

## **Archaeological Survey of Kooh-e Khajeh in Sistan**

**Reza MehrAfarin<sup>1</sup>, Seyyed Rasoul Mousavi Haji<sup>2</sup>,  
Seyyede Leila Bani Jamali<sup>3</sup>**

Received: 11/2/2010

Accepted: 21/6/2010

### **Abstract**

**Kooh-e Khajeh (Kajeh Mountain), with 120m height and 2-2.5km in diameter, is located at Hamoon Lake like an island. Since the archaic era, due to its specific geopolitical location, religious sacredness, and the natural beauty especially at the times of water-richness at Hamoon, this place caused the formation of settlements.**

**Based on an intensive archaeological survey conducted in this region, seventeen sites have been identified of which thirteen possess earthenware. Through typological and chronological studies of potteries found at surface level, two era of settlement have been identified in this Mount: one refers to the pre-Islam era beginning from 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. until the end of Sassanians; the second belongs to the Islamic era particularly on the basis of glazed potteries scattered on the surface as well as some structures built during 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century Hegira.**

**The buildings and structures related to the pre-Islam era include palaces, defensive forts and citadels, and temples, whereas; the buildings of the Islamic era are exclusively related to some religious places such as shrines, mausoleums and cemeteries.**

**Keywords: Sistan, Kooh-e Khajeh, Systematic Survey, Qal-e Kafaroon, Pottery of Sistan**

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1. Assistant Professor, Department of Archaeology, University of Sistan and Baluchistan

2. Assistant Professor, Department of Archaeology, University of Sistan and Baluchistan

3. MA in Archaeology, University of Sistan and Baluchistan

## Introduction

Koohe-e Khajeh is the most important relief in Sistan plain which is located some 20 km southwest of the city of Zabol, in Hamoon Lake (Fig.1). Its height, from surface level, is 120 meters and its diameter is about 2-2.5km (Alaei Taleghani, 2005: 214). Geographically, the proposed Mount is at 30°56'365" Latitudes and 61°15'206"Longitude.

In the three major religions of Islam, Christianity and Zoroaster, a special sacredness has been attached to Koohe-e Khajeh. In Avesta (Zoroaster's holy book), this Mount is called as *Oshida* and referred as the place of descending revelations to Zoroaster (MehrAfarin, 2000:15-16). The three Magi who followed the star of Jesus Christ's Emersion up to Jerusalem had risen from Koohe-e Khajeh (Herzfeld, 1941:292) and finally one of the followers of Ali (First Imam of Shiism) who martyred by brigands, was buried on the top of this Mount (Sajjadi, 2003: 52). The element of sacredness attached to this Mount has constantly made it the most attractive region of Sistan for pilgrimages and burials.

Since the archaic eras, the geopolitical position of Koohe-e Khajeh caused unruly and rebellious people, blacklisted and anathematized princes and even the ruling elites of Sistan to find it a safe and defendable haven. On the other hand, the beautiful and unique natural attractions of the Mount

especially during water-richness of Hamoon Lake together with pleasant summer weather as well as hunting attracted the attention of powerful people and governors (Herzfeld, 1941: 293).

The above factors led to the emergence of substantial monuments and buildings on the flat surface and the sloping domain of the Mount since the time immemorial (Fig.2). The most significant and important monuments identified during the archeological survey include: 1- Koohe-e Khajeh Palace (Citadel); 2- Kok-e Koohzad Castle; 3- Chehel Dokhtaran Castle; 4- The Islamic era's mausoleums and cemetery (Khwaja Ghaltan's Mausoleum).

Several archaeologists and architects (Stein, 1928; Herzfeld, 1988; Gullini, 1964; Sajjadi, 2003; Mousavi, 1995; Ghanimati, 2001) have investigated and researched on Koohe-e Khajeh. However, they were unable to identify and recognize all of the sites and monuments there. Besides, no constant chronology has been provided for Kaferoon Castle and other sites, hence; there is a substantial discrepancy and differences of idea among researchers and archaeologists. As such, the current study is an attempt, besides identifying all the existing sites, to find the settlement date, length and the end of habitation period through gathering and collecting typical samples of surface potteries from each of the identified monuments and buildings.

### Methodology

This research is based on a field work. For that matter, authors made a complete survey of surface and outskirts of Kooh- Khajeh step by step. After the discovery of a site, geographical coordinates of each site were recorded using GPS. Thereafter, some index potteries were collected from each site in order to classify as well as setup a relative chronology.

### Archaeological survey of Kooh-e Khajeh

Kooh-e Khajeh has constantly been in focus due to its sacredness and geopolitical location hence; one can observe some settlements in its domain, each resulted from the existing political, economical, and religious conditions. Of course, its natural status, especially hydrology has been effective too on this procedure, since Sistan was rich in water. The spread (and propagation) of human settlements was in a suitable level considering that the Mount was surrounded by water, however; this level of settlement could be reduced at the times of water shortage and drought.

