What Can a Door Socket Tell Us?

Intriguing Discoveries at Quwākh Tapeh

BY SAJJAD ALIBAIGI, ALIREZA MORADI-BISOTUNI, AND NOUROLLAH KARIMI
IN 1992, the accidental discovery of a ceramic vessel at Quwākh Tapeh, a historical key site along the Silk Road (Great Khurasan Road) in Kermānshāh, western Iran, revealed 141 coins dating back to the 4th through 3rd centuries BCE. In recent visits, in addition to a series of surface potsherds dating from the 3rd millennium BCE to the Sassanid period, a decorated stone door socket and several carved stones were found, indicating the existence of an extremely important monument, such as a palace or an administrative center, from the Neo-Assyrian period.

Aerial view of Quwākh Tapeh in western Iran. Photo by Reza Azizi.
THE GREAT MĀHIDASHT PLAIN is the largest, best watered, and most fertile plain in the Zagros area. These features, along with its mild climate and, most importantly, its location on the Silk Road, have been a constant draw for human groups and important settlements have been established there. In the Great Māhidasht region, numerous studies by Erich Schmidt and George Miles, Aurel Stein, Robert Braidwood, Ali Akbar Sarfaraz, Louis D. Levine, Abbās Motarjem, Shahin Kermājānī, Yousef Morādī, Abbās Rezāeiniā, and Maryam Dehghān have identified 550 archaeological sites from ancient Paleolithic to historical times, some of which are registered on the Iran National Heritage List owing to their importance.

One of the major settlements of the Great Māhidasht Plain is Quwākh Tapeh in the north of Māhidasht and southeast of Kuzarān, which has been studied and visited several times by archaeologists. However, little is known about this site and, despite the occasional discovery of a small treasure trove of ancient coins, it remains less known due to the lack of archaeological excavations. In recent visits, in addition to a number of potsherds that indicate the settlement continuity of the site, a large stone door socket was discovered that certainly belonged to an impressive building, suggesting the importance of the site in the past.
QUWĀKH TAPEH

Quwākh Tapeh is a relatively large mound located 43 km west of Kermānshāh and a little more than 4 km southeast of the small town of Kuzarān. The site comprises a large prominence 330 m long, 220 m wide, and 17 m taller than the surrounding lands (Great Central Mound). There are numerous small or large prominences both near to and far from the mound, indicating a large archaeological site measuring 500 m² with a current area of approximately 25 ha. The existence of a water canal in the eastern part of the mound and a dried-up spring in the southwest show that these two sources provided the water needed for inhabitants of the area.

The mound was first identified in Erich Schmidt’s 1934 surveys for the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute, locating Quwākh Tapeh on a map published in 1940 in Flights Over Ancient Cities of Iran. Some years later, in the 1940s, the site was surveyed and visited by Stein. Ali Akbar Sarfarāz and colleagues reexamined the site in the surveys of the Great Māhidasht Plain in 1968. On July 10, 1969 they succeeded in registering the site as number 865 on the Iran National Heritage List. In 1998, during the investigations of Abbas Motarjem in Kuzarān plain, Quwākh Tapeh was revisited. In his report, Motarjem described Quwākh Tapeh as a site dating back to the Parthian period.

FINDINGS

Except for Abbas Motarjem’s report, there is not much information about Quwākh Tapeh and previous studies have mentioned only the name of the site. Motarjem, while pointing out the importance of the site, mentions
the presence of many Parthian potteries and maintains that Quwākh Tapeh was a large settlement during the Parthian period. In 2014, with the agreement of the Cultural Heritage Office of Kermānšāh, the authors visited and began studying the coins discovered at the site. After a three-year interval, the authors visited again and this time new findings were observed on the surface of the site.

TREASURY OF COINS

Nearly 30 years ago, a student accidentally found a small ceramic vessel containing a highly important treasure 205 m east of the central high mound of Quwākh Tapeh. Shortly thereafter, the incident was reported to the Kuzarān police and the Cultural Heritage Office of Kermānšāh then became aware of the discovery. This is how the treasure was kept safe from plunder and all of its contents were collected and made available to the government.

A very brief two-line newsletter published in 1993 in the Iranian Journal of Archeology and History by Ali Rouhbakhshan and Kamyar Abdi reads: “On December 16, 1992 in the Quwākh Tapeh of Kuzarān, Kermānshāh province, 141 coins were obtained that belong to the Seleucid period and date back over 2,000 years.”

According to locals, this small treasure was found about 1 m deep at 130 m east of the Great Central Mound of Quwākh Tapeh and was revealed by floods after a canal was dug in the mounds. The ceramic vessel contained 141 silver coins featuring Alexander the Great, the Seleucid king (either Antiochus I or II), and Mazaeus the Achaemenid/Macedonian Satrap of Babylon, some of which are Athenian Owl type imitations. The authors had access to 124 of these coins, which are held in the Museum of Anthropology of Kermānshāh at Tekyeh Moaven al-molk and described in more detail on page 32.

