



The Kech Makran Region in Protohistoric Times

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For a long time, the Kech-Makran region in southwestern Pakistan was primarily known from Greek texts as the territory of ancient Gedrosia and the land of the *ichtyophagous* people ('fish-eaters'), a territory that was crossed by Alexander the Great in 325 BCE, when he returned from the Indus Valley. Kech-Makran has long been considered a no man's land on the archaeological map of the Indo-Iranian borderlands, even after Sir A. Stein had conducted a one-month archaeological fieldwork (a large trench at Shahi-Tump and surveys) in 1928 in this region.¹ This fieldwork for the first time brought to light the important cultural heritage of this region, particularly vestiges dating to the protohistoric period. However, despite more intensive research after World War II in Pakistan and its neighbouring regions, Kech-Makran remained little investigated until a new and more comprehensive archaeological program was established by R. Besenval in the late 1980s. This program, the 'French Archaeological Mission in Makran', was a cooperative venture of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in France and the Department of Archaeology and Museums of Pakistan (DOAM). It was also strongly supported by the local population in Kech-Makran, who showed great interest in preserving the cultural heritage of the region and provided important logistical support. The research program lasted for twenty years, from 1987 to 2007, and filled a significant knowledge gap about ancient cultures

and environment in southwestern Pakistan.² In particular, it has revealed that the Chalcolithic and Bronze-Age cultures of this region were rich in their material culture and dynamic in their interactions also with southeastern Iran, the Indus Valley, and the Oman Peninsula. The objectives of the mission were to establish a chrono-cultural sequence of the region and its archaeological map and to study its protohistoric population in greater detail, particularly in the present districts of Turbat and Gwadar. The first phase of the mission's program consisted of an extensive exploration of these areas and resulted in the discovery of more than 230 archaeological sites.³ The site of Miri Qalat (Figs. 11.1; 2), located 6 km north-west of Turbat on the right bank of the Kech River, was then selected for excavation in the second phase (1990–1996), for the reason that the archaeological materials collected at the surface of this site had shown that it had been occupied for a long period of time. Besenval thought that excavating at this site would provide important data for the establishment of a chrono-cultural sequence of Kech-Makran.⁴ The results of this excavation confirmed this hypothesis. The site was occupied from the 5th millennium (Period I) to the late 3rd millennium BCE (Period IV). After a gap during the 2nd millennium BCE, the site was re-occupied from the middle of the 1st millennium BCE

¹ Stein 1931.

² Besenval / Sanlaville 1990; Besenval 1992; 1997a; 1997b; 2000; 2005; 2011.

³ Besenval / Sanlaville 1990; Besenval 1992; 1997a; Didier 2013, 43, 63–64.

⁴ Besenval 1992; 1997a, 1997b; 2000.



Fig. 11.1
The site of Miri Qalat
in the Kech Valley



Fig. 11.3
The site of Shahi-Tump
in the Kech Valley



Fig. 11.2
Excavations in Trench I
at Miri Qalat

(Period V) to the 18th/19th centuries CE (Period VIIIc). The site of Shahi-Tump (Figs. 11.3; 4), located 3 km south of Miri Qalat on the left bank of the Kech River, was then excavated (1997–2006) and provided more abundant and more detailed data on the settlements and material culture of the earliest periods identified at Miri Qalat, which date from the end of the 5th millennium to the beginning of the 3rd millennium BCE (Periods I to III).⁵ Numerous data, documenting the ancient environment and food economy in Kech-Makran, were collected and analysed on the basis of different approaches: archaeo-botanical and archaeo-zoological analyses⁶, a specific study of the coast which included an analysis of the past exploitation of its resources and ethnographic observations of fishery activities⁷, and a palaeo-geographical

5 Besenval 2000; 2005; 2011; Besenval et al. 2005.
6 Tengberg 1999; Desse et al. 2009.
7 Desse / Desse-Berset 2005.



Fig. 11.4
Excavation of grave 159
at Shahi-Tump



Fig. 11.5
Shahi-Tump, Trench I
architecture dating to
Period I (end of the
5th mill. BCE ?)

reconstruction of the ancient terrain, land, rivers, and coastline of the region through a geomatic approach.⁸ Lastly, looting became increasingly frequent in 2003 and 2004, and destroyed most of the numerous protohistoric graveyards located in the Dasht Plain, south of the Kech River. The mission saved many archaeological ceramics in this area.⁹ This exhibition catalogue, however, with about 40 ceramics most likely from Kech-Makran, reflects the large impact of looting in this region. Archaeological fieldwork of the mission stopped after 2007, as the area became unstable then. The abundant archaeological data-archives, drawings, and photographs – collected by the mission are still evaluated. The text below is meant to provide an overview of the ancient occupation in Kech-Makran. It is based on the various contributions (publications, reports, and PhD dissertations) by the members