One of the aims of this research is to identify all of the settlements that were constructed on various parts of the Mount in different time intervals. Before this, archaeologists and architects could uncover the palace of Kooh-e Khajeh (Kaferoon Castle) alone and ignored the vital role of other sites, which in fact supplemented each other. Thus, through an

intensive survey of Kooh-e Khajeh, seventeen sites have been identified of which thirteen have potteries. Identification of all the monuments and buildings (structures) caused that the archeological atlas of this mount be developed and prepared for the first time (Fig.3).

Establishing the chronology of these seventeen sites was one of the secondary aims of the research. It must be noted that despite researches and studies on Kaferoon Castle, its chronology has not been announced explicitly yet and one can see conflicting ideas about it (Gullini, 1964: 65; Kawami, 1987: 154). So far, most studies have focused on the architectural fragments of this castle and they ignored other archaeological aspects, particularly pottery. In fact, potteries as unchangeable materials constitute much of the cultural aspects in an archaeological site and can solely provide a great deal of useful information. Therefore, the present research attempts to study the scattered surface potteries in order to develop a relative chronology of the aforesaid sites. It should be noted that an absolute chronology would be possible only through excavation and stratigraphy as well as by obtaining specific opuses such as inscriptions, coins, carbon-14 test, etc.

According to the selected model in this research which was aimed to achieve relative chronology of the sites of Kooh-e Khajeh

based on the surface potteries, the variables of the pottery were considered more significant. Of course, in relation to the typology and chronology of the collected potteries, the sites which had been excavated previously were prioritized and the results obtained from the field surveys received secondary importance.

All potteries collected from each of the sites at Kooh-e Khajeh were compared with potteries from other sites of historical and Islamic eras, in terms of their shape (edge form), form of containers and dishes, type of decoration, plan, decoration plan, paste, and color. Based on typology of the collected potteries, two settlement stages have been identified in Kooh-e Khajeh, of which the first belongs to pre-Islam (Seleucid, Parthian and Sassanian) and the second belongs to the Islamic era-- 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries A.H. (Banijamali, 2008: 62).

Based on dispersion of the surface potteries, sites of Kooh-e Khajeh can be divided into two groups: Sites with potteries; sites without potteries.

### 1. Sites with potteries:

From among seventeen sites identified in Kooh-e Khajeh, thirteen sites have potteries which are in the form of big and small broken sherds. The rate of dispersion (i.e. scattering) of potteries in these sites are not identical i.e. some sites have very high while some have

very low dispersion. The sites 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16 and 17 possess pottery fragments (Fig. 3). Typology and relative chronology of surface potteries in the aforesaid thirteen sites show that two different eras of settlement could be detected (Table1).

*1-1. Historical era (Parthian- Sassanian):* Potteries belonging to this era lack inner and outer glaze (enamel) and unlike the pre-historical potteries, these are not decorated (Figs. 9, 10 and 11). In addition to simplicity, ornaments and decorations such as incised decorations (mostly grooved and wave-shaped) and the branded decorations have found on them (Table2).

The sites which have some historical era settlement include: site 2 (Kok Koohzad, Fig. 4); site 14 (Chehel Dokhtaran Castle, Fig. 5); sites 15, 16, and 17. The chronology of these five sites reaches to the age of Parthian and Sassanian. It seems that in this particular era, the Kooh-e Khajeh has had a special importance and has attracted the attention of governors and Satrapies of the archaic Drangiana (Sistan) and subsequently the attention of Sakas. This significance can be summarized in its geopolitical and religious position, on the one hand, from the political struggles and competitions between the Greeks of Bactria, Arsacides (particularly, the family of Soren Pahlav) and subsequently the Sakas who were the newcomers, on the other hand.

These factors lead people consider the Kooch-e Khajeh a sacred place and attempt to build defensive, royal, and religious monuments and buildings there.

The sites of historical eras (Parthian and Sassanians) are mainly in the form of reinforced and fortified structure built by bricks, mud, and black basalt and corpus (cadaver zed) stones. Before the suggested date, no other monument or building could be observed on the surface level of the Mount. Therefore, regarding the presence of scattered potteries, we can reject the date of Achaemenid period as claimed by Gullini (Gullini, 1946: 65,263).

*1-2. Historical-Islamic era:* Only one site from this era has been found in the southern domain of Kooch-e Khajeh. Site 1 called Kaferoon Castle (Ghahghaheh Shahr or Kakh-e Rostam, Fig. 6), is the largest and the most well-known archaic site of Kooch-e Khajeh. This castle, in fact, is the most outstanding and prevailing archaic site located on this Mount, and is substantially important in the Iranian architecture history. Regarding greatness, strength, and decorations, it seems that this monument has been one of the most elegant palaces of Drangiana's governor where, besides the palace, the presence of a temple with the fire altar indicates the significance and authority of the common religion (Herzfeld, 1941: 301).

The typology of potteries of this site shows that there has been two different settlement periods. The first period dates back to the Arsacides and subsequently, the Sassanians (Figs. 9, 10, 11); this period has had an uninterrupted and non-stopped continuance. After this, we see such an intermission in this great monument that until the 6<sup>th</sup> century AH, any pottery which can represent the mentioned period was not found in the surface and periphery of it. The typological comparison shows the second settlement period had restarted with a lengthy interval, through 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AH and continued its life, in a small scale, for two centuries (Fig. 12). Therefore, this monument would better be assumed as the most eminent and superior in the aforementioned sites and consider Kok Koohzad and Chehel Dokhtaran as the supplementary for citadel.

