

AYŞE GÜRSAN-SALZMANN, *The New Chronology of the Bronze Age Settlement of Tepe Hissar, Iran*. University Museum Monographs 142. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2016, xx+388 pages, 238 b/w illustrations, 27 tables, cloth, ISBN 978-1-934536-834; e-book ISBN 978-1-934536-84-1.

Tepe Hissar or, more correctly, Tappeh Hesār is one of the most important archaeological sites in the northern margin of Dasht-e Kavir (desert plain), located in north-eastern Iran. In 1886, the Persian king Nāser al-din Shāh's court ordered an unknown man to excavate at Tappeh Hesār to obtain objects for the Shah's private museum. A year later, Albert Houtum-Schindler, a German or Dutch engineer,¹ visited the mound twice² and advised the government to channel water through the site in order to gather objects whole and unbroken!³ Large-scale archaeological excavations at Tappeh Hesār were finally undertaken by Erich Friedrich Schmidt in 1931–1932 on behalf of the University of Pennsylvania revealing one of the first large Bronze Age settlements in the north-east of Iran. Because of the construction of the Tehran-Mashhad railway, Tappeh Hesār received more attention and, subsequently, several excavations took place. Robert H. Dyson Jr. and his expedition excavated for a single season in 1976, in order to revise and correct the stratigraphy and chronology of Tappeh Hesār. Two decades later in 1995, another excavation was conducted by Ehsan Yaghmaii from the Iranian Center for Archaeological Research; it has not been published so far. The main discovery of his excavation was a number of clay seals with cuneiform signs, which were found neither by Schmidt's excavations nor by Dyson's mission.⁴ The last excavation at Tappeh Hesār was carried out recently by Kouros Roustaei from the Iranian Center for Archaeological Research in 2006.⁵ For the first time, he discovered Iron Age deposits at the site dating back to c. 950–850 BC.⁶

1 GURNEY 2012.

2 HOUTUM-SCHINDLER 1887.

3 Based on A. Houtum-Schindler's statement, the objects were found some yards below the surface. Several burials were excavated and a number of grey burnished vessels, copper objects, alabaster pieces and three stamp seals were discovered: HOUTUM-SCHINDLER 1887, 426. – In 1925, E. E. Herzfeld, who surveyed the Damghān Plain, catalogued the objects unearthed by Houtum-Schindler: HERZFELD 1988.

4 Up to now, E. Yaghmaii has not published the clay seals of Tappeh Hesār. – See ROUSTAEI 2010, 615.

5 ROUSTAEI 2010.

6 ROUSTAEI 2010, 617.

With approximately 12 hectares, Tappeh Hesār represents a long sequence of occupation from the early 4th millennium BC to the Late Iron Age. Based on pottery changes, Schmidt divided the deposits at Tappeh Hesār into three major periods (Hesār I, II and III), including eight phases (Hesār IA, IB, IC, IIA, IIB, IIIA, IIIB and IIIC).⁷ Radiocarbon dating⁸ confirmed that Tappeh Hesār was occupied intensively and for a long period during the Bronze Age (Hesār II and III), although a long chronological hiatus occurs between the first and the second half of the 3rd millennium at the site. Even though Robert Dyson and Susan Howard, in their studies, kept the backbone of Schmidt's chronology (Hesār I, II and III periods), they reduced the phases to six (A, B, C, D, E and F) assigned from top to bottom.⁹ Although later excavations were conducted in much more detail, it must be noted that the earliest chronology, established by Schmidt, has been in continuous use by most archaeological studies. Ayşe Gürsan-Salzmänn has recently addressed this issue once again to establish 'the new chronology of the Bronze Age' at Tepe Hissar. The present book is the result of her post-doctoral project which was started in 1994. From 2004 onwards, the research project has been modified to 'reassess Schmidt's excavations in the light of the 1976 campaign, specifically, aimed at generating a comparative ceramic chronology'.¹⁰ The book includes an introduction, which discusses the research history of Tappeh Hesār and archival investigations, in addition to research questions¹¹ which include the following: (1) establishing a ceramic chronology based on the combined evidence from occupational levels using stratified ceramic assemblages excavated in 1976; (2) correcting Schmidt's burial sequence by employing the results of the new ceramic chronology;

7 SCHMIDT 1937.

8 See VOIGT, DYSON 1992, Table 1: Hesār IC/IIA (c. 3900–3850 BC), Hesār II (c. 3350–3000 BC) and Hesār III (c. 2400–2150 BC).

