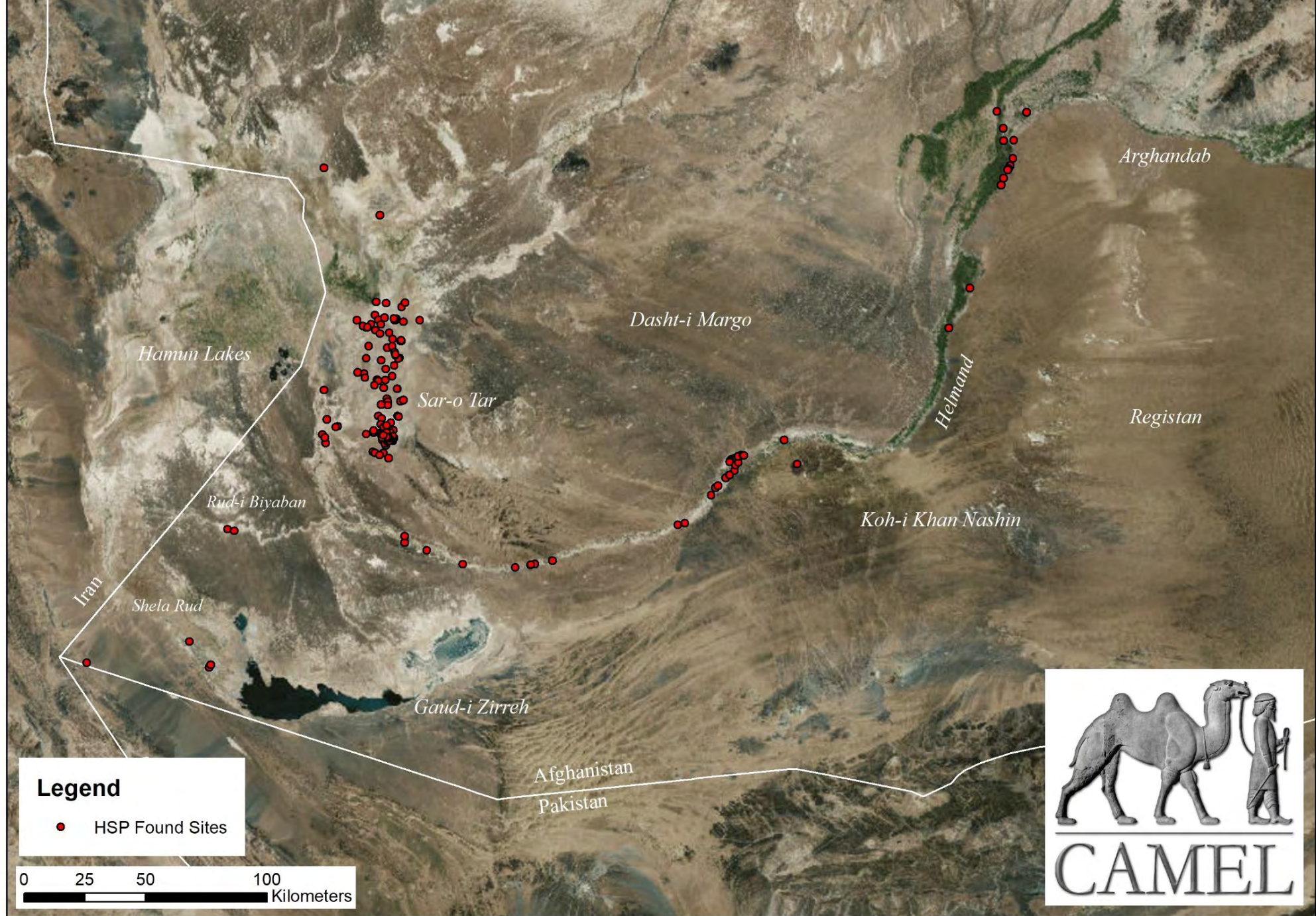
Ours was the first long-term, region-wide survey and excavation project in Afghan Sistan



# Interdisciplinary, including both ethnographic and geological components



# HSP Survey Sites



# Afghan Sistan archaeological chronology

- Bronze Age 3<sup>rd</sup> - early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE
- Early Iron Age 12<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> C BCE
- Median 8<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> C BCE
- Achaemenid 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> C BCE
- Hellenistic 3<sup>rd</sup> -2<sup>nd</sup> C BCE
- Saka/Parthian 2<sup>nd</sup> C BCE- 2<sup>nd</sup> C CE
- Sassanian 3<sup>rd</sup> C CE- 7<sup>th</sup> C CE
- Saffarid 9<sup>th</sup> -10<sup>th</sup> C CE
- Ghaznavid 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> C CE
- Ghorid 13<sup>th</sup> C CE
- Timurid 15<sup>th</sup> C CE