*1-3. Islamic era:* About seven sites have been found with glazed potteries that are related to the Islamic era of the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AH (Fig. 12). The Islamic sites of Kooch-e Khajeh includes sites 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 11 (Fig.3). These seven sites have ceremonial monuments, particularly burials (mausoleum). In the Islamic era, the Kooch-e Khajeh became the center of attraction for Muslims in the region because of its sacredness resulted from the burial of one of the greatest Muslim saint called Khwajah

Mehdi, such that this Mount was named as Koohe Khajeh. Since the grave of Khwajah Mehdi is located in the northeastern front of the Mount (Fig. 7), Muslims preferred this part to construct a mausoleum.

## 2. Sites without potteries:

Four of the identified sites at Koohe Khajeh lack potteries. These are: No.3 (stone graves), 9 (Khwajah Ghaltan Shrine), 12 (stone pond), and 13 (depressions) (Fig. 3). Moreover, there are some evidence which attribute sites 3 and 9 to the Islamic era. Although the most of the stone graves do not contain skeletons, some opened by jackals and foxes show they were made in the same direction that of Muslims i.e. the dead facing toward Mecca (Fig. 8). According to some previous researchers, except rotten sherds of canvas which seem to be grave-cloth (winding sheet), no other cultural materials have been obtained from these graves (Tate, 1910: 256). Thus, it is possible to attribute them to an unknown Islamic period.

The site 9, called Khwajah Mehdi's Mausoleum, is a monument made of brick and mud and is not much old. It appears that this place has been repaired and reconstructed frequently due to its sacredness. This site, according to its plan and shape, belongs to recent Islamic period.

Dating the sites 12 and 13, to some extent, is

very difficult because, they not only lack pottery fragments rather there are absence of any specific architecture. Although, it must be noted that the site 12, which is in form of a stone pond, has bricks which enable researcher to engage in dating through excavation and measuring its dimensions. Since the above-mentioned place is located in the vicinity of monuments and mausoleums of the Islamic era, it can be attributed to the Islamic era cautiously.

Throughout the eastern front of Koohe Khajeh, we observe some depressions whose shape and dimensions differ from each other. These depressions are called site 13. Considering with the lack of pottery and architecture, it would be very difficult to give any date to this site. At the same time, their performance and affirmative causes are not so clear and explicit. Perhaps it is possible to call them the depressions which have changed into this form in order to deriving basalt stones. Further, there is the possibility that some of these depressions are Stoddan (place to put human skeleton). Anyway, the chronology suggested for these depressions can cover both historical and Islamic eras. It should be noted that some European travelers who visited this mount in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have cited these depressions and introduced them as ancient sites.

### Potteries of Kooh-e Khajeh

As mentioned before, studying scattered potteries on surface level has been the basis for dating the sites of Kooh-e Khajeh. Consequently, pottery samples were gathered from surface, domain, and periphery of each sites and after classification and typological studies, the relative chronology was provided for each site. Here, the paper briefly highlights some of the characteristics of potteries of each era.

The potteries of Kooh-e Khajeh, related to the Parthian era, are mostly consisted of simple potteries, lacking decoration or ornamentation. The pottery colors include buff, brick red, brick-colored, red, orange, and dark brown (Mousavi Haji & MehrAfarin, 2008: 87). These are generally coated their containers and dishes with various covers and colors. Attempting to satisfy such an emotion resulted in generating the coatings with buff, red, brown, brick-colored, brick red, and orange colors (Figs. 9, 10 and 11). Of course, some potteries are self-generating. Some of the outstanding examples of the forms of this group include wide-orifice bowls, cup, glass, and chalice (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10(1,2,3)).

The preferred ornamentation and decoration of potteries in this era include incised design (Fig 9(1); Fig. 10(4)), polished (Fig. 10(2,3)), stamped and geometrical shapes (Fig. 11(1,2)). One of the designs observed on some of the

potteries is an incised figure in the form of grooves which was created, horizontally and parallel to each other, by a kind of tool whose tip has been less than 0.5cm. Usually, size of grooves and the protuberant parts of these designs are equal (Fig. 9(3); Fig. 10(4)). Such a decoration has been known as the grooved style of Sistan because of its abundance on the surface of historical ages of Sistan (Haerinck, 1997: 232-5). It is very likely that generating grooves on potteries would have been common since the Achaemenids era or even before. Such decorations could be observed on Achaemenid potteries of Dahane Gholaman.

Another decoration of historical age of Sistan in Kooh-e Khajeh is horizontal burnished lines which were created parallel to each other on the outer surface of containers. Sometimes, this too could be drawn on the inner surface of potteries. Of course, the latter instance is true mostly in wide-orifice containers such as bowls. In containers with narrow orifice, this decoration is seen on outer surface (Fig. 10(2,3)).

