








## An Interim Report of the New Excavations at the Neolithic Site of Chogha Golan, Ilam Province, Western Iran

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Article Info	Abstract
<b>Pp:</b> 51-67	Chogha Golan has previously found a spectacular place in studies of the emergence of early agriculture and sedentary life in western Asia. Earlier brief work by the University of Tübingen in 2009-2010 suggested that Chogha Golan was inhabited between ca. 9700-7600 BC and witnessed a long initial experimentation with food production. However, despite this significant archaeological position, the site was left without further fieldwork until a new stage of excavations was initiated in 2023, aimed at investigating the diverse nature of the long-term resilience of the inhabitants of the Zagros foothills over the course of the transition to the Neolithic. In this regard, the first season of the excavations was carried out in October-November 2023. Accordingly, an 4×8 m area was excavated at the top of the site. As a result, 5 occupational phases were distinguished based on architectural remains within 285 cm of residential sequence yet excavated. However, the virgin soil was not reached, leaving investigation of remaining underlying levels to the next season. This article presents the preliminary results of the 2023 excavations and then contextualizes their significance for a better understanding of the Neolithization process across the Zagros region.
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## 1. Introduction

The ‘hilly flanks’ of the Zagros Mountains played an important role in the formulation of early theories about the origins of agriculture and sedentary life. In the last seven decades, however, they have been less and less explored. In the 1940-50s, the pioneering investigations of R. Braidwood (1960) laid the foundation for the subsequent intensification of work in the 1960-70s, when key sites such as Ali Kosh (Hole *et al.*, 1969), Ganj Dareh (Smith, 1990) and Guran (Mortensen, 2014) were excavated. However, later political instability shifted the focus of research to the Levant and more recently to the upper reaches of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers along the Taurus, with the result that the Zagros received little attention (see Darabi 2015; Matthews and Fazeli Nashli 2022; Watkins 2024; Zeder 2024a). Since the late 2000s, several new projects have been undertaken in the central Zagros of Iran, where a considerable amount of promising evidence has come from the sites of Sheikhi Abad (Matthews *et al.*, 2013), East Chia Sabz (Darabi *et al.*, 2011) and Chogha Golan (Zeidi *et al.*, 2012). Together with the revision of Ganj Dareh and Asiab (Darabi 2019; Richter *et al.*, 2021), they contributed to a better understanding of the transition to Neolithic life during the first three ‘creative millennia’ of the Holocene, when local societies took their first steps towards socio-economic transformations, including early cultivation and animal husbandry (Darabi, 2022; Zeder, 2024b). Accordingly, we are now in a position to estimate the beginning of ‘low-level food production’ on the flanks of the Zagros and Chogha Golan has contributed significantly to this estimate. According to the data published so far, people experimented with a wide range of plants at this site for a long time. Thus, over a long period of occupation spanning the 10th -8th millennia BC, there is evidence for a shift from the collection of wild plants to the cultivation of selected species, namely two-row barley, lentils and emmer (see Riehl *et al.*, 2012; 2016). However, later archaeobotanical reassessments have suggested that early domesticated species appeared abruptly at the site in the upper layers dating to the early 8th millennium BC (see Weide *et al.*, 2018). Together with the evidence from the synchronous site of Sheikhi Abad (Whitlam *et al.*, 2018), this called into question the local origins of agriculture throughout the Zagros region. However, this idea is generally based on a short stratigraphic excavation at Chogha Golan (see below).

The Transitional Neolithic (ca. 9800-8000 BC), during which time pivotal transformations towards Neolithic life took place, has been very little studied in the central Zagros. The layers presenting evidence of this period have been excavated in a very small area, less than 10 square meters on a regional scale. This highlights the importance of carrying out long-term and large-scale excavations at the relevant sites in order to address the key questions of ‘why’ and ‘how’ societies began to change the socio-economic aspects of their lives during the Transitional Neolithic. In this context, a new project entitled Tracing the Resilience of Neolithic Societies in the Zagros Foothills was launched in 2023. This project, led by H. Darabi, focused on Chogha Golan, a site that previously presented a long sequence dated to ca. 9700-7600 BC (see below). Accordingly, the first step was taken by conducting new excavations in October-November 2023. This article reports preliminary results of the excavations and, placing them within a regional context, argues how they could help our better understandings of the Neolithization process in the Zagros region.