Further fieldwork was impossible after 1979

Afghan-Soviet War 1979-1989

Afghan Civil War 1989-1991

Taliban Control 1991-2001

Afghan- US War 2001-2020



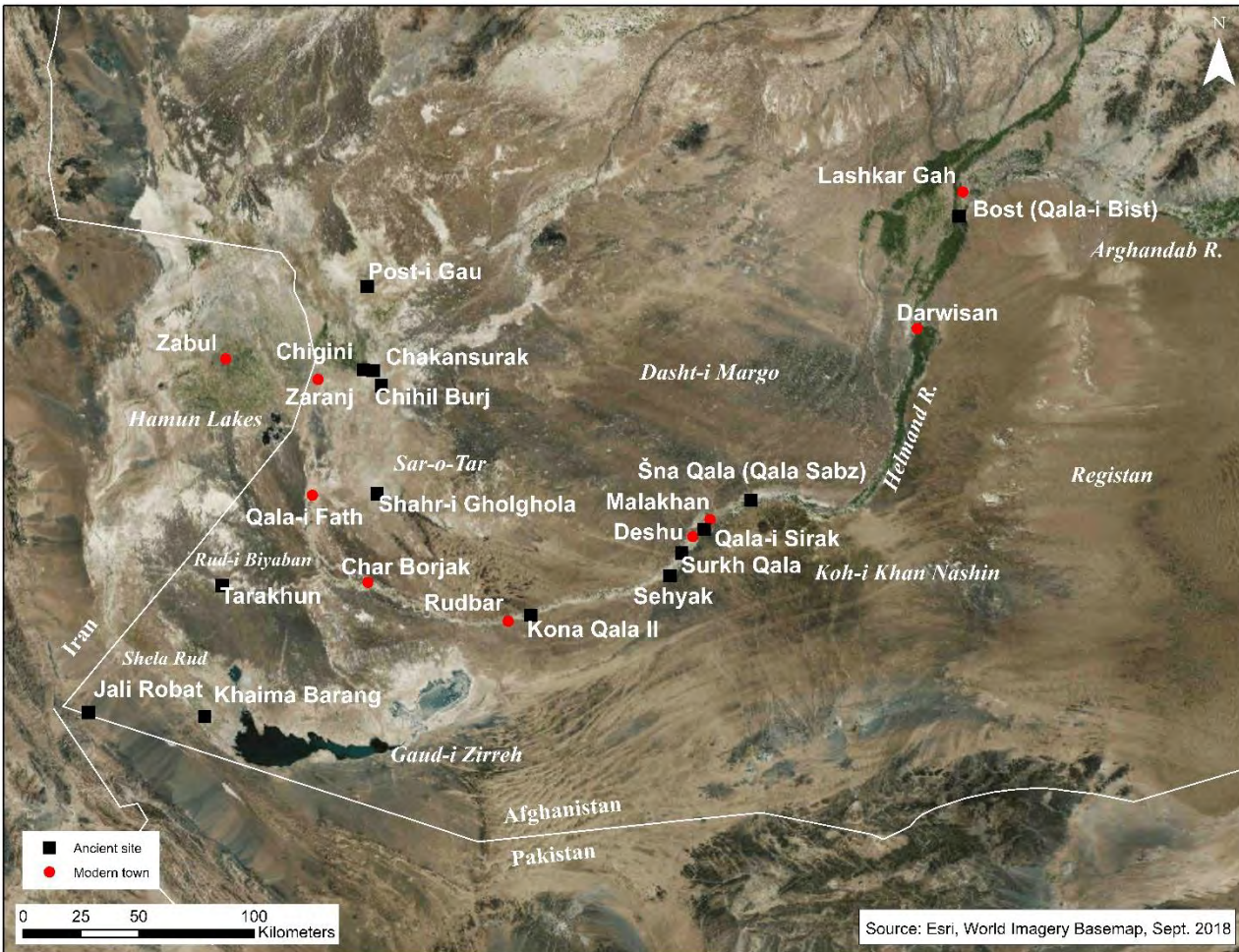
# A project report 45 years on hold



# The Helmand Valley in Afghan Sistan

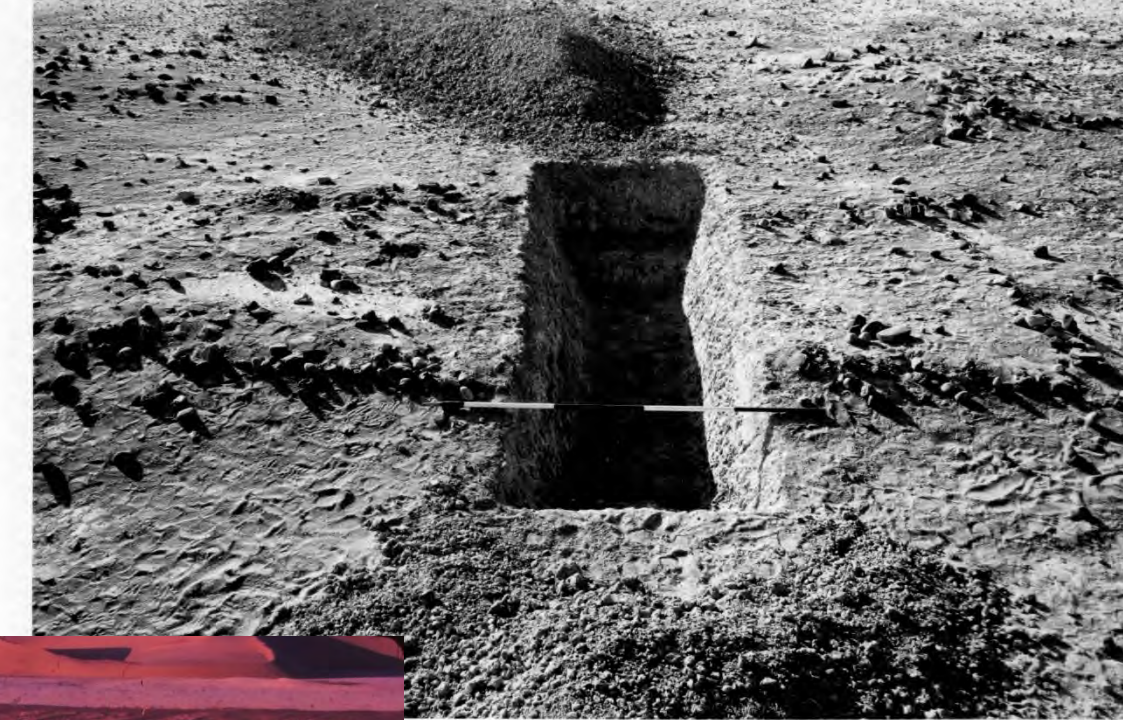


# Surrounded by deserts



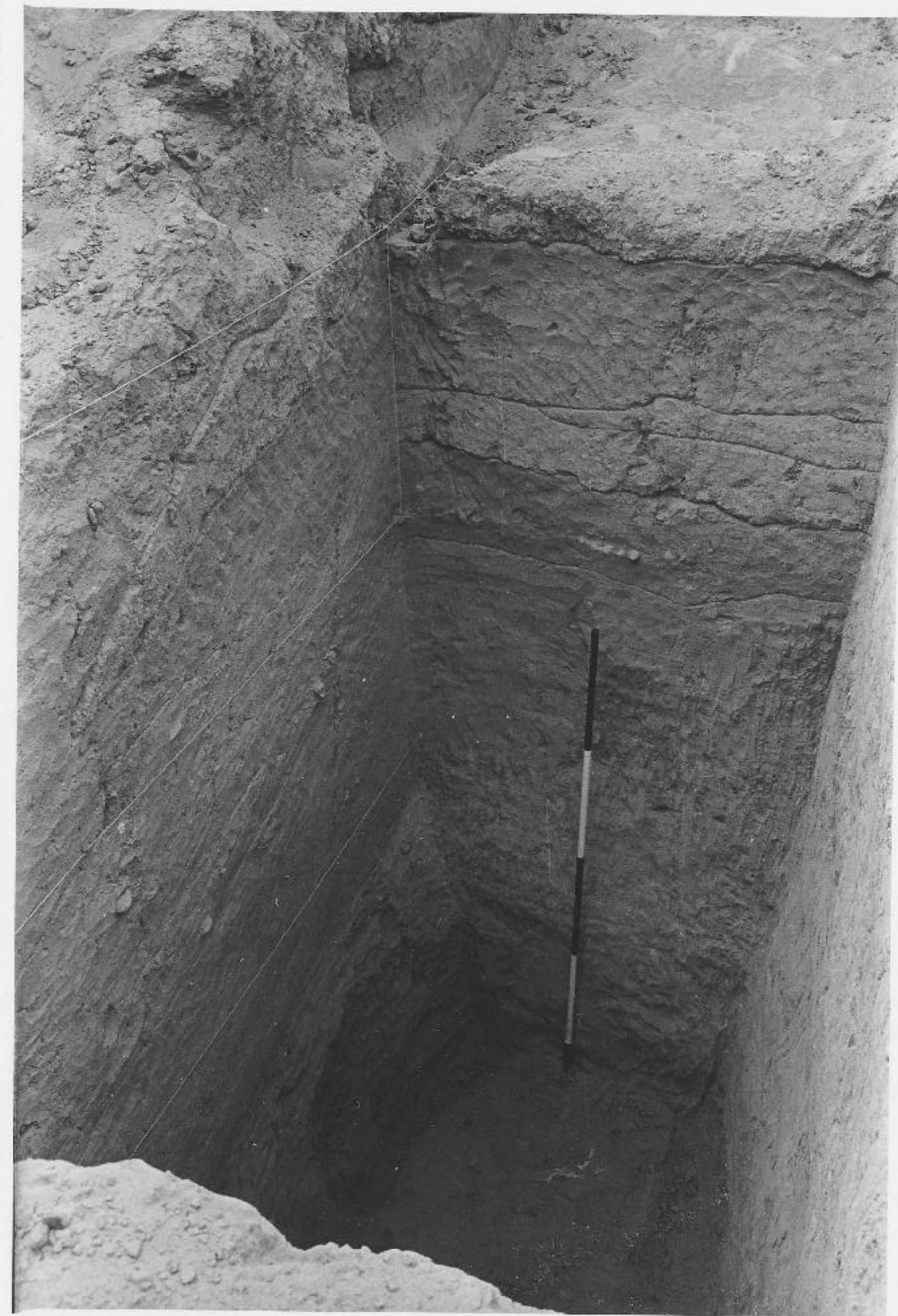
Shaped by the winds





Wind  
Deflation

And by the river



