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The *simsimiyya* Lyre from the Suez Canal: Craftsmanship and Identities

by KAWKAB TAWFIK

Originariamente pentacordica, la *simsimiyya* vede il suo sviluppo organologico parallelamente ad un processo di acquisizione di significato e connotazione identitaria tra le comunità delle città del Canale di Suez. La *simsimiyya* arrivò in quest'area attraverso varie ondate e rotte migratorie, ma si ritiene sia stata principalmente introdotta nella regione nel XIX secolo dai lavoratori di origine nubiana e sudanese impiegati nella costruzione del Canale. Il suo sviluppo organologico ed il cambiamento delle sue forme musicali sono il risultato di complesse condizioni socio-culturali nelle quali il ruolo del suonatore di *simsimiyya* cambiò durante gli eventi del Canale dagli anni '50 in poi. Da strumento suonato da operai e pescatori nei caffè del porto, con le guerre del 1956 e 1967 la *simsimiyya* venne elevata a strumento di resistenza popolare ed anticoloniale ed iniziò ad essere suonata al di fuori del suo ambiente originario, trasformandosi anche in uno strumento da palcoscenico. Iniziò quindi ad arricchire il proprio repertorio aggiungendo elementi della tradizione urbana ed elevandosi a strumento del genere *tarab* e sviluppando diverse realizzazioni sonore, a seconda dello spazio geografico e sociale in cui viene suonata. Oggi la *simsimiyya* si comporta come aggregante collettivo nelle varie dinamiche sociali ed è simbolo di orgoglio identitario delle comunità del Canale di Suez.

INTRODUCTION

The *simsimiyya* lyre (in Arabic *سيميمية*) is a music instrument played along the coasts of the Red Sea and Arabic Gulf by the Bedouin communities who live on the Sinai Peninsula and in the XX century it became the main musical and cultural component of urban Egyptians in the cities along Suez Canal, namely, Port Said, Suez and Ismailiyah.

The *simsimiyya* is an originally five-stringed instrument belonging to the lyre category of which the sound-box can consist of a small rectangular oil can, or a piece of wood in a box-like or bowl-like shape, or in a deep tin plate covered by a soundboard of sheep or fish skin, within which are three small round sound-holes. The arms, set through the soundboard at points distant about the third of the diameter from the circumference, are linked on the extremities by another wooden bar holding a minimum of five gut strings, knotted around the bar and raised from the soundboard by means of a movable bridge tailpiece, placed at the center of it. The *simsimiyya* from Suez Canal cities usually consists of plastic fishing wires instead of the gut strings, and is knotted around the same wooden tuning pegs of the 'ūd (Arabic lute), or in some cases it uses metallic strings, the same of the bicycle brakes knotted round the metallic guitar pegs (Fig. 1).

The strings are plucked with a plectrum, called *mizwāg* or *rīša*, by the right hand for the melody, while the left hand blocks the unplucked strings and will sometimes twang some of the strings as a soft accompaniment. The player can also use the plectrum to produce a tremolo as embellishment, in imitation of the *firdās* technique of the 'ūd.



Fig. 1 - A *simsimiyya* with metallic pegs produced by Muhammad Ghaly in 2016. Photo Author.

I am interested in how identities are “shaped” through this instrument, and how individuals participate in them. Since the 1960s in contemporary societies, identity has usually been imagined particularly in relation to matters of ethnicity or nation, yet “practised” in a wide variety of ways (Stokes 1994). I start from these themes to explore whether and how it evokes and identifies their culture, and how makers, the crafting of the instrument, its materiality, all contribute to this identity construction. As I elaborate below, the uneven character of the *simsimiyya* means that from some angles it appears to be a single collective tradition, but it nonetheless seems to be practised and experienced in a variety of ways and places: music venues, squares, political parties, coffee shops, private clubs, aficionados’ hubs, sporting clubs, wedding parties as well as online and virtual spaces and social media.

As a bridge between literature on the *simsimiyya* and ethnomusicological perspectives on music and identity, we need to consider existing academic ideas on self/national identity, the development of policies of cultural heritage and forms of hybridity, and the ways these are connected in a historical perspective. The following questions are intended to shape the article combining these main areas. In what ways does this peculiar Egyptian instrument re-configure or re-formulate identities within the social contexts and spaces it is found? How should we conceive of national identity through a musical instrument? (Bates, 2012). How is the *simsimiyya* implicated in socio-cultural processes? How do shapes and materials (wood, strings) come to be socially meaningful as markers of identity for some *simsimiyya* players and makers?

Just as musical practices contribute to how identity is “made,” so I will argue, the *simsimiyya* contributes and animates the Egyptian music life in the area of the Suez Canal (Figs. 2-3). It acts mainly as an identity trope (e.g. illustrating the Canal’s people pride in the anti-colonial historical context); a material resource (e.g. wood, shapes and their symbolic associations), and a powerful imaginary that provides ways of engaging with



Figs. 2-3 - The *ṣuḥbaḡiyya al-simsimiyya* club of Suez, November 2018. Photos Author.

the identity of the musical instrument. I will investigate why this instrument matters in terms of Egyptian Arab and Mediterranean music. The instrument acts as an emblem of cultural identity, similarly to what happened elsewhere in the Mediterranean for instruments such as *saz*, *nay* and *lyra* (Bates 2012; Dawe 2005; Senay 2014).

My interest in making a case for ethnomusicologists to consider the particular relevance of musical instrument in the shaping of musical practice as well as social values and ideals is not entirely new. Similar aims were surely behind Regula Qureshi's *The Indian Sarangi: Sound of Affect, Site of Contest* (1997), Andy Bennett and Kevin Dawe's book *Guitar Cultures* (2001), and Senay's more recent article *The Fall and Rise of the Ney: From the Sufi Lodge to the World Stage* (2014). Each of these works, in various ways, intersects with my theme of musical instrument and identity. Bennett and Dawe (2001) present fine-grained ethnographies of the guitar as a global phenomenon, emphasising how a musical instrument tends to embody deep patterns of thought and experience that can vary with place and time in a society. The cultural dimension is also present in the work of Regula Burckhart Qureshi (1997). Qureshi argues that the Indian *sarangi* is uniquely endowed with meaning and its sound mostly immediately evokes situated experience. Concerning identity, I also attempt to take one interpretative step beyond those made by Qureshi. She explores for example the interrelations between audible aesthetics of sound and instrumental symbolisms (see also Bates 2009: 368), but does not ask what other possible ways of interpreting and experiencing sound might have if not simply through listening. My own study also benefits from the recent surge of works in sound studies. It emerges as an expanding discourse involving many disciplines (Feld, Brenneis 2004), from musicology to anthropology, social theorists, historians and scholars in science and technology studies, who focused mainly on listening and reception. I aim to highlight that when it comes to the players, identity shifts to the playing of the instrument and inevitably to the sound they perceived.

From the opening pages of Senay's article (2014), the parallels between *ney* and *simsimiyya* were clear to me and, by the end of the article, they were overwhelming, specifically for what concerns the connection with public life, national cultural policy, the diffusion in new concert spaces, the instrument's renaissance and the new auditory and pedagogical sites. The way in which the *ney* and its interaction between individual, national and extra-national actors also resonate with common narratives about *simsimiyya*'s appeal. However, Senay compellingly demonstrates that the expansion of the *ney*'s musical genres and its incorporation into popular music forms stylised as "Sufi music" play a central role in the public construction as a "spiritual instrument." In the case of *simsimiyya*, the link between emblematic clichés and nationhood may not present itself quite so explicitly, but the ways in which the personal and the private aspects of instruments' experiences are raised to the level of social imaginaries is one that I share in this article.

Furthermore, this article contributes to a number of areas of scholarship. First, it adds to the literature on Arab music in general (Frishkopf 2010; Racy 2013) and Arab music in Egypt (Danielson 1999; El-Shawan Castelo-Branco 2002; Marcus 2007). Here, my central contribution is to the literature of music and identity, and politics revival, through the study of musical-material objects. Moreover, concerning the scholarship of the region, my article contributes to the literature on Arab music in colonial and post-colonial time. Despite the popularity of the *simsimiyya* in the Egyptian cultural and social life, the available literature specifically focused on this instrument is quite scarce. The main three studies related to the *simsimiyya* and its repertoire in Egypt have very different focuses and approaches. A first and relevant contribution to the literature on the *simsimiyya* in Egypt is Ammon Shiloa's ethnographic article (1972) that focuses on the lyre played by the Bedouin communities in South Sinai, its musical and performative aspects. Lately, Shabana (2014) describes in his monography—in Arabic language—the social role of the *dammah* songs from Port Said, illustrating how the *damma-simsimiyya* song were

connecting the working-class members despite their very diverse and multicultural backgrounds. He also inquires the origin of the musical forms and elements of the *damma* songs in Port Said in relation to the ethnical, geographical and cultural origins of the *damma* community members. Finally, Musallam (2017) presents some historical events from the Suez crisis till the outbreak of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution by looking at the transmission of ideology, imaginary and values from the oral history point of view, in which the *simsimiyya* songs, musicians and poets played a central role in shaping the local identity in the framework of the anti-colonial and post-colonial struggle.

METHODS AND FIELD

Some of the conceptual challenges I faced in this research were similar to those faced by ethnographic researchers for decades: coping with insider/outsider dichotomies (Nettl 2005); balancing objective, subjective and reflexive interpretation (Rice 1994; 2008; Shelemay 2008); gaining the trust of consultants (Beaudry 2008), and managing one's place in relation to competing interests and pre-existing social hierarchies, tensions and rivalries. In this article, I use the term *field* to describe the social relations and cultural phenomena that coalesce around the *simsimiyya* within its contexts. I suggest what especially characterises this study is a concern with the notion of field that is both sound-visual, object-material, public-private, real-virtual (Strangelove 2010). What results is a very much a multi-sited (Marcus 1995) sense of the fieldwork, its inhabitants, materiality and feelings.

I initially also used video recording of music performances as part of my data collection strategy, and later on I contributed to the fields of visual anthropology and film studies (Zemp 1988; Baily 1989; Hockings 1995) with short videos taken from the 2017 to the 2019 between Cairo, Suez, Port Said and Ismailiyya. During this period of time, I first approached the El Mastaba Center from which I received key contacts and a strong support in my research. I intensively travelled to the Suez Canal Cities, meeting musicians, poets, cultural promoters and organizers, as well as *simsimiyya* makers. I could meet the musicians during their public performances, but also in private spaces and circumstances, such as *qa'adāt mūsīqiya* (music gatherings) and home gatherings. I attended on a monthly base the El Tanbura band performances in Cairo at the Dammah Theatre (Fig. 4) as any other performance happening in Cairo and strengthened personal relationships with some of the people with whom I interacted with.

Furthermore, I was observing the content on social media and the interaction among the *simsimiyya* community, and how—and to which extend—this became a participatory activity. By interacting and then sharing my own content and films, I soon became visible to the community and to other professionals in doing their own research. My case is a particularly rich example pointing to the relationship between cultural production and artefacts.

In these virtual domains, at one extreme, we can count very well-known individuals: teachers with many students who are frequently involved in institutional activities; prominent *simsimiyya* makers whose instruments sell widely; those involved in organising events and associations. At the other extreme are those players and aficionados, not necessarily in remote locations or musically any less skilled, who interact very little with others, preferring to play for themselves or to listen to what others post on-line. Thus, internet enabled me to follow who was performing, when and where, as well as make sense of networks of people and performative physical spaces. Facebook was also an



Fig. 4 - The Tanbura Band performing at Dammah Theater, Abdin, Cairo, January 2020. Photo Author.

extremely important way of building and maintaining relationships and contacts both during and after fieldwork.

Language skills have been extremely important to my research. Only one person I met as part of my research spoke a little English. All those I encountered spoke Arabic, Egyptian's main official language. Conversations, ranging from informal chats to formal and filmed interviews, formed a key part of my fieldwork and are central to my research method. I regularly listened to *simsimiyya* recordings through the rich digital archive of El Mastaba Center for Egyptian Folk Music, watched videos online as well as in the form of YouTube clips and read websites and newspapers. I have conducted research in the libraries of the High Egyptian Institute for Traditional music, Egyptian National Library (Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya) and Cairo Opera House Library.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Regarding the origin of the instrument, it seems that the *simsimiyya* arrived in the Suez Canal area through different waves and routes of migration: an internal route along the Nile River, and an external maritime route along the coast of the Red Sea. It is commonly believed that the *simsimiyya* was introduced to the country's Northern coast from the Nile Valley in the 19th century by Nubian, Sudanese and Upper Egyptian workers during the digging of the Suez Canal. There is indeed no mention of the *simsimiyya* in any reports of the Napoleonic expeditions or within other travelers' accounts, reinforcing the conclusion that the instrument arrived in the Suez Canal region after the Canal's digging work. On the other hand, there is archaeological evidence dating the *simsimiyya* back to the pharaonic period, in the form of the trapezoid wooden sound-box, and of the round bowl variation, which is very similar to the Nubian *kisār*, or the *ṭanbūra* (with different tuning). The Nubian *kisār* is similar, on a smaller scale, to the Sudanese pentatonic *ṭanbūra* with the round wooden case used in *zār* ceremonies. In this regard, another com-

mon hypothesis is that *simsimiyya* is actually derived from the *ṭanbūra*, which was diffused specifically in the *zār* rituals of the Suez area and practiced by some communities of Sudanese origin. The musician Hassan Bergamon was the last *sanga* (*ṭanbūra* player in *zār* rituals)¹ to preserve this tradition; he began practicing *zār* in Ismailiyya from childhood, following his mother in the preparations for the rituals, in which Bergamon would play the *rango* xylophone, the *ṭanbūra* and *simsimiyya* lyres.

Furthermore, Amnon Shiloah refers that in 1936, the German ethnographer Hans Alexander Winkler discovered the instrument in two areas, Ḥamālta and Goşer, in Upper Egypt on the Red Sea coast, amongst a tribe mainly employed in fishing (Winkler 1936). While in Ḥamālta the instrument was called the *tambura*, in Goşer the term *simsimiyya* was used. Winkler also reports indications for the presence of the *simsimiyya* in coffee houses in the port of Djedda, in Saudi Arabia, which led Shiloah to deduce that the diffusion of this lyre across the Red Sea region stemmed from Sudan and the Horn of Africa, and that it was the instrument of fishermen and coffee houses in these coastal towns.

Upon the arrival of the *simsimiyya* in the Delta and the northern Suez Canal in 19th century, it met a social environment wherein the local musical culture was routed in the religious Sufi practice of the *zīkr* and *mawālid*,² but also in the fisherman and sailors' music repertoire from Damietta and Rashid,³ and the old *muwaşşahāt*, love songs that were circulated within urban culture through gramophones, a new innovation circulating at the time. Religious chants, urban *takht*, *ṭarab* and songs of labor converged then in the *ḍamma* songs (أغاني الضمة) (Shabanah 2014). The term *ḍamma* literary means “embrace” or “hug,” but it also refers to a social event in which the *simsimiyya* is played to entertain social gatherings at the *mastaba*, the typical courtyard of countryside houses, or in the alleys of small towns. In the *ḍamma* context, musicians would meet in public spaces or outside mosques, and the audience was invited to take part in the music practice. The community turning around the *simsimiyya*, made of musicians, singers and audience, was called *şoḥbaġiyya*, a term whose linguistic root (ş-ḥ-b) holds connotations of community belonging, the belonging of the individual to the group, as well as the belonging of the community to the *simsimiyya* practice itself, thus performing the function of a social link. In Port Said, the members of a *şoḥbaġiyya* were generally workers from different sectors who would gather at cafés in the Arab neighborhood after work, singing and rhythmically beating the wooden chairs or tables.

The technique of Suez Canal *simsimiyya* presents many similarities to that of the Sinai Bedouins described by Amnon Shiloah (1972) in 1968 in his report of a field trip to Sinai organized by the National Sound Archives and the Jewish Music Research Centre with the objective of recording Bedouin music. As for the Bedouin music from Sinai, the technique of the Suez Canal *simsimiyya* is typified by a strong rhythm. The strings are stretched dynamically, creating measured rhythmical formulae doubled by clapping and beating the drum or *ṭabla*, or anything else that could serve as percussion, such as spoons.

¹ Hassan Bergamon died in July 2020. He used to perform in the band *Rango* of the *El Mastaba Center*.

² *Zīkr* (literary “remembrance”) is a Muslim devotional act in which the name of God is repeated; and *mawālid* (sing. *mūlid*) is the festival dedicated to the birth of a holy person.

³ In the Manzalah Lake, between Damietta and Port Said, there is still a repertoire called *Hāġi* of seafaring singing accompanied by *simsimiyya* and *tabla*. *Hāġi* is an expression that literally means “I will come,” or “I will,” and denotes a genre of songs in which a monodic male choir responds to a solo male voice in a dynamic of back and forth. The themes of the songs are strictly related to fishing activities, as well as the dance that reproduces the movement of the draw of the net and rowing. In the moments of singing pause, the rhythm speeds up together with the use of the *kaf* beaten in a syncopated way as in the repertoire of the Canal.

While Sinai Bedouins primarily performed traditional songs of the Arab Gulf on the *simsimiyya*, the Egyptians who settled in the Suez Canal region blended Bedouin sounds with their own *ḍamma* genre, creating so-called *bambuṭiyya* music. *Bambuṭiyya* were the itinerant merchants who sold their goods to the passengers of ships during stopovers at the port or indeed whilst in transit. To engage their customers from a distance and amid noise from the ships proved a challenge, which these merchants overcame by mimicking the characteristic, shape and functionality of their products by way of advertisement. From this imitation and gesturing came the homonymous dance.

We are the bambuṭiyya / no one is equal to us / We are sailor traders / who work in the Canal, sing the bandmembers of *El Tanbura* in a song composed in 2009 to commemorate their twenty-year anniversary.⁴

The completion of the Suez Canal in 1869 was a strategic and political milestone in Egypt, and it had an impact on the development of folk music in the region. In the context of urbanization in the Suez Canal region, the *simsimiyya* grew to be the most essential instrument of popular culture in Port Said, Ismailiyya and Suez. The Gulf of Suez only began to be populated after the construction of the Canal, through several migratory waves mainly coming from Upper Egypt and Sudan, but also through waves of Europeans and Armenians looking for seasonal or permanent employment (Fahmy 2008). This geographical context of ethnic and cultural diversification of the land border, combined with the historic milieu of Egyptian labor struggle and popular anti-foreign resistance, are elements that held together the various peoples of the Canal and continue to do so today, shaping their strong socio-cultural identity, which is brought alive by the *simsimiyya*.

Previous studies exploring the relationship between music and identity⁵ have highlighted the complexity and the problematics of the definition of identity and space, leading the current critical discourse to abandon the idea of a clear isomorphism between spaces and cultural communities. However, due to its geographic location and ethnic composition, the Suez Canal lends itself to many, and contrasting, interpretations. Although the Suez Canal is a frontier land and an exchange and commercial hub for foreign peoples, its territory is partially separated from the rest of the Egyptian territory by the Eastern Desert, which partially isolates it from Cairo and the other urban centers along the Nile River. The precise spatial definition and geographical separation is certainly an element that determined cultural distinction and a sense of identity which is somehow detached from national belonging. What is very distinctive of this dynamic is that it does not come from the occurrence of homogeneous ethnic or economic-cultural elements, as is the case in other cultural contexts in Egypt, but it presents multicultural components linked together mainly through an anti-foreign and thus anticolonial political ideology, where the foreigner is often associated with exploitation and tyrannical colonialism.

The *simsimiyya* became a political-cultural symbol and began to acquire nationalistic connotations related to the labor struggle and popular resistance in 1952 with the Revolution of the Free Officers, and in 1956 with the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Gamal Abdel Nasser. The Egyptian military forces sought the support of popular resistance committees and involved civilians from different labor categories in the guerrillas along the coasts of the Canal. At that time, the *simsimiyya* was played in degraded popular social contexts, in the suburbs and in those coffees of the ports where drugs were also

⁴ Link to the song on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/yJPRMRzyZMs>.

⁵ The Italian ethnomusicologist Grazia Tuzi has extensively investigated the topic. For further readings: Tuzi 2015.

taken. With the involvement of the working class in the military guerrilla warfare, the *simsimiyya* became elevated to the instrument of the popular resistance, undergoing a process of mythicization and exploitation of this new acquired symbolism.

With the post-Naksa displacement of the people of the Canal in 1967, came changes to the significance of the *simsimiyya* and its repertoire of resistance songs. It was now a means of oral transmission and preservation of the collective memory; it was used to celebrate the heroes of the Canal, as well as a way to remark the pride for the role of the local communities in the anticolonial struggle. Furthermore, above all the *simsimiyya* was a means of social amalgamation and identity enhancement among the various communities that emigrated from the Canal throughout the Egyptian territory, especially in the Delta. Following the victory of Sadat in 1973 and the consequent return of these communities to their respective cities of origin, the practice of the *simsimiyya* was gradually abandoned, and it lost its function of social join to acquire an increasingly folkloristic value.

THE ANTHROPOMORPHIZATION OF THE *SIMSIMIYYA*

The *simsimiyya* also serves as a vehicle for social interactions in the Canal: it is a material agent that acts and interacts in the society, linking together the heterogeneous groups living in the territory. Following Kevin Dawe's reflections on the Cretan *lyra* (Dawe 2007: 114), the *simsimiyya* would likewise result in its ideological entity as a social as well as a material construction, and it assumes thus the dimension of a culture. In this context, the instrument possesses a transformative power capable of shaping social and cultural life. According to the ethnomusicologist, "musical instruments can transform minds, bodies, [...] the joy of playing a musical instrument comes from a perceived euphoria in physical, emotional and social level."

It is precisely this euphoria that constantly reappears in the stories and testimonies of the musicians of the Suez Canal who define their relationship with the *simsimiyya* by comparing it to the interaction of the sailors with the siren: the instrument has anthropomorphic characteristics and its own will and strength; its strong hypnotic ability is able to attract sailors and port workers, distracting them from their activities and family duties. In a documentary of El Mastaba center on the *simsimiyya*, a musician states: "the *simsimiyya* is my ruin, I should have gone to work to earn 10-15 pounds a day and instead I am sitting here singing with my companions, one song after another and here is the night, and I have not worked!"⁶

The anthropomorphization of the instrument is revealed with a very articulated position and force acting in the lyrics of numerous songs: in *Ganny simsimiyya* (Sing oh *simsimiyya*), the musician-soldier addresses the lyre, able to hit the enemy like *rusas* (bullets) and *bunduqiyya* (cannons). In an interview that I conducted in October 2018, Sayyed Kaboria, one of the founders of the *Awlad al-Ard* band from Suez, refers to this lyre saying that "the *simsimiyya* is a rifle, an airplane, the *simsimiyya* is a war instrument." The numerous conversations I had with the musicians from 2017 to 2019, singers and *shhbağiyya al-simsimiyya* reveal rather diverse reactions and relationships with the instrument: some refer to the sound of the instrument, "when I listen to a *taqsim* played by the *simsimiyya* I go into a trance (*wağd*)," whilst others mention its social function: "the *sim-*

⁶ Link to the documentary "The siren": Part 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jo7ktVyvxI4>; Part 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R00NejCGho0>.

simiyya gives me the opportunity to be with people,” and some even refer to its emotional and ideological value: “the songs of the *simsimiyya* give me pride.”

THE REVIVAL OF THE *SIMSIMIYYA* REPERTOIRE

At the end of the '90s the *simsimiyya* resumed gradually its original centrality in the culture and music practice of the Canal cities thanks to the promotion, revaluation and transmission work carried out by some musicians led by the El Mastaba Center for Egyptian Folk Music, an independent cultural center, founded by Zaccaria Ibrahim and based in Cairo, whose mission is to promote Egyptian folk music, in particular the Suez Canal music heritage.

The *simsimiyya* has until today retained its status as an instrument of local and national identity, and its representation of popular resistance, anti-foreign resistance, as well as any general struggle against the oppressor and a symbol of heroism and virility.

More recently, the revolution of 25th January 2011 emerged as a significant opportunity for many politically engaged musicians who found in Tahrir square an important stage and vehicle to spread their message. In this context, some *simsimiyya* musicians, led by Zaccaria Ibrahim, joined Tahrir demonstrations and sit-ins from January to February 2011 to express their support of the revolution and participate in the protests by singing pieces within the repertoire of the Suez Canal popular resistance music. The *simsimiyya* was thus again, after four decades, at the center of the political events and the vehicle of affirmation and pride of one's identity, in representation of the '*ahl al-Qanāl*, the people of the Canal. The struggle against the foreigner colonial power was subjected to a process of association and projection to the struggle against the tyrannical dictatorship and capitalistic system of Mubarak's regime.

Born in Port Said in 1952, Zaccaria Ibrahim founded *El Mastaba Center for Egyptian Folk Music* and in 1981 the band *El Tanbura*, the main *simsimiyya* ensemble in the Canal area. Along his activity of documentation and preservation of the local music heritage, he recorded some interviews to the first generations of *simsimiyya* musicians, who are no longer alive today. These recordings, available at El Mastaba archive, are very precious to define some of the migration routes of the *simsimiyya*, as well as the original social function and socio-cultural environment of the instrument. Three of the people interviewed by Z. Ibrahim were 'Alī Muhiḡbī, born in 1913 in Suez, Aḡmad al-Sawāḡlī, born in 1916 in Ismailiyya and Addaṣ 'Abd al-Salām, born in 1916 in Port Said. According to Zaccaria Ibrahim:

The three musicians refer that a certain Abdallah Kabarbar brought the *simsimiyya* to Ismailiyya and Port Said in 1938 with the music of the Sudanese *zār*. Kabarbar was, in fact, a Nubian musician who went to Suez with the migratory waves following the floods of the Nile on the Nubian villages caused by the construction of the Aswan Dam. According to these musicians, in Ismailiyya Kabarbar started to practice the *zār* secretly in the locality of *al-arayṣiyyūt al-'abīd*, a coastal area frequented by the *haggāna*, the Sudanese people who used to roam the coasts on camels in search of work and clients. In this environment, strongly characterized by Sudanese and where the *zār* was regularly practiced, Kabarbar met Ibrahim Khalaf, a *tanbūra* player and a frequent opium- and hashish-smoker in the harbor cafes. In 1938 Khalaf introduced Kabarbar to Hassan Metwally, the owner of one of these cafes in the infamous quarter of *Saba' Ḥusūn*, that was frequented by the local unlawful (*ma'allamīn*), where he started to play the *simsimiyya* to attract customers.” In this new context, the originally pentatonic *tanbūra*

and *simsimiyya* were tuned for the first time on the *maqām rast* and *bayātī* and became widespread in the cafes of Port Said.⁷

In addition, the stories collected by Zaccaria Ibrahim attest to a strong competition between the musicians of the *simsimiyya* who played in coffee shops and those of the *ḍamma*, that lasted until the 1980s. The *ḍamma* musicians, who belonged to a religious context and were Sufi practitioners, clearly condemned the *simsimiyya* music for the social environment that it represented, made up of criminals and infamous people. However, beyond the oral historiography, an undeniable social aspect of this instrument is certainly its belonging to the labor class.

After the mythologization of the *simsimiyya* during the Suez crisis, the return of the Canal people from their displacement and the new policy of *iftitah*—economic opening—inaugurated by the president Anwar Sadat, the cities of the Canal saw a rapid urban and commercial development that also affected the lifestyle and the type of music demand within the new society. The decade between the 1980s and 1990s is remembered by the veterans of the *simsimiyya* as a moment of cultural and artistic decline due to the process of music commercialization that was felt by the entire music industry in Egypt at the time. However, this new tendency has actually favored the transformation and diffusion of the instrument, one way or another. Young generations of *simsimiyya* players created new bands that fall into the genre of Egyptian pop music, and even the pop star Tamer Hosny used the *simsimiyya* in one of his earliest songs *Qarrab ḥabībī* [قرب حبيبي].⁸

THE INSTRUMENT MORPHOLOGY

The *simsimiyya* is still played in coffee houses, in uniquely male contexts as far as Suez and Ismailiya, and in mixed-gender social settings in Port Said. Each of the three cities has developed its own style and boasts its musicians and its bands, following a dynamic of competition that had positively favored the strengthening and development of the instrument itself in its organological structure and in its sound and tonal expressions. The change in the musical structure is the result of complex and dynamic socio-musical conditions which shaped the social role and image of the musician, and in turn, that of the instrument, during the historical and political events from the 1950s onwards. After the wars of '56 and '67 and the elevation of the *simsimiyya*'s status to an instrument of resistance, this lyre started to be played outside its traditional harbor environment and popular coffees, and it transformed slowly from a coffee shops instrument to a stage instrument. Upon their invitation to play on state television and radio programs, musicians began to approach the urban environment of the capital, which necessarily had a significant influence over their development. The *simsimiyya*, small and handy, easy to play and carry in fishing boats, transformed when started to be the leading instrument of entire ensembles performing on stages: it increased in its number of strings, its material was changed from the bicycle brakes traditionally used, to additional wooden or metal pegs, and the sound box was comprised of new materials. Originally pentacordic, the *simsimiyya* was mainly tuned to play a repertoire on the *maqām rast* and *bayātī*, but with the gradual incrementation of the strings, musicians started to play new *maqāmāt* from the

⁷ Interview with Zaccaria Ibrahim on the 19th October 2018 at the El Mastaba Center for Egyptian Folk Music, Cairo.

⁸ Link to the song video clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGrtu1iZ5Dg>.

tarab tradition⁹ and created a new repertoire of songs on different *maqamāt* and added compositional elements of the urban music environment, such as the *taqāsīm* and the *layālī* at the beginning of the melodic part.

In one of the interviews that I conducted in Port Said in 2018, the virtuoso Mohsen al-Ashry recounts the 80s and 90s as a moment of growth in the *simsimiyya* practice. According to him, the strong competition among the musicians of the three cities of the Canal—Port Said, Ismailiya and Suez—was the main reason for the organological development of the *simsimiyya* itself. From a pentacordic instrument, other strings were progressively added, driven by a dynamic of competition among the various musicians of the three cities. *Simsimiyya* players wanted to show off their instrument and its modifications in public, by playing *taqāsīm* and approaching the *simsimiyya* with the style of a *qanūn*.

The intense mobility of the musicians in the Canal area was another factor that stimulated the exchange and development of the instrument. Mohsen al-Ashry, who is now the most famous *simsimiyya* player of the Canal, was fascinated by the instrument when he met al-Waziri, the greatest musician of Ismailiya, who he met at the age of twelve and by whose style he was strongly influenced. Mohsen started to play the *simsimiyya* in Port Said at the age of six with Yusif al-Basus, a pupil of Ibrahim Khalaf. Like the other musicians of the Canal, Mohsen is wholly dedicated to the *simsimiyya* and attributes to his instrument a moral value within a spiritual and almost religious dimension. The characteristic of his style is due to the organological structure of his *simsimiyya*, produced by Mohammed al-Ghaly who increased the number of strings, reaching a total of twenty-four cords. In order to support such a number of strings, this *simsimiyya* has an above-average size, and the upper bar where the pegs are placed has a curved line to allow different pitches of sound. During the execution of the *taqāsīm*, the unplucked strings are not blocked and, while the right hand plucks the strings with a plectrum, the left hand is just twanging some of the strings as a soft accompaniment. Moreover, because this *simsimiyya* is meant to play in stage performances on stages with big dimension, it is also equipped with an amplifier connection.

Mohsen starts his executions always with long improvisations, or *taqāsīm*, which have the function of allowing the establishment of an emotional connection with the audience. In this way, the *simsimiyya* is elevated to *ālāt al-ṭarab* (instruments of the *ṭarab*) and the musician to a member of the *ahl al-ṭarab* (family of the *ṭarab*). Applying the forms of *ṭarab* and bringing the *simsimiyya* into performance in the capital, the instrument detaches itself from its popular local dimension and becomes an instrument for urban music, that can also be appreciated by the citizens of Cairo who do not share the same cultural and ideological bond that the Canal people have with the *simsimiyya*.

PRACTICE AND EVOLUTION OF *SIMSIMIYYA* NOWADAYS

The Context of Port Said

Even the new generations of the Canal region, who have not experienced wars, resistance and the migration except through the stories of their grandparents and parents, find

⁹ With *ṭarab* we refer here to the music repertoire mainly associated to the urban environments of the Arab cities. The term in general use in Arabic refers to a profound musical affect that can induce the listener to a state of ecstasy (Racy 2004).

the *simsimiyya* the primary element for their identification and expression. Port Said is certainly the most active city in the transmission of *simsimiyya*, and alongside the El Tanbura band that performs regularly every Wednesday evening at the Nigma café in Port Fouad, there are numerous small bands of emerging young people. The interest in learning this instrument has increased exponentially among the younger generation, showing a countertendency compared to the other Egyptian traditional musical instruments, that are instead at risk of disappearing.

For this cultural engagement, special merit should be given to the constant promotional and outreach work of Zaccaria Ibrahim and Mohsen al-Ashly. In 2010, Mohsen opened a *simsimiyya* school at a youth sports club on the outskirts of Port Said; the school includes in its curriculum courses for percussion (mainly *tabla*) and singing, in order to fully pass down the entire repertoire of Port Said and Suez Canal musical tradition. Zaccaria Ibrahim's El Mastaba center is responsible for organizing the music performances of every main public celebration in Port Said, such as Sham al-Nasim and December 23 celebrations. On these occasions, El Tanbura band and the other El Mastaba center's bands (Rango, Asyad al-Zar, Nubanour, Mazamir al-Nil) perform beside the other main *simsimiyya* bands of the Canal—*al-Waziry* band from Ismailiyya and *Sohbagiyya* from Suez—that are invited to participate at the festivities.

Since 2015 the *Shām al-Nasīm* concert starts with the performance of the new generations and pupils of Mohsen's school. The youth who first attended the *simsimiyya* school and who are now around 20-24 years old continue to perform, joining veteran bands or presenting their own new bands, such as the *Sohba al-simsimiyya*¹⁰ created by Ahmed Ashly, Mohsen's son. In these festivities the enthusiasm is so strong that all the musicians take the stage, alternating individual and collective performances, combining competition and spirit of collaboration, resulting into a mixed and open ensemble that continues its performance with a fluidity that lasts hours without interruption.

Music institutions such as the Institute of Egyptian Popular Arts and Music don't include the *simsimiyya* in their curricula and the transmission of the *simsimiyya* music practice is not yet institutionalized and is left to the independent initiatives of local civil associations, clubs (*nādī*) and private centers, as El Mastaba. For this reason, the transmission from one generation to the next is one of the successful aspects of the school; music courses are also open to women which makes Port Said the only city in the Canal that can boast female musicians and ensembles, unlike Suez and Ismailiyya where the most traditionalist and conservative society does not allow women to perform in public, nor to be part of the audience.

Among the young generation, Ahmed al-Ashry's band is the most famous in the Canal. Founded in 2016, *Sohba al-simsimiyya* perform mainly outside the context of Port Said and during the official performances, the members dress up as sailors, as the old bands used to do in the 60s. "The band's goal—says Ahmed—is to renew this musical genre in order to spread and keep public interest alive, and at the same time maintaining authenticity and identity." In 2017 the band performed at the opening ceremony of the International Youth Forum in Ismailiyya organized and attended by the President al-Sisi to celebrate the inauguration of the second Suez Canal.

Despite the acquisition of a strong ideological and political value, the *simsimiyya* still continues to play a role in the social daily events of the society of the Suez Canal, such as wedding or engagement parties. The musicians of the Canal are called from town to

¹⁰ Link to the band's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/so7ba.semsemia/>.



Fig. 5 - Mohsen Ashry and his son Ahmed performing at *caffè Nigma*, Port Fouad, May 2018. Photo Author.

town and a *simsimiyya* band can cost between 4000 and 20000 Egyptian pounds, depending on the number of musicians, the fame and prestige of the *simsimiyya* player, and the duration of the performance.

Interest in the *simsimiyya* is mounting and the number of Facebook pages and groups or YouTube channels dedicated to the *simsimiyya* is growing every day. *Simsimiyya* fans share in social media and digital spaces videos of private and public performances, historical images, commemorative posts for deceased poets and musicians, music classes and learning, building amatorial open archives¹¹ and triggering thus a virtuous circle of “participatory culture” (Burgess, Green 2009). Users interact on social media with intense dynamism and Facebook groups are a precious source of information and audio-visual material.¹²

Beside the *Nigma* café where the musicians perform in public (Fig. 5), some *ṣuḥbaġiyya al-simsimiyya* meet together privately, spending evenings and nights in the

¹¹ An example is the YouTube channel: *Archives of damma & simsimiyya songs from Port Said*, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBrWZAteBd-iG8pz43G6NYw/featured>.

¹² An example of Facebook group is *Port Said Simsimiyya Worshipers* (عشاق السمسمية البورسعيدية) with 33800 members, where we can find witnesses of musicians from the 50s-60s and 70s or of their families who make available to the community sources, anecdotes, photographs, etc.: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/263525177166443/about>.



Fig. 6 - Muhammad Ghaly in his *Thurathiya* workshop, Port Said, October 2018. Photo Author.

Thurathiya,¹³ the workshop of the craftsman Mohammed Ghaly, the main *simsimiyya* maker in Port Said and the Suez Canal. Mohammad Ghaly started his business in the '90s, inspired by Zaccaria Ibrahim's activity. Although the attention and interest in the genre and musical repertoire of the *simsimiyya* was increasing at the time, the production of the instrument was still limited and rudimental and Mohammed Ghaly therefore decided to focus his work in the *simsimiyya* production and opened a small workshop with his wife, which became later a private *simsimiyya* museum, as well as a meeting spot for musicians (Fig. 6).

The *Thurathiya* was initially located in a suburban and run-down area of Port Said, in a shack inside the city's second-hand market, behind the prisons, and consisted of three rooms, Mohammed's office, a laboratory and a room set up as a small museum dedicated to the instrument, and finally a courtyard, which had become a social space for some musicians and music lovers, a place to gather and sing the local popular repertoire. The *Thurathiya* museum, as Mohammed Ghaly defines it, is a place of worship of the *simsimiyya* and consists of a collection of historical *simsimiyya* specimens from the 1950s and 1970s, photographs of poets and musicians, *simsimiyya* with different numbers of strings, and finally some models of *ghandur*, reconstructions of pharaonic harps of different sizes. Mohammed Ghaly's *simsimiyya* has his mark made up of a *simsimiyya* and an *ankh*, the Egyptian key of life in the pharaonic hieroglyphs. As is common in Egypt and the Arab world, string instrument manufacturers insert their name and mobile phone

¹³ Link to *Thurathiya* Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/eltorathayah>.



Fig. 7 - Muhammad Ghaly's stamp in the soundbox of a *simsimiyya*, Port Said, May 2018. Photo Author.

number inside the sound box (Fig. 7). Some of the instruments he sold, however, do not carry his name but his wife's name, Asma', who learned from him to produce simple *simsimiyya*. Her *simsimiyya* have usually from five to seven strings and a sound box recovered from an enameled tin bottom plate, the two arms are applied on a fish skin sound board with generally an angular opening of about 60° and blocked at the base by the metal aspiration ring used for keyrings. A carpenter produces the arms of the instrument in series for her according to established measure-

ments, while the pegs that hold the strings are the same used by luthiers for the 'ūd and Asma's work therefore consists in the series assembly of the pieces.

Mohammed Ghaly is the producer of Mohsen al-Ashry's *simsimiyya*, on whose request he increased the number of strings to 24 and added a second row of strings for the quarter tone. The sound box has curved-trapezoidal shape and made by wood, while the crossbar has a length of 60 cm and has a curved shape to allow the realization of different pitches of sound. The production of this kind of *simsimiyya* requires about seven working days and Ghaly prefers not to add many decorations and inlays, as is typical for the lute, or color treatments on the wood so as not to make the instrument heavier and modify the sonority of the sound box. A classic *simsimiyya* with five or six strings can cost between 300 and 500 Egyptian pounds, while a more complex one with a wooden case and a higher number of strings, ranges from 1500 up to 4000 EGP.

After fourteen years of activity, in January 2019 the authorities dismantled the market and consequently also the craftsman's workshop. Fortunately, the *Thurathiya* has been included by an initiative of local youth associations launched in 2017 for the creation of a museum dedicated to Port Said's history and culture. This area of the Canal is in fact part of the territory under the Egyptian-Saudi Vision 2030 project through which the local Governor supported a series of enhancement initiatives in the area. Mohammed Ghali's laboratory was thus integrated into the new project and effectively transformed into a *simsimiyya* museum, called CANAL20.

The Context of Ismailiyya

The current music scene of the *simsimiyya* in Ismailiyya is dominated by the band *al-Waziry* which performs every Monday evening in a popular coffee shop in the outskirts of the small town, in an exclusively male environment (Fig. 8). The band's name, originally *Firqat al-ḥinna*, was founded in 1994 and took the current name in 2008 after the death of its founder, Mohammed al-Waziry, known as "the king of the *simsimiyya*."

The main specificity of this ensemble is in the uniqueness of its sound aesthetics that is strongly influenced by the popular *sha'abi* taste, characterized by echo and reverb,



Fig. 8 - Sameh Wahab playing a *simsimiyya* and the Waziry Band performing in Ismailiyya, October 2018. Photo Author.

typical of the music style for the wedding parties, which are the primary source of income for these musicians. The *sha'abi* dimension is also enforced by the participation of traditional characters belonging to the Suez Canal working-class cafe environment. One of the main voices in the ensemble also plays the role of *nabatshī*, a person in charge of collecting tips from the audience in exchange of praise, blessings, greetings and public reverences to the one who is making the offer. Usually the public offers tips to request a specific song or simply to allow the show to continue, or to have one's own name proclaimed by the musicians as a sign of prestige in front of the community, who will in turn recognize his generosity and economic position. Another traditional element of the local culture that features regularly at *al-Waziry* band performances is a *bambutiyya* dancer, a man in his seventies, usually dressed as a sailor, with a wool cap and a sweater with horizontal stripes. Today the band is led by Sameh Wahab whose five-string *simsimiyya* is connected to an amplifier, usually set to obtain a distortive, echo effect in the sound of the instrument, the singers and *nabatshi's* voice.

Recently, the political role of the cities of the Suez Canal has been the subject of the recent pro-army propaganda under the presidency of al-Sisi, that has undertaken a process of re-evaluation of the local culture and heritage within a narrative of recent military events in the region, namely, a local culture based on the exaltation of virility. Since 2014, the '67-'73 Suez Canal crisis and the recent war against Islamist terrorism in North Sinai have become two common topics in the Egyptian cinema, the film industry invested in the production of countless films and television series for the month of Ramadan.

Moreover, following the Youth Conference promoted by the President in Ismailiyya, the repertoire of the Ismailiyya tradition inevitably became an object of interest from the perspective of national propaganda. In the so-called “military fever” within the wave of public opinion in favour of the armed forces, in addition to the success of the Ramadan 2020 *musalsal* or television series *al-Ikhtiyar*, the producer Nar Mahrous¹⁴ hired the pop singer Mostafa Shawky for a cover of the song *Abūyā wassānī* or “My father has left me a command,”¹⁵ published on the official YouTube channel of Nasr Mahrous on 7th May 2020.¹⁶ The song was written by the poet Hafiz al-Sadiq, and the music composed by Abdu al-‘Osmal for the band *Awlād al-Ismailiyya*, meaning “The Children of Ismailiyya,” and it was broadcasted by Egyptian state television in 1968 after the Naksa, later becoming part of the city’s folk repertoire.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

An instrument of migrant and diasporic communities, the *simsimiyya* came to embody local cultural heritage and express a strong collective identity of a multicultural community whose components moved in the Suez Canal over the course of one and a half centuries. This lyre provided the basis and the pivotal point for continuous construction and renegotiation of identity resulting from historical, political, social, and cultural processes, and it had a significant impact on social interaction, group identity, and the construction of social meaning, it re-configured and re-formulated identities within the social contexts and spaces it was found. Not only it has been a cultural and expressive practice that connected members of different labor groups together, but it also shaped a new common identity for the ‘*ahl al-Qanāl*, the people of the Canal. Until today, the music and songs of the *simsimiyya* prompt a variety of social interpretations and significances, and are able to engage and communicate on an emotional level with those who share the *simsimiyya* music culture and common historical memory, and thus it has been used to mobilize for political and military purposes.

The important position which the music heritage of the Suez Canal holds within its regional identity is also due to a rich corpus of texts of alternative historical narrative transmitted only orally. These are sound documents with historiographic value that enrich collective memory. In such dynamics of creation and appropriation of values, the *simsimiyya* underwent a process of mythization and “heroization,” acquiring anthropomorphic characteristics and becoming worshipped for many passionate veterans. Similarly, the oral historical narratives related to the *simsimiyya* immortalized musicians and poets, such as Captain al-Ghazali and Kamel Eid, with unparalleled musical prowess and infinite courage in battle.

Moreover, the *simsimiyya* behaves in local social dynamics as a genuine unifying element in various collective situations. Its transmission from generation to generation is then the vital link between old and new generations and the beating heart of every public

¹⁴ Nasr Mahrous is a Christian producer who has dominated the Egyptian pop music industry since the 1980s with his record label company FreeMusic Art Production.

¹⁵ In an interview episode of the television program *al-Tisa‘a* of the 25th May 2020, the singer tells the reasons that led the producer to this choice: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkIoCOZxtCc>.

¹⁶ YouTube link to the song: <https://youtu.be/QCYA9jObsTo>.

¹⁷ Video of the band *Awlād al-Ismailiyya* from the Egyptian National Television: https://youtu.be/UfZfo1vg0_8.

event of the local municipalities. The dynamics of competition between the three main centers of the Canal (Port Said, Suez, Ismailiyya) are manifested through the pride and rivalries of their musicians, and have led to the evolution of the instrument itself. Shapes and materials (wood, strings) come to be socially meaningful as markers of identity for some *simsimiyya* players and makers: each city of the Canal expresses its own identity through specific sounds and styles that are resulting respectively from the material components of their *simsimiyya*. The increasing influence it had on local identity and the cultural elevation of the *simsimiyya* have allowed the instrument to reach stages in the theaters of Cairo, have favored its evolution on an executive and stylistic level, and in turn have raised it to a cultured instrument at the level of the *ṭarab*, and exported the identity of the Canal beyond its geographical boundaries.

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Preliminary Analyses of the Bronze Age and Post-Bronze Age Mortuary Monuments at the Dahwa Sites, North Batinah Coast, Sultanate of Oman*

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Allo stato attuale disponiamo di scarse informazioni circa la distribuzione e la cronologia delle sepolture preistoriche sulla costa settentrionale della regione di al-Batina nel Sultanato dell'Oman. Il presente contributo è incentrato sull'indagine preliminare del locale complesso di Dahwa con attenzione preminente ai monumenti funerari, anche in assenza di coeve testimonianze insediative. Abbiamo in particolare documentato e avviato lo scavo di due tombe del periodo Umm an-Nar (2700-2000 a.C.), e mappato e scavato alcune sepolture di epoca Wadi Suq (2000-1500 a.C.) e post-Bronzo (e.g. Età del Ferro, periodi pre-islamico e islamico) che ri-occuparono il sito Dahwa 1 (DH1).

INTRODUCTION

The Dahwa sites (e.g., DH1, DH5, DH6, DH7, DH8), located approximately 24 km Southwest from Saham (Fig. 1), comprise an important Umm an-Nar period (2700-2000 BCE) settlement. The remains of these settlements include at least 61 buildings and two Umm an-Nar circular tombs. Excavations at DH1 (Al-Jahwari et al. 2018; Al-Jahwari, Douglas, Williams forthcoming; Douglas et al. forthcoming; Williams et al. forthcoming) demonstrate that this settlement hosted significant copper smelting activities and likely acted as a regional trade center connecting the coast and sites further inland. Substantial amounts of Indus ceramics found both on the surface and in closed settlement contexts speak to the intensive nature of this trade activity.

In the present paper, we document the distribution of mortuary structures at this site and report the findings of tomb excavations conducted between 2015 and 2017. Significant reuse of the site for the construction of tombs occurred after the Umm an-Nar period, but the site was not reinhabited until the Islamic Period. This work contributes new information about pattern of use and reuse of an Umm an-Nar Period site for the construction of later mortuary monuments, provides architectural information about tombs that are relatively poorly described elsewhere in the literature, and in some cases, provides information about the mortuary goods and burial ritual evident in these monuments.

METHODOLOGY AND DOCUMENTATION

A systematic survey of the entirety of the Dahwa sites (Fig. 2) was conducted between January and May 2016. Buildings, tombs, graves, and other features of interest (e.g.,

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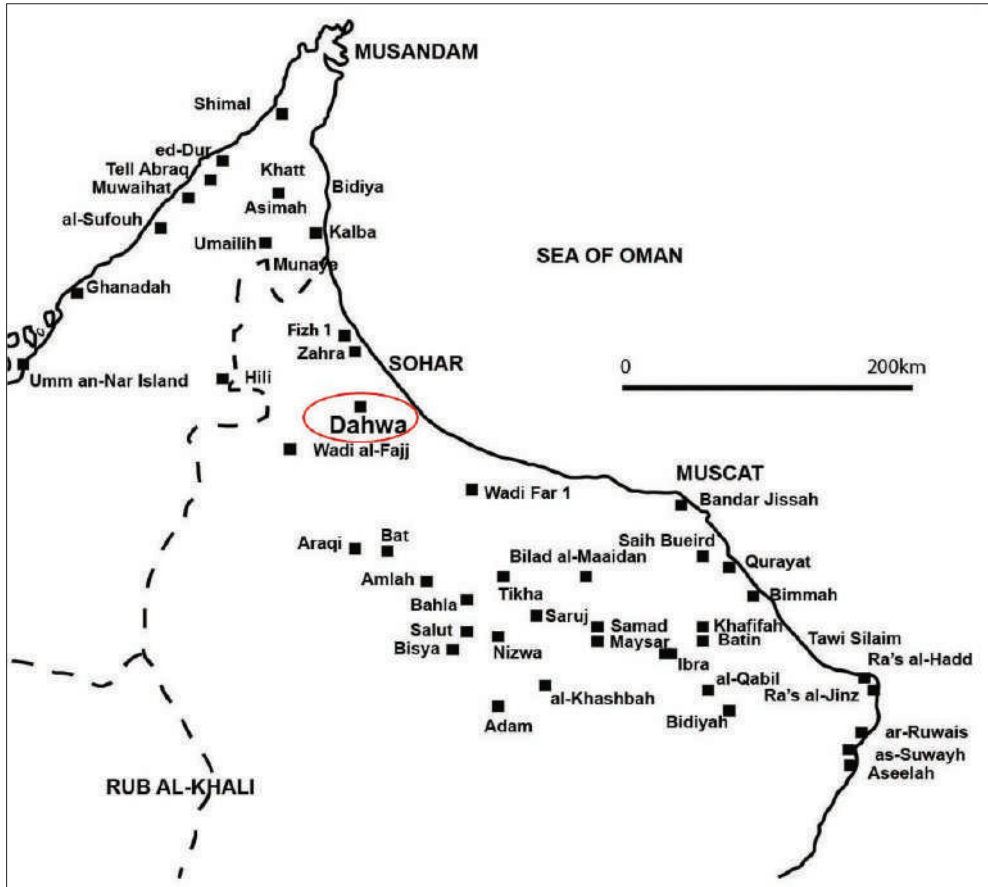


Fig. 1 - Location of the site of Dahwa on the Oman Peninsula. After Al-Jahwari et al. 2018.

copper slag distribution, stone circles of unknown date) were mapped using a Trimble GeoExplorer 6000 series handheld rover in combination with a Trimble R4 base station. Data were downloaded and postprocessed using Pathfinder software. The resulting plan of the Dahwa sites shows the distribution Umm an-Nar buildings and tombs, Wadi Suq tombs, other post-Bronze Age tombs (e.g., ranging from Early Iron Age through Islamic periods, based on architecture these are not Umm an-Nar or Wadi Suq tombs but more specific classification is not possible), a Late Islamic Settlement, and Islamic graves from several different periods.

MORTUARY USE AND REUSE OF DAHWA SITES

Umm an-Nar Period (2700-2000 BCE)

The first use of the Dahwa landscape was for the Umm an-Nar settlements at Dahwa. The settlements are currently defined using breaks in the topography and clusters of buildings that appear to cluster amongst themselves. A road disrupted the site of DH1 and local

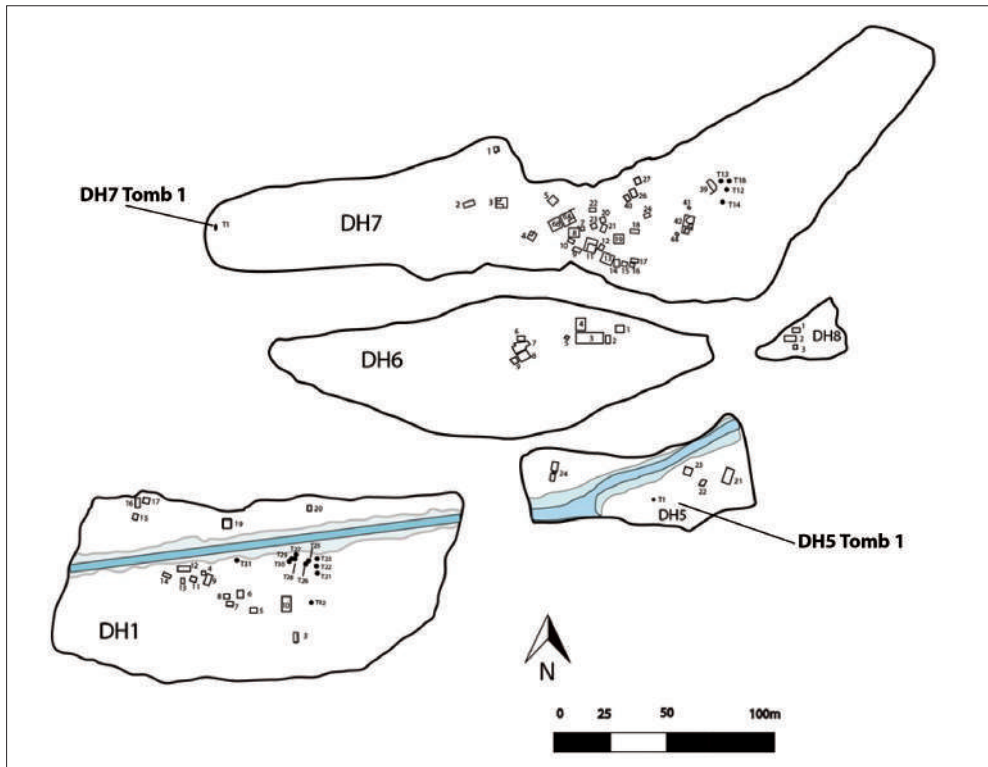


Fig. 2 - Overview of Dahwa sites (DH1, DH5, DH6, DH7, and DH8) including Bronze Age tombs. After Al Jahwari et al. 2018.

accounts indicate that additional structures were destroyed in that process. At least 61 buildings have been documented across DH1 – DH7 (see Fig. 2) that reveal evidence of copper smelting, storage, and domestic activities (Al-Jahwari et al. 2018; Douglas et al. forthcoming; Al-Jahwari, Douglas, Williams forthcoming). Two Umm an-Nar tombs have been documented at the Dahwa sites: DH5-Tomb 1 and DH7-Tomb 1 (Fig 2).

DH5-Tomb 1

DH5-Tomb 1 is a circular Umm an-Nar tomb, 6.0 m in diameter. Only the bottom course of cut blocks and an inner ring of less well modified stone were in place (Fig. 3). The tomb was disturbed by the growth of a tree in the Northwestern portion of the tomb. The root system displaced some stones and distorted the internal structure of the tomb as well as some of the wall stones. From this preliminary excavation, we observed some flat paving stones still in place, and we can understand that the subterranean compartment(s) of the tomb was 0.30m deep. It does not appear that the tomb was divided into formal chambers, but it may be that an internal wall projected from the Western ring wall. This configuration has also been documented at Bat (Tombs 54, 155, 401; Schmidt, Döpper 2014), Tell Abraç (Martin, Baustian, Osterholtz 2019), and Jebel Buhais (BHS 71; Jasim 2012).

One quarter of the tomb was excavated to determine the state of preservation and to try to place the tomb within the site chronology. The tomb was heavily disturbed not only



Fig. 3 - DH5-Tomb 1 post excavation. Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.

by human activity but also due to extensive root disturbance. Excavation revealed evidence of four interments. This included three adults and one subadult. These human remains were commingled and fragmentary except for small elements such as carpals and tarsals. Very little information about the health, diet, age-at-death, or sex of the individuals is available from these remains because of their highly fragmentary and commingled nature. Two fragmentary mandibles were avail-

able for evaluation of dental health. One mandible was approximately 90% complete and indicated complete antemortem loss of the posterior dentition as well as recent antemortem loss of the anterior dentition (e.g., only slightly remodeled alveolar bone). The second mandible fragment was less than 30% complete and did not provide additional evidence of antemortem tooth loss or dental disease. The few loose teeth recovered demonstrated very little dental attrition, which either suggests the death of young people or simply indicates a less coarse diet. These few data do not provide enough information to reach any conclusions about the dental health of the population who used this tomb. No further information was available to assess the sex of the individuals interred, more specific age estimation, or a picture of overall health status.

Burned faunal bone fragments and burned human bone fragments were recovered from the tomb. Based on the burning pattern, these bones were skeletonized and fragmented prior to the burning. There is an uneven pattern of burning – some bones have discrete areas of burning while others are burned in their entirety on one surface (e.g., internal cranial bones but not exterior). This is consistent with a small scale burning event, and where cremation (implying the destruction of the bones) was not intended. Still, there is too little information available, and the tomb is too disturbed to be more specific. Burning events are a common part of the Umm an-Nar mortuary ritual and have been documented at a number of sites (e.g., Hili Tomb A, Bondioli et al. 1998; McSweeney et al. 2008).

Burial goods recovered included sherds of a single imported Indus vessel and fragments of a single softstone vessel (Fig. 4a-b). Two barrel-shaped carnelian beads, small rounded bronze balls from a larger ornament, and a single shell fragment were also recovered.

Excavation of this tomb produced human skeletal remains, which were processed for chronometric dating. Because of the age of the interments and the environmental factors that impact these organic materials, no collagen was present in the skeletal remains. Bone bioapatite was used to establish a date for the interment of these individuals. The two samples were submitted for dating and produced date of 2277-2041 BCE and 2137-1971 BCE, respectively (Tab. 1). This range of dates possibly supports the hypothesis that this tomb was used over a period of time in the last centuries of the 3rd millennium BCE. Further testing and excavation is required to understand this more fully. Because of the close proximity to the coast, we cannot rule out that a marine diet may have influenced these chronometric dates. At the present time, there are no additional data to test this possibility. For the sake of evaluating the usefulness of these dates, therefore, we point out that the material culture and the skeletal material were clearly part of an intrusive burial



Fig. 4a-b - Ceramic (a) and softstone (b) sherds found in DH5-T1.
Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.

TABLE 1

Radiocarbon dating results on two samples of human bone from DH5-Tomb 1. Calibrations Calculated with OxCal 4.3 (Bronk Ramsey 2009) with IntCal13 Atmospheric Curve (Reimer et al. 2013).

Material	Sample #	UGAMS Lab #	Uncalibrated	C14 date (cal. BP)	Relative Contribution to Probabilities	2-sigma (cal. BC)	Relative Contribution to Probabilities
Bioapatite	DH1-T1-001	24913	3750 ± 25	3990-4043	0.18	2277-2252	0.05
				4069-4159	0.76	2228-2223	0.01
				4172-4177	0.01	2210-2120	0.76
				4201-4226	0.05	2094-2041	0.18
Bioapatite	DH1-T1-002	24914	3670 ± 25	3920-4086	100.00	2137-1971	100.00

dug through the floor of the existing Umm an-Nar tomb. During the excavation it was clear that all skeletal material and material culture were emptied from tomb and the walls were dismantled except for the plinth and a few unworked stones and some parts of the paved floor. The tomb was clearly abandoned, perhaps in favor of the larger Umm an-Nar circular tomb (DH7-T1) described below. The skeletal material and material culture that were found were clearly from an intrusive later event, likely toward the end of the date range indicated by radiocarbon dating.

DH7-Tomb 1 and Bone Pit

The large circular Umm an-Nar tomb and bone pit (Fig. 5) located in DH7 is the subject of ongoing analyses. DH7-Tomb 1 is 8.4m in diameter and it consists of six chambers symmetrically placed on either side of a central corridor, which allows communication between all of the chambers (Figs. 5-7). This corridor runs roughly East-West and while no entrance has been identified, it may be that the entrance was one or both ends of this



Fig. 5 - Overhead view of DH7-T1 and bone pit. Photo M. Al-Mamari.



Fig. 6 - DH7-Tomb 1, partially excavated. Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.

Fig. 7 - DH7-Tomb 1, Chamber A. Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.

corridor. The closest published parallel is Tomb 1 at Mowaihat (Haerinck 1991), which was 8.0 m in diameter and composed of eight chambers separated by a central corridor.

The floor of the circular tomb was not paved, but several layers of plaster were laid down over the use of the tomb. The purpose of these plaster layers cannot be known definitively, but given the fact that the plaster layers enveloped some of the tombs contents, a reasonable hypothesis is that the plaster served as parts of several refurbishment events in the tomb (Williams et al. forthcoming).

More than 180,000 bone fragments have been recovered from the tomb and bone pit. Preliminary analyses have revealed that the far fewer burned fragments found inside the tomb were not the result of burning events in the existing subterranean compartments,

but rather came from burning events in chambers of a possible second story or more likely, from larger burning events in the associated bone pit. This later circumstance is currently favored as an explanation because the bone pit contents were discovered eroding from the pit and downhill, clearly distributing skeletal remains and material culture into the tomb (located downhill from the pit) and off the sides of the small hill on which both the bone pit and the tomb were located. There is no evidence of a second story for the tomb, but given the removal of the stones and the general disruption of the tomb architecture above ground, we cannot rule this out definitively. The subterranean space ranges from 0.84 to 0.99 m deep and was composed of four courses of unhewn stones, larger stones composing the bottom courses.

Approximately 5 m to the East of DH7-Tomb 1 is an associated Umm an-Nar bone pit (Fig. 8). This pit has a maximum length of 4 m and a maximum width of 1.5 m at the top of the pit, but it tapers to more narrow dimensions near the bottom of the pit. Multiple loci of use/disuse have been identified in the Southern profile of the pit. It is not clear if these loci extend the entire length of the pit or only demonstrate the stratigraphy of that portion of the pit. Preliminary analyses reveal thousands of bone fragments as well as fragmented ceramic and softstone vessels. Complete analysis of the material culture and osteological remains will be completed in the near future.



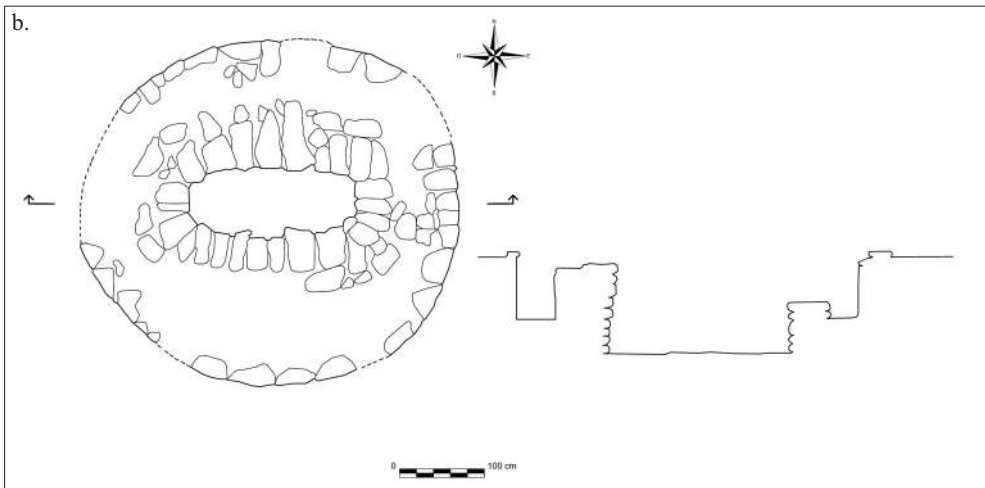
Fig. 8 - Profile of Southeastern edge of bone pit. Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.