## 2. Chogha Golan: Natural Setting and Research Background

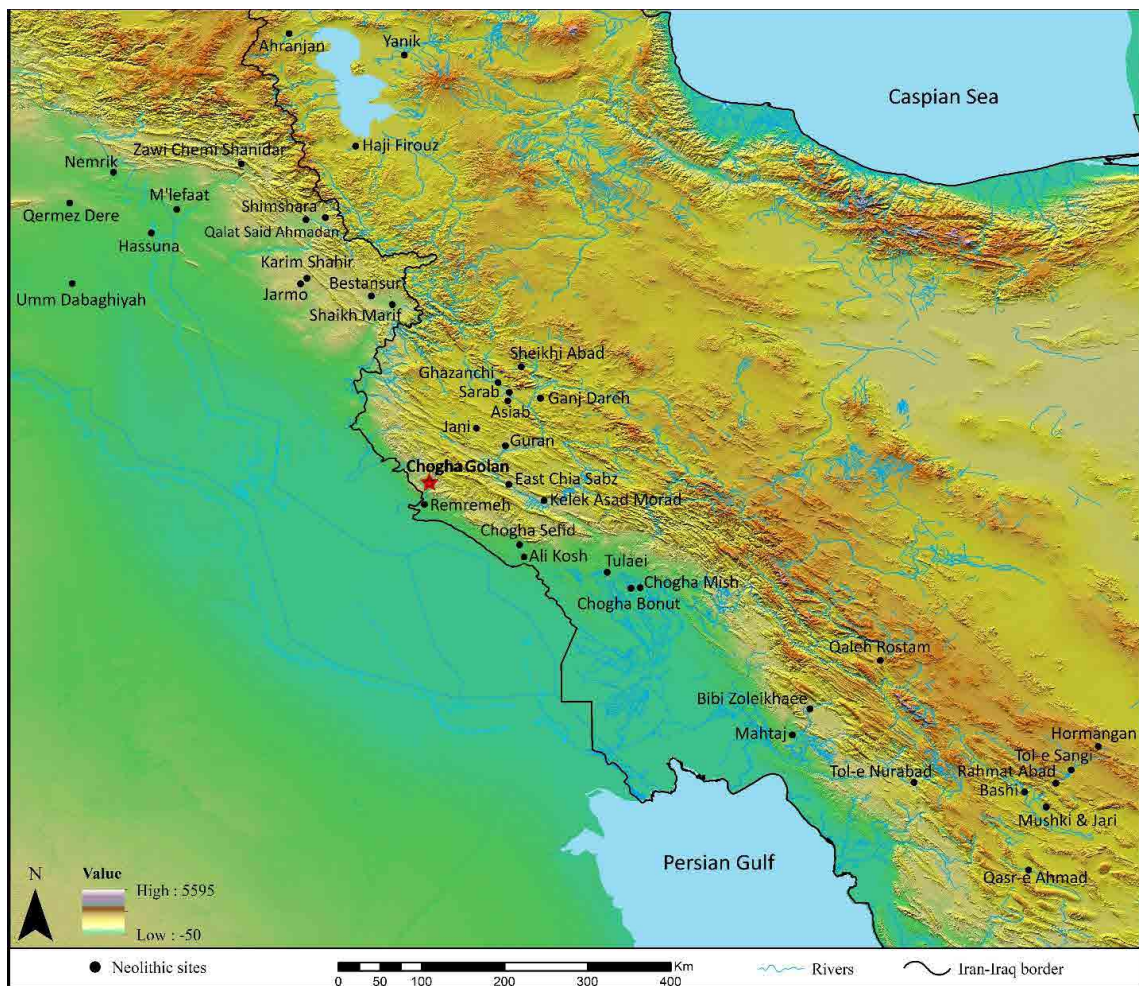
Chogha Golan (X 618238; Y 3693852) is located 30 km north of the city of Mehran in the Amirabad region, Ilam province, western Iran (Fig. 1). The site lies 100 m from the right bank of the Konjan Cham River and about 4 km south of the village of Golan (Fig. 2). It rises 7-8m above the surrounding areas at an altitude of 495m above sea level. A late Islamic branch of the qanat passed along the eastern edge of the site. Chogha Golan is distinguished from the surrounding area by its light and grayish soil, which has a high intensity of artifacts, especially lithics and grinding stones amidst the cultivated fields (Fig. 3). The site is situated in a rolling landscape consisting mostly of Aghajari marl overlain by Quaternary alluvium. Only 1 km east of the site, the Gachsaran Formation consisted of gypsum over a wide area. 5 km further north, the limestone ridge of Shah Nakhjir forms the first range of the Zagros Mountains. We can therefore imagine how important these different microenvironments were for the formation of Chogha Golan at the beginning of the Holocene.

In 1993, the site was first reported to the Provincial Cultural Heritage Office in Ilam. As a result, samples of surface lithics were sent to Tehran, where they were assigned to the Neolithic period. Accordingly, the late A. M. Khalilian visited and documented Chogha Golan as a 'proto-Neolithic' site (Khalilian 1999; see also Nokandeh 2010). Until then, the site was referred to as Chogha Khulaman. In 1999, it was delineated by G. Nokandeh, who suggested an area of 3h as its original size (Nokandeh 2001). Since then, Chogha Golan has been the main official name in the literature. In 2008, using the data available at the time, H. Darabi wrote his master's thesis on the site and proposed it as a suitable site for the study of the Neolithization of the Mehran Plain<sup>1</sup> (Darabi and Fazeli Nashli 2009). The first excavations were carried out by the University of Tübingen under the direction of N. J. Conard and M. Zeidi in 2009-2010.<sup>2</sup> Their aim was to collect organic and inorganic materials to be analyzed for the reconstruction of the environmental conditions and subsistence economy of the site's inhabitants (Zeidi *et al.*, 2012:260).

For this purpose, they excavated an area of 4×2 m to a depth of 1.5 m. In addition, the stratigraphic data came from a smaller, 2×1.5 m deep sounding, which was opened in the immediate vicinity of a looting pit at the top of the site. As a result, 11 archaeological horizons (phases) were documented within 8 m of the excavated sequence overlying the virgin soil. The sequence was radiocarbon dated to ca. 9700-7600 BC (Conard and Zeidi 2013; Starkovich *et al.*, 2016; Riehl *et al.*, 2013; Zeidi and Conard 2013). Among other finds, botanical remains from Chogha Golan have received more attention. Accordingly, the site was first regarded as an initial center for the cultivation of two-row barley, emmer and lentil (see Riehl 2015; Riehl *et al.*, 2012; 2013). However, later analyses suggested that the earliest morphologically domesticated crops at this site emerged suddenly in the early 8th millennium BC, again pointing to external origins of early agriculture in the Zagros region (Weide *et al.*, 2017; 2018). Under these circumstances, the origin and development of agriculture at the site is still unclear. Despite the site's key position, particularly when it comes to the origins of agriculture in western Asia, the excavations have not continued since 2010.

