IN SEARCH OF THE LAODIKE TEMPLE AT LAODIKEIA IN MEDIA / NAHAVAND, IRAN

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Abstract: Although important archaeological remains, such as Greek inscriptions and architectural elements are known from Nahavand since several decennia, it lasted until 2005 before a first exploratory season with excavations took place, followed by a second one in 2011. So far this research has led to important observations for the Seleucid and Parthian periods, but it is still too early to be able to locate with precision the temple in honour of Laodike, wife of Antiochus III. However, this temple is most likely to be located in the northwestern part of the town since several Seleucid/Parthian architectural remains have been found there.

Keywords: Laodikeia, Media, Nahavand, Queen Laodike, Antiochus III, Seleucid temple.

Archaeological remains of the Seleucid period in Iran are scarce and so is the written evidence. Though, more than a century ago objects to be attributed to this period have been reported from Nahavand, but until recently no real attempt had been made to get more detailed information on the site. Nahavand, in Hamadan province, lies south of Hamadan and some 40 km southwest of Malayer and to the northwest of Borujerd (fig. 1).

Previous discoveries

In 1910/11 a chance discovery in the vicinity of Nahavand of several silver and golden objects and vessels, probably of Parthian date but likely also containing heirlooms, drew attention to this location (Herzfeld 1928) (Pl. 2, n° 1-3). As the story goes, a landowner while working on his land found a vaulted chamber, possibly a tomb, filled with gold and silver.

A major discovery in 1944—once again a chance find—was made by a resident of Dokhaharan district in Nahavand city. Two Greek inscriptions
were found. The largest and well preserved (H. 119 cm) inscription allowed to identify this city with an ancient town called Laodikeia (Robert 1949; Rougemont 2012: 133-138, fig. 66) (Pl. 3, top). The 33-line inscription to be dated in 193 BC., had been written by the order of the Seleucid king Antiochus III (223-187 BC.). The stela was erected by the satrap Menedemos after he had received the message from the king. It is a request to construct a temple dedicated to the official cult for Laodike, Antiochus III’s wife. Antiochus had sent a letter to all governors of his empire asking them to transmit the message to the magistrates and officials of the towns concerned. The letter had to be written on a stela and then shown in the most visible places of the city. At Nahavand the king’s message was passed on by Menedemos to Apollodotos and other officials of Laodikeia.
In this respect it is also interesting to mention that another stela with a similar message and equally addressed to Menedemos, has allegedly been discovered somewhere in the region of Kermanshah (Robert 1967: 283-294; Rougemont 2012: 140-144, fig. 68). On this stela the message of Antiochus III was transmitted by Menedemos to Thoas. Yet another stela, but with the same message of the king, had also been found in 1884 at Dodurga, in the Karayük plain in Phrygia (Robert 1949: 8-10).

The other partially preserved inscription of only five lines (H. 19 cm, width: 34 cm), discovered at the same spot at Nahavand as the previous one, is an honorific text in honour of governor Menedemos (Robert 1949: 22-24; Rougemont 2012: 139-140, fig. 67) (Pl. 3, middle). Both inscriptions are now at the National Museum in Tehran.

Beside these inscriptions some other objects were reported to have been found. Late in the 40’s (Robert 1949: 21) Roman Ghirshman, on his way to Susa, spend a day at Nahavand and visited the spot where the inscriptions had been discovered. In a letter, he informed L. Robert that “La ville hellenistique couvrait une importante éminence à la bordure de la ville”. Further on he commented: “Toutefois j’attire l’attention de M. Robert sur ce que toute cette partie de l’ancien site est fouillé en plein jour, sous prétexte d’enlèvement des terres ou de pierres pour les constructions modernes” (Robert 1949: 21).

Ghirshman also talked to the man who accidently had found the inscriptions and who showed him a shattered column very close to the spot where he had found the inscriptions. An elder man also informed him that 50 years earlier he had seen in the area six columns buried below ground. A couple of days before Ghirshman’s visit a round stone altar decorated with a ribbon carved in relief (H. 100 cm; diam. 90 cm) had been found (Ghirshman 1963: 19, fig. 24) (Pl. 2, bottom).