The potteries of the Sassanian era in this region show the continuance of Parthian era. In this period, too, glazed or enameled potteries are lacking. Much of them are of simple type like the previous era. Likewise, the paste colors are buff, brick red, red, orange, and dark brown (Fig. 11). There, too, a thick layer of mud coating— colored buff, brick red, red, and

orange— is observed whose prevalent color is of the buff spectrum and the ornamentation and decoration of the potteries is limited to burnished and incised designs. Many of the forms of the containers found in Kooh-e Khajeh are comparable to the regions which have the pottery of the historical era, however; some of these forms are specific to this region and should be classified in the group of local potteries of Sistan.

The last settlement era which was identified in Kooh-e Khajeh is related to the medieval centuries of Islam (i.e. 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AH). Most of the potteries of this era, like the other Islamic region, are glazed with simple decoration (Fig. 12). The pastes are constituted of soft minerals and color spectrum comprising of buff and red. The simple glazed potteries include green blue, lapis lazuli, and dark green, and the decorated potteries include ornamentation and decorations such as painting and incised designs beneath the glaze. The decoration in such potteries includes geometrical designs, figures of plants, and inscriptions.

Another decoration of the Islamic era potteries at Kooh-e Khajeh is grooved incised design. Unlike grooved potteries of historical era of Sistan, these potteries have high strength and their designs and figures have special arrangement and order with perfect geometrical shapes. Further, these have

unstable and fragile paste and their grooved designs and figures are not so integrated and accurate hence; lack enough beauty and delicacy.

### Conclusion

As observed, with regard to cultural materials obtained from Kooh-e Khajeh, particularly pottery, the oldest era of settlement belongs to the Parthians whereas the most recent one is 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AH. The noteworthy point is the time discontinuity at the site1 (Kaferoon Castle). The first settlement era is related to the early Parthians but that could not continue until the end of Sassanians hence; no evidence of settlement is available for the period between 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AH. It was only since the 6<sup>th</sup> century, evidences of settlement and residence, though in a limited form, are observed.

Since, many ancient sites dating back to Achaemenid era could be unearthed in Sistan (MehrAfarin & Mousavi Haji, 2009), question arises as why the Kooh-e Khajeh, which is located in the middle of Hamoon Lake and suitable strategically for residence of governors, hadn't used in this era? The most important reason may be the central governance as well as control and supervision on the country such that during the Satrapy era. In other words, Sistan benefited from an extremely high security and safety and had no

foreign enemy along its borders, specifically on the eastern borders. It seems that because of security, they didn't need a place like Kooh-e Khajeh for settlement and residence. Another possibility may be distance of Kooh-e Khajeh from the center as well as deep surrounding water made this mount inaccessible. However, during later eras, the power and authority and also the supervision of central government substantially weakened. In addition, some powerful enemies sprang along the eastern borders, and considering the security and safety, they decided to start building some palaces, castles and citadels there. Furthermore, Kooh-e Khajeh has been mentioned in Avesta as a sacred place and Parthians were very faithful and loyal to their

religious traditions, this place gained substantial importance and led to the growth of settlements that continued even after the emergence of Sassanians.

Since, there is lack of potteries related to the late Sassanian era up to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AH in the archeological sites of Kooh-e Khajeh; as such, we can see a time interval or a settlement discontinuity there. This time interval too could observe during the recent field surveys conducted by Mousavi Haji and MehrAfarin in the Sistan plain (Mousavi Haji & MehrAfarin, 2008).

**Table1. Source of potteries compared and their antiquity**

Fig.	No	Criterion of Comparison				Antiquity	Location Comparison	Source
		Coating	Paste	Motif	Form			
9	1	■	■		■	Parthian	Qale Yazdgird	Keall, 1981:Fig.10, no.6/23
9	2	■	■		■	Parthian	Tape Gowri	Mehrafarin, 86:129, no.044
9	3	■	■	■	■	Parthian	Charsada	Wheeler,1962:Fig.33,no.286
9	4		■		■	Parthian	Qale Yazdgird	Keall, ibid: F12,no. 2/49
9	5		■		■	Sassanian	Merv. Erk Kala	Hermann, 1996:Fig.10, no.8
10	1	■			■	Parthian	Qale Sam	Haering, 1376:Fig.6, no.13
10	2	■		■	■	Parthian	Solookieh	Debevoise, 1934: no.155
10	3		■	■	■	Parthian	Tape Nooshijan	Haering, ibid: Fig.15, no.6
10	4	■	■	■		Parthian	Tape Gowri	Mehrafarin, ibid: 127, no.29
10	5	■	■	■		Parthian	Tape Gowri	Mehrafarin, ibid: 126, no.24
11	1	■		■		Sassanian	Qale Yazdgird	Kaal, ibid: Fig.24, no.32
11	2	■	■	■		Parthian	Bisotoon	Kleiss, 1970: Ab.22, no.2
11	3		■		■	Parthian	Qale Yazdgird	Keall, 1981: Fig.15,no.18/43
11	4	■			■	Parthian	Charsada	Wheeler, ibid: Fig.30,no.259
11	5	■			■	Sassanian	Mah Neshan	Khosrowzadeh,1383: Fig.14, no.14
12	1		■	■		Islamic	-	Towhidi, 1379: 271
12	2		■	■		Islamic	Zahedan Kohne	Mousavi Haji, 1382: Fig.39, no.7
12	3		■	■		Islamic	Zahedan Kohne	Mousavi Haji, ibid: Fig.45, no.2