## 3. Aims

As discussed above, there are already a considerable number of Neolithic sites in central Zagros (see: Fig. 1), and yet very little is known about the transition to the Neolithic. On a



**Fig. 1.** Map showing the distribution of main Neolithic sites, including Chogha Golan, throughout the Zagros region (map: H. Ghobadizadeh).

wider geographic scale, the role of climate and environmental changes and the acceleration of population are widely acknowledged in investigating the Neolithic transition in western Asia (see Watkins 2024; Zeder 2017; 2024b). However, these discussions have not yet been systematically applied to the central Zagros to identify the most likely catalysts for the Neolithization process and the socio-economic transformation of the region. In order to clarify these key issues, the new stage of excavations at Chogha Golan was carried out between October 10 and November 20, 2023. The general aims of the project are therefore to:

- Investigate the nature of the emergence of agriculture in the Zagros foothills (subsistence resilience)
- Study the initial steps towards village life (residential resilience)
- Document the technological evolution of human societies in the Zagros foothills (techno-economic resilience)
- Assess the settlers' interactions with their environment and contemporary societies over time (eco-cultural resilience)

#### 4. The 2023 Excavations

Based on the results of previous excavations and the topography of the site, we decided

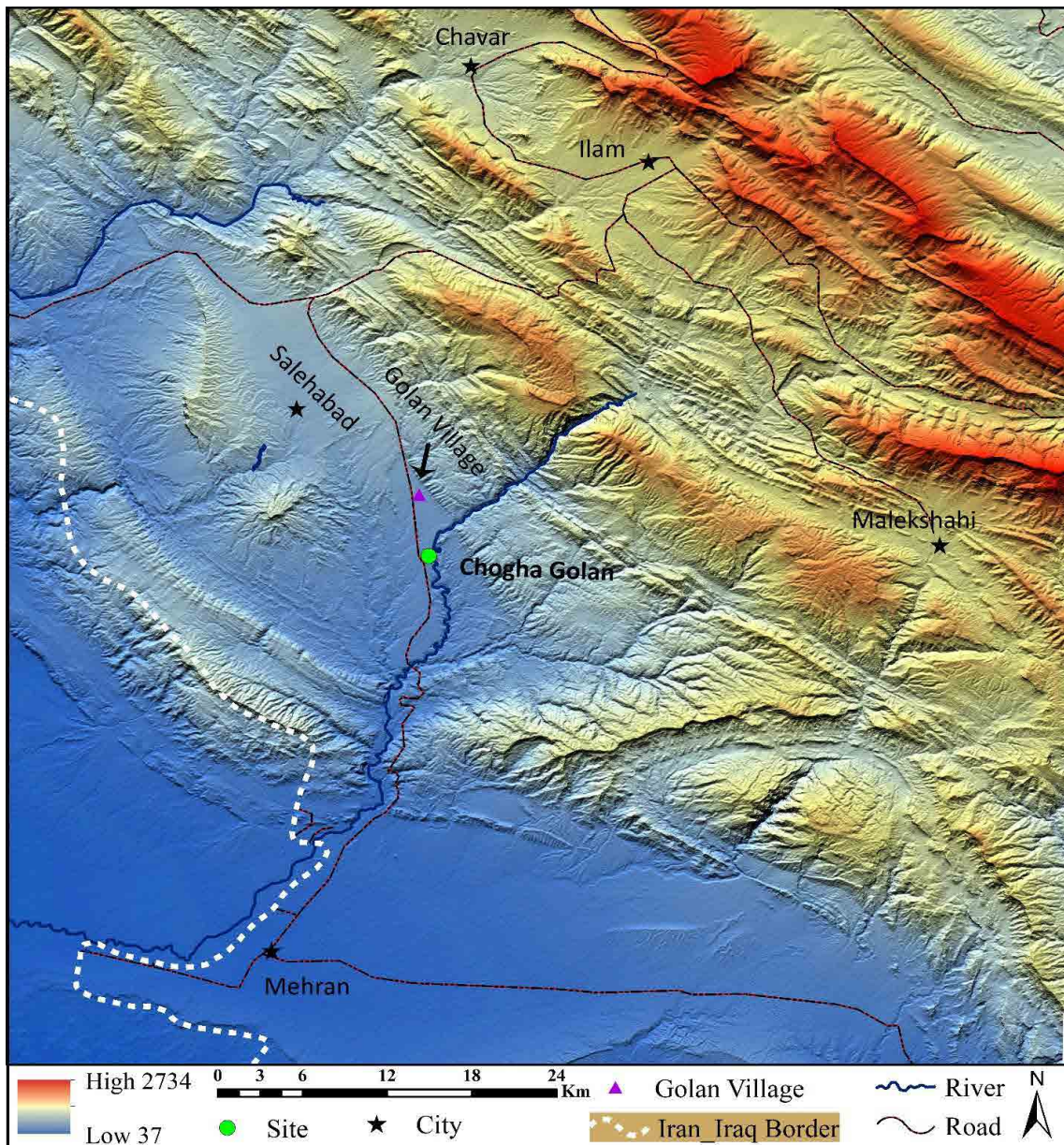


Fig. 2. The location of Chogha Golan on the right bank of the Konjan Cham River map (map: H. Ghobadizadeh).

to place our excavation area at the elevated central part of the site, where we expected to uncover a considerable amount of stratified architectural remains. This strategy was supported by evidence already revealed in the nearby looting pit at the summit of the mound, where the traces of several white plaster floors had been documented. We therefore opened up an 8×4 m area, designated Area I, in 2023. The excavation was initially carried out across the entire trench. Due to time constraints, we subsequently limited excavations to a smaller area of 3.5×2.5 m in the south-eastern corner, where stratigraphy was the main objective (Fig. 4). As evidenced by the architectural remains, five phases were distinguished within 285 cm of deposits, a depth at which the excavation stopped without reaching virgin soil (Fig. 5).