8 Davtian et al. 2004.

9 Didier 2013, 63–64.

of the French Archaeological Mission in Makran, including Roland Besenval †, Cécile Buquet, Jean Desse, Nathalie Desse-Berset, Aurore Didier, Vincent Marcon, Benjamin Mutin, and Margareta Tengberg.

The 5th Millennium BCE

The earliest traces of human occupation identified in Kech-Makran date to the late 5th millennium BCE and correspond to Period I, which was first observed in the deep level of Excavation III at Miri Qalat. It was then more extensively studied at Shahi-Tump in the course of Excavations I and III.¹⁰ The remains of circular hut-basements, built with perishable material and containing rare flints and animal bones, were excavated at the bottom of the trenches at this site. It is unclear, whether this occupation corresponds to permanent or temporary settlement. The next archaeological level consists of a large and massive quadrangular stone building (Fig. 11.5). The objects collected in these architectural levels include flints, worked stones, and some bone tools along with faunal and botanical remains. No ceramics were found in these levels; this is quite unusual in the context of the 5th millennium BCE in Iran and Pakistan, where ceramics are usually found in large numbers. In Period I the communities in the Kech Valley cultivated cereal crops (wheat and barley) and leguminous plants (lentils, *fabaceae*), collected fruit (jujube), and domesticated cattle (*bos taurus*), goats, and sheep. Fish bones were also found, which indicate an exploitation or exchange of resources from the Oman Sea.¹¹

The 4th Millennium BCE

Following Period I in the 5th millennium BCE, the 4th millennium is subdivided into two periods:

10 Besenval et al. 2005.

11 Desse / Desse-Berset 2005.



Fig. 11.6
Shahi-Tump, Trench Ia
grave dating to
Period II with a sea-
shell bangle and a
copper mirror
(first half of the
4th mill. BCE)

Period II and Period IIIa. Period II dates to the first half of the 4th millennium BCE, while Period IIIa comprises the second half and extends into the early 3rd millennium BCE. In contrast to Period I, the material assemblages are more abundant and include a larger variety of objects. Pottery, in particular, appears in Period II, and this new trait, along with the other categories of objects made of clay, bone, stone and copper recovered from Periods II and IIIa, allows the archaeologist to investigate a wider variety of aspects characteristic of the Kech-Makran populations in the 4th millennium BCE than was possible for the previous period. It also provides us with a better understanding of their relationships established with other communities in the Indo-Iranian borderlands by comparing the style of these objects with those observed on the vessels from these communities.¹²

12 Besenval 2011; Didier / Mutin 2013; Mutin 2007; Mutin 2013a.

Period II

Sequence and Archaeological Remains

Period II was essentially studied in the course of six excavation campaigns: Excavations II, III, and IV at Shahi-Tump and Excavations III, IV, and IX at Miri Qalat.¹³ The excavations at Shahi-Tump provided important data as to the chronological sequence of this period. In the first part of the sequence, beginning near the bottom of the site in Excavation III, Period II is characterised by successive architectural levels and a cemetery, which also encompasses the area of Excavation IV, located immediately south of Excavation III. Additional architectural levels were observed in Excavation IV, posterior to the burials. Pottery is not very frequent in these levels. It becomes extremely common only in the later part of Period II in the following and higher layers

13 Besenval 1992; 1997a; 1997b; 2000; 2005; 2011; Besenval et al. 2005; Mutin 2007; Mutin 2013a.



Fig. 11.7
Shahi-Tump, Trench I
necklace in black
steatite from a grave
dating to Period II
(first half of the
4th mill. BCE)

of Excavation IV and those of Excavation II. These layers include more massive architectural structures and a more abundant material assemblage. In Excavation III the earliest architecture assigned to Period II consists of a quadrangular stone complex. While stone is still employed, mud brick also appears in the constructions in the levels located on top of this stone building. Mud brick walls and a chimney built with mud bricks are reported from these levels. About 25 burials were subsequently dug into this architecture. The bodies are usually placed in



Fig. 11.8
Shahi-Tump, Trench II,
Period II architecture
(first half of the 4th
millennium BCE)