# Bronze Age Sistan





# Early Iron Age



Q350A  
painted  
ceramics



# Historical mention in Achaemenid and Hellenistic writings



# Previous archaeological work in the region

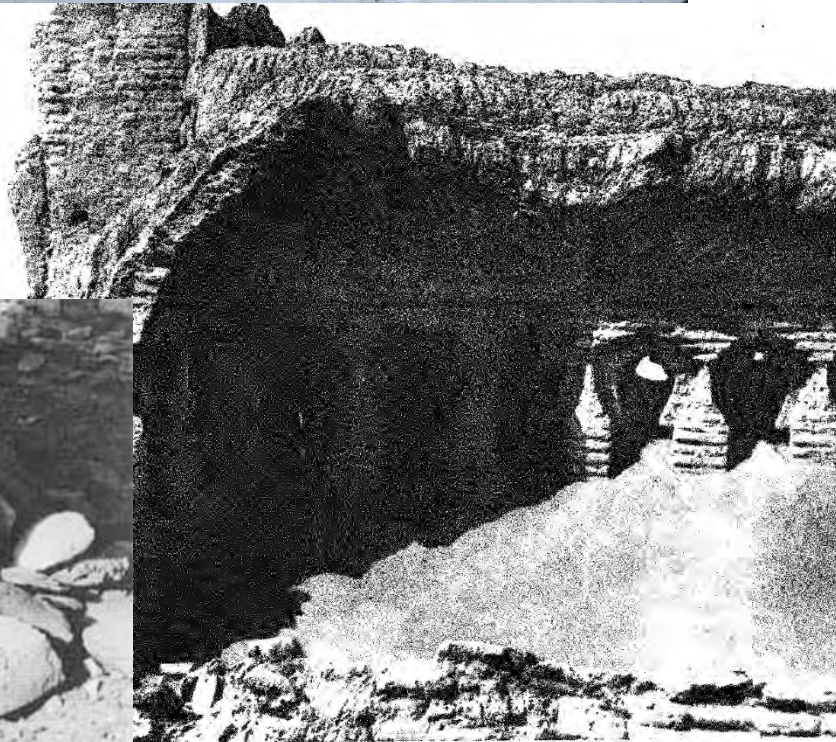
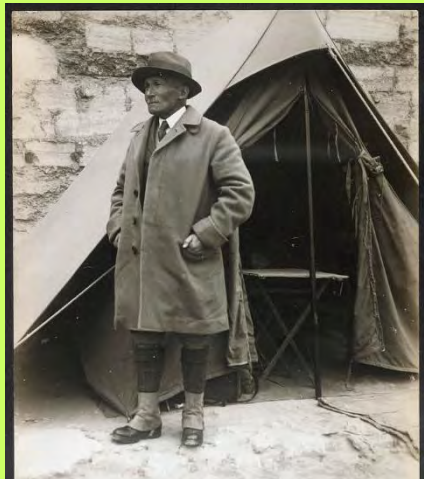
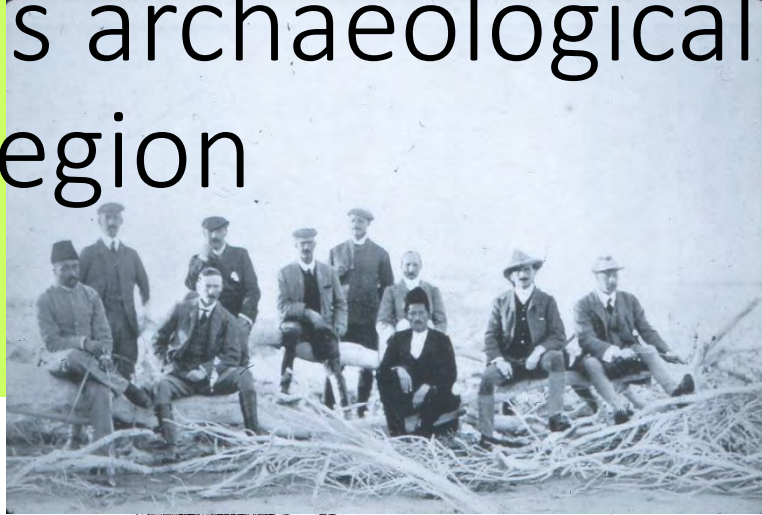
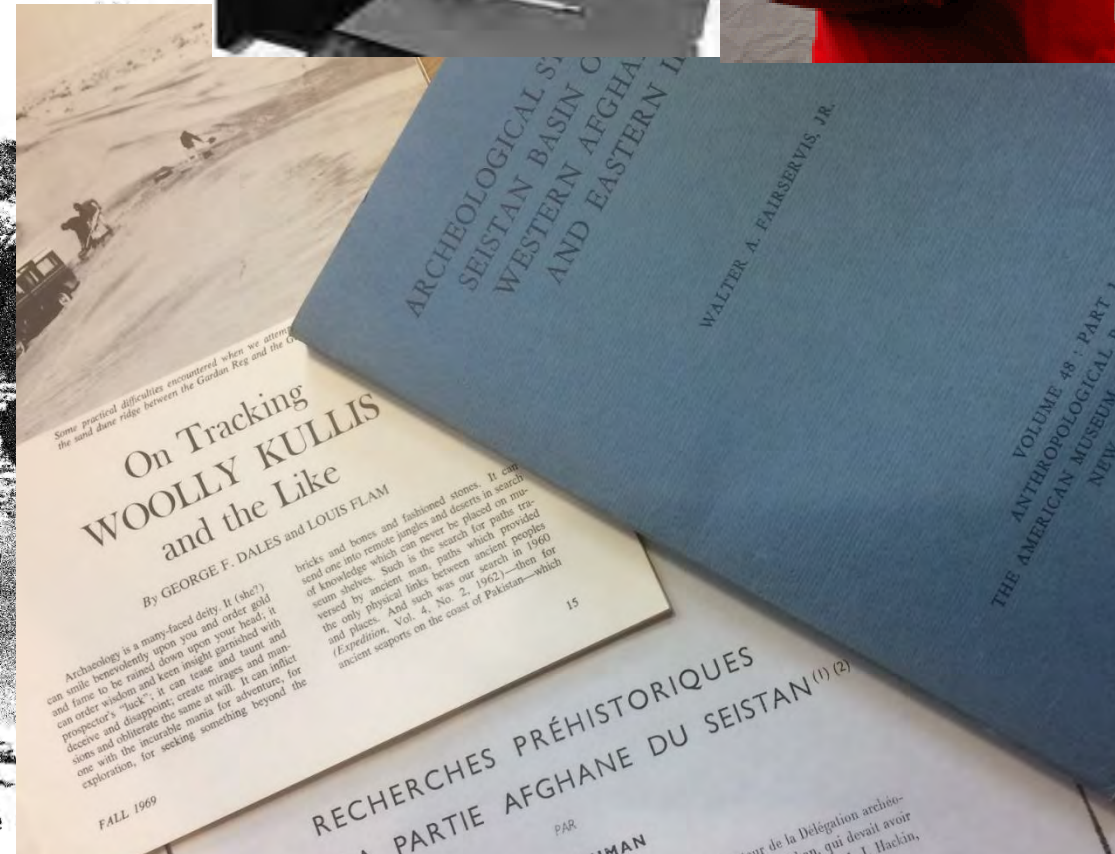
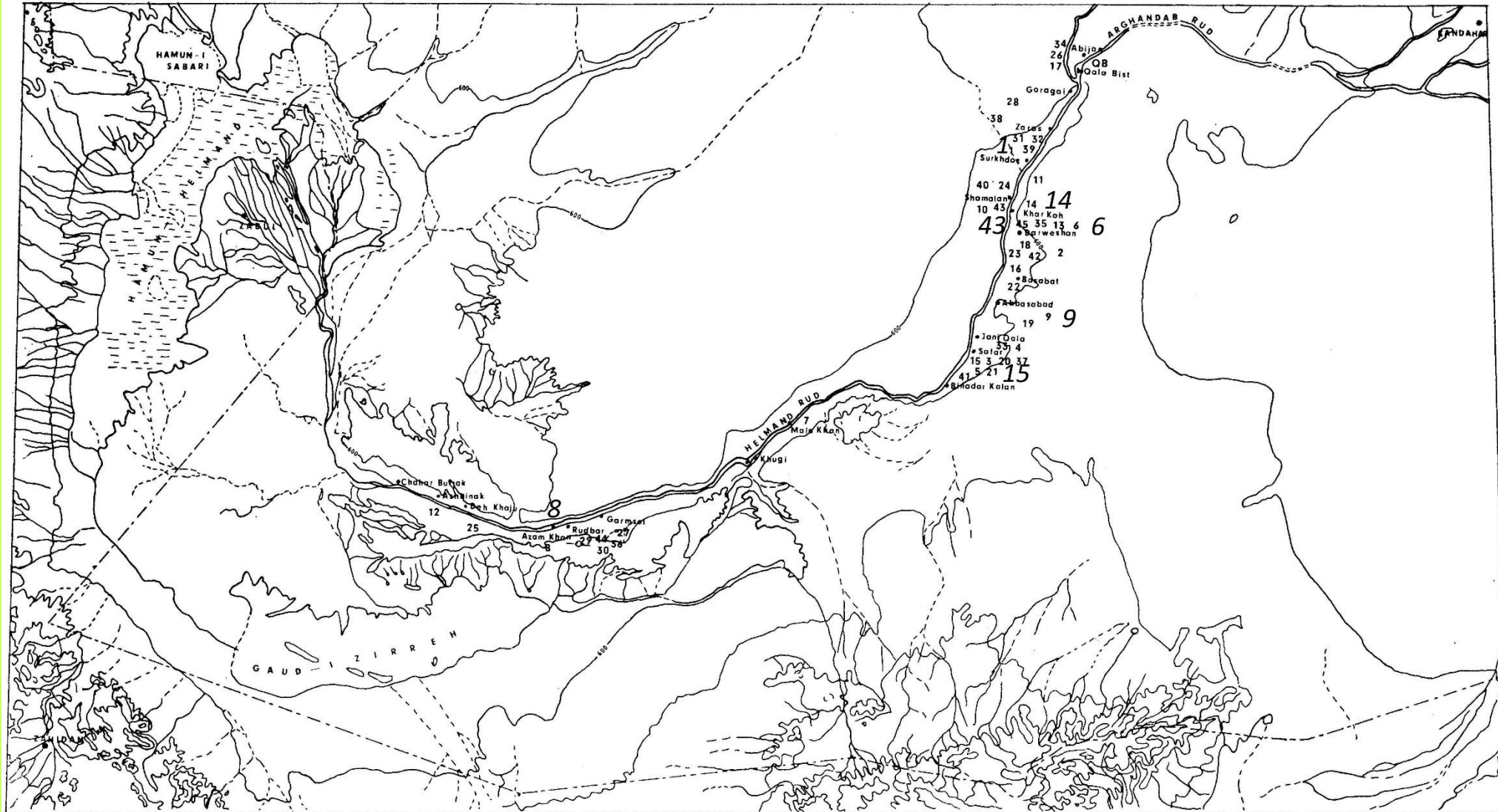


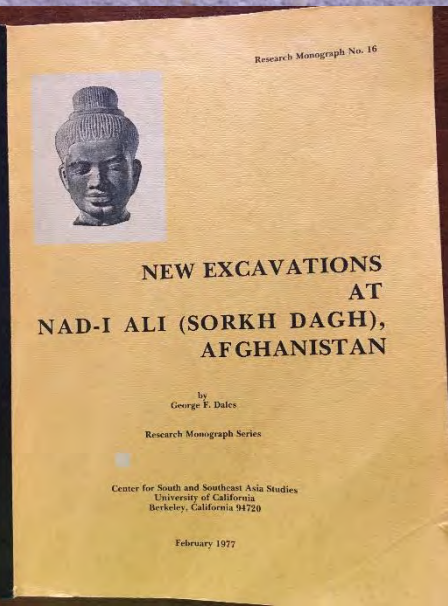
Fig. 95. — Le Bala Hissar. IV<sup>2</sup>. Intérieur d'une salle