Ghirshman also reported on the discovery of bronze figurines of Greek gods (such as Zeus, Athena, Apollo, and Demeter/Isis-Fortuna) and now in the possession of the National Museum of Iran at Tehran (Ghirshman 1963: 19, fig. 23) (Pl. 3, bottom). M. Rahbar (1976: 253) published another one, probably a Hermes figure, as equally coming from Nahavand (Pl. 3, bottom right). These statuettes were previously usually attributed to the 3rd./2nd. c. BC., but they are likely of later date (Roman Imperial) (Callieri 2007: 79-80).
Although Ghirshman was unable to locate exactly the site of the Laodike temple, he drew nonetheless attention to the importance of the site and the urgent need to explore the area. Also Louis Robert (1949: 21) had expressed the wish and suggestion of further exploration and to proceed with excavations: “Il n’est pas besoin de souligner l’intérêt qui s’attacherait à la fouille d’une des villes grecques de l’Iran, et, en l’espèce, à la Laodicée de Néhavand.”. “Je dirai même que, même si l’endroit avait été ravagé par des fouilles clandestines, il faudrait en avoir le coeur net et ne pas laisser inexploré le principal sanctuaire d’une Laodicée d’Iran”. Although the Laodike temple was registered in the Iranian list of historical sites as early as 1949 no further research was undertaken till 2005. In the meanwhile extensive building projects had taken place.

In 1978 the construction of a street by Nahavand municipality in the area of Dokhaharan and Pa Qaleh had led to the discovery of a column. Gh. Masoumi, while doing a survey in Kermanshah region was dispatched to inspect the site of the newly found column but he judged it as not that important and building activities were resumed. In his unpublished report, he also provided a sketch of a column base that had also been found (Pl. 12, n° 4). More recently a Parthian pottery coffin burial had been located in the courtyard of the Communication Office, as well as a Parthian cemetery in the northeast of Nahavand.

In addition to these discoveries, while excavations where taking place in 2005 and 2011, residents of the area showed some objects they had found. These included a single Seleucid bronze and two Parthian bronze coins, as well as a pottery human figurine (Pl. 4). Although these finds were not obtained from scientific excavations, they can somehow be regarded as archaeological items further documenting the historical periods at this part of the site.

The location Dokhaharan and research results

Dokhaharan and Pa Qaleh neighborhoods are located in the northwest corner of the city near a high rock called Choqa overlooking the plain (Pl. 1). Main access to this area is from the south through the streets of Dokhaharan, Qeysariyeh and Pa Qaleh. These are among the oldest neighborhoods in Nahavand with a traditional layout and narrow alleys. Housing obscures and hides all archaeological remains. In the center of Dokhaharan there is an old building called ‘Emamzadeh Dokhaharan’ also known to the locals as Khaharan-e Emam Reza.
In 2003 the Nahavand archaeological project was launched and a first one month season took place in 2005. A second season, after a six year delay, was undertaken from June to August 2011.

During the 2005 season eleven soundings were made and thirteen in 2011 (fig. 2). These trenches varied in size, according to the space available. In general different periods were attested, but only in one area (trench 11/2011) (Pl. 16) architectural remains in situ were encountered.

In one place bedrock was reached after barely 50 cm; another sounding proved to have been filled with more than 3 m of soil of recent date. However, in some soundings an excavation of 4 to 5 m depth was possible, but everything proved to have been mixed up due to disturbances over centuries. In other places, as soon as bedrock, water pipes or sewage system were reached the excavations were halted. As said already, only one intact area was located (sounding 11/2011). The 5 x 5 m trench had in situ deposits, including architecture, a vessel with a small collection of coins and a significant amount of sherds of Seleucid and Parthian date (Pl. 16 & 17).
At the end of the season each sounding was refilled. Unpublished reports by M. Rahbar were submitted to the archive of the Iranian Center for Archaeological research in Tehran and a short note was put in 2009 in the “Project Gallery” of the journal Antiquity (Rahbar & Alibaigi 2009).

Pottery

The pottery found on the surface or from the soundings belongs mainly to the Seleucid, Parthian, Sassanid or Islamic periods but since the layers have been mixed up several times, some sherds are hard or even impossible to attribute to a particular period. However, there was always a vast quantity of Islamic sherds.

The earliest remains to be found were a couple of Godin III-sherds. The most characteristic categories for the Seleucid and Parthian periods are without doubt sherds of painted festoon ware and clinky ware.

* Festoon ware

Some fifty painted sherds of the festoon ware type were recognized (Pl. 5 & 6). This ware, mainly to be found in Central Western Iran, was however also attested in Fars and Khuzistan and its production probably started in the (late?) Achaemenid period. Its main period of production has certainly to be situated in the Seleucid period. It lasted maybe into the 1st c. BC. (Haerinck 1983: 25-27, fig. 2 & 98-100, fig. 14; Adachi 2005: 28, fig. 2 & 4).