Summary of Umm an-Nar Period Tombs

Umm an-Nar mortuary monuments have been documented across the Oman Peninsula. It is not yet clear if the size of the settlement corresponds to the number of tombs or their use. At the Umm an-Nar settlements at Dahwa we have only two tombs and they are quite different in their placement, size, and possibly in their use. It is too early to establish if one of these tombs is earlier or later, or if different portions of the Dahwa community were interred in one tomb over another. We can observe that DH7-Tomb 1 occupied a more prominent place on the landscape and was visible from all parts of the settlement, whereas DH5-Tomb 1 was less prominent and smaller in size. DH5-Tomb 1 is not accompanied by a subterranean bone pit and this may indicate that it was used for a shorter time or during a period when final disposal of the dead did not include removal of the skeletal remains into a bone pit. The radiocarbon dates suggest a date of use near the end of the Umm an-Nar period, but these dates should be viewed with caution as they are only two, and they may not represent a) the full tomb membership and/or 2) the date of the primary use of the tomb (e.g., they may represent reuse events). The location of these tombs also has practical implications for their preservation. DH5-Tomb 1 is located close to a modern road, which likely closely matches the ancient path toward the wadi and so it was far more likely to be encountered by passersby for millennia. Reuse of stone from these monuments and reuse of the monuments for later interments is a well-known



Fig. 9a-b - Overhead view and plan of tomb DH1-Tomb 17. Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.



phenomenon and so this may obscure important information about the construction, use, and reuse of this monument. On the other hand, DH7-Tomb 1 is not along the road way, is on the downward slope of a hill, and is more obscured from modern view.

Wadi Suq Period (2000-1500 BCE)

There is no evidence of habitation of the Dahwa sites during the Wadi Suq period. No ceramic evidence has been recovered from surface collection of ceramics, and there is no evidence of any alteration of the Umm an-Nar buildings or the construction of new structures during this time at this location. There is evidence, however of small-scale reuse of the site for Wadi Suq tombs. There is a cluster of eight Wadi Suq tombs near to the Umm an-Nar settlement of DH1. Each of these tombs appears to have an oval subterranean chamber and a round circle of stones surrounding this chamber.

DH1-Tomb 17

DH1-T17 was a single chamber, oval, subterranean Wadi Suq tomb (Fig. 9a-b). A single course of a mix of stones, both repurposed stones from the nearby Umm an-Nar structures and other unworked stones, formed an oval around the chamber. The maximum



Fig. 10 - Remains of roof stones of DH1-Tomb 17. Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.



Fig. 11 - Internal wall and step down entry of DH1-Tomb 17. Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.

length of this oval ring is 4.65 m and the maximum width is 3.93 m. As the sediment was removed within this oval ring wall, the unworked, but well selected limestone stones of a roughly arranged roof were uncovered (Fig. 10).

The subterranean chamber was oriented East-West and had a step down entrance on the Eastern side. This entrance was likely blocked with stones after interment of the last deceased individual. The chamber was constructed with a single ring of unworked but well selected local stones, 8 courses deep

(1.3 m deep). The chamber floor was not lined with paving stones. The maximum internal length of the tomb chamber 2.4 m and the maximum internal width was 1.3 m. The single ring wall of the chamber varied between 0.45 and 0.6 m in width. This stone built chamber was made of well-selected stone so that the internal wall was quite regular (Fig. 11). From the arrangement of the stones, it appears that the roof was a composed by corbelling of several of the top courses of the walls and then stacking of these stones to form a low tumulus similar to that seen in Tomb BHS2 at Jebel Buhais (Jasim 2012). The shape and size of the chamber as well as the construction of DH1 Tomb 17 is very similar to tombs BHS2 and BHS6 at Jebel Buhais (*ibid.*) and Tomb 1122 from Bat (Frifelt 1975). BHS6 was slightly different because its floor was covered with gravel and no clear entrance could be determined .

The contents of the tomb were clearly disturbed, potentially in antiquity. Very little material culture remained; in fact, with the exception of three agate discoid beads, all other material culture (several ceramic sherds) pre-dates this tomb and could be either debris from the surface that fell into the chamber as it was dug or that was washed into the tomb from the surface after the tomb was built (Fig. 12). Poorly preserved skeletal remains from a single adult and a single subadult were recovered. The subadult had a partially formed first molar, which leads to an age estimate of under 3 years. No other information is available about the sex or age of the individuals interred.



Fig. 12 - Material culture recovered from DH1-Tomb 17. Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.

Summary of Wadi Suq Period Tombs

Thus far, a single Wadi Suq period tomb has been excavated at the Dahwa sites. This tomb was heavily robbed and perhaps reused at a later time. At least eight more Wadi Suq tombs are known at the Dahwa sites. These resemble the shape and size of the Wadi Suq tombs in Adam (Gernez, Giraud 2019) and it is possible that some of the tombs classified as “post-Bronze Age” tombs based on the apparent later cairn building style, may have been Wadi Suq subterranean tombs that were reused and altered. While the contents of this tomb are modest, this excavation and documentation of the remaining unexcavated tombs demonstrates use of the Dahwa sites during the Wadi Suq period. With an absence of Wadi Suq period reuse of the settlement and no Wadi Suq ceramics recovered from surface collection, these tombs are the only evidence of people in this immediate area during the Wadi Suq period. It is likely that the habitation site was on a much smaller scale than the preceding Umm an-Nar use of this area, and that these structures were more ephemeral and thus lost or at least less visible in the archaeological record.

Post-Bronze Age Tombs

Classification of tombs from their external appearance on the Oman Peninsula is sometimes straightforward process. Other times, however, classification is difficult if not impossible (Williams et al. forthcoming). During our survey we categorized tombs as “Post Bronze Age” tombs because they had features that exclude their inclusion either in the Bronze Age (at Dahwa this includes Umm an-Nar and Wadi Suq tombs) or Islamic period. These tombs share certain identifiable characteristics: a cairn structure made of dark wadi cobbles, and they are built on top of or near to Umm an-Nar period structures. It is possible that some of these tombs were constructed during the Wadi Suq period and later modified as part of a reuse event, obscuring more obvious Wadi Suq structural traits. To date, we have excavated two of these tombs, as described below.

DH1-Tomb 9

DH1-Tomb 9 is located in Dahwa 1 (DH1), which was the first focus of excavation at the Dahwa sites (Al-Jahwari, Douglas, Williams forthcoming). This tomb is a cluster of five chambers that form a honeycomb shape (Fig. 13). This mortuary unit is composed of two primary chambers (Chamber A and Chamber C), which were constructed on top of the wall of Umm an-Nar structure 10 (DH1: S10; Fig. 14). All of the chambers were disturbed before excavation. There was no evidence of roof structure for any of the chambers, with the possible exception of cobbles that were found in the chamber and which have been part of a roof.

Chamber A was oval in shape, 1.55 m long and with a maximum width of 0.80 m. It was constructed with a single ring wall that was 0.75-0.80 m wide. The Northern wall of this chamber consisted of two courses of large Umm an-Nar stones from the existing structure 10 (S10) wall and three courses of medium sized dark colored cobbles built on top of this foundation. The East wall was composed of three courses of original Umm an-Nar stone wall and five additional courses of rounded cobbles. The South wall is composed of two courses of the existing Umm an-Nar stone wall with a final course of medium sized dark cobbles added on top. This Southern wall was shared with chamber C (where it is the Northern wall of that tomb chamber). The contents of chamber A were disturbed before excavation. The chamber was filled with windblown silt and some stones

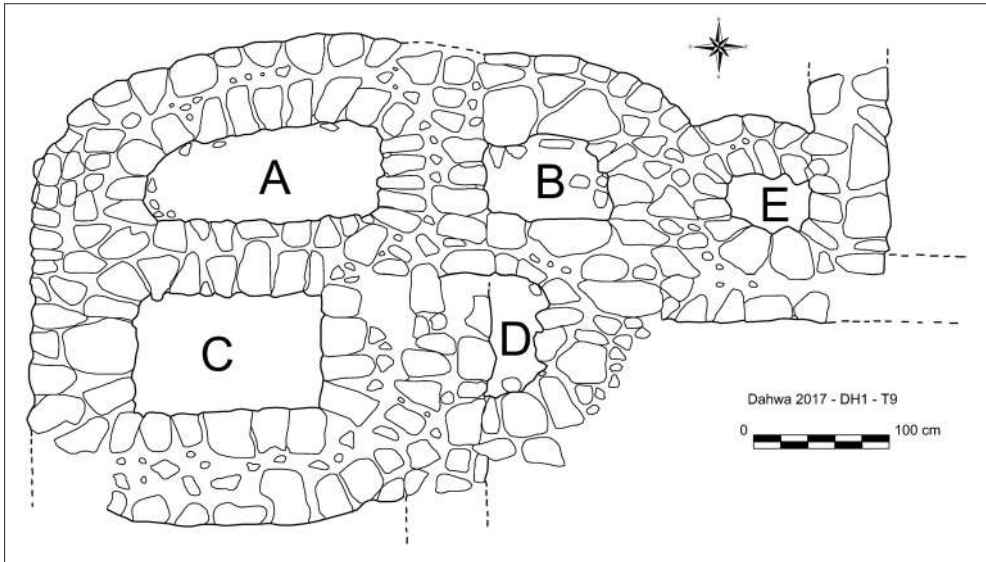


Fig. 13 - Overhead plan of DH1-Tomb 9. Drawing authors.



Fig. 14 - Overhead view of Tomb 9 and other post Umm an-Nar period tombs built on the Umm an-Nar structure of S10. Tombs 87, 88 and 89 are classified as “Post Bronze Age” tombs. Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.

that could have been wall fall, but appeared to be debris accumulated over time. Fragments of a glass vase (Fig. 15), a single steatite bead, and highly fragmentary human skeletal remains were recovered. The human bone was too fragmentary to provide any information about the individual(s) interred. Copper slag, which is common to find on

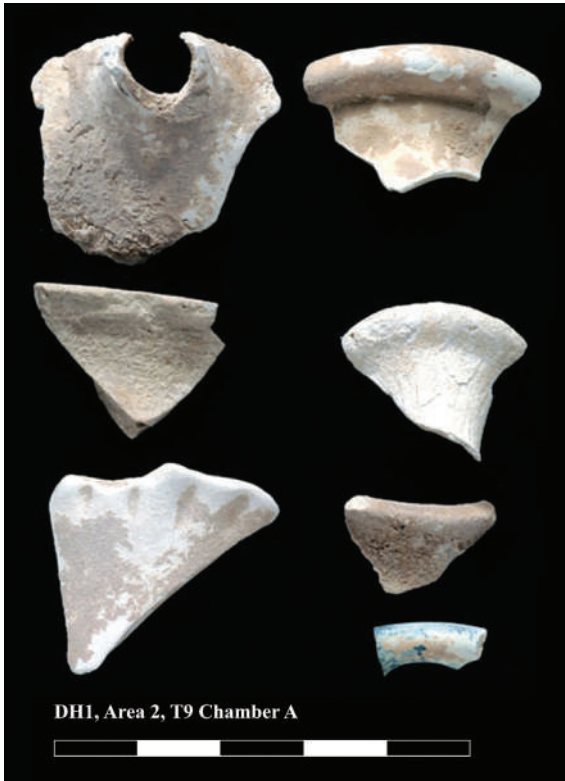


Fig. 15 - Fragments of glass vase recovered from DH1-Tomb 9, Chamber A.
Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.

Fig. 16 - Softstone spindle whorl recovered from DH1-Tomb 9, Chamber C.
Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.

the surface of all the Dahwa sites, was recovered from the bottom of this chamber, suggesting that the surface was not cleaned before the tomb was constructed on top of the Umm an-Nar structure.

Chamber C was also oval in shape. It was slightly larger with a length of 1.55 m and maximum width of 1.09 m. The single ring wall was 0.9-1 m thick. The chamber of this tomb was dug 0.10-1.15 m into the soil below the deepest course of Umm an-Nar stone wall. Highly fragmentary human skeletal and dental remains were recovered. While the bones were too fragmentary to provide additional information about the individual(s) interred, the dental remains demonstrate that at least one child aged 9 months - 1 year was interred in this chamber. Glass vase fragments identical to those found in Chamber A were also found in this chamber. Ceramic sherds and a softstone spindle whorl were also recovered (Fig. 16) from this chamber as well. A large number of beads were recovered including 83 green faience seed beads, 3 fish vertebrae, one carnelian bead, one steatite bead, and one unknown other stone bead (Fig. 17).

Supplementary Chambers/Receptacles: Three supplementary chambers or receptacles were built as additions to the two primary chambers (A and C). Chambers B, D, and E are small supplementary chambers or receptacles added to primary chambers A and C. Their shapes are irregular and their construction was more haphazard. A small amount of surface debris such as furnace lining and ceramic sherds were recovered from these chambers, but these materials do not help to date their construction or use, rather they support the idea that the surface was not cleared before their construction. No other contents were recovered from these features.

Chronology of DH1-Tomb 9:

Based on interrelationships of the walls of the five chambers of DH 1 Tomb 9, it is clear that Chamber C was the first construction event of this complex mortuary monument. This is supported both by the use of the standing wall of building S10 as well as the subfloor excavation performed prior to interment of the dead. Chamber A was constructed sometime after Chamber C, using the Northern wall of Chamber C, as well as also using a portion of the Umm an-Nar building S10 wall as a foundation. This construction was less careful—no subfloor excavation or cleaning of the Umm an-Nar period site debris was completed.

Sometime following the construction of primary chamber C, supplemental chamber/receptacle D was added to the Eastern aspect of Chamber C. This construction utilized the Eastern wall of chamber C. This supplemental receptacle/chamber measured 0.63×1.38 m. Next, Chamber B was added using the existing walls of both Chamber A and Chamber D. This structure measured 0.6×0.97 m. Finally, Chamber E was added, using the easting wall of Chamber B. This structure measured 0.33×0.55 m. Due to the lack of contents, it is not clear when these chambers were built or how they were used. Their size, irregular shape, and clear addition to the primary chambers, does suggest that they were built with reference the primary chambers, perhaps as additional related individuals (infants or children based on the size of the chambers) died, thus expanding the mortuary structure in this way. It is also possible that only Chambers A and C were for the interment of the deceased and that the additional compartments were receptacles for mortuary goods at some later time.

DH1-Tomb 27

DH1-Tomb 27 is an interesting cairn tomb that appeared to have two construction events based on the grey cut stones repurposed from Umm an-Nar structures at DH1 forming the bottom courses of the tomb, and dark brown medium sized unworked stones forming the upper courses and tumulus top of the monument. Additionally, a large amount of gravel was deposited on top of the tomb, filling between the double ring wall and covering the chamber (Fig. 18a-c).

This chamber was oval in shape with a maximum length of 1.85 m and maximum width of 1.25 m. The maximum standing height of the tomb before excavation 0.6 m, but the tomb was deflated and disturbed so the original height of the tomb was likely greater. The width of the double skin wall at the base of the monument was 0.83 m. The tomb was found in association with three other post-Bronze Age tombs: two cairns of

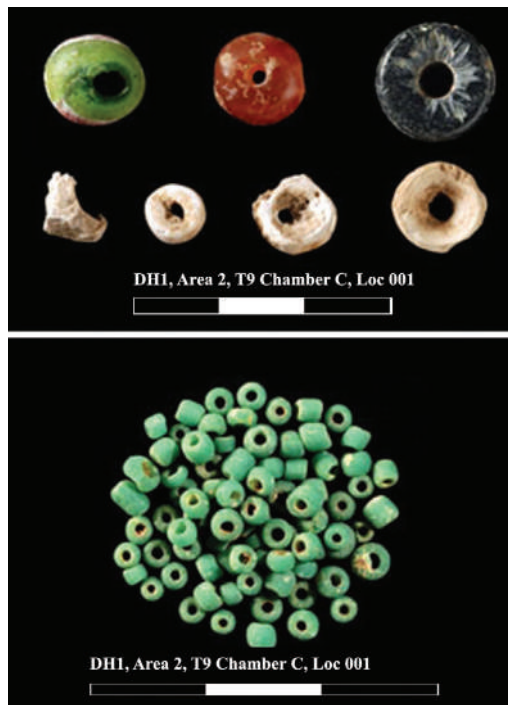


Fig. 17 - Beads recovered from DH1-Tomb 9, Chamber C. Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.

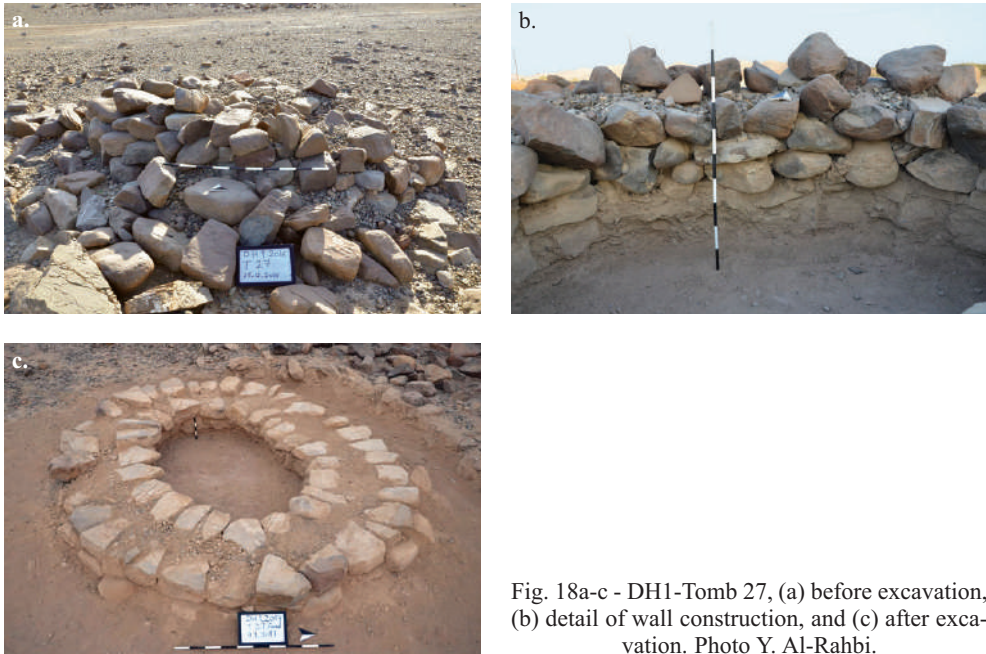


Fig. 18a-c - DH1-Tomb 27, (a) before excavation, (b) detail of wall construction, and (c) after excavation. Photo Y. Al-Rahbi.

similar construction and one tomb with three compartments forming a honeycomb shape (Fig. 19a-b).

No material culture or skeletal remains were recovered from this tomb so we are not able to date the construction or use of the tomb. The closest published parallel is “type 2 cell graves” described in a volume of rescue excavations on the Batinah coast (Kennet, al-Jahwari 2016). It should be noted that this is a descriptive category and not necessarily indicative of the age of the tomb. Indeed, it is possible that the original tomb was modified by later reuse, but without datable evidence, this is just speculation.

CONCLUSIONS

This brief report documents the survey of mortuary monuments and structures at the Dahwa sites on the Batinah Coast of the Sultanate of Oman. The distribution of tombs and settlements is not well-known in this region of Oman due to encroachment by residential and commercial building, the construction of the Batinah Coast Highway, and relatively less attention given to this important region. The work presented here demonstrates that significant, large scale settlements existed in this region during the Bronze Age. This landscape was modified over time by the building of mortuary monuments that both utilized the existing structures as foundations for mortuary monuments and by repurposing stones from these earlier settlements to build new free-standing structures for the interment of the dead. In fact, currently there is no evidence of occupation of the Dahwa sites after the Umm an-Nar period until the Late Islamic period. It is possible that small-scale, ephemeral Wadi Suq and Sasanian occupations existed at Dahwa (or someplace nearby), and this would explain the presence of mortuary monuments at this location.

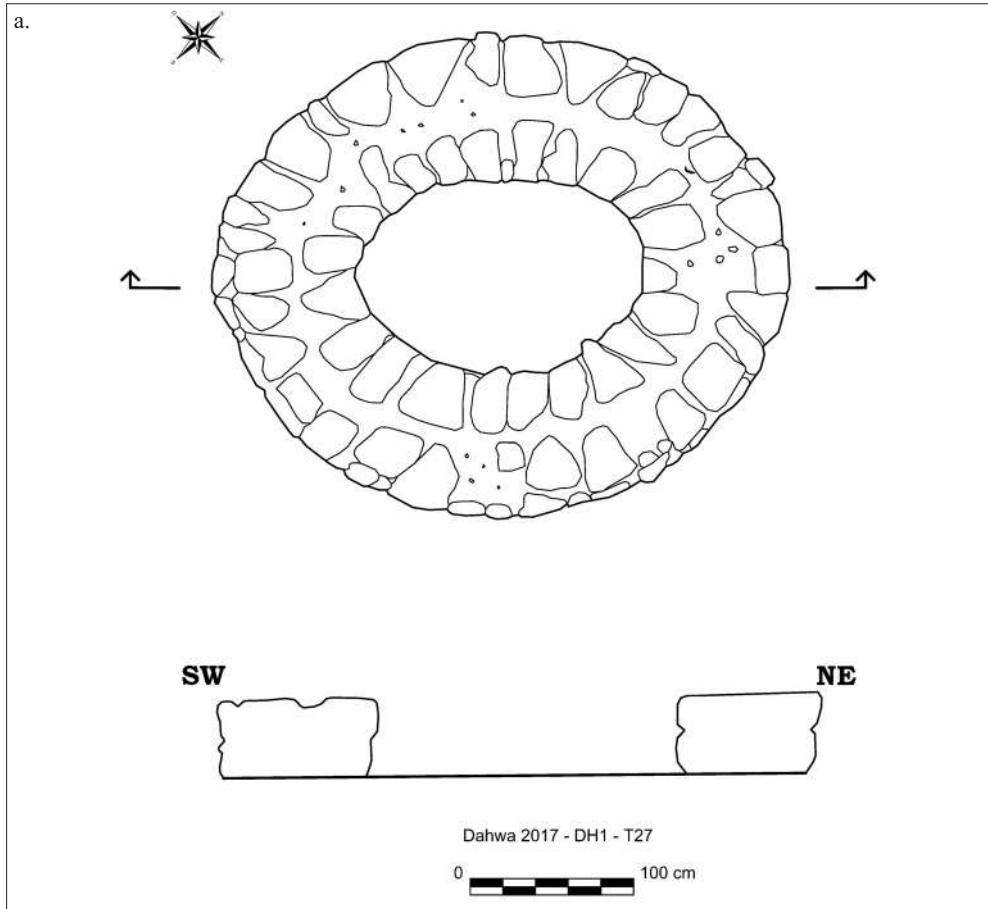


Fig. 19a-b - Schematic overhead plan and view of DH1-Tomb 27. Drawing authors, photo Y. Al-Rahbi.

The Dahwa sites show clear intensive use of the area during the Umm an-Nar period. Two Umm an-Nar tombs serviced these sites, but the chronology of use of these tombs is not yet clear. Survey and excavation of other mortuary monuments provides the only evidence for a Wadi Suq period presence at the site, and documents the more extensive use of the site for later (post-Bronze Age) tombs. Yet to be discovered are the settlements associated with the mortuary features that postdate the Umm an-Nar period.

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The Dynamics of Human Settlement in Historical Times in South-Central Fars, from Firuzabad to the Persian Gulf: First Preliminary Results of a New Research Project

by PIERFRANCESCO CALLIERI, ALIREZA ASKARI CHAVERDI, ALI EGHRA',
DIEGO MARIA MEZZAPELLE, KOUROSH MOHAMMADKHANI

Un nuovo filone di ricerca è stato avviato nel 2019 dalla Missione Archeologica Congiunta Italo-Iraniana nel Fars con il progetto “Da Firuzabad al Golfo Persico. Indagini multidisciplinari sul periodo sasanide”, che ha consentito alla Missione di estendere le proprie ricerche al primo periodo sasanide.

Il progetto intende fare nuova luce su alcuni punti di cruciale importanza storica, come l’impegno di Ardashir I sul territorio, indicato dalle fonti testuali, e le comunicazioni tra l’altopiano e il Golfo Persico, e prevede tra gli altri obiettivi una carta archeologica dell’area selezionata, realizzata in un contesto GIS, associata a un database online.

Lo studio della connettività tra Firuzabad e il Golfo Persico è iniziato grazie al contributo di A. Askari Chaverdi nei siti di Tomb-e Bot (entroterra) e Tal-e Pargo (pianura costiera), dove le attività archeologiche hanno prodotto due importanti sequenze stratigrafiche.

A Shahr-e Gur, antica Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah, A. Eghra' ha effettuato la documentazione topografica e lo studio delle tecniche murarie e degli orientamenti di tutti gli affioramenti strutturali dell’area centrale della città, da confrontare con il particolare schema radiale che le foto aeree mostrano ma che non corrisponde a nulla di visibile sul terreno. Un importante risultato di questa attività riguarda il tempio del fuoco noto come Takht-e Neshin, che sulla base dell’interpretazione delle immagini acquisite dall’UAV (drone) appare affiancato da una depressione nella superficie del terreno sui suoi lati sud e ovest, molto probabilmente un bacino d’acqua; sulle stesse immagini, questo monumento non appare più come un edificio isolato ma piuttosto come parte di un complesso architettonico molto più grande.

L’importante attività di prospezione geofisica nell’area interna della città di Gur è iniziata grazie alla collaborazione della Missione congiunta con K. Mohammadkhani: la tecnica geomagnetica è stata scelta come unico modo per affrontare la questione delle fasce concentriche più esterne della città di Gur, dove non si vedono resti strutturali sulla superficie che appare totalmente piatta, e ha prodotto buoni risultati che stimolano il proseguimento di questa attività anche in vista della necessità di produrre prove per la conservazione del sito.

L’importanza di effettuare un nuovo studio del tratto della costa del Golfo Persico in rapporto con Firuzabad alla ricerca di testimonianze di occupazione e di attività marittime nel primo periodo sasanide deve includere uno studio delle caratteristiche morfologiche della costa. Da un lato, la ricostruzione della linea di costa antica, fondamentale in un’area interessata da potenti eventi sismici, è stata fornita dal geomorfologo A. Sembroni, che la pubblica in uno studio separato; dall’altro, la carenza di fonti scritte e di studi archeologici ha suggerito di includere nel gruppo di ricerca un esperto di marineria antica, D.M. Mezzapelle, facendo appello alla sua competenza per individuare punti di approdo adeguati.

Nova fluo de esplorado estis komencata en 2019 de la komuna Irana-Itala Arkeologia Misio en Fars kun la projekto “de Firuzabad al la Persa Golfo. Interfakaj esploroj pri la Sasanida periodo”, kiu permesis al la misio etendi siajn esplorojn ĝis la frua Sasanida periodo.

La projekto intencas novajn lumojn sur kelkaj punktoj de decida historia graveco, kiel ekzemple la devontigo de Ardashir I sur la teritorio indikita de la tekstaj fontoj, kaj la komunikadoj inter la altebenaĵo kaj la Persa Golfo, kaj provizas, inter aliaj celoj, arkeologiajn mapojn de la elektita areo, efektivigita en kunteksto de GIS, kiu estas asociita al enreta datumbazo.

La studo de konektebleco inter Firuzabad kaj la Persa Golfo komencis danke al la kontribuo de A. Askari Chaverdi en la lokoj de Tomb-e Bot (enlanda) kaj Tal-e Pargo (marborda ebenaĵo), kie arkeologiaj aktivecoj produktis du gravajn straiĝrafajn sekvencojn.

En Shahr-e Gur, antikve Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah, A. Eghra' realigis la topografian dokumentadon, kaj la studon de teknikoj de masonaĵo kaj de la orientiĝoj de la tuta supriĝo en la strukturo de la centra areo de la urbo, por kompari ĝin kun la aparta radiusa skemo kiun la aeraj fotoj montras, sed estas nepre nevidebla sur la tero. Grava rezulto de tiu ĉi aktiveco rilatas al la templo de la fajro, konata kiel Takht-e Neshin, kiu sur la bazo de la interpreto de bildoj akiritaj fare de la UAV (virabelo) aperas akompanita per depresio en la surfaco de la tero, sur ĝia suda kaj okcidenta flankoj, verŝajne baseno da akvo; sur la samaj bildoj, tiu ĉi monumento ne plu aperas kiel izolita konstruaĵo sed prefere kiel parto de pli granda arkitektura komplekso.

La grava geofizika prospektorado en la interna areo de la urbo de Gur komencis danke al la kunlaboro de la komuna misio kun K. Mohammadkhani: la geomagneta tekniko estis elektita kiel la nura maniero pritrakti la temon de samcentraj bandoj ekstere de la urbo de Gur, kie oni ne povas vidi strukturajn restaĵojn sur la surfaco, kiu aperas tute plata, kaj ĝi produktis bonajn rezultojn, kiu stimulas la daŭrigo de ĉi tiu aktiveco, ankaŭ en vido de la bezono produkti indicon por la konservado de la ejo.

La graveco de efektiviganta nova studo de la sekcio de la Persa Golfo marbordo en rilato al Firuzabad en serĉo de indico de okupo kaj maraj agadoj en la frua Sasanida periodo devas inkludi studon de morfologiaj karakterizaĵoj de la marbordo. Unuflanke, la rekonstruo de la antikva marbordo, kiu estas fundamenta en areo tuŝita de potenca sismaj okazaĵoj, estis provizata per la geomorfologisto A. Sembroni, kiu eldonis ĝin en aparta studo; aliflanke, la manko de skribaj fontoj kaj arkeologiaj studoj sugestis inkludi en la esplorogrupo fakulon de antikva maristaro, D.M. Mezapelle, fidante sur sia kompetenteco por identigi taŭgajn alteriĝajn punktojn.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Birth of the Project

The Iranian-Italian Joint Archaeological Mission in Fars has been active since 2005 in the three areas of Tang-e Bolaghi, Pasargadae and Persepolis, concentrating on the Achaemenid and Post-Achaemenid periods. Its involvement in a different project, having a chronological focus on the Sasanian period, came about as a result of an invitation from professor Alireza Askari Chaverdi, co-director of the Joint Mission, member of Shiraz University, who also is the director of the archaeological base of Firuzabad, one of the three areas that are included within the multiple UNESCO World Heritage Site “Sassanid Archaeological Landscape of Fars” (SALF). P. Callieri indeed has been part since 2017 of the Iranian team that followed the presentation to the ICOMOS committee of the proposal for the inscription of the site in the UNESCO World Heritage List, at the invitation of the then Deputy for Cultural Heritage, Dr Mohammad Hassan Talebian, and was a member of the Iranian delegation at the WHC Convention held in Bahrain in the Summer of 2018 which resulted in a favourable vote of the assembly. As a result of this collaboration, the Iranian-Italian Mission was invited by the ICHHTO to give its contribution to the major international program “Sasanian Cultural Heritage for Sustainable Development Projects. An Integrated Multidisciplinary Program.”

This program stems from the ICOMOS recommendations on the occasion of the registration of the SALF sites in the UNESCO World Heritage List. The goal of the program

is to reach a solid scientific basis of knowledge on which to anchor projects of sustainable developments in the fields of movable and immovable cultural heritage and tourism. The width of concerned fields made it necessary to act on a multidisciplinary basis, with the collaboration of several institutions, both Iranian (ICHHTO, RICHT-ICAR, RCCCR, Shiraz University, Iranian National Institute for Oceanography and Atmospheric Sciences-INOAS) and European (University of Bologna, ISMEO, Italian Institute for Advanced Technologies for Cultural Heritage-ITABC-CNR, University of Urbino, University of Aix-Marseille, French CNRS).

The expected results are twofold: on one side a GIS system of the area can contain all the existing and future information in its environmental context and will represent the main source of information for specific researches; on the other side the conservation of the site will benefit tremendously not only from the collection of information but also from the involvement of the local communities on the basis of their economic benefit deriving from the archaeological heritage through sustainable tourism based on cultural and natural heritage.

The Iranian-Italian Joint Archaeological Mission in Fars has decided to actively participate in this wonderful but challenging project, acting on two fronts. The first step was to include the most important scientific issues in the proposal of the University of Bologna research unit of in the PRIN 2017¹ project, actually advertised in the spring of 2018. At the same time, the Joint Mission made the study of the Sasanian period in the area from Firuzabad to the Persian Gulf part of the program of activities planned in the MoU 2019-2023 between the RICHT and the Department of Cultural Heritage of the University of Bologna as well as the ISMEO, presented in the summer of 2018 under the name of “From Firuzabad to the Persian Gulf. Multidisciplinary investigations on the Sasanian period.”

Research Objectives and Their Historical Motivations

The program of research activities, including fieldwork, resulting from the combination of the two projects, PRIN 2017 and Joint Mission's, regards the vast area of Fars stretching from the plain of Firuzabad until the Persian Gulf, particularly the area of Gāvbandi-Nāyband where Askari Chaverdi in 2018 has started new field activities (Fig. 1). This study promised new light on the dynamics of human settlement in the concerned area in a diachronic perspective, highlighting the relationships between inhabitants, territorial policies and communication routes through the centuries, with a special attention for the Early Sasanian period (cf. Frye 1983; Daryaei 2009; 2010).

Investigating the ancient water management in the Firuzabad plain, i.e. hydraulic structures bringing water to the city of Shahr-e Gur (Sasanian Ardashīr-Xwarrah), also in order to verify the historical sources on king Ardashir I's active role in water management for the foundation of the circular city and the farming development of its surroundings (Huff 2008; 2014), was an essential subject of our original PRIN 2017 project, but

¹ Each of the sections of the article derives from the papers presented by the research unit of the University of Bologna during the seminar organized by Prof. Vito Messina as a webinar on the 22nd February 2021, related to the activities of the first year of research of the Research Project of National Interest—PRIN 2017 (no. 2017PR34CS) entitled “Ērānšāhr: Man Landscape and Society in Arsacid and Sasanian Iran. Texts, material culture and society from Arsaces to Yazdegerd III. Three case studies: Pars, Pahlav and Khuzestan,” with the unit of Sapienza University of Rome directed by Prof. Carlo Cereti as national leader and the unit of the University of Turin directed by Prof. Vito Messina as third component unit.

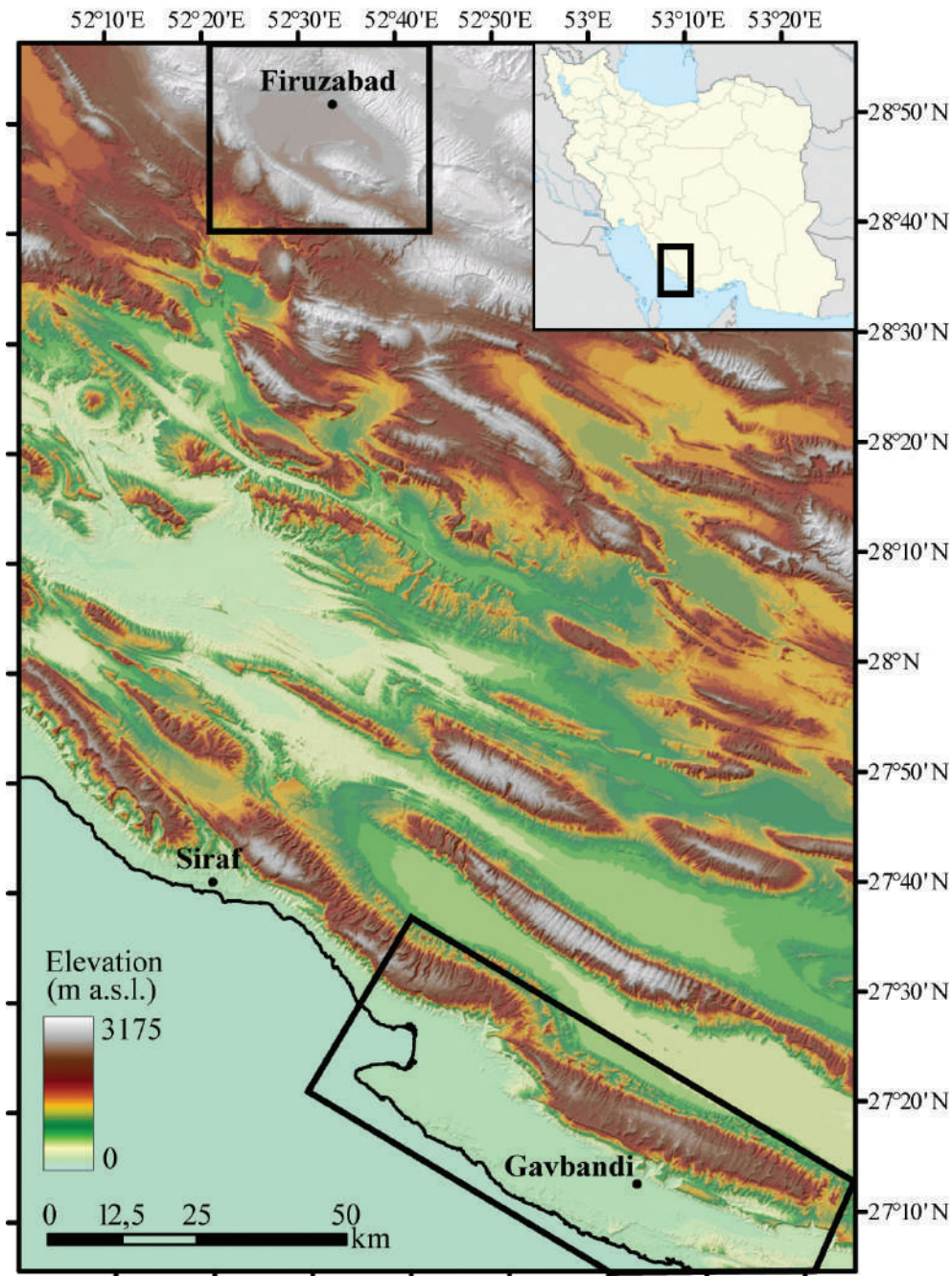


Fig. 1 - Physical map of the studied region. Elaboration A. Sembroni.

had already become part of the programs of an Iranian-French team, with which it was agreed that the research would be continued by them.

A very important research objective which, in view of the new situation, the Iranian-Italian Mission has selected has been to verify the actual layout of the areas of the city of Shahr-e Gur within the defensive wall and to explain the nature of the lines that draw the characteristic internal subdivision of radial sectors and concentric bands visible from above.

A second subject chosen concerns connectivity between the Iranian highlands and the Persian Gulf. It starts from the study of the city gates and the road accesses to Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah in the Firuzabad plain (cf. Huff 2008; 2014), and in a wider approach aims at identifying the specific road connections of this city with the Persian Gulf as well as the possible harbours used during the Early Sasanian period in this area of Fars (Tomaschek 1890; Berthelot 1935; cf. Callieri 2021a).

The Early Islamic Arabo-Persian written sources, which illustrate Ardashir's commitment in the foundation of Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah, also provide indications of the king's early engagement in the coastal area of Fars which led to political control over the entire Persian Gulf (Miri 2012; cf. Piacentini Fiorani 1985).² Behind the legendary aspects, in these sources lie a number of historical facts upon which we cannot dwell here. However, they imply that the location of the ancient itineraries between Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah and the Persian Gulf holds a great importance for closer definition of Ardashir's territorial interest in the extensive and varied coastal areas.

The appropriateness of the choice of directing a project centred on the Early Sasanian period from Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah to the Persian Gulf becomes even more clear thanks to other historical considerations (Callieri 2021a). The extensive surface surveys which Andrew Williamson carried out in Fars (at the time extended administratively to the sea) between 1968 and 1971 mainly concerned the coastal areas, in a long stretch of the North-Eastern coast of the Persian Gulf, from Bushehr to Jâsk. The untimely death of the researcher left a vast collection of pottery unprocessed, which since 2001 is the object of the Williamson Collection Project, launched at the University of Durham (Priestman 2003: 345-348). Most of this material, however, belongs to Middle to Late Sasanian and Islamic ages.

The archaeological site of Sirâf at modern Bandar Tâheri, which still represents the main excavated site in the coastal area, is often mentioned as the port of the Sasanians in the Southern stretch of the Persian Gulf, whereas Bushehr area and especially Rev Ardaxšīr were the main landing in the Northernmost stretch (Callieri 2021a: 234). However the role of Sirâf for the Early Sasanian period needs to be reconsidered in the

² On those sources, we read that Ardashir engaged himself in a fight with the lord of the coastal areas of Fars and Kerman. The name of this powerful enemy that Ardashir had to fight appears in Tabari (817, 5) with different readings. C.E. Bosworth transliterates 'b.t.n.b.w.d. and interprets Haftānbūkt? (Bosworth 1999: 10; cf. Shaki 2002), but a different reading is Āsūwar or Iswer (Zotenberg 1867: 176). The *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšēr ī Pābagān* attributes the sovereignty over this shore of the Persian Gulf to Haftowād (Grenet 2003: 32-34, 124), the Lord of the Worm whose residence was in the domain of Gulār, in the region of Gulārān: one of his seven sons lived in the region of Ērahistān and there he had gathered an army of soldiers from Arabia (Tāzīgān) and Oman (Mēzūnīgān). After initial defeat at Gulār, Ardashir launched an attack on the castle of Haftowād, but was again driven back by the fierce resistance. Only the Glory of the Kavis (*xwarrah ī Kayān*) helped him over this difficult situation and he stopped for the night in a village called Mānd—a name which also indicates one of the main rivers of Southern Fars, flowing from Firuzabad. With the help of two loyal Zoroastrian brothers from this village, Ardashir finally succeeded in overthrowing Haftowād and imposing his power over the Persian Gulf (Cf. Callieri 2021a).

light of Seth Priestman's assertion, based on his study of pottery from the excavations, that the date of Sirâf's ceramic material is very close to the beginning of the Islamic era or at the earliest the 5th-6th century CE (Priestman 2005; 2013: 22, 154; Khakzad et al. 2015: 1-2) and in view of the results of new Iranian excavations which have not found levels of clear Sasanian age (Tofighian 2014; Esma'ili Jelodar 2015/1394; Khosrowzadeh 2015/1394). It is therefore important to carry out a new study of the Persian Gulf coast that takes into account on one side the available archaeological evidence critically approached, since the excavations in Sirâf have demonstrated that this port did not exist at the Early Sasanian age, and on the other the morphological characteristics of the coast in order to identify suitable landing places. For this second and fundamental issue, two non-archaeological aspects must be kept in mind: the reconstruction of the ancient coastline on which the geomorphological investigations by A. Sembroni are giving new light (Sembroni, Askari Chaverdi, forthcoming), and the consideration of technical characteristics of the ancient seafaring, which D.M. Mezzapelle, archaeologist and sailor, guarantees (see below). With these two contributions, we believe it is possible to identify areas in which to concentrate surface surveys in search of coastal settlements from the Sasanian period, especially Early Sasanian ones if there is a possibility to single them out.

But, as it has also been stressed by other authors (Asadi et al. 2013: 23-24), the need is felt for study of the connections between the Persian Gulf and the central highlands. These are two areas of a very different environmental nature but with no clear-cut boundary between hot (*garmsir*) and temperate (*mo'adel*) regions: the topographical configuration of Fars sees in the hinterland region of the Persian Gulf a series of parallel valleys at progressively higher levels, extending from the coast to the central plateau and sharing features of both areas.

For some of these valleys, it was possible to identify a correspondence with toponyms indicated in Middle Persian and Early-Islamic written sources. In the Middle-Persian late Sasanian text *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšēr ī Pābagān* we see that Ardashir moved with relative ease between Estaxr, Ardaxšēr-Xwarrah and the areas nearer to the Persian Gulf, including Ērahistān and Gulār. According to Grenet, Ērahistān should correspond to the valley of Mohr and Lāmerd districts, which are only separated from the Persian Gulf by a mountain ridge, and which share several features with the coastal region, beginning with climate (Grenet 2003: fig. 2). As for Gulār, Grenet (2003: 124) suggests, probably on the basis of etymology, that it should correspond to the present village of Gelār, 54 km West of Guyom, a few dozen kilometres to the North of Shiraz, but this identification is contradicted by the fact that after the second unsuccessful attack on the castle at Gulār, "Ardashir found himself alone on the sea shore" (*Ardaxšēr xwad tanihā ō bār ī drayā ōbast*, VIII, 6). Thus it seems more reasonable to accept the location of Gulār on the coast near to the Eastern boundary of Fars as well as its identification proposed by N. Miri with the town of Kujārān-Ardašir, mentioned by the medieval Islamic sources as one of the cities founded by the first Sasanian king (Asha 1999: 42-43; Miri 2012: 126). Whitehouse and Williamson (1937: 32) mention that Hamzah al-Esfahani also named Kujārān-Ardašir as a town founded by Ardashir I, but give no exact reference to any of Hamza's four works still extant. B. de Cardi (1972: 306) suggested locating Kujārān-Ardašir on the coast of the area of Bandar-e Lengeh. But according to M.B. Vosoughi (2012) the name of medieval city of Korān should be a variant spelling of Kujārān, on the evidence of the ethnonym of Kārāni appearing on two tombstone inscriptions in a cemetery near Galehdar, not far from Tomb-e Bot.

The discovery in this area by A. Askari Chaverdi, at the site of Tomb-e Bot, of extremely interesting architectural elements of Achaemenid type but of inferior work-

manship, dated by the discoverer to the late Parthian period, can also be interpreted differently on the basis of a comprehensive approach to Ardashir's policy in the Persian Gulf area. As already proposed (Callieri 2021a), the Tomb-e Bot Achaemenidizing architectural elements according to P. Callieri might find their best chronological attribution in Ardashir's period, on the evidence of the presence of Achaemenid features also observed at Firuzabad.

The Galehdar division of Mohr district represents an area surveyed by Sir Aurel Stein (1937), H. Gaube (1980) and more recently A. Askari Chaverdi (Askari Chaverdi, Petrie, Taylor et al. 2008; Askari Chaverdi 2013). Mohr valley is separated from the Sirâf area by a ridge of mountains reaching 1,000 m: crossing the ridge, as undertaken by Stein in 1933, ending North of the Galehdar village, proved particularly difficult (Fig. 2). Stein saw traces of an old road and was convinced that "this route, difficult as it must always have been, had been in regular use for the traffic which once was carried on between the emporium of Sirâf and the old trading centres of Iran" (Stein 1937: 213). However, the only natural passages from Mohr valley towards the Persian Gulf presenting less difficulty lie further South and link the Mohr valley with the region of Gâvbandi, present Parsian, ending to the West on the gulf of Nâyband (Fig. 3) (Hausleiter et al. 1997; Motarjem 1998; Asadi et al. 2013; Askari Chaverdi 2018).

As for the Gâvbandi valley (Williamson 1969-1970: 231), A. Askari Chaverdi has recently started excavations of stratigraphic trenches at the site of Tal-e Pargo near the city of Parsian (Askari Chaverdi 2018), which will also be illustrated in his section of this paper. According to W. Tomaschek (1890: 56-57), the area is crossed by the river Nâband-rôd, which he identifies with the *Bagrâdas potamôs* of Nearchos or with the "*flumen Hyperis/Syperis in medio sinu Persico, onerarium navium capax*" mentioned by Onesicritus in Juba.

The large gulf of Nâyband, an area of recognised anchoring capacities (Toufighian 2014: Khakzad, Moosaie 2020: 40), is close off to the West by the promontory bearing the same name, which Tomaschek identifies as the *promunturium Themistias* mentioned by Pliny the Elder (§ 110), and had the port of Bandar Bedikhân on its Northern shore in 19th century: the latter is likely to have been absorbed by the new oil terminals of Asaluyeh (Tomaschek 1890: 56).

The importance of Mohr-Lamerd and Gâvbandi areas in the early Sasanian period, which will be illustrated in detail by A. Askari Chaverdi in the following section of this article, offers evidence of one of the possible areas of Ardashir's intervention on the Persian Gulf, namely the stretch extending Eastwards from Sirâf. It is an area which also the *Kârnâmag ī Ardaxšēr ī Pābagān* also associates with the initial warfare of Ardashir, if the proposed location of Ērahistân is confirmed. Our working hypothesis has to be verified through further and systematic archaeological surveys both in these hinterland regions and in the coastal area from Nâyband to Bandar Jazzeh, part of this research project.

Short Summary of the First Results of the Activities

After the first field-work season of the Joint Mission in 2019, prior to the forced interruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the project has been adjusted to the new situation which the start of the PRIN 2017 project and of the activity by the Iranian-French Mission at Firuzabad has required.

The first objective of this perspective, carried out over an extended area and based on existing documentation combined with new elaborations of existing cartography, is an

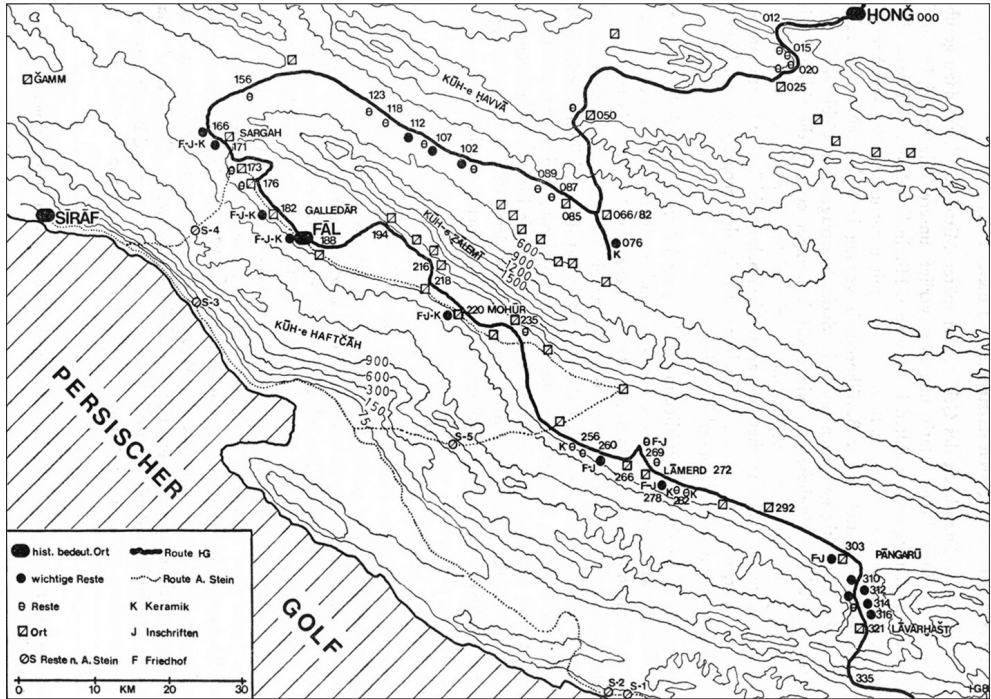


Fig. 2 - The different routes from Galehdar to Persian Gulf. After Gaube 1980.

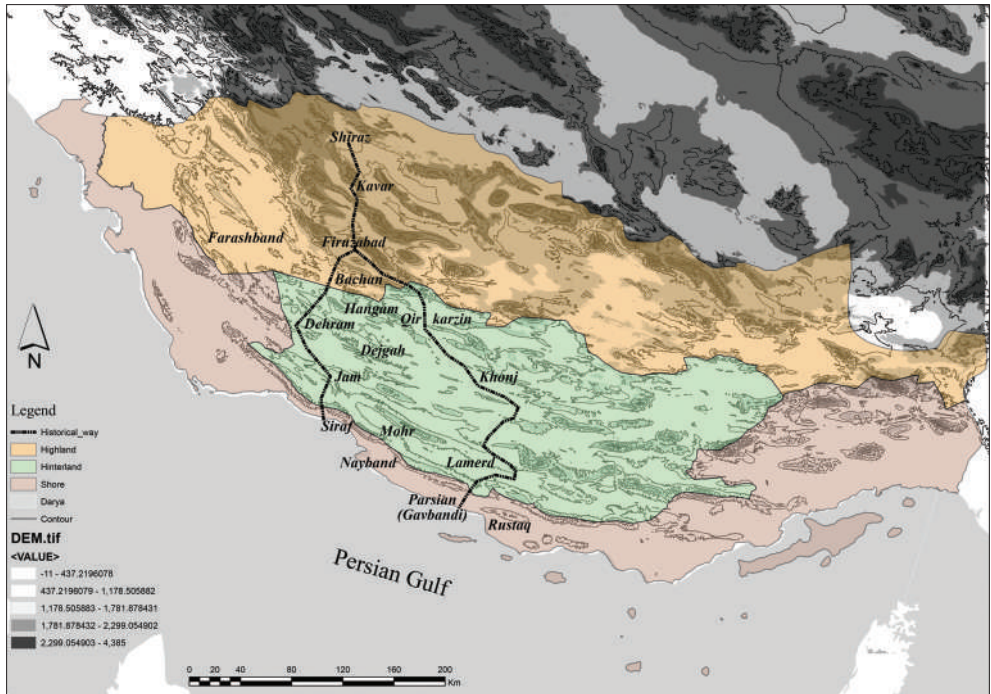


Fig. 3 - The region between Firuzabad and the Persian Gulf Coast covered by the project. Elaboration A. Askari Chaverdi.

archaeological map of the area chosen for the research, realised in a GIS environment, associated with an online database and obtained by inserting already available information, including that published in Persian. A post-doc fellowship was activated with funds from the PRIN 2017 project, and its holder, Andrea Sembroni, has carried out in the first year the detailed geomorphological study, which offers the guarantee of methodological validity and correctness of the GIS, with the reconstruction of the ancient landscapes and above all of the coastline of the time, which is profoundly different from the current one. Due to its highly specialised nature, Sembroni's contribution (Sembroni, Askari Chaverdi, forthcoming) has been submitted for publication in a geological journal.³

The second objective is the search for new original data that will come from the surface archaeological exploration carried out by the Shiraz University team in the most interesting areas, mainly the Firuzabad plain surrounding the city of Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah, the valleys of the Southern districts of Lamerd and Mohr, and the mentioned stretch of the Persian Gulf coast: the latter was the subject in November 2019 of a short inspection funded with project funds and led by M. Naderi Bani as part of the formalised collaboration with the Iranian National Institute for Oceanography in Tehran.

The set of three reference sites, respectively for the plateau (Firuzabad), for the coastal hinterland (Tomb-e Bot) and for the coast (Tal-e Pargo), allowed the group of Iranian researchers collaborating in the project under the direction of A. Askari Chaverdi (see below), to start collecting topographical data for the GIS envisaged in the program and to collect information on the various sites identified in spatial reconnaissance, in the first year limited to the Firuzabad plateau.

As for Firuzabad, the archaeological activities there have now been limited to the complete documentation of all the structural emergencies outcropping in the inner circle and in the first adjacent concentric belt of the city of Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah, today's site of Shahr-e Gur, to be compared with the particular radial "grid" that aerial photos highlight but that on the ground doesn't correspond to anything visible: a particular interest was also given to the central fire-temple known as Takht-e Neshin. Thanks to the five-year agreement with the Research Institute for Cultural Heritage and Tourism of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the first season of documentation activity, conducted with the excellent competences of Ali Eghra', surveyor of the Joint Mission, has been completed (see below).

This surface work was accompanied by the first geophysical prospections which Kouros Mohammadkhani of Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran has carried out with great competence and generosity (see below).

The article ends with a section dedicated to maritime routes along the Northeastern coast of the Persian Gulf, for which the fieldwork has not yet started. We preferred to anticipate the methodological approach chosen by the scholar in charge of the sector within the framework of the PRIN 2017, Diego Maria Mezzapelle: on the basis of his practical experience as a sailor, as well as an underwater archaeologist, it will be possible to highlight the topographical characteristics that are essential for a stretch of coastline to have been used in ancient times as a port and landing, thus guaranteeing the formulation of hypotheses anchored to practical foundations.

Of considerable interest for the study of the topography of Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah is also the work by Aleksander Engeskaug, doctoral candidate at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and member of the PRIN2017 project, who in a separate forthcoming

³ The article has been submitted to the journal *Geomorphology* and is pending review for acceptance.

ing article proposes a new interpretation of the passage from *Kār-nāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān* (5.13) dedicated to the illustration of the foundation of Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah, briefly anticipated (Engeskaug 2021).

PIERFRANCESCO CALLIERI

FIRUZABAD TO THE PERSIAN GULF: ARDAXŠĪR-XWARRAH—TOMB-E BOT—TAL-E PARGO,
A POSSIBLE TRADE ROUTE. AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY

An archaeological survey and review of the archaeological sites of Sasanian province of Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah has been ongoing since 2019 as the contribution of the Iranian team from the Shiraz University to the Iranian-Italian project, with the aim of recognizing the trade routes of Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah province from Firuzabad to the Persian Gulf and locating the possible harbours. This survey has made use of the previous seminal contribution of the mission of the Shiraz University particularly in the two areas of Lamerd and Mohr (Askari Chaverdi, Azarnoush 2004/1383) and Gāvbandi (Parsian), which are likely to be part of this territorial system. These activities provided a strong archaeological information basis on the Southern coasts and hinterland plains of Fars province (Askari Chaverdi, forthcoming), which has flowed into the Italian PRIN 2017 project “The dynamics of human settlement in historical times in South-central Fars, from Firuzabad to the Persian Gulf.”

In order to understand the trade, economic and cultural relations of the Persian Gulf with the highland plains, besides the available geographical and historical information, archaeological findings from the coastal plains (Sirāf, Nāyband, Gāvbandi and Rostag), inland plains (Lamerd, Mohr, Jam, Khonj, Qir, Hangam, Dehram, Dejgah) and highland plains (Firuzabad, Farashband, Bachun, Kavar and Shiraz) represent a fundamental source (Fig. 3).

According to textual documents, Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah was the name of the capital of the Sasanian province of Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah,⁴ and the identification of this name is based on the late Sasanian seal impression discovered at Qasr-e Abu Nasr (Frye 1973: 51-52, D. 219). Another document, a written text from Khafīr, a locality in the Jahrom region, belonging to the Middle Islamic centuries, more precisely the Ilkhanid period, 13th to 14th century (Shaikhol Hokamaei 2009/1388: 15-16) shows that the administrative unit was then still used. A large part of ancient Fars, i.e. the plains of Shiraz, Kavar, Firuzabad, Farashband, Dejgan, Mohr and Lamerd, Asaluyeh, Sirāf and Gāvbandi were all parts of the province of Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah; indeed, according to historical texts, the province of Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah included the entire area of the central and Southern part of Fars up to the Persian Gulf (Estakhrī, *Masālek wa Mamālek*: 95).

Larestan was the Southernmost of these divisions in the province of Fars, and Lamerd and Mohr counties were located in the Southern part of this region. The vast area of Larestan, which in the Sasanian period was considered to be a part of the *khorreh* of Ardashir, in the Early Islamic period extended to the port of Sirāf on the coast of the

⁴ In the pre-Islamic period, Fars was divided into five *khorreh* (districts): Estakhr, Ardashir, Shapur, Qobad and Darabgerd (Gyselen 1989: 70-71, fn. 6; Estakhrī, *Kitāb al-masālek wa'l-mamālek*: 95; Ebn al-Balkhī, *Fārs-nāmeḥ*: 286).

From the Middle Islamic period these divisions changed and the four administrative divisions became those of Shabankareh, Central Fars, Kohgiluyeh and Larestan (Hosseini Fasaie, *Fārs-nāmeḥ Nāserī*, V.2, P.900).

Persian Gulf (Estakhrī, *Masālek wa Mamālek*: 100; Ebn al-Balkhī, *Fārs-nāmeḥ*: 328; Nöldeke 1879: 48).

In the Islamic period, the entire coastal area of the port of Sirāf was called Seif, the area to the East of Sirāf was called Seif Aammareh, the area to the West of Sirāf was called Muzaffar, while the central part had the name Seif Zuhair (Estakhrī, *Masālek wa Mamālek*: 100; Ebn al-Balkhī, *Fārs-nāmeḥ*: 337).

All the coastal plains of this area from the bay of Nāyband to Gāvbandi and the two inland plains North of the central area of Seif (Sirāf) formed the lands called Koran and Êrahistān, names that have now been replaced by those of Gāvbandi, Lamerd and Mohr (Estakhrī, *Masālek wa Mamālek*).

Highland Plains. Archaeological Project at Shahr-e Gur: Past Data, Present Work and Future Prospects

The lively town of Firuzabad, characterised by a visible Qashqa'ī presence, is located 110 km South of Shiraz in the South-central part of present Fars province. The extension of the plain is about 3,575 square kilometres with a width ranging from 10 to 20 km (Huff 1999: 633). The region is within the SE Zagros chain, and the plain, with an average altitude of 1,351 metres above sea level, is surrounded by mountain ranges. The region is in a “hot semi-desert” climate zone, which makes the area suitable for sheep and goat herding and irrigated agriculture, in particular, wheat, fruit and vegetables (*ibid.*): irrigation is made possible by the Tang-a Ab river, flowing at a much lower elevation than that of the town, and by springs such as the large one giving birth to the lake in front of the Ardashir's Palace.

On the basis of the archaeological surveys carried out in the past in the Firuzabad plain, 97 archaeological sites have been identified here, including 1 site dated to the Achaemenid period, 4 sites dated to the Parthian period and 31 sites dated to the Sasanian period (Nowruzi 2007/1384: 336). Among these is the ancient site of Shahr-e Gur, the city of Gur, old Ardashīr-Xwarrah, one of the main Iranian cities of the Sasanian and early Islamic periods, located 1 km from the modern city and made peculiar by its circular layout with a diameter of about 2 km.

The old city is included in the monuments of Firuzabad which in 2018 were inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List, namely also: Qal'e-ye Dokhtar; the Ardashir Palace, so-called Ateshkadeh; the rock relief of Ardashir's investiture and the bridge of Mehr Narse; the rock relief of Ardashir's victory over Artaban.

The remains of the city of Ardashīr-Xwarrah are the main evidence of Sasanian-era urban settlement in the Firuzabad plain (Fig. 4). According to the Pahlavi text of the *Kārnāmag ī Ardashīr ī Pābagān*, the main part of the Firuzabad plain before the foundation of Ardashīr-Xwarrah was a swamp, drained by Ardashir to prepare the ground for the construction of the city (Huff 2008; Cereti 2012: 585-588; see Engeskaug 2021). Following the establishment of a land allocation system and the transfer of water from the Tang-e Ab River for irrigation, agricultural activities developed in the plain. In an interesting example, beyond a mountain ridge, a wall, most probably of an aqueduct, runs exactly North-South in line with the tower beyond the ridge. The aqueduct was fed by water sources in the Eastern part of the Firuzabad plain: the water flowed in a channel cut in the rock and penetrated the rocky ridge through a tunnel carved in the stone. This is probably the actual background of the ancient and medieval reports about the tunnel that Ardashir is said to have ordered to be excavated through a mountain.

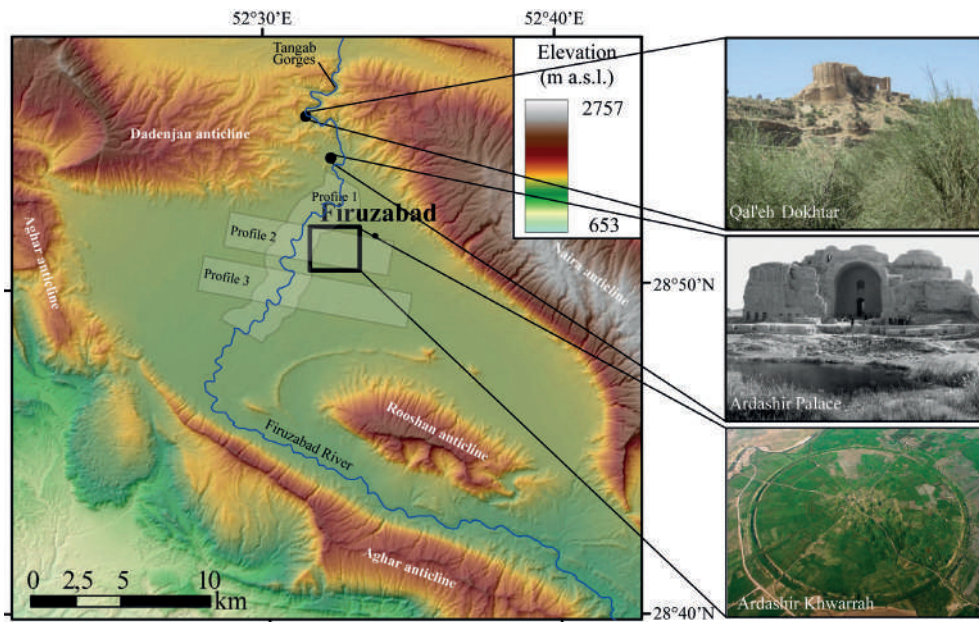


Fig. 4 - Topographic map of the Firuzabad plain and surroundings (ALOS Global DEM with a resolution of *c.* 30 m), with location and photos of the three main archaeological sites of the whole area. After Sembroni, Askari Chavedi forthcoming: fig. 2.