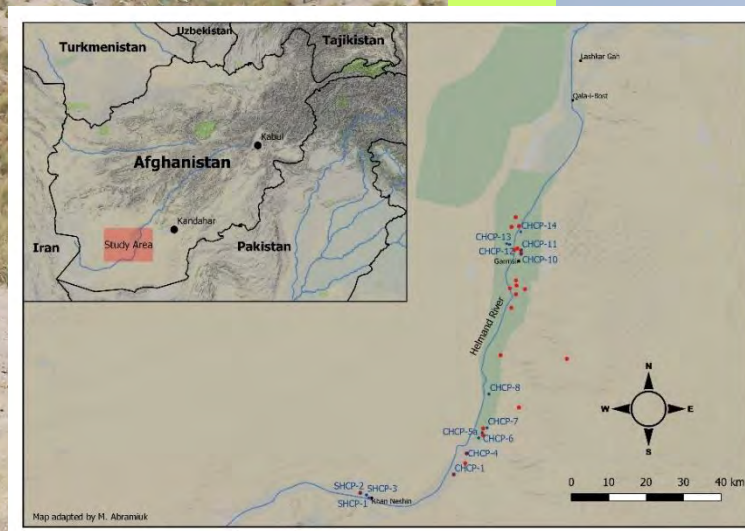
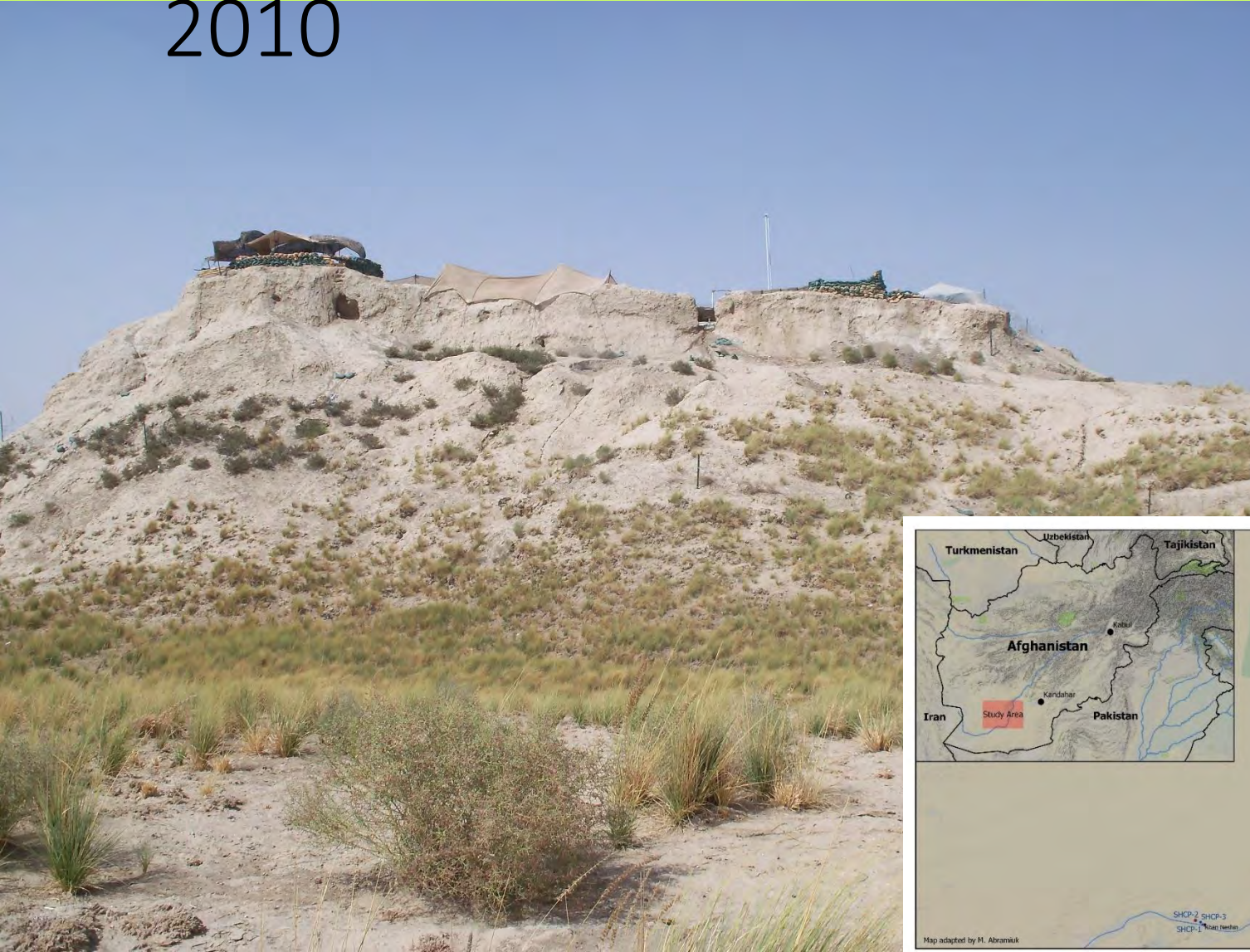
# Norman Hammond's survey of the Helmand Valley, 1966



# George Dales re-excavates Sorkh Dag, 1968



# Mark Abramiuk's wartime survey, 2010



# Recent work in Iranian Sistan

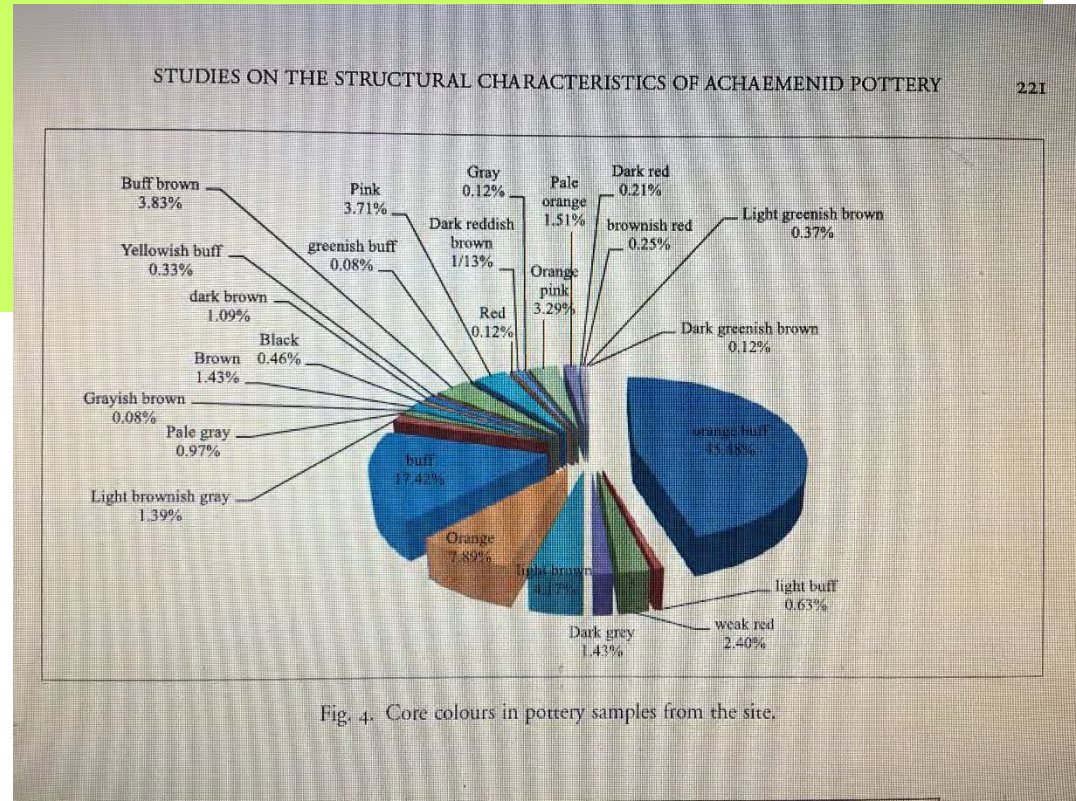
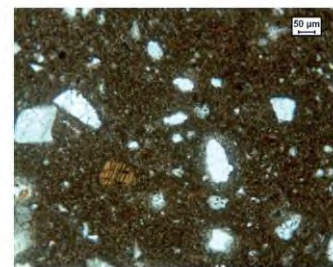
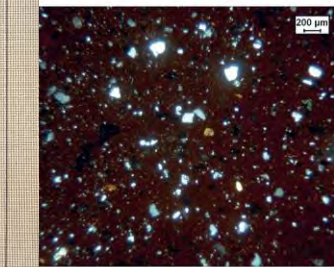
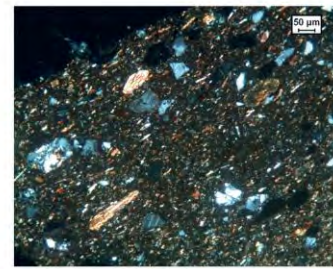
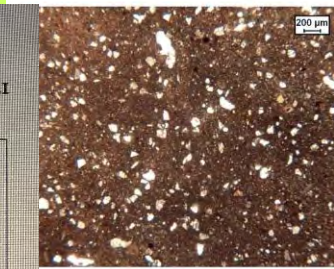
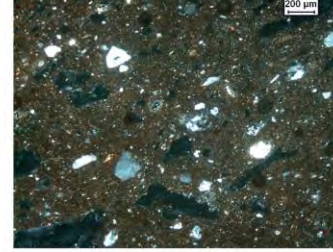
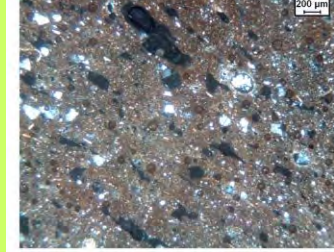


Fig. 5 - Map showing sites in Southern Sistan possibly dated to the Achaemenid period (after Mehrfarin 2016, fig. 2).

# Where do you find preislamic sites in the Helmand Valley?





In the river valley itself, the only visible sites are the big ones, or with later occupation