Table 2. Catalogue of potteries

Fig.	No.	Temper		Paste Color			Outer Coating			Decoration Type				
		Mineral	Herbal	Buff	Red/orange	Dark	Enameled	Coating	Their color	Incised	Meso-relieve	Burnished	Decorated glazed	Simple
9	1	■			■			■		■				
9	2	■			■			■						■
9	3	■			■			■		■				
9	4	■			■			■		■				
9	5	■			■			■						■
10	1	■			■			■						■
10	2	■			■			■				■		
10	3	■			■			■				■		
10	4	■			■			■		■				
10	5	■			■			■		■	■			
11	1	■				■		■		■				
11	2	■			■				■	■	■			
11	3	■			■				■					■
11	4	■			■			■						■
11	5	■			■				■					■
12	1	■		■			■						■	
12	2	■		■			■						■	
12	3	■		■				■					■	

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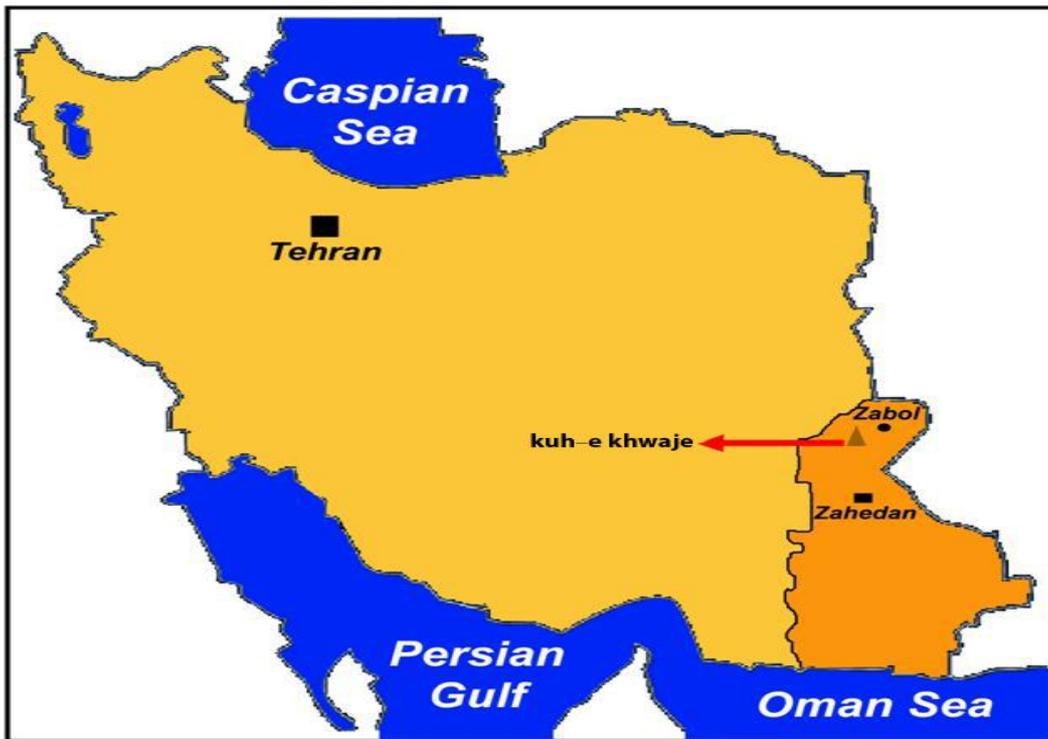