Considering the aerial photographs available in the published bibliography, it can be said that the radiating plan of the streets of the round city of Ardashir-Xwarrah extended to the plain beyond the circular fortification of the city, up to a distance of 10 km from the central tower. The two main perpendicular axes of the scheme, determined by the axes of the tower and the four main gates, which are marked by four large breaches in the city wall, lead to ruined buildings, which should belong to Ardashir's building programme (Huff 1986: 302-308).

The streets of the round city of Ardashir-Xwarrah, from the outer fortification end against the city's central circle, 400 m in diameter, possibly a fortified perimeter. This area today has at its exact centre (Huff 1969-1970: 324-338) a tall tower with an almost square plan, called 'Tirbal' or 'Menar' in Islamic sources, the remains of which have survived to the present day (Fig. 5): excavations carried out by an Iranian-German mission, still unpublished (Niakan, Huff, in Archives of ICAR, 2005), have revealed the presence of the foundations of the structures that originally stood around the massive central core, now buried under the soil. The tower is a massive structure built in raw stone masonry with a length of 9 m on each side and a height of more than 30 m. It actually served as the core of a tower-staircase which, with the width of the destroyed stairs and the added outer walls, must have been about 20 m long on each side. It was thought to have an external spiral staircase and to be a descendant of the *ziggurat*, until the German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld recognized its true nature (1934: 123). The tower provided visual contact with the fortresses which controlled the main access route to the plain in the Tang-e Ab gorge, Tol-e Khezr on the NW and Qal'e-ye Pesar on the NE, and in addition to this military function, it must have been indispensable for surveying activities when planning and building the city and the land division in the plain.



Fig. 5 - View of the Menar of the Shahr-e Gur. Photo courtesy ICHTO base of Firuzabad.

There are other hill-shaped ruins within the city which, based on their location, are presumed to be civil establishments. Therefore, it is assumed that the official, administrative, ceremonial and religious buildings were located within the central circle of the city while the civil and residential buildings existed within the larger outer circles (Huff 1986: 302-308). The main building material of the city, both in the centre and in the surrounding residential sectors, must have been mud-brick, with two exceptions: the structures built of cut stone blocks of the so-called Takht-e Neshin (see Eghra', below), as well as the already mentioned central tower-like structure.

Hinterland Plains: Lamerd and Mohr

An archaeological survey was carried out by the author in the 2000s in the hinterland plains of the Lamerd and Mohr districts, with the aim of establishing the cultural sequence of the region from prehistoric to historic times. The region had been first partially surveyed in the winter of 1932-33 by Sir Aurel Stein, who recorded 12 sites in its Southern plain (Stein 1937: 213-234). A further 21 sites would be added to his catalogue by a subsequent survey programme by H. Gaube (1980: 149-166, taf. 30-37). Finally, fieldwork by the author in 1999-2000 under the advice of M. Azarnoush identified a further 43 sites (Askari Chaverdi, Azarnoush 2004: 3-18).

The survey regarded an area of fertile land of about 5,000 square kilometers. In this fieldwork, on the basis of the available maps the studied area was divided into 50 squares measuring 10 by 10 km (Fig. 6). Each of these squares was coded based on the Northeast angle of that square. In this way, on the map, the first two digits are the number of the horizontal side above each square and the second two digits are the number of the vertical side to the right of each square. The archaeological survey started from the Northwest of the Southern plain and ended in the Northeast corner of the Northern plain. This full coverage survey was conducted in three stages: preliminary, complementary and focused by intensive sites. On the basis of the study of surface collection of potsherds and artifacts, 76 sites were recorded. On some parts of the region in which geomorphological analysis suggested better environmental conditions, we made a more intensive survey. As a result, we were able to recognize some indications of the development of settlement patterns in the surveyed area. The total number of sites would amount to more than 100 as a result of frequent re-surveys between 2018 and 2019.

The sites range from the first half of the 4th millennium BCE to the late Islamic period. We could only find one site with material comparable to Chalcolithic Bakun A (4000-3500 BCE) (Askari Chaverdi, Petrie, Taylor 2008: 21-42). In addition, 4 sites date to the Achaemenid period, 12 sites to the Parthian period, 44 sites to the Sasanian period and 50 sites to the Islamic period. Out of the Islamic settlements, 19 sites can be dated to the early, 8 sites to the mid and 32 sites to the late periods (Askari Chaverdi, Azarnoush 2004: 3-18).

Among these sites, Tomb-e Bot was selected for a series of systematic investigations between 1998 and 2011 and a stratified systematic sampling was also carried out in 2019-2020 in the hope of finding answers to crucial historical questions for Fars, ranging from the collapse of the Achaemenid Empire to the rise of the Sasanian Empire. Located in the Mehran River Valley about 40 km North of the port of Sirâf, Tomb-e Bot is situated at latitude 27°44'268" North, longitude 52°39'122" East, at an elevation of 500 metres a.s.l. (Askari Chaverdi 2001; 2002; 2017). The site covers a total area of 5-7 hectares together with the adjacent mounds and the foothills. The farmland in the site receives its

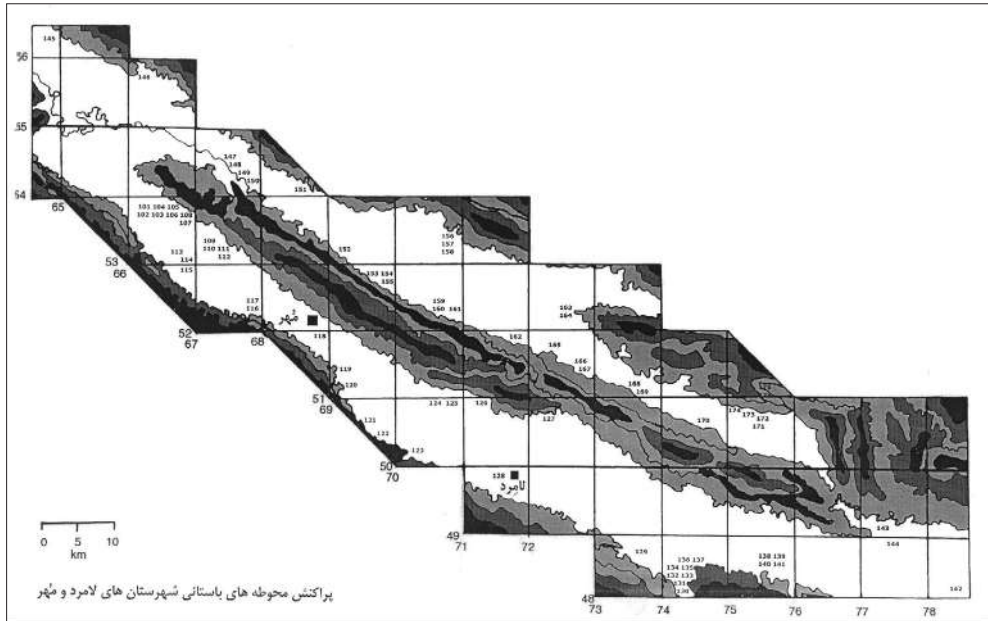


Fig. 6 - Survey of the Lamerd and Mohr districts. Elaboration A. Askari Chaverdi.

irrigation water from a nearby well, which provides drinking water. Due to its arable soil, the area allows the local agro-pastoral community to live there throughout the year. The seasonal river Mehran crosses the plain about 800 m to the South. Several chance discoveries of architectural elements in local gray limestone, with three elements of Achaemenidizing capitals with volutes, three elements of Achaemenidizing capitals with addorsed animal protomes (Fig. 7), a fragmented stone human bust and two eagle protomes being the most intriguing cases (Askari Chaverdi 2001: 66-72), have been made in recent years as a result of agricultural activities.

The most significant phase of this sequence, based on the surface finds, is the 2nd century CE, which marked many historical, political and social developments in the region (*ibid.*: 66-72; 2017). What has become evident to a large extent from the analysis of the surface pottery assemblage from the site is that the late Arsacid period witnessed the apogee of opulence at Tomb-e Bot, a fact also supported by the style of the artworks from the site surface, particularly the human bust, and their comparison with other related material dated to the late 2nd and early 3rd century CE (Askari Chaverdi 2016).

Pending new evidence to better clarify the chronology of this key site, the archaeological evidence for Achaemenidizing features in South Fars demonstrates the region's central role in the continuation of Achaemenid heritage in ancient Iran, particularly during the transition period and before the rise of the Sasanians. Given the frequent discussions in recent decades about whether or not the Sasanians intentionally imitated Achaemenid traditions, particularly in terms of architecture and art (Callieri 2021a), considering the close stylistic connections between the artworks of Tomb-e Bot with Achaemenid and Arsacid art on the one hand and Sasanian art on the other, as well as the uninterrupted occupations of Tomb-e Bot from the Arsacid to the Sasanian period, as suggested by its ceramic assemblages, we trust that the new project, particularly if it includes new stratigraphic excavations, will allow to get decisive evidence regarding the chronological



Fig. 7 - Tomb-e Bot, elements of Achaemenidising capitals on the site. Photo A. Askari Chaverdi.

aspects of the interlude between the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods in the Fars region. Extensive archaeological excavations should be carried out in this site. Continuation of archaeological activities in the framework of PRIN 2017 project can achieve significant success in recognizing the Parthian and Sasanian periods.

Coastal Plain: Gâvbandi (Present-Day Parsian)

This region with an area of 1700 km² is the valley of the river of the same name, which flows into the Gulf of Nâyband to the NW between the high coastal range bordering the Mohr and Lamerd valleys to the North-East, and a further coastal range parallel to the first but of lesser height to the South-West, along the Persian Gulf shore. Parsian and Kushkonar are the two main modern cities. The average height of this plain from sea level near the coast is 5 to 15 m and in various parts of the plain it varies between 20 m and a maximum of 50 m. The region of Parsian has a special strategic position in the South of Iran (Figs. 1, 8), because it had and has sufficient resources of sweet water: the skilled use of this environmental capacities for habitation in this area had a direct relationship with the high level of traditional water technologies.

The decision to explore the Gâvbandi plain in the Parsian district is based on the environmental conditions potentially suitable for human settlement in a region such as the Persian Gulf with its very hot and dry climate, where water sources are very rare. Methodology of field survey follows the full coverage with more intensive survey in the fertile areas, exactly such as Lamerd and Mohr area, and also here the available maps were used in order to create squares measuring 10 by 10 km. The evidence of frequentation of the plain along the axis of the fertile Zagros marls and the relative distribution of land in this plain shows that the environmental potential of this area could be exploited thanks to the

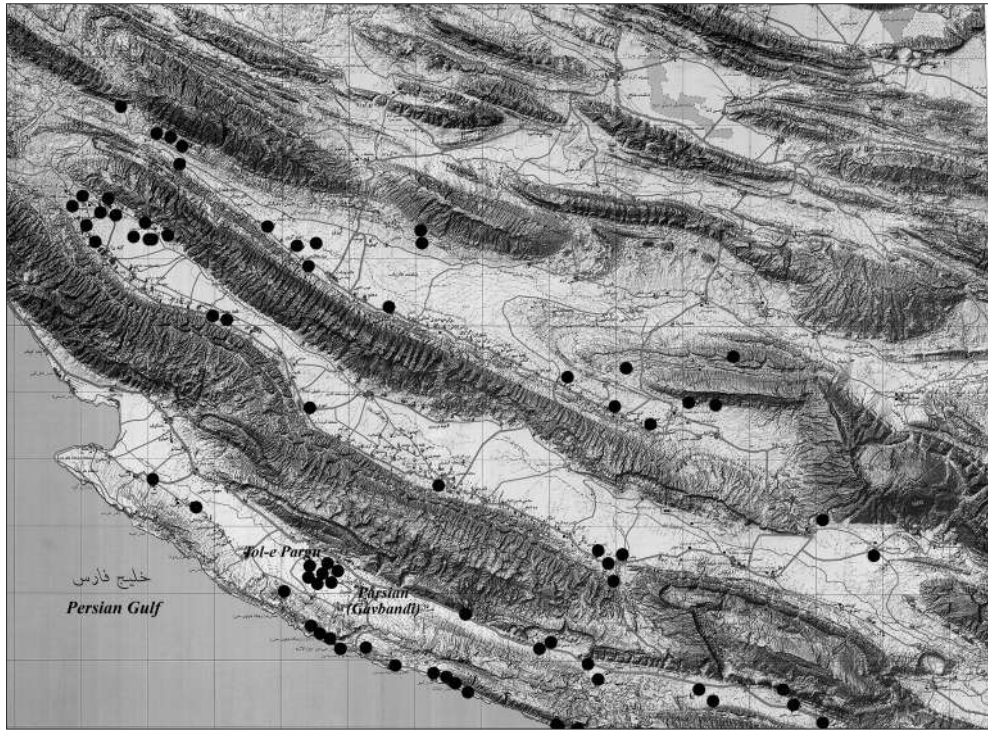


Fig. 8 - Survey of the Gâvbandi plain. Elaboration A. Askari Chaverdi.

technical skills achieved by society in the Parthian and Sasanian periods. Since it was necessary for the economic as well as the military⁵ system to establish commercial ports on the shores of the Persian Gulf, the region of Gâvbandi⁶ certainly represented one of the areas most likely to have been chosen for this function: and therefore we have decided to concentrate part of our archaeological research here.

The importance of the Gâvbandi-Parsian plain is shown not only by its traces of irrigated agricultural resources in plain, but also by the existence of a defence systems for the control of the coast of the Persian Gulf, to which the Kalat-e Sorkh fortress seems to belong.

According to the archaeological survey carried out by A. Askari Chaverdi in 2005, 54 sites have been identified in the Gâvbandi plain (Fig. 8) (Askari Chaverdi, forthcoming). The sequence of settlement periods at the sites is as follows: one site is inhabited at the end of the prehistoric period and continues to be used in the Old Elamite period. In addition, the Achaemenid period was identified at 1 site, the Parthian period at 4 sites, the Sasanian period at 34 sites and the Islamic period at 41 sites.

⁵ Hamzeh Isfahani points to the number of military centers from Bushehr to Lengeh port at the beginning of the Islamic era (Hamzeh Isfahani, *Kitab Tarikh Sini muluk al-arz wal-anbiya*)

⁶ The name of Gâvbandi, deriving from a method of dividing water from ancient times, indicates that the plain of Gâvbandi had a water and agricultural resource management system: basically the term *gâvband* means the amount of share between the owner and the subject people who received land and water by the owner, however with irrigation and cultivation work being carried out by another person, subject people. Finally in the Autumn season, the harvest is divided in the frame of the *gâvband* contract.



Fig. 9 - Tal-e Pargo: surface of the stepped trench. Photo A. Askari Chaverdi.

The need to have a ceramic sequence for the dating of the sites identified in the survey suggested the execution of a stratigraphic excavation to obtain the ceramic sequence from stratigraphic contexts of absolute reliability.

Among all the ancient sites located during the surface survey, the site of Pargo-ye Chah Darvazeh in Bambari village was selected. Preliminary hypotheses based on potsherds collected during the field survey suggest a possible dating to the early Sasanian period. The important, Tal-e Pargo Bozorg or Chah Darvazeh site is located three kilometers Southwest of Parsian city in Gâvbandi region and 600 meters Southeast of Bambari village at coordinates $27^{\circ}11'93''$ longitude and $52^{\circ}00'791''$ latitude. This large hill with dimensions of 160×220 m and a height of 10 m from the surface of the surrounding land with an area of about 3 ha is one of the largest and most important ancient sites of the region. The site consists of several ups and downs and architectural structures made of stone and plaster appear throughout its various parts. Also, the sherd distribution on the surface of the site is various and impressive. This site is located in the central part of the plain in the most fertile part of agricultural lands. There, the plots are exploited by aquatic cultivation method. There are plenty of palm trees and native plants in this part, and every year the lands around Tal-e Pargo site are cultivated. The excavation sounding in the Northwestern part of the site was excavated in a stepped form (Fig. 9). This program was carried out with the cooperation and management of the Iranian Centre for Archaeological Research of the Research Institute for Cultural Heritage and within the framework of a memorandum of understanding signed by the Shiraz University and the General Office of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Crafts of Hormozgan Province in 2019. The

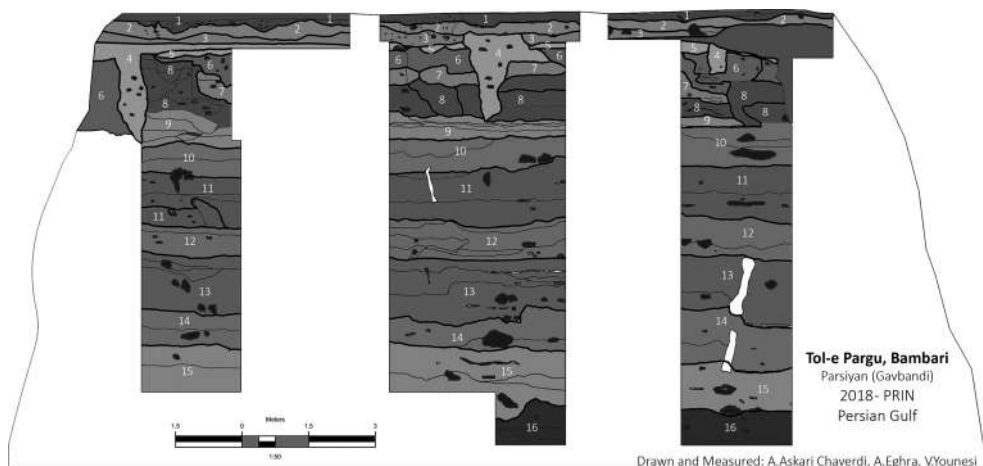


Fig. 10 - Tal-e Pargo: stratigraphic sections of the trench excavated. Elaboration A. Askari Chaverdi.

highest part of this sounding in unit number 1, belonging to phase number 1, is at the height of 30.02 m above sea level and the lowest part of the sounding in unit number 173 of phase 16 was at 21.28 m above sea level. In total, considering the height from the lowest part to the highest level of stratigraphic sounding, stratigraphy sounding excavated about 8.74 meters of ancient deposits. Based on the study and typology of ceramic finds from the stratigraphy of the archaeological contexts, 16 settlement phases were identified in this site in relative order of dating the settlement phases from the uppermost or last of the first phase to the lowermost or oldest phase of settlement, i.e. phase 16 (Fig. 10). On the basis of the preliminary study of ceramic finds, the relative dating of phase one (early Islamic period), phase two and three (late Sasanian period), phase four and five (middle Sasanian period), phase six and seven (early Sasanian period) and phase eight (late Parthian period) were advanced. Similarly, settlement phases 9 and 10 (Middle Parthian period), phases 11-14 (beginning of Parthian era) and settlement phases 15 and 16 can be dated with the overlap of the beginning of the post-Achaemenid era, the Seleucid period and the Parthian period (Askari Chaverdi, forthcoming).

The horizon of the settlement sequence of this area is equal to the sequence of the Tomb-e Bot site. With the collapse of the political class of the Achaemenid society, it seems that similar to the Tomb-e Bot site, inland, hinterland and coast of Persian Gulf flourished during the Parthian period in the South of Fars province (Askari Chaverdi 2001). To the extent that at the end of the Parthian period, in Tomb-e Bot site, artistic masterpieces were pursued to imitate or to gain legitimacy from the Achaemenid heritage (Askari Chaverdi 2002; 2016; 2017). With the emergence of the Sasanian dynasty and the foundation of Firuzabad, this region was considered within the framework of Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah province and like Tomb-e Bot site in the hinterlands plain of Lamerd and Mohr, throughout the Sasanian period, Gāvbandi plain has been developed and inhabited. In terms of cultural function and interactions, considering that this ancient site is located at a distance of 7 km from the coast in a fertile plain, the possibility of its development and its functional role with the ports of this stretch of the coast such as Teben, Bostano, Nây-band and Sirâf must be taken in consideration and more importantly, its cultural and functional relation with important ancient sites such as the ancient site of Tomb-e Bot in its Northern hinterland plain is important. This shows that this area was well managed econ-

omically and biologically: plain environmental resources are significant but resource management has been more important.

At the end of the Sasanian period and during the 7th century CE, simultaneously with the horizon of Sirâf development habitation in this site continues as in the Tomb-e Bot site. However, from the 8th and 9th centuries CE, i.e. simultaneously with the 3rd and 4th centuries AH, the habitual sequence of this site declined and the biological and livelihood economy system of this plain collapsed and probably coincided with the decline of Sirâf and Ardaxšîr-Xwarrah city, Firuzabad. In general, extensive biological changes have taken place in these coastal and hinterland of Ardaxšîr-Xwarrah region.

ALIREZA ASKARI CHAVERDI

DOCUMENTATION OF HISTORICAL SITES WITH MORPHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES
THE CASE OF THE CITY OF ARDAXŠÎR-XWARRAH (FIRUZABAD PLAIN,
CENTRAL-SOUTHERN FARs)

In January 2020, following the official start of PRIN 2017 project, and in connection with the program of activities of the Iranian-Italian Joint Archaeological Mission in Fars, a Documentation Team was established in order to examine, acquire, and technically analyze the available data on the Firuzabad plain in terms of field surveys and office operations, in a continuity with the activities carried out in 2019. Such an operation is essential to perform a systematic investigation of the study area. In details, the Iranian-Italian Joint Archaeological Mission Documentation Team pursues three major goals: 1) documentation of valuable historical monuments located in the Shahr-e Gur site via the completion of all the data collected in 2019 useful for a metric three-dimensionalization, 2) large-scale documentation of the Firuzabad plain necessary to satisfy the requirements of the



Fig. 11 - Aerial view of the 'Menar' in the central circle of Shahr-e Gur. Photo A. Eghra'.

other specialists, such as geomorphologists and geophysicists, working in the Iranian-Italian team; 3) detailed metric documentation of the Firuzabad plain to satisfy the requirements of archaeologists and cultural heritage specialists. It is expected that these three goals are all fulfilled in the third year of cooperation.

The Iranian-Italian Documentation Team faced many challenges in 2020. The team's performance weakened in consequence of the COVID-19 disease; however, despite harsh conditions, it succeeded in achieving satisfactory results.

During the first season (2020), the Documentation Team was focused particularly on the site of Shahr-e Gur (Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah) (Fig. 11). The documentation activity here had started in 2019, with the topographical support to the geophysical surveys, which were carried out in two specific locations (A and B in Fig. 25). Following the geophysical survey, the Documentation Team focused on the archaeological and topographic characterization of the Shahr-e Gur site at micro and macro scales, to obtain a detailed information about the study area. The team primarily realized the survey of the whole area using low-height aerial photogrammetry (close-range photogrammetry) (Fig. 12). The

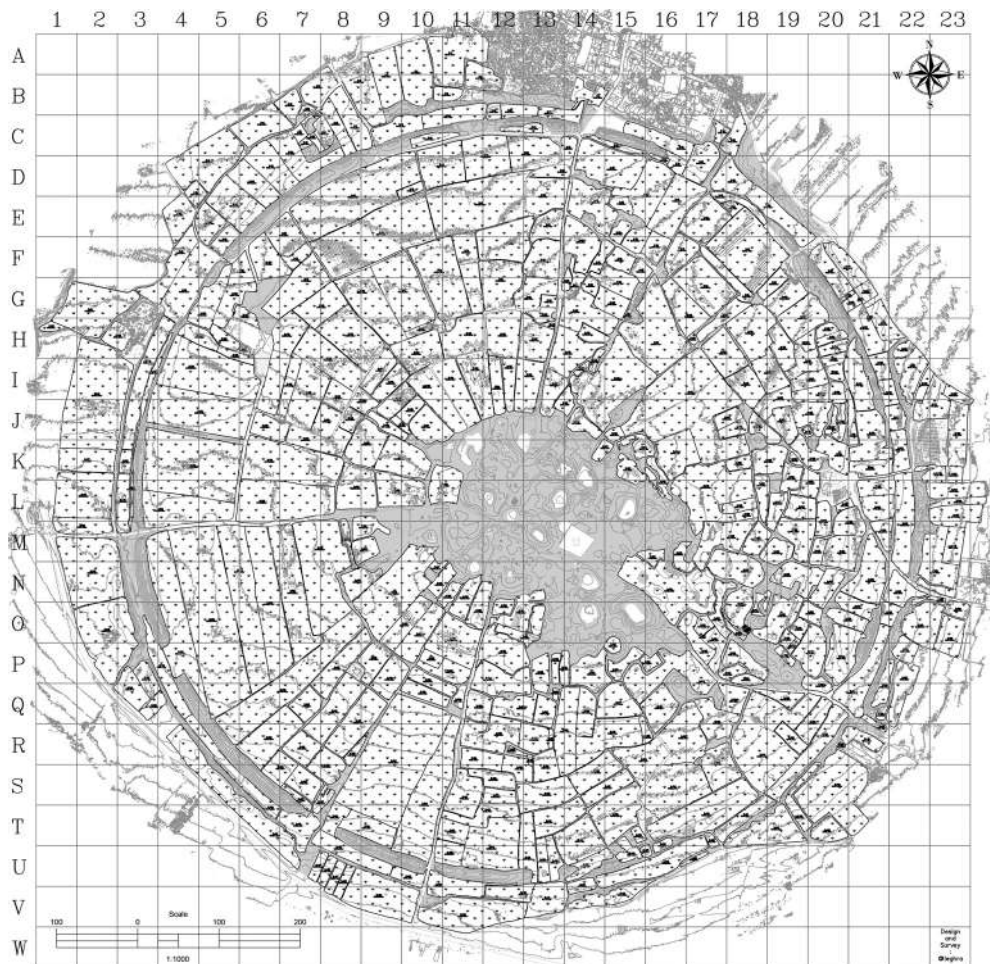


Fig. 12 - Shahr-e Gur, plan resulting from the survey of the whole area using low-height aerial photogrammetry (close-range photogrammetry). Elaboration A. Eghra'.



Fig. 13 - Aerial view of Shahr-e Gur, with Qal 'e-ye Dokhtar on the background. Photo A. Eghra'.

activity was first concentrated on monuments predominantly located at the center of the city. For this purpose, the documentation activity was performed in three steps (Fig. 13).

Step 1. The surveying of the center of Shahr-e Gur in an area of approximately 36 ha was realized using the dual-frequency GPS-rover and an EOS750D camera to recognize the remains of historical monuments on the ground. This information includes UTM coordinates and height at the two extremities of each existing stretch of wall visible on the surface, as well as its description based on the building material and the masonry technique, with the attempt at associating it to an architectural structure (Fig. 14). The information obtained was imported into the Civil3d software.

Step 2. The precise and qualitative photogrammetric surveying of the center of Shahr-e Gur was performed with the close-range photogrammetric approach. The map of Shahr-e Gur was elaborated by matching the information obtained by utilizing the drone Phantom4proV2 (DJI Co.) 50 m above the ground, a GPS device (Raymand Co.), and Shamim Network, and the information from the Iran National Cartographic Center, including 18 mobile ground points and five fixed concrete points. The surveying was carried out in 2020 in two parts. The photogrammetric information was first acquired on Jan. 19, 2020, when thatches and weeds in the center of Shahr-e Gur were cleaned up. Once acquired, the data were processed into the AgisoftMetashape software. Lastly, the inputs obtained during processing were transferred to the Civil3d and GIS softwares for cartography, matching, and analysis. Once the output obtained from information processing and cartography were transferred, the surveying information from Shahr-e Gur center surveying was matched with UAV output information (Fig. 15). In this connection, all the existing architectural information in Shahr-e Gur acquired so far was classified descriptively. The purpose is to classify Shahr-e Gur buildings in terms of their history and construction architecture type (Fig. 16).

Step 3. It consisted in the analysis of the survey information. The information was analyzed using GIS and scheduled through the formulation of descriptive and in-depth analysis. In this functional stage, it was attempted to prepare elevation models (DEM and

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Fig. 14 - An example of a wall structure identified in the central circle of Shahr-e Gur (photo A. Eghra').



Fig. 15 - Display of identified wall structures in the central circle of the Shahr-e Gur on the image taken by drone. Elaboration A. Eghra'.

DSM) and a 3D model of the watercourse and canals. Afterward, the type of urban elements in Shahr-e Gur were determined (Fig. 17).

The results of the three steps above mentioned yielded detailed information about the status of the architectural plan of the fire-temple of Shahr-e Gur called Takht-e Neshin, the type of watercourse, the locations of two ponds, as well as the morphologies of the architectural structures at the center of Shahr-e Gur (Fig. 18). The elevation models (DEM and DSM) in the Global Mapper software significantly helped the Documentation Team to identify the original plan of the Takht-e Neshin compound in Shahr-e Gur (Fig. 19). In the past, it was assumed that this complex in Shahr-e Gur, representing the Ardaxšīr-Xwarrāh fire temple mentioned in the sources, only consisted in the *chahar taq* square building made of massive squared stone blocks (Huff 1972). However, based on the results obtained, nowadays, we can claim that at Shahr-e Gur there was a fire sanctuary with the *chahar taq* protected by a host of rooms and a central courtyard (Figs. 20, 21).

The results of the analysis by the Documentation Team in the QT Modeler and the application of the *Classify* tool demonstrated that there were two ponds in Shahr-e Gur. In accordance with the location of the architectural structures at the centre of the city, namely the so-called Menar, and particularly the Takht-e Neshin, there seems to be a large

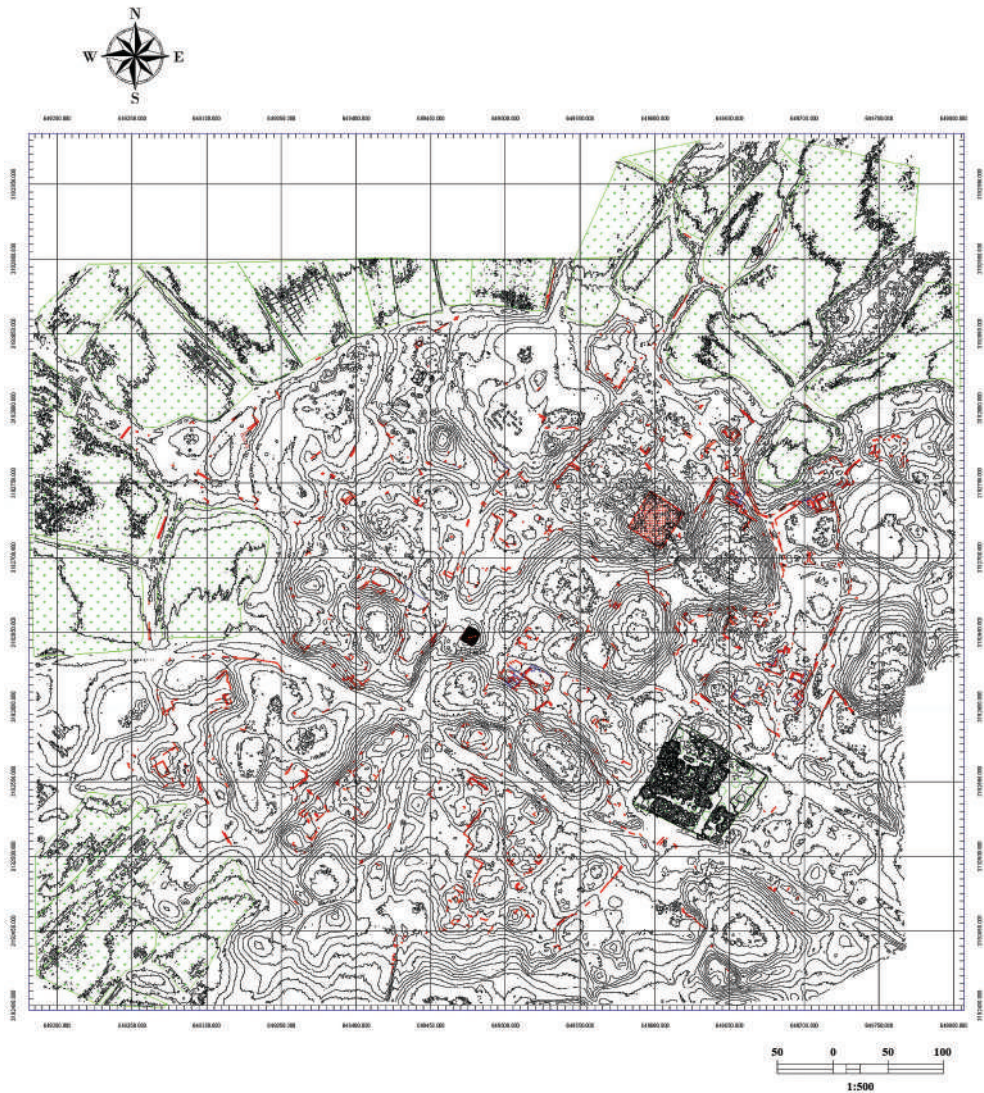


Fig. 16 - Topographic map prepared from the central circle of Shahr-e Gur, on which the position of the wall structures is specified. Elaboration A. Eghra'.

pond that can be related with the fire sanctuary at the center of Shahr-e Gur (see Engeskaug's paper in this volume) and another one outside the boundary of the central circle of the city. It is noteworthy that the slope of the central circle of Shahr-e Gur indicates that water flowed from the internal pond at the city center to the one outside the center of Shahr-e Gur (Fig. 22).

Matching UAV-taken orthophotographs and the GPS-taken architectural structures as well as drawing on the topography of the central circle of Shahr-e Gur, the Documentation Team succeeded in detecting an initial plan of urbanization elements, e.g., aqueducts and buildings at Shahr-e Gur city centre (Figs. 23, 24). As for the many stretches of walls visible on the surface, they were catalogued, grouped and classified on the basis of the information on the masonry, thickness and orientation of each of them. Sub-

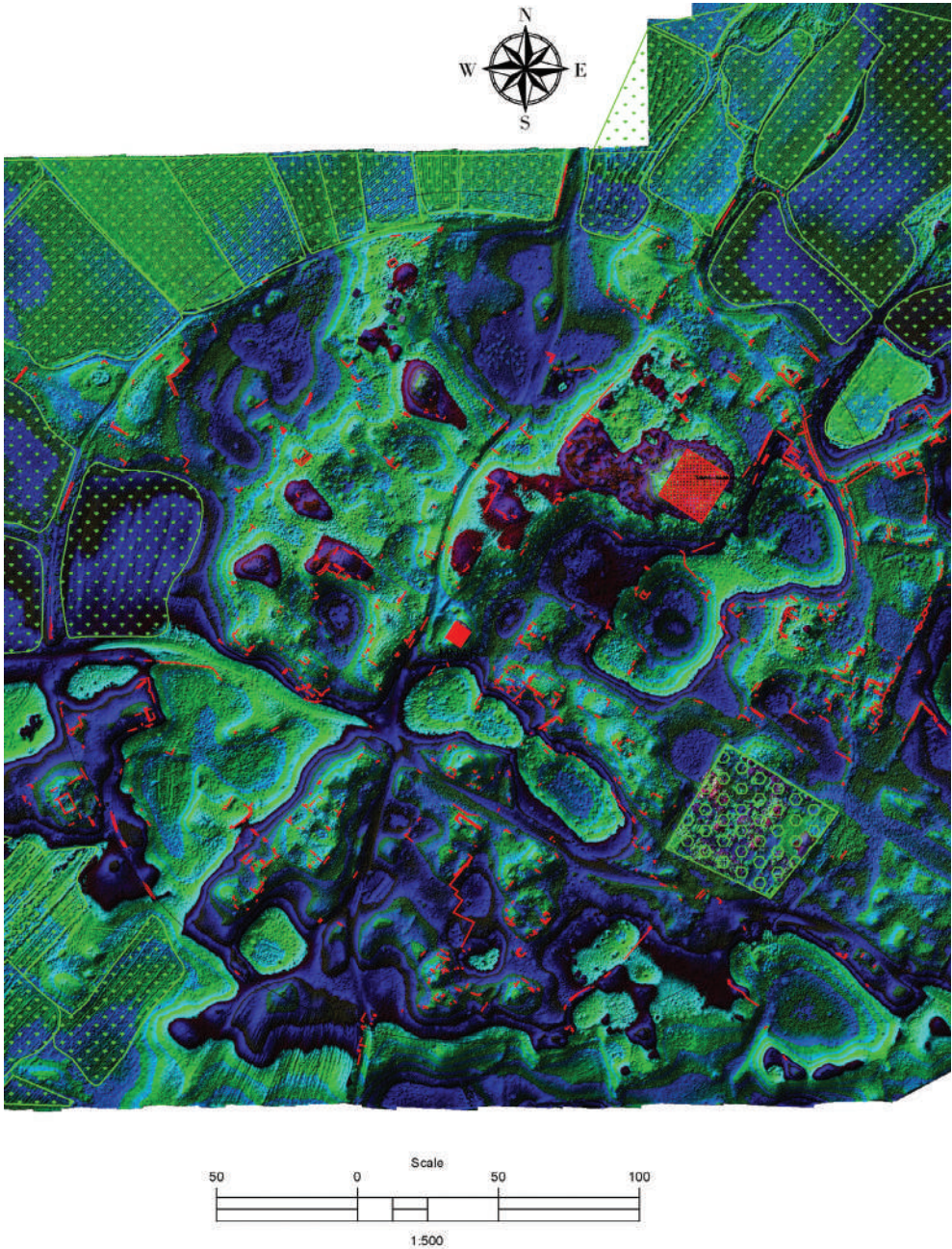


Fig. 17 - DEM map prepared from the central circle of Shahr-e Gur, on which the position of the structures is specified. Elaboration A. Eghra'.

sequently, plans were drawn up including related structures, which will then be processed to verify the existence of built blocks with different axes in the central sector of the city, to be compared with the scheme of subdivision into radial axes and concentric circles that is visible in the aerial photos. We hope that a plan with all urbanization and architect-



Fig. 18 - Bird sight view of the central circle of Shahr-e Gur. Elaboration A. Eghra⁴.

tural elements of Shahr-e Gur can be developed within the next few months and the 3D models of the center of Shahr-e Gur be formulated.

ALI EGHRA⁴

GEOPHYSICAL STUDY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL DOCUMENTATION
OF SHAHR-E GUR, ANCIENT ARDAXŠĪR-XWARRAH

Introduction

With the aim of strengthening and supporting the criteria used for inscription of the “Sassanid Archaeological Landscape of Fars Province” (SALF) site in the UNESCO World Heritage List, efforts had been made for eight years to achieve this goal, which became a fact in 2018. The Firuzabad base of “Sassanid Archaeological Landscape of



Fig. 19 - Picture of a flat building in the central circle of Shahr-e Gur adjacent to the main building of Takht-e Neshin. Photo A. Eghra'.

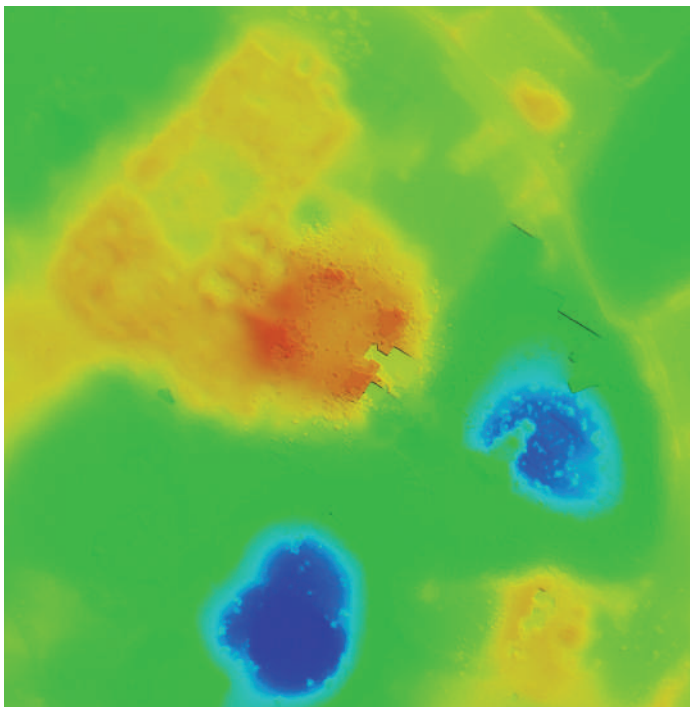


Fig. 20 - DEM map prepared from the said complex in the central circle of Shahr-e Gur. Elaboration A. Eghra'.

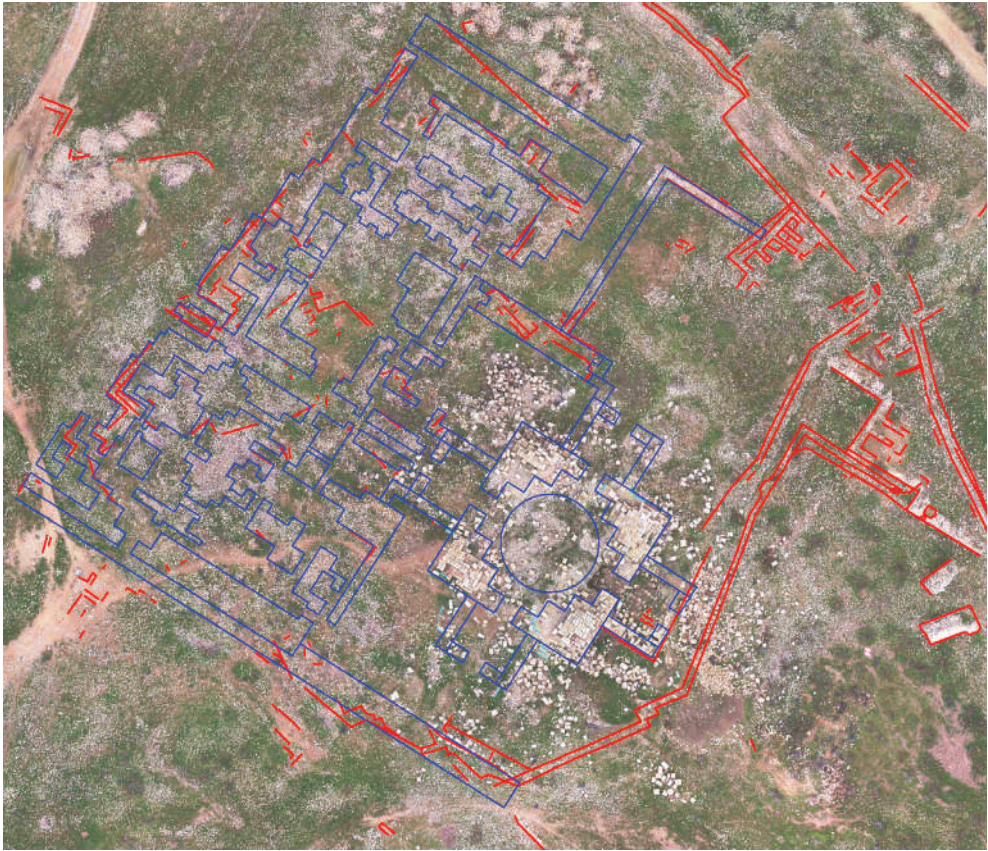


Fig. 21 - Plan of the building complex in the central circle of Shahr-e Gur discovered around the Takht-e Neshin. Elaboration A. Eghra'.

Fars Region” (SALF), one year after the inscription of the ancient sites of the region in the World Heritage List, started extensive activities in the field of documentation and database using scientific methodologies and instrumentation, in particular in the Firuzabad plain, where the ancient landscape of the urban archaeological site of Shahr-e Gur was investigated.

The research program in geophysics which is part of the Iranian-Italian Joint Archaeological Mission and PRIN 2017 projects was designed within the framework of the ICOMOS recommendations made during the 42nd session of UNESCO World Heritage in Manama (Bahrain) in Summer 2018, which concerned the sustainable development of the areas of the “Sassanid Archaeological Landscape of Fars” inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The field activities performed demonstrated the need to adopt a multidisciplinary scientific approach.

The objectives set at the time of the site’s inscription are underway according to the World Heritage Committee document, based on decisions taken at the 42nd session of the UNESCO World Assembly, as part of the international monitoring program for new WH sites. Adjusting the profile of the buffer zone and the boundaries of the constrained areas registered in a zone, setting up and implementing the proposed new criteria, completing the integrated protection and crisis management plan, realizing geophysical

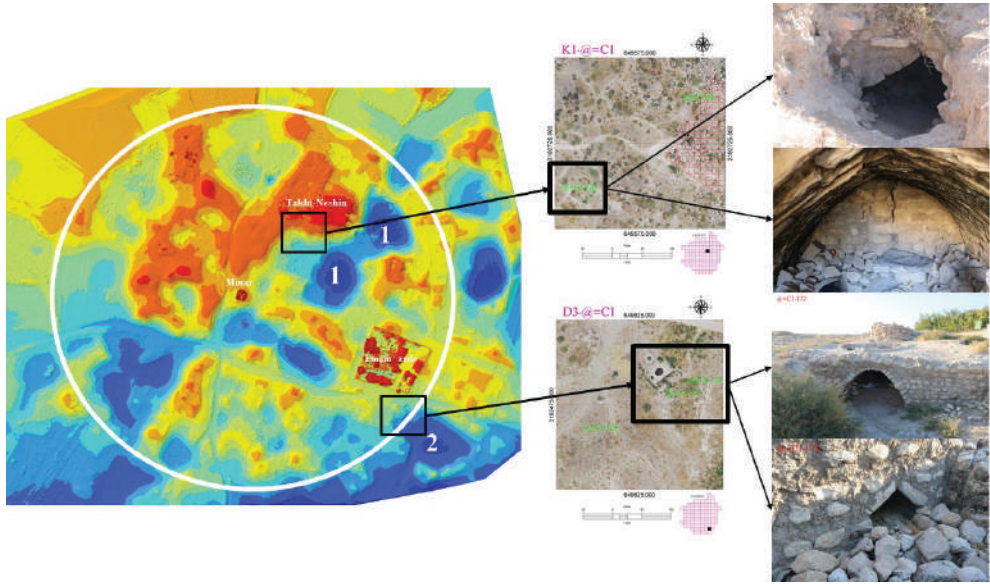


Fig. 22 - DEM map prepared of the central circle of Shahr-e Gur with the location of water basins 1 and 2. Elaboration A. Eghra'.

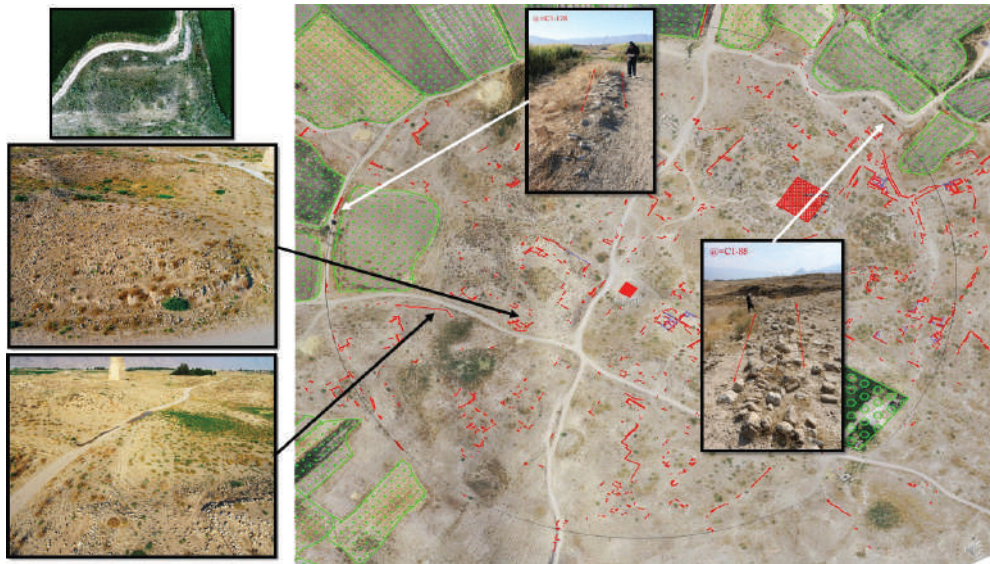


Fig. 23 - Identification of the possible defence wall of the central circle of Shahr-e Gur and other buildings in the central circle of the city. Elaboration A. Eghra'.

studies and monitoring the works with the implementation of the ICOMOS recommendations are all actions underway. But the city of Gur was inhabited for a thousand years from the 3rd to the 13th century CE and due to the density and complexity of the architectural materials used to identify the periods of settlement it also requires archaeological investigation.

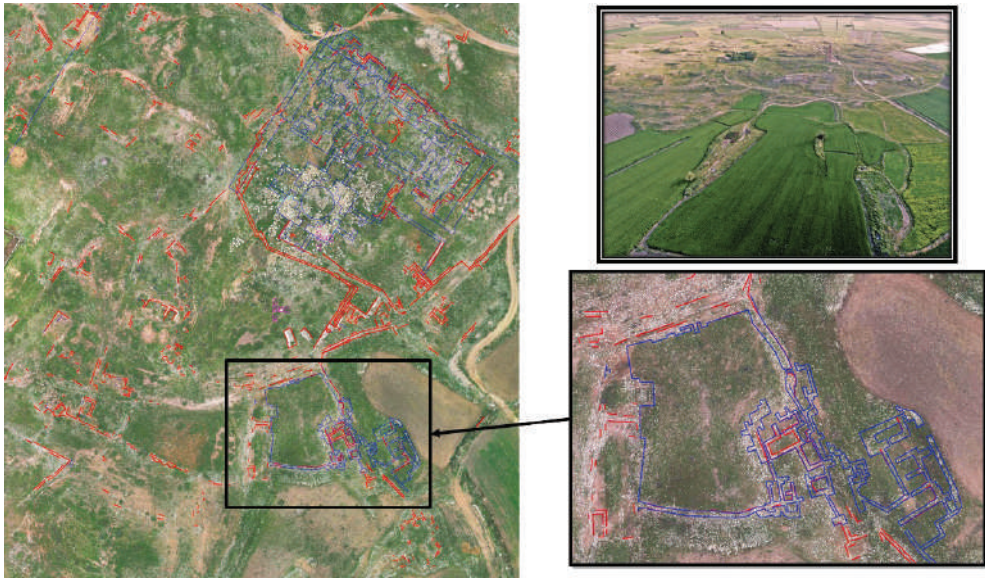


Fig. 24 - Identified example of a building in the central circle of Shahr-e Gur. Elaboration A. Eghra'.

State of the Art of Shahr-e Gur Documentation

In 1940, for the first time, Eric F. Schmidt presented two aerial photographs of the town of Gur (Schmidt 1940: pls. 18-19).

In his book *Flying Over the Ancient Cities of Iran*, he describes the photos this way:

In defiance of the ruling Parthian dynasty, Ardashir I built here the capital from which he spread his empire. The circular city defence, about three-quarters of a mile in diameter, is interrupted at lower right by a gate formation, while in the center of the circle the remains of an assumed tower for the eternal fire form the only construction now left above ground (March 30, 1936; 8:02 A.M.; altitude, 854 meters; 1/250 sec.; no filter; direction of view, approximately NE). (Schmidt 1940: pl. 18).

Further on, describing an oblique photo of the central circle of the city of Shahr-e Gur, he writes:

While most of the ancient city dwellings have sunk below the present surface, mound formations in the inner circle of Gur indicate the former existence of important constructions grouped around the fire tower. Even the contours of houses and rooms are marked by lighter tints caused by the absence of vegetation on top of the ancient walls (March 30, 1936; 7:58 A.M.; altitude, 824 meters; 1/250 sec; no filter). (Schmidt 1940: pl. 19).

After Schmidt, in 1955/1334 the National Cartographic Center of Iran, in co-survey with the Army Geographical Organization, in order to prepare a complete mosaic of Iran, took aerial images of valuable areas. The city of Gur and the Firuzabad plain were photographed in different years and, in 1967/1346, the second and comprehensive set of aerial photos of the city of Gur were published. The best quality photos of the city of Gur were prepared in 1967/1346 by the National Cartographic Center of Iran.

In 1977/1356, with the beginning of the executive investigations for the restoration and conservation of the castle of Qal'e-ye Dokhtar, a German mission led by Dietrich Huff, started its survey in the city of Gur and provided documentary reports. Some numerical information, such as the diameter of the city and the area of the road, can be found systematically in Huff's report. His information, which is the result of a cartographic survey, was collected in a map that for unknown reasons had not been submitted to the Firuzabad archaeological base yet. Based on the same information, Huff presented a drawing and plan of the town of Gur.

In 2017/1396, in the framework of the new long-term program of the Firuzabad Cultural Heritage Database team, aiming to collect all the information about the Sasanian archaeological landscape of Firuzabad in GIS environments, a new documentation of the city of Gur was accomplished using short-range photogrammetric (UAV) system and extensive topographic survey. Currently the program is at 50%. In 2019/1398, during the first season of the Iranian-Italian joint investigation in Firuzabad plain, after obtaining an official documentary license to use geophysical survey with magnetic method and short-range photogrammetric system (UAV), the systematic surveying for the identification of all the structures of Gur finally started. In this season the work focused on the central circle of the city.

Geophysical Studies of the Gur City (Shahr-e Gur, Ancient Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah)

The first season of documenting the buried architectural structures of the city of Gur in the Firuzabad plain using geophysical methods has started on November 5, 2019. The aim of these studies is to identify possible structures in the cultivated parts of Gur city, especially in areas where the surface lacks outcropping structural remains. Indeed, a large part of the archaeological site of Gur city is cultivated every year; therefore, it is necessary to identify the archaeologically significant areas with possible ancient structures and ensure compliance with the ban on agricultural activities in these areas. Geophysics provides the only non-invasive methods to identify possible ancient structures beneath the surface.

This program was carried out in the framework of an international collaboration between the Iranian-Italian Joint Archaeological Mission in Fars and Kourosh Mohamadkhani of the Shahid Beheshti University of Tehran. Ali Eghra', the topographer of the team, also took part within the framework established by the Iranian Centre for Archeological Research (ICAR) and the World Heritage Site of Sassanid Archaeological Landscape of Fars—Base of Firuzabad and Sarvestan, under the auspices of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism and the General Office of Cultural Heritage of Fars Province.

As mentioned above, in 2019/1398, new devices such as a magnetometer were used for the first time in Gur. In order to recognise the effects of the subsoil, information was collected with a short-range photogrammetric system (UAV) to access surface information in two intervals with an area of one hectare (for each area). This information was used to identify the layout of the town of Gur and to identify the presence or absence of architectural structures on agricultural land which today appears flattened and totally devoid of surfacing structures.

Survey Description

In fact, the project began in October 2019 with the topographic activity linked to the selection and preparation of the areas to be studied. In this phase, several options

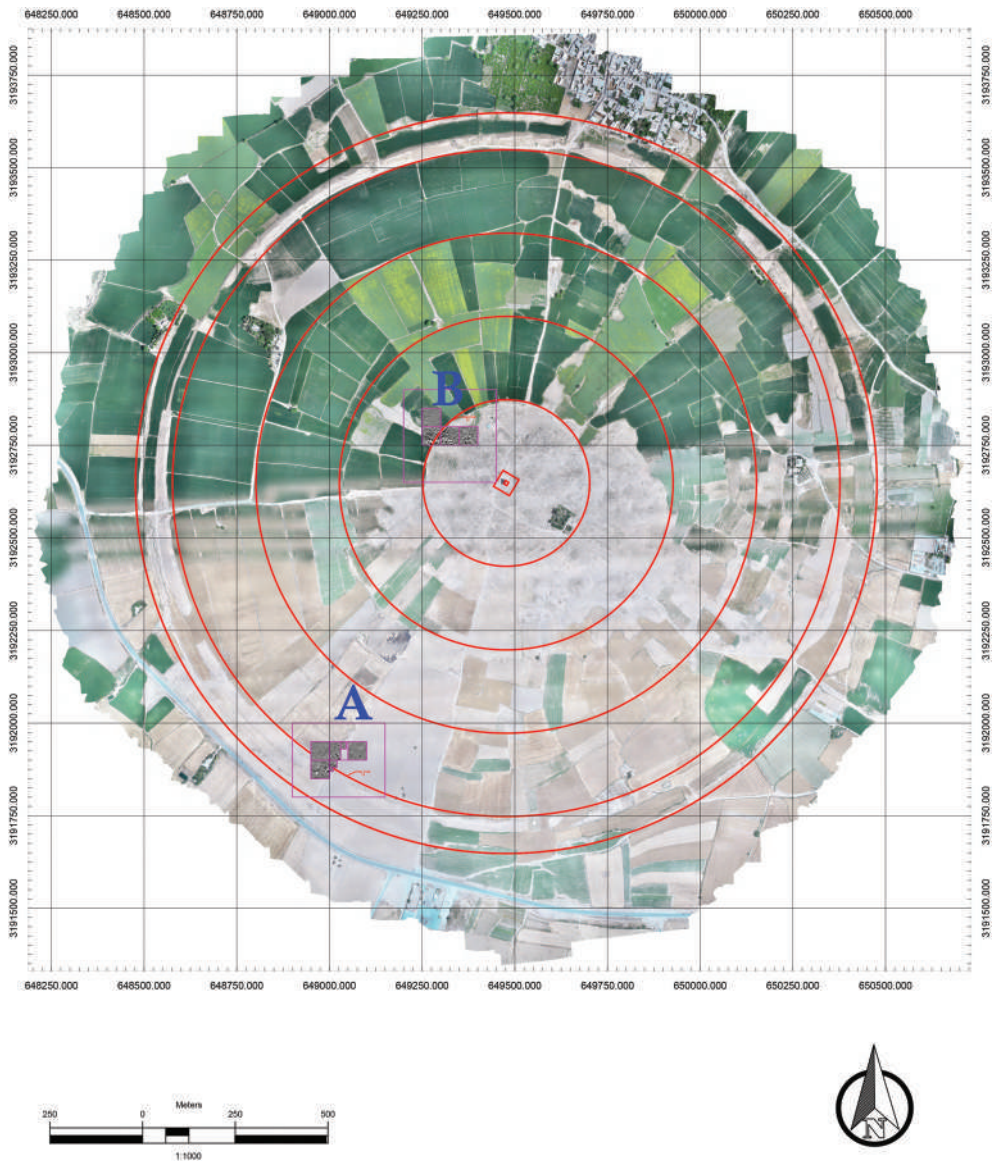


Fig. 25 - The position of the Shahr-e Gur areas surveyed by geophysics on the image taken by drone. Elaboration A. Eghra¹.

were considered. Considering the available time and resources, the initial idea was to select two areas, of 1 ha each, in two different parts of the city of Gur in order to make the first survey easier and faster. Each surveyed area was to be chosen so as to cover part of the area with surfacing archaeological structures and part of the agricultural land devoid of structures and totally flattened. For this purpose, several alternatives were prepared so that, once in the field, the final choice would have been made. During the field survey, two of the three areas initially marked on the map, were selected (Fig. 25).

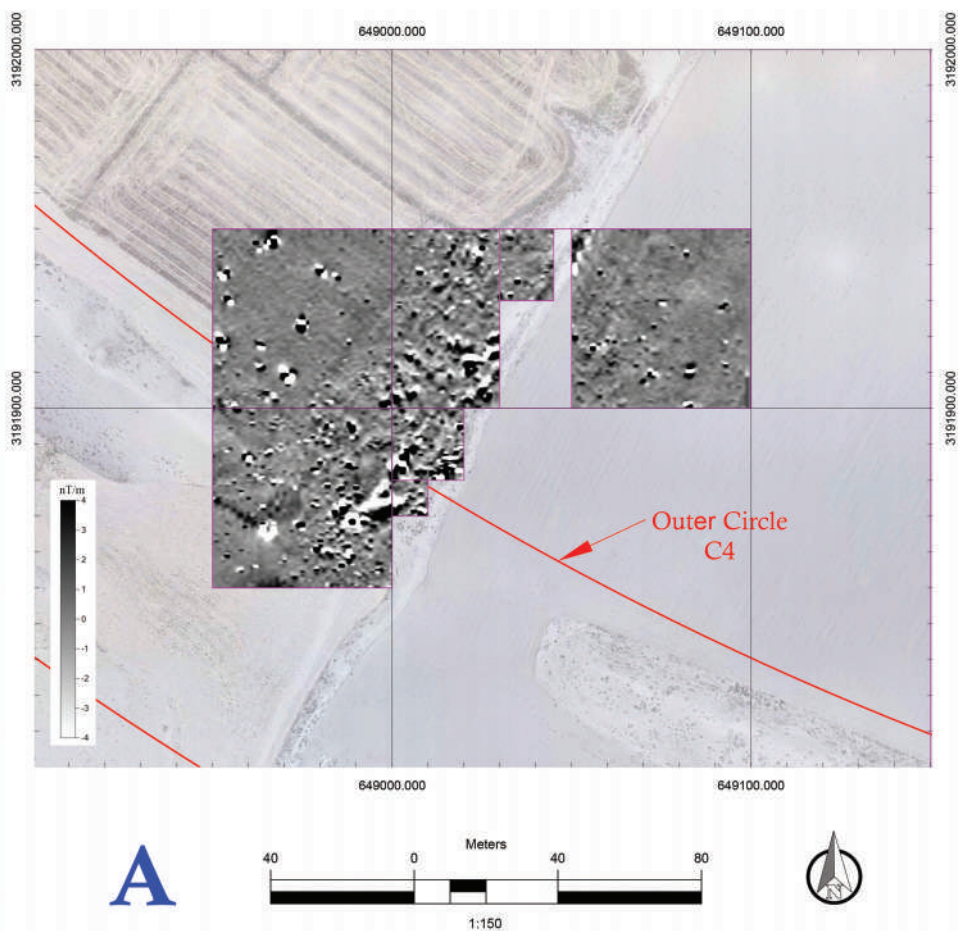


Fig. 26 - Geomagnetic map of Area A. Elaboration K. Mohammadkhani.

The first area (A) is on the road connecting the Southern Ardashir Gate to the central part of the city. The second area (B) is located on the East-West road of the city of Gur, at the boundary between the innermost circle and the second circle, covering part of the land plots heavily used for agriculture. In particular, this last area allowed to investigate the road pattern and its relationship with the possible wall of the central circle of the city of Gur.

Area A, in the South-West area of the city, was selected to be laid across the fortification wall and divided into 4 squares of 50 by 50 metres. Due to the strong difference in level of the land surface, the Eastern part of this section was divided into smaller squares and rectangles in order to perform the magnetic scaling. The magnetic survey in this grid was carried out on one-metre profiles in a zig-zag mode. At the same time, the aerial photography program was carried out focusing on the area of A. The height of the UAV drone from the ground was 50 m and with the 75% grid overlap, the geophysical study was documented.

Area B, on the North-West side of the central circle, was approached as in Area A, as also happened for the study method and documentation by UAV.