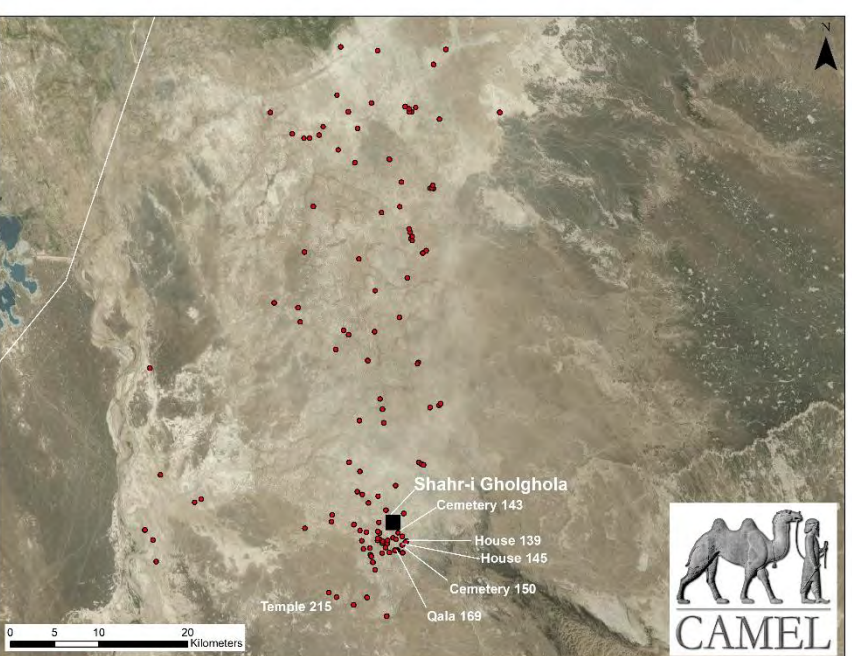


# Zindan (Hammond site 6, Abramiuk CHCP 11)

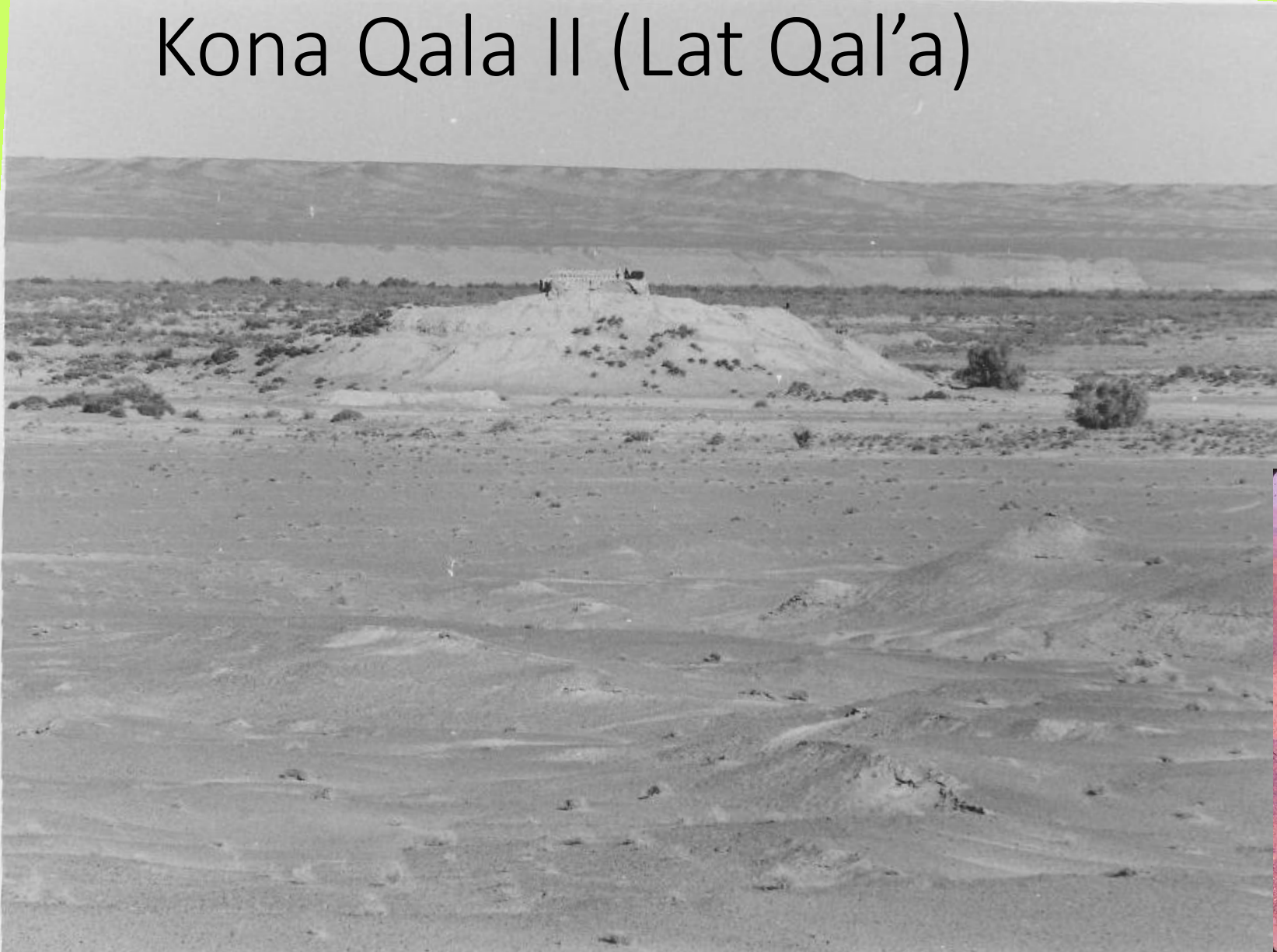


# Sar-o-Tar

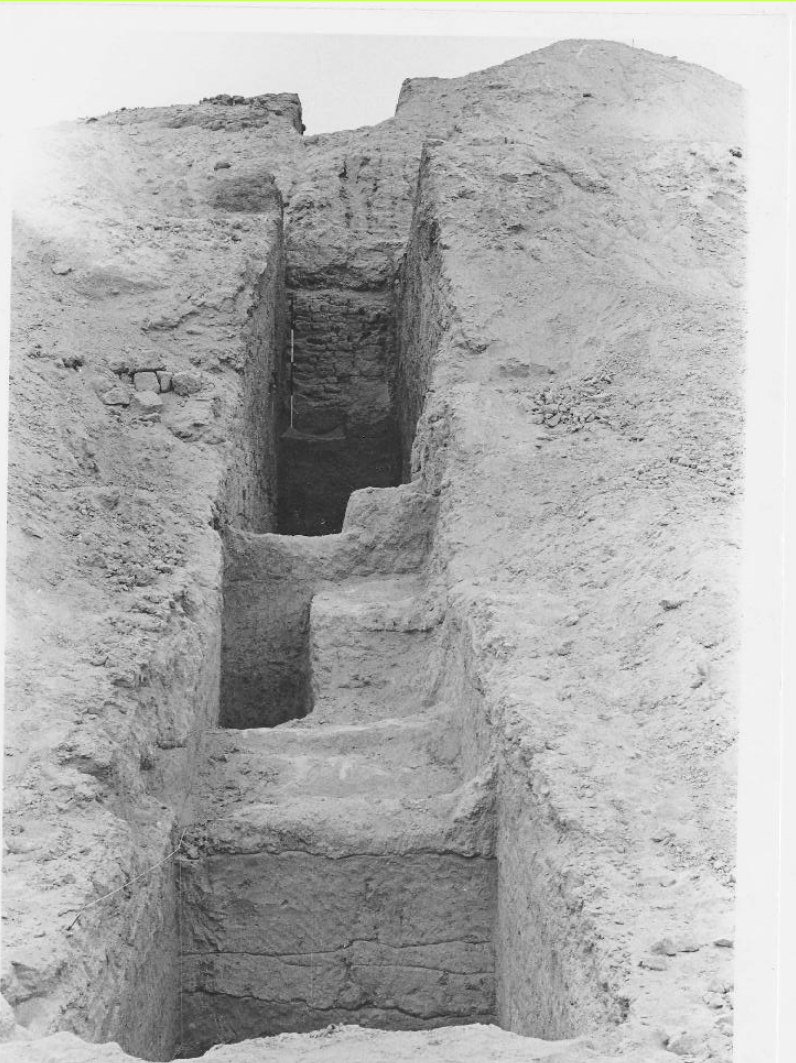
Empty of Achaemenid/Hellenistic Age remains



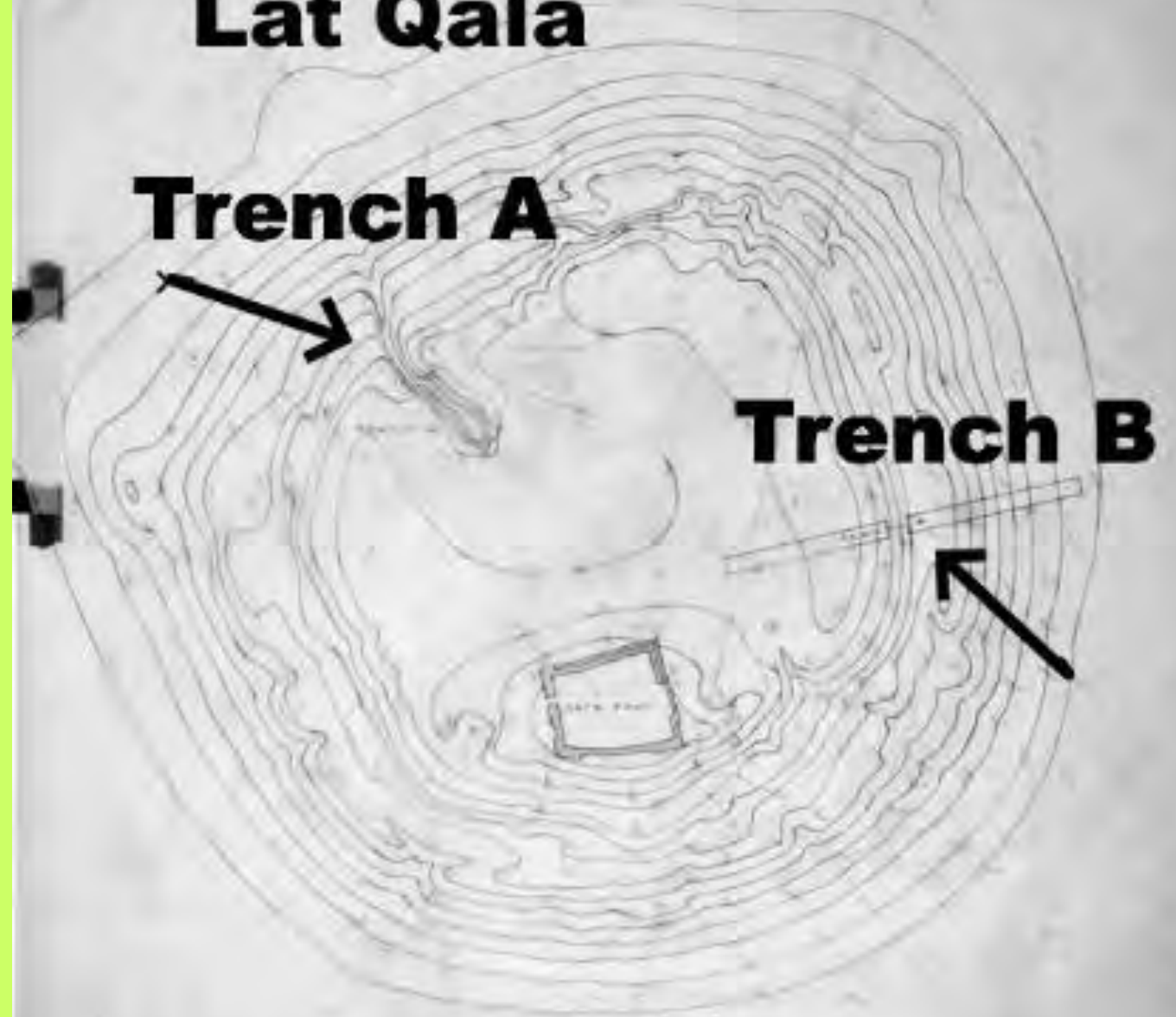
# Our sole stratified excavation, Kona Qala II (Lat Qal'a)