Fig.1 Location of Kooh-e Khajeh in Sistan, Iran

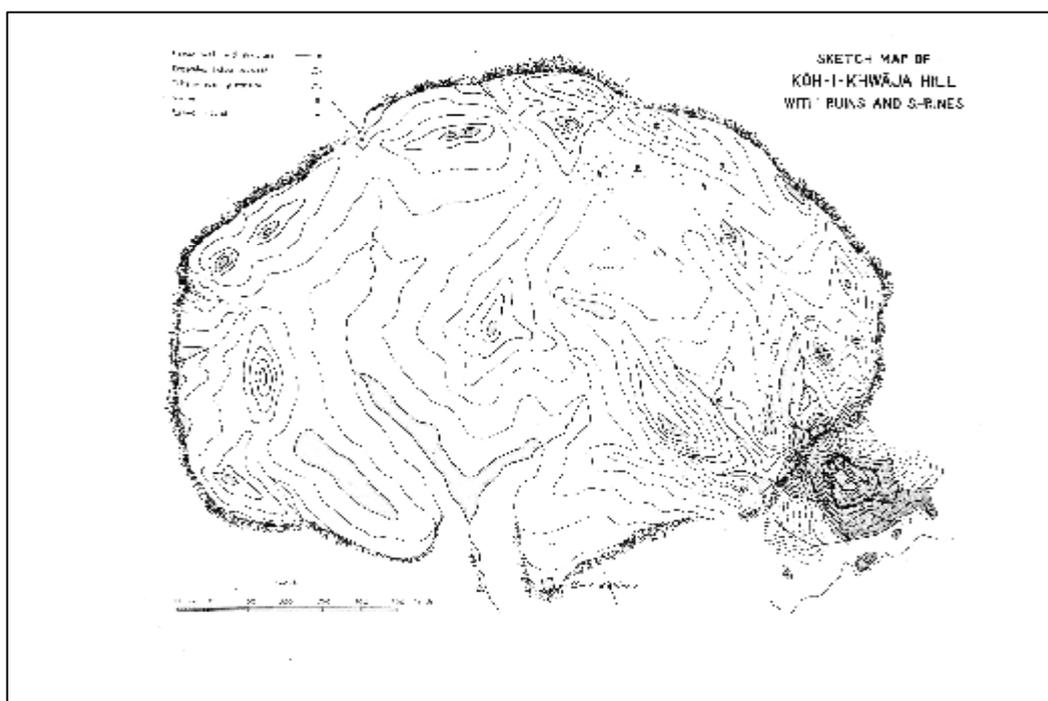


Fig.2 Topography of Kooh-e Khajeh, Stein M.A

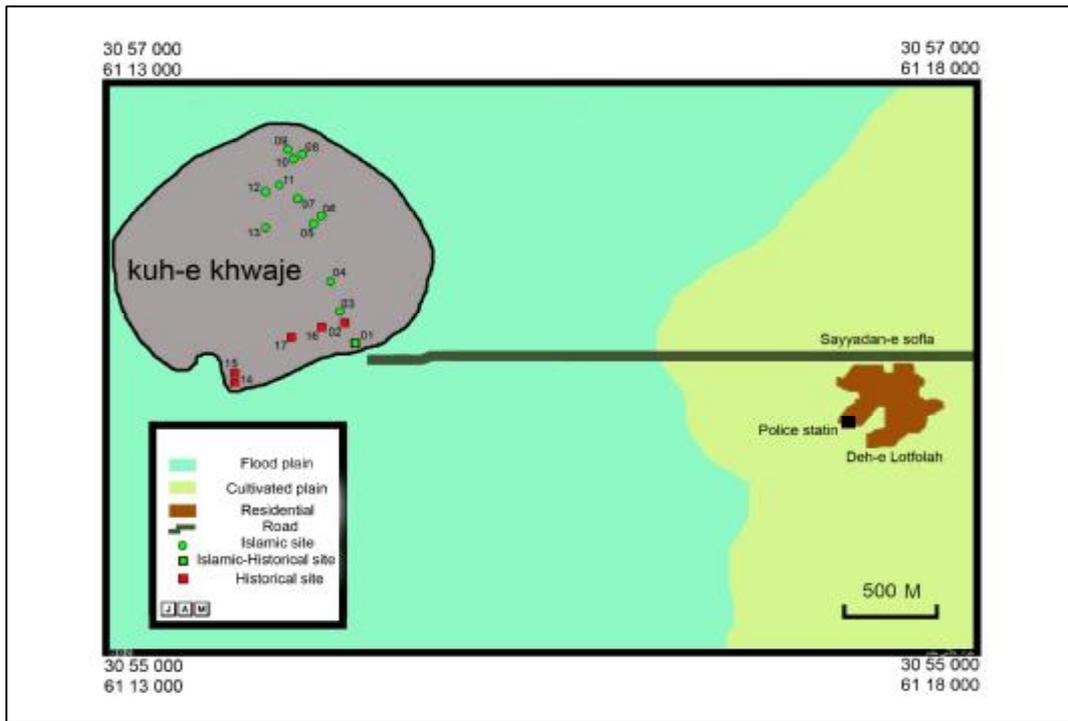


Fig.3 Archeological Atlas of Kooch-e Khajeh;