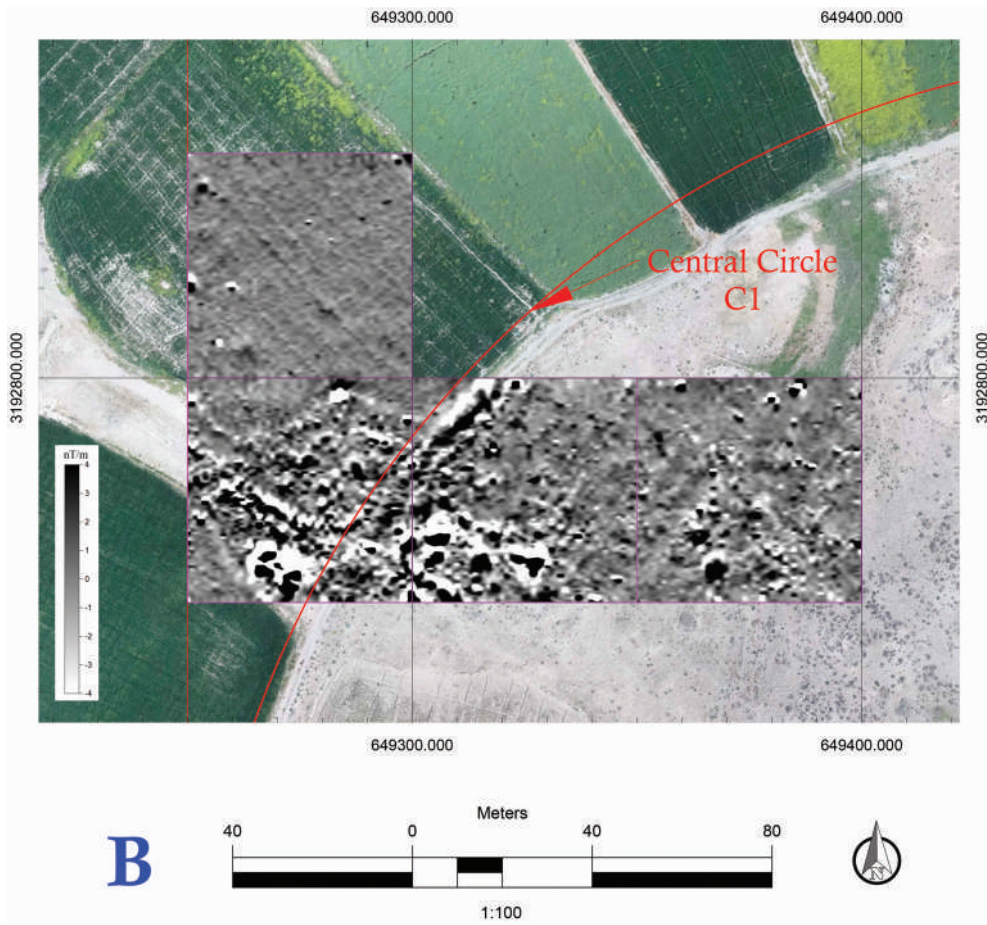


Fig. 27 - Geomagnetic map of Area B. Elaboration K. Mohammadkhani.

Results

The results of the magnetic study in both areas show significant anomalies. In Area A (Fig. 26), which was placed on part of the fortification wall, linear anomalies can be seen, which could be related to architectural constructions, but due to the extensive destruction of (construction roads, farmland and destruction of possible structures in this section), it cannot be commented on with certainty. Many magnetic dipoles or bipolar magnetic anomalies can be seen in this area, which are caused by heated areas. These anomalies may be related to the accumulation of heated materials and/or the accumulation of bricks or rubble in the architectural structures.

In Area B (Fig. 27) in the central part, the revealed anomalies show possible remains of building foundations around the central part of the city, especially the circular structure indicating the need for further investigation and protection measures in this part. An extension of the magnetic study to find more remains of the possible circular structure around the central circle is very important in this area, particularly considering that outside it there is flattened agricultural land, cultivation and livestock farming. In the flattened cul-

tivated part, a regular pattern of the architectural plan did not appear, but the volume of debris indicates that there were architectural structures that collapsed severely over time. Several large and strongly magnetic bipolar anomalies in this area indicate the presence of a debris accumulation or heated structure beneath the surface.

The realization of exploratory boreholes on some magnetic anomalies is suggested to identify the real nature of anomalies and the type of buried structures. Moreover, a protection and conservation program for the archaeological remains is crucial.

KOUROSH MOHAMMADKHANI

ANCIENT LANDINGS AND HARBOURS IN THE LIGHT OF NAVIGATION PRACTICES

The identification of the Arsacid and Sasanian harbours along the Iranian coast of the Persian Gulf can provide important indications for the reconstruction of the dynamics of settlement and communication, given that this area was certainly influenced by difficult climatic and environmental conditions and reduced possibilities of sustaining human presence in certain seasons of the year (Ghobadian, Ghobadian 2019). In recent decades, important studies on the archaeology of the Persian Gulf (Khosrowzadeh 2015/1394; Tofighian 2014) have stimulated new research on naval and marine archaeology which have been carried out by Iranian archaeological teams in various areas of the Persian Gulf (Tofighian 2018/1397a; 2018/1397b). A fundamental study for this activity has been the reconstruction of the environment in the period in question, including the ancient coastline (Mercuri, Villaescusa, Bertinello 2013). More recently, the study of ports has benefited from a comprehensive inventory of stone anchors found along the Northern Persian Gulf coast (Khakzad, Moosaie 2020), which interestingly underlines the likely important role of the port of Nâyband suggested by a significantly higher number of anchors than at other sites, including Sirâf: and Nâyband is the port on the Gâvbandi plain that our project has chosen for the study of the coastal region (Fig. 1).

However, the scarcity of written sources concerning ports in the area of the Persian Gulf in pre-Islamic period, obliges us to take a comparative look also at the ancient situation in the Mediterranean, where research on these areas is more advanced, particularly in Roman archaeology, as the many discoveries of ports and dry docks show.

In order to identify possible ancient harbour areas along the Persian Gulf coastline of the project area, besides the well-known port of Sirâf (Whitehouse 1971; 1974; 2009; Khakzad et al. 2015; Pourkerman et al. 2018; 2020), together with the processing of the results of the above-mentioned anchors collection, we consider also possible to operate with an experimental criterion by applying the knowledge of traditional seamanship (Persian Gulf Pilot 1865; cf. Medas 1997; Arnaud 2014). The art of sailing by traditional means has in fact been handed down from ancient civilizations, mostly orally, to the present day. Every self-respecting sailor who goes to sea recognizes at a glance all the possible pitfalls that a rugged coastline has to offer in relation to the environment and weather conditions. Combining the criteria of modern earth and environmental sciences with the ancient art of sailing will certainly make it less difficult to achieve the objectives set.

The study of landings and ports represents an important contribution to the PRIN 2017 Project, which has among its objectives the identification of the Arsacid and Sasanian age settlements along the Iranian coast of the Persian Gulf, because it makes possible identifying the dynamics that have allowed man to choose one part of the coast over another in relation to the ever increasing need to exploit the sea and its resources. It will

therefore also be possible to recognize any submerged ports and study their dynamics using the latest techniques and technologies at the service of archaeology, such as the search by means of side scan sonar and multibeam that are able to identify objects on the seabed and in the sand (Tusa 2010: 188-192).

The theme of landings and ports in Antiquity has to deal with a vast and complex evolution that has seen an extraordinary transformation, especially during the Roman period, dictated by the ever-increasing need to make commercial and military operations as fast and economical as possible (Luciano 2019). The important distinction of Roman sources between natural landings (in Latin *plagia*) and ports proper (in Latin *portus*) represented probably a truth also for Iran: in the Mediterranean, only the latter are equipped with service and protection infrastructures, while the former limit themselves to using stretches of coastline whose natural conditions are particularly favourable for sheltering and supplying ships (Celdrán 1995-1996: 219-228).

We must then consider a series of important factors, certainly linked to geological, geomorphological and anthropological reasons, which have profoundly modified landings and ports in ancient times. The introduction of geo-archaeology, a discipline that has contributed to filling some of the gaps in the knowledge of these precious testimonies of the relationship between man and the sea, thanks to an accurate study of the various ancient geological stratifications, allows to establish the geological framework of the studied points and not to confuse them with the older ones: therefore, it must be considered a fundamental step in this study, as the case of the port of Megara Hyblaea, next to Syracuse (Fig. 28), widely studied from the geological point of view, shows (Tiralongo 2011).

The scientific approach has focused on deepening the techniques for performing geophysical surveys, such as side scan sonar used to effectively create an image of large areas of the seabed, multi-beam systems such as other sonar systems, multi-beam systems that fan out acoustic waves under the multi-beam ecosound transceiver obtaining highly detailed images and the subbottom profiler that identifies and measures various layers of marine sediment that exist below the sediment/water interface (Pizzeghello 2019: 46-54). All this has, for example, integrated and clearly enriched the information system of the Italian underwater archaeological map and consequently the knowledge of the coasts of the Mediterranean basin and the areas beyond the Mare Nostrum.

For some years now, the attention of scholars for coastal archaeological sites has been focused both on the purely archaeological aspects, with the reconstruction of the various phases of their urban development, and on those related to the geomorphological evolution of the sites (Goiran, Morhange 2003; Marriner, Morhange 2007; Morhange, Marriner, Carayon 2016; Pourkerman et al. 2018). All archaeological sites near the sea, particularly settlements whether submerged or emerged, as well as ports, are in fact true indicators of the different water levels and positions of the ancient coastline. The known and chronologically ascertained archaeological structures can be considered as real landmarks and therefore can provide an essential contribution to research. In fact, the study of phenomena such as eustasy or others indirectly connected with palaeoclimatology can draw very important information from chronologically determined archaeological structures close to the sea, which become real landmarks (Morhange, Laborel, Hesnard 2001). Several times in the course of the past the sea level has changed due to astronomical, climatic and biological causes during glacial and interglacial periods. In the study of coastal changes, climate variations also play a predominant role in the balance between sea and land. Erosion processes caused by marine action in general, such as transport, dispersion and deposition of sediments, are phenomena that are closely related to wave motion and wind, and ultimately to climate.

Landing Places in Antiquity.

In Antiquity, waterways, and in particular the sea, were an essential commodity, since proximity to the sea or a river was indispensable for connectivity between places and populations. Imagine the importance of waterways in antiquity: people and goods travelled on them in greater numbers and faster than on roads. Waterways were an essential element for the emergence of large urban centres, and the first forms of cities developed along rivers and near the sea. When the first explorers embarked on the founding of new colonies, they prioritised the physical characteristics that different places offered, and landings were decisive for the emergence of new cities but also for providing shelter from the weather during longer journeys.

Every self-respecting sailor, when approaching the coast, even if he has never sailed there, analyses every element of the natural conformation of the coast, trying to find suitable points for a possible anchorage or perhaps simply to shelter from the winds and strong swells.

In order to be safe, a harbour must not only be deep, but also sheltered, since running aground on a wooden boat in ancient times could mean losing the boat and its cargo. Nowadays, as in the past, the depth of the sea is continually monitored on board vessels, despite the endless cartography available. In ancient times, this was done by sounding and systematically measuring the depth of the sea at regular intervals (Crippa, Borrelli 2019: 29-34).

Analyzing the geographical position and the course of the currents and winds in the different regions makes it possible to identify favorable landing places for navigation for those coming from the main locations, considering that in ancient times the propulsion of boats was by means of sails, which were square and therefore stern. Another important point is the nature of the seabed, which must be deep enough to avoid running aground, and its natural physical constitution, which must guarantee a safe shelter and a good foundation (Salomon et al. 2016; see also Giaime, Marriner, Morhange 2018).

Sediment, understood both as a natural occurrence and as a man-made product, is certainly one of the effects that ensures the preservation of artefacts at sea or in the waters in general. The eventual accumulation of sediment and the granularity of the deposits indicate the degree of protection that the artefacts can receive: the proximity of a river, for example, can favour the covering of ancient port evidence, whether organic or not these covers will slow down their degradation process. So the preservation of a landing place or an ancient port is the product of a multitude of causes, both anthropic and natural, which often occur due to the presence of sedimentation. Among the possible anthropogenic causes of greatest importance for a correct interpretation of the deposit, a prominent role is played by “human waste,” especially near quays, but also near rivers, which deposit the bulk of the deposit in the sea as they flow. It should also be remembered that these anthropogenic deposits are particularly favorable for the preservation of organic artefacts such as leather or wood. Another well-known and natural type is the sandy deposit, which covers and preserves structures and artefacts; its granularity is fundamental in determining its greater or lesser capacity for preservation (Morhange, Carayon, Marriner 2007: 249-251). Silt is one of the best deposits in terms of preservation: a very silty seabed is capable of restoring some incredibly well-preserved artefacts, including organic ones. The importance of a correct study of the sediment and its stratification has made it possible in many contexts to assign a correct chronology to the deposit, also in view of the fact that, unlike in terrestrial archaeology, underwater deposits are rarely subject to upheavals in their stratigraphy. It could be particularly interesting to apply this approach in our field, as it

would certainly open new chapters in the research of the coastal settlements of the Persian Gulf. Environmental change has also modified the exposure of populations to natural hazards and migration is, in many cases, the only answer to this. The impact of environmental change on migration will never be overestimated.

Changing climatic conditions generated real environmental transformations that gave rise to phases of water receding and phases of rising: this condition generated an important migratory flow of the inhabitants of the land towards the coasts. Migration can represent a “transformative” adaptation to environmental change, and in many cases it has been an extremely effective way to build long-term resilience.

Investigation Methodologies

There are no universal guidelines for interpreting the phenomenon of changing coastlines, and this should be taken into account during archaeological research aiming at the identification of archaeological port areas along the coast (Antonioli, Leoni 1998). The coastlines are in continuous movement and their evolutions can be identified by very precise instrumental approach on the basis of GIS data management systems, allowing to draw vector lines along the land-sea limits on the basis of maps and orthophotos. These maps and orthophotos are also georeferenced and superimposable, highlighting unequivocally the major changes that have occurred over the wide time scales identified. In this way, coastlines are traced that generate backward and forward surfaces, which can be easily calculated in terms of area and width. The limits of the port areas have also been traced, which often represent important elements of interruption in the littoral sedimentary dynamics and considerable effects of shoreline variation. In our project, the MoU existing with the INIOAS-Iranian National Institute for Oceanography and Atmospheric Sciences, will provide the possibility to obtain these fundamental data. At the same time, an original geomorphological study has been carried out by A. Sembroni in the frame of the PRIN 2017 project in the area of Gâvbandi- Nâyband. It has indicated that the evolution of the coastline in the Gulf of Nâyband is caused mainly by tectonic uplift and sea level fluctuations, while the contribution of the Gâvbandi River is negligible. In particular, the reconstruction of the palaeo-coastline contemporary to the beginning of the Sasanian period shows a lagoon configuration similar to the present day one (Fig. 29) which could have favored the development of port activities (Sembroni, Askari Chaverdi, forthcoming).

Also the ancient written sources, if accompanied by a work of exegesis and a philological investigation of the terminology used, often make it possible to attempt some comparisons in the field. Even Ancient itineraries can, with caution, provide topographical indications which, if corroborated by Medieval documentation, can solve various problems related to radical changes in ancient port sites. In the operational study of the Persian Gulf coast which has just started, all the available data from all the researchers of the project should be used, creating a database that can be shared. In this way the research would bring more significant results.

As is well known, the immense sea that is the Mediterranean brought even the most distant cultures into contact with each other: just think of those of the Near East, who used this waterway to bring commercial products to Mediterranean markets, transmitting their cultures together, as did the Phoenicians, for example, who were extraordinary seafarers. When we think of the Phoenician and Punic civilisations, we observe an astonishing ability to build ports and to choose important shelters for navigation, which allow us to count the

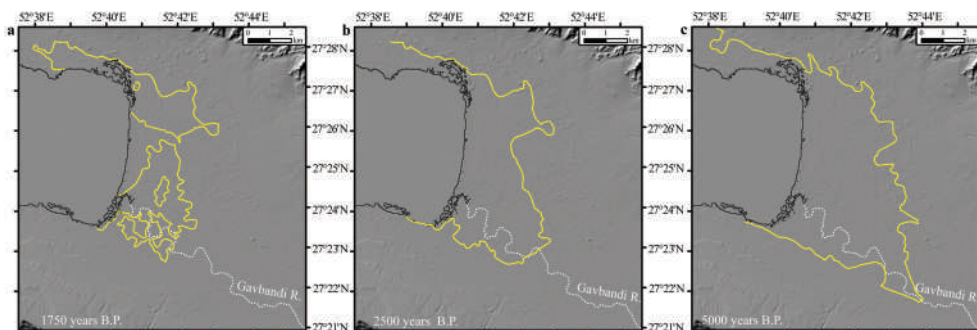


Fig. 29 - The coastline of the Gulf of Nâyband Gulf at various ages. Elaboration A. Sembroni.

Phoenicians and the Carthaginians among the greatest seafaring peoples of all time. The Phoenicians certainly introduced important innovations in port construction methods: the most important port sites of this great civilisation are found in Lebanon (Carayon, Marriner, Morhange 2011). Several Greek authors inform us that during the Achaemenid period, Phoenicians provided the Persian empire with a fleet. The philological investigation of the tradition according to which the Phoenicians originated from the Erythraean Sea, i.e. from the Persian Gulf, allowed G. Garbini (2002: 47) not only to understand that the tradition was very likely artificially created by the Phoenicians themselves in order to show the Persians how close they were to them (cf. Callieri 2013: 127), but also to hypothesise the existence of a Phoenician garrison on the island of Bahrain, ancient Tylos, in the framework of the full Achaemenid control of the Arabian coast of the Persian Gulf, of which P. Callieri produced plausible evidence (Callieri 2019: 105; 2021b).

A second area of great importance in the study of the Persian Gulf is represented by the Red Sea, since during the classical period (300 BCE - 400 CE) the latter emerged as one of the largest hubs of ancient international trade through the Indian Ocean. For a long time, these contacts were described from a Rome-centric point of view, looking at the connections between Rome and India via the Red Sea. The classification of numerous archaeological materials as coming from the Mediterranean has promoted various studies of Roman domination or colonization of the Red Sea. In fact, from the Hellenistic period, thanks to Alexander the Great and after the conquest of Egypt by the Romans in 30 BCE, traders started to reach the Mediterranean also through the Red Sea. This led to a very important starting point in the study of routes and settlements in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

The study of landing and ports in the Persian Gulf that we want to undertake has a common thread with the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean basin that pass through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. During the first year of the project, dedicated to the collection and study of written sources this work aims to expose the methodological approach of field study, in which the environmental research provided by INIOAS is joined to an interpretation of the coast based on seafaring experience.

The study of the navigation of the fleet led by Nearchos in the Persian Gulf (Arrian, *Indikè*, Chapters 36-42. Cf. Medas 2003; 2004: 144-154) will be undertaken on the basis of these considerations in the second year, when the study moves from the Iranian Plateau and Firuzabad plain towards the Persian Gulf area.

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3D Digital Modelling of a Jiroft Carved Chlorite Pot An Experiment of Archaeological Visualizing

by MASSIMO VIDALE, GIUSEPPE SALEMI, EMANUELA FARE SIN

Un piccolo vaso scolpito in clorite dalla civiltà dell'Halil Rud (nell'area di Jiroft, Kerman, Iran, c. 2500 a.C.), caratterizzato da una raffinata iconografia zoomorfa, è stato documentato tramite un modello digitale in 3D ottenuto con un sistema a luce strutturata. Il modello digitale non solo ha documentato in modo realistico tramite un nuovo formato 3D la complessa raffigurazione in rilievo, ma ha anche permesso osservazioni analitiche che sarebbero state impossibili tramite le fotografie tradizionali ed il disegno a mano. Lo studio dunque fornisce le linee guida di una metodologia innovativa per la registrazione e l'interpretazione dell'eccezionale produzione artistica degli scultori di clorite dell'Halil Rud. L'iconografia del vaso di clorite viene poi discussa in termini di identificazione zoologica, comportamento di gruppo e abitudini riproduttive della specie ritratta; l'ipotesi finale è che gli animali e il loro ambiente vegetale possano essere stati intesi come una metafora antropologica, incentrata sul ruolo dominante dei maschi nelle famiglie nucleari.

Introduction

The small chlorite vessel published in this article (Fig. 1) is beyond any doubt an original artwork of the Jiroft or Halil Rud production, although nothing is known of its original whereabouts. At present, it is kept in a private collection. The owner kindly allowed us to record it with the 3D scanning systems available in our Department of Cultural Heritage: Archaeology, History of Art, of Music and Cinema of University of Padua, in order to test the feasibility and results of this approach.

In the experience of the first author, in fact, both the iconography and material and technical details are fully compatible with a series of carved pots of the same kind at present kept at the Jiroft Museum (Kerman, Iran) and published in Madjidzadeh (2003a). The form of the pot, too, after an important modification to be discussed later, closely reminds that of other chlorite artefacts. Its presumed dating is around the mid-3rd millennium BCE. Therefore, it adds to the many Halil Rud or Jiroft artifacts coming from looted contexts, so far published for the sake of their beauty and iconographic implications (Pittman 1990; Hakemi 1997; Muscarella 2001; Madjidzadeh 2003a; 2003b; Perrot, Madjidzadeh 2005; Hejebri Nobari et al. 2012; Piran, Madjidzadeh 2013; Desset 2018; Vidale et al. 2021).

Description of the Pot

The pot has a truncated cone-shaped body, with a flat projecting rim, and measures 9.5×7.5 cm. It is made of a dark green chlorite, with a uniformly worn surface; it is in good conditions but for a damaged spot on the rim. Four gazelles, in decreasing order of size, exit a thick bush, represented as a plant with asymmetric branches, covered by long, lanceolated leaves (hereafter plant A). These leaves chaotically fill any possible



Fig. 1 - The carved chlorite pot discussed in this work; a view of the male leading the gazelles row. Private collection. Photo M. Vidale.

space around the animals, thus conveying the impression that the bush is a dense, intricate abode.

The row of gazelles is led by a male, whose sex is emphasized by a long, pointed white-inlaid penis. Under this, a bisected triangular feature indicates the testicles. Exiting the bush of Plant A, this gazelle seems to come to an open space. Here, one sees another large, different plant, with branches resembling stems, lined by short incised traits and crowned by large five-petals corollas (Plant B). The male gazelle's muzzle, S-shaped ribbed horns, tails, and the outline of the muscular mass of the limbs are well comparable with the rendering of the same animals on tall footed cups published in Madjidzadeh (2003a: 18-35). The long, pointed and white-inlaid penis is a unicum (?) but in the chlorite corpus there are also pots with other scenes in which the sex of the animals is clearly emphasized (for example, Madjidzadeh 2003a: 20).

The second gazelle (Fig. 2), the same size and horns of the heading male, is a female. Where the genitals should be, she has udders, sketchily suggested by a zig-zag sign. Whereas the leading male has a slender body, the female's one is heavier, almost cylindrical. The swelling of the belly (when contrasted with the slender profile of the other gazelles) looks anomalous and might suggest a state of pregnancy.

Moving further right, the smaller gazelles are cubs of different size, still protected by the dense tangle of leaves. The third is another female, judged by the absence of external genitals; the fourth and last is certainly male, because of the little but clearly marked penis. Differently from the first three gazelles, his ribbed horns are straight.

The carving, although figures and details are somehow bulky, is competent, without uncertainties or visible errors (see also Figs. 3-5). There are no signs of the use of a lathe—whose rotatory marks often accompany the Jiroft-like forgeries, or of any other modern tool. The heads of the flowers of plant B are drilled cup-like marks. White inlays survive in the eyes of the three larger animals, but it is not clear whether the leaves and petals of plants A and B were inlaid, too. There are no visible remains of mastics or glues in the presumed sockets.

In the Jiroft chlorite corpus, scenes with herbivores (goats, gazelles, ibexes) often grazing in wild mountain or hill-like environments, or feeding on bushes or trees, are relatively common on high-footed, pedestalled cups. Therefore, it is probable that this pot, too, was originally a pedestalled cup of such a description. Possibly, the foot was broken while the pot was manufactured, or perhaps the breakage happened later. At any rate, there is no visible trace of the removed part, because the base of the pot was very carefully polished. Given this, it is also unlikely that the pot and the stem were two separate pieces that had been originally assembled through a join.

3D Scanning and Digital Modelling

3D technologies and computer-based visualization system are quite efficient research tools to support the visual analysis, recording and interpretation of archaeological artefacts. In his paper “Towards a virtual archaeology” Reilly (1990) used for the first time the term Virtual Archaeology to describe the use of computer-based approaches and simulations for archaeological excavations. In 2008, Sanders simply stated that using 3D modelling “[...] takes advantage of the digital medium to [...] produce new insight into all the past, which after all is what archaeology is supposed to be all about.”

What is the potential of virtual 3D models of artifacts in our archaeological epistemologies? Over the years, were developed principles, theory, methods and instruments which standardized the use of computer-based visualization in cultural heritage studies, with the final result of improving the interpretations of the artefacts through simulation, holistic analysis and cognitive enhancement.



Fig. 2 - The second gazelle of the row is a female one; note the usters, rendered with a zig-zag pattern, and the large inflated belly, suggesting that the animal is pregnant.
Photo M. Vidale.

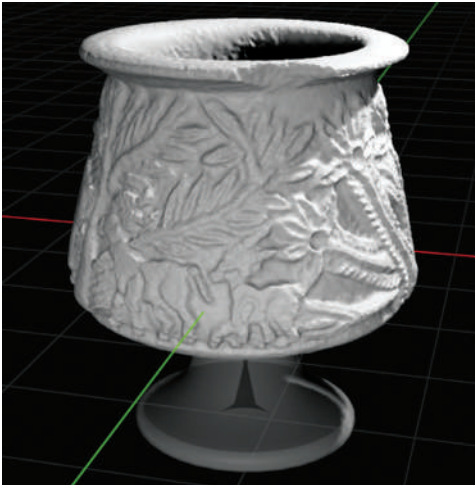
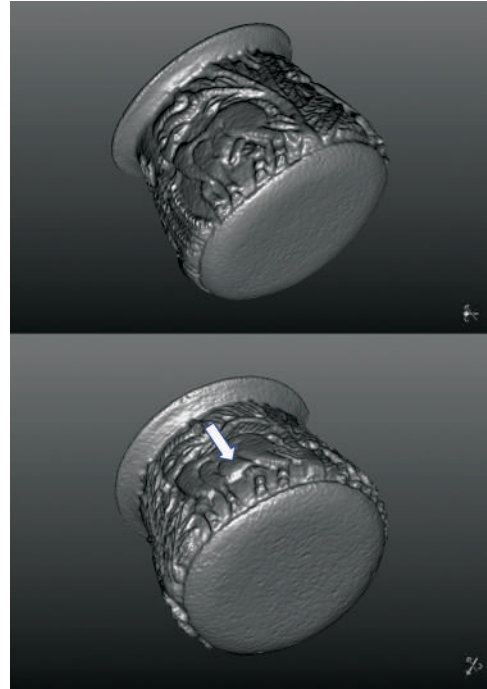


Fig. 3 - The third and fourth gazelle of the row are cubs, still protected by a dense tangle of branches and leaves; the one on the right is a male, as shown by the small penis. Photo M. Vidale.

Fig. 4 - Two views of the 3D digital model of the pot. On top, a view from below of the belly and penis of the male chinkara; the view from below in the lower image emphasizes with the arrow the inflated belly of the large female gazelle, supporting the impression that the animal is pregnant. By M. Faresin.

Fig. 5 - The 3D digital model of the pot allows to visualize the hypothesis that the pot, originally, was a stemmed cup (by M. Faresin and G. Salemi). Form and measures of the missing foot were taken from similar specimens published in Madjidzadeh 2003a.

A model, in fact, captures the entire visual (morphologic and morphometric) appearance of the original artefact. It can be manipulated in three dimensions or investigated from numerous perspectives (move it around, zoom in and out). Moreover, as Jeffrey (2015) noted, 3D models have features that would otherwise be unthinkable in material specimens: no substance, no location, no danger involved in manipulation, no degradation, and infinite reproducibility (both virtual and material) at low costs.

Virtual archaeology applications require a scientific approach and involve consequential—but distinct—phases, defined as a project pipeline. A structured light system (Cronos Dual by Open Technologies, rebranded Faro) was chosen for the relief: it involves the projection of a series of parallel light strips onto an object. Based on the displacement of the stripes as viewed through a camera, the system can identify and retrieve the 3D coordinates on the surface of the object in view. This scanner acquires both the object geometry, gained from the 3D coordinates, and a photo-realistic texture, taken from a high-resolution camera (Zhang 2018). The combination of metric accuracy and high quality visual accuracy makes this system suitable for a research that requires the use of 3D model for visual quality as well as for its analytical potential.

The carved chlorite pot was measured with 10 µm accuracy, using an automatic turntable connected to the acquisition software. The turntable rotation angle was set at 20°, thus making possible a rough alignment during the acquisition phase, and to verify in real time the quality of the survey and the possible presence of non-sampled areas.

Data processing with Optical RevEng 2.4 SR 8 Pro software followed the standard steps of the 3D scanning pipeline (Faresin, Salemi 2019). Namely,

1. Point cloud alignment: the reconstruction of the 3D model of the surveyed object requires the registration of the scans in a unique (local or general) reference system. This phase was performed through the identification of the homologous points (e.g. iconographic features) inside the overlapping portion of two adjacent scans. Once the points (at least three) are collected, a simple six parameter transformation (three rotations and three translations) can be estimated and all the points of a scan can be changed into the coordinate system of a scan that has been assumed as the reference system.
2. Point cloud merger (or fusion): the transition from a structured point cloud to a single reticule of polygons (triangles) connected each other.
3. Mesh editing: the improvement of the quality of the reconstructed mesh. The acquisition process may have incomplete or uncorrected areas. This step requires holes filling algorithms and editing tools for topological mistakes (e.g. cross-section triangles or anomalous vertices).

The result, in this case, was a 3D high resolution model composed by 274,455 points and 548,584 triangles.

The 3D scan of the outer surface of the pot, eventually, generated the continuous bas-relief frieze of Fig. 6. Images of this kind can usefully integrate or even substitute the traditional drawings which, no matter how much analytically accurate, completely flatten the volumetric perception of similar Jiroft artworks.

Proposed Identification of the Animal and Vegetal Species

The animals portrayed on the chlorite pot belong to the same species, being almost certainly chinkara gazelles (*Gazella Bennettii*)—*gebeer* or *jebeer* in farsi—, the currently endangered gazelle which lived in the Eastern and Southeastern Iranian Plateau, in the coastal regions around the Hormuz Gulf, and Eastwards in the Northwestern regions of the Indo-Pakistani Subcontinent (Fig. 6). Chinkaras have a discussed taxonomy (Groves 1993; Habibi 2014). The two sister species of Iranian gazelles, chinkaras or *Gazella bennettii* (adapted to dry areas) and *Gazella subgutturosa* (adapted to open plains) may be frequently confused, even more because recent genetic studies (Fadakar et al. 2020) sug-



Fig. 6 - The carved figuration of the pot recorded as a 3D digital model and reconstructed as a continuous frieze. By E. Faresin.

Fig. 7 - A chinkara (*Gazella bennettii*) in Jaisalmer (Rajasthan, India); modified from a photo by Vishwa Kiran (<https://www.pinterest.it/pin/566398090631815892/visual-search/>). Compare the position of the advancing foreleg to the same detail as it appears in Fig. 1.

gest that the two species may have had a long prehistory of natural hybridization. While the does of *Gazella subgutturosa* have no horns, the females of *Gazella Bennettii* do have them, even if somehow smaller than those of the males of the same species (Habibi 2014). Concerning habitats,

The Chinkara is found in arid plains and hills, deserts, dry scrub and light forests. In India, it lives in habitats with an average annual precipitation rate of 150–750 mm, while in Iran the species occurs in arid and hyperarid habitats with an annual average precipitation between 50 and 250 mm. The Iranian Chinkara lives in plains and occasionally prefers hills and foothills. The altitude of its habitats ranges from 10 m a.s.l. (on Persian Gulf Islands such as Lavan, Hengam and Hormoz) to 2000 m a.s.l.

in Khabr National Park, Kerman. (Akbari, Varasteh Moradi, Sarhangzadeh et al. 2014: 191-192).

In a wildlife refuge in the Yazd province (Akbari, Habibipoor, Mousavi 2013) chinkaras move in small groups with a neat preference for foothills fans and slopes, where they may find more easily water and cover. Rahmani (1990), while confirming that in the Rajasthan populations chinkaras are generally seen in small groups of 1–3 individuals, reports, in contrast, a sex ratio biased towards females. This agrees with observations made in captive breeding centers, according to which only one dominant male can mate in each herd (Akbari, Varasteh Moradi, Sarhangzadeh et al. 2014). The most complete information on the group composition is provided by McCarty (2012) who writes that chinkaras

[...] are generally observed alone or in groups of 3 that include a mother and her offspring. Large herds of 8 to 10 individuals are occasionally observed. Larger groups are more commonly observed during the breeding seasons. The largest herd recorded was composed of 25 individuals in July 1987 and was observed feeding on millet in a crop field during a drought when the monsoon season did not occur.

Akbari et al. (2015) conclude that the chinkara group size in central Iran is one of the smallest ever documented in the world, probably being an adaptation to the extremely arid environment and poor-quality vegetation of the region. The sex ratio is skewed significantly towards females, the typical herd consisting of a single male, one or more does and the fawns—precisely what seems to be illustrated by our pot. McCarty (2012) reports that chinkaras have nocturnal feeding habits and are most active just prior to sunset and throughout the night. He also states that great part of the metabolic water intake of these gazelles comes from the vegetation they eat and that “[...] the brush and trees that make up their diet are found in mountain ranges and deciduous forests, while grasses and other herbaceous plants are found in valleys and agricultural fields.” *Zygophyllum eurypterum*, *Fortuynia bungei*, and *Haloxylon aphyllum*, in particular, are the most important bushes or herbal species eaten by chinkaras in the spring season (Akbari, Varasteh Moradi, Baghestani et al. 2014).

McCarty 2012 also informs that chinkaras have two breeding seasons, one from late August to early October, and the second in spring, March to late April. Chinkaras have a gestation period of 5 to 5.5 months and females generally give birth to one offspring. Cubs can stay with their mothers up to 12 months. According to Hemami and Groves (2001: 117),

In Iran, they are often seen singly or in small herds of two to six. There may be more than one breeding season in the South. For example, in the Nayband Preserved Area, fawns have been seen in May, but in Chahgah (28°28'N, 51°41'E) in Southern Bushehr, game guards have seen fawns in May and in autumn.

Ultimately, this information might agree with the representation on our pot of two fawns of different age (maybe, for example, eight and three months?) walking in the wood by the mother.

The biological identification of the two plants we called A and B is more problematic. Considering their size in comparison with that of the animals, we should be dealing with tall desert shrubs or short trees. Plant A, because of the long lanceolate leaves, for example, might refer to desert species like *Amygdalus lycioides*, *Pistachia atlantica* v. *cabulica*, or even *Salvadora persica* and others (assuming that fruits, flowers and buds were purposefully not represented). However, also bush species like the smaller *For-*



Fig. 8 - Branches of the wild almond or *Amygdalus scoparia* whose stems studded with large, five-petaled corollas might have been a source of inspiration for the graphic rendering of Plant B. <https://nrgb.rifra-ac.ir/product/amygdalus-scoparia/>.

tuynia bungei and *Haloxylon sp.*, commonly eaten by these gazelles, have elongated leaves or terminal stems and cannot be excluded. More convincing might be identifying Plant B with the wild almond tree or *Amygdalus scoparia* (Fig. 8) because of its long stems studded with large, five-petal corollas (even though we have no explanation for the lateral segments so prominent all along the stems of Plant B).

Another possibility, moreover, is that the presence/absence of flowers might refer not only to different species, but to different growth seasons of plants of the same desert ecosystems: but the conjecture, obviously enough, cannot be verified.

Interpretation

The implications of the represented scene are much more evident in the 3D digital model reconstructed as a continuous frieze (in Fig. 5) than in the individual details of each plant or animal (like in the pictures of Figs. 1-3). This is interesting, because as far as we know the craftsman or artist could never visualize the entire scene reconstructed in Fig. 6;

even though we have to confess our ignorance in matter of shapes, models, templates at disposal of the carvers, 4500 years ago. For example, we may wonder whether these craftsmen or artists used trace designs or shapes on leather, cloth or similar soft/flexible media; or used clay negative impressions taken from pre-existing artworks, a choice that would involve a cognitive overlapping with the technical sphere of cylinder seals manufacturing and use. Possibly, however, designs, their linkage and proportions to the support were simply embedded in terms of kinesthetic know-how in the skills of the stone carvers.

To sum up, the pot shows a small family group of chinkara gazelles including a dominant male, a possibly pregnant female and two sub-adults/juveniles (one female, one male) which are still hiding under a tangle of branches and leaves. As we have seen, zoological information suggests that the scene is quite realistic. The proportions, the horns, even the features of the tails are rendered in credible forms. The two females are protected by the adult male who moves on in front, but also, symbolically, by the male fawn at rear. The animals proceed in a row, ordered according to their size, thus strengthening the impression of an ordered exit from the bushes. Considering what was said about the habits of these gazelles, it is easy to imagine the chinkaras quietly and carefully leaving the thicket for grazing, just before sunset. The emphasis on the inlaid sexual

organ of the leading male fits with the implications of male-driven fertility and reproduction permeating the scene. The doe might well have been portrayed as pregnant, and the body size (therefore the age) of the fawns points to more than one mating season in the same year—another implication which fits very well with the natural reproduction habits of these beautiful animals.

Conclusions

This is the first experiment at digital modelling in 3D ever made on a carved chlorite vessel of the Halil Rud civilization, and it was quite successful. The recording and final digital rendering of the pot required some five to six hours of work. Later, by scrutinizing the digital images from multiple possible viewpoints, at ease, at length, and at different scales of magnification—something that is not always possible in the normal conditions of access to artworks in a museum—we could observe in greater detail an important aspect of one of the images, namely the probably pregnant belly of the doe (Fig. 4, bottom; as marked by the white arrow). The same digital images of the chlorite pot were also used to propose a graphic restoration of the foot of the pedestalled cup, presumably broken during manufacture (Fig. 5). Finally, the same 3D recording was easily exploited to reproduce in a single frieze the complete carved figuration of the pot, which granted a reliable graphic recording of its entire surface, and a more complete interpretation of the entire animal scene (Fig. 6). How far this kind of documentation can substitute, or rather integrate, more traditional, accurate trace drawings, remains to be established.

The naturalistic representation of the family of gazelles, once projected into an anthropic analogy, may have stressed the importance of a male-dominated nuclear family, led by a male endowed with a strong reproductive sexuality. At the same time, the idea of these beautiful, harmless creatures emerging from their shelter in the pale glow of morning, protected by the elder male, has something tender and affective which could recall intimate family values. Perhaps the animal group scene in this small cup might have been implicitly or explicitly conceived as a naturalizing social metaphor, exactly like, in another carved chlorite masterpiece, a trophic chain of scavengers (lions, hyenas, vultures) on a carcass might have hinted to a precise hierarchy of identities and roles nested in the early urban world of the Halil Rud valley (Vidale et al. 2021). That natural imagery provided the Halil Rud craftspeople with powerful metaphors of social order, therefore, will be added to other partial attempts at “deciphering” the multiple socio-economic implications, aesthetics and communication codes of the Halil Rud chlorite art (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1988; 1993; Muscarella 1993; Aruz 2003; Kohl 2004; Perrot, Madjidzadeh 2005; Winkelmann 2005; Vidale 2015; 2017; Vidale et al. 2021).

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The Reappearance of the Buddha

A Preliminary Study on the Lost Clay Statues

in the Caves of Kucha*

by GIUSEPPE VIGNATO

Tra le circa 800 grotte buddhiste dell'antico regno di Kucha (nord del Taklamakan, Xinjiang, Cina), circa un terzo presentava un impianto decorativo, solitamente incentrato su una statua; alcune di esse ne contavano oltre 150. Tuttavia poiché nessuna delle statue è sopravvissuta nella sua interezza gli studi iconografici si sono concentrati sulle pitture. Ai fini di un'accurata comprensione delle grotte e dell'iconografia, in queste pagine si insisterà sulla necessità di ricostruire il numero, la dimensione, la postura, i materiali e le tecniche di costruzione delle statue a partire dalle tracce che rimangono nelle grotte stesse.

For over a century the study of the caves of Qiuci in China and abroad has mainly focused on the paintings. Recent scholarship has perpetuated this trend. This is largely because, although there are extant portions of paintings both within the caves and in museums outside China, very little of the statuary remains.¹ There is not even one complete statue in situ and the few fragmentary ones in museums do not cover the whole spectrum of statues which would once have been present in the caves.²

The profusion of studies on the paintings has created an unbalanced and one-sided understanding of the caves, since at the core of each decorated cave there stood, except for in very few cases, a statue. In order to study the form and function of the caves, it is thus necessary to "re-locate" the (now lost) statues in their original places.

This paper constitutes a preliminary investigation into the number and posture of the statues originally installed in the caves, in addition to examining the materials and techniques used in their construction. One of the paper's main purposes is to stress the importance of the statuary for our comprehension of the caves. It aims to recreate the appearance of the caves when the statues were in them.

Caves with Statuary

In almost all the decorated caves in Kucha the main image was a statue. Although most appear to have only contained a few key statues, several of the caves would have

* The Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin has granted the copy-rights for the publications of several photographs: special thanks to Lilla Russell-Smith, the curator for Central Asian collection for her assistance in this matter.

¹ The idea for this paper was stimulated by discussions with Birgit Angelika Schmidt, currently working on the statues now kept in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin. Other people have offered crucial comments and suggestions: Guo Feng, Luca Maria Olivieri, Miki Morita.

² Statue fragments remain in only a few caves, such as Kizil New Cave 1[2], Cave 196.

contained over a hundred. Lost to time, neglect or vandalism, the statues that peopled the caves can be reconstructed on the basis of, in order of importance: the few fragments still extant in their original contexts; the marks of their installation on walls, pedestals and platforms; photographs and written reports made by those who visited the site in the early 20th century when the caves were in a better state of repair; the fragmentary statues unearthed from the caves and now kept in museums around the world; comparison with wooden statuettes found during clearance of the caves, although not part of the original decor; the paintings within the caves themselves.

Statuary was used in caves of different types. We might begin with oversize statues, since they have given their name to one type of cave.³ Monumental image caves were typically constructed to display a colossal statue standing against the rear wall of the main chamber of the cave. In several cases there was also a second colossus, the nirvāṇa image in the rear chamber. These two statues were the focus of worship in the respective rooms of the caves and were surrounded by tens of other statues, either life-size or slightly smaller. Kizil Cave 47 may be taken as an archetypal example. A large Buddha statue, approximately 15 meters tall, stood against the rear wall of the main chamber. Grooves and beam holes in the wall permit the way the statue armature was connected to the wall to be understood; they also indicate that the statue was in the “fear not gesture.”⁴ Five rows of rectangular holes along the sidewalls of the main chamber were meant for the insertion of brackets intended to support ledges, which would have in turn supported rows of life-size statues along the sidewalls. The bodies of these statues rested on the ledges and were connected to the walls with soft clay plaster;⁵ the head was independently made and secured to the wall by a wooden peg. These peg holes, hewn at the same height and at a regular distance from one another, allow the number of statues to be calculated. The five rows of seven peg holes indicate that there were originally 70 life-size statues installed along the sidewalls. Each sidewall curved into the barrel vault ceiling just above the uppermost ledge, which held a row of busts. Statues might also have been installed on the front wall, on each side of the large doorway, although its present damaged state prevents a decisive evaluation. Taken together, there would certainly have been over a hundred statues in the main chamber (Fig. 1). The standing colossus would undoubtedly have been a Buddha displaying the “fear not gesture.” Further studies will be required to determine whether the statues along the walls were Buddhas, the most plausible solution, or other celestial beings (Howard, Vignato 2012: 78).

From the rear areas the colossal scale of the reclining Buddha can be appreciated. The large statue rested on a platform of the same length as the rear wall. Without going into detail about the statue’s subsequent remodelling, it should be noted that it was surrounded by a plethora of other statues. A row of busts was set on top of a ledge which ran along the rear and side walls; busts were also installed along the top of the outer wall

³ Larger than life-size statues are referred to here as monumental statues. In Kucha these include the statue standing against the rear wall of the main chamber of the monumental image caves, the statue of the reclined Buddha on the nirvāṇa platform of the monumental and central pillar caves, as well as the seated cross-legged Buddha statue on top of a pedestal in the main chamber of the square caves.

⁴ The way the statue was installed, and the other statuary within the caves has already been discussed in Howard, Vignato 2012: 66.

⁵ The term “clay” refers to the naturally occurring material composed of fine-grained “clay minerals” (phyllosilicates and other materials that impart plasticity), silt, sand and gravel of various sizes. The “clay minerals” form the binder in the clay, since their structure enables them to retain water. Clay may be used as a plastering material or in the form of sun-dried adobe bricks and rammed earth by adding plants (or other fibrous materials) and/or animal components and water. This definition is due to Birgit Angelika Schmidt.

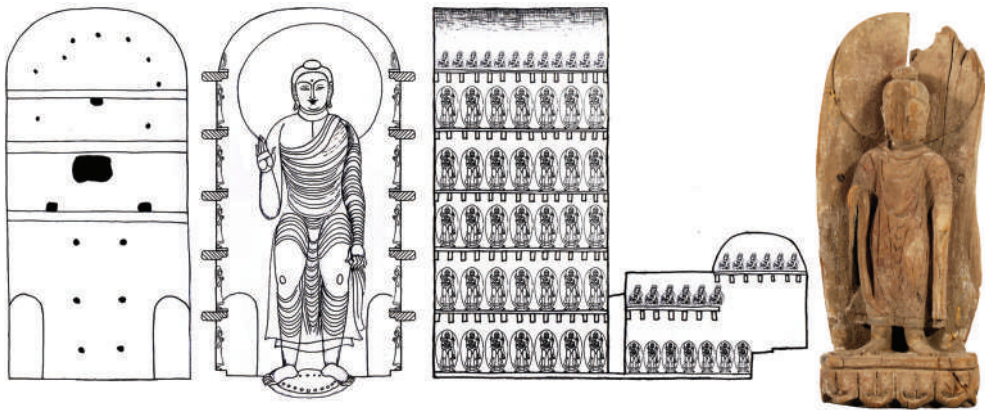


Fig. 1 - Kizil Cave 47. From left to right: rear wall of the main chamber with marks for the installation of the colossal image; proposed reconstruction of the colossus; the reconstruction of the statuary along the left wall of the main chamber and the outer wall of the left corridor. Right: a wooden statuette unearthed from Kizil Cave 76 (16.5 cm high, inv. no. III 8152©SMB, Museum für Asiatische Kunst) which might be a small-scale duplicate of the colossus in Cave 47.

of each side corridor, above a row of life-size statues installed on top of a carved platform which ran along the foot of each of these walls. Life-size standing statues were installed on the rear of the pillar: one within a niche, one on either side of it, and five above. After an unknown period of time a large niche was carved on each side of the pillar: the main image was seated against the rear wall, and the secondary ones on either side of the niche. In addition to the large parinirvāṇa statue, the rear areas contained over fifty statues of varying dimensions.

Although the biography of Kizil Cave 47 is much more complex, the above abridged description makes clear that the cave contained over 150 statues of various sizes, representing various deities and in a variety of postures. It is now apparent that the iconography of the cave cannot be grasped without taking into consideration the missing statuary. This applies equally to other cave types, although it is less apparent and even more easily overlooked.

Square caves in the rock monasteries of Kucha have rarely been considered with regard to the statuary they contained. A recent study classified square caves on the basis of the presence/absence of statues within them. Based on the layout of the décor and corresponding architecture, these caves have been divided into three types: caves with a main statue set on a central pedestal, caves that contained both a central statue and statues along the four walls, and caves without statues.⁶

In most cases the iconographic center of square caves was a large statue, as demonstrated by the remains of a pedestal in the center of the room. The largest number consisted of caves with a domed ceiling, among which Kizil Cave 76[2] is perhaps the clearest example;⁷ at present only the lower part of the pedestal is preserved. Although

⁶ Vignato, Hiyama 2020. In this book the caves assigned to an early period, defined as “Tradition A,” are analyzed. In most cases they present either a domed or a Laternendecke ceiling, and Style A (First Pictorial Style) paintings. Decorated square caves assigned to subsequent traditions are not taken into consideration; some of these might have not had any statue at all.

⁷ Fragments of large statues were also unearthed during the clearance of debris from caves of the same type, such as Kizil square caves 90-13 and 81.

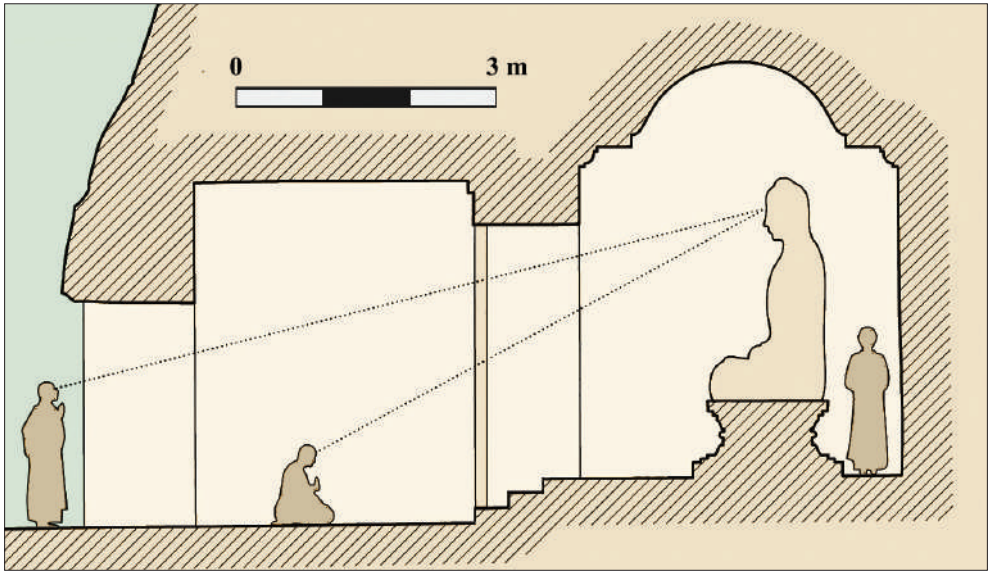


Fig. 2 - Kizil Cave 76[2]. Above: reconstructed prospect of the cave at the time of use. The reconstructed height of the Buddha and the addition of life-size monks aims at showing the limited usable space in the cave and the dominance of the statue. Below: base for the colossal statue in Kizil Cave 76[2], with the lower limbs of the Buddha attached to it (adapted from the historical photograph by the Third German expedition, no. B 0797©SMB, Museum für Asiatische Kunst).

these no longer exist, in a photograph taken by the Turfan expedition the crossed legs of a meditating Buddha can be seen on top of the pedestal. The size of these remains permits their virtual reconstruction, suggesting that the statue would have been over 2.5 m tall, sculpted in the round. This seated colossus would have literally filled the main chamber, leaving at most enough space for devotees to ritually circumambulate it (Fig. 2). Note that the cave has been repeatedly studied with regard to its paintings, but the fact that such a large statue had been present in its center was often overlooked or completely ignored, even for example in the reconstruction of the cave in the Berlin Museum. This in spite of the fact that the cave's structure indicates that its function was to allow ritual circumambulation of the now absent central statue, rather than focusing on the paintings therein.

Besides having a statue set on a pedestal at the center of the room, other caves contained life-size standing statues in two rows along the four walls. The statues in the

lower row rested on a carved platform, while those in the upper row stood on ledges, fashioned similarly to those seen in the monumental image caves. Caves of this type are all topped by Laternendecke ceilings.⁸

Square caves assigned to later periods have not received systematic study with respect to their statuary, but differences in the arrangement of their iconography suggest that at least some of them would not have required the presence of any statue. However, the “Tang style” square caves in Kumtura contained a very large pedestal, centered but set slightly back within the room, large enough to hold several statues. This specific type of cave deserves reconsideration, since previous studies have taken the painting on the rear wall as the cave’s main iconography, without considering that the central focus of the iconography was most likely the group of statues on top of the pedestal.

To date, the presence of statues in the main chamber of central pillar caves has been almost completely left out of the iconographic analysis, despite the fact that the main statue was obviously the core of the iconographical program. The large number of articles about wall paintings makes the statuary in this cave type appear irrelevant. However, it was the statue in the niche in the center of the main wall of the main chamber that set the tone for the main chamber’s iconography. In most cases the statue was a meditating Buddha seated cross-legged; this can be ascertained from the painted halo and nimbus on the main wall of the niche (Fig. 3). The statue and the decoration of the surrounding wall is intended to represent a specific story, identified by the earliest scholars as the *Indrasaila guha* narrative.⁹ The structure of the niches suggests that in most cases the statue was constructed on a wooden board which would have served to facilitate its installation in the niche, and may also have permitted the statue to be taken out for parades and the like.¹⁰

Little attention has been given to the fact that the statues which formed the core images in central pillar caves are set in different postures, as indicated by the shape of the niche, implying different themes and therefore variations in the crucial content of the cave. Attention to the dissimilarity of the main icons in different caves, especially if combined with consideration of the variations in the rest of the caves’ iconography, would permit a clearer classification of the central pillar caves in Kucha.

In addition to the core statue, other statues were also sometimes installed in the main chamber of the central pillar caves. Seated statues can often be seen set in small niches carved into the front wall, on both sides of the doorway.¹¹ Later central pillar caves tend to contain several other statues. One, three or five statuettes were inserted in niches carved on the rear wall above or on either side of the main niche; less common are the caves with a small niche above the doorway in the front wall for the insertion of a statuette completing the otherwise painted narrative in the lunette (Caves 126, 160). Life-size statues were also sometimes installed along the side walls, in one row (Cave 69), two rows (New Cave 1, Cave 161), or within concave niches (Kumtura South Monastery Cave

⁸ These caves are found only in Kizil. It is likely that Kizil Cave 156 did not have a central statue, but only statues along the rear and side walls, the central one much larger in size.

⁹ For an interpretation of this topic, see Howard, Vignato 2012: 111-113.

¹⁰ “The fact that the main statue was not anchored within the niche, but could be placed in the niche and taken out with relative ease is significant from a ritual perspective as it raises the possibility that the main image with its large mandorla was carried out in a ‘procession of images,’ using palanquins similar to the two found in the ante-chamber of Cave 76 and as mentioned in contemporary texts” (Vignato 2016-2017: 37).

¹¹ In most niches for seated statues, one niche was slightly larger than the other. Standing statues in niches on the front wall were installed in Kizil Caves 8, 27 and 34. See Vignato 2005.



Fig. 3 - Left: Kizil Cave 171, rear wall of the main chamber (photograph by the author, 2019). Right: wooden statuette unearthed from the antechamber of Kizil Cave 76 (9 cm high, inv. no. III 8134, Museum für Asiatische Kunst). Note that the proportion of the halo and nimbus of the wood statuette corresponds to those painted on the back wall of the niche.

17, Kumtura North Monastery Cave 12). The presence of statuary along the sidewalls indicates a radical shift in the themes represented in the caves.

Structurally speaking, the rear areas of center pillar caves can be classified either as a sequence of three corridors, or having a larger rear chamber connected to the main chamber through two side corridors. While the three corridors were normally simply painted, those caves with a rear chamber included a modelled representation of the nirvāṇa on top of a platform on the long side of the outer wall, and a plethora of other statues. The themes represented differed from cave to cave, but included at least some of the following: standing or seated statues along the side walls, a statue within a niche or a modelled representation of the cremation of the Buddha on a ledge in a high position on the front wall of the rear chamber, busts set on ledges along the four walls of the rear chamber. A row of life-size statues might be set along the outer wall of the corridors,¹² and in a few cases statues were inserted in niches carved into the side walls of the corridors.¹³

¹² Cave 63 was decorated with statues along the outer walls of the three corridors.

¹³ Despite aspiring to comprehensiveness, a recent study (Zin 2020) remains nonetheless an iconographic study of painted representations. In fact, although including the caves with sculptured representations of the nirvāṇa, only the sculptured reclining Buddha is considered, disregarding the number and posture of the sculptures that surrounded it. Instead, attention is focused on the remaining paintings in between the now absent statues. An attempt to understand the marks left by the statues that originally filled the rear chamber

Statuary in the caves of Kucha is found mainly in these three types of caves. Statues were also inserted in niches outside the caves, as well as in buildings in free-standing monasteries. Having examined their placement within the caves, this paper now moves on to discuss the full range of the statues' postures in the caves.

Posture of the Statues

Only Buddhas and other celestial beings, such as bodhisattvas and devas, appear to have been represented by large statues in the caves.¹⁴ In some cases, the identification of statues is quite straightforward, whereas in others only a systematic reconstruction of the iconography of the whole cave will enable an assessment of their identity. The focus here is on the statues' postures, since this has implications not only for their iconographic identification, but also for the technology required for their construction. Once more, in this task we can interpret the marks on the walls and form of the niches, in terms of either the painted backgrounds, grooves or other marks of their installation within them, and examine the early photographs which record statues in place in the caves. Although not part of the cave per se, the wooden statuettes found in the caves deserve attention, since they likely cover all the range of postures of the statues that were originally present in the caves. In several cases also the proportions of the nimbi and halos, as well as those of the different parts of the body, seem to coincide.¹⁵ Lastly, reference can be made to the painted representations of corresponding figures within the caves. These elements concur in forming mental images of the statues that originally peopled the caves.

Special attention should be given to these wooden statuettes. Although they were unearthed in Kizil, the appearance of some of these statuettes shows strong NW Indian influence. They might have been copies—or copies of copies—of famous statuary from the regions West of Qiuci that served as models for the large statues in the caves. Others could have been made locally, imitating the large statues in the caves, used by monks for their discipline, meant to be taken home by devotees after their pilgrimage to the holy places, or left as offerings within the caves, a practice which may be seen to have continued up to the present day.¹⁶ No matter what the reason was for making these statuettes, the similarity of their posture to the now lost larger ones in the caves allows the statuary within the cave to be recreated.

On the basis of their placement inside the caves, standing statues seem to have been limited to Buddha and Bodhisattvas. The posture of the colossal Buddha standing in the main chamber of the monumental image cave is largely agreed upon. The direction of the beams forming the armature for the arms suggest that in most cases the Buddha displayed the “fear not gesture” (Howard, Vignato 2012: 78). This statue might have been similar, for instance, to a statuette now in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Fig. 1),

would reveal a more complete view of the parinirvāṇa in Kucha, and likely reveal the reason two different media—paintings and statues—were used to represent the same theme.

¹⁴ Kept in museums across the world, the remains of Kucheansculptures consist mainly of small heads of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, monks, donors, knights, demons and brahmins. In addition, smaller limb fragments such as hands or feet and other body-parts, as well as decorative elements, can be found in museum collections.

¹⁵ See the catalogue of the wooden finds in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin: Bhattacharya 1977.

¹⁶ I am grateful to Guo Feng and Luca Maria Olivieri for a discussion that led to a better understanding of the possible origins of these statues. It would be helpful to study them as a way to explore whether they can be considered one of the carriers of Buddhist iconography from India and Gandhara to the Western regions.

which can be safely considered a small-scale representation of the colossuses in Kizil Cave 47 and other similar monumental image caves.

Standing Buddhas were used also as main images in a few central pillar caves. The main statues in Kizil Caves 27 and 193¹⁷ were likely wooden standing images probably sculpted in the round and could have been carried out of the caves. In these cases, another wooden statuette can be taken as a faithful representation, since it is set within a niche (Fig. 4). Other central pillar caves had a standing Buddha as a main image, but probably made of clay and not transportable, since there remain peg holes for its attachment to the wall—such as Kizil Cave 160 (Howard, Vignato 2012: 206, fig. 144).

In addition to forming the main images in the caves, standing Buddha or Bodhisattvas statues were installed along the sidewalls of the main chambers of some monumental, central pillar and also square caves; they are found as well along the corridors and in the rear chambers of monumental and central pillar caves. In most cases these statues are all of the same height, not only in Kizil (e.g. in Cave 77, New Cave 1[2]), but also in Kizilgaha and Simsim (Fig. 5).¹⁸

The main image in several caves was the seated Buddha in cross-legged position. The most typical occurrence is an over life-size image on top of a pedestal in square caves, the most telling being that recorded in Cave 76[2]. Several other square caves had a similar image, but none remain. The statues in this and similar caves seem to have lacked halo and nimbus (Fig. 2) (Vignato, Hiyama 2020: 23-29).

Despite these anomalies, in the majority of central pillar caves the statue installed in the niche at the center of the rear wall of the main chamber was a seated Buddha in cross-legged position, detached from the wall so as to be easily carried in and out of the cave.¹⁹ A similarly seated Buddha was also the most common figure in the painted stories of the life of the Buddha on the caves' walls and ceilings. Several wooden statuettes representing the Buddha in this posture have been found in Kucha (Fig. 6). In most cases they are seated on a throne with a mountain pattern carved on the front façade, and display a halo and nimbus with proportions similar to those painted on the rear wall of most main niches. A couple of statuettes only have a round body halo decorated with flames. Extraordinarily, a gilded wooden halo decorated with similar flames was unearthed in Kizil Cave 76

¹⁷ A slightly shorter standing statue was installed in the main niche of Cave 227. The presence of a sculpture in the round in Cave 193 can be inferred both from the niche and the peculiar doorway. A life-size sculpture in the round would have been present in the main niche, not attached to the wall; the doorway into the main chamber is the only registered case of an arched architrave over the doorway between the antechamber and main chamber in Kizil, without signs for the installation of the doorframe its height allowing the standing statue to be carried out of the cave in an upright position. The front part of the antechamber has collapsed, but it was probably protected by a large wooden door. Note that the height of this door sharply contrasts with the limited height of doors in neighboring Caves 175-186. The situation of Kizil Cave 27 might have been similar, the height of the cave allowing for a tall and sizable doorway. Note also the two niches for life-size standing statues on the front wall of Cave 27, found also in Caves 8 and 34: they also hosted standing statues, likely attached to the rear wall of the niche.

¹⁸ Although material evidence is lacking, the use of molds for the construction of these statues might be worth investigating.

¹⁹ Several pieces of evidence support this conclusion. There is no peg for fixing the statue head to the wall, always present in statues of similar size along the other walls of the cave; the rear wall of the niche was fully painted, a major difference compared to statues that were attached to unpainted walls, with paint then applied to statue and walls at the same time; the base of the niche was carved so as to allow the insertion and extraction of a board on which the statue was set; the height and width of the doorways were always sufficiently large to allow this operation; and historical records tell of the important tradition of image processions in Kucha as well as in the kingdoms surrounding the Taklamakan.



Fig. 4 - Wooden statuette representing a standing Buddha with aureole within a niche (19.9 cm high). Inv. no. III 7409, Museum für Asiatische Kunst.

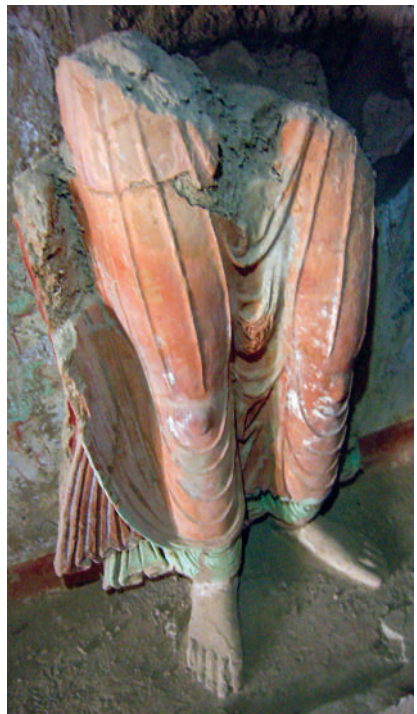


Fig. 5 - Kizil Cave Xin 1[2]. Standing life-size statue along the outer wall of the left corridor. © Yoko Taniguchi, 2008.



Fig. 6 - Large halo decorated with swirling flame motif held in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (111.9 cm high, inv. no. III 55©SMB, Museum für Asiatische Kunst), and a wooden statuette displaying a similar round halo (16.5 cm high, inv. no. III 7408©SMB, Museum für Asiatische Kunst).

(Fig. 6). It supposedly belonged to Kizil Cave 206, a cave with a round halo of the same size painted on the rear wall of its niche.²⁰ The correspondence between the proportions of the painted backgrounds on the niches and those of the statuettes indicates that the latter were precise small-scale reproductions of the statues originally set in the main niches of central pillar caves.

Other statues seated in the crossed-leg position were set in smaller niches carved in the main chamber of central pillar or square caves, as well as in the inner or outer walls of the corridors or the rear chamber. This was certainly the most common posture for Buddha statues in Kucha.

Conversely, the Buddha seated in European posture as the main image in a central pillar cave is a type that has not been observed. This posture is represented by a statuette found in Kizil (Fig. 7); these were inserted in niches with a deeper upper half and a shallower lower part, with a shallow seat, as seen for instance in central pillar Caves 4, 34 and 172. The niches in these caves would allow for the insertion of a statue seated in European posture. The deeper grooves above the seat in the median section and at the base suggest that this statue included a wooden structure on its back that allowed it to be conveniently inserted into and taken out of the niche. This posture was used, although infrequently, in the paintings of Kucha (seen, for instance, in Caves 205, 244). The main image in some of the Tang Style caves in Kumtura might have been a statue in a similar posture.²¹

²⁰ These objects have been studied in Vignato 2016-2017.

²¹ For discussion of the posture of the main image in Tang caves in Kumtura from an iconographic perspective see Liu Tao 刘韬.