Excavated in 1975



## Kona Qala II/ Lat Qala

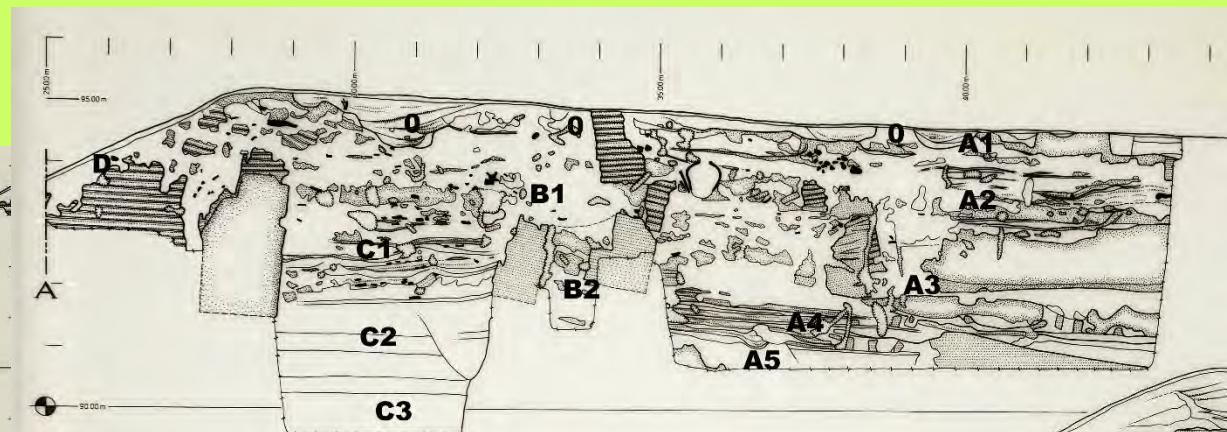
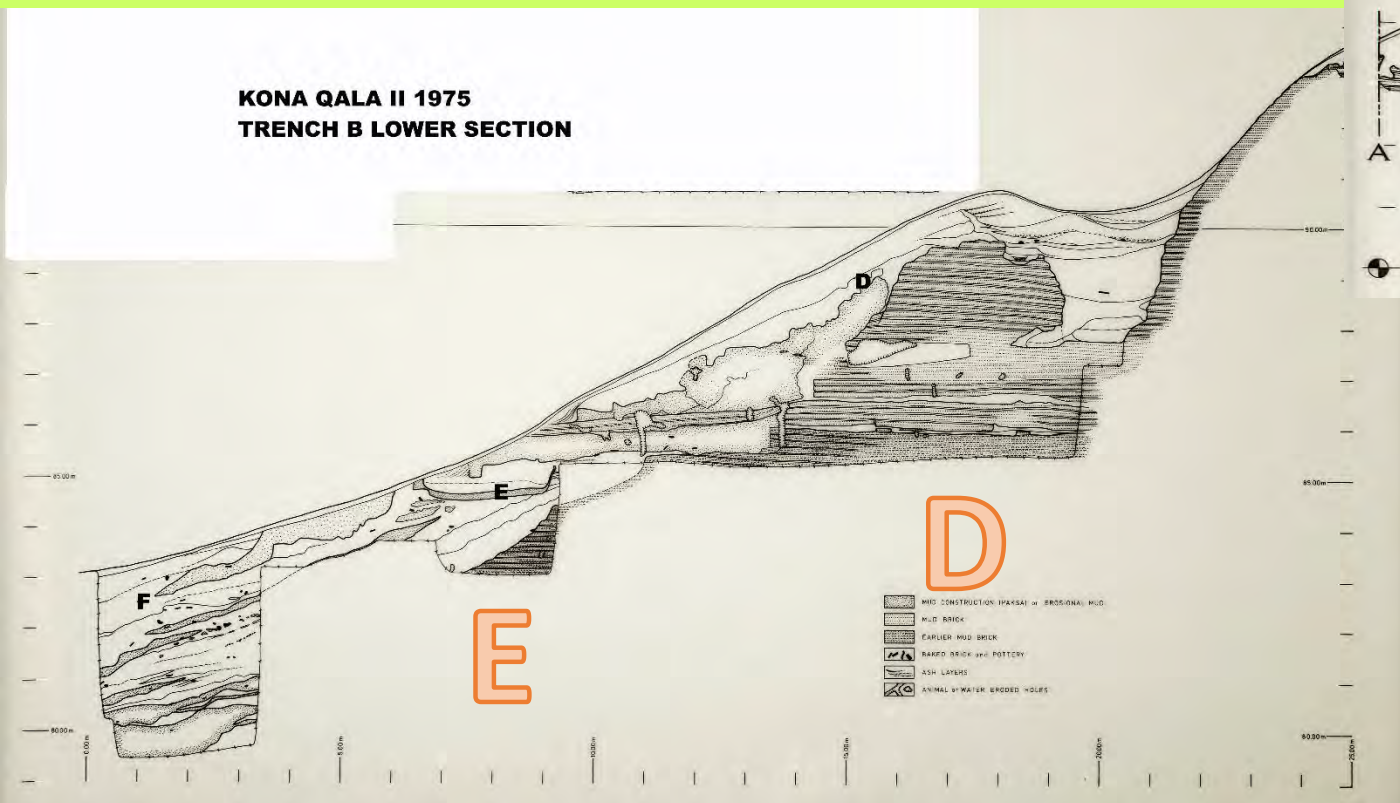