9 DYSON, HOWARD 1989. In their chronology, which was based on architectural phases, phases F and E are attributed to Hesār I, phases D and C to Hesār II, and phases B and A to Hesār III.

10 p. 6.

11 pp. 1–12.

(3) addressing the funerary behaviour as part of the socio-cultural context; and (4) investigating the socio-cultural trajectory of the Tappeh Hesār settlement and its role in regional and inter-regional connections.¹²

The book comprises six chapters and four appendices.¹³ Chapter 1 is entitled 'Erich F. Schmidt Excavations (1931–32)'.¹⁴ In this chapter, the author gives a very comprehensive and detailed overview of Schmidt's excavations, his methodology, aims and results. After this account, the reader is immediately confronted with the results of the 1976 study season in Chapter 2.¹⁵ This chapter is again descriptive and similar to Chapter 1. Interestingly, the author supplies a chronological table at the end of the second chapter to compare periods and phases as introduced by Schmidt, Dyson and Howard.¹⁶

The main chapter, however, is the third, where Gürsan-Salzmänn starts the analysis of ceramic complexes of the main mound.¹⁷ The main purpose of this chapter is to 'present a new ceramic chronology for the settlement sequence at Tappeh Hesār, Period I–III ca. 3900–1800 BC, based on ceramic assemblages from the Main Mound and North Flat'.¹⁸ Her pottery classification is built on the descriptive method, considering the Schmidt and Howard architectural stratigraphy of the Main Mound and North Flat. At the beginning of Chapter 3, the author brings a short description for the pottery classification systems, which were applied by Schmidt and Howard.¹⁹ On pages 74 and 75, she introduces the selected ceramic assemblages, consisting of two large pottery assemblages from the 1976 excavations ($n = 5100$) and the complete vessels ($n = 1600$) retrieved from the Main Mound and North Flat of Schmidt's excavations. She states that the ceramics from the 1976 excavations derive from six different contexts, but she introduces only five of them.²⁰ In the section C2 'Ware Classification Attributes'²¹ the entire pottery including red, buff, buff painted, coarse and grey wares are classified into three groups of coarse, medium and fine in texture, but there is a lack of standardisation for this definition.²² The other issue refers to the statistical analysis

of the wares (Table 3.1). On page 74, it is clearly stated that from the total number of 5100 pottery sherds, 3600 were examined for this research, of which 750 were diagnostic. In Table 3.1, however, only 655 sherds are considered for the analysis. On page 81, the new chronological table for the 'revised periods' finally comes into view. In her chronology, Gürsan-Salzmänn has generated an Early, Middle and Late Hissar [Hesār] period, each of which comprises sub-phases, which in my opinion are still a little confusing. From page 82 to 164 the author presents the stratigraphy and typical pottery shapes of each of the periods and phases from the earliest levels upwards. She avoids describing the earliest period (Early Hissar I) and we immediately face the Late Hissar I/ Phases F and F–E, of which only five sherds are shown.²³ The other disadvantage of this chapter refers to the pottery terminology. Different types of bowls²⁴ are all called 'Globular Bowl', while they clearly show discrepancies concerning their shapes. In addition, no differentiation has been considered between open and closed vessels. In Figure 3.7, for example, No. 3 is called 'Globular Bowl', but in Figure 3.9, No. 4, the same shape is introduced as 'Jar'.²⁵ The next issue is the poor quality of the illustrations. In addition to the blurriness of the figures,²⁶ the upper parts of the rims are, in many cases, not illustrated carefully enough to recognise them and to be able to make further comparisons.²⁷ It must also be added that profiles are missing for some ceramics.²⁸ The statistical analysis, one of the most important issues, is not explicitly and adequately explained. The author gives no clear account of the pottery for each of the specific phases she defines. The maximum quantity of pottery in the graphs is 30,²⁹ which differs from the statistical data she states at the beginning of the chapter. Chapter 3, with its very short conclusion, misses the opportunity to conduct meaningful statistical analyses of the pottery assemblages of each of the defined phases and to compare them all.