Phase 1 is represented by the appearance of three rooms built from a combination of clay slabs or strips, pise and mud bricks. Of these, only the central room, measuring 3.0



**Fig. 3.** Aerial view of Chogha Golan showing the location of former and new excavation areas, looking north-west (photo: H. Darabi)



**Fig. 4.** Aerial view of the excavation area in 2023 (photo: H. Darabi)

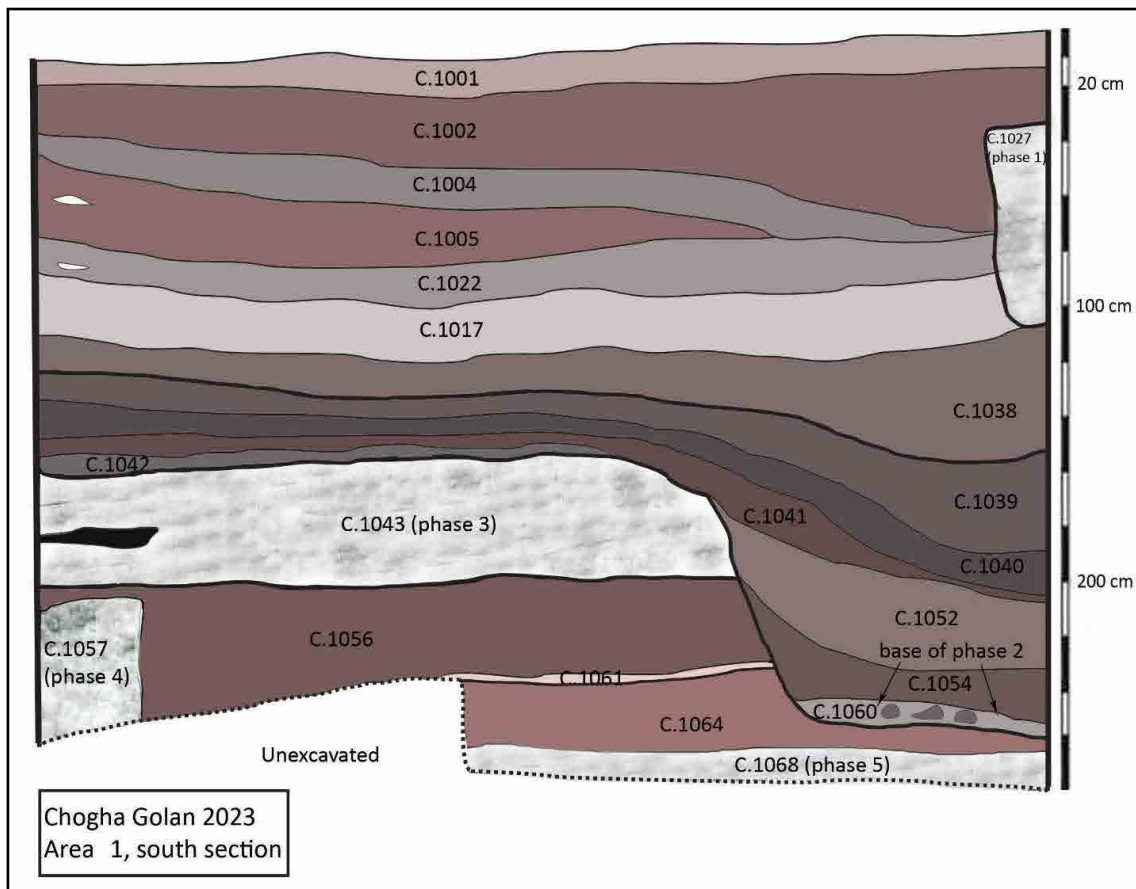


Fig. 5. Profile of the southern section in Area I showing distinguished phases separated by bold lines (drawing: H. Darabi)

× 2.0 m, was almost completely exposed in the excavation area. Interestingly, a circular pit with a diameter of 110 cm was uncovered in the middle of the central room. This had been dug down to 112 cm into the underlying deposit and contained a pair of animal horn cores. They were located at opposite positions in the northern and southern corners of the pit (Fig. 6). It is evident that they were deliberately placed in the pit, which itself was plastered with clay and covered with a layer of packed clay. The placement of animal horns and skulls was a common ritual behavior in the early Neolithic, as observed at other sites such as Ganj Dareh (Smith 1990), Sheikhi Abad (Matthews *et al.*, 2013) and Ali Kosh (Darabi *et al.*, 2024).

Phase 2 consists of an industrial area, including a partially exposed gypsum kiln and its burnt surroundings, in the southwest corner of the trench at a depth of 80-160 cm below the surface. In addition, part of a deep, large refuse pit (175 cm deep) was found in the eastern area of the trench. It seemed that the pit was used in connection with the nearby industrial area. It had been dug into the underlying phases 2-4, with a maximum depth of 260 cm.

Phase 3 is represented by the remains of a mudbrick structure and associated collapse, exposed between 160-200 cm below the surface. The nature of the structure is unknown. However, it was probably part of a platform.

Phase 4 is indicated by the remains of two walls of pise and mudbrick and their white plastered floors at a depth of 200-260 cm. In one partially excavated room, a mortar was