Trench A produced nothing useful



# Kona Qala II 75B Upper and Lower Sections

KONA QALA II 1975  
TRENCH B LOWER SECTION



F

E

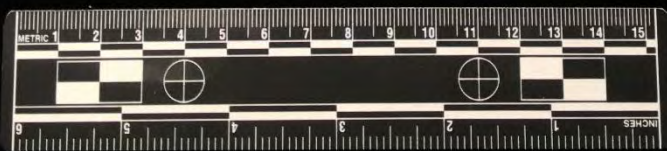
D

C

B

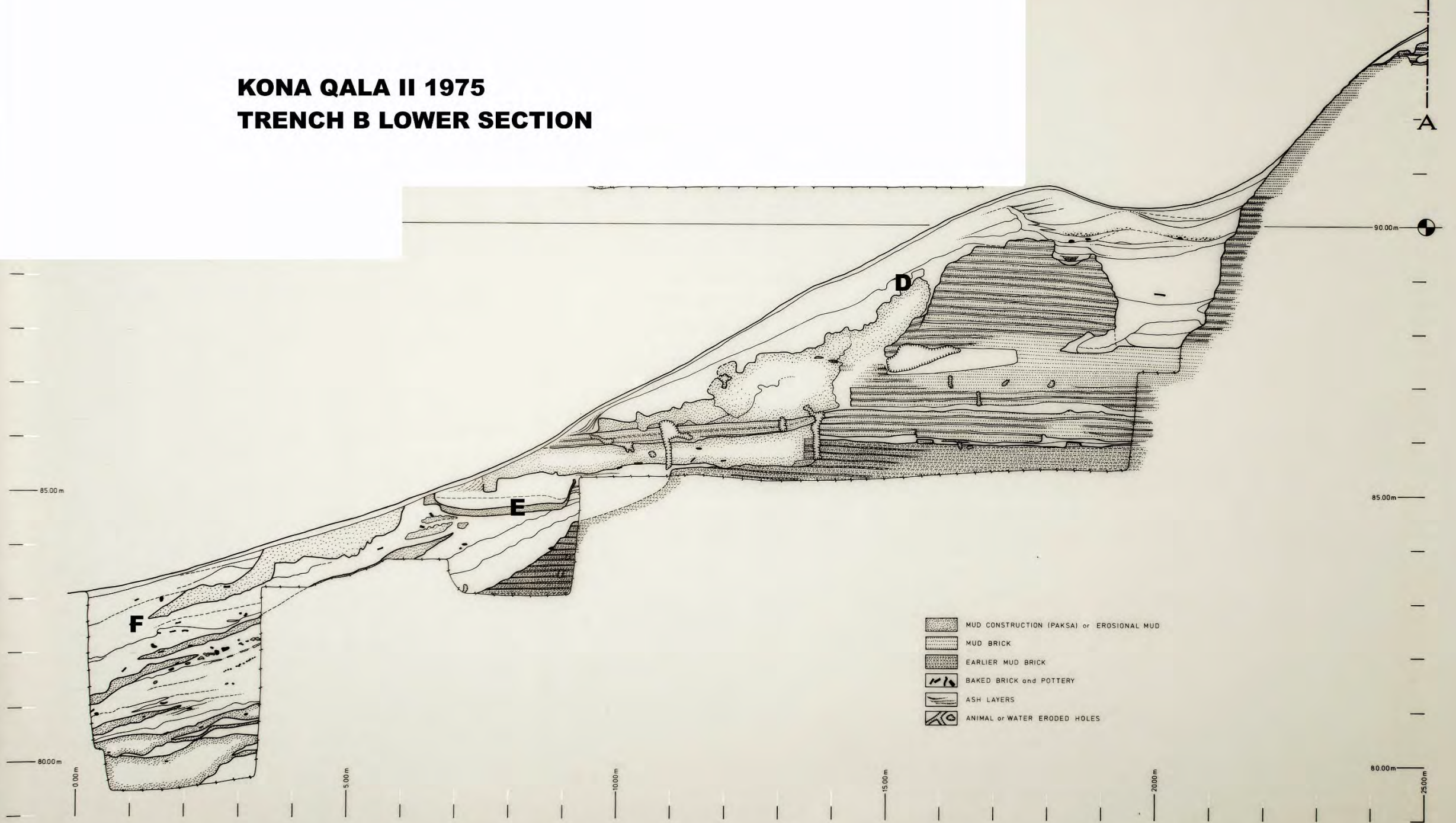
A

# Both Bronze and Early Iron Age levels

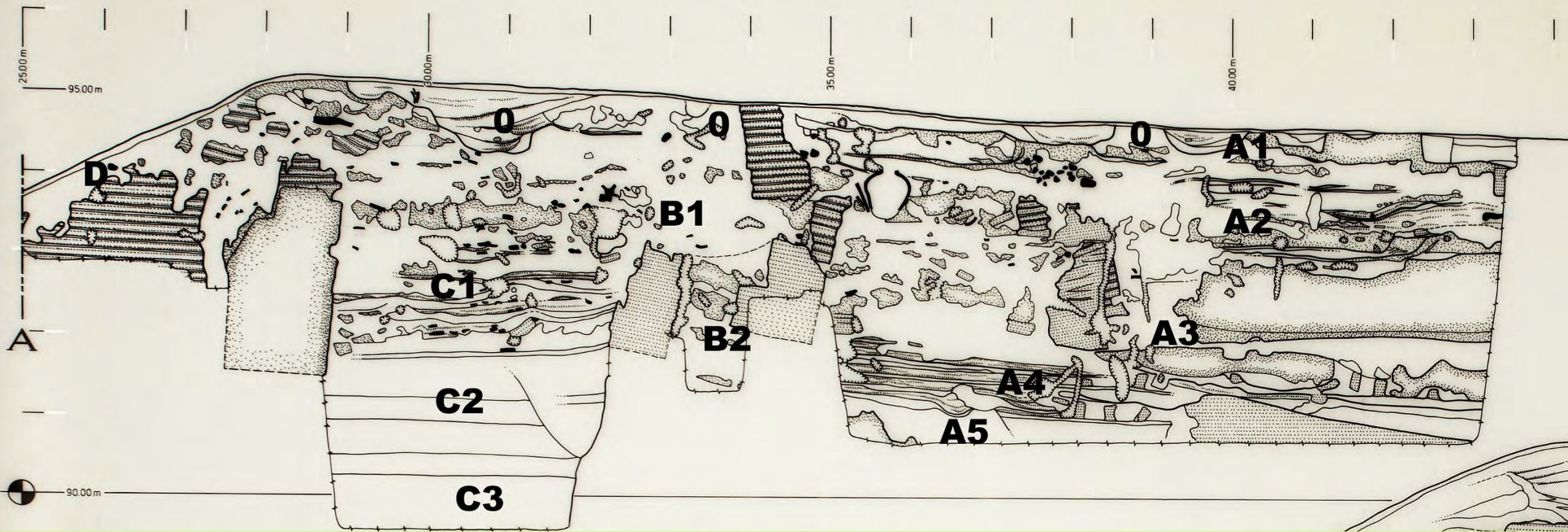




# KONA QALA II 1975 TRENCH B LOWER SECTION



# Achaemenid levels A5/C3 Hellenistic levels A4/C2



# Stratified Ceramics from A5 and C3



# Other Achaemenid ceramics in later fills



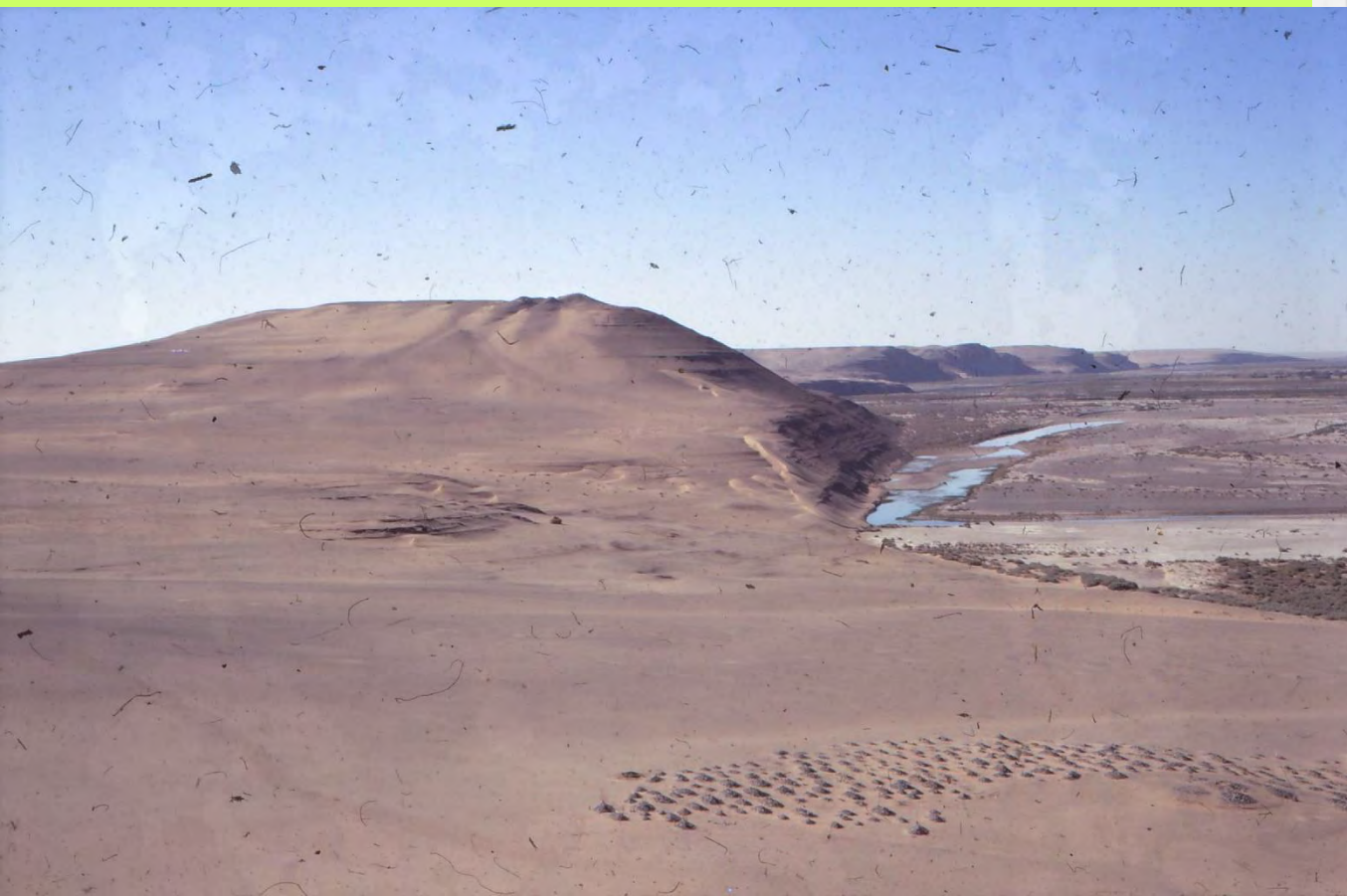
# Hellenistic stratified ceramics



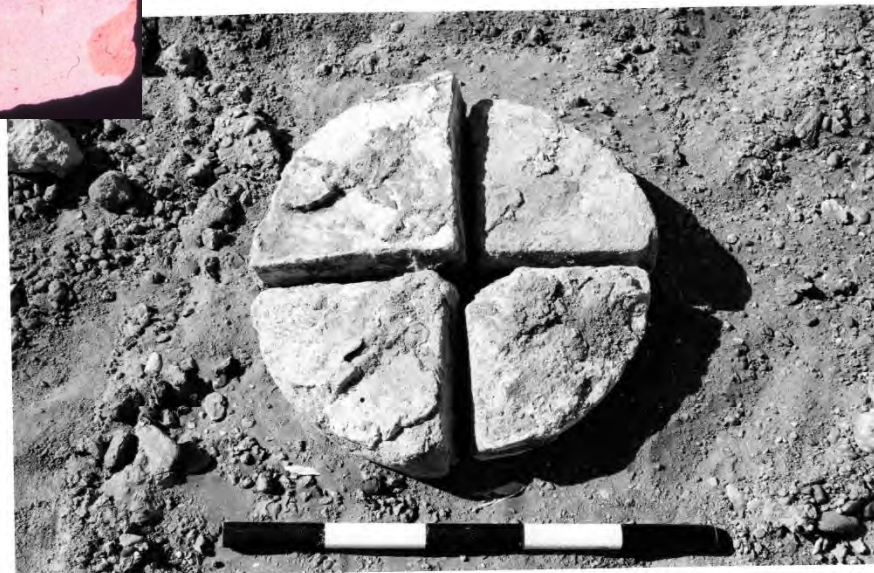
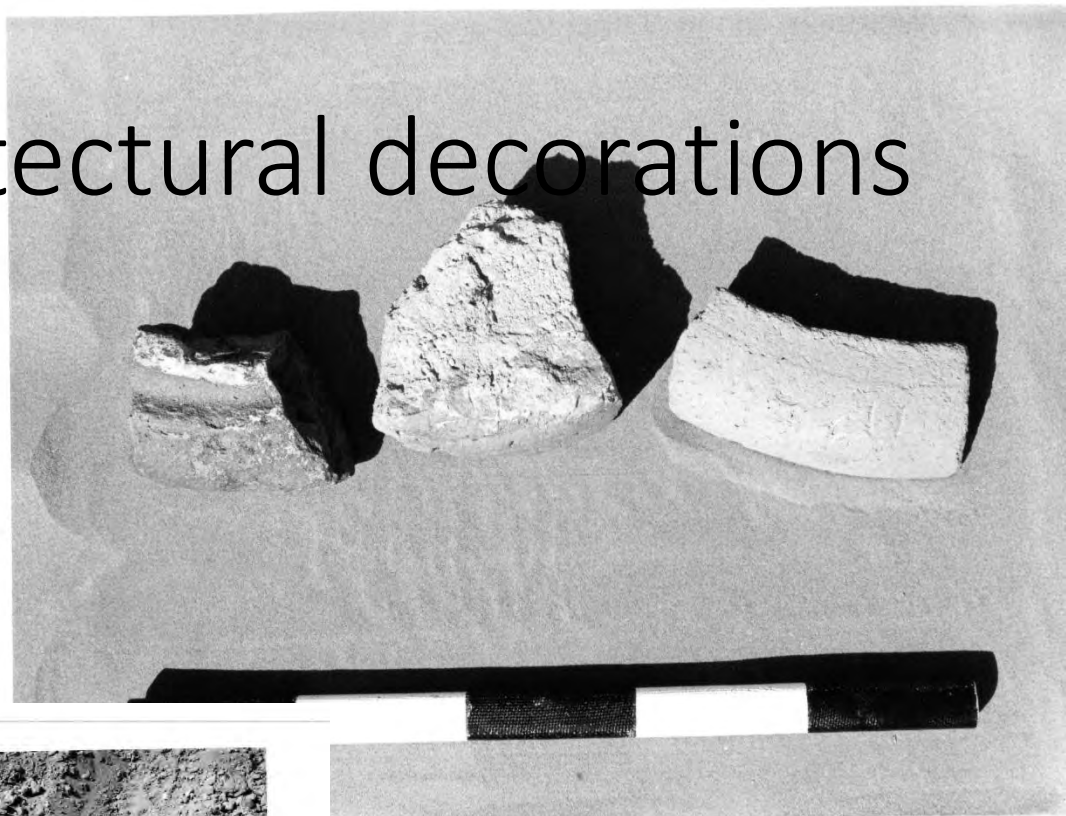
# Dipinta Storica Sistana ware



# Khwaja Kanur



# Evidence of western architectural decorations

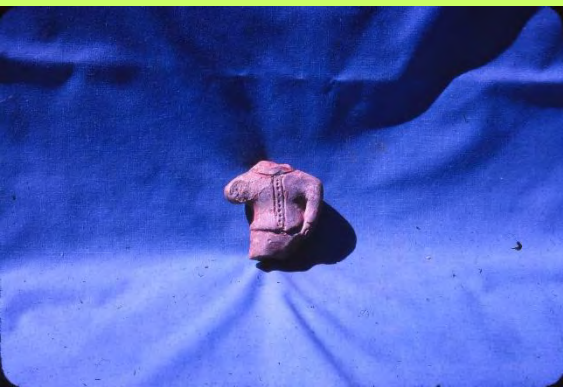




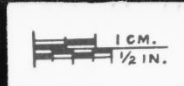
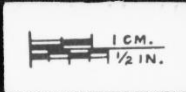
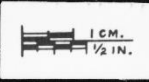
# Hellenistic artifacts



Only hinting at the wealth of the site



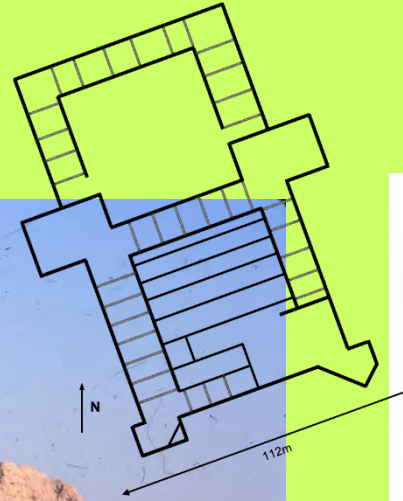
# Almost 5,000 animal figurines



# And architectural fragments

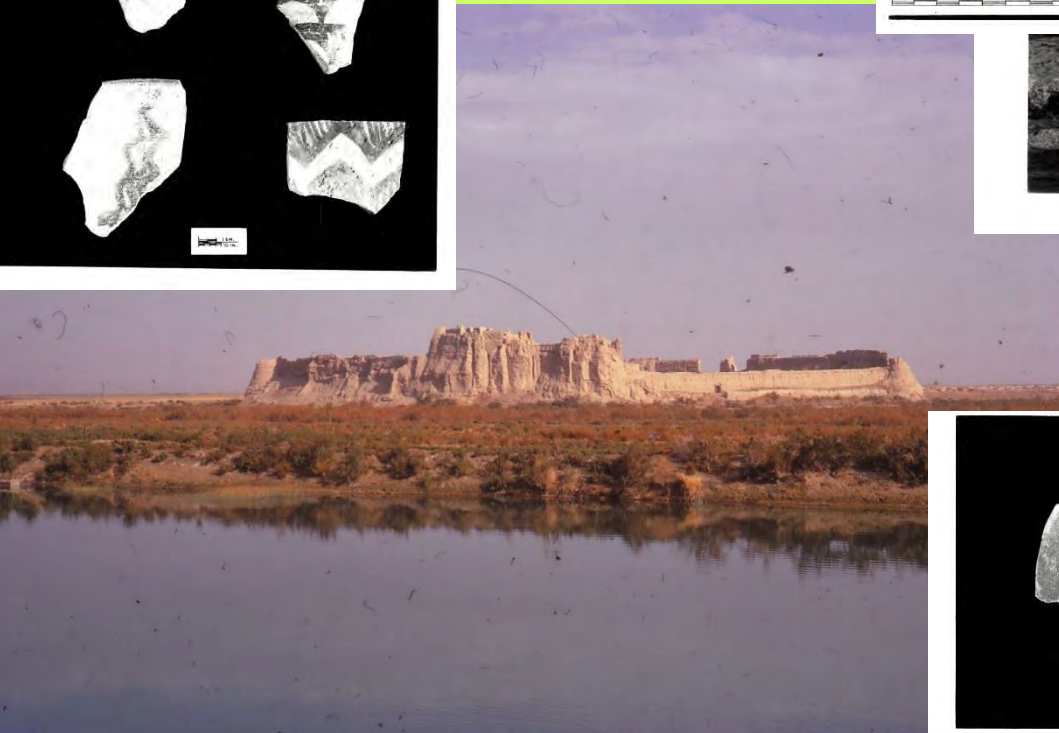
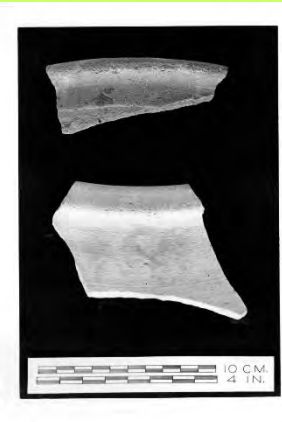
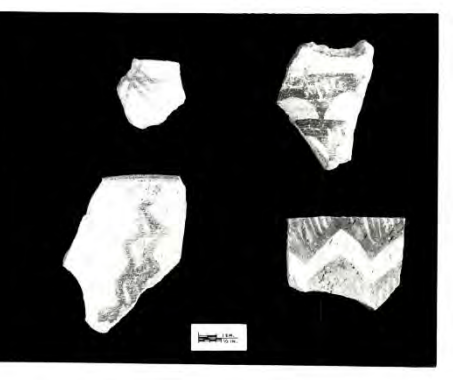


Where did these materials come from? Mokhatar