Fig. 7 - Left: Kizil Cave 4, main chamber; note the structure of the main niche (photo no. B 1159©SMB, Museum für Asiatische Kunst). It could accommodate a Buddha seated in European pose, as represented by the statuette on the right (12.5 cm high, inv. no. III 8135, Museum für Asiatische Kunst) recovered from Kizil Cave 76.

Images seated with crossed ankles were used to represent bodhisattvas and devas. These were secondary images installed along the sidewalls and corridors. An example of such figures can be seen in a photograph from Houshan (Cave 215A?), and the photograph of a statue found in Kumtura. There are several representations of deities seated in the same way in the caves (Fig. 8), such as the depiction of Maitreya (?) on the front wall of many central pillar caves.

The statues of the Buddha in *nirvāṇa* posture are easily identifiable, with the Buddha sitting on a *nirvāṇa* platform carved out of the rock. These sculptures were found in both in central pillar caves—where they are to be considered colossal images, the largest in the cave, and monumental image caves, where the reclining colossus was by norm the second largest image after the standing one in the main chamber. There are no images of the *nirvāṇa* among the wooden statuettes, but the statuary was very similar to the painted representations (Fig. 9).

Busts are in a category of their own, since they were never used to represent the main image, but employed in secondary position. They generally occupied the top ledge, next to the ceiling, marking the transition between this world and the heavenly realms. In square and central pillar caves they were painted below the impost, and in the area marking the transition between walls and ceiling in the corridors of monumental image caves. Apart from these painted representations, several central pillar caves were furnished with small sculptured busts set on top of ledges just below the impost. Small wooden representations of celestial musicians have been found by 20th century explorers in Kizil (Fig. 10).

This section has covered the variety of postures assumed by the statues and their placement in the caves of Kucha that may be inferred from existing marks in the caves,



Fig. 8 - Left: cross-ankle heavenly being from Kumtura North monastery (left, inv. no. B 1848©SMB, Museum für Asiatische Kunst). Centre: Kizil, an unidentified cave in Houshan (inv. no. B 651©SMB, Museum für Asiatische Kunst). Right: a small statuette unearthed from Kizil Cave 76 (16 cm high, inv. no. III 8147©SMB, Museum für Asiatische Kunst).



Fig. 9 - Above: sculptured nirvana in Kizil New Cave 1[2], partially restored (image: <http://www.silk-roads.org.cn/portal.php?mod=view&aid=18220> – accessed 17 November 2021). Below: painted nirvana scene from Cave 171 (photo no. IB 8891©SMB, Museum für Asiatische Kunst).



Fig. 10 - Above: wood statuettes of crowned *Gandharvas* unearthed in Kizil (left: 11 cm high, inv. no. III 8136; right: 9.5 cm high, inv. no. 8138©SMB, Museum für Asiatische Kunst). Larger similar sculptures were installed in the top ledge of monumental image caves, and below the impost of several central pillar caves. Below: musicians painted below the impost of Kizil Cave 38 (image: http://www.silkroads.org.cn/article_13648_1.html – accessed 17 November 2021).

checked against the early photographic record or inferred from comparison with the wooden statuettes and paintings in the caves. The survey underlines once more that most of the core images in the caves were represented by statues. Although a detailed iconographic analysis of the missing statuary will never be possible, the different postures assumed by main and secondary statues do provide strong evidence for the identification of different iconographic programs.

The main material used to make statues for the caves of Kucha was clay. This sets the tone for the whole discussion that follows: except for a very few late cases the vast majority of statues were made of clay and there was no attempt to construct them around a rock core, a solution that would have been reasonable for the standing monumental images at least, and even more so for the parinirvāṇa statues. The colossal standing Buddhas in the monumental image caves were over ten meters tall and required a robust wooden armature to sustain the weight of the modelled clay sculpture, and an impressive scaffold to carry out the work. Using a clay plaster finishing over a roughly carved rock core image to create large parinirvāṇa statues would have been an easy solution. Instead, although the platform was carved from the rock, the statue was entirely modelled in clay plaster. This implies a strong predilection for clay, which was used for shaping even the largest statues.²² None of the colossal images contained in square caves were carved out of rock; it can be assumed that the large statue in this type of cave would also have needed a strong wooden framework.²³ The lack of corresponding marks in the cave suggests that the statue was not equipped with halo and nimbus.²⁴

Colossal images were built within the cave in the desired place, on top of their pedestals. We can envisage the carpenters at work, setting up a more than ten-meter-tall armature, solidly attached to the rear wall of the main chamber and able to bear the weight of such a large statue. The modelling in clay of monumental statues implied the use of scaffolding, which would eventually have been dismantled from top to bottom once the work was completed. The same sequence was likely used for the installation of the life-size statues along the sidewalls, after which statues and walls were painted. A smaller scaffold would also have been needed for the construction of statues in square caves and would also have been used for painting the caves. The construction of the nirvāṇa statues in the rear chamber would certainly have been easier, not needing complicated armatures or scaffolding; their size would imply that they were made on the spot. Note that elements such as the bases or pedestals for the statues, the sculptured nirvāṇa platform and the pillows on which the Buddha rested his head were carved from the rock, indicating a well-thought-out interplay between the carved and clay modelled elements in a cave.

Standing life-size statues were numerous in Kucha: they adorned the sidewalls, corridors and rear areas of many monumental image caves and also several central pillar caves. In most cases they too were made of clay plaster.²⁵ The statues projected for half

²² Xuan Zang recorded colossal images over 30 meters tall outside the gate of the capital. This well known document has failed to focus attention on the material these statues could be made of. Since they were carved in proximity to the capital, that is on an area of flat land, it is likely that they were made of clay—what other material could have been used? If this was the case, the art of clay statuary in Kucha was exceptionally successful.

²³ The height of the image seated on a pedestal, calculated from the dimension of the statue's legs seen in the photograph of the German explorers, was approximately two and a half meters. Statues in other square caves were approximately the same size.

²⁴ Vignato, Hiyama 2020: 167, 183. A corresponding large halo and nimbus would have needed to be sustained by a large wooden armature, but there are no traces of its installation on the floor or ceiling.

²⁵ The number of life-size statues along the sidewalls would suggest that molds were employed for their construction. There are no material remains of molds of this size. If molds were used, the front half of the body of the statue would be in high relief, while the back would have been flat and provided a large contact surface that could be attached to the wall without the need for pegs, of which there are no traces. It would have sufficed to smear the wall with soft, sticky clay to “glue” the statue to the wall and then to use similar soft clay to seal the statue around the edge of its silhouette. The randomly applied lumps of soft clay which

of their natural circumference, and needed to be attached to the wall for structural strength. The heads of these statues were made independently. They are almost full round, undoubtedly made with a mold and much more compact material, and were therefore much heavier than the body.²⁶ The limited flat surface on the back that was meant to be attached to the wall was too small and inadequate to sustain the head. Therefore each head needed to be sustained by a peg hole, and the number of peg holes carved at the same height is the most reliable indicator of the number of statues in a cave.²⁷

Another type of life-size statue was the few that were sculpted in the round and installed in appropriately sized niches in some central pillar caves (Kizil Caves 27, 193). Since these statues were sculpted in the round they could be taken out of the niche; they are discussed below, since they would have required a different construction technique.

The lower halves of life-size statues seated with crossed ankles have been recorded in a photograph assumed to be of the Houshan area of Kizil (Fig. 8). The enlargement of the photograph shows that the main armature (legs and torso) was made of wood, around which were bundled reeds and rough straw tied up with a straw rope, subsequently covered with clay and then painted. Their three-dimensionality and the slight differences suggest they were handmade. Practically speaking, it is likely that the armature and bundled materials around it were made outside the cave, and the modelling in clay carried out after the armature had been installed in the intended place.

Smaller than life-size statues were also very common. They were made with at least two types of material. Most appear to have been made of clay, some in molds, then installed, or inserted, in place. These were attached to the wall and could not be moved.²⁸ Others were likely made of wood, meant to be inserted in niches and could be readily taken out. This seems to have been the case of the statues in the niches with a fully painted rear wall, an indication that the statues were not attached to it. In the niches which would have originally contained a statue which was not intended to be removable it was attached to the wall and the area behind was left unpainted, with a peg hole to keep the head in place. The painted background probably served to provide a dignified appearance when the statue was temporarily taken out. Among the caves with these characteristics are the central pillar caves, specifically the niches carved at the center of the rear wall of the main chambers, as well as some of the niches carved on the front wall.²⁹ I would add here that the large halo decorated with flames found in Kizil, described above (Fig. 6), which was well over a meter in diameter, was equipped with two round tenons that could be

are still present on the walls in the places where the statues would have originally stood favor the explanation given above, i.e. that life-size statues were made on the ground and afterwards attached to the wall. The hypothesis put forward requires confirmation from more detailed work on the statue remains and the installation marks to be seen on the walls. If instead they were individually constructed on the spot by hand, it is possible that some crucial parts were made with molds.

²⁶ Molds for the heads, or rather faces, have been found in Xinjiang. Some are in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin and in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Images of these molds will be published shortly by Birgit Angelika Schmidt.

²⁷ In many cases the plaster has collapsed and therefore there are no other signs of the presence of the statues apart from these peg holes. During investigation attention should be given to the fact that some of these holes were filled with mud deposited after rainfall, which make them hardly visible at times.

²⁸ On the rear wall of Kizil Cave 27 a plethora of niches of different sizes were carved, 59 of which were meant for statues just over 30 cm in height. Small statues were also inserted in niches above and on the sides of the main niche in the rear wall of the main chamber of several caves, especially in District Five in Kizil (from one to three niches), as well as in other sites (Taitaier Cave 16 with five small niches around the main one).

²⁹ These niches are normally slightly different in size, indicating that the statues they contained were different, further information for the study of the caves' iconography.

inserted into corresponding mortises carved in the base. There is also a hole in the lower part of the halo that could be used to insert a nail to fix it to the statue.³⁰ The statue for which it was made could not have been made of clay, but was certainly made of wood; the statue had also the function of joining the halo and the base.

Apart from the cross-legged seated statues, some standing life-size statues were also meant to be carried out of the cave when required (Kizil Cave 27, 193); moreover, statues seated in the European pose (Caves Cave 4, 34, 171) seem to have been equipped with a structure that allowed them to be taken out of the niche. All movable statues would have had to have been made of wood, since clay cracks easily under stress. Although there are no remains of large wooden statues, wood seems to have been the most likely material for up to life-size portable statues.³¹

Constructing statues with a core carved out of the rock was done only in very rare cases in a late period in Kucha. Only one statue built using this technique is known in Kizil (Cave 196), a very small statue within a niche carved next to the floor in the front wall of the rear chamber. After the front of the cave collapsed, mud brought in by water completely submerged this statue. The statue, carved in sandstone, was in such a precarious condition that was not fully excavated. Two other examples, dated to the Tang Dynasty, are over-life-size statues seated cross-legged in Kumtura Caves 70 and 71. Note that the heads of these large statues were made separately and subsequently installed.

Summarizing the above findings concerning the materials and techniques used for the statuary in the caves of Kucha, we have seen that most of the statues were made of clay, with an armature that could be of wood or bunches of reeds, and in rare cases with a rock core; very small sculptures would not have required an armature. Molds were most likely used for the heads of life-size or slightly smaller statues, and possibly also for their bodies. The main images in central pillar caves were probably made of wood, since they were meant to be taken in and out of the caves. Other materials might have been used as well, such as lacquer, however there are insufficient extant examples for any conclusions to be drawn.³² To date no remains of large metal images have been discovered.

The dimensions of the statues can, in most cases, be learned from the size of niches, the remains of the painted background, and the installation marks on the walls. The statues' location and dimensions do not only facilitate our understanding of their relevance within the cave at the time of use, but seem to be related to the construction techniques. Statues

³⁰ The importance of this piece cannot be underestimated, since, to my knowledge, there are no similar remains in China. I report here the description in the catalogue by Bhattacharya 1977: 69: "Huge mandorla with flame, III 55, H 1119 mm. Prob. 6th-7th cent. A.D. Prob. from Kizil. A huge mandorla carved out from five planks. It is ovoid in shape and slightly concave. On its top, on the reverse, a fragmentary wooden clamp joining two planks together can be seen. Some of these planks are filled with wooden dowels. The mandorla has a simple border and is entirely decorated with incised flames. Identical flame-decorations can be seen on those of the Buddhas from Kizil, carved on wood. Ground colour is white. The mandorla is gilded entirely. Reverse is plain. Traces of white colour are found." The description fails to mention the well preserved symmetrical round tenons in the lower section, the fact that the lower central part, corresponding to the back of the Buddha, was plain and not decorated with flames, and the small hole that could have been used to fix the halo to the back of the statue by means of a pin or nail.

³¹ This affirmation has strong repercussions for the clay heads and other sculptures in museum collections. If the statues in the main niche of the central pillar caves were made of wood in order to be carried out of the caves, none of the clay Buddha heads now kept in museums belonged to the main statue—most likely they were secondary decorative figures and elements. The complete loss of all the main statues from central pillar caves might also be because all wooden elements within and outside the caves have been systematically plundered and used for fuel, or re-used in other contexts.

³² Wang Zheng, personal communication.

of different sizes, in fact, require different construction techniques, ranging from very robust wooden poles and beams, to reeds; very small statues did not need any armature.

Architectural Sculpture

There were also sculptured or modelled nonfigurative elements in the caves. Although the remains are limited, there are sufficient traces to draw some conclusions. One of the most common three-dimensional items was a diamond-shaped mountain-pattern created by shaped tiles on the rear wall of several central pillar caves. The regular size of the tiles and the way they were applied to the wall—with a small peg and fresh clay on the back—indicates that they were made on the ground in molds before being applied to the wall and then painted. Peg holes were carved in a well-ordered pattern and at times chalk lines dividing the wall into a diamond grid of the same dimensions as the tiles can still be seen, with a peg hole carved at the center of each one. Note the similarity between these tile grids and the diamond pattern painted on the ceiling of the main chamber, with diamonds containing stories of the present or previous life of the Buddha, and the same pattern painted on the ceilings of the rear areas—at times very simplified, showing a division into just nine smaller diamonds, as in most applied tiles. This pattern was very common in Kucha, and is also seen on wooden statuette pedestals and furniture.³³

These tiles were one of the several forms of appliqué ornamentation. Unfortunately, very few of them remain, but the marks on the walls indicate that they were widely used in the rear chamber of central pillar or monumental image caves—sometimes they might also have displayed figurative elements. Remains of clay modelled trees on both ends of the nirvāṇa platform can still be seen in the rear chambers of some monumental image or central pillar caves. The modelled halo of the nirvāṇa or some standing statues is partially extant in a few cases, or can be inferred from the sets of peg holes above and around the place where the statue stood.

Sumeru Mountain pedestals for the main statues in square caves (Kizil Cave 76[2]), and in the lower sections of a few central pillar caves (Simsim Cave 26), were carved out of the rock and finished with plaster. The platforms along the sidewalls of caves which hosted rows of statues were also plastered and painted. Moldings embellishing the transition between the walls and ceilings were sculptured and covered with clay plaster. All these architectural features added three-dimensionality to the caves: together with the statues they made the cave a more multifaceted place than can be experienced at present.

Style of the Statues

Most of the attention in previous and contemporary studies has been given to different pictorial styles; a question that arises is whether the statues also followed different styles. Specifically, since Pictorial Style A was typically used to adorn square caves, were the statues constructed following the same aesthetic schema? Or were the same molds used across the different styles?³⁴ These problems might be solved by analysis of the existing

³³ Figs. 3 and 6 in this paper. For a more complete overview see Bhattacharya 1977: figs. 21, 23-25, 28-29, 48.

³⁴ Birgit Angelika Schmidt's research has led her to the conclusion that, unlike wall paintings, the sculptures were apparently handed down unchanged (in their proportions and shapes) for centuries. Aesthetics/style was expressed more through painting and might have changed over the centuries. Personal communication.

statue fragments. At present, the statues seen in early photographs and the remains in museums do not offer clear clues about different styles (Fig. 11). One has also to keep in mind that the images in the main niche of central pillar caves were possibly made of wood and gilded. Note also that the small wooden statuettes recovered in Kucha reveal very different styles—although this might be due to their having been brought to Kucha from different areas, it may also indicate that in addition to imitating the posture of the statuary, they also reflect the presence of a variety of styles.

Statue Processions

As mentioned above, it is apparent that several of these statues were not anchored in place and sculpted in the round. Such statues could have been used for processions, a popular religious activity in the Western Regions in the epoch recorded in Buddhist sources.³⁵ Most of these statues would have been relatively small, about one meter in height, representations of the Buddha seated with legs crossed. A few others would have been life-sized representations of the Buddha either standing or seated in the European posture. These statues would have needed to be made of light, resistant material, wood being the most likely candidate.

Since the main images in square caves were attached to pedestals, and those in colossal image caves to the walls, only the statues in central pillar caves could be taken out of the caves. This fact highlights the importance of the study of the mobility of statues as a substantial element in the study of Buddhism in the Kuchan area. The distinctive architectural features and iconographical contents of central pillar caves, taken together with the probability that their main images could be carried out, imply affiliation to a tradition different from that represented in the square caves, which not only have different architecture, iconography and pictorial style, but also main icons which could not be taken out of them. Furthermore, since the main image in some central pillar caves of a later period could not be moved (Cave 160), paying attention to whether the statue could be moved in and out of the cave or not might also reveal significant variations within the tradition exemplified by the central pillar caves.

Repositioning or Restoration of Statues

Some statues that were made for a specific cave might later have been reutilized after their original “home” had suffered damage. One of the most telling examples is that of Cave 69. After the collapse of the square Cave 69[1], causing the loss of a large section of the ceiling of the main chamber, the extant statues along the four walls were exposed to the elements. Some of them seem to have been re-used for the decoration of the main chamber of the subsequent Cave 69[2]; others were probably installed in the corridors of New Cave 1[2]—that is they were first utilized in a square cave and later in a central pillar cave.

In Kizil Cave 47 some of the statues would also have been exposed to the elements after the collapse of the front wall and ceiling of the main chamber; these might have been detached and installed in the rear areas.

³⁵ Statue processions were recorded, for instance, by Xuanzang: “伽藍百餘所。僧徒五千餘人習學小乘教說一切有部” (p. 870a24–25) [vol. 1, p. 20 in Beal 1884].



Fig. 11 - Kumtura New Cave 1, Buddha clay statue within the niche on the left wall of the deep doorway. This was the last surviving clay statue in situ among all the caves of Kucha (stolen in 2006). Note the mountain pattern at the base, and the two modelled lions. (image: <http://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1683723588725208676&wfr=spider&for=pc> accessed 17 November 2021).

Statues could also undergo repair or slight stylistic adjustments in line with new aesthetic sensitivity, and appear to have been repainted from time to time. A most telling case is that of the nirvāṇa statue of Kizil Cave 47: it is clear that the modelled halo was originally smaller, and that it was enlarged in a later period, requiring widening of the top of the platform that was carried out with mudbricks. Another case concerns the fragments of blue curly hair found in Kizil Cave 81: they were certainly part of the large statue at the center of the room, but it is possible that they belonged to a later reworking of the main statue.

An aspect that should be kept in mind regards the finds from cave clearances. Large caches of wooden statuettes and furniture, as well a variety of objects and pieces of statuary, were found in large caches in a few caves. It appears that some caves were chosen as depositories for damaged material, possibly at the time Buddhism was declining in Kucha. It is still customary in the Buddhist community to show respect for damaged sacred objects by depositing them in suitable places. This warns against attributing to one particular cave the remnants of statuary found inside it. Only in the case of statues attached to the walls of caves that have not undergone repurposing or partial refurbishing can the statuary be safely considered to have certainly belonged to the original schema of that specific cave.

Wooden Statuettes

In this paper wooden statuettes have only been discussed in passing, in relation to the statues installed within the caves. Detailed consideration of the wooden statuettes, the other wooden architectural elements (brackets, ledges, railings) and parts of furniture found inside the caves is beyond the remit of the present study. These statuettes have never been studied in relation to the caves—this paper simply aims to highlight the kind of results that can be obtained by considering them with regard to study of the caves. Comparison between these wooden statuettes in terms of their proportions and style and with the installation marks and painted backgrounds within the caves would lead to improved identification of the statues within the caves. Identification of the primary and secondary icons within a cave would also permit a better understanding of the traditions that influenced the development of Buddhism in Kucha.³⁶

Conclusions

This preliminary overview and analysis of statuary as an integral part of the caves has revealed that statues in the caves of Kucha were not only numerous, but also the main focus of devotion. The centerpiece of the decorated caves was almost always a statue, a fact insufficiently considered in scholarly writings to date. The loss of statuary has sidetracked iconographic studies onto the paintings, disregarding the main image. The study of statuary, as far as the remains allow, is essential for a correct

³⁶ An interesting study could be carried out on the types of wood used for the statuettes. This would provide some data concerning their places of origin. It is known that good construction wood could be obtained from the Tianshan Mountains. During fieldwork the elderly people working in Kizil told me that the wood used in the 1950s to construct the modern door of the caves came from trees felled in the Tianshan Mountains and floated down the Muzart River to the sites. It is likely that in antiquity good construction wood was obtained in the same way. Whether the statuettes were made of this or other types of wood remains to be ascertained.

understanding of a cave's iconographic program, as well as for an appraisal of the way caves were used.

This study has also evidenced that all monumental image caves were furnished with at least one statue, and at times with a second colossal parinirvāṇa statue in the rear chamber. In several cases they also had life-size statues attached to the walls, so that in all there could have been over a hundred statues in monumental image caves. Monumental image caves such as Kizil Cave 47, Simsim Cave 11 and Kizilgaha Cave 23 were among the most complex caves and required an impressive number of statues to function. A tendency toward simplification can be seen in later monumental image caves, their walls decorated with more paintings and less statues, parallel to a change in content, particularly clear in cases where a painted representation of the parinirvāṇa has replaced the sculpted form. In some caves the representation is entirely absent.

In many cases, the iconography of decorated square caves was centered on one (or more) large statues set on a pedestal at the center of the main chamber. None remain, but the "sense of place" in these caves was different from that experienced today (Vignato, Hiyama 2020: 139-140). Instead of facing the walls and looking at the paintings, in ancient times the attention of the circumambulating devotees would have been fixed on the statue. Some square caves contained statuary installed along the four walls, or had several statues on the central pedestal, while a few others were without statuary altogether.

Central pillar caves were incomplete without at least one statue. The statue within the niche in the rear wall, the iconographic center of the main chamber, must be taken as the starting point for a correct interpretation of all the other themes in the cave. Apart from the main statue, there could be several other statues in the main chamber and a plethora in the rear areas, where the statues completed the representation of the nirvāṇa narrative.

Apart from statues in the niches within the caves, statues were also installed in niches carved at different places through the sites, at times constructed after the collapse of large caves (Vignato forthcoming). The systematic study of the statues in these niches will reveal more information about the life of the site.

The caves were structured so as to attract attention to the statue. The impact of a colossal image on a worshipper entering a monumental image cave can be easily imagined. The barrel vault ceiling in the main chamber of the central pillar caves would have led the eyes of devotees to the statue within the niche at the center of the rear wall—one has also to envision the enhanced three-dimensionality of the rear wall against the smoothness of the sidewalls, ceiling and floor. In square caves the statue was centered on an axis connecting the apex of the dome or Laternendecke ceiling with the center of the floor, emphasizing the symbiotic relation between architecture, paintings and sculpture. The successive stages in the making of the cave—carving and setting up of statuary, painting—are indicative of systematic work that established and emphasized the statue's centrality within it.

The vast majority of statues were made of clay. The various techniques utilized for their production seem to have been related to size and posture, although the possibility that different workshops and/or sites adopted different techniques should also be investigated. Colossal statues posed structural problems dissimilar from those of smaller figures. They needed a solid armature, likely made of sizable wooden posts. Bundles of reeds were sufficient for the armature of life-size statues attached to the walls. Size also determined the place of construction. Smaller statues could be constructed outside the cave, while colossal ones could only have been built inside. There are very few examples of statues with stone cores; these statues would by necessity have been built within the cave.

Construction techniques should be carefully observed and distinguished, since they might reveal the presence of one or more different art centers in Kucha, or along the route North of the Taklamakan; the possibility of different schools in Tumshuq, Kucha, Yanqi, Turfan should also be considered. Chronological issues also need to be examined, since techniques might have evolved over time, and therefore assist in differentiating between periods. In addition to construction of statues, the techniques used to install the statues in the caves should also be carefully considered, since these data are much more abundant than the few extant statuary fragments. Such a study might also bring insights with regards to the query about art schools in the area, as well as knowledge about the connections and networks of the different nodes along the historical Silk Routes.

Statuary added three-dimensionality to the caves. Since a century of studies has been mainly concentrated on the paintings, with the study of cave architecture lagging behind, focusing on the presence of statues within the caves might help to direct studies towards the physicality of the caves and the way their space was used and experienced.

After clay, wood was the second most common material used for making statues for the caves. Although not even one single large wooden statue survives, it is likely to have been the preferred material for life-size standing and seated statues in the main niches in central pillar caves that could be carried out of the caves.

A plethora of wooden statuettes, ranging from just above 10 to 50 cm tall have been found during the clearing of the caves. Although the manner in which these statuettes came to be there is not known, since they do not belong to the caves *per se*, we have noted that they parallel the statuary in the caves, and should be carefully studied for virtual reconstructions of the caves themselves. Additionally, they bear witness to the presence of a lively tradition of sculpted wooden statuettes, whose purpose, apart from that hinted above, requires further investigation.

On the basis of these preliminary results, I would like to suggest a few directions for further studies. A thorough survey of the caves to apprise the number of statues and their identification should be attempted. The systematic collection of data concerning the marks on the walls will certainly reveal important details about the iconography, especially through consideration of the statue installation marks in conjunction with the extant paintings between them. This will help to reconstruct the layout of the décor, and possibly recover some iconographic details. The study of statuary seems to be the best tool at our disposal for a holistic study of the caves. I also suggest drawing up a table that can be used as a basis for a preliminary survey of the statues in the caves of Kucha, since few people will be able to do systematic work in the area in the near future (Fig. 12). This investigation will certainly benefit from the results of the study being carried out on the fragmentary statues kept in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.³⁷ Hopefully this pioneer study will inspire similar work on the statuary kept in other museums.³⁸

Using the presence and placement of statuary within caves to attempt a classification of the caves could reveal new and more significant patterns. A recent study of the early square caves in Kucha has demonstrated that taking statuary into consideration for classificatory purposes can lead to a more telling typological classification (Vignato,

³⁷ Technical issues about materials and techniques are part of an ongoing detailed investigation by Birgit Angelika Schmidt: *The Central Asian Clay Sculptures at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin – Investigations into Materiality, Manufacturing Methods and Provenance.*

³⁸ The National Museum of Korea has already performed systematic scientific studies on their clay sculptures: Jo Yeontae 조연태 2013.

Cave type	Cave number	Location						Form			Posture					Size			Media		Total number				
		Antechamber	Main chamber		Rear areas			Relief	High Relief	In-the-round	Standing	Cross-legged	European	Cross-ankles	Nirvana	Busts	Colossal	Life-Size	Less Life-Size	Small		Clay	Wood	Movable	
			Main	Secondary	Decorative	Main	Secondary																		Decorative
Monumental	47		1					⊙		⊙						⊙				⊙			Over 130		
				90		24			⊙		⊙									⊙					
					1					⊙					⊙					⊙					
					⊙	7*	⊙			⊙		⊙							⊙		⊙				
Square	76[2]		1						⊙		⊙					⊙			⊙			1			
Central Pillar	193		⊙*					⊙			⊙									⊙			9*		
				1*						⊙	⊙										⊙	⊙			
					⊙*					⊙		⊙								⊙	⊙				
	38		1*						⊙		⊙									⊙	⊙	3*			

Fig. 12 - Suggested diagram to be used for the collection of preliminary information about the statuary originally in the caves of Kucha, as seen from the marks in the caves (* within niches).

Hiyama 2020: 140-144). In the case of central pillar caves, for example, attention to the posture of the main statue (seated cross-legged, but also seated in the European pose or standing) might reveal hitherto unrealized variations in iconographic programs; the presence of statues along the sidewalls indicates a major ideological shift in their decoration; the presence or absence of statuary in the rear areas might reveal important patterns for understanding the development of the central pillar cave type, and by contrast also of the square caves. In summary, taking statuary as a classificatory principle provides a better understanding of the caves, and opens new and interesting research perspectives.

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Connections and Correspondences in the Hagiographies of Shirdi Sai Baba's and Sathya Sai Baba's Origins

by ANTONIO RIGOPOULOS

Your present manifestation
And your manifold nature are indeed
[hard to understand!
Knowledge of your caste and creed
You do not reveal to anybody.
Some say you are a Muslim,
Some that you are a Brahmin.
Thus like Kṛṣṇa,
The divine projection of illusions
[is also your sport.

(Das Ganu, *Śrī Sāināth Stavanmañjarī*, vv. 62-63)

Focalizzandosi sui racconti delle loro origini, l'articolo esplora le connessioni e corrispondenze agiografiche tra il Sai Baba di Shirdi (m. 1918) e il Sathya Sai Baba di Puttaparthi (1926-2011), due dei più popolari *guru* dell'India contemporanea. La storia dell'infanzia e del maestro del Sai Baba di Shirdi, in seguito recepita con alcune varianti dal Sathya Sai Baba, fu ricostruita da Narayan Dattatreya Sahasrabuddhe alias Das Ganu (1868-1962), un bramino devoto al santo di Shirdi e noto compositore di inni laudativi (*kīrtan*). I racconti da lui ricostruiti mostrano la persistenza di una serie di temi cari alla letteratura agiografica sanscrita e marāṭhī, con particolare riferimento alle figure del poeta-santo Kabīr (XV secolo) e del dio Dattātreya e alle loro tradizioni di spiritualità integrativa. Specialmente significative sono le corrispondenze tra il racconto delle origini del Sai Baba di Shirdi e il mito di fondazione del villaggio di Puttaparthi. Centrale è qui il tema del sacrificio (*yajña*), ch'è l'azione (*karman*) per eccellenza. Esso innesca un circolo virtuoso ossia l'espiazione del peccato di una comunità per il tramite dell'amore devoto (*bhakti*). A sua volta, la *bhakti* porta all'avvento di un salvatore divino (*avatāra*) che fonda un nuovo culto e trasmette la conoscenza (*jñāna*) che esita nella liberazione (*mokṣa*), l'affrancamento dal ciclo inconcludente e doloroso della rinascita (*samsāra*).

Today Sai Baba of Shirdi (d. October 15, 1918) is unquestionably the most popular saint in India, personifying the archetype of the holy man. His portraits are ubiquitous, and he finds a place in almost all family altars and *pūjā* rooms. His temples and shrines are found throughout the country and Shirdi in the Ahmednagar District of Maharashtra has become a national pilgrimage center. Venerated as a wondrous miracle-worker by millions throughout the subcontinent, he is worshipped not just as a god-realized person but as the full embodiment of divinity.

Sai Baba was an eclectic Sufi ascetic, a *faqīr* (lit. "poor man"), epitomizing the pluralistic religious landscape of the Deccan. He lived most of his life in a dilapidated mosque (*masjid*) advocating a spirituality accommodating Sufism and Hindu devotion-

alism (*bhakti*), above and beyond caste strictures and the orthodoxies of institutionalized religions. When pressed as to whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim, he would get angry and even abuse people. In the course of interrogation by a legal officer, he is reported as saying that his creed or religion was Kabīr, the 15th century Sant of Benares. Like other integrative mystics, Sai Baba viewed Kabīr as his model and on more than one occasion identified himself with him, even saying that Kabīr was his *guru*.

Sai Baba's early life is enmeshed in uncertainty: no historical evidence is available on the time and place of his birth, the identity of his parents, or his religious upbringing and training. Apparently, he first appeared in Shirdi as a young lad dressed in the white garb of a *faqīr*. Even his real name is unknown, since Sai Baba is an appellative which was attached to him by the local people. When he was young, he was simply addressed as Sai, a term of Persian origin often attributed to Muslim ascetics, meaning "holy one." The epithet Baba, a common term ascribed to respected seniors and holy men meaning "father," was added later on.

On Shirdi Sai Baba's Birthplace, Upbringing, and Master

Time and again Sai Baba's devotees have addressed the 'mystery' of his origins, proposing various hypotheses. An exception is to be seen in the major hagiography of Sai Baba by Govind Raghunath Dabholkar (1859-1929), the *Shri Sai Satcharita*—the most sacred and authoritative text for all followers. For the author it suffices to record that "just as, by great good fortune, Gonai found Nama in the Bhima river, and Tamaal found Kabir in an oyster shell in the Bhagirathi, so also, Shri Sainath first appeared for his devotees, in the Shirdi village, under a Neem tree, at the tender age of sixteen."¹ Other hagiographies report a few, occasional utterances of his on supposedly biographical matters, such as when he said that his uncle (*mama*) had brought him to Shirdi from Aurangabad.² Their factuality is hard to assess given that our *faqīr* often resorted to allegorical parlance. Nonetheless, there are hints that prior to his settlement in Shirdi he resided in Aurangabad. Ganesh Shrikrishna Khaparde (1854-1938)—a prominent lawyer and politician, member of the central legislative assembly who served as an aide to the nationalist leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920)—in an entry of his *Shirdi Diary* dated December 30, 1911, wrote:

He [...] told a small tale calculated to impress the virtue of patience. He said he went to Aurangabad in one of his wanderings and saw a Fakir sitting in a Musjid near which there was a very tall tamarind tree. The Fakir would not let him enter the Musjid first but ultimately consented to his putting up in it. The Fakir depended entirely on a piece of cake that an old woman used to supply him at midday. Sayin Maharaj [= Sai Baba] volunteered to beg for him and kept him supplied amply with food for twelve years³ and then thought of leaving the place. The old Fakir shed tears at parting and had to be consoled with soft words. Sayin Maharaj visited him four years later and found him there doing well. The Fakir then came here a few years ago and lodged at the Cha-

¹ G.R. Dabholkar (Hemadpant), *Shri Sai Satcharita: The Life and Teachings of Shirdi Sai Baba*, Translated from the Original Marathi by Indira Kher, New Delhi 1999, p. 65 (chap. 4, vv. 110-111). The *Shri Sai Satcharita* was conceived during Sai Baba's lifetime and with the saint's blessings and express permission. Dabholkar began writing it in verse form during 1922-1923 and completed the work six years later. All in all, it comprises 53 chapters and contains more than 9,000 verses.

² B.V. Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba*, Madras 1980-1985³ [1955-1956], vol. 1, p. 11. On Sai Baba's coming to Shirdi, see C.B. Satpathy, *New Findings on Shirdi Sai Baba*, New Delhi 2019, pp. 21-36.

³ The number twelve is symbolic of a fullness of time.

wadi.⁴ Mother Baba Fakir looked after him. From what was said I gathered that Sayin Baba stayed twelve years to instruct the Aurangabad Fakir and set him up fully in the spiritual world.⁵

Rao Bahadur M.W. Pradhan, a Bombay High Court magistrate, on the evidence of Sai Baba's staunch *bhakta* Hari Sitaram Dikshit (d. 1926) dating to the early 1920s, remarked that though there was no reliable information about his native place or parents, yet "[it] is certain that Sai Baba was very familiar with several places in the Nizam's territory. In his talks he several times used to mention Selu, Jalna, Manwath, Pathri, Parbhani, Nowrangabad (Aurangabad), Beed, Bedar—all Moglai [=Mughal] places."⁶

Quite late in his life, Sai Baba is reported as having told Mhalsapati (d. 1922), the *pujārī* of the local Khaṇḍobā temple and one of his closest devotees from the early days, that he was born in the village of Pathri, in the Parbhani district of the then Hyderabad State, to Brahmin parents who, while he was still a child, handed him over to the care of a *faqīr* who brought him up.⁷ Vaman Prangovind Patel alias Swami Sai Sharan Anand (1889-1982), who first met the saint in December 1911, adds the detail that Sai Baba told Mhalsapati that he was born in a Yajurvedi Deshastha Brahmin family.⁸ Because of Mhalsapati's reputation as a trustworthy person, his testimony was accepted by many and propagated by B.V. Narasimhaswami (1874-1956), who played a key role in the popularization of the cult of Sai Baba as from the 1930s.⁹

Rao Bahadur M. W. Pradhan, however, while conceding that the *faqīr* must have known Pathri and its people quite well, observed that there was no proof of his having been born there:

Once a man from Pathri had come to take Baba's *darshan*.¹⁰ Baba's enquiries made from this man about the Pathri village and several of its well-known residents showed

⁴ A travellers' resting place.

⁵ *Shirdi Diary of the Hon'ble Mr. G. S. Khaparde*, Shri Sai Baba Sansthan, Bombay n.d., p. 38. Moreover, it is reported that shortly before his demise in 1918 Sai Baba sent Kasim, the son of one Bade Baba (d. 1925)—a *faqīr* whom he favored—to go and see the Sufi saint Shamsuddin Miyan of Aurangabad to inform him of his imminent death. He also asked Kasim to go and see Banne Miyan (d. 1921), another Sufi of Aurangabad, with the message that Allāh was taking his life away. Sai Baba must have had contacts with these Aurangabad Sufis from his early years; see N. Green, *Indian Sufism since the Seventeenth Century: Saints, Books and Empires in the Muslim Deccan*, London and New York 2009, p. 117. See also Id., "Stories of Saints and Sultans: Re-mem-bering History at the Sufi Shrines of Aurangabad", *Modern Asian Studies*, 38, 2, 2004, pp. 419-446.

⁶ R.B.M.W. Pradhan, *Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Glimpse of Indian Spirituality*, The Sai Baba Sansthan, Shirdi 1982⁸ [1933], p. 26. See also Swami Sai Sharan Anand, *Shri Sai Baba*, Translated from Gujarati by V.B. Kher, New Delhi 1997 [1946], pp. 2, 7.

⁷ Mhalsapati's testimony was first documented in an early issue of *Shri Sai Leela*, the official magazine of the Shri Sai Baba Sansthān, dated 1924; see N.V. Gunaji, *Shri Sai Satcharita; or The Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shri Sai Baba*, Adapted from the Original Marathi Book of Hemadpant, Shri Sai Baba Sansthan, Bombay 1982¹⁰ [1944], p. 39 n.

⁸ See Swami Sai Sharan Anand, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

⁹ See Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba, cit.*, vol. 1, p. 11. At the end of the 1940s, the story of Sai Baba being born to a Brahmin couple who abandoned him in the forest and of his being found and adopted by a Muslim couple found ample circulation in South India; see N. Purnaiya, *The Divine Leelas of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba*, Bangalore 2003³ [1976], p. 34. On Narasimhaswami, see K. McLain, *The Afterlife of Sai Baba: Competing Visions of a Global Saint*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London 2016, pp. 91-132; K.R.D. Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation*, New Delhi 2015, pp. 68-73; G.R. Vijayakumar, *Shri Narasimha Swami: Apostle of Shirdi Sai Baba*, New Delhi 2009.

¹⁰ *Darśan* literally means "vision." The transformative experience of seeing the divine and being seen by it; see K. Valpey, "Pūjā and darśana", in K.A. Jacobsen, H. Basu, A. Malinar, V. Narayanan, eds., *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism. Vol. 2. Sacred Texts and Languages, Ritual Traditions, Arts, Concepts*, Leiden 2010, pp. 380-394.

that he knew the place very intimately; but this alone does not warrant that Pathri was Baba's birthplace.¹¹

Sometime later, Swami Sai Sharan Anand drew attention to the account of one Suman Sundar. On the evidence offered by his *guru* Madhavnath, the latter proposed the hypothesis that Sai Baba was the eldest of the three sons of a Yajurvedi Brahmin from Pathri in an issue of *Shri Sai Leela* of July-September 1942. Moreover:

When the boy was five, a *fakir* came to the Brahmin and said, 'Give mine to me.' The Brahmin replied: 'Whatever I have is yours.' Then asking for the eldest boy he took him away. He brought the boy back to his father when he was nine years old and, partaking of milk at his place, again took him away for another three years. The period between the years twelve and eighteen, the boy spent in seclusion, and at the age of nineteen he appeared in Shirdi beneath the *neem* tree.¹²

On the basis of this hypothesis, in 1975 the prominent devotee V.B. Kher undertook extensive research in Pathri and reached the "probable conclusion" that the original name of Sai Baba was Haribhau Bhusari and that he was a Deshastha Brahmin, either Rigvedi or Yajurvedi, whose family deity was Hanuman.¹³

In the course of time, many *bhaktas* have come to regard Pathri as Shirdi Sai Baba's birthplace (*janmasthan*) and in 1999 a shrine was erected there in his honor; it eventually grew into a spacious temple. There has always been some controversy between the organization of the Shri Sai Baba Sansthān, which aims at preserving its exclusive monopoly over the saint, and the institution of the Pathri temple. The old dispute over the birthplace of Sai Baba was recently reignited in January 2019, when the Shri Sai Baba Sansthān threatened to prevent visitors from entering Shirdi's holy precincts in order to protest against what Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray had reportedly stated, i.e. that Pathri was Sai Baba's birthplace and that a special grant of Rs. 100 crores would be utilized for the development of Pathri as a place of pilgrimage.¹⁴

Whatever its historical plausibility may be, the point is that Mhalsapati's testimony, postulating that Sai Baba had Brahmin parents and an upbringing by a Muslim *faqīr*, exemplifies an integrative, composite scheme aiming at the Hinduization of the saint, affirming his pure Brahminness: this was the heartfelt wish of the great majority of his Hindu *bhaktas* and it significantly reflects the hagiographical paradigm of Kabīr.¹⁵ To be sure, the claim that Sai Baba was a Brahmin was voiced by several devotees. Swami Sai Sharan Anand writes that the saint unequivocally told him so much in

¹¹ Pradhan, *op.cit.*, p. 26. See also Swami Sai Sharan Anand, *op.cit.*, pp. 2, 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

¹³ See V.B. Kher, *Sai Baba: His Divine Glimpses*, Foreword by M. V. Kamath, New Delhi 2001, pp. 1-14. A trustee of the Sri Sai Baba Sansthān from 1984 to 1989, V.B. Kher is the author of several research papers on Sai Baba. The saint held Hanumān/Mārūtī in high esteem and was occasionally possessed by him. On one such occasion, "when asked for the reason [for his possession] Baba said that his parents had dedicated him to Maruti and so he was telling Maruti, 'I am your brother;'" see Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba, cit.*, vol. 3, p. 173 n. See also A. Williams, *Experiencing Sai Baba's Shirdi: A Guide*, Shirdi 2004, p. 98; B.V. Narasimhaswami, *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings*, Madras 1942, p. 47.

¹⁴ On this recent controversy, see "Sai Baba Birthplace Controversy: Shirdi or Pathri? Where was Sai Baba Born?"; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CU9OhERQBew>. On Shirdi Sai Baba's temple in Pathri, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-eeNFQdIo8>.

¹⁵ In several biographies and popular Kabīrpanthī texts, Kabīr is said to be the son of a Brahmin virgin widow, born without a human father as a result of a blessing by saint Rāmānanda. The infant was later abandoned and retrieved by a Muslim *julāhā* couple, Niru and Nima, who became Kabīr's foster parents.

1912.¹⁶ Still, it is probable that on various occasions Sai Baba used the term Brahmin in a purely symbolical way, so as to express an essentially spiritual choice.¹⁷

Concerning Sai Baba's *guru*, the most popular reconstruction was the one offered by Narayan Dattatreya Sahasrabuddhe alias Das Ganu (1868-1962), a Chitpavan Brahmin who worked as a police constable and was a noted *kīrtankār*, i.e. a performer of song-sermons,¹⁸ as well as being a prolific writer.¹⁹ He played an important role in spreading Sai Baba's fame throughout western India.²⁰ He first met the saint in 1892 and, although he did not spend much time with him, claimed that he heard from Sai Baba's mouth some revealing autobiographical reminiscences. In an interview he granted to Narasimhaswami in June 1936, he stated that "Baba has several times said that 'Venkusa' was his Guru and that by the grace of 'Venkusa' Baba had attained to his position."²¹

¹⁶ See Swami Sai Sharan Anand, *op.cit.*, pp. 10-11. See also Narasimhaswami, *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings, cit.*, p. 212.

¹⁷ See A. Osborne, *The Incredible Sai Baba*, Delhi 1970 [1957], p. 58. On the Pathri issue, see Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation, cit.*, pp. 74-77.

¹⁸ Das Ganu performed his *kīrtans* for free, keeping Sai Baba's photograph in front of him. Typically he was bare-bodied, except for a plain *dhotī* around his waist, as per Sai Baba's instruction. A few songs of his are famous, being sung daily in Shirdi during *ārtīs*, i.e. the ceremonies of circulating a tray of lights at the end of worship: *Sāī raham nazar karnā; Raham nazar karo ab more Sāī; Śīrdī mājhe Paṇḍharpur Sāī Bābā Ramāvār*. For an account of Das Ganu's activity as a *kīrtankār*, see V.J. Tarkhad, *Live Experiences of the Tarkhad Family with Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi*, Mumbai 2020, pp. 23-25.

¹⁹ The *Shri Sai Satcharita* narrates three main stories concerning Das Ganu: how he had *darśan* of his beloved god Viṭṭhal after the completion of a week-long chanting of the divine name, as ordered by Sai Baba; how he saw water trickling down from both the saint's toes, which he identified as the twin rivers of the Ganges and Yamunā (he had wished to leave Shirdi and go take a dip at the holy confluence of Prayag, but Sai Baba had told him that Shirdi itself is our Prayag); how he learned the meaning of a passage of the *Īśā Upaniṣad* on which he was writing a commentary (Sai Baba told him that a maid-servant of H. S. Dikshit would soon solve his doubt when he would go visit him at his home in Vile Parle near Bombay); see Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, pp. 61-63, 325-333, 352 (chap. 4, vv. 83-88, 102-107; chap. 20, vv. 12-105; chap. 22, vv. 19-23). Dabholkar also reports: "On the day after Baba gave up the ghost, in the early morning, at sunrise, Baba appeared in a vision in Das Ganu's dream at Pandharpur. 'The mosque has tumbled down. All the grocers and oil-merchants of Shirdi have harassed me. So I am now going away from here.... Cover me up in an abundance of flowers. O, do fulfil this wish of mine! Come! Come immediately to Shirdi!' Meanwhile, as the letter was despatched from Shirdi, he came to know of Baba's *Mahasamadhi* [= death]. As he heard it, Das Ganu set out for Shirdi, without losing a moment;" *ibid.*, p. 696 (chap. 42, vv. 69-72). He honored the saint by singing *bhajans* and *kīrtans* at his tomb, day and night, and by weaving "a most beautiful flower-garland of *Hari-naam*" (chap. 42, v. 74). Among Das Ganu's numerous writings, his Marāṭhī version of the *Godāvarī Māhātmya* deserves mention. He breathed his last at Pandharpur on October 25, 1962, at the ripe old age of ninety-four. The most extensive biography of Das Ganu is the one by his disciple Anant Damodar Athavale: *Santkavī Śrī Dās Gaṇu Mahārāj: Vyaktī āṇi vāṇmay*, Pune 1955. On Das Ganu, see McLain, *op.cit.*, pp. 54-90; Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation, cit.*, pp. 221-226; Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba, cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 122-154; http://saamrithadhara.com/mahabhakthas/das_ganu.html. See also G.R. Sholapurkar, *Foot-prints at Shirdi and Puttaparthi*, Foreword by V.K. Gokak, Delhi 1989, pp. 18-19.

²⁰ Sai Baba worship in the Bombay Presidency started by the combined efforts of Narayan Govind Chandorkar and Das Ganu; see Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, pp. 239-240, 422-423, 453 (chap. 15, vv. 18-36; chap. 26, vv. 59, 64; chap. 28, vv. 27-30). It was especially after 1910 that innumerable persons were attracted to Shirdi due to the fact that "Das Ganu visited Bombay and through his *kīrtans*, impressed Baba's greatness upon the minds of all;" *ibid.*, p. 635 (chap. 38, v. 108). People had great faith in Das Ganu: he convinced them to go to Shirdi, take Sai Baba's *darśan* and seek his blessings; see *ibid.*, p. 223 (chap. 14, vv. 80-82).

²¹ B.V. Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba. Parts I, II & III*, Mylapore, Chennai 2006 [1940], p. 130. Following Das Ganu, Narasimhaswami remarked: "Baba refers to this Guru as Venkusa with great affection time and again and shows that his *marga* [= path] with this Guru was the Universal religion of love;" Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba, cit.*, vol. 4, p. 104.

In *devanāgarī* script the name Veṅkuṣā is spelt वैकुंशा, i.e. Vaiṅkuṣā, where the ‘ai’ is to be pronounced as an open e as in ‘hen’ and the accent falls on the first syllable Vaiṅ/Veṅ. Veṅkuṣā was interpreted by Das Ganu as a diminutive of Veṅkaṭeśvara/Veṅkaṭeśa—“the lord (*īśvara/īśa*) of the Veṅkaṭa hill,” a form of Viṣṇu known as Bālājī (“the child [Kṛṣṇa]”)—the famous god of Tirupati in the State of Andhra Pradesh.²² In Maharashtra this deity is also known as Vyaṅkaṭeś and as Veṅku—a common nickname in South India—which is the diminutive or contracted form of Veṅkaṭ/Vyaṅkaṭ. Significantly, a devotional booklet has it that Veṅkuṣā was called Veṅkudās, “the slave of Veṅku.”²³ If Das Ganu was officially the first to identify Veṅkuṣā with Veṅkaṭeśvara/Veṅkaṭeśa, it was by no means an idiosyncratic move on his part. Such assimilation came naturally to him, as it would to any Southern Indian, even today. It should be noted that the worship of this deity was strong in Shirdi when young Sai Baba came to stay in the village. The *Shri Sai Satcharita* (chap. 5, v. 148) reports that an ascetic known as Devidas—who had arrived in Shirdi twelve years before Sai Baba and of whose company the latter was fond—²⁴ “taught Appa Bhil to write on a slate and made everyone recite *Vyankatesh Stotra*,²⁵ which he had taught and which they knew by heart. He conducted these lessons regularly.”²⁶ Thus it is probable that Sai Baba was also influenced by Devidas’s devotion for Vyaṅkaṭeś.

Das Ganu pointed out that Sai Baba told him that he came from Selu,²⁷ a town only fifteen miles away from Pathri. Moreover in the presence of Narayan Govind (Nanasaheb) Chandorkar (d. 1921),²⁸ a devotee who was highly influential in spreading the *faqīr*’s fame and thanks to whom Das Ganu himself first found his way to Shirdi, the latter stated that Sai Baba told him “that the brick he used as a pillow at Shirdi and which is still retained as a relic of Baba at Shirdi was given by his Guru to him, [and] that his Guru was ‘Venkusa.’”²⁹ Narasimhaswami, who accepted and popularized Das Ganu’s recon-

²² On the god Veṅkaṭeśvara/Veṅkaṭeśa and the Tirupati temple, see A. Mohammad, “The Sri Venkateswara Temple in Tirupati,” in P. Pratap Kumar, ed., *Contemporary Hinduism*, London and New York 2014, pp. 232-244; V. Narayanan, “Veṅkaṭeśvara,” in K.A. Jacobsen, H. Basu, A. Malinar, V. Narayanan, eds., *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism. Vol. 1. Regions, Pilgrimage, Deities*, Leiden 2009, pp. 81-85; C.S. Vasudevan, *Temples of Andhra Pradesh*, Delhi 2000, pp. 151-228; R.C. Dhere, *The Rise of a Folk God: Viṭṭhal of Pandharpur*, Translated by Anne Feldhaus, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York 2011, pp. 47-51, 54-68, 74-75, 83-84, 237-240. This latter monograph is especially insightful, showing the similarities between Viṭṭhal and Veṅkaṭeśvara.

²³ See A.S. Rao, *Life History of Shirdi Sai Baba*, New Delhi 1997, p. 13.

²⁴ See Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, pp. 75 (chap. 5, vv. 31-33), 85 (chap. 5, v. 147). Dabholkar also says that Devidas “was only ten or eleven years old when he first came to Shirdi;” *ibid.* (chap. 5, v. 144).

²⁵ A Marāṭhī hymn in praise of god Vyaṅkaṭeś in 108 verses. Apparently, it was composed by Devidas himself in the year 1804 (*śaka* era 1726); see <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP023-1-2-181>; <https://www.bhaktiras.net/shri-vyankatesh-stotra>.

²⁶ Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, p. 85. The Shirdi villager Tatya Kote Patil, who was to become very close to Sai Baba, had elected Devidas as his *guru* and several other villagers were his disciples. Devidas is celebrated for having defeated in a public debate the *faqīr* Jawahar Ali, who was then driven away from Shirdi.

²⁷ Also known as Sailu and Shelwadi.

²⁸ He first met Sai Baba in 1891. A wealthy Brahmin, he was the Deputy Collector of Ahmednagar and a highly educated person who held a degree in Philosophy and knew Sanskrit well. Sai Baba once said that he and Chandorkar knew themselves from the past four lives; see Narasimhaswami, *Sri Sai Baba’s Charters and Sayings, cit.*, p. 211.

²⁹ Narasimhaswami, *Devotees’ Experiences of Sri Sai Baba, cit.*, p. 139. When Alison Williams writes that “some devotees felt that it [= the brick] had been given to Baba by his guru but there is no concrete proof that Baba ever stated this,” she seems to be unaware of Das Ganu’s testimony; see Williams, *op.cit.*, p. 88 no. 6.

struction, albeit with a few variants, recounts the following episode regarding the saint's brick, which was told to him by Mhalsapati:

Baba always kept his head on an old brick (which is believed to be the brick given to him by Venkusa with a torn cloth). Madhav Phasle,³⁰ a servant of Baba used to hand over that brick to Mhalsapati every night and along with it, a tattered cloth (believed to be Venkusa's gift) to be placed over it and other cloths to be spread on the ground as bed for Baba. Mhalsapati would first place the brick and then the tattered cloth, and then spread the other cloth or cloths. Ten or twelve days before 1918 Dasserā,³¹ Madhav Phasle, in handing over the brick, allowed it to slip down to the ground, and it broke into two. Then the broken pieces were placed as pillows for Baba. Baba asked, "Who broke the brick?" Mhalsapati mentioned that Madhav Phasle broke the brick. Baba got very angry with Madhav and placed his hands on his own head and felt extremely sad. Baba said, "*Sopat tutali*," i.e. the companion is broken. Next day Kaka (H.S. Dikshit) came and said there was no need to deplore the breaking, as he would join the pieces with silver joints. Baba said: "Even if you join them with gold, what is the use? *This brick is my Sobatya (companion)* (evidently from his Selu days) and its breakage betokens evil." From that time onwards Baba was dispirited. At least Mhalsapati thought so.³²

A similar account is to be found in Narasimhaswami's *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings*, where the saint is reported to have said: "My fakir's wife left me with 'Venkusa' at Selu. I stayed with him 12 years, and left Selu. This brick (which Baba always lovingly used to support his arm or head) is my Guru's gift, my life companion. It is not the brick that is broken now—but my Karma (prarabdha) it is that has snapped. I cannot survive the breaking of the brick."³³

Although G. R. Dabholkar, too, includes this episode in his *Shri Sai Satcharita* (chap. 44, vv. 43-56), it should be noted that he makes no mention of Venkuṣā. Dabholkar states that the saint used to rest his head and elbow on this old brick at the mosque, while sitting in a yogic *āsana*. When it broke, the *faqīr* is said to have wept, and to have exclaimed: "The brick, in the company of which, I go into a state of Self-absorption, and which was dearer to me as life itself—that companion of mine is broken and I too, cannot remain without it. That brick, my companion of a lifetime, has gone, leaving me behind."³⁴

Das Ganu provides a unique account of Sai Baba's interrogation by a Commissioner of the Dhulia Court, one Nana Joshi, a first-class magistrate and assistant collector. The Commissioner was sent to Shirdi to interrogate Sai Baba on a case of theft of jewels, given that the accused pleaded that it was Sai Baba who gave him the jewels, thus citing him as a witness. Apparently, "three hours before his arrival Baba had sent for chairs and a table and improvised a Court at the Mosque."³⁵ The answers that Sai Baba gave to the

³⁰ He used to do the saint's chores, such as sweeping the mosque, washing his robes and taking care of his horse Shyam Sundar. Sai Baba fondly called him *ghodevālā*, i.e. "one who tends a horse."

³¹ The day of Sai Baba's death.

³² Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba, cit.*, vol. 2, p. 20. On the saint's brick, see V. Chitluri, *Baba's Rinanubandh: Leelas during His Sojourn in Shirdi*, New Delhi 2007, pp. 79-81. When Sai Baba died, the brick—mended with gold and silver wire—accompanied him in the tomb, placed as a pillow under his head; see *ibid.*, p. 81; Williams, *op.cit.*, p. 88.

³³ Narasimhaswami, *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings, cit.*, p. 61.

³⁴ Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, p. 726 (chap. 44, vv. 55-56). Another source reports these words of the saint: "'It is over; it is finished. My relationship with this brick in this life is finished. I must go now' (*Sevat jhala ata sarvach atoople. Janmachi khari sobateen sevati goleech. Ata apanhi goli pahaje. Aphan veet sonyacha tarene neet julvoon bandhan ghevu*);" Williams, *op.cit.*, p. 88 no. 6.

³⁵ Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba, cit.*, p. 128.

Commissioner with regard to his identity are worth quoting: “Commissioner: What is your name? Baba: They call me Sai Baba. C.: Your father’s name? B.: Also Sai Baba. C.: Your Guru’s name? B.: Venkusa. C.: Creed or religion? B.: Kabir. C.: Caste or race? B.: Parvardigar (i.e. God). C.: Age, please? B.: Lakhs of years.”³⁶ Eventually the saint, who was not required to sign at the end of the examination, was found to be extraneous to the case since it was proved that the accused was not in Shirdi when the jewels were allegedly received from him. Unfortunately, no date is given for this episode.³⁷

Sai Baba is also said to have made explicit mention of Veṅkuśā to Nanasaheb Chandorkar. Narasimhaswami reports: “Nana, I am not angry with you. You my children can be angry with me. If Venkusa were alive I could be angry with him.”³⁸ Even Rao Bahadur Hari Vinayak Sathe, another of the saint’s close devotees who first met him in 1904, is reported to have said: “He [= Sai Baba] gave me his Guru’s name. It ended with ‘Shah’ or ‘Sa’ [= śā]. I have forgotten the rest of the name. It might be ‘Venkusa.’”³⁹

The ambiguity that the name of the *faqīr*’s *guru* may have ended in Shāh is notable and tallies with the conviction of other devotees and researchers that Sai Baba’s master was a Sufi.⁴⁰ If this were in fact the case, the name Veṅku Shāh would indicate a Sufi adept of Veṅkaṭeśvara.⁴¹ This would by no means be exceptional, there being many Muslim worshippers of the god of Tirupati.⁴² The deity’s integrative character is worth stressing: in their songs, the Tamil Alṽar saints often refer to Veṅkaṭeśvara as a combined form of Hari and Hara, i.e. Viṣṇu and Śiva, or of the *trimūrti* itself, i.e. of Hari, Hara, and Brahmā.⁴³

Besides the Veṅku Shāh hypothesis, Swami Sai Sharan Anand states that Sai Baba had told him more than once that his *guru*’s name was Roshan Shāh Miyān, *miyān* being a term of respect among Muslims, and conjectures that he must be entombed under the *nīm* or Margosa tree in Shirdi where Sai Baba reportedly said his *guru*’s burial place (*turbat*) is located, i.e. what is known as the Gurusthān.⁴⁴ This testimony, however, finds no other attestation, and Swami Sai Sharan Anand himself admits that the saint used the term *roshan*, meaning “light” or “sun,” especially when telling allegorical stories.⁴⁵

On the other hand, another devotee as influential as Ganpatrao G. Narke, a Geology Professor, told Narasimhaswami that he heard Sai Baba say that his *guru* was a Brahmin.⁴⁶ Even the popular story that has it that Sai Baba told the villagers that his *guru* was buried

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129.

³⁷ This exchange was also reported by N.V. Gunaji in 1954; see N.V. Gunaji, *op.cit.*, p. xxiii. For an overview, see Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation, cit.*, pp. 189-191.

³⁸ Narasimhaswami, *Sri Sai Baba’s Charters and Sayings, cit.*, p. 62.

³⁹ *Id.*, *Devotees’ Experiences of Sri Sai Baba, cit.*, p. 113. Sathe said to Narasimhaswami that Sai Baba told him that the grave of his *guru* was located under a Margosa tree in Shirdi; see *ibid.*

⁴⁰ See M. Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma: Shirdi Sai Baba in the Light of Sufism*, New Delhi 1999, pp. 40, 73.

⁴¹ A biographer of Sathya Sai Baba, Bill Aitken, goes so far as to suggest: “But could it be that Venkusa is actually a garbled form of ‘Fakir Shah,’ the Sufi equivalent of Dattatreya, and honoured in popular affections throughout the Deccan?”; B. Aitken, *Sri Sathya Sai Baba: A Life*, New Delhi 2004, p. 60.

⁴² A local story tells of the god’s marriage with the Muslim girl Bibi Nanchamma; see Mohammad, *op.cit.*, p. 232.

⁴³ See Dhare, *op.cit.*, p. 58.

⁴⁴ See Swami Sai Sharan Anand, *op.cit.*, pp. 33-34. Marianne Warren considers Swami Sai Sharan Anand’s interpretation plausible; see Warren, *op.cit.*, pp. 42-43. For a useful guide to Shirdi, see Williams, *op.cit.*

⁴⁵ For a critical evaluation of Swami Sai Sharan Anand’s theory, see Kher, *op.cit.*, pp. 48-51. On Roshan Shah Mian and allusive speech, see Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation, cit.*, pp. 82-83.

⁴⁶ See Narasimhaswami, *Devotees’ Experiences of Sri Sai Baba, cit.*, pp. 22, 24.

under a *nīm* tree has come in for all sorts of speculation—for example, that it was in fact the burial place of a *guru* of one of his previous births or even of Kabīr (or of some leaves/flowers representing his body, as reported by Das Ganu)⁴⁷—while Dabholkar, in his *Shri Sai Satcharita* (chap. 4, vv. 133-34), dismisses the whole issue saying that it was probably just a joke on the part of the *faqīr*, supposing that it must have been, rather, his own abode in the early years.⁴⁸

All in all, the idea that one Veñkuṣā (or Veñku Shāh) was Sai Baba's *guru* remains to date the most widespread conjecture among devotees. This belief was first voiced and popularized by Das Ganu (and later propagated in Narasimhaswami's writings), though it appears to have been shared by N.G. Chandorkar and perhaps by Mhalsapati himself (whereas R.B.H.V. Sathe deemed it just possible). In particular, Sai Baba's answers at the official hearing with Nana Joshi, Commissioner of the Dhulia Court, strike me as being particularly noteworthy, the symbolic parlance of our *faqīr* notwithstanding.⁴⁹

Das Ganu's Story of Shirdi Sai Baba's Origins

The saint's references to Veñkuṣā and Selu prompted Das Ganu to go on a research trip there in 1901 and look into these issues with the local villagers. In 1936, on being interviewed by Narasimhaswami, he told him that "the villagers said that there was an old Saint, that a young boy was being trained by him, that some got vexed with the Saint and threw stones at him and killed him and that the boy escaped and that all this took place 100 years previously."⁵⁰ Das Ganu wrote his poetic reconstruction of Sai Baba's origins as chapter 26 of his Marāṭhī *Bhaktisārāmṛt*, which was published in 1925.⁵¹

The essentials of this story are that Sai Baba was born in Manwath, near Pathri, to Muslim parents. His father is said to have been a *faqīr* who passed away when he was five

⁴⁷ See Das Ganu, *Sai Hari Katha (Bhaktisaramrit, Bhaktileelamrit and Santkathamrit)*, Compiled and Translated by R.N. Kakarya, New Delhi 2007 [1945], pp. 57 ff.; Narasimhaswami, *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings, cit.*, p. 54. See also Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba, cit.*, vol. 3, pp. 101-102, 156; McLain, *op.cit.*, p. 79.

⁴⁸ See Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, pp. 66-68. Nonetheless, it is reported that Sai Baba himself referred to this site as "the Guru's Samadhi;" V. Chitluri, *Baba's Divine Symphony*, New Delhi, 2014, p. 76.