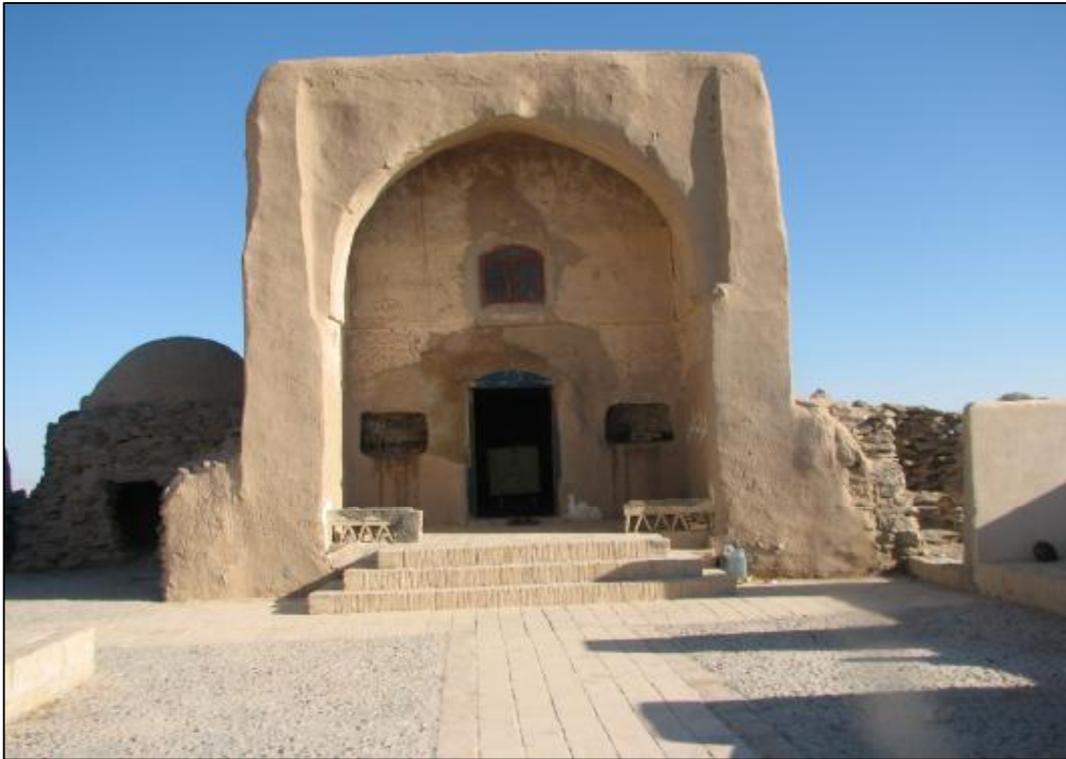
Fig.4 Kok Koohzad Castle



Fig.5 Chehel Dokhtaran Castle



Fig.6 Kaferoon Castle

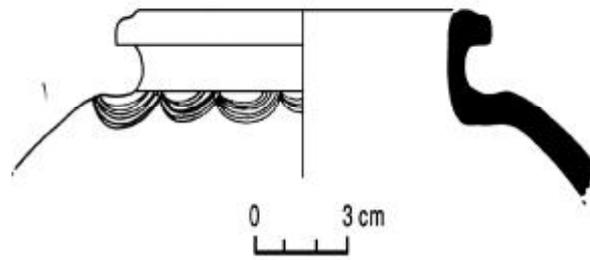


**Fig.7 Khajeh Mehdi's Masoleum**

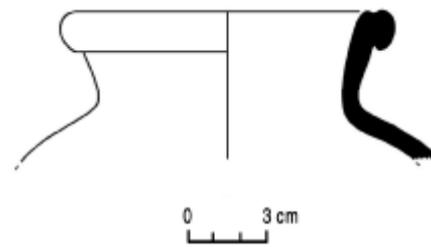


**Fig.8 The stone graves**

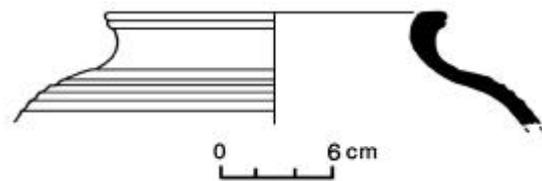
No.1



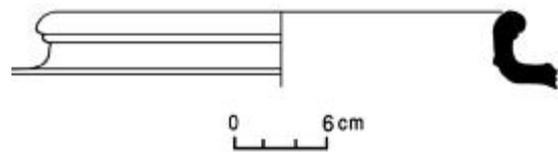
No.2



No.3



No.4



No.5

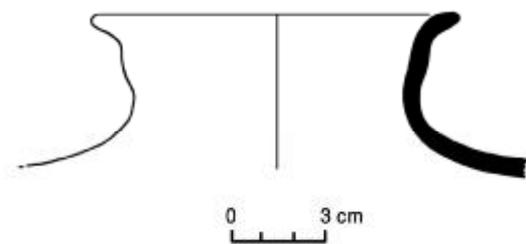
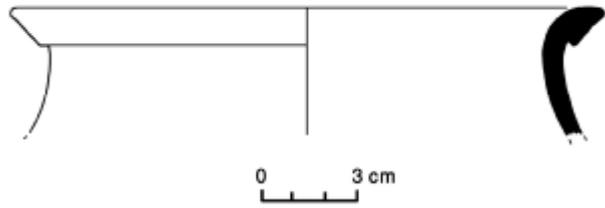
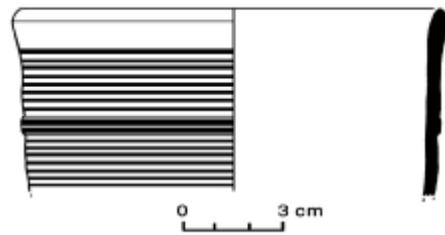


