

## **Northeast Iran During the Early and Middle Bronze Age Case Study: Survey Results in the Mashhad Plain (Kashaf Rud)**

**Document Type: Original Article**

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### **Abstract**

The archeological history of the Northeast Iran dates back to the Paleolithic period or in other words "Old Stone Age". In this region, a basin which is called "Kashaf Rud", has formed a fertile soil and abundant ecosystem during different historical periods in Mashhad Plain. Suitable landscape, along with other factors, has caused the formation, development and continuation of human societies. Due to the lack of sufficient researches conducted in this field, our understanding of prehistoric cultures in the mentioned area is not broad, therefore understanding the cultural components, along with the introduction of the Bronze Age settlements in the region and the orientation and accomplishment of future studies, is considered one of the goals and necessities of archaeological studies in the region. Understanding cultural characteristics, particularly pottery traditions, and evaluating intra-regional and extra-regional relations are the most important research queries. The basis of the present research is the introduction of settlement centers, the recognition of pottery traditions and understanding the cultural landscape as opposed to geographical landscape of the Bronze Age of the Kashaf Rud Basin (Mashhad Plain) according to comparative studies. The results of the research show heterogeneous pottery characteristics in the Old Bronze Age with the surrounding areas, as well as similar species in the Middle Bronze Age with neighboring areas, and the study of the settlement centers shows the gradual growth and continuity of the settlement, along with the increase in population in both the Old and Middle Bronze Age phases. In addition, unlike other regions of northeastern Iran and Turkmenistan, not only the settlements of the Middle Bronze Age (at the same time as the Namazga V) in the region were not abandoned or reduced, but also in the New Bronze Age, the settlements in the Mashhad plain region were continued. Pottery, in addition to having homogeneity with neighboring regions, also has local varieties that can be dated only by studying the manufacturing techniques.

**Key Words:** Khorasan, Kashaf Rud basin, Mashhad plain, Bronze Age, Settlement centers, Cultural landscape

### **Introduction & Method**

The lack of archeological data in Northeast Iran has caused its cultural characteristics to be more ambiguous than in Central Asia (Basafa and Rezaei 2014: 11). Through years of research, archaeologists have achieved a complete sequence of prehistoric and early historical cultures in the southwestern part of Central Asia (Boucharlat, et. al. 2005: 503). In the Bronze Age, which is one of the most important pre-historic periods and is also interpreted with the

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Received: 2022/04/10 Accepted: 2022/07/24

word urbanization, components such as social complexity and population growth, and trans-regional communication, etc. are considered to be its most important characteristics. In Khorasan, although the richness of the Bronze Age can be recognized due to the few studies conducted in several settlements (Kohl, 1984), although lack of a comprehensive study plan is evident. The authors' research in 1395 AH in order to develop a research plan for the region, investigate and evaluate cultural systems and explain the prehistoric cultural landscape of the Mashhad Plain (Davari, et. al. 2021), recognize the settlement patterns of the Neolithic period until The Middle Bronze Age of Mashhad (Basafa and Davari, 2021) and the preliminary understanding of the developments and settlement pattern of the New Bronze Age of this area (Basafa and Davari, 2022) are among the most serious studies. Anyway, knowing that our understanding of the prehistoric cultures of the Khorasan region is not the same in all parts, it becomes necessary to know this area more thorough. Undoubtedly, the study of the prehistoric cultures of Khorasan can reveal basic and fundamental information and, in parallel, can assist to understand the general archeology of the Iranian plateau and Central Asia. The statistical population of this research is settlements that have been dated in a comparative approach based on the clay data of prehistoric settlements in the region from the Neolithic period to the Late Bronze Age. Subsequently based on remote sensing studies and via preparing different maps with different scales, as well as using output and location maps in the geographic information method (GIS), the cultural and geographical landscape of these establishments have been analyzed. It should be mentioned that the foundation of the current research is based only on the presentation of research achievements related to the investigation of the "cultural" as opposed to "geographical" landscape of the Bronze Age of the Kashaf Rud basin, and the introduction of the settlements of this period.

### **Bronze Age settlement centers of Mashhad Plain (Kashaf Rud Basin)**

During archaeological activities in the form of investigation and identification which was performed by the General Directorate of Cultural Heritage Organization of Khorasan Razavi province, in the drainage basin of Kashaf Rud, in Mashhad plain, a total of 14 prehistoric settlements have been identified. Based on the surface materials, 10 settlements have the cultural sequence of the Bronze Age (Fig. 1). From the total of these 10 settlements, 6 settlements have the cultural sequence of previous periods based on surface material cultures, and only 4 settlements were inhabited initially in the Bronze Age.

### **Conclusion**

The distribution of the early and middle bronze age sites of Iran, which are often discovered on the outskirts, and the sequence and cultural development determined based on their surface material culture, indicate the continuity and gradual growth of human settlements in the region, and in later times, with the gradual growth of these settlements, their distribution also increased in the Kashaf Rud basin and according to their cultural periods, they formed numerous settlement centers and created numerous urban centers in the Bronze Age, especially the Middle Bronze Age. The study of the settlement centers shows the gradual growth and continuity of the settlement as well as the population increase in the two stages of the Old and Middle Bronze Age. In addition, unlike other regions of northeastern Iran and Turkmenistan, not only the settlements of the Middle Bronze Age (coinciding with the Namazga V 2500–2200 BCE) in the region have not been abandoned or downsized; Rather, in the Late Bronze Age, settlement in the Mashhad plain has been continued.

**Citation:** Davari M.S., Basafa H., 2022. Northeast Iran During the Early and Middle Bronze Age Case Study: Survey Results in the Mashhad Plain (Kashaf Rud). Journal of Iran's Pre-Islamic Archaeological Essays. 7(1): 35-54.