⁴⁹ V. B. Kher also sees Sai Baba's reply as to what his creed or religion was, i.e. Kabīr, as "very significant;" see Kher, *op.cit.*, p. xiii.

⁵⁰ Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba, cit.*, p. 139. Das Ganu admitted that "he could not specify any villager as having told him anything in particular;" *ibid.*

⁵¹ Das Ganu also wrote about Sai Baba in chapters 52 and 53 of the *Bhaktisārāmṛt*. He says that these two chapters were composed by him during the saint's own lifetime and that they were placed in his hands and approved by him with the words "alright." Most other chapters, and presumably also the 26th, were composed after 1918; see Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba, cit.*, p. 139. Earlier, Das Ganu had written two other works: the *Santkathāmṛt*, published in 1903 (which devotes chap. 57 to Sai Baba), and the *Bhaktīlāmṛt*, published in 1906 (which devotes chaps. 31-33 to Sai Baba, known as *Satya-Sai kathā*); see Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, pp. 18 (chap. 2, vv. 23-27), 213 (chap. 13, vv. 183-184). The saint is said to have approved them both, saying: "That is all right;" Narasimhaswami, *Devotees' Experiences of Sri Sai Baba, cit.*, p. 138. The seven chapters on Sai Baba in these three works were published in 1945 as a separate compilation titled *Sai Hari Katha*. Significantly, in his Preface to the first edition of this book Narasimhaswami wrote that "[T]hese will be the texts on which all Keertankars all over Madras are to base their Sai Keertan;" Das Ganu, *Sai Hari Katha*, p. ii. Das Ganu also wrote poems in praise of Sai Baba; see Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, p. 19 (chap. 2, v. 30). A fine example is the *Shri Sainath Stavan Manjari*; see Das Ganu, *The Blossom of Praise to Shri Sainath*. English Translation in Verse of *Shri Sainath Stavan Manjari* Originally in Marathi *ovi* Metre, Translated by Shri D.Y. Biniwale and Edited with Notes and Preface by M.B. Nimbalkar, Rajahmundry 1987.

years old. Just before dying, the *faqīr* asked his wife to take the boy to Selu and to hand him over to one Gopalrao Deshmukh, a landowner (*zamīndār*) and a merciful Brahmin revered as a saint and miracle-worker by the locals.⁵² Gopalrao was especially devoted to Venkateśvara—to the point of completely identifying with him—and, as mentioned, this is the reason why Das Ganu inferred that Venkuṣā was the name by which he was popularly known (*Bhaktisārāmṛt*, chap. 26, v. 233).⁵³ After reacting with remarkable dispassion to the news of his son Lakshmanrao's death, Gopalrao recognizes the Muslim boy as Kabīr reborn—Gopalrao himself being none other than Rāmānanda, i.e. Kabīr's *guru*—in accordance with the revelation that saint Suvāg Shāh had 'spoken' from his tomb (*dargāh*) in Ahmedabad when Gopalrao had visited it during a pilgrimage to various holy sites.⁵⁴

Gopalrao's household and relatives, however, do not take kindly to his favoring the Muslim boy: they despise him as a vile *yavana*⁵⁵ and are jealous of him. They believe that the *faqīr*'s widow, who Gopalrao had accommodated in his compound and who died when the boy turned twelve, must have cast an evil spell on Gopalrao. Therefore, one day a group of men decide to kill the boy by hurling bricks at him while he and Gopalrao are spending a retreat of four months in a nearby forest. By mistake, the brick hurled at the boy hits Gopalrao on the head, which leads to profuse bleeding, while the man who had hurled the brick immediately falls dead as a consequence of his evil act. The boy is desperate and pleads with his master to send him away, realizing that he is the cause of all his suffering. Before dying, Gopalrao transfers his divine nature and all his powers to his young disciple. He asks him to go and fetch some milk from a barren black cow that the master by his touch transforms into the cow of plenty and tells the boy to drink three seers of that milk, signifying *karman*, *bhakti*, and *jñāna*—the three paths (*mārgas*) of action, devotion, and knowledge leading to enlightenment (*mokṣa*)—after which he attains supreme knowledge: wherever he looks, everything appears as Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa to him. Gopalrao gives the boy his head cloth and the very brick that hit him, tainted with his blood, signifying the transfer of his spiritual wealth to him.⁵⁶ He tells him to remember that he was Kabīr in a former birth, to remain celibate, and to regard God and the world

⁵² Gopalrao's father is said to have been one Keshavarao, an ardent *vīra vaiṣṇava* from the village of Jambavavi in Maharashtra. It was the god Venkateśvara himself who blessed Keshavarao and his wife with offspring, promising that Rāmānanda would be born as their son. Apparently, when Gopalrao came to Seluwadi he raised a fort and gifted land to the local people. He changed the name of the village to Selu "and obtained the good Deshmukh jaghir of Jintur Pargana by power" (*Bhaktisārāmṛt*, chap. 26, v. 47). Das Ganu narrates a few miracles of his, such as restoring sight to a blind woman and driving away a demon.

⁵³ The idea is that Gopalrao was constantly immersed in his chosen deity. A temple of Venkateśvara with a tall *gopuram*, said to have been built around 1808, is located just half a mile away from Selu station; see M.V. Kamath, V.B. Kher, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Unique Saint*, Bombay 1991, p. 28.

⁵⁴ Das Ganu writes that the tomb "began to perspire and burst into speech" (v. 132). As he himself notes in v. 131, Suvāg Shāh is well-known in Marāṭhī hagiography, being presented in chapter 43, vv. 93-143, of Mahīpati's *Bhaktalīlāmṛt*; see J.E. Abbott, N.R. Godbole, J.F. Edwards, trans., *Nectar from Indian Saints: An English Translation of Mahīpati's Marāṭhī Bhaktalīlāmṛt, Chapters 1-12, 41-51*, Poona 1935, pp. 263-267. On the hagiographer Mahīpati (1715-1790), see J. Keune, "Gathering the Bhaktas in Marāṭhī", *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, 15, 2, 2007, pp. 169-188.

⁵⁵ Lit. "Ionian," i.e. Greek. From medieval times, this expression is used as a derogatory term to refer to Muslims.

⁵⁶ Being hit on the forehead is often believed to be a turning point that 'awakens' the mind and opens one's 'third eye,' bringing about divine knowledge. A case in point is that of the Parsi saint Meher Baba (1894-1969), who was hit on the forehead by a stone thrown at him by Upasni Maharaj (1870-1941), a disciple of Sai Baba; see A. Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, State University of New York Press, Albany, N.Y. 1993, p. 208. Violent events such as this are not infrequent in the lives of extreme ascetics of the *avadhūta* type.

as one: he should practice silence or confine himself to laconic utterances, remain in one place, and raise those who surrender themselves to him. The evil men who wanted to kill the boy realize their sin and repent, and the boy, complying to their request, proceeds to resuscitate the man who had hurled the brick at him by applying the dust of his master's feet to his forehead. The next day, before 'leaving the body,' Gopalrao tells his disciples that they will discover a four-armed idol of Veṅkaṭeśvara under the tree where he tells them his body should be buried. Finally, he gives the boy the cloth he wore to make his own robe (*kafnī*) from, and signals him to leave Selu at once and go westward, along the southern bank of the river Godāvārī.

The account is followed up in chapter 52 of the *Bhaktisārāmṛt*, where Das Ganu narrates that the boy wandered in solitude around the areas of Aurangabad and Daulatabad and, one day, while sitting in a thick forest, met with Chandbhai,⁵⁷ a Muslim who had been searching for his lost mare for the last four days. The boy, identified as a *faqīr*, invites Chandbhai to rest a while and have a smoke with him, and miraculously produces fire by striking the earth with his pincers. He then exhibits his power of clairvoyance by directing him to a hedge where his missing mare is found.⁵⁸ Grateful, Chandbhai invites the prodigious *faqīr* to his home and later accompanies him to Shirdi with the marriage-party of his brother-in-law who was to marry a bride from Shirdi. This story of the lost mare is popular among devotees, and Dabholkar in his *Shri Sai Satcharita* (chap. 5, vv. 1-23; chap. 39, vv. 7-12) associates it with young Sai Baba's reappearance in Shirdi.⁵⁹

As noted, while Das Ganu was officially the first to identify Veṅkuṣā with Veṅkaṭeśvara, the assimilation was made quite commonly. Furthermore, just as the older form of Prakrit *veṅkaṭa* is Sanskrit *vyāṅkaṭa*, the name Veṅkuṣā might be traced back to *vyāṅkuṣa*, lit. "without (*vi-*) hook/goad (*aṅkuṣa*)," "unrestrained,"⁶⁰ possibly identifying a radical ascetic of the *avadhūta* type who knows no rules and regulations and conducts himself as he pleases.⁶¹ Thus in his 1984 book titled *May Sai Baba Bless Us All* S. V. Tanavde

⁵⁷ Lit. "brother (*bhāī*) Chand." The name Chand (*caṇḍ*) means "fierce," "angry."

⁵⁸ Finding lost animals through their power of clairvoyance is a feat often attributed to holy men, in India and throughout the world. In the Bible a case in point is the episode of the lost donkeys of Kish, Saul's father: Saul and his servant asked for the help of "a man of God," namely Samuel, to find them (*1 Samuel* 9.1-19).

⁵⁹ See Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, pp. 73-75, 644. Here the name of the Muslim gentleman is Chand Patil from Dhooikheda, a village of the Aurangabad district. It is said that he could not trace his lost mare for two months and that he spotted the young *faqīr* under a mango tree about nine miles away from Aurangabad. On this story, see Kher, *op.cit.*, pp. 21-28. For a detailed overview of Das Ganu's reconstruction, see *ibid.*, pp. 37-41.

⁶⁰ See M. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary. Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*, New Edition, Greatly Enlarged and Improved with the Collaboration of E. Leumann, C. Cappeller and Other Scholars, New Delhi 1988³, pp. 1014 col. 1, 1028 col. 2, 1029 col. 1; V.S. Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Revised & Enlarged Edition, Kyoto 1986, p. 1507 col. 1.

⁶¹ On the freedom of the supreme ascetic who may behave as a child or a madman (*bāla*), a lunatic or an intoxicated person (*unmatta*), and a demonic being (*piśāca*), see P. Olivelle, trans., *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation*, with Introduction and Notes Oxford University Press, New York 1992, pp. 107-112. The *avadhūta*'s spontaneous behavior free of all constraint is celebrated in the *Avadhūtagītā*; see *Avadhūta Gītā (Song of the Free)*, translated and annotated by Swami Ashokananda Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Madras 1988³. It is worth noting that according to the *Shri Sai Satcharita* (chap. 3, vv. 109-141) Sai Baba appreciated the company of an "unrestrained" (vv. 110, 116-117) Rohilla—a member of a people of Afghan Pathan origin—who used to recite the six sacred phrases (*kalimas*) of Islām at the top of his voice, greatly disturbing the Shirdi villagers, especially at night. Though the rude Rohilla behaved like a madcap, Sai Baba loved him dearly. He said: "I like the company of the Rohilla because he loves God's name;" Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, p. 48 (v. 140).

interprets *Veṅkuṣā* as *Vyaṅkuṣā*.⁶² Given that the *aṅkuṣā* is an elephant-driver's hook, the term *vyaṅkuṣā* indicates *prima facie* an unrestrained elephant, i.e. a *gaja* or *nāga*, this latter term being polysemic since it also identifies a cobra. The *aṅkuṣā* is an attribute of several Hindu gods and goddesses, and primarily of the elephant-headed god Gaṇeśa, who usually holds this weapon in his upraised right hand: with it, he is thought to sever all attachments, removing all obstacles from one's path.

Bearing in mind Sai Baba's irony and love of cryptic parlance, it could even be suggested that *Vaiṅkuṣā/Veṅkuṣā* is a mangled form of *Vaikuṅṭh Shāh*, achieved by shifting the nasal before the *k* and dropping the final *ṭh*, assimilating it to the palatal *ś*. Stating that his *guru*'s name was *Vaikuṅṭh Shāh* or "the lord/king of *Vaikuṅṭh*," could have been a way to affirm that *Viṣṇu* and *Allāh* are one and the same, in which case it would be a purely symbolical utterance, meaning that his master was the almighty god. A composite appellation of the kind would nicely blend the name of *Viṣṇu*'s heaven, which according to the *Purāṇas* is variously situated at the top of the "cosmic egg" (*brahmāṇḍa*) or on the eastern peak of Mount Meru, with the Persian title *Shāh*. Sai Baba is reported to have mentioned *Vaikuṅṭh* in at least one of his sayings, pointing out that freedom from rebirth is not to be confused with any paradise: "Moksha is not Heaven, Kailas or Vaikunta. It is subtle and not gross. It is the invisible origin of the Universe—pure consciousness, pure being, Shuddha Chaitanya. Being or becoming that, is Moksha. That is immortality and that is the goal of human life. All other aims are worthless."⁶³

Leaving etymological speculations aside, what is to be noted is that Das Ganu identifies Sai Baba with *Kabīr* and *Veṅkuṣā* with *Kabīr*'s alleged Hindu *guru* *Rāmānanda*, evidently because he had heard Sai Baba saying that he had been *Kabīr* in one of his previous births and that his "religion" was *Kabīr*. With regard to Sai Baba's declaration that he was *Kabīr*, we have the reliable testimony of G.S. Khaparde, who noted in an entry in his *Shirdi Diary* dated December 10, 1910: "He said he was *Kabir* before and used to spin yarn."⁶⁴ Das Ganu points out the composite character of Sai Baba who, though being a Muslim by birth, has nonetheless a Brahmin as his *guru* (no reference is made to his having had foster parents). A remarkable aspect of *Veṅkuṣā* is his integrative spirituality, as his visit to the tomb of the Sufi saint *Suvāg Shāh* is meant to underline. The opposition between the good Brahmin *Veṅkuṣā*—who welcomes a Muslim and leads him to God-realization—and the entourage of his family and relatives—representatives of a blind, conservative orthodoxy—has the purpose of glorifying *Veṅkuṣā*'s and Sai Baba's composite characters, their universalism, beyond the dichotomous strictures of caste and institutionalized religions.

Das Ganu explains Sai Baba's attire, *kafnī* and headgear, as being *Veṅkuṣā*'s gifts to his disciple: by putting on his master's clothes he identifies with him completely, his garments being the tangible expression of his spiritual transmission. Moreover, *Veṅkuṣā*'s gift of the brick stained with his blood, symbolizing his life/spirit, is the sacred remnant and reminder of his "sacrifice," the lasting sign of his presence and of the pupil's consecration (*dīkṣā*), signifying the transfer of his spiritual power to his beloved pupil/"son." As noted, *Narasimhaswami* appropriated and further popularized Das Ganu's reconstruc-

⁶² See S.V. Tanavde, *May Sai Baba Bless Us All: Story of His Life and Teachings*, Rendered in English by T.V. Parvate, Bombay 1984, p. 4.

⁶³ *Narasimhaswami*, *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings*, cit., p. 31.

⁶⁴ *Shirdi Diary of the Hon'ble Mr. G. S. Khaparde*, p. 7. On Sai Baba's link to *Kabīr*, see A. Rigopoulos, *The Hagiographer and the Avatar: The Life and Works of Narayan Kasturi*, State University of New York Press, Albany, N.Y. 2021, pp. 195-197.

tion with a few embellishments and with the one significant variant that, following Mhal-sapati, he presented Sai Baba as having been born in Pathri to Brahmin parents who later entrusted him to a *faqīr* in his infancy.⁶⁵

Over the years Das Ganu's story has come in for criticism⁶⁶ in various respects and was eventually rejected by V.B. Kher. After field research in Selu in 1975 during which he contacted the fifth and sixth generations of Gopalrao Deshmukh's descendants, he found out that the dates of Gopalrao Deshmukh alias Baba Saheb Subhedar (1715-1802) are far too early and cannot possibly coincide with the dates of Sai Baba's apprenticeship with him.⁶⁷ Kher comes to the conclusion that the *guru* of Sai Baba must have been an "unknown Sufi divine."⁶⁸ Nonetheless, if the identification of Gopalrao with Veṅkuṣā is historically untenable, we still have the *faqīr*'s allusions to Veṅkuṣā (or Veṅku Shāh), Selu and the brick, being the only recurring elements in most of the sources. Das Ganu's tale, like all his literary production, must be appreciated as part and parcel of the Marāṭhī hagiographic tradition. His aim was not historical accuracy but portrayal of the exemplary figure of Sai Baba, in an effort to highlight the saint's quintessential spiritual "truth"—his integrative, composite character within the milieu of Maharashtrian religiosity. As in all hagiographies, what we have is an inextricable interweaving of myth and history which does not rule out the factuality of some features of the narrative plot.

We should not fail to appreciate the intensity with which Sai Baba spoke of his *guru*, emphasizing their bond of reciprocal love and his total absorption in him. He taught that full devotion to the *guru* is the sole thing that counts along the spiritual path since it is only the pupil's surrender to him that prompts the outpouring of the *guru*'s grace. For Sai Baba the *guru* was all, and meditation on the master is a characteristic of both Sufi and *bhakta* adepts. Thus in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* (chap. 19, vv. 61-68) he is reported as saying:

And so, for twelve years I remained at the *guru*'s feet. He reared me as a child till I grew up. There was no dearth of food or clothes and his heart abounded with love for me. He was the very image of devotion and love and had a genuine affection for the disciple. Rare indeed, is a *guru* like mine. I just cannot describe the happiness I enjoyed in his company. Oh, how can I describe that love! As I looked at his face, my eyes would be absorbed in meditation, giving us both an experience of bliss. To look at anything else, I just did not know. Day and night, I lovingly gazed into his face. I knew no hunger, no thirst. Without the *guru* the mind would grow restless. Except him, I could meditate on nothing else [...]. He alone, was my constant goal. Truly, the skill of the *guru* is simply marvelous! [...]. He never treated me with indifference or unconcern, but always protected me in my troubles. Sometimes I was allowed to remain at his feet;

⁶⁵ On Narasimhaswami's narrative, see the *Life of Sai Baba*, *cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 11-18. See also *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. viii-ix, 148-149; vol. 4, p. 104. A.G. Munsif also presented Das Ganu's reconstruction in detail in *The Meher Baba Journal*, published between 1938 and 1942; see A.G. Munsif, *Sai Baba: The Perfect Master*, Pune 1991, pp. 20-30.

⁶⁶ See E. Bharadwaja, *Sai Baba the Master*, Ongole 1983, pp. 248-250.

⁶⁷ See Kher, *op.cit.*, pp. 43-48. I first received news of Das Ganu's narrative from a devotee of the saint during field research in Shirdi in October 1985; he interweaved it with the story of Sai Baba's Gurusthān, pointing out the historical implausibility of the former; see A. Rigopoulos, *Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba: As Gathered During a Field Research in Shirdi and Other Locales in October-November 1985*, Edizioni Ca' Foscari, Venezia 2020, pp. 89-93.

⁶⁸ Kher, *op.cit.*, p. 52. Along these lines, see K.R.D. Shepherd, *Sai Baba: Faqir of Shirdi*, New Delhi 2017, pp. 40, 44.

sometimes, beyond the shores of the sea.⁶⁹ But never did I lose the joy of his company. He was looking after me very kindly. As the mother-tortoise feeds her little ones on her loving glance, so was the way of my *guru*, who looked after the child with loving glances.⁷⁰

In chapter 32, vv. 75-82 of this same text, our *faqīr* ecstatically recalls how his *guru* had once suspended him upside down in a well, feet-up, head-down, for more than four hours, during which time he experienced an indescribable joy.⁷¹ Like the previous account, this, too, has a ring of authenticity about it, and it may well be autobiographical:

Even as I am relating this to you, love surges in my heart. The *guru* then took me to his school, showing for me the same loving concern as the mother-bird who clasps her young ones under her wings. And oh, how fascinating was the *guru*'s school! So much so that I forgot my fond attachment to my parents; the chain of delusion, attachment was broken and I was liberated, quite effortlessly. Bonds which are undesirable were totally snapped [...]. I felt like embracing the *guru*, storing up his image in the eyes themselves. Unless his image lives in the eyes all the time, the eyes will be but two balls of flesh. Or, I would rather be blind without his image.... My house, my family my parents—*Gururaya*⁷² became everything for me. All my sense-organs, including the mind, had left their places and come to stay in my eyes alone, for the purpose of meditating upon the *guru*. When *guru* alone is the object of meditation for the eyes and all else is as *guru* himself, so that there is nothing separate from him, then it is called single-minded meditation. When thus meditating on the form of the *guru*, the workings of the intellect cease. Therefore, ultimately, only make an obeisance to him, observing speechless silence.⁷³

The Story of Veṅkāvadhūta. Sathya Sai Baba as avatāra of Shirdi Sai Baba

Ratnākaram Sathyanārāyaṇa Rāju⁷⁴ alias Sathya Sai Baba (Nov. 23, 1926 - Apr. 24, 2011) from the village of Puttaparthi in the Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, was the charismatic saint who was by far the most successful in presenting himself as the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba.⁷⁵ To give the measure of the latter's popularity, while he was still alive there were other 'Sai Babas' (in Kopergaon, in Bandra, in Nagpur) that claimed to be 'one' with the Shirdi *faqīr*, though they soon faded away without leaving any trace.⁷⁶ After the saint's death on October 15, 1918, several individuals put forward

⁶⁹ Sending a disciple "beyond the shores of the sea," i.e. far away from the physical presence of the *guru*, is part of the training: only in this way will the disciple come to realize the *guru*'s spiritual omnipresence.

⁷⁰ Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, pp. 304-305.

⁷¹ On this, probably a Sufi practice known as inverted *chillah*, see Warren, *op.cit.*, pp. 213-215.

⁷² The *guru* as supreme king.

⁷³ Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, pp. 521-522. On this narrative and Sai Baba's outpouring of love for his *guru*, see A. Rigopoulos, "Sāi Bābā of Śīrḍī and Yoga Powers", in K.A. Jacobsen, ed., *Yoga Powers: Extraordinary Capacities Attained Through Meditation and Concentration*, Leiden 2012, pp. 404-407.

⁷⁴ He belonged to the Rāju or Bhatrāju caste of bards and genealogists, a Kṣatriya sub-caste. In Andhra Pradesh, the Bhatrājus are generally occupied as teachers or speaking minstrels, popularizing sacred literature through songs and poetry. They are supposed to be the offspring of a Kṣatriya female and a Vaiśya male and are mostly Viṣṇu worshippers. They are the only non-Brahmin caste that perform the duties of a religious teacher.

⁷⁵ Among Sathya Sai Baba's competitors were Sri Narayan Baba (b. 1936) and Basheer Baba (1942-1983) from Hyderabad; see Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, *cit.*, p. 247; Id., *Oral Testimonies on Sai Baba*, *cit.*, pp. 54-57, 83-84, 95-96, 186-187.

⁷⁶ Ramalingaswami, *Ambrosia in Shirdi*, Shri Sai Baba Sansthan, Shirdi 1984, p. 174. Even during Sathya Sai Baba's lifetime there were individuals who claimed to be Sathya Sai Baba.

the claim of being Sai Baba, particularly in South India where his fame as a miracle-worker spread fast thanks to the missionary activity of Narasimhaswami.

Sai Baba had never shown the least interest in promoting any religious institution or ashram and had never bothered to nominate any successor. Rather, he had assured his followers that he would always be with them and confided that he would incarnate again and again, as he had done in the past. Apparently, he told a few devotees, including H.S. Dikshit, that he would manifest himself as a child of eight and the *Shri Sai Satcharita* interprets this to mean that he would reappear just like Kṛṣṇa, who manifested himself before his mother Devakī at that age.⁷⁷ Thus many *bhaktas* came to believe that Sai Baba had “just gone on a journey and will come back again.”⁷⁸ This idea of future incarnations at which the *faqīr* had hinted led a few individuals to advance the claim of being *avatāras* of Sai Baba. Narasimhaswami was fascinated by the hypothesis, and he himself believed in “a series of Avatars.”⁷⁹ He mentions two cases that he investigated, one of a boy in Karur and another of a girl in Bangalore, but he came to the conclusion that they were impostors, purely interested in fame and money, and they soon disappeared from public view.⁸⁰

Even before his teens Sathyanārāyaṇa, or Sathya as he was affectionately called, would give various proofs of his abilities as a wonder-worker, especially through all sorts of ‘materializations’ (*vibhūti*, i.e. ashes, food, fruits, candies, rings, pictures, idols, etc.), and presented himself as a devotee of Shirdi Sai Baba, simultaneously identifying with him.⁸¹ At the same time, Sathya identified himself with Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, paradigm of the juvenile god, while later on he identified himself with Śiva and with virtually all the deities of the Hindu pantheon. It is noteworthy that his school-teachers V.C. Kondappa and B.C. Subbannachar thought of him as a great *bhakta* of the Maharashtrian saint.⁸² He was so successful in promoting Sai Baba’s name and fame that in the late 1940s Narasimhaswami told his elder brother Seshama Rāju: “Though we do *prachar* (propagation) of Sai Baba, we have not been as effective as this boy has been in spreading the name of Sai Baba. Whether he is an incarnation or not of Sai Baba, only time will tell.”⁸³ Narasimhaswami, however, was not convinced by young Sathyanārāyaṇa. The following observations, which he wrote in his *Life of Sai Baba*, refer most probably to him, though he does not specify as much:

Mere power to read thought, mere clairvoyance, mere production of articles from empty box or hands and mere devotion to Sai or God, will not constitute one into an Avatar of Sai. So, we might conclude [...] by saying that Sai left no successor to his seat, that there was no seat to succeed to [...] and that there is no person living who can be rec-

⁷⁷ Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, p. 717 (chap. 43, vv. 139-141); Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba, cit.*, vol. 2, p. 348.

⁷⁸ Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, p. 717 (chap. 43, v. 144).

⁷⁹ Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba, cit.*, vol. 4, p. 64.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 347. By dedicating a chapter to the description of Sai Baba’s *līlās* in southern India, especially in Andhra, Narasimhaswami lent implicit support to such claims; see *ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 175-184.

⁸¹ As stated in verse 62 of the *Sri Sai Sathakamu*: “Sri Puttapparthi Sai! You went to school like an ordinary child. In your free time you worshipped the portrait of Sai in the midst of children;” V.C. Kondappa, *Sai’s Story: As Revealed by Sathya Sai to His Teacher*, Original in Telugu by V.C. Kondappa, Translated by Pathakunta Obula Reddy, Bangalore 2004, p. 17. Sathyanārāyaṇa would frequently fall into ecstatic trances, during which he claimed he “travelled” to Shirdi, and was especially fond of singing devotional hymns and performing epic and mythological plays. The sources emphasize his acts of healing every kind of disease and his ability to grant visions.

⁸² R. Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form: A Biographical Series on Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Vol. 1: The Advent (1926-1950)*, Bangalore 2000, pp. 199, 203, 560.

⁸³ V. Balu, S. Balu, *Divine Glory*, Delhi 1999², p. 146. Narasimhaswami wrote about his visit to Puttapparthi in *Sai Sudha*, the official magazine of his Shirdi Sai Samaj based in Madras.

ognized by all as having the entire Sai spirit or Soul in his body, that is, who can be regarded as the Avatar of Sai.⁸⁴

It was either on May 23, 1940 or, more probably, on October 21, 1943⁸⁵ that Sathyanārāyaṇa solemnly declared that he was Sai Baba:

I am Sai Baba [...] I belong to Apasthamba Suthra;⁸⁶ I am of the Bharadwaja Gothra;⁸⁷ [...] I have come because Venka Avadhootha and other saints prayed for my coming. I shall bless you and remove all that troubles you. Worship me on every Guru Var (Thursday, the day of the Guru). Keep your mind and homes pure.⁸⁸

Soon afterward, with the words “I am no longer your Sathya, I am Sai Baba,” he announced the beginning of his mission. Sitting on a rock in the garden of one of his first devotees, he sang a *bhajan* which was to become an all-time favorite among his *bhaktas*. Its opening lines run: *Mānasa bhajare guru-caraṇam / Dustara-bhava-sāgara-taraṇam*, “Worship in thy mind the *guru*’s feet: [these alone] carry over the ocean of existence, hard to overcome!”⁸⁹

Although few in Puttaparthi and the surrounding areas knew of Sai Baba, we find evidence that he was worshipped even in Sathyanārāyaṇa’s own extended family. In Penukonda one Kesavaiya, a Sub-Registrar who was a devotee of the Maharashtrian *faqīr*, was among the first to put Sathyanārāyaṇa’s claim to the test.⁹⁰ In the course of time, by furnishing various ‘proofs’ of his identity through his alleged powers, Sathyanārāyaṇa succeeded in establishing himself as Sai Baba.⁹¹

The deity of Sathyanārāyaṇa’s family (*kuladevatā*) was one Veṅkāvadhūta, a saintly figure to whom Sathyanārāyaṇa’s grandfather, Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju (1840-1952), was devoted.⁹² He and his wife Lakshamma had named their two sons ‘Veṅka’ after him, i.e. Pedda Veṅkama Rāju (1885-1963), the future father of Sathyanārāyaṇa, and Chinna Veṅkama Rāju. The appellation Veṅkāvadhūta, meaning “the *avadhūta* by name Veṅka,” implies that he was an ascetic of the highest order consecrated to the god

⁸⁴ Narasimhaswami, *Life of Sai Baba, cit.*, vol. 2, p. 347.

⁸⁵ Padmanaban, *op.cit.*, pp. 146-149, 160 no. 64.

⁸⁶ The interpretive writings of sage Āpastamba on the *Vedas*, i.e. his school of Vedic exegesis.

⁸⁷ Sage Bharadvāja’s spiritual lineage.

⁸⁸ Padmanaban, *op.cit.*, p. 114.

⁸⁹ See N. Kasturi, *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram, Part I (1926-1960). Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba*, Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications, Prasanthi Nilayam 1980⁸ [1961], pp. 54-56.

⁹⁰ See Padmanaban, *op.cit.*, pp. 114-115.

⁹¹ On Sathya Sai Baba’s purported link and spiritual identity with Shirdi Sai Baba, see Kasturi, *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram, Part I (1926-1960), cit.*, pp. 177-218; H. Murphet, *Sai Baba: Man of Miracles*, York Beach, Maine 1971, pp. 58-67, 149-160; Padmanaban, *op.cit.*, pp. 455-491; Sholapurkar, *op.cit.* H.S. Dikshit’s nephew, who once went to Puttaparthi “to put to an acid test the identity of Sathya Sai Baba with Shirdi Baba,” was himself turned into a devotee of the *guru* of Puttaparthi; see V.K. Gokak, *Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (An Interpretation)*, New Delhi 19832 [1975], p. 68²; N. Kasturi, *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram, Part II. The Life of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba*, Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications, Prasanthi Nilayam 1981⁴ [1968], p. 126. In the course of a public speech held in October 1961, Sathya Sai Baba stated that what Shirdi Sai Baba had actually told H.S. Dikshit was that he would be reborn after eight years, not that he would appear “as an eight-year-old-body;” see Sri Sathya Sai Baba, *Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. 2. Discourses of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba Delivered During 1961-62*, Sri Sathya Sai Books & Publications, Prasanthi Nilayam 2008², p. 127.

⁹² On Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju in Sathya Sai Baba’s own words, see Sri Sathya Sai Baba, *His Story as Told by Himself: A Compilation from the Divine Discourses of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba*, Sri Sathya Sai Sadhana Trust, Prasanthi Nilayam 2014, pp. 15-25, 167-176.

Veṅkaṭeśvara. This holy man was believed to have hailed from Maharashtra and to have finally settled at Hussainpur in the then Kingdom of Mysore in today's Karnataka, Pava-gada Taluk, close to the border of Andhra Pradesh, where he ended his days. His tomb in Hussainpur is located in what is known as the Veṅkāvadhūta temple.⁹³

Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju is reported to have had a memorable encounter with Veṅkāvadhūta one afternoon in Puttaparthi, under a Banyan tree.⁹⁴ After accepting Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju's food offerings, Veṅkāvadhūta solemnly announced that Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa would soon manifest himself in the village in order to rescue Bhūmi Devī, i.e. the Earth Goddess, who was in great distress.⁹⁵ Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju never forgot this startling prophecy and when his grandson Sathyanārāyaṇa declared that he was Sai Baba and that he had come "because Venka Avadhoota and other saints prayed for my coming,"⁹⁶ he was immediately convinced that he represented the fulfillment of Veṅkāvadhūta's words. Indeed, Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju is said to have been the first to realize the divine nature of his grandson, years before his declaration, when Sathyanārāyaṇa was still a child.⁹⁷

Sathya Sai Baba's biographer Narayan Kasturi (1897-1987), who went to Hussainpur to gather information on Veṅkāvadhūta in the 1970s or even earlier, was told by the locals "that their grandparents believed that the Avadhoota had come to Andhra from the Maharashtra region and there are some who insist that he was indeed the Venkusa, under whose patriarchal care the Sai Baba of Shirdi had spent his boyhood."⁹⁸ Thus, Kasturi and many devotees of Sathya Sai Baba came to believe that Veṅkuṣā and Veṅkāvadhūta were the same person. By doing so, they were able to establish a definite link between Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba, the mysterious *guru* of the former being none other than the family deity of the latter.⁹⁹ When I interviewed Kasturi in Puttaparthi back in November 1985, he made this point clear to me.¹⁰⁰

⁹³ On Veṅkāvadhūta's tomb and the saint's powerful presence, see Padmanaban, *op.cit.*, p. 25 no. 11. In 1998, Ranganathan Padmanaban was told by one Rama Rao, priest of the Veṅkāvadhūta temple in Hussainpur, that Veṅkāvadhūta had gone into *jīvasamādhi*, i.e. had willingly "left the body," about 300 years ago. In this case, Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju could never have met Veṅkāvadhūta; see *ibid.* On the other hand, A.V. Narasimha Murthy, former Head of the Department of Ancient History & Archaeology of the University of Mysore who visited the site in 2010, reports that Veṅkāvadhūta died in Hussainpur "more than a century ago," around 1900. If this is true, Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju—who was born in 1840—could have met Veṅkāvadhūta sometime in the second half of the 19th century; see <http://appmithistories.blogspot.com/2013/02/sri-venka-avadhoota.html>.

⁹⁴ Here is how he described the holy man to Narayan Kasturi when the latter interviewed him in 1948: "No face could ever be gloomy in his presence for he was always jovial. No door was ever closed as he passed by; everyone invited him in. He was claimed as kinsman by people everywhere, though he himself refused to accept such a relationship or such ties with anyone. He was hungry when another was hungry in his presence. He wore clothes only when they were wound around him and they remained on him only until they fell off. He carried his body about as if it was gossamer. The rain washed it; the sun dried it; sleep visited it as it sat or stood and left it when it found itself unwelcome. His voice never grated, his eyes shone bright. When he laid his hand on the head of someone, that touch was a prelude to Paradise. He was a breeze, a cloud, a bird on flight from earth to heaven. No one knew [...] where he came from or where indeed he went. He was here, there, anywhere, everywhere, for more years than any knew or could guess" (N. Kasturi, *Easwaramma: The Chosen Mother*, Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications, Prasanthi Nilayam 1984, pp. 12-13).

⁹⁵ See Padmanaban, *op.cit.*, pp. 12, 25 no. 9; Kasturi, *Easwaramma, cit.*, p. 13.

⁹⁶ Padmanaban, *op.cit.*, p. 114.

⁹⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 42.

⁹⁸ Kasturi, *Easwaramma, cit.*, p. 13.

⁹⁹ See *Venka Avadhuta*, Satya Sai Vedanadalayam Books and Publication Trust, Hyderabad 2005. For an overview of the Veṅkāvadhūta issue, see Warren, *op.cit.*, pp. 41, 370-374.

¹⁰⁰ See Rigopoulos, *The Hagiographer and the Avatar, cit.*, pp. 189-190. Kasturi pronounced the name as Veṅkūsa, stretching the u vowel and placing the accent on it, with no palatalization of the s. He possibly did so in an effort to assimilate it to Veṅkāvadhūta.

It is worth noting that the identification of Veṅkuṣā with Veṅkāvadhūta, besides being upheld by many local devotees of Veṅkāvadhūta in Hussainpur and in the State of Karnataka, is also shared by numerous devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba. The identification of Veṅkuṣā with Veṅkāvadhūta has been reiterated by Prof. Sanna Nagappa, folklorist of the RVP College of Hosakote who, in 2003, after an extensive field-research in the Andhra-Karnataka border areas, published a book in Kannada on Veṅkāvadhūta: *Pavada Purusha Sri Venkavadootaru* (Mysore: Spurthi Prakashana, 2003). Prof. A.V. Narasimha Murthy, Former head of the Department of Ancient History & Archaeology at the University of Mysore who also did research in Hussainpur, summarizes Sanna Nagappa's findings thus:

Venkusa was born in a Marathi Brahmin family in the village Selu. The boy who subsequently became Shirdi Baba, selected him as his teacher. But the local people who did not accept Shirdi Baba began tormenting both of them. Out of disgust, Venkusa left Maharashtra and after wandering here and there as a monk of Avadhoota Order, came and settled down in Husainpura, 60 km. from Pavagada. Because of his yogic powers, he attained the status of an Avadhoota and became famous as Venkavadhoota. He is said to have performed a large number of miracles in and around Pavagada. These miracles made him famous [...] Venkavadhoota did not believe in the caste system. Though he was a Brahmin, he lived with lower caste people and ate food with them and thus was a real *sanyasi*.¹⁰¹ He lived in a cowshed till his death. This saint gave importance to serving the people without any distinction. He taught the people how to attain happiness in spite of being poor.... [T]he simple, local people took his teachings in the right spirit and became his disciples [...] There are many folk songs in the area which are sung even now by the devotees and others [...] When Venkavadhoota felt that his end was nearing, he wanted to cast off his body. He made arrangements for his *samadhi* and went into the pit and asked the people gathered there to pour salt over his body. That was done and the grave was closed with a stone cap. Some people complained to the king that some devotees had buried a living man which is a crime. The king ordered an enquiry. The officers opened the grave and found the man sitting in the same posture. They closed the grave and from then he became a god of the village. A temple was built over this *samadhi* [...] Thus a small village is slowly becoming a great religious centre with plans to build a big temple [...] We the Kannadigas can be proud of this great personality who was a one-time *guru* of Shirdi Saibaba, one of the greatest saints of our times.¹⁰²

The origin of these alleged findings lies in a revised version of Das Ganu's and Narasimhaswami's reconstructions, given that although the people of Selu are said to have tormented both Veṅkuṣā and his young disciple, in the end Veṅkuṣā does not die but, disgusted by their violent behavior, decides to leave the place and become a wandering ascetic, eventually settling at Hussainpur. His portrayal as a Brahmin and a miracle-worker *avadhūta* exemplifying a life of poverty and service serves to attune him to Shirdi Sai Baba's composite, *faqīri* model, underlining his Hinduness while simultaneously highlighting his equanimity and his utter disregard of caste distinctions and religious affiliations.

That sometime after his demise the tomb of Veṅkāvadhūta was opened and he was found sitting in a meditative posture, as if he were alive, is a hagiographical motif that finds its model in the popular legend of Jñāndev reported by Eknāth (16th century),¹⁰³ and

¹⁰¹ A renunciant.

¹⁰² See <http://appmithistories.blogspot.com/2013/02/sri-venka-avadhoota.html>.

¹⁰³ According to this legend, Jñāndev asked Eknāth to open his tomb in Alandi so as to push aside the roots of an *ajan* tree that encircled his throat, hindering his contemplation; see J.E. Abbott, N.R. Godbole, trans., *Stories of Indian Saints: Translation of Mahipati's Marathi Bhaktavijaya*, with an Introduction by G.V. Tagare. Vols. 1 & 2, Delhi 1995 [Poona, 1933⁴], Part 2, p. 186 (chap. 46, vv. 163-169).

aims at the immortalization of the saint. On this episode, another source reports: “A *Hawaldar* (army sergeant) came to the tomb, opened it and saw *puja* material laid out, with lamps burning! He closed the tomb and became a devotee.”¹⁰⁴ This immediately calls to mind the Shirdi tale regarding the subterranean cell of the Gurusthān, purportedly discovered under the same *nīm* tree that young Sai Baba had elected as his temporary abode. As Dabholkar states in his *Shri Sai Satcharita* (chap. 4, vv. 128-29): “The layer of bricks over, they found an underground cell with four metal lamps burning in it, the entrance to which was closed by a quern-stone. The cell was paved with limestone and contained a wooden seat, a *Gomukhi*¹⁰⁵ with a beautiful rosary. Then the god [Khaṇḍobā] said,¹⁰⁶ ‘For twelve years this boy undertook penance at this spot.’”¹⁰⁷ All these stories conform to the hagiographic pattern of finding an immortal *yogin* within a tomb which is in fact an underground cavern/cell/shrine.¹⁰⁸

Veṅkāvadhūta is viewed by many as a manifestation of the god Datta/Dattātreya, who is the prototype of the *avadhūta* and personification of the *trimūrti* of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva.¹⁰⁹ Both Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba are popularly identified with Dattātreya and it is worth noting that Shirdi Sai Baba’s *Shri Sai Satcharita* is regarded as the modern *Gurucaritra* (c. 1550), the founding text of the *Dattasampradāya* in the Marāṭhī area. Das Ganu himself celebrates Sai Baba as the *trimūrti* in one of his *padas*: “Such *leelas*¹¹⁰ of the Trinity [= Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva], we experience—in you, day after day, O Baba Sai.”¹¹¹ Dattātreya embodies the roles of the immortal *guru*, supreme *yogin*, and eternal *avatāra* all in one. In the first place, he is the *guru*-god, and the foremost quality that his followers are required to cultivate is *gurubhakti*. As a composite deity, over the centuries he has been appropriated by a variety of religious groups since devotion to him cuts through social strata and sectarian affiliations. By utilizing the “Dattātreya tool,” Hindus have tended to appropriate and sanitize figures which they thought to be impure or non-Hindu. Thus it is widely believed that Dattātreya may incarnate in *faqīrs*, and Sufis themselves throughout the Deccan honor him as Shāh Faqīr/Faqīr Shāh or Shāh Datta.¹¹² Dattātreya incarnations often exhibit an antinomian

¹⁰⁴ Padmanaban, *op.cit.*, p. 25 no. 11.

¹⁰⁵ A glove shaped like a cow’s mouth, which covers the hand in counting rosary beads.

¹⁰⁶ The god Khaṇḍobā spoke through Mhalsapati, who acted as a psychic medium. Possession (*āveśa*) by a god or goddess was and still is an institutionalized feature of village Hinduism; see F.M. Smith, *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization*, Columbia University Press, New York 2006.

¹⁰⁷ Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁰⁸ See the story narrated by the 15th century poet Harihara of the 12th century Liṅgāyat saint Allama Prabhu, who hailed from Karnataka and is revered as an *avatāra* of Dattātreya; A.K. Ramanujan, trans., *Speaking of Śiva*, Harmondsworth 1973, p. 144; Kher, *op.cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁰⁹ This integrative deity is portrayed as three-faced (*trimukhī*) in modern iconography, bearing the three heads of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. Originally the *Purāṇas* portrayed him as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, which is why his central face is usually thought to represent Viṣṇu, i.e. his primary identity. For an introduction, see A. Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin, and Avatāra. A Study of the Transformative and Inclusive Character of a Multi-Faceted Hindu Deity*, State University of New York Press, Albany, N.Y. 1998. On the *Dattasampradāya*, see G. Morse, “The Datta *Sampradāya* and Its Others”, in G. Ben-Herut, J. Keune, A.E. Monius, eds., *Regional Communities of Devotion in South Asia: Insiders, Outsiders, and Interlopers*, London-New York 2020, pp. 137-159.

¹¹⁰ Lit. “plays,” “sports.” Miraculous feats.

¹¹¹ Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, p. 65.

¹¹² See Kher, *op.cit.*, p. 61; Aitken, *op.cit.*, p. 61; D. Deák, “Śahādat or Śahā Datta? Locating the Mysterious Fakir in the Marathi Texts”, in D. Hermann, F. Speziale, eds., *Muslim Cultures in the Indo-Iranian World during the Early-Modern and Modern Periods*, Berlin 2010, pp. 501-532.

character and are believed to grant both liberation (*mukti*) and mundane enjoyments (*bhukti*).

Hagiographical sources report that Shirdi Sai Baba identified with this deity on several occasions.¹¹³ Even Sathya Sai Baba, from his early youth, spoke of himself as “the essential embodiment of the Trinity” of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva.¹¹⁴ In conversations with devotees he occasionally stated that he was a manifestation of Dattātreya, even ‘materializing’ images of the deity. While he was still a student, he humbled a local pundit by correcting his understanding of the *Haṃsa Gītā*, which includes a popular dialogue between King Yadu and a *bālāvdhūta* traditionally identified as Dattātreya.¹¹⁵ Several aspects of his teachings assimilate him to Dattātreya and recent scholarship documents the fact that many Hindus, especially in Andhra, regard him as an *avatāra* of Dattātreya.¹¹⁶

The first and most obvious similarity with Dattātreya is Sathya Sai Baba’s emphasis on the *guru*’s major status, given that he presented himself as the ultimate divine teacher.¹¹⁷ As noted, the opening lines of the first devotional song that the lord of Puttaparthi taught at the inauguration of his mission are revealing in their programmatic character: *Mānasa bhajare guru-caraṇam / Dustara-bhava-sāgara-taraṇam*. M.L. Leela (1927-1999), a devotee who was a witness of Sathya Sai Baba’s early years in the 1940s, reports that the closing line of this *bhajan* originally ran *Om Śrī Datta Anasūyā Putra Sāi Bābājī Venkuśārā*, i.e. “Lord Datta, the son of Anasūyā, [who is] the Revered Sai Baba, [the son i.e. pupil] of Venkuśā.”¹¹⁸ This is an important clue, since it shows that Sathya Sai Baba identified Shirdi Sai Baba—and himself—with Datta and acknowledged Venkuśā as Shirdi Sai Baba’s *guru* from the very beginning of his mission, when he was just thirteen or sixteen years old.

¹¹³ See Rigopoulos, *The Hagiographer and the Avatar*, cit., pp. 226-228.

¹¹⁴ See Kondappa, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

¹¹⁵ Padmanaban, *op.cit.*, pp. 100-101. The *Haṃsa Gītā* is also known as *Uddhava Gītā*.

¹¹⁶ See M.V. Krishnayya, “Dattatreya Worship in the Popular Hinduism of Coastal Andhra”, in J. Blumenthal, ed., *Incompatible Visions: South Asian Religions in History and Culture. Essays in Honor of David M. Knipe*, Center for South Asia, Madison, WI 2005, p. 178. In a recent hagiography on Śrīpād Śrīvallabh produced in Andhra, Shirdi Sai Baba is taken to be an *avatāra* of Dattātreya via utilization of Sathya Sai Baba’s Bharadvāja myth and Śiva-Śakti portrayal; see S. Bhatt, *Sripada Srivallabha Charitamrutam: Biography of a Dattatreya Avatar*, Münster 2019, pp. 509-513. For an overview of Sathya Sai Baba as Dattātreya, see Rigopoulos, *The Hagiographer and the Avatar*, cit., pp. 228-245. According to Ms. Jyotsna Reddy, Sathya Sai Baba was recognized as an *avatāra* of Dattātreya by the Maharashtrian saint Gulavani Maharaj (1889-1974) and also by one Sri Abbaji, a Datta devotee. She says that Sathya Sai Baba was very fond of a Dattātreya *bhajan*: *Datta Guru Datta Guru Dattātreya Guru / Ādi Nātha Dīna Nātha Brahma Rūpa Guru / Alakha Nirāñjana Bhava Bhaya Bhañjana Dattātreya Guru / Sai Nātha Guru Sathya Sai Guru*. This was one of his favorite songs and he asked her father, the famous music composer Pandurang Dikshit, to sing it again and again; see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKvxc6ytIAE> (minutes 2-3); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVZcsJ_6xC4 (minutes 19-20); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsOTEBo_mKY (minute 16).

¹¹⁷ On Sathya Sai Baba as the supreme *guru*, see N. Kasturi, *Loving God: Eighty Five Years under the Watchful Eye of the Lord*, Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications, Prasanthi Nilayam 1982, pp. 243-244, 270, 325; H.M. Shivaram, ed., *Sathya Sai Baba: God in Action. Talks by Prof. N. Kasturi*, Sri Sathya Sai Sadhana Trust, Prasanthi Nilayam 2015, pp. 229-235.

¹¹⁸ M.L. Leela, *Lokanatha Sai*, Sri Sathya Sai Mandali Trust, Madras n.d., p. 132. The closing line in current *bhajan* books is *Omkāraṃ Baba Omkāraṃ Baba Omkāraṃ Baba Om Namo Baba*. M.L. Leela came from Madras and was the daughter of Lokanatha Mudaliar; see Padmanaban, *op.cit.*, pp. 217-219, 230-231, 278, 361, 431, 473.

The *raison d'être* of Sathya Sai Baba's plethora of miracles from the early days is said to be the material and spiritual welfare of his *bhaktas*, i.e. *bhukti* and *mukti*.¹¹⁹ Along these lines, as early as the end of the 1940s Sathya Sai Baba's grandfather, Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju, told Kasturi that he considered his grandson to be a special type of *avadhūta*: "This grandson too is an Avadhootha, but he is *in* the world, *for* the world."¹²⁰ The *guru*'s daily 'materialization' of miracle-working *vibhūti*—fine off-white ash—is another quality which links him to Dattātreyā, given that the deity, much like all ascetics, is particularly fond of *vibhūti*.¹²¹ Sathya Sai Baba's *vibhūti* is thought to cure all sorts of diseases, afford protection, and grant liberation. His followers often mix it with water and drink it as a medicine. Shirdi Sai Baba, too, was famously in the habit of giving his devotees ash (*udī*), both as a token of grace and as a healing substance, which he drew from his perpetually burning fire (*dhūnī*).¹²²

Sathya Sai Baba's Narratives of Shirdi Sai Baba's Origins

One night in 1944, Sathya Sai Baba first disclosed the story of Shirdi Sai Baba's origins to his Bukkapatnam Board High School teacher, V.C. Kondappa. He rendered his narrative in Telugu poetry and published it that same year as the *Sayeeshuni Charitra*. It was the first book to be written on the *guru* of Puttapparthi and his "previous incarnation."¹²³

The main points of this narrative can be summarized thus. There once lived in Pathri¹²⁴ a Brahmin couple of pious *śaivas*, the boatman Gaṅgādhara¹²⁵ and his virtuous wife Devagiriāmmā,¹²⁶ who were childless. One day, Śiva himself came to their house in disguise as a guest. Wishing to test their devotion, he told them that he wanted a woman for his pleasure. Devagiriāmmā was startled at such request but nonetheless went to look

¹¹⁹ On the *guru* of Puttapparthi as the wondrous 'tree of plenty' conferring both *bhukti* and *mukti*, see A. Rigopoulos, "A Modern *Kalpavṛkṣa*: Sathya Sāi Bābā and the Wish-Fulfilling Tree", in F.M. Ferrari, T. Dähnhardt, eds., *Roots of Wisdom, Branches of Devotion: Plant Life in South Asian Traditions*, Sheffield-Bristol 2016, pp. 3-28.

¹²⁰ Kasturi, *Loving God*, *cit.*, p. 85. Another feature that assimilated him to Dattātreyā and the *avadhūta* typology was his occasional childish (*bāla*) behavior. On his *bāla* aspects, see *ibid.*, pp. 150-156; Padmamma, *Twameva Matha*, Bangalore 2009, pp. 40-41; D. Baskin, *Divine Memories of Sathya Sai Baba*, San Diego 1990, pp. 93, 117-119; H. Levin, *Good Chances*, Introduction by Elsie Cowan, Prasanthi Nilayam 1998, p. 80.

¹²¹ See A. Rigopoulos, "Vibhūti", in K.A. Jacobsen, H. Basu, A. Malinar, V. Narayanan, eds., *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism. Vol. 5. Religious Symbols; Hinduism and Migration: Contemporary Communities Outside South Asia; Some Modern Religious Groups and Teachers*, Leiden 2013, pp. 181-183.

¹²² See Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi*, *cit.*, pp. 68, 88-90, 100, 115, 127-128, 187-188, 203, 221, 227-228, 238, 276, 328, 346-347, 351 no. 35.

¹²³ For an English translation, see Kondappa, *op.cit.* In 1944 Thammiraju Manchiraju, the Mathematics teacher of Sathya Sai Baba, also composed the *Sri Sai Sathakamu*; see Padmanaban, *op.cit.*, p. 138. When Kondappa's book came out, Sathya Sai Baba asked M.L. Leela to read the salient portions aloud and "when the section on the life of Shirdi Sai was being read, Baba's form changed to that of the Sai Baba of Shirdi. From the crowd, Leela's father, Lokanatha Mudaliar cried, 'Hey Sai! Hey Sai!' and ran to embrace Him. It took some effort to separate the two;" Leela, *op.cit.*, p. 55.

¹²⁴ Devotees of Sathya Sai Baba do not fail to point out the similarity between Pathri (Marāṭhī: Pāthri) and Parthi, i.e. Puttapparthi (Telugu: Puṭṭaparti). As Bill Aitken notes: "The Indian ear delights in matching sounds and 'Parthi'—short for Puttapparthi—goes well with Pathri;" Aitken, *op.cit.*, p. 63.

¹²⁵ Lit. "bearer of the Ganges." An epithet of Śiva, who holds the Gaṅgā in his locks of matted hair.

¹²⁶ Lit. "the mother of the divine hill." Devagiri is also another name of Daulatabad.

for a prostitute who might please their guest for the night. Unfortunately, however, she could not find any. Gaṅgādhara then told his wife that she herself should please their visitor and left the house. While Devagiriāmmā was in a quandary wondering how she could fulfill the guest's wish without losing her virtue,¹²⁷ a girl knocked at the door who was really Pārvaṭī in disguise, saying she had heard she was looking for a woman and had come to offer her services. Devagiriāmmā's joy knew no bounds and she accompanied the girl to the guest room. Then Śiva and Pārvaṭī revealed themselves to Devagiriāmmā and her husband and decided to reward them by granting boons. Devagiriāmmā asked Pārvaṭī that she bless them with a son, so as to continue their lineage, and also with a daughter, and the goddess readily granted her wish. Moreover, Śiva announced that he himself would be born as their third child. As promised by the divine couple, a boy and a girl were born to them, and soon Devagiriāmmā was pregnant with her third child. When she was about to give birth, Gaṅgādhara decided to abandon worldly life and retire to the woods and she, as his loyal wife, followed him. She thus gave birth to her baby under the shade of a big tree and left him there. The child was found by a childless *faqīr* of Pathri and he and his wife, full of joy, adopted him and called him Baba.

When he was twelve, Baba used to play marbles with the other boys. One of them was a rich man's son and, failing to find any marbles to play with, he searched his house and brought along a golden *liṅga*, the aniconic emblem of Śiva. When he hit it, it rolled off at considerable speed and Baba caught it in his mouth and swallowed it, to the amazement of all. When the boy told his mother that Baba had swallowed the *liṅga* she immediately went to find him and asked him to open his mouth and return the sacred stone: she was astonished to contemplate within it the ten *avatāras* of Viṣṇu and consequently came to recognize his divinity. Baba used to worship the *liṅga* every morning and evening but when the local Muslims discovered what he was doing he was no longer allowed into the mosque and his foster parents were excommunicated. Baba then started visiting the Hindu temples but the people there did not like a Muslim entering their sacred precincts and grew angry with him and his family. Seeing all the trouble that the boy was causing, the *faqīr* hardened his heart and finally drove him out of his house.

Baba left the village and roamed around in solitude for some years. One day along the banks of the Godāvarī he met a Nawāb—a Muslim nobleman—who was in search of his horse. With his divine vision, he told him that the horse would soon be coming from the opposite village. Soon enough the horse came as he had predicted, and the Nawāb, impressed by this feat and other wonders (*līlās*) of his, became a devotee and started calling him Sai. The Nawāb decided he wanted to stay with him and wrote a letter to his two sons and son-in-law informing them of his decision. Another wonder that Baba showed the Nawāb took place when he pointed to a lizard on the wall of the mosque where he lived and said that its sister would soon be coming to see it from the Nawāb's capital. Meanwhile, the Nawāb's sons and son-in-law arrived wishing to take him back with them. A lizard then popped out of their baggage, rushed to meet the one on the wall and they merrily left together, to the Nawāb's amazement. In the end, his two sons and son-in-law became devotees of Sai and they also decided to stay with him. Finally, the saint reached Shirdi when he was sixteen years old.

The story goes on to present some aspects of Sai Baba's personality (he acted like a mad man, at times shouting and at other times keeping quiet) and miracles (such as when

¹²⁷ Here there is a conflict with the host's duties: the guest is sacred and must be given all that he/she asks for.

he lighted oil-lamps with water, a popular feat celebrated in the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, chap. 5, vv. 101-114). It also highlights his teachings—first and foremost the twin virtues of faith (*śraddhā*) and courageous patience (*saburī*)—and how he taught the *Purāṇas* and the Quran to demonstrate the unity of Hindus and Muslims. Sai Baba’s Muslim servant Abdul (1871-1954) is extolled as his foremost devotee.¹²⁸

Sathya Sai Baba’s narrative is strongly reminiscent of a Purāṇic tale and presents some typical motifs: the barrenness that is miraculously cured; the appearance of a deity incognito; the announcement of a deity’s birth in human form; and the abandonment of a divine child who is raised by foster parents. Following Narasimhaswami, Sai Baba is said to have been born in Pathri to a pious Brahmin family, though in fact he is no ordinary mortal but an *avatāra* of Śiva (in lieu of Kabīr reincarnated). Here there are no references to Gopalrao/Veṅkuṣā, nor to any training of the boy under any *guru*. The test to which Śiva puts the chaste Devagiriāmmā requiring that she should please him sexually, is reminiscent of the Purāṇic story of Dattātreya’s mother Anasūyā.¹²⁹ Śiva’s request for female company is a Tantric element that is akin to Dattātreya’s portrayal, given that the latter is the patron lord of prostitutes.

While stressing the pure Hinduness of his previous incarnation, Sathya Sai Baba confirms Sai Baba’s composite background by accepting the scheme of his abandonment soon after birth and adoption by a *faqīr* and his wife. The episode of his swallowing the golden *liṅga* is meant to underline his identity as Śiva while his granting a vision of the ten Viṣṇu *avatāras* by opening his mouth—patterned on the story of the boy Kṛṣṇa conveying the vision of the entire universe in his mouth to his foster-mother Yaśodā¹³⁰—is intended to prove that he is also Viṣṇu, which again tallies with Dattātreya’s integrative paradigm. That his foster-father finally decided to send him away, the Muslims not accepting his *liṅga* worship within their mosque and the Hindus not liking his entering/polluting their temples, serves to underline his being beyond institutionalized religions.¹³¹

Sai Baba’s meeting with a Nawāb during his wandering period and the episode of the lost horse, though differing from the *Shri Sai Satcharita* account (chap. 5, vv. 6-13), are clearly based on that popular tale.¹³² Sathya Sai Baba’s specification that the Nawāb was the first to call him Sai differs from the *communis opinio* that the first to have called him Sai was Mhalsapati, the priest of the Khaṇḍobā temple in Shirdi (*Shri Sai Satcharita*, chap. 5, v. 29). The wonder that Sai Baba predicted to the Nawāb—the delightful episode

¹²⁸ Verse 79 of the *Sri Sai Sathakamu* extols Abdul as the one who kept Sai Baba’s name ever in his heart; see Kondappa, *op.cit.*, p. 18. It is reported that in 1946 Krishnaswamy, the son of Arani Rajamma who was the sister of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Chincholi, was told by Abdul that within a year his royal family would be blessed by Sai Baba’s *darśan* and in 1947, Krishnaswamy’s mother Arani Rajamma together with her sister M. S. Seethamma had their first *darśan* of Sathya Sai Baba in Bangalore; see Padmanaban, *op.cit.*, pp. 457-459. In a public speech held in October 1961, Sathya Sai Baba said that “Abdul Baba was also informed that in 7 years [from Sai Baba’s demise] this [*Mahashakti*] will appear in Madras State;” Sri Sathya Sai Baba, *Sathya Sai Speaks*, Vol. 2, *cit.*, p. 127. On Abdul and his precious notebook, see Warren, *op.cit.*, pp. 261-333; Shepherd, *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation*, *cit.*, pp. 123-125; Id., *Sai Baba: Faqir of Shirdi*, *cit.*, pp. 5-12.

¹²⁹ See Kondappa, *op.cit.*, pp. 1-2; Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya*, *cit.*, pp. 5-8.

¹³⁰ This famous tale is told in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.8.

¹³¹ Shirdi Sai Baba’s composite character ensuring friendship between Hindus and Muslims and warding off all differences is also celebrated in the *Sri Sai Sathakamu* (vv. 12, 43, 50, 53); see Kondappa, *op.cit.*, pp. 12, 15-16.

¹³² An episode of a lost mare is also said to have occurred in Sathya Sai Baba’s early life; see Padmanaban, *op.cit.*, pp. 127-130.

of a lizard coming to meet its sister in the mosque—is also based on a well-known tale narrated in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* (chap. 15, vv. 82-101).¹³³

Approximately thirty years later, in the early or mid-1970s, Vinayak Krishna Gokak (1909-1992), the prominent Kannada litterateur and Vice-Chancellor of the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, asked Sathya Sai Baba if it was true that Veṅkuṣā was Shirdi Sai Baba's *guru*. Answering the question in the affirmative, Sathya Sai Baba ventured into the narration of a long story basically confirming his earlier account with a few variants, to which he added Das Ganu's/Narasimhaswami's reconstruction of the Veṅkuṣā episode albeit with some modifications.¹³⁴

The main variants with respect to his earlier account boil down to a few names (Gaṅgā Bhavadia/Bhavadiya, i.e. "Your Honor the Ganges" in lieu of Gaṅgādhara; Mr. Patil, a Muslim, in lieu of the anonymous *faqīr*; Babu, quite a common name for a Muslim, in lieu of Baba) and details (the *liṅga* is substituted with a *śālagrāma*,¹³⁵ more consistent with his granting a vision of Viṣṇu's cosmic form; his foster-father dies when Babu is still a boy and thus Mr. Patil's widow decides to take him to an ashram for orphans in nearby Selu run by a holy man called Veṅkuṣā; there is no mention of his meeting the Nawāb or of the episodes of the lost horse and the lizards). Sathya Sai Baba takes pains to stress the divine boy's composite character: "He not only installed and worshipped a stone *liṅga* in a mosque, but also recited passages from the Koran in all the Hindu temples He visited. Thus He upset both the communities. By these acts, Babu tried to show the unity of both the religions to the people of that village."¹³⁶

With regard to the boy's stay with Veṅkuṣā, the main changes in Sathya Sai Baba's retelling are the following: from a rich and pious *vaiṣṇava* and respected governor of a district, Veṅkuṣā is turned into the *śaiva guru* of an ashram; in his forewarning dream, Veṅkuṣā is told by Śiva that he himself will soon be coming to him (not Kabīr); it is not Veṅkuṣā's relatives that become jealous of the boy but rather the other boys of the ashram; while Babu is in the forest fetching some *bilva* leaves¹³⁷ for worship, in accordance with Veṅkuṣā's instructions, one of these jealous disciples hurls a brick at him inflicting a deep wound on his forehead, which causes profuse bleeding (and the opening of his third eye as Śiva), i.e. it is not Veṅkuṣā who gets hit and wounded in Babu's place but it is the latter who receives the injury; the episodes of the boy milking a black cow and of his resurrecting the evil one who had hurled the brick against him are not mentioned. Sathya Sai Baba pointed out that this brick was most dear to Veṅkuṣā who shed tears over it, being stained with his divine pupil's blood. Finally, Veṅkuṣā gives the brick to the boy as *guru-dīkṣā* when the latter leaves Selu. Sathya Sai Baba remarked:

What a strange situation! The young Lord received a brick stained with His own blood, as a token of love and reverence towards Him from Venkusha. The brick was almost as

¹³³ See Dabholkar, *op.cit.*, pp. 244-246. Here, the lizard's sister gets to the Shirdi mosque by means of a man who came on horseback from Aurangabad to have the saint's *darśan*: she emerged from his horse's mouth-bag.