Fig.9 Samples of historical era pottery of Kooh-e Khajeh

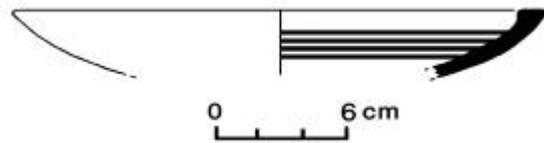
No.1



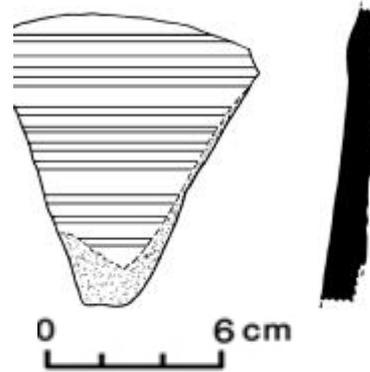
No.2



No.3



No.4



No.5

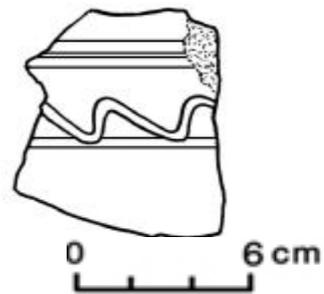
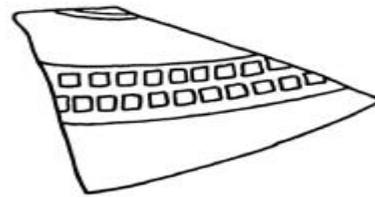
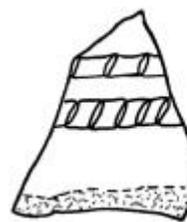


Fig.10 Samples of historical era pottery of Kooh-e Khajeh

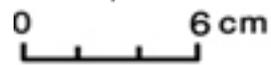
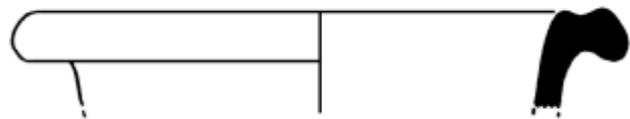
No.1



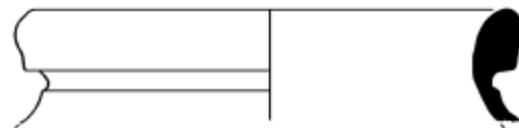
No.2



No.3



No.4



No.5

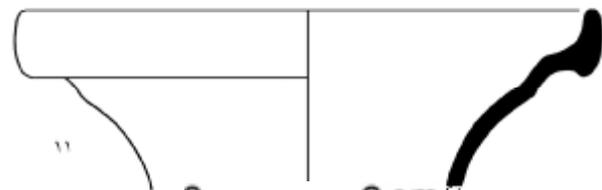


Fig.11 Samples of historical era pottery of Kooh-e Khajeh



Fig.12 Samples of Islamic era pottery of Kooh-e Khajeh

## بررسی باستان‌شناختی کوه خواجه سیستان

دکتر رضا مهرآفرین،<sup>1</sup> دکتر سید رسول موسوی حاجی،<sup>2</sup> سیده لیلا بنی جمالی<sup>3</sup>

تاریخ دریافت: 1389/112

تاریخ پذیرش: 1389/6/21

کوه خواجه با ارتفاع 120 متر و قطر دو تا دو و نیم کیلومتر همانند جزیره‌ای در متن دریاچه هامون سیستان واقع شده است. این محل به دلایل مختلفی چون: موقعیت مناسب جغرافیایی، تقدس مذهبی و طبیعت زیبا - به ویژه در ایام پرآبی - از دیرباز مورد توجه ساکنان منطقه بوده و مکانی مناسب برای استقرار گروه‌های انسانی بر سطح و دامنه آن بوده است.

با انجام بررسی فشرده باستان‌شناختی بر سطح و دامنه این کوه، تعداد هفده محوطه در آن شناسایی گردید که از این تعداد، سیزده محوطه دارای سفال و بقیه فاقد سفال بوده‌اند. با مطالعه نمونه‌های سفالین جمع‌آوری شده از سطح محوطه‌های باستانی که به صورت طبقه‌بندی، گونه‌شناسی و مقایسه گونه‌شناختی انجام گرفت، دو دوره استقرار در این کوه مشخص گردید. دوره نخست از سده سوم قبل از میلاد تا پایان دوره ساسانی را در برمی‌گیرد و دوره دوم به سده‌های 6 تا 8 هجری قمری مربوط می‌شود.

آثار و بناهای متعلق به پیش از اسلام که تعداد آنها به شش محوطه می‌رسد، بر سطح و دامنه کوه بنا گردیده و شامل قصرها، بناهای دفاعی، دژها و بناهای مذهبی می‌گردند در حالی که آثار دوره اسلامی این کوه را آرامگاه‌ها، زیارتگاه‌ها و گورستان تشکیل می‌دهند.

واژگان کلیدی: سیستان، کوه خواجه، بررسی باستان‌شناسی، قلعه کافرون، سفال سیستان

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1. استادیار گروه باستان‌شناسی دانشگاه سیستان و بلوچستان  
2. استادیار گروه باستان‌شناسی دانشگاه سیستان و بلوچستان  
3. کارشناس ارشد باستان‌شناسی