In chapters 4 and 5, Gürsan-Salzmänn aims to correlate her newly established chronology with the burial pottery chronology established by Schmidt. Chapter 4 'Burial Stratigraphy: The Main Mound and the North Flat, 1931–32 and 1976'³⁰ introduces the burials of each of the periods which

¹² p. 7.

¹³ Appendix 1: Pottery Charts; Appendix 2: Low and High Outliner Burial Tables; Appendix 3: Maps; Appendix 4: Radiocarbon Dates from the 1976 Restudy Project.

¹⁴ pp. 13–40.

¹⁵ pp. 41–70.

¹⁶ p. 69.

¹⁷ pp. 71–166.

¹⁸ p. 71.

¹⁹ pp. 71–73.

²⁰ p. 74.

²¹ pp. 74–75.

²² p. 74.

²³ Fig. 3.4.

²⁴ For example Fig. 3.7.

²⁵ p. 95.

²⁶ For example Figs. 3.28; 3.26/14.

²⁷ Figs. 3.12/4, 8; 3.13/1, 4; 3.14 (almost all of them); 3.16/2; 3.19/6; 3.23/3; 3.27/2; 3.46/2.

²⁸ For example Fig. 3.12/5.

²⁹ For example Fig. 3.25.

³⁰ pp. 167–216.

were excavated by Schmidt in 1931–1932. It is accompanied by a distribution map of the burials on the Main Mound and North Flat.³¹ It is correctly noted that Schmidt's stratigraphy was based on the burials, and further excavations in 1976 showed that the burials had been dug from the upper layers to the lower deposits, revealing a discrepancy between the architectural levels and Schmidt's stratigraphy. The author compiled a schematic reconstruction of the stratigraphy of Schmidt's excavations, aiming at a relative positioning of burials at different depths and a correlation of burials to floors and structural remains.³² Specifically, the author first correlates the burials with the stratigraphy created by Schmidt, and then associates the burials with the 1976 stratigraphy in order to connect the burial pottery to the specific architectural phases at the site.³³

Some constraints of the stratigraphy of the site, based on old excavations, are noteworthy. For example, Schmidt had only used 40 % of the excavated burials for his stratigraphy,³⁴ and his sketches and plans can, in some cases, not be trusted (see an example on page 192 and Section 4.13). In addition, one of the most important squares for the Hissar II period, Square CF57, excavated in 1932 and 1976 on the North Flat, is discussed in this chapter.³⁵ The main results of the comparative stratigraphy are presented on page 214, showing three burial episodes at Tappeh Hesār: (1) 'immediately above the Burned Building, in the "L.1" walls in square CF37',³⁶ (2) 'under the floor of Burned Building squares 3CF37–38',³⁷ and (3) 'an earlier episode above Dyon's deep trench, below the base of the walls of "room 16"'.³⁸ Chronologically, these burial episodes display a continuous sequence from Late Hissar I through to Late Hissar II, with a possible gap of some hundred years between Late Hissar II (Phase C) and Mid-Hissar I (Phase B), and continue through to Late Hissar III (Phase B–A/A).³⁹ Chapter 5 'Death and Burial Culture of Tape Hissar'⁴⁰ contains four main parts: The first part contains the burial data and their analyses, the second contextualises the burials in cultural and chronological terms, the third part addresses the Tappeh Hesār burial culture within a framework promoted by Fahlander and

Oestigaard⁴¹ and the fourth part gives a diachronic overview of burial culture and ritual at Tappeh Hesār.⁴² Remarkable is a GIS map of the burials which represents the horizontal distribution of the dated burial groups in each square and from different periods.⁴³ The main outcome of this effort shows that the burials were interred in uninhabited areas of the settlement.⁴⁴ The author describes pit graves, cist graves, communal chamber burials and a single vault grave⁴⁵ as burial forms at Tappeh Hesār. In the second part of the chapter, she selects 204 dated and stratigraphically verified burials out of the 537 excavated burials from the Main Mound and the North Flat for analysis.