This treasure has a total weight of roughly 2 kg and the very small amount of green oxide on the coins shows they were minted with high-grade silver. It seems likely that the treasure was deposited during the Early Seleucid
period, given the time span of the discovered coins and the lack of specimens more recent than the Antiochus I or II period. In 2011, Dr. Mehdi Daryaei registered several coins from different periods for the Museum of Anthropology of Kermānshāh at Tekyeh Moaven al-molk, including Quwākh Tapeh coins.

STONE DOOR SOCKET
On our first visit to the eastern slope of Quwākh Tapeh in 2014, we found four pieces of white limestone, one of which was used as a staircase, in the courtyard of a deserted and half-ruined house. Near another house to the south of the site were several other carved stones, one of which, if not an obelisk base, is probably a small stone casket. Our recent visit revealed that the owner of the abandoned house had removed the stone staircase to the edge of his farmland. Examination showed that this carved and ornamented stone was not an ordinary stone fragment, but a very large door socket in the style of the Neo-Assyrian period. Similar door sockets were uncovered in Neo-Assyrian palaces or temples of the Mesopotamia, including the temple of Nebo in Khorsabad, Neo-Assyrian palaces at Nimrud and Khorsabad, and Neo-Assyrian provincial capitals such as Arsalanatash, Till-Barsib, and Ziyaret Tepe. This monumental door socket indicates that Quwākh Tapeh was not an ordinary village, but rather a place with important constructions, the most important of which was likely a complex dating back to the Neo-Assyrian period.

SIGNIFICANCE
The results of our investigation into Quwākh Tapeh—especially the extent of archaeological deposits and the existence of numerous and varied pottery collections and stone objects—indicate that Quwākh Tapeh was
ALEXANDER III OF MACEDON COINS: The Alexander III coins consist of 46 tetradrachms and 7 silver two drachms. The tetradrachms are between 16.6-17.5 g in weight, 24.1-29 mm in diameter, and 3.0-3.5 mm thick. The two drachms weigh 8.0-8.6 g and are 3-3.5 mm thick and 21-22.1 mm in diameter. On the obverse (front face) of all these coins, the bust of Heracles with a lion headdress can be seen. On the reverse (back face), Zeus is seated on a throne, turned to the left, and holding an eagle in his right hand and a scepter in his left hand with the legend (engraved words) Ἀλεξάνδρου (of Alexander).

COINS OF MAZAЕUS (THE LION COINS): In the collection, there are 26 silver tetradrachms of Mazaeus, the Satrap of Babylon during the rule of Alexander (331-328 BCE). These coins weigh 16.8-17.2 g and are 20-26 mm in diameter and 4.5-6 mm thick. On the obverse of the coin, Baal is shown sitting on a throne and holding a scepter. Behind Baal there is a short inscription in Aramaic that reads “Baal tarz (the lord of Tarsus).” On the reverse is a walking male lion. In the upper space behind the lion, a short inscription is written with the title MZY (Mazaeus). In some cases, a mark is engraved on the top of the lion’s body instead of the inscription. Some of these coins do not have any inscriptions.

COINS IMITATING THE ATHENIAN OWL STYLE: There are 44 silver tetradrachms in the collection. Each features a right-side profile of Athena with a helmet, earrings, and a hairless face, imitating the Athenian Owl tetradrachm of the 5th century BCE. On the reverse is the right-side profile of an owl. To the right of the owl are two olive leaves and three letters: ΑΘΕ (Athens). These coins weigh 16.2-17.2 g and are 5-6 mm thick and 21.5-24 mm in diameter. Samples with a maximum diameter of 28 mm and thickness of 7.5 mm can also be seen. Some coins have a short inscription to the right of the owl: the legend MZY (Mazaeus).

SELEUCID COIN: There is a coin from Antiochus I or II in the collection. The king’s right-side profile is engraved on the obverse, and on the reverse, Zeus sits on the omphalos (a rounded stone representing the center of the world) with a bird perched on his right hand. A short inscription, βασιλέως αντιόχου, is engraved on both sides of Zeus. This coin weighs 16.6 g and is 28 mm in diameter and 3.5 mm thick.
an important center in the Neo-Assyrian period and that it contains significant archeological remnants. The discovery of the door socket in the Neo-Assyrian period is particularly interesting. If this door socket belongs to the Assyrian period, it is in fact the second Zagros site, after Tapeh Giyan in Nahavand, to reveal remnants of the Neo-Assyrian Empire of the 8th century BCE. Given that the Assyrian cuneiform texts speak of the conquest of the region and its annexation to the Neo-Assyrian Empire, the discovery of this finding may be important to tracing the Assyrian settlement in Iran, which is frequently mentioned in the texts, but missing from archaeological remnants.

The discovery at Quwākh Tapeh of a small treasure trove of ancient coins dating back to the 4th through 3rd centuries BCE is also significant. The finding of the Athenian Owl-type coins in the heart of central Zagros, far from their minting location, is important in itself, and will bring forth various topics for further study. The most recent coin in the collection dates back to the early Seleucid period (the time of Antiochus I or II). This suggests that the treasure found at Quwākh Tapeh was likely deposited in the early Seleucid period (before 245 BCE).

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FOR FURTHER READING


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