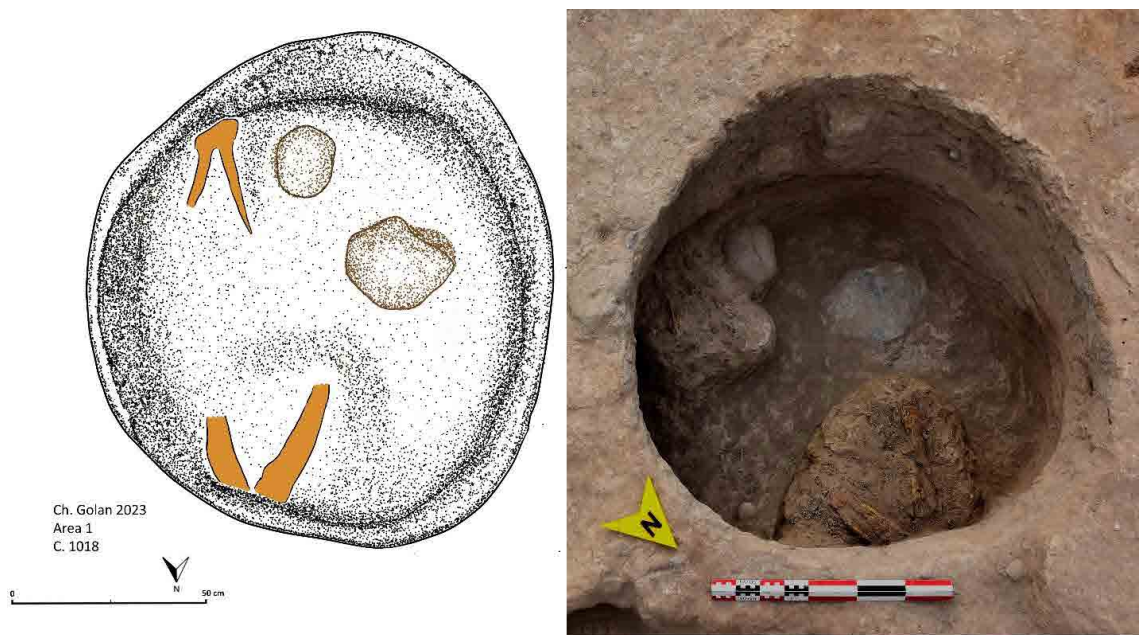


Fig. 6. Animal horn placed in a pit (photo and drawing: H. Darabi)

attached to the white floor. The floors and walls were elaborately plastered with gypsum and then decorated with red ochre.

Phase 5 consists of two wall stubs built of a combination of pise and mud bricks at a depth of 244-285 cm. A white plaster floor was also uncovered in connection with the walls. The relevant floor was again decorated with red ochre.

In an attempt to stratigraphically and chronologically correlate these phases with the former excavations we may generally and tentatively point to the upper four Archaeological Horizons (AHs 1-4) that have been radiocarbon dated to ca. 8200-7600 BC (see Riehl *et al.*, 2013). However, a more precise reconciliation requires not only excavation at underlying layers but also a detailed publication of the former stratigraphy.

## 5. Finds

The 2023 excavation yielded a variety of finds, including lithics, ground stones and objects made of clay, stone and bone. In total, a collection of 11462 pieces of lithics (cores, tools and debris) was found. The collection is still under study. However, a preliminary visual analysis shows that various types of chert of medium and high quality were used as raw material. According to their color, we can divide them into samples of black, dark gray, light gray, reddish brown and beige chert. No obsidian was found. All these types of raw material are locally available as outcrops and nodules or cobbles that sometimes preserved their cortex (see also Zeidi and Conard 2013:318). They were all knapped on-site as suggested by the presence of their cores and debris, including cortical flakes. It appears that the raw material in Phase 1 was more variable than in the lower phases. In addition, dark chert was more abundant in the uppermost phase. The cores show scars of blade, bladelet and flake. Amongst others, the bullet-shaped cores are predominant in the collection, indicating that bladelet production was a priority (Fig.7). The tools can be divided typologically into notches, denticulates and utilized, retouched and, to a lesser extent, backed pieces. Some micro-bruins, drills and shiny blades are also present.





**Fig. 7. Samples of the bullet-shaped cores found in the 2023 excavations (photo: H. Darabi)**

A total of 27 clay objects were documented as figurines (n.16), tokens (n.7) and unidentifiable fragments (n.4). Most of the figurines depict schematically anthropomorphic females and are conical in shape. They are also headless and sometimes show further details such as breasts and shoulders. In one case, both eyes are represented by two indentations and the nose is also indicated between them. Stab-marks are visible on some figurines (Fig. 8). In addition, two samples showed patches of red ochre. No samples indicating animal figurines were found. The figurines are generally reminiscent of the conical samples from Ganj Dareh (Broman Morales and Smith 1990). However, figurines with eyes and breasts were also reported from Jarmo/Charmo in Iraqi Kurdistan (Broman Morales 1983). The tokens found are small pieces of fired clay in spherical, circular and cubic shapes. They are frequently reported from Neolithic sites. Tokens are commonly interpreted as counting tools and precursors of writing systems (Schmandt-Besserat 1992) and, more recently, as multi-functional artifacts (Bennison-Chapman 2018).

Overall, 47 samples of complete and broken ground stones were recovered from the excavation though a large number can be seen on the surface of the site. They were made of limestone and igneous rocks such as basalt and granite. Sometimes sandstone, marble and even chert were also used as other types of raw material. Most of the samples were found at the bottom of the pit in Phase 2. The collection is typologically divided into mortars, pestles, pounders, stone vessels, grooved stones and combined items. Stains of red ochre are evident on some of the samples. The combined items represent at least two types of ground stones at the same time (e.g. quern-mortar, pestle-slab). This indicates the circulation and change of their use over time. In one case, a slab-chopping tool was found from the industrial area where gypsum boulders had been heated and processed (Fig. 9). It shows remnants of red ochre and incised lines on the surface, suggesting that it was