# Other project sites with Ach./Hell. material

## Qala-I Sirak, Qala Surkh (South), Tepe Deshu II



## ACHAEMENID SITES

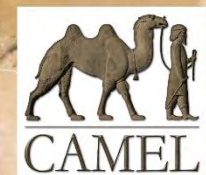


Source: Esri, World Imagery Basemap, Nov. 2019

## HELLENISTIC SITES



Source: Esri, World Imagery Basemap, Nov. 2019



# Qala-i Bist/ Bust



The Crowell weight. Fig. 1 - Bottom. Figs. 2-4 - Sides. Scale 1 : 1.





Nad-I Ali



How many of these were substantial Achaemenid or Hellenistic tepes?



# Additional resources

- General lectures on the Helmand Sistan Project, UC Berkeley YouTube
- [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SnyrLdzwl2X2nRXdps\\_t7VpHNIJkRhqJ/view?ts=5c630729](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SnyrLdzwl2X2nRXdps_t7VpHNIJkRhqJ/view?ts=5c630729)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ith80qx5S58&t=32s>
- Helmand Sistan Project website (expected 2021)
- <https://sistanarchaeology.org/>
- The Sistan Early Iron Age, paper in the journal *Afghanistan*
- <https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/afg.2019.0025>
- Some conference presentations on academia.edu
- <https://si.academia.edu/MitchellAllen>
- Scholarly Roadkill blog
- <https://www.scholarlyroadsideservice.com/blog>
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