¹³⁴ See Gokak, *Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, cit.*, pp. 61-66. Gokak wished to know more about Veṅkuṣā and the following evening asked the *guru* if he could add more details. Sathya Sai Baba, however, said: "It is not very pleasant to be talking about oneself. I will talk about some other saint;" *ibid.*, p. 66. See also V.K. Gokak, "Shirdi Sai and Sathya Sai", in V.K. Gokak, ed., *Sai Chandana: Book of Homage*, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Prasanthi Nilayam 1985, pp. 236-240; E.B. Fanibunda, *Vision of the Divine*, Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications, Prasanthi Nilayam 1987, pp. 1-2.

¹³⁵ A rounded stone containing a fossilized ammonite regarded by *vaiṣṇavas* as imbued with Viṣṇu himself.

¹³⁶ Fanibunda, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

¹³⁷ *Aegle marmelos*. An ingredient of Śiva's cult.

dear to Venkusha as Baba Himself, and Baba having received it from Venkusha as Guru-Diksha, it was equally dear to Him as well. What a bond! Is it any wonder that Baba carried the brick with Him when he arrived in Shirdi with Patil's marriage party from Kirkee (near Pune).¹³⁸ It was always by His side.¹³⁹

An essential difference in comparison with Das Ganu's and Narasimhaswami's accounts is that here Venkuṣā does not die. This is indeed crucial, given that if Venkuṣā had died the equation Venkuṣā = Venkāvadhūta, establishing the identity of Shirdi Sai Baba's *guru* with the *guru* of Sathya Sai Baba's grandfather who prophesized his advent, would be impossible. Although Sathya Sai Baba himself never explicitly claimed that Venkuṣā and Venkāvadhūta were the same person, this identification is upheld by many of his devotees.

In 1990, the *guru* of Puttaparthi offered some final details on Sai Baba's origins, pinpointing the chronology of the events and somewhat adjusting his previous versions.¹⁴⁰ Thus he stated that Shirdi Sai Baba was born in Pathri on September 28, 1835,¹⁴¹ and that he was taken under the care of a Sufi *faqīr* and his wife for four years. The *faqīr* then passed away and his wife, no longer able to handle the boy—who caused tensions in the village by singing songs in praise of Allāh in Hindu temples and proclaiming that Rāma or Śiva is Allāh in the mosque—handed him over to Venkuṣā, who is defined as a high-souled, pious scholar living in a nearby ashram. The boy is said to have stayed with Venkuṣā for twelve years and to have left him one night in 1851 due to the envy of the other inmates of the ashram.

Sathya Sai Baba's narratives reiterate the fundamental stages in the unfolding of Sai Baba's early life: his birth at Pathri; his first tutelage under a Muslim *faqīr*; his being taken to Venkuṣā at Selu by the *faqīr*'s widow; his second and longer period of apprenticeship under Venkuṣā; his final departure with the brick as *guru-dīkṣā*.¹⁴² Das

¹³⁸ This Patil is Chand Patil, as in the popular story narrated in the *Shri Sai Satcharita* (chap. 5, vv. 6-23; chap. 27, vv. 14-16). He is not to be confused with Babu's foster-father.

¹³⁹ Fanibunda, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁰ See Sri Sathya Sai Baba, "Revelations about the Sai Avatar", *Sanathana Sarathi*, 33, no. 11 (November 1990), p. 290. The *guru* of Puttaparthi delivered this speech on Shirdi Sai Baba on the day of the latter's alleged birthday, September 28, 1990.

¹⁴¹ There are discrepancies, however, given that according to another source the *guru* said that Shirdi Sai Baba was born on September 27, 1838; see Sri Sathya Sai Baba, *Discourses by Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, Vols. 1-4*, Compiled by Tajmool Hosein, Sri Sathya Sai Baba Organisation of the West Indies, Trinidad 1988-1993, vol. 4, p. 362.

¹⁴² Sathya Sai Baba mentioned Das Ganu on at least three occasions in the course of his early public speeches. In February 1961, he observed how Das Ganu and other Shirdi devotees had only seen "but the fringe" of Sai Baba's sublimity, and in October of that same year he stated that "word was sent to Das Ganu and Mhalsapati" that Sai Baba would manifest himself again; see Sri Sathya Sai Baba, *Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. 2, cit.*, pp. 8, 127. In a speech he delivered in October 1964, two years after Das Ganu's death, he offered quite a detailed portrayal of him: "When I was in the previous *sarira* (body), Das Ganu who was a police officer came to Shirdi on account of his good luck. That visit transformed him. Moreover, Baba accosted him as Das Ganu as soon as he saw him, and this stunned him. He asked Baba that some parties that were opposed to him might be put down and that he might get promotion in his official career. Baba invited him to remain in Shirdi itself and escape all bother. He told him: 'Do not wonder why I am suggesting this, when you craved for something else.' Later, when promotions came, he ignored Baba and his promise to come away as soon as his honor was vindicated by official promotion. So, Baba had to bring about circumstances which compelled him to come at last, as per Baba's plan. He (Das Ganu) composed a number of songs and *stotras* (hymns); he began performing *Harikathas* on Baba everywhere and he was instrumental in bringing the news of the advent of Baba to thousands in the land. His life was spent in and through the Lord" (Sri Sathya Sai Baba, *Sathya Sai Speaks, vol. 4. Discourses of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (Delivered During 1964)*, Sri Sathya Sai Books & Publications, Prasanthi Nilayam 2012, pp. 260-261).

Ganu's tale, Narasimhaswami's reelaboration of it, and Sathya Sai Baba's retellings demonstrate the power of motifs and their persistence over time and space: childless couples and divine visitations, the miraculous birth of a Brahmin child and his upbringing by a Muslim *faqīr*, the close bond between a *guru* and his disciple, the violent sacrificial act that triggers divine realization and inaugurates a new mission/cult, ascetics in subterranean tombs, and the like. These themes find their exemplars in Sanskrit and Marāṭhī literature (*Purāṇas* and *Caritas*) and notably in the figures of Kabīr and Dattātreya and their integrative traditions. Remarkably, Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba identified themselves with either one or both of these figures long before their hagiographies were written.

Correspondences between Das Ganu's Story and the Myth of Puttaparthi

Alongside the persistence of the power of suggestion of Veṅkuṣā's name (via Veṅkāvadhūta) and of Das Ganu's reconstruction in Sathya Sai Baba's retellings, some intriguing correspondences are to be noted between Das Ganu's narrative and the myth of Puttaparthi's origins and its subsequent appropriation by Sathya Sai Baba. Puttaparthi literally means "multiplier of termite mounds," and folk tales centered upon termite mounds (Telugu: *puṭṭa*; Sanskrit: *valmīka*) are a characteristic of India's pastoral and tribal areas, especially in the South. Even in Tirupati, the *Veṅkaṭācala Māhātmya* said to be part of the *Bhaviṣyottara Purāṇa* narrates that Veṅkaṭeśvara first emerged from a termite mound under a tamarind tree and that a cow used to feed him with milk from her udders.¹⁴³ The myth of Puttaparthi portrays an originally prosperous area, encircled by luxuriant natural surroundings. Its name was Gollapalle, the "village of cowherds" who tended beautiful cows and flourished on their milk. Once a divine cobra (*nāga*) issued forth from a termite mound and, applying its mouth to a cow's teats, started sucking the milk that she willingly offered. This scene provoked a violent reaction from one cowherd, who hit the snake with a stone. This was the sin that brought upon the village the *nāga*'s curse and precipitated its decline. The hamlet was turned into barren land, and cattle and cowherds dwindled. It was therefore renamed Valmikipura and subsequently Puttaparthi.

The local elders, in an effort to atone for the sin of harming/murdering the *nāga*, decided to worship the stone that hit it. Thus the stone, bearing a blood-red streak, was installed in a small temple and came to be honored as the *nāga* itself. However, worship of the snake stone which came to be identified as Śrī Veṅugopālasvāmin, i.e. Kṛṣṇa Gopāla bearing the flute, was not enough to avert the *nāga*'s curse. Locals report that it was the goddess Sathyamma, their village deity (*grāmadevatā*), who told them what else they needed to do in order to appease the *nāga*'s wrath.¹⁴⁴ While being possessed by the goddess, a medium of Sathyamma revealed that in order to assuage the *nāga*'s curse all the cowherds were to be sent out of the village: only in this way would the termite mounds dwindle away. Thus the head of the village ordered the cowherds to leave the place and move to a hilly area. They did so and, in fulfilment of Sathyamma's words, the ubiquitous termite mounds gradually thinned out.

¹⁴³ See Dhare, *op.cit.*, pp. 49-51, 67.

¹⁴⁴ On the Puttaparthi myth, see A. Rigopoulos, "The Construction of a Cultic Center Through Narrative: The Founding Myth of the Village of Puttaparthi and Sathya Sāi Bābā", *History of Religions*, 54, no. 2, Nov. 2014, pp. 117-150.

The story goes that one night the pious Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju had a dream in which the goddess Sathyabhāmā asked him to provide shelter for her. She stood outside in the rain during a terrible storm while waiting for her beloved Kṛṣṇa, whom she had sent to gather the flowers of the Pārijāta tree from Indra's heaven. As soon as Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju woke up, he thought it clear that in order to provide 'shelter' to the goddess he was to erect a temple for her. Therefore, sometime in the late 19th century the Sathyabhāmā temple was built and it came to incorporate the Sathyamma shrine, being homologized with the village deity. The co-identification of the two goddesses was favored by the similarity in their names and by the fact that both are understood to be manifestations of Mother Earth.

The anguish of Mother Earth alias Sathyamma/Sathyabhāmā reflects the sad condition of Puttaparthi: the goddess, who is the village, is incapable of effectively restoring its pristine prosperity by herself. Evidently, worship of the stone identified as Śrī Veṅugopālasvāmin and sending away of all cowherds from Puttaparthi were not deemed sufficient measures. In this connection it is noteworthy that when Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju met Veṅkāvadhūta, the latter told him of the legendary origin of the sacred stone:¹⁴⁵ Veṅkāvadhūta's final announcement that Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa would soon manifest himself in the village to rescue Mother Earth highlights the fact that only the return of the goddess' lord in the flesh would once and for all eradicate the *nāga*'s curse. Eventually, the advent of Ratnākaram Sathyanārāyaṇa Rāju alias Sathya Sai Baba was interpreted as the fulfillment of Veṅkāvadhūta's prophecy.

From a narratological perspective, the structural correspondences between Das Ganu's reconstruction (*cum* Sathya Sai Baba's retelling) and the Puttaparthi myth (*cum* Veṅkāvadhūta's prophecy) can be summed up as follows:

- a. A violent act, i.e. the hurling of the brick that wounds either Veṅkuṣā or his young disciple, is the occasion that stirs the latter's realization and inaugurates his mission, in accordance with Veṅkuṣā's words and transmission of power;
- a¹. A violent act, i.e. the hurling of the stone that wounds/kills the *nāga*, is the occasion that brings about Sathya Sai Baba's avatāric descent and mission, in accordance with Veṅkāvadhūta's words that only Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa's advent would put an end to the *nāga*'s curse once and for all;
- b. The brick hurled at the boy by a jealous relative/disciple of Veṅkuṣā that either wounds or kills Veṅkuṣā in lieu of the boy or wounds the boy, getting smeared with the *guru*'s or the pupil's blood, becomes a sacred object that will lead to the establishment of a new cult, i.e. Shirdi Sai Baba's cult. Also in the folk myth of Veṅkaṭeśvara's origin from a termite mound, when a cowherd struck with his axe the cow that was feeding the god with her milk, the god saved the cow by taking the blow on his forehead (and the god took on the form of a stone for worship);¹⁴⁶
- b¹. The stone hurled at the *nāga* by a jealous cowherd either wounds or kills the divine snake and, getting smeared with his blood, becomes a sacred object leading to the establishment of a new cult, that of Śrī Gopālasvāmin, with whom the *nāga* is homologized and with whom Sathya Sai Baba will later be identified;
- c. The boy milks the barren cow that Veṅkuṣā turned into a cow of plenty, namely Kāmadhenu, which is none other than he himself. By drinking three seers of this milk, which are symbolical of the triad of *karman*, *bhakti*, and *jñāna*, the pupil

¹⁴⁵ See Kasturi, *Easwaramma, cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁴⁶ See Dhere, *op.cit.*, p. 67.

achieves his master's status, i.e. the fullness of divine realization. The cow's milk represents Veṅkuṣā's loving nourishment which he lavishes on his beloved disciple, signaling their spiritual oneness;

c¹. The *nāga* drinks the milk of a bountiful cow that stands for the cow of plenty, namely Kāmadhenu. This milk is the *nāga*'s material and spiritual nourishment and signifies the bond of love that unites the male god with his female counterpart which is thought to guarantee cosmic harmony and the welfare of the village;

d. The repentance of the relatives/disciples of Veṅkuṣā. The one who had hurled the brick at the boy—who had instantly died because of his sinful act—is brought back to life by the boy himself, whom the master endows with all of his powers. What saves from death is repentance which leads to devotion (*bhakti*);

d¹. The repentance of the cowherds of Puttapparthi, represented by the one who had hurled the stone at the *nāga*. The cowherds are saved from death, i.e. the *nāga*'s curse, by giving proof of their devotion. Thus they dutifully follow the instructions of Sathyamma and build a new temple in which they enshrine the sacred stone identified as Śrī Gopālasvāmin;

e. In compliance with Veṅkuṣā's command, the boy leaves the village of Selu with his inseparable brick as *guru-dīkṣā* and sets out to accomplish his divine mission and vanquish all evil forces by establishing himself in Shirdi, inaugurating a new cult;

e¹. In fulfilment of Veṅkāvadhūta's prophecy, the young Ratnākaram Sathyanārāyaṇa Rāju alias Sathya Sai Baba who is homologized with the stone worshipped in the Śrī Veṅugopālasvāmin temple sets out to vanquish the *nāga*'s curse once and for all and accomplish his divine mission by establishing himself in Puttapparthi, inaugurating a new cult.

On top of all this, the hagiographical identifications of Gopalrao/Veṅkuṣā with Veṅkaṭeśvara—who first originated from a termite mound—and later with Veṅkāvadhūta have helped to strengthen these correspondences and to suggest an indissoluble link between the saints of Shirdi and Puttapparthi (significantly extolled as another Tirupati),¹⁴⁷ all the more accentuated by their both being homologized with the integrative icon of Dattātreyā. After all, Veṅkuṣā could even be identified with the cobra, i.e. the *nāga*, on the grounds that his very name, if understood as Vyaṅkuṣa, is ambiguously evocative of a serpentine nature alongside an elephantine one.

Conclusion

The underlying theological truth that Das Ganu's tale and the myth of Puttapparthi both share and wish to convey is that the violent act perpetrated against a saint or deity must be understood as a veritable sacrifice (*yajña*): the victim's blood is the powerful sacrificial remnant (*śeṣa*, *ucchiṣṭa*) foreshadowing a new life and a new beginning—the emergence of a new cult. This is effectively activated by *bhakti*, which can only be ignited by sincere repentance on the part of whomsoever committed the violent act, usually after undergoing fitting punishment in accordance with the law of karmic retribution. The jealous, murderous actor is to be understood as the unconscious agent of the sacrifice who is

¹⁴⁷ See Kasturi, *Garland of 108 Precious Gems: Ashtothara Sathanama Rathnamala*, Sri Sathya Sai Education and Publication Foundation, Prasanthi Nilayam 1979⁴, p. 25; Kasturi, *Easwaramma*, cit., p. 90. As from 1946, Sathya Sai Baba was a frequent visitor to Tirupati.

ultimately transmuted, together with his community, into the faithful *bhakta* of the very same saint/deity that he had originally failed to recognize and worship, his eventual change in name and form notwithstanding.¹⁴⁸

The correspondences in the hagiographies of Shirdi Sai Baba and Sathya Sai Baba are by no means random but show us the power of motifs and their persistence across time and space, revealing the deep-rootedness of the composite character of Deccani religiosity. What is central to these narratives is the unfailing power of the sacrificial act—*karman* in its quintessential sense. In both cases the victim is a divine entity and the deadly, sinful violence is the prelude to life's resurgence, the 'seed' of a new divine epiphany. Sacrifice sets into motion a virtuous circle: the atonement of an ashram/village community through the power of love and devotion (*bhakti*) which in turn leads to the advent of a savior/avatāric figure ensuring the attainment of knowledge (*jñāna*) and leading devotees to the achievement of both worldly enjoyments (*bhukti*) and liberation (*mukti*).

What Das Ganu did through his narrative was to rearrange into a harmonious whole several hagiographic motifs he knew well, as part and parcel of Marāṭhī religiosity. Analogously, the Puttaparthi termite mound myth must be acknowledged as a particular instance of a recurring pattern that is found throughout South Indian villages, notwithstanding its local variations.¹⁴⁹ The fact that Das Ganu's story corresponds to this mythic plot shows how deeply rooted the latter is in the religious mentality of the rural inhabitants of the Deccan plateau. To be sure, the Brahmin Das Ganu did not necessarily know about termite mound myths and he certainly did not have any of these stories in mind when he reconstructed Shirdi Sai Baba's origins. And yet his tale and the Puttaparthi termite mound myth accord, highlighting the broader framework of an ingrained religious worldview in which a violent, sacrilegious act is conceptualized as a sacrifice that will infallibly bear its fruit (*phala*), culminating in the rebirth/resurrection of the wounded/killed divine hero and the establishment of a new cult.

All in all, what we see at work here are some structural hagiographic patterns that cyclically reproduce themselves, local variants and differences in detail notwithstanding. Indeed, certain underlying narrative structures remain constant, despite the diversity of forms and content. The variations on the theme—first and foremost the identity of the main characters involved—enhance the power of attraction of these fascinating tales, keeping the tradition alive by renovating it with every new retelling.

¹⁴⁸ On these issues, see D.D. Shulman, "The Serpent and the Sacrifice: An Anthill Myth from Tiruvārūr", *History of Religions*, 18, no. 2, 1978, pp. 107-137.

¹⁴⁹ See G. Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, *The Self-milking Cow and the Bleeding Liṅgam: Criss-cross of Motifs in Indian Temple Legends*, Wiesbaden 1987; N.E. Craddock, *Anthills, Split Mothers, and Sacrifice: Conceptions of Female Power in the Mariyamman Tradition*, PhD Diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1994.

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Mi la ras pa's Representation in Mang yul Gung thang Xylographs: Preliminary Remarks on the Stylistic Changes of “the Laughing Vajra”*

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L'argomento di questo articolo deriva dalle ricerche svolte per due progetti correlati – *Tibetan Book Evolution and Technology* e *Transforming Technologies and Buddhist Book Culture: The Introduction of Printing and Digital Text Reproduction in Tibetan Societies* – basati al Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit (Università di Cambridge) tra il 2010 e il 2015. L'articolo è incentrato sulle illustrazioni di Mi la ras pa (1040-1123) trovate nelle xilografie stampate nel regno del Mang yul Gung thang (Tibet sud-occidentale) nel XVI secolo. Lo studio analizza sedici immagini dello *yogin* realizzate in quattro diverse stamperie del regno tra il 1540-1541 e il 1581 e le suddivide in due tipologie stilistiche, la prima delle quali è a sua volta suddivisa in due sottotipi. Le immagini sono esaminate singolarmente e poi comparativamente, attraverso l'analisi di alcuni elementi ricorrenti.

INTRODUCTION

This paper stems from two correlated projects—*Tibetan Book Evolution and Technology* (TiBET) and *Transforming Technologies and Buddhist Book Culture: The Introduction of Printing and Digital Text Reproduction in Tibetan Societies* (TTBBC) hosted at the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit (University of Cambridge). These projects had several objectives, such as: 1) to assemble and study extant early xylographs from Southwestern Tibet; 2) to build an online database with information on the different aspects of prints; 3) to build a map of printing houses of that area; 4) to study the production of Tibetan xylographs and their use; 5) to identify the characteristic stylistic features, that is to say front page, layout, *ductus*, orthographic peculiarities and woodcut illustrations, in order to locate the provenance of prints.¹ Research on the last objective, and on woodcut representations in particular, led to the subject of this paper.²

* The figures 1-16, 19-21 are a courtesy of the AHRC Project *Transforming Technologies and Buddhist Book Culture: The Introduction of Printing and Digital Text Reproduction in Tibetan Societies* (AH/H001 599X/1).

¹ Information on the Marie Skłodowska Curie Project TiBET awarded to Michela Clemente can be found at <https://www.miasu.socanth.cam.ac.uk/projects/tibetan-book-evolution-and-technology>. Information on the AHRC Project TTBBC led by Uradyn Bulag and Hildegard Diemberger can be found at <https://www.miasu.socanth.cam.ac.uk/projects/transforming-technologies-and-buddhist-book-culture-introduction-printing-and-digital-text>. For further details, see Clemente 2016a; 2016b; 2017; 2018; 2019a; 2021b; Clemente, Lunardo 2017; Clemente et al. 2021; Diemberger 2016a; 2016b; Diemberger, Clemente 2013; Diemberger, Elliott, Clemente 2014; Ricciardi, Pallipurath 2016; Boesi 2021; Chilvers, Clemente 2021; Lunardo 2021.

² This paper was first presented at the 15th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, which took place in Paris (July 2019).

Most extant xylographs gathered by the above-mentioned projects were produced in the Mang yul Gung thang kingdom (Southwestern Tibet) in the 16th century, therefore the present study focuses on the illustrations included in these prints. The small kingdom of Mang yul Gung thang played a key role in the Tibetan printing history. In the 15th century the xylographic technique had started to be commonly used in central and Western Tibet. This was likely enabled by the economic prosperity that followed the opening of new trading routes and the communication infrastructure established by the Yuan-Sa skya empire. After the collapse of the Yuan Dynasty (1280-1368) Tibetan local noble families emerged and started to fight to control more territories. The local rulers—emulating the Mongolian emperors by taking advantage of the new technology—tried to assert their political power through the sponsorship of religious schools, the foundation of printing houses, and the production of buddhist prints. The Southwestern Tibetan area was particularly active in the 15th and 16th centuries, by promoting several printing projects. According to the study of extant early prints of that area examined so far, in the 15th century the centre of printing activity was La stod lHo. Around the second decade of the 16th century, the centre of production of buddhist printed works shifted from La stod lHo to the neighbouring kingdom of Mang yul Gung thang, where several printing houses started to be established thanks to the support of the ruling family of the region. Like in La stod lHo, the earliest xylographs printed in Mang yul Gung thang were promoted by members of the Bo dong pa school. The first prints were produced in 1514 and 1515.³

By analysing illustrations of 16th century xylographs produced in Mang yul Gung thang, we noticed some stylistic changes occurring over the century. More importantly, while selecting images for a paper, we realised that what we thought to be Mi la ras pa's peculiar feature, that is to say his right hand lifted to his right ear, was not a standard iconography in these xylographs. This struck us and we decided to further investigate this subject. This paper presents some very preliminary remarks on Mi la ras pa's iconography in Mang yul Gung thang prints.

Mi la ras pa (1040-1123) appears to be the most represented figure in the illustrations of xylographs analysed so far. This may be linked to geographic, religious, and literary factors. Mi la ras pa was born in Gung thang and spent several years in different hermitages located in the same area; the devotion to this master was therefore profound and well-spread among people inhabiting Gung thang and the surrounding areas. Furthermore, printing projects undertaken in this area during the 16th century are associated with religious schools and masters belonging to different bKa' brgyud branches. Moreover, the works produced as prints in this area are mainly hagiographies of important bKa' brgyud masters, and one of the most reprinted texts among them is *The Life and Spiritual Songs of Mi la ras pa*.

This paper examines sixteen images of “the Laughing Vajra” included in xylographs produced between 1540-1541 and 1581 in four different printing houses located in the Mang yul Gung thang kingdom, namely rDzong dkar (in the capital of Gung thang), Glang phug (in the La 'debs Valley), Brag dkar rta so (between Mang yul and Gung thang) and gNas (near sKyid sgrong, in Mang yul). Nine of these sixteen xylographs were printed at Brag dkar rta so, four at gNas, two at Glang phug,⁴ and one at rDzong dkar.

³ For an overview of the printing activity in La stod lHo and Mang yul Gung thang based on extant early prints, see in particular Clemente 2018: 20, 22, 24, 35-36.

⁴ The colophon of vol. 709/4 does not actually mention the name of the printing house in which the xylograph was realised, but we believe it was produced at Glang phug according to the history of the printing project and the stylistic features of the print.

The artists who drew these sixteen illustrations are most of the times not mentioned in the colophons of the prints on which they worked. Only two names are quoted in the respective texts, namely mKhas pa dPal chen, who worked on the illustrations of the autobiography with songs of lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal (vol. 657/5, see below), and mKhas pa Dri med, responsible for the representations included in the collection of Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan's spiritual songs (vol. 709/4, see below). mKhas pa ("artist") dPal chen was a painter from Gung thang who was active at least between 1540 and 1557.⁵ mKhas pa Dri med, one of the most skilled and renowned painters of the 16th century, was also from Gung thang, where he was active between 1521 and 1563. According to colophons and signatures on woodblocks of Mang yul Gung thang prints, he is associated with sMan thang pa's painting tradition. sMan thang pa sMan bla don grub rgya mtsho (b. 1409) was the founder of the *sman bris/ris*, "the painting-style of sMan [thang pa]," which is the first national school of painting in Tibet.⁶

The artists who engraved the illustrations are most of the times mentioned in colophons, but they are often listed together with carvers of blocks, without any distinctions; it is therefore not so easy to understand who had the responsibility of such task. It is necessary to underline here that most artists were trained in a single specialisation, therefore not all carvers of woodblocks were also able to engrave illustrations. So far, we were able to identify few carvers of illustrations (*le lha'i rkos byed*). Among these latter, four are mentioned in colophons and signatures of the sixteen examined prints, namely, mKhas pa bSod nams bkra shis, bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal mtshan, dpon btsun Padma and rDo rje tshe brtan. mKhas pa bSod nams bkra shis was a well-known carver of illustrations and woodblocks from gTsang, a village located to the South-West of rDzong dkar. Sometimes called *mkhas pa chen po*, "the great artist," he was active at least from 1523 to 1555.⁷ bCu dpon ("leader of ten [soldiers]")⁸ rDo rje rgyal mtshan was also a native of gTsang who was trained in three specialisations, that is to say as scribe, carver of blocks and carver of illustrations. He was active at least between 1533 and 1563.⁹ dPon btsun Padma was a renowned carver from gTsang. He was skilled as both carver of blocks and carver of illustrations. He was mostly active between 1533 and 1561.¹⁰ Information on the last-mentioned carver of illustrations, rDo rje tshe brtan, is scarce. We are aware of his involvement into two printing projects, namely, the execution of Nam mkha' rgyal

⁵ On this master, see Jackson 1996: 122; Ehrhard 2000a: 77, 79; Clemente 2017: 383; 2019b: 51-52; Clemente, Lunardo 2017: 299, 300-302, 311; Lunardo 2021: 49.

⁶ In the colophon of NGMPP L1121/3-1122/1, mKhas pa Dri med is mentioned as *sprul sku sman thang pa'i brgyud 'dzin*, "holder of *sprul sku* sMan thang pa lineage." Such an epithet underlines a wide spread of the artistic style of sMan thang pa sMan bla Don grub in Mang yul Gung thang in the 16th century. On this artist, see https://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8443/exist/apps/TTBBC/modules/keyref_display.xq?id=MC_040; Sernesi 2016a. See also Jackson 1996: 122-125; Ehrhard 2000a: 71, 73-76; Clemente 2016b: 85-87; 2020: 107, 111; Clemente, Lunardo 2017: 299-303, 309, 311; Lunardo 2021: 44, 46, 47, 51, 52, 54. On Sman thang pa, see Lo Bue, Ricca 1990: 27-28; Denwood 1996; Jackson 1996: 103-138.

⁷ On this artist, see https://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8443/exist/apps/TTBBC/modules/keyref_display.xq?id=MC_048; Ehrhard 2000a: 71-73, 75, 79; Clemente 2016b: 87-89; 2017: 380, 382, 388; Clemente, Lunardo 2017: 299-303, 308, 311; Lunardo 2021: 43.

⁸ Thanks to titles used for artists we are aware that these were officials or else belonged to administration.

⁹ On bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal mtshan, see in particular https://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8443/exist/apps/TTBBC/modules/keyref_display.xq?id=MC_061; the appendixes in Clemente 2017: 387, and Clemente, Lunardo 2017: 311.

¹⁰ On this artist, see https://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8443/exist/apps/TTBBC/modules/keyref_display.xq?id=MC_091; Ehrhard 2000a: 76, 78; Clemente, Lunardo 2017: 297-300, 308, 311.

mtshan's spiritual songs and, in the following year, the realisation of the blockprint of a text entitled *rGyal ba yang dgon pa'i thugs kyi bcud ngo sprod bdun gyi mgur ma*, for which he acted as carver of blocks. Both projects took place in the La 'debs Valley.¹¹

THE SIXTEEN DEPICTIONS OF MI LA RAS PA

The sixteen depictions exhibit two iconographic typologies. The former, which can be considered as the main one, can be found in fourteen illustrations. This iconography shows Mi la ras pa in a lively and dynamic attitude, with one of his hands lifted to his ear, listening to the *ḍākiṅīs*, and with his legs usually depicted in the *lilāsana* posture. The latter typology, which is associated with two analysed illustrations, represents the *yogin* with different hand gestures and implements, but never portrayed in the act of listening.¹²

The first typology can be divided in turn into two sub-types: sub-type 1 represents Mi la with his right hand lifted to his right ear—seven illustrations match with this sub-type; sub-type 2 depicts the *yogin* with his left hand raised towards his left ear—seven illustrations match with this sub-type.

Whereas the representations matching with sub-type 1 are the standard iconography of this master in paintings, statues and manuscript illuminations, the depictions belonging to sub-type 2 seem to have been extremely rare, if not unique, at the time of the production of Mang yul Gung thang prints. We summarise hereafter basic information on the prints containing the examined illustrations by typology and subtype.

Typology 1—Sub-type 1 (Right Hand in Hearing Gesture)

Tucci Tibetan Collection Vol. 671/5: *sKyes mchog 'ba' ra bas mdzad pa'i sgrub pa nyams su blang ba'i lag len dgos 'dod 'byung ba'i gter mdzod*.¹³

Place of Printing: rDzong dkar; Date of Printing: 1540-1541; Author: 'Ba' ra ba rGyal mtshan dpal bzang (1310-1391); Printer: Nam mkha' rdo rje (1480-1553); Carver of illustrations (front and back pages): mkhas pa bSod nam bkra shis (Fig. 1).

NGMPP¹⁴ E2517/6: *Sangs rgyas thams cad kyi rnam 'phrul rje btsun ti lo pa'i rnam mgur*.¹⁵

¹¹ On this artist, see https://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8443/exist/apps/TTBBC/modules/keyref_display.xq?id=MC_130.

¹² Both illustrations show Mi la's legs in *lilāsana*. An image appearing in a mid-17th century reprint of *Mi la ras pa's life and songs* (NGMPP L250/7) exhibits instead this *yogin's* legs in *vajrāsana* posture. This illustration can be found in a xylograph produced at Sangs rgyas thog chen Chos sdings, in Tshong 'dus (Mang yul).

¹³ For the catalogue entry of this xylograph, see De Rossi Filibeck 2003: 335. A detailed description of the text can be found at http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=txt_no&what=671_5&url=/db/apps/TTBBC/data/entries/FGT_671_5.xml. See also Clemente 2016a: 410; 2019a: 85.

¹⁴ Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project.

¹⁵ For the cataloguing of this microfilm by the Nepalese German Manuscript Cataloguing Project, see https://catalogue.ngmcp.uni-hamburg.de/receive/aaingmcp_tbtdocument_00066747. A detailed description of this text can be found at http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=txt_no&what=2517_6&url=/db/apps/TTBBC/data/entries/NGMPP_E_2517_6.xml. See also Schaeffer 2011: 469; Clemente 2015: 191; 2016a: 407; 2019a: 81.



Fig. 1 - Mi la ras pa, typ. 1 sub-type 1 (vol. 671/5, Tucci Tibetan Collection).



Fig. 2 - Mi la ras pa, typ. 1 sub-type 1 (NGMPP 2517/6).

Place of Printing: Brag dkar rta so; Date of Printing: 1550; Printer: lHa btsun Rin chen nram rgyal (1473-1557); Probable carver of illustrations: bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal mtshan¹⁶ (Fig. 2).

NGMPP E2518/4: *Chos rje dags po lha rje'i gsung / bstan chos lung gi nyid 'od.*¹⁷

Place of Printing: Brag dkar rta so; Date of Printing: 1550; Printer: lHa btsun Rin chen nram rgyal (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 - Mi la ras pa (in the centre) with sGam po pa (on the left) and Ras chung pa (on the right) (NGMPP 2518/4). Typ. 1 sub-type 1.

¹⁶ Although he is not specifically mentioned in the text as the carver of illustration but simply as one of the engravers and listed among the others, he seems to be the only one who had the skill to do such work.

¹⁷ For the cataloguing of the microfilm by the Nepalese German Manuscript Cataloguing Project, see https://catalogue.ngmcp.uni-hamburg.de/receive/aaingmcp_tbtdocument_00066743. A detailed description of this text can be found at http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=tst_no&what=2518_4&url=/db/apps/TTBBC/data/entries/NGMPP_E_2518_4.xml. On this text, see Schaeffer 2011: 475; Smith 2001: 77; Clemente 2015: 192; 2018: 31-32; 2019a: 77. On the *Dwags po bka' 'bum*, see Kragh 2013; Sernesi 2016b: 294-299.



Fig. 4 - Mi la ras pa, Typ. 1 sub-type 1 (vol. 709/2, Tucci Tibetan Collection).

Fig. 5 - Mi la ras pa, Typ. 1 sub-type 1 (NGMPP L250/8).

Tucci Tibetan Collection Vol. 709/2: *Shā kya'i dge slong rdo rje 'dzin pa chen po / nam mkha' rdo rje'i rnam par thar pa ngo mtshar gsal ba'i me long*.¹⁸

Place of Printing: Glang phug (La 'de Valley); Date of Printing: 1554; Printer: Nam mkha' dpal 'byor; Probable carver of the illustrations: dpon btsun Padma¹⁹ (Fig. 4).

NGMPP L250/8-L251/1: *rJe btsun mi la ras pa'i rnam thar rgyas par phye pa mgur 'bum*.²⁰

Place of printing: Brag dkar rta so; Date of printing: 1555; Printer: lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal; Possible carvers of the illustrations: bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal mtshan and/or dpon btsun Padma (Fig. 5).²¹

Tucci Tibetan Collection Vol. 657/5: *dPal ldan bla ma dam pa mkhas grub lha btsun chos kyi rgyal po'i rnam mgur blo 'das chos sku'i rang gdangs*.²²

¹⁸ For the catalogue entry of this xylograph, see De Rossi Filibeck 2003: 342. A detailed description of this text can be found at http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=txt_no&what=709_2&url=/db/apps/TTBBC/data/entries/FGT_709_2.xml. See also Sernesi 2013: 205; Clemente 2016a: 412; 2018: 26; 2019a: 91. For a summary of the life story of Nam mkha' rdo rje based on this work, see Ehrhard 2000a: 55-66.

¹⁹ The colophon of the text does not mention the artist who engraved the illustrations, but among the listed carvers dPon btsun Padma is the only one who was trained to achieve such work.

²⁰ For the cataloguing of this microfilm by the Nepalese German Manuscript Cataloguing Project, see https://catalogue.ngmcp.uni-hamburg.de/receive/aaingmcp_tbtdocument_00047457.

²¹ Although both bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal mtshan and dpon btsun Padma are not mentioned in the text specifically as the carvers of illustrations, but simply as carvers, both artists had the skill to do such work.

²² For the catalogue entry of this xylograph, see De Rossi Filibeck 2003: 331. For a description and the translation of the colophon, see Clemente 2007: 124, 130-132. For a study of the work, see Clemente 2009;



Fig. 6 - Mi la ras pa (on the left) with Mar pa (in the centre) and Ras chung pa (on the right) (vol. 657/5, Tucci Tibetan Collection). Typ. 1 sub-type 1.

Place of Printing: Brag dkar rta so; Date of printing: between 1555 and 1557; Drawer of illustrations: mkhas pa dPal chen; Probable carvers of illustrations: dpon btsun Padma, mkhas pa bSod nams bkra shis, bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal mtshan (Fig. 6).²³

Tucci Tibetan Collection Vol. 657/4: *rJe btsun ras chung rdo rje grags pa'i rnam thar rnam mkhyen thar lam gsal ba'i me long ye shes kyi snang ba*.²⁴

Place of Printing: gNas; Date of Printing: 1559; Printer: gNas Rab 'byams pa Byams pa phun tshogs (1503-1581); Carver of the first illustrations: bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal mtshan (Fig. 7).

2014. See also Schaeffer 2011: 475; Clemente 2015: 187; 2016a: 408; 2016c; 2019a: 79; Diemberger, Clemente 2013. A detailed description of the text can be found at http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=tst_no&what=657_5&url=/db/apps/TTBBC/data/entries/FGT_657_5.xml.

²³ These three artists are mentioned in the colophon of this text simply as carvers, but they all had the required specialisation as carver of illustrations, therefore they could accomplish such work.

²⁴ For the catalogue entry of this xylograph, see De Rossi Filibeck 2003: 330-331. A detailed description of the text can be found at http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=tst_no&what=657_4&url=/db/apps/TTBBC/data/entries/FGT_657_4.xml. For a partial translation of its colophon, see Clemente 2007: 143-150 (please, note that this xylograph was erroneously identified as a Brag dkar rta so print). See also Smith 2001: 76; Roberts 2007: 40-47; Ehrhard 2012: 158, 161-162; Clemente 2016a: 411-412; 2016b: 79; 2018: 32-33; 2019a: 90-91.



Fig. 7 - Mi la ras pa (in the centre) with Mar pa (on the left) and Grub pa'i rgyal mo (on the right) (vol. 657/4, Tucci Tibetan Collection). Typ. 1 sub-type 1.

Typology 1—Sub-type 2 (Left Hand in Hearing Gesture)

Tucci Tibetan Collection Vol. 706: *Grub thob gtsang pa smyon pa'i rnam thar dad pa'i spu long g.yo ba.*²⁵ Place of printing: Brag dkar rta so; Date of Printing: 1543; Printer: lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal; Carvers of the first illustrations: dpon btsun Padma and bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal mtshan (Fig. 8).

Tucci Tibetan Collection Vol. 709/4: *Shākya'i dge slong nam mkha' rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po'i mgur 'bum.*²⁶ Place of Printing: Glang phug (La 'de

Valley); Date of printing: 1545; Drawer of illustrations: mkhas pa Dri med; Carver of the first illustrations: bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal; Carver of the last illustrations: rDo rje tshe brtan (Fig. 9).

Tucci Tibetan Collection Vol. 1089/2: *rJe btsun mi la ras pa'i rdo rje mgur drug sogs gsung rgyun thor bu 'ga'.*²⁷ Place of printing: Brag dkar rta so; Date of Printing: 1550; Printer: lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal (Fig. 10).

NGMPP L969/4_1: *mKhas grub kun gyi gtsug rgyan / paṅ chen nā ro pa'i rnam thar / ngo mtshar rmad 'byung.*²⁸

²⁵ For its catalogue entry, see De Rossi Filibeck 2003: 341. A detailed description of the text can be found at http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=txt_no&what=706&url=/db/apps/TTBBC/data/entries/FGT_706.xml. The translation of its colophon is available in Clemente 2007: 124, 135-37. On this work, see Larsson 2012. See also Smith 2001: 76; Schaeffer 2011: 474; Clemente 2015: 188; 2016a: 407; 2016b: 77-78; 2019a: 76; Diemberger, Clemente 2013: 134.

²⁶ For the catalogue entry of this xylograph, see De Rossi Filibeck 2003: 342. A detailed description of the text can be found at http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=txt_no&what=709_4&url=/db/apps/TTBBC/data/entries/FGT_709_4.xml. The colophon is also provided in Ehrhard 2000a: 142-147. See also Sernesi 2013: 205; Clemente 2019a: 93.

²⁷ For its cataloguing, see De Rossi Filibeck 2003: 394. For a description of the xylograph and the transliteration of the colophon, see Clemente 2007: 124-125, 138. A detailed description of the text can be found at http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=txt_no&what=1089_2&url=/db/apps/TTBBC/data/entries/FGT_1089_2.xml. For a translation of the whole text, see Cutillo, Kunga Rinpoche 1978; 1986. For a study of the work, see Sernesi 2004. See also Roberts 2007: 38; Schaeffer 2011: 470; Sernesi 2011: 198-199; Smith 2011: 76; Clemente 2015: 189; 2016a: 407.

²⁸ A detailed description of the text can be found at http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=txt_no&what=969_4_1&url=/db/apps/TTBBC/data/entries/NGMPP_L_969_4_1.xml. See also Guenther 1963; Smith 2001: 76; Sernesi 2004: 257; Schaeffer 2011: 469; Clemente 2015: 190; 2016a: 406-407; 2019a: 75.



a.



b.

Fig. 8a-b - Mi la ras pa, Typ. 1 sub-type 2 and detail of the “z-shaped” fold on Mi la's robe (vol. 706, Tucci Tibetan Collection).



a.



b.



c.

Fig. 9a-c - Mi la ras pa, Typ. 1 sub-type 2 and details of the “z-shaped” fold on Mi la's robe and of the “conch-shaped leaf” (vol. 709/4, Tucci Tibetan Collection).

Place of writing/printing: Brag dkar rta so; Date of Printing: between 1533 and 1557; Printer: lHa btsun Rin chen nram rgyal. Probable Carver of illustrations: dpon btsun Padma (Fig. 11).



Fig. 10 - Mi la ras pa, Typ. 1 sub-type 2 (vol. 1089/2, Tucci Tibetan Collection).

NGMPP L136/7: *Dam chos yid bzhin gyi nor bu thar pa rin po che'i rgyan zhes bya ba bka' / phyag chu bo gnyis kyi theg pa chen po'i lam rim gyi bshad pa.*²⁹

Place of printing: gNas; Date of Printing: 1573-1574; Printer: Byams pa phun tshogs (Fig. 12).

NGMPP L118/3: *rJe sgam po pas mdzad pa'i tai lo nā ro'i rnam thar.*³⁰

Place of printing: gNas; Date of Printing: 1573-1574; Printer: Byams pa phun tshogs (Fig. 13).

NGMPP L783/3: *mKhas grub chen po byams pa phun tshogs kyi rnam thar ngo mtshar snang ba'i nyin byed yid bzhin nor bu dgos 'dod kun 'byung dad pa'i gsol 'debs.*³¹

Place of Printing: gNas; Date of Printing: 1581 (Fig. 14).³²

Typology 2 (Depictions Lacking the Hearing Gesture)

NGMPP E2518/3: *Tshe gcig la 'ja' lus brnyes pa rje ras chung pa'i rnam thar rags bsdus mgur rnam rgyas pa.*³³

Place of printing: Brag dkar rta so; Date of Printing: 1563; Author: IHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal; Probable Carver of Illustrations: bcu dpon rDo rje rgyal mtshan (Fig. 15).

²⁹ For the cataloguing of this microfilm by the Nepalese German Manuscript Cataloguing Project, see https://catalogue.ngmcp.uni-hamburg.de/receive/aaingmcp_tbtdocument_00046443. On this text, see also Sernesi 2016b: 297-298; Clemente 2018: 32.

³⁰ On this work, see Sernesi 2016b: 297-298; Clemente 2018: 32.

³¹ For the cataloguing of this microfilm by the Nepalese German Manuscript Cataloguing Project, see https://catalogue.ngmcp.uni-hamburg.de/receive/aaingmcp_tbtdocument_00039454. On this work, see Ehrhard 2012. See also Clemente 2018: 33.

³² According to the signatures on the blocks, four carvers worked for the realisation of this xylograph, namely gNas Nam mkha', La 'de Nam mkha', Nam mkha' bsam grub and Don grub bzang. Unfortunately, we do not have further information about these artists, therefore we cannot venture a conjecture on the responsible for the carving of illustrations.

³³ For the cataloguing of this microfilm by the Nepalese German Manuscript Cataloguing Project, see https://catalogue.ngmcp.uni-hamburg.de/receive/aaingmcp_tbtdocument_00066742. A detailed description of the text can be found at http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=txt_no&what=2518_3&url=/db/apps/TTBBC/data/entries/NGMPP_E_2518_3.xml. On this text, see also Clemente 2007: 125, 142-143; 2015: 189; 2016a: 408; 2019a: 80-81; Roberts 2007: 7-9, 37; Diemberger, Clemente 2013: 135.



Fig. 11 - Mi la ras pa (on the left) with Mar pa (in the centre) and Ras chung pa (on the right) (NGMPP L969/4_1). Typ. 1 sub-type 2.



Fig. 12 - Mi la ras pa, Typ. 1 sub-type 2 (NGMPP L136/7).



Fig. 13 - Mi la ras pa (on the left) with Mar pa (in the centre) and sGam po pa (on the right) (NGMPP L118/3). Typ. 1 sub-type 2.



Fig. 14 - Mi la ras pa, Typ. 1 sub-type 2 (NGMPP L783/3).



Fig. 15 - Mi la ras pa, Typ. 2 (NGMPP E2518/3).

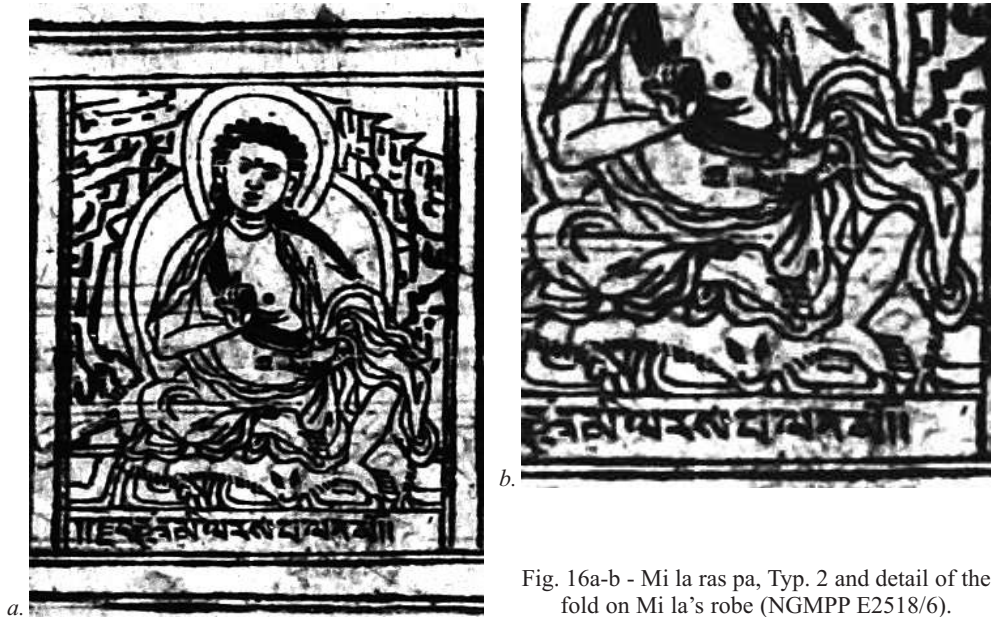


Fig. 16a-b - Mi la ras pa, Typ. 2 and detail of the fold on Mi la's robe (NGMPP E2518/6).

NGMPP E2518/6: *Grub thob gling ras kyī rnam mgur mthong ba don ldan*.³⁴

Place of printing: Brag dkar rta so; Date of Printing: not before 1538 not after 1557; Printer: lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal; Probable Carver of Illustrations: *bcu dpon* rDo rje rgyal mtshan (Fig. 16).

The aforementioned sub-types are not simply mirror images. For example, Fig. 6 shows Mi la ras pa with his master Mar pa Chos kyī blo gros (1012-1096) and his disciple Ras chung rDo rje grags (1084-1161). Mi la is depicted with his right hand lifted to his right ear, and—contrary to what one might expect—with his left leg raised. Fig. 11 also shows Mi la ras pa with Mar pa and Ras chung pa. In this case Mi la's left hand is raised towards his left ear but, like in the first representation, his left leg is lifted. Both illustrations belong to Brag dkar rta so prints.

In two later representations of sub-type 2 found in xylographs produced at gNas (Figs. 12-13) the *lilāsana* is depicted as a more relaxed posture, exhibiting Mi la's left leg not completely raised, but crossed and leant on his right leg, in what appears to be a variant of the crossed-leg posture. Both prints were realised in 1574-1575 under the supervision of Byams pa phun tshogs (1503-1581), a disciple of lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal (1473-1557) and rGod tshang ras chen (1482-1559) who promoted several printing projects at gNas.³⁵

³⁴ For the cataloguing of this microfilm by the Nepalese German Manuscript Cataloguing Project, see https://catalogue.ngmcp.uni-hamburg.de/receive/aaingmcp_tbtdocument_00066741. A detailed description of the text can be found at http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=txt_no&what=2518_6&url=/db/apps/TTBBC/data/entries/NGMPP_E_2518_6.xml. See also Smith 2001: 76; Schaeffer 2011: 472; Diemberger, Clemente 2013: 135; Clemente 2015: 190; 2016a: 406; 2019a: 76.

³⁵ On Byams pa phun tshogs, see in particular Ehrhard 2012. On lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal, see in particular Diemberger, Clemente 2013; Clemente 2014; 2015; 2016c. On rGod tshang ras chen, see in particular Ehrhard 2010.

By examining these illustrations, we also noticed that, although the style is similar, each representation is different from the others. Furthermore, some illustrations do not exhibit fixed elements which define the *yogins'* style in iconographic representations. For example, in a depiction belonging to the second typology (Fig. 16), Mi la ras pa is drawn with his left leg raised and half-naked, whereas in another representation (Fig. 15) the *yogin's* left leg, although raised holding a leaf of a nettle,³⁶ is covered with a white robe. Both representations can be found again in xylographs from Brag dkar rta so. The hands' gestures depicted in these illustrations are also different: the first representation shows Mi la's right hand in *vitarkamudrā*, while his left hand holds a skull cup; the second illustration shows the *yogin* with his left hand lifted and projected outwards. This latter gesture might actually be a *vitarkamudrā* with Mi la's left hand. Although this gesture seems not to be attested, it is worth mentioning that a Buddha associated with the *Kriyātantra*, namely Trisamayavyūha Muni, is represented with both his hands in *vitarkamudrā*.

Despite the differences among the examined illustrations, at a figurative level these exhibit a quite common formal language. All depictions bear a refined design of Mi la ras pa's robe. This latter presents innumerable folds—sometimes quite artificial—falling softly on his arm or else covering both shoulders. Mi la's robe is designed by using thick and full lines which produce the apparent effect of a drape made up of strips of fabric sewn together. Although the way of representing the drape of the *yogin's* robe is common to all illustrations found in Mang yul Gung thang prints, only those produced at Brag dkar rta so appear to replicate a particular detail, that is to say, a fold of Mi la's robe describing a perfect curve just above the *yogin's* elbow, from which other folds seem to fall. This fold can be found in illustrations representing the “Laughing Vajra” holding a skull cup with his left hand and exhibiting his left arm covered with his robe (see figs. 2 and 16a).

A remarkably recurring element is a particular “z-shaped” fold on the robe, usually drawn at the calf of Mi la's bent leg, as seen in Figs. 8a and 9a. Although this appears to be a widely used element in 16th century Mang yul Gung thang illustrations, it is already known in the production of 15th century gTsang miniatures. It can be found, for example, in an illustration portraying Nāgārjuna, which is included in the xylograph of the treatise entitled *rTsa ba shes rab*, printed in gTsang in the mid-15th century.³⁷ The “z-shaped” fold motif depicted on Nāgārjuna's robe appears virtually identical with the same element exhibited in Mi la ras pa's dress (see Figs. 8a and 9a). A further example of this “z-shaped” fold can be seen in the illuminations of a dGe lugs pa manuscript related to rituals based on the Buddha of Medicine, which is preserved in the Tucci Tibetan Collection (vol. 1284).³⁸ It is possible to notice here robes and *dhoti*-like garments with a rigid and flat rendering of the drape, but bearing the “z-shaped” fold motif on the leg of some drawn figures, such as a white *bodhisattva*, likely Samantabhadra (see Fig. 17).

In the sixteen illustrations of Mi la ras pa nimbus and halos are drawn in several different ways. In the representations realised at Brag dkar rta so, for example, six exhibit a

³⁶ The authors wish to thank an anonymous reviewer of the article for identifying the nettle.

³⁷ See Jackson 1996: 130-131. This work was printed under the patronage of a *dharmarāja* (*chos rgyal*) who, according to Jackson, is the renowned gTsang ruler Rab brtan kun bzang 'Phags pa (1389-1442) of rGyal rtse. He sponsored the realisation of this xylograph during his last years. The name of the artist responsible for this illustration is not mentioned, but it is known that the carvers involved in the production of this print were members of a family of famous engravers from Mon mo rDo ra.

³⁸ See De Rossi Filibeck 2003: 429. This manuscript is currently under examination and results of this study will be published in due course. A preliminary survey enables us to date the illuminations to the 15th century according to the style of specific details.



Fig. 17 - The “z-shaped” fold on a *bodhisattva*'s robe in a manuscript illumination (vol. 1284, Tucci Tibetan Collection). Photo M. Clemente.

simple nimbus, depicted as an empty space (see Figs. 3, 6, 8, 10, 11, 15); two present a nimbus with an outer narrow band (Figs. 2, 16); and one lacks a nimbus at all (Fig. 5). Brag dkar rta so illustrations exhibit a halo divided into two parts by a line (Fig. 15), three depictions of a halo with a simple plain shape (Figs. 3, 8, 10), two representations of a halo characterised by an outer narrow band—like the nimbus of the respective figures—(Figs. 2, 16), and three images in which the halo is missing (Figs. 5, 6, 11).

Mi la ras pa is usually depicted with shoulder-length hair, curly or straight. An exception can be found in one of the illustrations produced at gNas in 1581 (Fig. 14). This portrait shows the *yogin* as a bald man and may represent Mi la ras pa's physical appearance during his last years. This illustration might be seen as an attempt to provide a more realistic historical reconstruction of the *yogin*'s figure, and to represent figuratively the high spiritual level achieved by this master at the time. In several passages of works related to Mi la ras pa, this master refers to himself as an aged man, in some cases too old to confer empowerments or perform elaborated rituals.³⁹ By looking for similar representations in illuminations and illustrations of manuscripts and prints, we were able to find so far only another example showing Mi la ras pa in his old age (see Fig. 18). This illustration can

³⁹ With such statements Mi la ras pa ironically underlines the uselessness of complicated rituals compared to experience gained from an uninterrupted hard asceticism. On this subject, see Stagg 2017: 575-576.



Fig. 18 - Mi la ras pa in his old age (vol. 377/6, Tucci Tibetan Collection). Photo M. Clemente.

be found in a 17th century 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud xylograph printed in Punakha (sPungs thang bde chen pho brang).⁴⁰

The iconography of the most relevant masters in the illustrations of 16th century Mang yul Gung thang blockprints—especially that related to figures belonging to bKa' brgyud lineages—is not fixed. Even if clothing and accessories may be standardised, the representation of body positions, arm gestures and face expressions significantly differ. Figures are characterised by dynamism and personality, and details are extremely accurate;⁴¹ however, this subject requires further investigation through a detailed analysis of illustrations included in all available 16th century Mang yul Gung thang xylographs.

⁴⁰ This xylograph is preserved in the Tucci Tibetan Collection (vol. 377/6). See De Rossi Filibeck 2003: 149. A portrait of Mi la ras pa in his old age can also be found in a 16th century *chab mdo* style *thang ka*, preserved in the Nyingjei Lam Collection (see <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/68329>), where the *yogin* is depicted with white hair and eyebrows.

⁴¹ For a discussion on the characterisations of the figures, see Singer 1995; Jackson 2011: 16-19; Estournel 2021.

Mi la's meditation belt can be depicted as a plain band (Figs. 4, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15), or with a main central band and two smaller outer ones (Figs. 1, 8, 9, 11, 16). It is missing in four illustrations, all belonging to Brag dkar rta so prints (Figs. 2, 3, 5, 6).

The "Laughing Vajra" is always represented seated. The place where he sits is however depicted in different ways: as a simple antelope skin (Figs. 1, 4); a skin placed on a throne (Figs. 6, 11) or on a lotus throne (Figs. 2, 8-10, 15-16); a skin laying on a lotus, which is in turn placed on a throne (Figs. 3, 7); a lotus (Figs. 12, 14) or a lotus placed on a throne (Fig. 13); a throne (Fig. 5). Thrones can be represented in two iconographic types, namely a typical multi-level throne structure, and a platform-like throne. This latter is decorated with three bands with geometric ornamental patterns. Both types exhibit at the centre of the throne a fabric rug, presenting a fluid style in the case of illustrations of Brag dkar rta so prints (see Fig. 5), whereas in gNas xylographs appears to have a more rigid and formal style (see Figs. 7, 13). Both types originate from the Indo-Nepalese art.⁴²

Lotuses thrones are usually composed by a unique row of double petals. In the case of Brag dkar rta so prints these petals are depicted pointing downwards, while, for example, in gNas xylographs petals can be depicted pointing both downwards and upwards. Petals usually are in round shape. Exceptions may be found in some illustrations from Brag dkar rta so and Glang phug (Figs. 8-10), where petals exhibit a sort of central bend, like a pointed-shaped arch, which might be a reminiscence of an element seen before, for example in some paintings of the great stūpa of rGyal rtse.⁴³

The *smān bris* style is emphasised in landscapes, especially in natural details such as mountains and peaks, foliate branches, flowers, the peculiar Chinese-inspired crags drawn as curtains framing Mi la ras pa's figure, and gem-like square rocks.⁴⁴ Clouds appear only in Fig. 7, above mountains, as a sort of frame for peaks.

The use of elements to define the landscape may have a definition both symmetrical and asymmetrical in illustrations coming from the same printing house, as in the case of the cliffs found, for example, in figs. 11 and 16, both from Brag dkar rta so. This is a peculiarity of the whole artistic production of 16th century Mang yul Gung thang woodcut illustrations. An exception in the background of landscapes can be found in fig. 5, where a fabric canopy with drapes tied to both sides is depicted above Mi la's head.

Leaves are represented in two distinguished forms, namely an elongated leaf with a central line (Fig. 6), and a "conch-shaped leaf" (Figs. 9b and 10). This latter can be found in xylographs produced in several printing houses located within the Mang yul Gung thang kingdom and realised by different artists. However, this element had already been used in a 15th century blockprint entitled *Legs bshad snying po'i dka' 'grel bstan pa'i sgron me*, which was produced in Central Tibet in 1493.⁴⁵ This might point to the use of such motif over the century, or it might indicate that it started to be used at the end of the 15th century. It also documents its usage outside Mang yul Gung thang.

⁴² Both types can also be found in different illustrations placed on the same folio. This is for example the case of the xylograph entitled *sKyes bu gsum gyi lam rim rgyas pa khrid du sbyar ba / rje btsun gsang ba'i byin gyis mdzad pa* (cf. dPal brtsegs 2013: text no. 27) by Bo dong Phyogs las nram rgyal (1376-1451), which was printed at bTsum. The representation found on the left of f.1b exhibits a rigid square shaped rug with linear and quadrangular motifs under the throne of Vajradhāra. The illustrations on the right shows instead a fabric rug that flows under the Buddha's lotus in a more dynamic and natural way.

⁴³ See Lo Bue, Ricca 1990: 187, pl. 49.

⁴⁴ See Jackson 1996: 127.

⁴⁵ See dPal brtsegs 2013: text no. 11.

Among the sixteen representations of Mi la ras pa analysed so far, Fig. 8 (included in vol. 706) is the only one presenting chromatic infill. The great *yogin* is depicted in the act of listening to the *dākiñīs* with his left hand to his ear, while with his right hand at his waist he holds a *kapāla*. His legs are depicted in *lilāsana*, with his left leg raised. A limited palette of three colors, namely green, red and white, is used. The complexion is defined by a light green tone; simple lines are used to draw elements of the body such as chest and navel. The cotton robe, which covers both shoulders, is white. A meditation belt composed by three red bands is depicted from Mi la's right shoulder to his torso. Nimbus and halo are defined by two simple flat shapes colored by a light red—almost orange—tone. Mi la ras pa rests on a skin, which is in turn placed on a lotus with red and green petals. Landscape is created by crags framing symmetrically the *yogin*'s figure like curtains, while leaves and flowers appear asymmetrically around the halo.



Fig. 19 - Nāropa (NGMPP L1121/3-1122/1).

The colophon of this volume does not provide information on the artist who drew the illustration. However, if we analyse some details, we can notice some stringent similarities with elements characterising Fig. 9 (included in vol. 709/4): the drawing of Mi la ras pa's chest, using double lines, is identical in both representations, although the detail of the nipple in Fig. 8 is missing; the *yogin*'s meditation belt is defined in the same way; the drapery with the "z-shaped" fold on the right leg is virtually identical (see Figs. 8a, 9a), although the rendering of Mi la's robe appears to be simpler in Fig. 9; the design of the *yogin*'s legs and the position of his feet are the same; the drawing of this toes and the line that defines his ankles are identical; both illustrations represent Mi la ras pa wearing two bracelets, on his right arm and on the wrist of his left hand, as well as an anklet on his right ankle. Although these depictions exhibit a different rendering of Mi la's hair and face lines, a significant similarity is however evident in the above-mentioned details. This might suggest that the two illustrations were drawn by the same hand. The colophon of vol. 709/4 refers that the drawer of the images is mkhas pa Dri med; it is therefore very likely that this artist may be also responsible for the illustrations of vol. 706, which was realised just two years before, although in a different printing house. If we compare similar details in other works made by mkhas pa Dri med, we find the same way of drawing muscular definition, navel, bracelets on the arms and anklets. This is clear for example in the illustrations realised by mkhas pa Dri med for NGMPP L1121/3-1122/1⁴⁶ (Fig. 19),

⁴⁶ NGMPP L1121/3-L1122/1: *Theg pa'i mchog rin po che'i mdzod*; Author: Klong chen Rab 'byams pa (1308-1363); Place of Printing: Kun gsal sngang po che; Date of Printing: 1533; Drawer of the illustrations: mKhas pa Dri med; Carver of the first illustrations: mKhas pa bSod nams bkra shis. On this work, see http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=txt_no&what=L1121_3&url=/db/



Fig. 20 - Saraha (NGMPP L143/6-144/1).



Fig. 21 - gTsang smyon Heruka (NGMPP L211/3).

NGMPP L143/6-144/1⁴⁷ (Fig. 20), NGMPP L211/3⁴⁸ (Fig. 21). This, however, remains a hypothesis, pending a more exhaustive comparison with a larger number of illustrations attributed to mkhas pa Dri med.

CONCLUSIONS

Mi la ras pa appears to be the most represented figure in 16th century Mang yul Gung thang prints analysed so far. The examined images exhibit two iconographic typologies, the main of which can in turn be divided into two sub-types. These latter both show Mi la ras pa with his hand lifted to his ear, but this gesture is depicted differently according to the sub-type with which the illustration matches. Sub-type 2 exhibits “the Laughing Vajra” with his left hand lifted to his left ear, an iconography which does not appear to

apps/TTBBC/data/entries/NGMPP_L_1121_3_1122_1.xml. The colophon is also available in Ehrhard 2000a: 104-114. A facsimile edition is available in Ehrhard 2000b. See also Clemente 2016a: 410; 2016b: 86; 2019a: 83. Illustrations included in this xylograph were also analysed by David Jackson (1996: 122-125).

⁴⁷ NGMPP L143/6-144/1 = *sPrul sku bstan gnyis gling pa pad ma tshe dbang rgyal po'i mgur 'bum dgos 'dod kun 'byung*; Author: bsTan gnyis gling pa Padma tshe dbang rgyal po (1480-1535); Place of Printing: Khyung rdzong dkar po; Date of Printing: 1537; Drawer of illustrations: mkhas pa Dri med; Carver of illustrations: bSod nams bkra shis. On this text, see https://catalogue.ngmcp.uni-hamburg.de/receive/aaingmcp_tbtdocument_00046505. The colophon is transliterated in Ehrhard 2000a: 115-117.