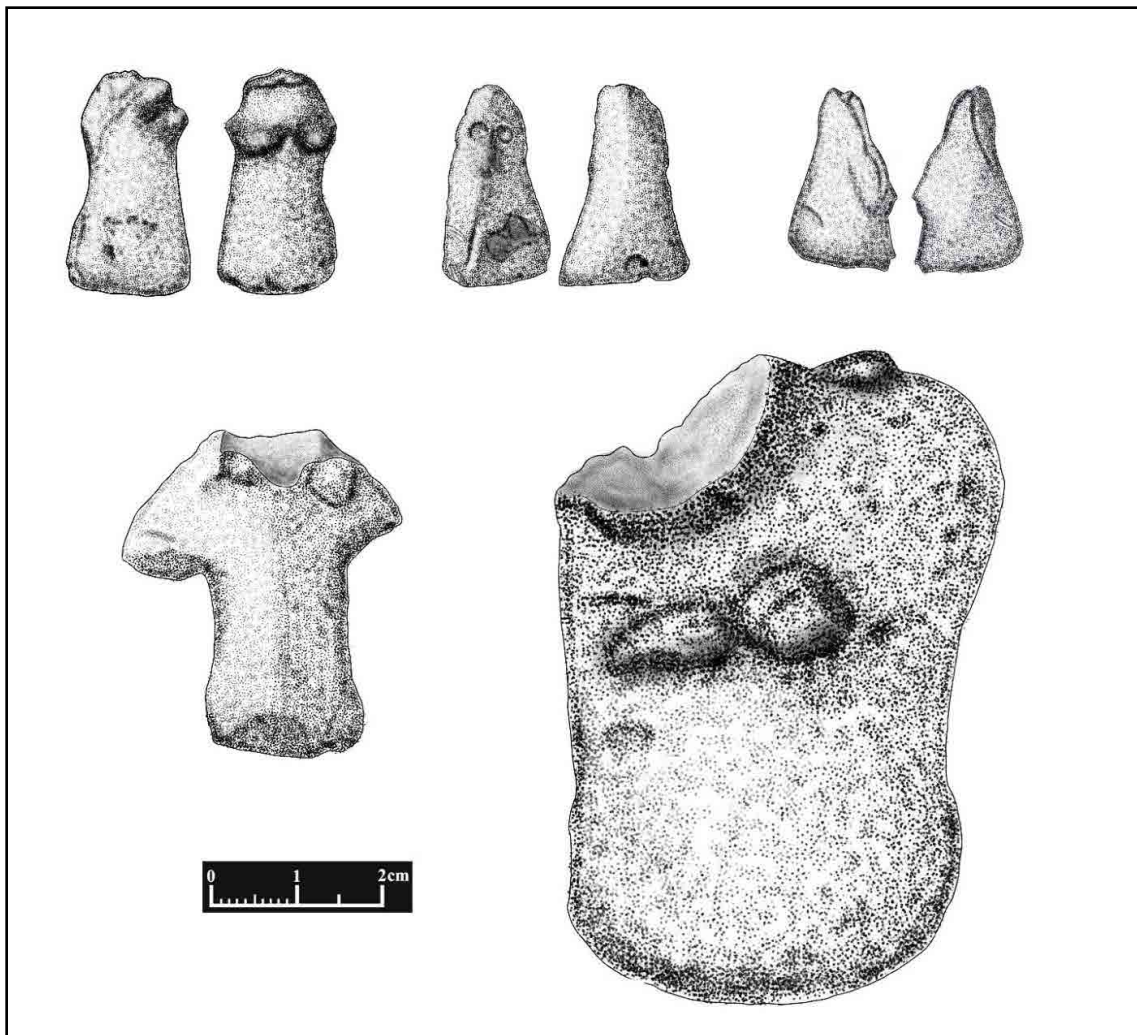


Fig. 8. Some human figurines from the 2023 excavations (drawings: H. Darabi)

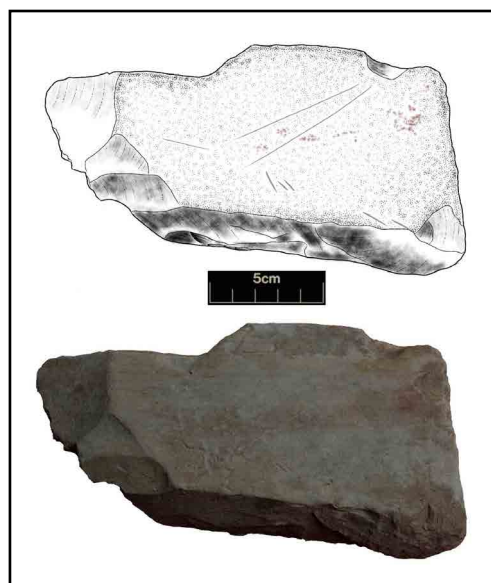
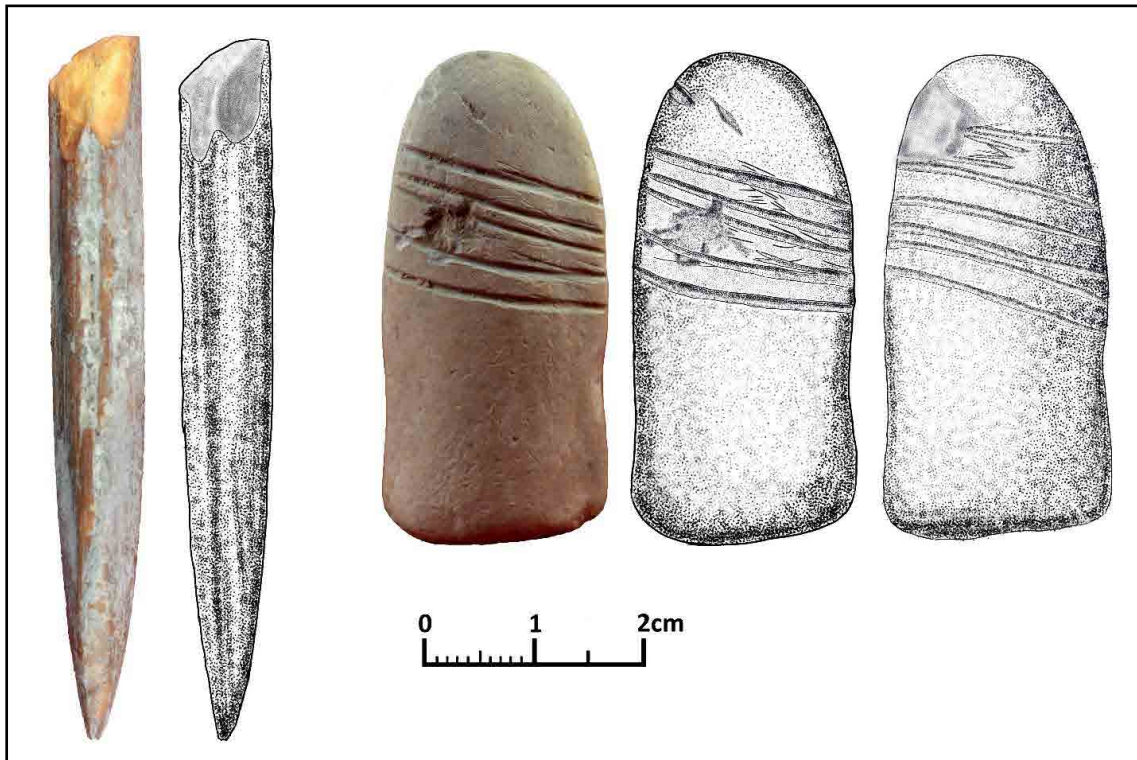