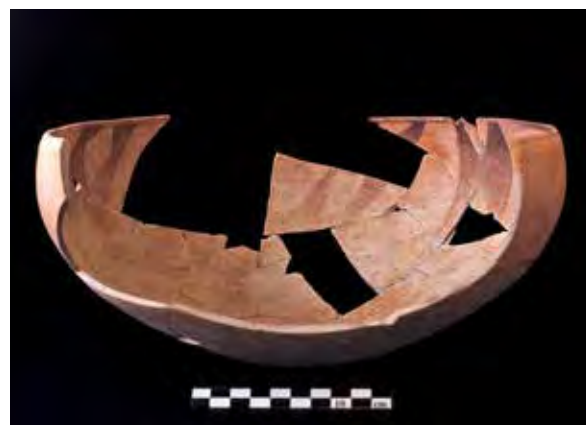


Fig. 11.9
Shahi-Tump,
Trench II, Period II,
pottery bowl

foetal position and covered with ochre. The graves contain no ceramics but various other types of objects (Fig. 11.6) including necklaces made of sea-shell and steatite beads (Fig. 11.7), sea-shell bangles, sea-shells filled with ochre, a bone spatula, stone vessels, and copper objects such as an axe, a spear point, and a copper mirror. A deposit of small fish was observed in one grave.¹⁴

14 Besenval 2000; Buquet 2005.

The more recent phase of Period II, in which pottery is found in greater quantities, is essentially documented at Shahi-Tump by Excavations II and IV as well as at Miri Qalat by Excavations III and IV. A more massive architecture was constructed during this phase (Fig. 11.8). Successive complexes of houses were excavated in Excavation II at Shahi-Tump. Well-preserved floors, fireplaces including hearths connected to mud-brick chimneys, trash areas, and circulation alleys were found inside. The walls were built with stones and mud brick; and the presence of carbonised beams and vegetal imprints in clay shows that they were roofed with layers of clay alternating with vegetal layers. In two instances, a burning led to the partial or total reconstruction in the area of Excavation II. The material assemblage of this later phase of Period II is mostly composed of ceramics. The most common ceramic type is designated as Miri Ware.¹⁵ It is characterised by very fine, painted vessels (Fig. 11.9). The potters of Period II made bowls, goblets, pots, and jars in this style for the consumption of food and liquids as well as for storage. They painted these ceramics mostly with geometric motifs, while animal motifs – the ibex in particular – are less frequently observed. The colour of the painting ranges from brown to black. The decoration on the bowls is painted on the inside and on the other vessel types on the outside. A painted line covers the rim and a few millimetres downwards on both the inner and outer surfaces. Painted decoration is also frequently observed on the bases of the bowls, and a few potter marks have been recorded. The paste of Miri Ware is well-levigated. The manufacturing technique of this pottery could not be determined for every single sherd recorded; technological observations, however, were made on some complete ceramics, showing that these vessels were produced by means of the coiling technique. They were then shaped on a rotative device, probably a *tournette*, as marks observed on both their inner and outer

15 Didier / Mutin 2013; Mutin 2007; Mutin 2013a.



Fig. 11.10
Shahi-Tump, Trench II
amulet in mother-
of-pearl dating to
Period II

surfaces tend to indicate. This ceramic type is well-fired and mostly of buff, pink, red, or grey colour. The grey vessels are among the oldest examples of grey ceramics known at present from Pakistan and Iran. Their colour results from piling the vessels within the firing structures, a process that is identified through mirror impressions, or transfers of decoration from one vessel to another. The same method was used for the following Period IIIa. These fine vessels were supplemented with a coarse cooking ware and Basket Ware, a type of vessels moulded into baskets.¹⁶ The other categories of objects include alabaster and steatite vessels, a stone-macehead, bone awls, a few copper objects, terracotta bangles with or without mat-imprints, sea-shell beads and bangles, and pendants such as a unique small fish-figurine made of mother-of-pearl (Fig. 11.10).

Food Economy

The Period II communities at Miri Qalat and Shahi-Tump cultivated wheat and barley, while date palm was also present. They domesticated mostly cattle and goat, whereas hunting was extremely limited. Lastly, the sea-shell objects and fish bones recovered at Miri Qalat and Shahi-Tump indicate that they exploited or exchanged resources from the Oman Sea and consumed fish, probably dried.¹⁷

16 Mutin 2006; 2007; 2013a.

17 Besenval 2011; Desse / Desse-Berset 2005.