The analysed burials are grouped into five categories: (1) Late Hissar I to Early Hissar II (Phase F–E); (2) Early to Mid-Hissar II (Phase E, E–D); (3) Late Hissar II to Early Hissar III (Phase D and D–C); (4) Hissar IIIB (Phase B); and (5) Late Hissar III (Phase B–A/A).⁴⁶ The third part of Chapter 5 deals with burial rituals. In this part, Gürsan-Salzmänn addresses topics such as long-term continuity of the cemetery, secondary burials and postmortem manipulation of body parts, articulation of objects on skeletal parts, feasting on the basis of animal bones, food and drinking vessels as well as performance of rituals.⁴⁷ The last section of Chapter 5 conceptualises the burial culture and ritual at Tappeh Hesār. In this part, the author discusses shapes of graves as well as burial objects in different periods and tries to give an insight into the burial traditions and their transformations.⁴⁸

The last chapter of the book entitled 'Concluding Remarks'⁴⁹ consists of three parts. The first part summarises the social and cultural changes at Tappeh Hesār from the 4th to the early 2nd millennium BC. The second part refers to the role of Tappeh Hesār in regional and long-distance networks of cultural and trade connections. Finally, in part three, the author suggests future research directions at Tappeh Hesār.⁵⁰ The first part of the chapter includes a table of relative chronology, in which Gürsan-Salzmänn compares here newly established chronology with that of adjacent sites in northern Iran as well as farther west and south (Table 6.1). In this chronology, she leaves the two earlier

31 pp. 167–168.

32 p. 170.

33 pp. 170–216.

34 p. 169.

35 pp. 209–213.

36 p. 214.

37 p. 214.

38 p. 214.

39 Altogether spanning from c. 3900/3700 BC to 2200/1800 BC.

40 pp. 217–266.

41 FAHLANDER, OESTIGAARD 2008.

42 p. 217.

43 Fig. 5.1.

44 p. 218.

45 pp. 221–222.

46 pp. 227–251.

47 pp. 253–257.

48 For detailed information about the Hissar III B and III C burials, see pp. 261–264.

49 pp. 267–297.

50 p. 267.


phases of Early Hissar I or Phase Pre-F (c. 4300–4000 BC) and Phase F (c. 3900–3700 BC) without a name (the same table). It is not explicitly stated whether she considers Early and Middle Hissar I at all. This problem also occurs for Phase C or Early Hissar III (c. 2900–2500 BC). Neither on page 144 nor on page 279 is this phase precisely defined and remains ambiguous. Although the reader misses the Early Hissar I period in Table 6.1, the author describes it on pages 270–271. The other confusion occurs in Late Hissar I/Early Hissar II (Phases F, F–E). In Table 6.1 Late Hissar I is not considered as Phase F and is also dated to 3700 BC, while on page 271, the Late Hissar I period corresponds to Phase F, dating back to c. 3900–3700 BC.

Nevertheless, Gürsan-Salzman gives a short, but useful account of pottery development, technological advancements, craft and architectural development on the following pages.⁵¹ She states that ‘The demise of the Burned Building created a hiatus of unknown duration, followed by the final period (IIIC) of the Tepe Hissar settlement interpreted as the transition to the late Bronze Age’.⁵² This statement, however, is not in accordance with the recent investigations, which clearly revealed remains of the Iron Age occupation at Tappeh Hesār.⁵³ It is unfortunate that the materials from the 1995 excavations of Tappeh Hesār by Yaghmaï have not yet been published. The clay seals and signs discovered at Tappeh Hesār indicate administrative activities at the site and enlighten its role in regional and intra-regional exchange during the 3rd millennium BC. These findings could help to develop the second part of this chapter, which deals with regional and long-distance connections.

Despite my critical comments, the book is useful for several reasons: First, the book benefits from archival material (such as Schmidt’s handwritten notes and the 1976 season pottery descriptions), which is not accessible to all researchers interested in the archaeology of the Bronze Age in the region. Second, the author put remarkable effort into digitising the old archives, thereby facilitating further research and comparisons especially of pottery. Third, this research may be considered a case study for future investigations into the Late Bronze Age and the transition between the Bronze and the Iron Age at Tappeh Hesār.

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Mohammad Karami
 Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen
 SFB 1070 ‘Resource Cultures’
 Gartenstraße 29
 72074 Tübingen
 Germany
 mohammad.karami@uni-tuebingen.de
 orcid.org/0000-0002-0840-3520

ARCHAEOLOGIA AUSTRIACA, Band 102/2018, 261–264
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 doi: 10.1553/archaologia102s261

⁵¹ pp. 273–286.

⁵² p. 281.

⁵³ ROUSTAEI 2010.