Fig. 9. The working plate-chopping tool found from the industrial area in phase 2 (drawing and photo: H. Darabi)

used as a working plate, but was also modified and used as a chopping tool, presumably for breaking up chunks of gypsum.

In addition to the finds mentioned above, a number of other objects made of stone and bone were also recovered. These include six awls made of bone, two stone beads, two pieces of bone pendants, and four stone plaques that were decorated with incised lines and shallow holes (Fig. 10).



**Fig. 10.** A bone awl and a stone plaque incised with parallel lines (drawings and photos: H. Darabi)

## 6. Concluding remarks

In the foothills of the Zagros, Chogha Golan shows the longest uninterrupted sequence (ca. 9700-7600 BC) of inhabitations during the transition to the Neolithic (Fig. 11), the era of ‘creativity and innovation’ in the first three millennia of the Holocene coinciding with fundamental changes in food production and village life. As T. Watkins (2024:26) notes, “the first sedentary communities and the beginnings of cultivation practices arose among ‘logistically organized’ collectors”. In this context, Chogha Golan seems to have best situated to allow access to a range of diverse resources in the adjacent ecological zones. Compared to contemporary regional sites, which generally sized 0.5-1 hectare, Chogha Golan is an unusually large settlement for the period. Our reassessment of the delineated area revealed that the site was up to 5.5 hectares in size though this whole area was not synchronously under occupation. Together with the long sequence, this makes Chogha Golan a uniquely spectacular site in the entire Zagros region. This peculiarity should be seen in the context of a particularly rich and sustainable environment that not only provided the inhabitants with an increasing ecological knowledge, but also supported population growth and intensity over time. Although the development of the site in different phases is not yet known, Chogha Golan could be an early Neolithic ‘mega-site’ at the Zagros

due to its unusually large area and long sequence. This makes it an ideal place to study the socio-economic transformations towards Neolithic life. In this regard, the emergence and development of cultivation, animal husbandry, sedentarization and also technological changes could be traced at Chogha Golan. Our excavations have shown that white plaster was an abundantly used material for building houses due to its availability over time. The discovery of an area where the gypsum was apparently heated and processed draws special attention. A close relationship between the production and use of white plaster, together with red ochre, and the abundance of grinding stones deserves close consideration. This indicates that ground stones can be seen not only in connection with the processing of plant materials, but also of red ochre and gypsum at this site. The discovery of a large mortar with plaster remains in its depressions suggests that it was used to process white plaster. In addition, the presence of red ochre is also clearly visible on some samples of grinding stones. Traditionally, ground stones are taken in relationship to food production (see Wright 1992; 1994). However, the appearance and diachronic change of ground stones and their relationships to changes in subsistence strategies are not yet known in the Neolithic Zagros, indicating a great importance of further excavations at Chogha Golan, where a widespread plant-based subsistence is already documented (Riehl *et al.*, 2013; Weide *et al.*, 2017; 2018). Moreover, high density of ground stones at the site may have resulted from long-lived subsequent occupations. The excavation of the underlying layers/phases will also allow us to investigate the diachronic techno-typological evolution of the lithics and their links with other socio-economic transformations including the emergence of agriculture at the site. Recently, it has been claimed that pressure technique