⁴⁸ NGMPP L211/3 = *rJe rgod tshang pa'i rnam thar rgyal thang pa bde chen rdo rjes mdzad pa la mgur chen 'gas rgyan pa*; Author: rGyal thang pa bDe chen rdo rje; Editor, Compiler and Printer: lHa btsun Rin chen mam rgyal (1473-1557); Place of Printing: Brag dkar rta so; Date of Printing: 1563; Drawer of illustrations: mKhas pa Dri med. On this xylograph, see https://catalogue.ngmcp.uni-hamburg.de/receive/aaingmcp_tbtdocument_00047055; http://booksdb.socanth.cam.ac.uk:8080/exist/apps/TTBBC/index.html?type=txt_no&what=211_3&url=/db/apps/TTBBC/data/entries/NGMPP_L_211_3.xml. See also Schaeffer 2011: 472.

be a standardised representation of such master in paintings, statues and book illustrations. Since the small kingdom of Mang yul Gung thang played a significant role in the introduction and spread of printing into Tibet, it might be possible that this iconographic way of representing Mi la ras pa originated in this area—the place where the famous *yogin* was born and mostly lived—and from this kingdom may have spread elsewhere. However, at the current stage of our study, this remains just a working hypothesis, and we look forward to further investigate this research line.

Typology 2 might be inspired by earlier paintings of Mi la ras pa, such as his depiction in a mural painting of the gSas/gser mkhar dgu thog (c. 1225?), where the *yogin* is represented with his left hand in *abhayamudrā* (<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/7345/images/primary#-1976,-3032,4088,0>), or his image included in a *thang ka* preserved in the Musée Guimet—which should be older than 1210—where Mi la ras pa is portrayed with his hands over his heart (<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/77201/images/primary#-1451,-2173,2895,0>), or else his representation in a painting preserved at the Rubin Museum (13th-14th century?), where his hands are depicted in *dharmacakrapravartanamudrā* (<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/65121>).⁴⁹

Both typologies presented in this essay exhibit similar elements which can be found in several illustrations of Mang yul Gung thang prints, but each image differs from the others, even when these originate from the same printing house. This is for example the case of illustrations produced at Brag dkar rta so, all printed by lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal, although in different years. The style of an illustration may indeed depend on several factors, such as the individual style of the artists who created it, that is to say the drawer and the carver; the style or guidelines of the printing house that produced the xylograph where the illustration is included; the promoter of the printing project, who may have provided artists with specific indication on the iconographic style to follow; the sponsors of the printing project, who may have asked the artists to give a certain style to their illustrations. These typologies, therefore, do not present fixed models. Although based on the use of elements related to the same figurative language, each illustration seems to recount its own story. Illustrations were realised by using elements which can be found in all Mang yul Gung thang prints. It is evident that people involved in the creation of each drawing decided how to use these elements. One of these elements in particular, the “z-shaped” fold found on the drapery of masters’ and deities’ robes, recurs in most illustrations—and we have seen how spread this was in the woodcut production of Mang yul Gung thang starting, at least, from the end of the 15th century onwards. Some of the artists who worked on the examined xylographs are associated with the *sman ris* painting style of sMan thang pa. As pointed out by David Jackson (1996: chap. 3), illustrations of Mang yul Gung thang prints attest the first traces of the *sman ris* style in early blockprints, and provide evidence of its adaptation and re-interpretation by local artists. This happened through an aesthetic that has accentuated, and integrated elements related also to Chinese aesthetics, like the softness of drapery or the craggy, squared, gem-like rocks, in an organic language. This kind of style moves definitely away from a Nepal Valley’s oriented style, and also from previous Central Tibetan artistic experiences which can be seen for example in the great *stūpa* of rGyal rtse. We are aware that some artists attended classes in the schools of calligraphy and printing (*bris rkos kyi slob grwa*), which were established in the Mang yul Gung thang areas starting from the 15th century onwards.

⁴⁹ The authors wish to heartily thank Amy Heller, who kindly read a previous version of this paper, for these references.

Other artists were instead trained by the supervisors of the projects before beginning their enterprise. Iconographic manuals or sketch books may have been used in schools of calligraphy and printing and during workshops organised by the promoters of the projects. We are aware that sMan bla Don grub authored iconometric treatises and that some Tibetan scholars composed manuals that encourage art productions which do not slavishly follow the norms of the canonical texts. These treatises introduce a measure of artistic freedom, however slight. An early example of this genre is the *rTen gsum bzhugs gnas dang bcas pa'i bzhengs tshul yon tan 'byung gnas*, composed in the 13th century by Tsha mo rong bSod nams 'od zer, a disciple of 'Phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1235-1280). This treatise, which describes the iconometry of *maṇḍalas* and images, enjoyed high repute, attracting positive comment in one of sMan bla's own treatise, the *bDe bar gshegs pa'i sku gzugs kyi cha tshad rab dbye yid bzhin nor bu*.⁵⁰ It is therefore possible that artists associated with sMan thang pa's tradition followed the suggestions of such treatises and adopted that kind of artistic freedom for their work. However, this also remains a working hypothesis to investigate with future research.

⁵⁰ See Cüppers, Van der Kuijp, Pagel 2012: 5.

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- Vol. 657/5 = IHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal (1473-1557) *dPal ldan bla ma dam pa mkhas grub lha btsun chos kyi rgyal po'i rnam mgur blo 'das chos sku'i rang gdangs*, xylograph, fols. 1a-54a.
- Vol. 671/5 = 'Ba' ra ba rGyal mtshan dpal bzang (1310-1391) *sKyes mchog 'ba' ra bas mdzad pa'i sgrub pa nyams su blang ba'i lag len dgos 'dod 'byung ba'i gter mdzod*, xylograph, fols. 223a-365a.
- Vol. 706 = IHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal (1473-1557) *Grub thob gtsang pa smyon pa'i rnam thar dad pa'i spu long g.yo ba*, xylograph, fols. 1-65a.
- Vol. 709/2 = Chos rgyal lhun grub (16th c.) *Shākya'i dge slong rdo rje 'dzin pa chen po / nam mkha' rdo rje'i rnam par thar pa ngo mtshar gsal ba'i me long*, xylograph, fols. 1a-53a.

⁵¹ All NGMPP documents listed correspond to microfilms made by the Nepal-German Manuscript Cataloguing and Preservation Project and kept at the National Archives, Kathmandu; all volumes listed are kept in the Tucci Tibetan Collection, "Biblioteca IsIAO" – Sala delle collezioni africane e orientali, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Rome, and follow the shelfmark given by Elena De Rossi Filibeck in her *Catalogue of the Tucci Tibetan Fund in the Library of IsIAO*, Vol. 2. Cf. De Rossi Filibeck 2003.

- Vol. 709/4 = Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan (1475-1530) *Shākya'i dge slong nam mkha' rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po'i mgur 'bum*, xylograph, fols. 1a-46a.
- Vol. 1089/2 = lHa btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal (1473-1557) *rJe btsun mi la ras pa'i rdo rje mgur drug sogs gsung rgyun thor bu 'ga'*, xylograph, fols. 1a-109a.
- Vol. 1284 = *sMan bla...* (illegible title), manuscript, fols. 1a-97a.

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Resistance and Class Elitism in Minerals Extraction in Resource-rich Aceh, Indonesia

by GIACOMO TABACCO

In questo articolo, analizzo la relazione tra lo sfruttamento “iper-capitalistico” delle risorse naturali in Indonesia, e i concetti e le pratiche minerarie artigianali locali che hanno caratterizzato Aceh, una regione di frontiera, ricca in risorse minerarie e segnata da una lunga lotta di indipendenza dallo stato indonesiano. In primo luogo, effettuo una ricognizione storica dell’industria mineraria in Indonesia per poi sviluppare due *case studies*. Dialogando con la letteratura che mette in luce le forme di ineguaglianza insite nell’accesso alle risorse, avanzo l’ipotesi che sebbene l’estrazione artigianale rappresenti un’alternativa socialmente ed eticamente più sostenibile rispetto all’estrazione industriale su vasta scala, essa moltiplichi molto spesso le ineguaglianze, in particolare quelle basate sull’appartenenza di classe.

INTRODUCTION

A theatre of war until 2005, the epicenter of the 2004 earthquake and tsunami, and a humanitarian reconstruction hub in the late 2000s, Aceh is a region where deforestation, agribusiness, industrial mining and environmental degradation are still at an early stage. Its particular history and relation with the state have converted this resource-rich Indonesian area into a frontier, where the small-scale and informal extraction of minerals and other commodities is now particularly rampant.

Low-technology, yet capitalistic, informal mining and the ideas of “accessible” local natural resources that permeates the recent history of the gold-rich West Aceh area are primarily driven by a set of general circumstances, relevant in Indonesia and most developing countries. As I will articulate in the first section of the paper, these circumstances include the shortcomings of the colonial and the post-colonial state in handling the commodities, political decentralization, economic liberalization and growing socio-economic importance of local elites, combined with the high demand for raw materials.

As the second section of the paper and the case studies therein will demonstrate, Aceh has in common with other Indonesian regions the decentralization of natural resource governance and the increasing importance of ethnicity and class in the exercise of power over local assets. Simultaneously this region represents a particular case among other regions in Indonesia that are rich in natural resources and where manufacturing and mining industries haven’t manifested so far. First, this region has a long tradition of small-scale yet very capitalistic cash cropping and mining, that has cyclically transformed fields and mines in market-oriented hot spots, well connected to Southeast Asia and the world. Under the umbrella of the sultanate that ruled Aceh from 1496 until 1904, in the shadow of two recent conflicts, and in post-disaster times the region has been dynamic from a technological, economic and cultural point of view. Second, Acehnese identity largely relies on the pride in resistance to colonial forces and the Indonesian state. Such forms of

refusal, which are both conceptual and operational, have transformed Aceh in a hostile ecosystem where large-scale ventures have been hard to establish and long-term projects often impossible to maintain.

Central to this paper is the idea that in Aceh boom-and-bust informal businesses such as artisanal small-scale mining (ASM) are intrinsically complex phenomena. On the one hand, these informal businesses represent viable alternatives to industrial production. Arguably, the large-scale multinational ventures that had extracted and transformed in the 1980s and 90s the Acehnese natural gas in the region of Lhokseumawe failed to benefit people in the long term, materially and socially. On the other hand, informality echoes profound class inequalities that cause damage to specific categories of people, namely landless households and unskilled workers.¹

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF MINING PRACTICES AND CONCEPTS IN INDONESIA

Coal, tin, copper, nickel, gas, oil, cement, gold; underneath the Indonesian surface of almost 2 million square kilometers inhabited by 270.625.568 people, lie countless mineral riches. As for land mineralization, Indonesia is more privileged than other Southeast Asian countries and, to some extent, even China. These geological circumstances have rendered the insular nation a major exporter of raw materials in the region and beyond.

In addition, the abundance of fresh water and the tropical climate make the Indonesian soil particularly suitable for the cultivation of vegetable oils, timber, natural rubber, tobacco, rice, fruit, vegetables, cocoa and spices. Monoculture and intensive plantation agriculture of these vegetal species have both continued to meet the increasing domestic demand and have stimulated their commerce, with palm oil and wood pulp representing the top crops. Similarly, the sea that surrounds the archipelago ensures a supply of fish and the forested inner core of most of the islands represents an ongoing valuable source of timber.

From the Western tip of the country to its Eastern fringes—“from Sabang to Merauke,” as Indonesians usually say—Indonesia is dotted with valuable natural assets, and people correctly perceive the archipelago as a blessed land of riches. For example, the gold vein that parallels the Bukit Barisan mountain range on the island of Sumatra emerges in the central part of Java and Sulawesi, and finally manifests in the Grasberg mega-mine, in the province of Papua, at the Easternmost corner of the country. Because of its widespread distribution and attainability, many Indonesians are familiar with gold and are often used to handling it, in the form of ore, alluvial nuggets, and marriage jewelry made of local gold. They also like to talk about the precious metal; wondering where gold is likely to be discovered, the best techniques to process it, who is the best entrepreneur to work with or to smuggle minerals from.

Traditionally, a number of extractive practices, which are diverse in terms of scale, temporalities, output, technology and capital, have coexisted in Indonesia. Minerals are produced both in massive industrial mines, and within networks of “informal” miners, who use shovels and picks to recover a few grams of ore. Nevertheless, despite these

¹ I draw this paper from my doctoral (2012-2016) and postdoctoral (2018-2020) research in the Indonesian region of Aceh. I would like to thank for their inputs my Acehnese respondents, as well as my fellow researchers at the projects: “Integration in Southeast Asia: Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion (SEA-TIDE)” and “Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA).”

structural differences, such production schemes often share a common backdrop and concepts about the utilization of the biomass. As sociologist Paul Gellert highlighted (2010), Indonesian rulers (at their various administrative levels and during different political seasons) have built upon minerals and other natural resources in developing and maintaining their power. In most of the cases, political and economic power in Indonesia coincides with the establishing of “extractive regimes,” whose apparatuses tap high-yielding riches from the ecosystem and “hyper-exploit” them, until such riches are gone. This trend of fast and boundless resource utilization characterizes state-run extractive mega-projects, corporate mining, and small-scale digging alike, and is still rampant today. For instance, the “dreams” of economic development elaborated by many provincial and sub-provincial administrations in contemporary Indonesia, as well as the tensions between decentralized provinces or regencies and the central government, are often modeled on raw material and agricultural product exploitation, and are reminiscent of the economic policies implemented during the Suharto regime, namely those of the 1960s and 1970s. Suharto served as the second Indonesian president between 1968 and 1998.

While different extractive practices became entangled in a common mainstream concept of environmental “hyper-exploitation” and few people became rich thanks to natural resources; chaotic and competing dynamics have begun to arise. As it turns out, conflicting forces such as the state, and the local, customary, and extra-legal powers, claimed their own right to access and avail of such resources, engendering divergent visions and bitter conflicts (McCarthy 2006). In essence, a general sense of competition, injustice and oppression has pervaded the Indonesian resource landscape. On the one hand, people have responded to a “predatory” logic and hence dangerously underestimated the environmental and socio-economic consequences of their practices in the long term. On the other hand, the actual prosperity fostered by the extraction of raw materials rarely percolates outside a close circle of privileged people, often consisting of government officials, politicians and their affiliates.

Pre-colonial Traditional Mines and Early Colonial Ventures

Although the ruthless process of industrialization of the mining industry is located historically during the authoritarian government of Suharto (1967-1998), the quest of minerals is not a 20th century prerogative (Van Leeuwen 1994; Aspinnall 2001; Ballard 2002; Andiko 2006; Lestari 2011).

Several sources show that a thriving traditional gold mining industry was active on the island of Sumatra, both during the operations of the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (Dutch East Indies Company), and during the subsequent colonial period, from the beginning of the nineteenth century until 1945. The first significant example is related to the story of two Germans, Elias Hesse and Johann Wilhelm Vogel, respectively an accountant and a mining technician, who worked in Sumatra under the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (Somers Heidhues 2006). At that time, the Company had established a series of commercial outposts in Padang and Pulau Cingkuk, on the West coast of Sumatra, attracted by the abundance of gold that had earned the island the nickname of “Suvarnadvipa” (gold island). This project wound up a fiasco, because the mines were located in remote highlands and the Dutch couldn’t fully penetrate the trade of local gold, which followed deep-rooted commercial trajectories across inland centers towards the territories under the rule of the sultanate of Aceh. Additionally, miners and mines experts distrusted the European newcomers and preferred to work with their established partners.

A further testimony by Xavier Brau de Saint Pol Lias, a French diplomat who visited Sumatra in the late 19th century (Brau de Saint Pol Lias 1891: 163), hints at the presence of Chinese and Javanese “settlers,” who mined gold in their “rudimentary mines” located up the remote mountains of the Northwestern tip of Sumatra, in today’s Aceh Besar regency. This mining industry was mainly based on the expertise and capital of “brave Chinese mine chiefs” (*toke*) and the work of “their tireless laborers” (*kuli*), who were also Chinese or of Javanese origins. Interestingly, a similar scheme consisting of Chinese foremen and Javanese miners also characterized gold extraction in Cikotok and Cikondang (now West Java), in the early decades of the 19th century (Lestari 2011).

The colonial exploitation of other minerals overlapped with traditional mining enterprises. This is the case of coal mining in Ombilin-Sawahlunto, West Sumatra (Devi, Prayogo 2013), and diamond exploitation in Kalimantan (Aspinall 2001). Additionally, the rich tin deposits on Bangka, an island off Southern Sumatra, also represent an excellent example of the commercial dynamism of the time. On the one hand, both the Kingdom of Srivijaya in the ninth century and the Sultanate of Palembang in the 18th century controlled most of the gold mining hubs across Sumatra. On the other hand, although locals were traditionally involved in the transformation of the minerals, most miners were Chinese. Such workers were involved in the transformation of the minerals, most miners were Chinese. Such workers were particularly appreciated, because they were better integrated into the circles of Indian traders, knew advanced mining techniques and had access to substantial capital in their homeland (Erman 2007). The Sultanate of Palembang held the monopoly on the Bangka tin mines until 1717, when the Dutch East Indies Company defeated it and became the sole ruler of the mines (Wiriosudarmo 2001).

The Centralization of Mineral Resources under the Dutch Empire

For two centuries, the Dutch East Indies Company successfully capitalized on the natural assets of its territories, steadily holding monopolies over minerals, sugar and other agricultural resources, by means of military power and legally binding agreements.

After the Company’s bankruptcy, the Dutch colonial administrators, who inherited its possessions, began to systematize economic and political control over the subsoil and agricultural land. More specifically, the agrarian law (*Agrarish Wet*) passed in 1870 and the mining law (*Indische Mijnwet*) implemented in 1899 formally rendered the natural riches of the colony part of the motherland’s wealth. As for the mineral deposits, the new legislative scheme put the manifold extractive practices scattered across the archipelago under the same statute. Most importantly, it intentionally disregarded communities’ customary rights and effectively blocked attempts to access mining industries by local entrepreneurs (Devi, Prayogo 2013).

In this political climate, while the smallholders and the small-scale players were disadvantaged, the Dutch government entrusted, both financially and technologically, multinational mining corporations with the running of its colonial most profitable deposits. This situation proved a profit-making venture for both parties: the private sector could lay its hands on valuable assets and the state benefitted from the mining royalties. For instance, the coal deposits in Eastern Kalimantan, the oil wells in East Java and the tin mines in Bangka transformed into foreign-controlled businesses during the 19th century (Wiriosudarmo 2001; Kartodiharjo, Jhamtani 2009; Lestari 2011). It is no coincidence that two major players in the global transformation of raw materials such as Shell and

Billiton Maatschappij (now BHP Billiton), were initially incorporated in the favorable economic climate granted by the Dutch colonial policies.

Anti-imperialism Trends after the Independence: Minerals Belong to the Indonesians

During the first half of the 20th century, a growing nationalist sentiment spread across the archipelago. This eventually led to self-rule across the different territories and the birth of independent Indonesia in 1945. In addressing the management of natural resources, the first post-colonial government by Sukarno (1945-1967), stayed faithful to its strong nationalist and anti-imperialist principles and nationalized all the country's Dutch enterprises (see law 10/1959 in Gandataruna, Haymon 2011 and Ballard 2002).² In tandem with the ban on foreign capital and technology, Sukarno's government didn't place much importance on the mining sector, and its late production centers thus stagnated throughout his mandate.

However, during this political period, natural resources began being conceived, both ideologically and practically, as keys to national prosperity and development. Such concepts materialized in the Indonesian Constitution, that states that the natural resources of the nation "must be used for the prosperity of the people" (*untuk sebesar-besar kemakmuran rakyat*). Simultaneously, the new state and its apparatus established the government's inalienable right to control national assets (*hak menguasai negara*) and made the state the sole intermediary between such assets and the citizens.

Interestingly, in this very early phase of the Indonesian republic, underground riches obtained a special status (*pengaturan tersendiri*). Such designation meant that minerals belonged to the state and, with very few exceptions, people couldn't claim customary rights over such assets.

Export-oriented Hyper Production during Suharto's Orde Baru

In 1967, General Suharto rose to power. Along with a wave of authoritarianism, the Orde Baru, the new political and social regime designed by Suharto and his political entourage in the middle of the Cold War, was characterized by the promulgation of two "mining-oriented" laws. In particular, law 1/1967 re-opened Indonesia to foreign investment, and law 11/1967 encouraged the proliferation of large-scale mining industries by state-sponsored private conglomerates.

At that time, mineral extraction rapidly transformed into a heavily industrialized sector, oriented towards export markets, relying on million-dollar capital, high-tech transformation processes and joint ventures between the Indonesian government and foreign companies. Such agreements, called "work contracts" (*kontrak karya*), stipulated that the ownership of the ore body and the land rights were never transferred to the private sector. Conversely, the state "rented" the deposits to a foreign company and levied a tax on the production of the latter (Salim 2005). For instance, US Freeport Sulfur, now PT Freeport Indonesia, accessed the Grasberg-Ertsberg copper and gold mine, one of the world's largest of its kind, under such an industrial scheme.

Between 1967 and 1998, because of the policies of Suharto's government-oriented toward the export of raw materials, 200 large-scale industrial mining ventures drilled the

² For example, oil wells and mines that had belonged to the Dutch were nationalized through the creation of state-owned enterprises, such as PT Pertamina, PT Tambang Timah, and PT Aneka Tambang.

Indonesian soil. Together, these ventures occupied an area of about 350,000 square kilometers, representing more than 20% of the country's available land. It has also been estimated that, in the same period, the mining sector was worth over 648 million dollars in tax revenue (PwC Indonesia 2015). This state income provided the government with a flow of cash that was partially invested in developing healthcare, education and infrastructure in towns, villages and remote areas. These circumstances are reminiscent of the liberalization of gold mining in Mali and Burkina Faso studied by Sabine Luning (2008; 2014) and Cristiana Panella (2010), and mirror the recommendations of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for reducing poverty and public debt by liberalizing the mining sector.

Regrettably, while the state provided a number of basic infrastructures and services for the people; tarmac roads, universal education and healthcare being the main ones, common Indonesians, especially in overpopulated Java, remained poor. The corruption, collusion and nepotism practices (*korupsi, kolusi dan nepotisme*) by the Suharto family and the government officials that were spreading across the country quickly started to affect extraction concessions, which was the most profitable and strategic sector at that time. As a consequence, nearly all the mining revenues stagnated into a set of ministries in Jakarta and other central and local institutions, and seldom reached civil society (Hadiz, Robison 2005).

New Niches in Post-authoritarian Decentralized Indonesia

Suharto's totalitarian state eventually crumbled under the pressure of popular unrest and the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis. Among a wide range of urgent political tasks aimed at reshaping Indonesia socio-economically and restoring the democratic principles, the subsequent governments began to question the central system of administration. The system was perceived as weak from a political point of view, and in terms of the practicalities of governing the country. Additionally, as soon as Suharto resigned, many local administrators, especially those who ruled mineral-rich provinces, saw new opportunities arising from mining concessions and incomes, and successfully called for increased fiscal and political regional autonomy (*otonomi daerah*).

In the early 2000s, Indonesia progressively shifted to democracy; political violence was banned, and voting and civil rights were restored. Overall, government accountability improved, also thanks to the decentralization measures. However, although Suharto's regime was defeated both politically and, at least in part, culturally, its main protagonists often remained in charge. As a consequence, the predatory attitude towards the extraction of minerals that characterized the Suharto-centered rule broke up into small "local" units and continued to exist.

In the midst of the chaotic reforms season, and because of decentralization-friendly measures, new niches to tap for taxes and money came to light. Reminiscent of the Thai power transformations in the 1980s, the old regime politicians appointed their protégés as leaders in the recently empowered provinces and regencies, and forged new alliances, often with organized crime, to access the resources more directly and effectively.

A peculiar mining regulation echoed the shift of power that characterized Indonesian politics since the 2000s. When law 4/2009 was finally passed, the designation of mining areas (*wilayah pertambangan*) officially fell under the jurisdiction and taxation system of regencies and cities, with loose supervision by provinces and the ministries in Jakarta. Additionally, the law required multinational corporations to review the ownership of their Indonesian-based branches and include Indonesian partners, often small, private entre-

preneurs. Therefore, the new post-Suharto mining law further reinforced the link between extraction businesses and local power.³

Unfortunately, as Kosim Gandataruna and Kirsty Haymon pointed out in a critical paper (2011): since the approval of the new legislation, mining concessions have increased steeply and, in 2009-2010 more than 8,000 licenses were granted by local officials. As it turns out, the new socio-economic climate has multiplied the opportunities to access the mineral resources on small and often microscopic-scale projects. At the same time, the predatory logic that once permeated the Suharto-centered circles has begun to manifest in the periphery. There, the local elites have often prospered, thanks to enhanced power, businesses opportunities in newly restructured ventures, and local taxes on natural riches. Unsurprisingly, in a political culture where power is often laced with virtually boundless exploitation of the biomass, mining ventures have been fostering prosperity in the inner circles of those in power. Many people, especially those with poor political connections, have been more exposed to financial risks and have failed to capture value in the long term.⁴

INFORMALITY AND ITS ENTANGLEMENTS

As a vital section of Indonesian economy and society, the mining industry is manifold. On the one side, as I have illustrated previously, the ruling classes have dominated the export-oriented and high-tech industrial mining for decades, by means of coercive measures and violence. Post-authoritarian private and local government-sponsored businesses substantially echo such behavior. On the other side, the archipelago has always been characterized by mining spots where raw materials are extracted and transformed on a much smaller scale, employing little capital and technology, and that do not necessarily appear on official maps (Boulant-Smit 2002).

In Indonesia, as it is often the case in other extractive societies, to the side of the mining projects by the government lie a number of additional extractive practices, that, because of labor, financial and technical characteristics are conventionally labeled as “artisanal small-scale mining,” by most scholars, as well as Indonesian officials. In spite of its economic and social relevance, extensive quantitative and qualitative information about ASM is often missing. For example, Indonesian artisanal small-scale mining is almost invisible in historical sources, in government reports and even in the studies carried

³ Law No. 3 of 2020 has recently amended Law 4/2009. On the one side, the new law centralizes the process of the determination of the mining areas and the licensing of mining businesses. On the other, much in line with the previous jurisprudence, the central government has the right to delegate its authority to provincial governments. Mining is one of the sectors to be impacted by another law passed in 2020, the *RUU Cipta Kerja* or “Omnibus Law,” a package of new controversial laws that has the objective of creating more jobs by improving the ease of doing business. In the mining environment, this law stipulates that although the local governments can still issue regional government approvals (for instance, in the environment sector), it will be subject to the standards, procedures and criteria determined by the central government. As many analysts have noted, the implementation of these two new laws—that were enacted in the pandemic period when the commodity prices are overall low—remains unclear.

⁴ From an environmental standpoint, the post-1998 reforms leave much to be desired. On the one hand, the government has acknowledged for the first time the environmental hazards related to the mining industry and began addressing the environmental impact of mining. In consequence, since 1999, two-thirds of the country have been designated as “forest area” (*kawasan hutan*) or “protection area,” where open-pit mining is illegal. On the other hand, scholars pointed out that the implementation of the law has been very weak, given the lack of resource personnel, equipment, leaks in information gathering and corruption.

out by independent organizations and consultants. Interestingly, Indonesian mining doesn't mention ASM, causing a dangerous legal vacuum.

Nevertheless, the informal sector is the largest Indonesian "employer," as it employs far more workers than the formal one. This is the case in retail, food services, domestic work, sex work, as well as the extraction of minerals. It has been estimated that in the early 2000s, 65.4% of the mining workforce was informal (Lestari 2011), while the rough calculation by the International Labour Organization and the Indonesian Statistics Agency in the mid-2000s accounts for about 77,000 informal mines across the archipelago and between 300,000 and 500,000 informal miners (Spiegel 2012).

From a general point of view, ASM centers are characterized by low earnings, low productivity, low technology, low labor-intensiveness, employment of a migrant workforce, few accident prevention measures and high environmental impact (International Labor Organization 1999). Additionally, artisanal small-scale mining has been aptly described as an "elusive, unquantifiable and uncertain section of the mining economy" (Lahiri-Dutt 2004).

The Birth of "New" Mines

According to Sabine Luning (2014), the socio-economic circumstances that occurred during the Cold War and after the fall of the Berlin Wall led people in the so-called developing countries to extract wealth on a small scale and to embark on informal economy. Firstly, since the second half of the twentieth century, the decolonization processes have reshaped the geography of the global extraction: mineral production has shifted from mining hubs in the United States, Canada, South Africa and Australia to developing countries, with the help of the ambitious creation of new production centers or upgrading existing ones. Secondly, such processes are linked to the increasing demand for raw materials and the consequent rise in the prices of the minerals. They are also laced with specific neoliberal agendas applied to post-colonial societies, where the mining industry is expected to contribute to reducing poverty and public debt (Li 2014; Welker 2014).

These relatively new macroeconomic and political circumstances have resulted in two main outcomes in the context of the small-scale artisanal extraction of minerals. On the one hand, some ASM ventures, that are deeply rooted and codified culturally and economically in developing countries such as Indonesia, have undergone radical reshaping processes that have often led to the industrialization of such ventures. In these cases, old "informal" mines that sit on large deposits have been transformed into strategic industrial projects. It is no coincidence that state and non-state groups have imposed barriers to ASM, both in terms of trade and land access, often criminalizing its practices, in Indonesia as in most developing countries (Hilson, McQuilken 2014). On the other hand, the high demand for minerals, job and money opportunities, poor implementation of laws and corruption have stimulated the activation of non-industrial centers of extraction. Such "eccentric hubs" coexist with more established and official mines, and rely upon ASM legacy, that is networks of small investors and skilled miners, technicians and middlemen.

Grey Areas and Friction between Informal and Formal Mining

Although (in countries like Indonesia) the fate of informal and industrial mining formally divides into two branches, such division is often stricter on governments' regulations than it is in reality. In their introduction to "The State and Illegality in Indonesia,"

political anthropologists Edward Aspinall and Gerry van Klinken point out that the Indonesian state has determined what is legal and what is illegal. In order to confer legitimacy to this distinction, it has often turned to violence (2011: 15). During Suharto's regime and the governments that followed both in Jakarta and at the local level, such a political division between legal/formal and illegal/informal practices was instrumental in bringing about successful economic exploitation of the biomass to the elites' best advantage. Among those who follow a critical approach, sociologist Paul Gellert suggested that political power in Indonesia in regards to commodities overlaps, to a large extent, with violence, ethical abuse and kleptomania, that have given rise to poverty and hindered traditional livelihoods (Gellert 2010).

Against this backdrop, tension periodically manifests between the mining industries and the people who have been exposed to low-technology mining as investors or who have worked down the pits. For instance, wealthy people who are eager for small investments in ASM or have already financed such ventures, lack the expertise, the network and the funds to navigate the industrial sector and are usually cut off from the business. On numerous occasions, established artisanal miners have a hard time in accessing jobs in the industrial production processes, because industrial mines tend to hire highly trained personnel only (Lahiri-Dutt 2004; Gellert 2010; Peluso 2015). Sometimes, as Anna Tsing illustrated (2005), during the processes of formalization of ASM, junior mining companies that are about to launch underground exploration have appropriated traditional miners' knowledge of subsoil mineralization, in return for derisory money.⁵

While the criminalization of traditional mining practices has been mainstreamed at various levels, Indonesian bureaucrats, and people in general, are ambivalent. As the legal system is very vague about ASM, artisanal mining can easily be downgraded to an "illegal activity, which interferes with the national strategic interests," when it is convenient to do so politically and economically. Conversely, officials are in the habit of promoting traditional, technologically backward and economically hazardous practices, if it comes to attracting state investments and foreign capital (Spiegel 2012; Peluso 2018).⁶ As I noticed often during my field trips, the life trajectories of many Indonesian workers of the non-industrial mining sector echo the ambiguity of the industry. Sometimes regarded by the state and the capitalists as valuable workforce, and then again sometimes as thieves and peddlers of minerals, these workers occupy a professional and existential grey area, that is neither illegal nor legal, and where commodities are frequently political and contested.

Competing Interests in Contested Resources

As I have already mentioned, in 1998 Suharto was overthrown and Indonesians embarked on economic and political reforms, primarily towards deregulation and free-market capitalism. Industrial mining operations dominated by state ownership and interventionist policies progressively gave way to nebulous concepts and practices of exploitation of the country's natural riches. In such a context, the demand for raw materials, on the rise until the 2007 financial crisis, has prompted the new local elites with

⁵ Sabine Luning exposed similar practices in Burkina Faso, where junior companies also turned established artisanal miners into valuable path-finders (2014).

⁶ In the current mining law, lawmakers adopted the ambiguous phrase "community mining" (*pertambangan rakyat*) to identify all the non-industrial extractive activities. Indonesian have the right to exploit mineral commodities by "community mining," provided that they don't damage strategic projects.

plenipotentiary powers over mineral deposits, to tap into the extraction business, increasing their tax revenue and generating large personal profits (Gellert 2010). Unsurprisingly, in order to succeed, they have often turned to lobby the central government for laissez-faire measures, forging new alliances with foreign and internal capitalists, and bribing officials and voters.

From my perspective and from what I gathered during successive field trips to resource-rich Aceh, the Suharto-centered regime and its structures of power have broken into smaller local regimes, which, reminiscent of their forerunner, revolve in many cases around the boundless and speculative exploitation of fossil fuel and minerals. Such processes of “political atomization” basically multiplied stakeholders and further intensified competition for accessing the mineral deposits. Consequently, as I will demonstrate below, in post-1998 Indonesia, ASM, that is tightly connected to such atomization, generates further inequality.

RESOURCE-RICH ACEH AND ITS FORMS OF RESISTANCE

During my field trips to the post-disaster Indonesian province of Aceh, studying an artisanal gold mining bubble that lasted from 2008 to 2012, I have often encountered contradictions. These are the narratives that were shared and circulated by several of my interlocutors: “Aceh is an endless reservoir of free land and raw materials,” “Since the conflict has finally ended, anyone can borrow such riches,” “Aceh is the latest Indonesian frontier: hard-working migrants, new technologies, foreign corporations, and state-run projects are welcome.” However, as a growing number of frustrated villagers and investors appreciate, Aceh might not be as open to boundless speculations by the state and the investors as it seems. After all, offside of few exceptions, the flood of infrastructural and economic changes peaked shortly after the war but then made way for stop-and-go microscopic ventures and intermittent income.

Cultural Phenomena, in Times of Peace and Times of War

The history and cultural features of Aceh are peculiar and make this region intrinsically different from other provinces in Indonesia that are similarly characterized the abundance of natural resources and where manufacturing and mining industries have not manifested so far. The Westernmost region of the archipelago that faces the Indian Ocean and is adjacent to the Malay Peninsula, Aceh has little in common with Java, the rest of Indonesia and, to some extent, Southeast Asia. First, its people speak Acehnese, a Malayo-Polynesian language that belongs to the Chamic branch, unintelligible to Malays and Javanese. Second, it was exposed more directly than other Southeast Asian areas to the political, mercantile and cultural influence of Arabia and the Middle East.

On the one hand, such political and economic connections contributed to the birth and development of a centralized sultanate (and powerful network of vassals), which governed the capitalistic exploitation of Acehnese pepper (and other spices valuable at that time), trading globally via ports in Arabia and the Ottoman Empire, between the 16th and 19th centuries, with fluctuating levels of power and success. On the other hand, the cultural proximity to the Arabian and Middle Eastern societies meant Islam, as a religion and a tool to conceptualize politics and economy, took root earlier and more profoundly in Aceh than elsewhere in Southeast Asia. This further encouraged people to consider themselves

not only different from neighboring communities for linguistic and historical reasons, but also distinctive and more pious among other Muslims in Java and the Malay world.

Although the sultanate was characterized by recurring internal rivalries between the sovereigns and noblemen for land entitlement, external disputes with the Europeans over trade duties, and economic crises, it represented a period of political and social stability. Under the umbrella of the sultanate, pepper farming, cash cropping and even small-scale gold mining were actually low-risk investments that yielded good fruits for farmers, miners, landlords and Western traders alike. Things rapidly changed in the mid-19th century when the Dutch occupied the independent sultanate to gain access to its resources and consolidate their political power at the fringes of the colony.

The colonial transition opened the door to a turbulent period in Aceh that lasted until the mid-2000s. During the Dutch military occupation and subsequent war (1873-1904), the Acehnese fought back, strenuously defended the sultanate, and engaged in what they conceptualized as a Holy War against the Europeans. They eventually lost but the sentiments of hate and revenge and the reluctance to assimilation into Dutch East Indies made it almost impossible for Holland to fully implement its colonial rule in the area, politically and economically, as it did in Java.

After Indonesia gained independence and Aceh was incorporated into the new nation, discontent with the country's political dynamics rose. Sukarno promised great autonomy, but Acehnese political structures were progressively dismantled. The actual worsening of democratic rights under Suharto and the conviction of several Muslim scholars (Ulama) that Aceh was culturally incompatible with increasingly secular Indonesia led to insurgency, militarization of Aceh by Indonesian security forces and violent war from the 1970s until 2005. The Free Aceh Movement (GAM), an armed group, monopolized the secession cause and fought the "Rebellion of Aceh" against the counter-insurgency Indonesian troops from 1976 to 2005. Interestingly, in 1977, GAM's first operation was carried out against Mobil Oil, the Jakarta-endorsed mineral company which exploited the Acehnese gas field in Lhokseumawe. At the heart of the first rise was the idea of regaining sovereignty over the gas reserves.

The Conflict between Market-oriented Exploitation, Resistance and Insecure Environment

It has been rightly argued that the Acehnese identity is held together by the sultanate, strong Islamic commitment, pride in self-reliance, language and a set of kinship structures and relations (*adat*). In my opinion, however, contradictory determination in exploiting economically Acehnese natural riches should be added to the equation. First, a number of technological, political and intellectual infrastructures enabled very capitalistic and market-oriented cash cropping and, as I will demonstrate below, short-lived mining ventures. This proved the case until colonial times when Aceh was a global hub for spices and to a lesser extent in recent decades. Second, in this determination to make the most out of the natural resources, there has often been disharmony between the willingness of Acehnese leaders, Ulama and ordinary people to become entangled in non-Acehnese socioeconomic systems and the reluctance to assimilation. In other words, people in this region usually value "foreigners," for instance European traders and more recently Jakarta-endorsed multinationals, for their ability to bring capital, technology and ultimately prosperity, often overestimating their reach and the actual worth of Acehnese assets. On the other hand, in a quite conservative line of thinking, they fear such absorption into alien dynamics might sooner or later challenge the Acehnese cultural unity.

Therefore, in my understanding, there are two main circumstances that have obstructed the large-scale extraction of resources and the industrialization of Aceh. One is cultural and the other one presents a more practical nature. First, the tensions I have mentioned between market-oriented exploitation and resistance to sociocultural transformations is basically unsolved. Second, warfare and isolated insurgencies have made it particularly insecure for the state and the private sector to establish manufacturing and mining businesses. So far, there has been only one industrial venture in the region; that is a gas plant on the outskirts of Lhokseumawe, run by the Americans in association with the state company Pertamina, from the 1970s until the late 1990s and now on stand-by. While this project proved successful economically, it soon began to fuel speculations of unfair wealth redistribution. Pro-independence rebels saw it as the symbol of misappropriation by Jakarta bureaucrats and, at the height of the secession conflict, targeted the company's personnel and the security forces that patrolled the compound, amidst a wave of violence and human rights crimes by the Indonesian army.

THE RELEVANCE OF CLASS AND RACE BACKGROUND IN ACEHNESE ASM

In this and the following chapter, I will zoom in on small-scale and informal extraction of minerals, a relevant economic activity that continued in the shadow of the recent conflict between Indonesian security forces and Acehese rebels, and in the midst of post-tsunami and post-war reconstruction. I will introduce two case studies and draw upon my research in the regency of Aceh Jaya, a major theatre of war, a rural area untouched by industrial projects, and a hub for gold "community mining." In chapter "The Landmark of Modernity in Aceh: the Gas Fields in Lhokseumawe," I will explore the sole example of industrial mining in Aceh, in the gas-rich region of Lhokseumawe.

My aim is to contribute to studies that analyze the relationships between global capitalism, local capitalism and other forms of socio-economic connection. The case studies will also show the correlation between local forms of capitalism and persisting socio-economic vulnerability, thus contributing to the debate on how diverse livelihoods and subsistence strategies have emerged out of the trends of global/local capitalism and flourished to cope with their shortcomings (Li 2011; Verbrugge et al. 2015; McCarthy 2019; Rigg 2019).

Ishak: Civil Servant by Day, Rebel by Night

Ishak is a 55-year-old autochthonous Acehese man, father of four children who are now in their late 20s, and married to an Acehese woman from the same village in West Aceh. A high school teacher since he graduated in Islamic theology, Ishak made a career as a high-rank civil servant at the sub-provincial education department, right at the peak of the civil conflict between the Indonesian security forces and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in the early 2000s. At that time, Aceh was divided into two sections. In towns, war felt distant, people were reasonably safe, and the central political power remained largely undisrupted, to the point that the education department could hire teachers to be sent to local schools and carry out its administrative duties despite the hostilities. However, a few kilometers inland, past the main asphalt road, towards the paddies and the forested mountains, laid the battleground. There, rebels and soldiers frequently clashed and civilians underwent violence from both sides: the army personnel forcibly resettled

many of them and humiliated or tortured others, while armed GAM combatants made rural life extremely insecure and depended entirely on the farmers' household.

Every morning, in the middle of the war, Ishak put his civil servant uniform on, drove to his office on the "town side" of Aceh and sat at his desk. At night, however, he was one of the most active members of the resistance. Ishak was not only committed to the independence cause intellectually, but also materially. Being more educated than most of his fellow villagers, people usually regarded him as a charismatic leader and turned to him when it came to conceptualizing their struggle in religious and political terms. Thanks to his civil servant authority, he was able to buy large quantities of weapons from complicit policemen and smuggle them to the rebels, while he could sell logs sourced from the GAM-controlled territories to black-market traders. This behavior proved very fortunate for Ishak and his family. His civil servant wage, which was comparatively high and stable, brought in good money. These revenues, combined with the illegal ones, infused in the household a sense of limited prosperity in the middle of a bitter civil war. After all, Ishak was one of the few villagers who could afford a car and a cement house. Simultaneously, he could pursue his political views, provide the resistance with essential logistics and funding, and tap personal incomes from logging.

New Opportunities in Post-conflict and Post-tsunami Aceh

Soon after the 2004 megathrust earthquake and tsunami hit Aceh, causing havoc and bringing the conflict to an end, new opportunities arose. Aceh re-opened to the world, meaning that a flow of unprecedented humanitarian aid reached the region and businesses of a different kind flourished anew. In this prosperous climate, a bunch of former GAM top commanders successfully lobbied the head of the Aceh Jaya regency to issue a "community mining" license at the Gunong Hujeun, an unregistered area 10 kilometers upstream from the regency's capital, where gold nuggets had been panned from the rivers on a stop and go basis throughout the conflict.

In times of peace, thanks to the convenient "community mining" permit, extraction became much easier and the outputs of minerals grew in quality and quantity. A group of influential mines' investors began to emerge. This group of investors was in most cases composed by the former guerilla commanders who benefitted the most from generous conflict compensation. Therefore, they could rely on large capital to import skilled miners from Java, where ASM is more rooted than in Aceh, and mining tools, mainly jackhammers and ore grinders. Being well connected to the newly-installed administration, they were the first to access the "special extractive area" and, in most of the cases, they could build their shafts and tunnels in the best spots.

Neither Ishak nor his sons partook in the transformation of gold, despite being Acehnese, men, and former GAM combatants or sympathizers, three ethnic, gender and political categories that hugely dominate ASM in Aceh Jaya. In essence, Ishak and his family benefitted from the reconstruction phase differently: Ishak tried to embark on a new political career in pacified Aceh (but ultimately failed) and his children went to university, hoping to access high-yielding jobs thanks to such diplomas. Nevertheless, Ishak's viewpoint on small-scale extraction is meaningful:

goldmining is a risky job, economically, physically, and ethically. First, you might easily go bankrupt because with gold you can't take anything for granted: it's far away in the underground and you never know where it is hiding. Second, mining is not like farming rice [...] it is dangerous, and you risk losing your life in the deep pits. Third, up in the

Gunong Hujeun people often forget religion and good manners, for example, they consume drugs. Having that said, gold mining is amazing, for youths and men alike. After so many harsh years in Aceh, we the Acehnese all deserve to access the riches of our land. Gold mining here is easy, you don't need big capital, authorizations from the local government come automatically, you can extract wealth directly from your land. It's like doing business close to home, among relatives and old friends.

Racialized Mines in Elites' Eyes: the Class of the Well-connected

After the war, Aceh was ultimately integrated within the Indonesian decentralized state frame as an autonomous province. Such assimilation was greatly influenced by the demands of the GAM delegates at the peace talks that guaranteed special subsidies from the central state and very low taxation, meaning most of the levies on businesses in the province remain in Aceh. In a political and economic environment which is technically business-friendly, ideas about extraction of wealth from the Acehnese rich soil and subsoil have proven extremely contradictory and are reminiscent of the conceptual tensions I mentioned previously.

On the one hand, to the side of ASM blossoming in “free Aceh,” the majority of the people I encountered also called for very large-scale mining projects to be developed in the province by the central government and run by corporations. In sum, people wish that Aceh develops economically and socially, but nobody is fully aware of what development via industrial mining entails in terms of labor and land consumption. For instance, environmental and social threads that have characterized large-scale mining in Papua feel very distant in Aceh. Ishak, as most of his peers, agrees that “Aceh needs development projects,” but his concepts of development mirror the broad idea of Indonesian development (*pembangunan*), that is essentially based on the enhancement of infrastructure and the reduction of poverty. In tandem with the tendency to adopt pro-development worldviews, Ishak also hopes his children are well-off in the future and their lives align with middle-class ones in urban Indonesia. On the other hand, Ishak, as many villagers in rural Aceh do, questions the Indonesian development agenda that went mainstream in Aceh after the end of the hostilities. Ultimately, as Ishak explained to me, opening the doors to corporations, and the state, might increase taxes that would flow to Jakarta directly, reducing the Acehnese people's share.

It is useful to keep in mind that Ishak belongs to the class that, at the regency level, benefitted the most from decentralization and, peculiar to Aceh, the peace and reconstruction processes. His perspective is hence biased but meaningful because reflects the narrations by the majority of those who occupy the same social status. As an Acehnese who has a long-term collaboration with high-rank politicians and owns few plots of land, Ishak basically regards Acehnese-run small-scale mining as the best strategy to prosper and protect local natural riches from the interests of the state.

From this point of view, the ecosystem and land entitlement are extremely politicized and racialized. Primarily race, that in this context is “Acehneseness,” and also political patronage guarantees access to valuable biomass. Then, “non-Acehnese” skills, capital and technology are easily integrated into this all-Acehnese framework, as has been the case in the gold rush that occurred a few years ago. In my opinion, this viewpoint is conservative, progressive, and unfair at the same time. First, it isn't a novelty as it largely builds upon the “hyper-capitalist” and small-scale farming of pepper and other spices that dominated the area until the nineteenth century and the illegal businesses that operated during conflict time. Second, it effectively synchronizes with today's deregulation and

decentralization trends in provincial and regency-run mining. Third, this viewpoint is clearly elitist, as it excludes from the benefits of exploitation those who don't or can't rely on patronage, and hence remain vulnerable, materially and socially.

The post-colonial views on informality that have been primarily articulated in Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt's scholarship (2007; 2008) appear pertinent to this context, as the elite that Ishak represents has recognized ASM as one of the tools to resist the Indonesian state and those state-run forms of capitalism that in Aceh have echoed dishonest appropriation. From a general perspective, the narrative about opposition to and resistance against external forces was one of the constitutive elements of the Acehese insurgency (Aspinall 2009). Equally important, resistance was the strategy that the GAM adopted to frame and operationalize the pro-secession fight.

On the other hand, it has become clear also in this social environment, as it did in the ones described by Eleanor Fisher (2007), Boris Verbrugge (2015), and Nancy Peluso (2018), that ASM relies on a strict structure of power and often excludes many people from its mechanism. I will further investigate such inequalities in the next section, which consists of a case study about a young Acehese miner and his socio-economic vulnerability.

THE BENEFITS AND DAMAGE OF INFORMAL WORK PATTERNS TO "ORDINARY PEOPLE"

Earlier, I have explained that there aren't any factories in Aceh. On the geographical and administrative fringes of the country, with few inhabitants and numerous underexploited mineral deposits, this province is one of the few Indonesian ones where industrial extraction and production hasn't developed yet, except the natural gas plant in East Aceh that I mentioned previously. The reason for the underdeveloped industrialization is both historical, meaning Aceh was a theatre of war during colonial rule and for the last three decades so no one could build factories there, and political, as post-disaster programs to rebuild the region socially and economically didn't deliver.

Interestingly, many Acehese people, including those with predominantly rural backgrounds, are at least in part acquainted with industries and factory life. During the conflict, some migrated to Indonesian or Malaysian cities where they worked in construction and factories. Others know a little through television reports and accounts by their fellow villagers. Undeniably, in my circle of interlocutors, people are likely to form idealized judgments about personal development and access to middle-class lifestyle with the help of wage labor. Nevertheless, they also acknowledge that realistically Aceh is not likely to undergo industrialization in the short term. As a matter of fact, people have been exposed to a series of socio-political failures: secession ambitions weren't fulfilled, post-disaster reconstruction generated impermanent prosperity, and today's status of "autonomous province" has brought in special subsidies but never fostered significant infrastructural overhauling and the creation of job opportunities. These circumstances have greatly limited their expectations.

Sudirman, a Villager Engaged in Informal Mining

I befriended Sudirman, an Acehese man in his mid-30s, who is directly involved in extractive practices. He considers himself a gold miner and a "hunter" of precious stones (*pemburu batu*). He is by no means as educated as Ishak, having dropped out of school as a teenager. Another difference he has to Ishak, is that he hasn't secured large capital in

illegal economies. Sudirman's commitment to the independence cause is not as strong either. During the war, Sudirman, who was in his 20s, didn't join the GAM like most of his peers but was rather a keen drug dealer and weapons smuggler. At that time, he went back and forth across the Strait of Malacca, an important transit point for illegal goods between Aceh, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

After the tsunami, Sudirman, who is a descendant of a landless family from East Aceh, heard of the booming extractive economy at Gunong Hujeun and, being Acehnese and a man, he found he could easily mine gold there. Such professional experience exposed him to a range of new dynamics. While he had got used to the exchange of man-made products on extra-legal trajectories in a context of warfare, he discovered that the Acehnese underground was full of riches to be harvested. In contradiction to the intrinsic differences between the goods he has handled, Sudirman realized that mineral extraction in pacified Aceh was part of informal structures that reminded him of the one that characterized the war black market. As in drug and weapons smuggling, ASM relies on clientelist networks: influential patrons gather capital, pay for very basic equipment, enter into spoken agreements with employees and eventually redistribute the value they capture.

When I joined Sudirman on a "stones hunt" in the jade-rich valleys of the Nagan Raya regency, he told me that:

it's better for me to stick into "community mining." I haven't got a high school diploma, and nobody would hire me in a factory or in a big mine outside my area. Besides, I'm not good at conforming to factory discipline. Good stones, like jade, quartz, and, of course, gold are just around the corner here in Aceh. All you have to do is to be brave, endure the harsh working conditions up in the jungle and look for the right patron. Sometimes I feel frustrated because finding capitals and stones is tricky. However, I still feel privileged: as an Acehnese, I'm entitled to make the most out of my land.

In some ways, Sudirman has materially prospered from "community mining." When he joined the gold rush during its heyday and worked as a miner for a local investor who operated a couple of mines, he was able to earn about 10 million Rupiah (600 Euro) every few months. This intermittent revenue allowed him to build a small house and to put money aside for his marriage. At that time, people's confidence in "community mining" was seldom misplaced: gold was plentiful and Acehnese young men as Sudirman who couldn't afford to finance a mine directly could always work in the employ of wealthier people on favorable terms, based on common ethnic belonging.⁷

Like many people who are part of the generations that cross the 2005 peace agreement, Sudirman learned that there were numerous advantages in sticking to the informal extraction patterns, also as a response to the lack of formal jobs in the province. As I have already mentioned, since the post-disaster reconstruction, the government is committed to scale-up and formalize the economic utilization of the Acehnese natural assets. Nevertheless, such pro-development agenda has manifested on paper and on political discourses only but is seldom applied in practice. My understanding is that people of the same professional and class as Sudirman have turned these ambiguous political and administrative conditions into an advantage. Because of their background and ethnicity, they can conveniently navigate the extractive environment, and ultimately capture value along the diverse transformation chains.

⁷ I have explored in detail the mining environment and the working life at Gunong Hujeung in another paper of mine: Tabacco 2018.

In parallel, Sudirman and his peer have also been greatly influenced by the “rhetoric of resistance” forged in a bottom-down way by the GAM throughout the conflict. In a manner not dissimilar to that of Ishak, resistance is here a specific discourse to reassert sovereignty over local minerals, to reinforce the right of the locals to work, and to oppose appropriation by non-Acehnese people. Specific to this social class, Sudirman was adamant on the need to protect local extractive ventures from external interferences, especially those he considered to be associated with the Javanese ethnicity, the dominant one in Indonesia. From Sudirman’s perspective and based upon the experience he gathered during the civil war and at the goldmines, the Javanese mindset includes greed attitudes. Based on my fieldwork, Sudirman and his fellow miners conceptualize informal work within all-Acehnese circles as a form of resistance to “globalized work” such as in a factory outside Aceh. It is in fact “globalized work” that they tend to perceive as more penalizing to them because it may lack the protections protection arising from the same ethnic affiliation.

Exclusion and Poverty: the Class of the Non-well-connected

At the peak of Sudirman’s career as an informal “stones hunter,” the gold deposits at Gunong Hujeun were exhausted, and the extraordinary circumstances of the gold rush vanished in a matter of few months. Sudirman, who has no schooling and is not comfortable migrating to town or working in urban environments, remained in the area and tried his hardest to mobilize patrons and fellow miners and convince them to extract new commodities available in the region, such as jade, or process the existing low-grade gold tailings. However, he failed. In terms of prices and opportunities to attract investors from outside Aceh, no other raw material could compete with gold. Another point is that money, that had been originated in the gold rush, quickly ran out and people were reluctant to risk their savings on potentially low-yielding mining ventures.

In line with the economic obstacles that prevented further mineral exploitation in the area, barriers forged in class have often restricted Sudirman and many others in the same social conditions from availing themselves of natural riches and governmental subsidies. Soon after the collapse of the gold “community mining,” only a small number of people emerged as the controllers of the few remaining high-yielding sectors, namely agribusiness and public works. This is particularly the case in Aceh Jaya, where the gold rush once occurred and that has ironically become one of the poorest regencies of the province. This scenario is reminiscent of the circumstances in Tanzania articulated by Eleanor Fisher, where the integration of artisan mining in legal structures has led to the deterioration of existing inequalities (2007). It also reflects the emergence of a “dominant stratum of ASM entrepreneurs” that excludes poverty-ridden workforce, a condition that has characterized small-scale extraction in The Philippines (Verbrugge 2015).

As Sudirman has learned the hard way, the newly created chains of commodities are not as easy to penetrate as the old ones and being Acehnese doesn’t guarantee access to work. The extraction of wealth is, at an increasing rate, a matter of social positioning, networking and political sponsorship, to the extent that class benefits greatly outweigh race ones. Badly connected to the governmental elites, Sudirman and dozens of his peers compete to obtain private or political patronage and from time to time succeed in accessing short-term, low-wage unskilled jobs. They often consider themselves poor, and actually are materially and socially, and, in my perspective, are bound to stay that way due to the circumstances of the region.

As I have already mentioned, there has been only one industrial venture in Aceh; that is a gas plant on the outskirts of Lhokseumawe, on the province's Northeastern coast that faces the Strait of Malacca. Run by the American multinational Mobil in association with the state company Pertamina from the 1970s until the late 1990s, it is now on stand-by because the main deposits of gas run out. While this project proved successful economically, it soon started to fuel speculations of unfair wealth redistribution. Pro-independence GAM rebels saw it as the symbol of misappropriation by Jakarta bureaucrats and, at the height of the secession conflict in the late 1990s, targeted the company's personnel and the security forces that patrolled the compound, amidst a wave of violence and human rights crimes by the Indonesian army.

Amid gas depletion, the provincial government has won a bid for transforming the former industrial facilities into a "Special Economic Zone." This state-run re-industrialization mega-project is still on paper and would include petrochemical factories, an international port and other logistic platforms for Indonesian, Asian and Middle Eastern hydrocarbons bypassing the Strait of Malacca.

The region of Lhokseumawe has been heavily shaped by foreign-led gas extraction. First, the discovery and economic exploitation of natural gas translated into the creation of diverse jobs, ranging from menial to skilled ones. It also reinvigorated Acehnese's idea of being in control of valuable natural resources and able to trade them globally. Finally, industrialization allowed a number of communities, both the urban ones in Lhokseumawe and the rural ones on the premises of the drilling fields and the refineries, to profit from the corporate social initiatives; scholarships, health centers, indemnification for land acquisition.

On the other hand, the installation of the Mobile/Pertamina gas plants exposed the civilians to a more insecure environment during the conflict, as compared to other regions in Aceh of less strategic importance. The "Simpang KKA shooting," the 1999 infamous killing of 52 Acehnese protesters by the Indonesian army and one of the most violent accidents of the Acehnese war, took place just a few kilometer from the gas project. More than that, the processes of industrialization have often proven unsustainable, socially and economically, and have usually sowed patchy prosperity, as the two following stories will illustrate.

Fahmi's Aristocratic Ancestry Secures Skilled Job

The offspring of a wealthy and influential family based in Lhokseumawe, Fahmi is my only acquaintance of mine who actually works for the ongoing Pertamina project that inherited the Mobil gas facilities. Now in his early thirties and father of two, Fahmi has an aristocratic pedigree. His father and grandfather belonged to the Acehnese gentry that has passed downland through generations and occupied key positions in the local government. Reportedly, Fahmi's father, who sided with the independence cause, financed the GAM insurgency. This attitude allowed the family to further increase its social status, when the pro-independence movement eventually gained power in pacified Aceh.

Fahmi's life has been deeply marked by the "work contract" (*kontrak karya*), originally stipulated between the government's emanation Pertamina and Mobil in the early-1970s. As a matter of fact, Fahmi attended the Polytechnic of Lhokseumawe, an institution that is unique in Aceh and has advanced back-to-back with gas extraction. He majored in

chemical engineering and, when I first got acquainted with him in 2015, was eyeing a master's degree in gas engineering in Qatar, the country that commands almost 14 percent of the world's total natural gas reserves. That master was jointly sponsored by Pertamina and the Acehese local government, in an effort to train Acehese engineers and little by little lessen dependence on "imported" engineers. In the end, the program fell through, still Fahmi, thanks to his network, was successful in standing out in the highly competitive job market. Unlike in the past, the industrial projects in Lhokseumawe have been put on hold or drastically downscaled and today they hire just a fraction of the employees they used to engage. Fahmi is among the few skilled workers hired by Pertamina to run the plant that burns the gas residue to produce electricity.

Hendrik is Excluded from the Transforming Gas Industry

Hendrik, who is about Fahmi's same age and native to the area of Bireuen, some 50 kilometers West of Lhokseumawe, comes from a family that doesn't own farmland. Like his father and his elder brothers, he has made ends meet by harvesting crops in someone else's farms and by working as a day laborer in construction. This routine has gone on until Hendrik migrated to Malaysia, a common and somewhat handy solution for Acehese young jobseekers from poor backgrounds. At first an illegal migrant laborer, Hendrik then succeeded in securing a fix-term contract as a storekeeper. The job was rewarding and brought in good money that Hendrik could set aside little by little. In that period, Hendrik met online Mirah, a girl from a village on the outskirts of Lhokseumawe, close to the gas plants. The two started a long-distance relationship and after a few months got married in Lhokseumawe. Meanwhile, Hendrik's Malaysian contract and work permit had expired, and the couple decided to move in together in the house that belongs to Mirah's mother, in line with the established Acehese custom.

An Acehese who is not new to village life but experienced migration and enjoyed working in Malaysia, Hendrik felt catapulted into a resource-rich yet jobless environment. First, the planned reconversions of the Lhokseumawe industrial cluster have continued to stall. Therefore, the promised creation of jobs for underskilled staff and training programs for apprentices hasn't taken off so far. It is not a coincidence if the region of Lhokseumawe, once a mining hub, averages today the highest figures in Aceh for unemployment and migration.

Second, reminiscent of the dynamics of exclusion that marked the gas extraction during the civil conflict, the few surviving mining operations, like the Pertamina gas-powered plant, are difficult to access for ordinary people. Hendrik explained to me that the recruitment of gardeners, janitors and other menial workers in the Pertamina industrial and residential compounds are governed by a strict code. Each village in proximity to the compounds is grated a quota of workers by Pertamina, as a form of corporate social responsibility. The allocation is so scarce compared to the number of unemployed villagers that the village heads often draw lots for the positions.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN INFORMALITY AND CLASS

It is worth mentioning that, based on my experience, in an extractive society which is structurally impermanent and flexible, class affiliation is perceived as quite rigid. "Unprivileged" respondents such as Sudirman and Hendrik were resolute in their feeling about social and cultural capital being essentially inherited rather than obtained. Accord-

ingly, they lay little hope into self-employment opportunities and social mobility, especially in the long run. In other words, while luck, wealth and employment are often categorized as transitory and nuanced conditions, class positioning is considered permanent or semi-permanent. It is precisely the lack of social and cultural capital that, in Sudirman's and Hendrik's eyes, will make them in constant need of patrons, also labeled as donors (*donor*), whose capital they expect to catalyze informal work.

Unsurprisingly, Ishak, Fahmi and other "privileged" interlocutors were much less vocal than Sudirman, Hendrik and their peers about class-based inequalities. In most cases, "privileged" people downplayed structural issues. Consistently, they maintained that hard work and discipline alone guarantee prosperity for all Acehnese people within the framework of informal mining.

CONCLUSION

Political decentralization, that was heavily implemented in the Indonesian Reform Era, and "special autonomy," an administrative status that Aceh was granted after the cease-fire in 2005, exponentially increased the control of local governments over mining and transformed ASM in the province. The consequences of such socio-political metamorphoses are twofold. On the one hand, regency and city-led mining began to represent a market-ready and easy way to extract and transform minerals and other commodities. Most of its protagonists, from entrepreneurs to the workforce, usually belong to the same social and ethnic context and, as Sudirman's story demonstrated, people have the perception that mining is within anyone's reach. On the other hand, in decentralized Indonesia and pacified Aceh, ASM has sometimes yielded good results but reproduced inequalities that are primarily based on class. In this regard, Ishak, who is well connected to the political elite, still considers ASM an empowering tool for ethnically Acehnese villagers. Conversely, after the extraordinary gold rush flamed out, Sudirman realized his class ranking and networking capabilities wouldn't allow him to access new ventures run by the regency government and local investors.

The central argument of this paper is that in the shadow of self-rule, war, resistance to the state, and special autonomy the economic utilization of natural resources has trapped the Acehnese society in a vicious circle. While people are in the habit of framing gold, gas and the other assets under the rhetoric of "Acehnese riches to transform and redistribute among the ethnically Acehnese," the economy is stagnant, an increasing number of villagers are poor and little by little profound class inequalities are intensifying in ASM and other businesses.

As the income of ASM and cash cropping remains highly variable and the gulf between the elites and the poor widens, the inequalities and the resulting persistence of poverty in Aceh are similar to the socio-economic phenomena studied by Fisher (2007), Verbrugge (2015) and Peluso (2018). In line with the structuralist approaches of these scholars, this paper has illustrated that frontier-like, resource-rich Aceh doesn't consist of a chaotic arena away from political control but represents a complex environment of authoritarian structures of power. From this perspective, it is fundamental to adopt also in the Acehnese context a nuanced and differential attitude that enables to look at the elitist entitlement to local assets and the conceptual and practical relevance of ethnicity, locality and resistance to state-run capitalism.

Finally, this study of gold-rich West Aceh has shown that the combination of elitism, pride in resistance and self-rule, and determination in exploiting local resources trans-

formed the region into a distinctive province of politically decentralized Indonesia. Paradoxically, over the course of history, this province has often represented a capitalist “playground” and a blessed land of easy and fast money, as well as a theatre of economic failures, unjust redistribution of wealth and violent rivalries between classes. Under the rhetoric of economic regionalism, racialized entitlement and cultural distinctiveness, inequalities often remain “invisible” to government initiative and are difficult to acknowledge and overcome for people who live in poverty. Therefore, this study also represents a call to increasingly adopt bottom-up and integrative approaches for studying ASM, informality, risk and poverty in Indonesia and beyond.

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