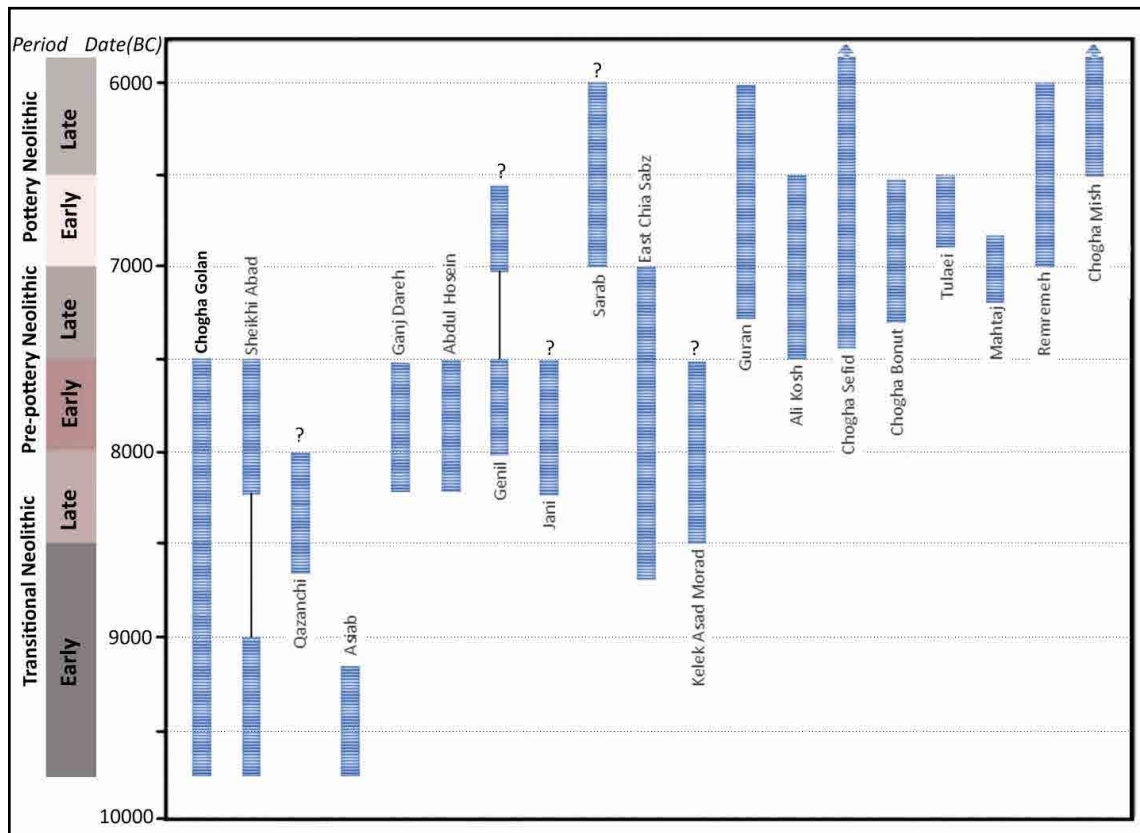


Fig. 11. Chronological placement of Chogha Golan among other key Neolithic sites in the central Zagros (chart: H. Darabi)

was in use since the beginning of the settlement of Chogha Golan (Zeidi and Conard 2024). This idea is not consistent with the results of other Neolithic sites in the region. Instead, regional evidence shows that the pressure technique in the production of stone tools, known as the M'lefatian tradition, was prevalent from the late 9th millennium BC (Nishiaki and Darabi, 2018). This is also underlined by further analysis of the new lithic samples from the lowest layers of the site.

Both previous and recent excavations at Chogha Golan have highlighted the creativity of societies resulting from their resilient strategies during the first two millennia of the Holocene in the Zagros foothills. Undoubtedly, carrying out further excavations at the site and also post-fieldwork studies, including zooarchaeological and archaeobotanical analyses, will shed light on this (r)evolutionary but still little-known period in the Zagros and more broadly in the Eastern Fertile Crescent.

## 7. Acknowledgements

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## 8. Endnote

1. In fact, Hoojat Darabi had not only laid the theoretical foundations but had also made the initial local administrative arrangements to subsequently conduct excavations at the site for his doctoral thesis. But then he suddenly realized that the excavation was to be carried out by the University of Tübingen. Originally, the then director of the Iranian Center for Archaeological Research orally agreed to the joint excavation. However, as he left his position, this plan was actually changed and the Tübingen team carried out the excavations alone.

2. The excavations were undertaken as part of the Tübingen-Iranian Stone Age Research Project (TISARP), while this project was originally intended to focus on the Stone Age, i.e., the Paleolithic (see Conard and Zeidi 2012:366).

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## گزارش مقدماتی از کاوش‌های جدید در محوطهٔ نوسنگی چغاگلان، استان ایلام، غرب ایران

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چکیده	تاریخچه مقاله
چغاگلان پیش‌تر به‌عنوان مکان بسیار مهمی در مطالعات مربوط به ظهور کشاورزی اولیه و استقرار دائمی در جنوب غرب آسیا شناخته شده است. کارهای مختصر قبلی دانشگاه توپینگن در سال‌های ۱۳۸۸-۹ نشان داد که چغاگلان در حدود ۹۷۰۰-۷۶۰۰ پیش‌ازمیلاد مسکونی بوده و شاهد یک دورهٔ طولانی از تجارب اولیه در تولید غذا بوده است؛ با این حال، با وجود این جایگاه مهم باستان‌شناسی، این محوطه تا آغاز مرحلهٔ جدیدی از کاوش‌ها در سال ۱۴۰۲ ه.ش. بدون پژوهش میدانی رها شده بود. در این سال یک پروژهٔ جدید با هدف بررسی ماهیت متنوع تاب‌آوری بلندمدت توسط ساکنان کوهپایه‌های زاگرس در طول گذار به نوسنگی شروع شد. در این راستا، نخستین فصل کاوش‌ها در ماه‌های مهر و آبان ۱۴۰۲ انجام شد. بر این اساس، ترانشه‌ای به ابعاد ۴×۸ متر در بالای محوطه کاوش شد؛ در نتیجه، ۵ فاز استقرار براساس بقایای معماری در یک توالی به ضخامت ۲۸۵ سانتی‌متر شناسایی گردید. با این حال، کاوش به خاک بکر نرسید و مطالعهٔ لایه‌های زیرین باقی‌مانده به فصول بعدی موکول شد. این پژوهش، نتایج اولیهٔ کاوش مذکور را ارائه کرده و سپس اهمیت آن‌ها را در بستر جغرافیایی زاگرس برای درک بهتر فرآیند نوسنگی شدن این منطقه مورد توجه قرار داده است.	<b>صص: ۶۷-۵۱</b> <b>نوع مقاله:</b> پژوهشی <b>تاریخ دریافت:</b> ۱۴۰۳/۰۶/۰۱ <b>تاریخ بازنگری:</b> ۱۴۰۳/۰۸/۱۵ <b>تاریخ پذیرش:</b> ۱۴۰۳/۰۸/۲۸ <b>تاریخ انتشار:</b> ۱۴۰۳/۰۹/۳۰

**کلیدواژگان:**  
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