At this point it is also interesting to remember Herzfeld’s rhyton in the shape of a bovid’s head and in festoon ware style (now in the British Museum) (Pl. 7, bottom). Herzfeld described it as coming from the “Niha-wand region, allegedly from the town Nihawand itself” (Herzfeld 1929/30: 70; Herzfeld 1933: 19-20, 24, Pl. XXII; Herzfeld 1941: 92-93, Pl. XV). He also published other sherds of this style from Nahavand (Herzfeld 1933: 19, 20, 24, Pl. XXII, 2, 4; Herzfeld 1941: 92-93, fig. 184) (Pl. 7).

* Clinky ware

This ware is an excellent diagnostic for the Parthian period and is present on numerous sites in Western Iran (Haerinck 1983: 100-106, fig. 15-16, Pl. VII: 1-2; Adachi 2005: 27-28, fig. 3) (Pl. 8, bottom & Pl. 9). Its production started maybe in the first half of the 2nd c. BC., but it is difficult
for the moment to establish for how long it lasted. Maybe its production went on till the end of the Parthian period (in this respect it is worth mentioning that the vessel containing 11 coins to be dated between the 1st. c. AD. and somewhere in the first half of the 2nd. c. AD. is equally clinky ware: Pl. 16).

In Nahavand this pottery was not only attested in the Dokhaharan area, but also in a vast area around and on Choqa’s rocky outcrop.

**Architectural remains**

Most architectural remains found, such as walls or foundations, belong to the Islamic period. Clear Seleucid and Parthian structures are absent most likely due to later perturbations. Since the layers are mixed up it is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain a decent idea of the developments that have taken place through time and remains are difficult to be attributed to one period or another.

Only in one sounding, though equally as disturbed as the other areas, remains of a mud brick wall (brick size: 33 × 33 × 8 to 10 cm) and a thin mud layer as floor were unearthed (Pl. 16). A deep sounding in that trench showed, however, a still 1.5 m intact layer of the Parthian period. In other places, bases, columns and a capital as well as fragments of worked stones were found, some of them in a re-used situation.

**Architectural remains of possibly Seleucid date**

Several dispersed and often re-used columns bases, column shafts and an Ionic capital were found.

* **Ionic capital:**

(73.5 cm wide and 26.5 cm high): a nice Ionic capital with the usual contracted volutes (Pl. 10-11). The capital was transferred to the Nahavand museum (=Hammam-e Hajj Agha Torab). Top part of the central decoration is lost.

* **Column bases and shafts:**

The column bases resemble quite closely a column base found at the graveyard of Bisitun (Luschey 1996: 57, Taf. 7 n° 2; Kleiss 1996: 248-249, Abb. 5).
— One (60 cm in diam. and 33 cm high), badly worn due to its long use as mortar, was located in the courtyard of a house in Qeysariyeh area (Pl. 12, n° 2; Pl. 15, top left).

— In the area west of Hosseinieh and Emamzadeh Dokhaharan near Choqa rocky outcrop, known as Hammam-e Dokhaharan another base was found upside down, supporting a Qajar period column. It is a circular base, ca. 90 cm in diam. and 50 cm high (Pl. 12, n° 5). A similar base with the same measurements, was found some 30 years ago by Mr. Gh. Masoumi (Pl. 12 n° 4).

— Equally in the Dokhaharan area, at the southern limit of Dokhaharan Street and 100 m East of the mosque and Emamzadeh Dokhaharan, remains of a column base, shaft and several pieces of carved stone were unearthed in a sounding in an area about 2.5 × 7.5 m. These pieces probably belong to the Seleucid era (Pl. 13, top & Pl. 14). The measurements were difficult to establish since the fragmentary large base decorated with mouldings and with shaft without flutes is partly stuck beneath the wall of a modern house. The base has a diam. of approx. 68 cm and the measurable height was at least 70 cm.

— Another big shaft without flutes was also discovered in this sounding and could as well belong to the Seleucid period (Pl. 13).

**Other finds**

* Coins: In an area 150 m east of Emamzadeh Dokhaharan, a trench of 1 × 5 m was opened in an unoccupied plot. Unfortunately this area proved to be largely disturbed like all other areas. However, at a depth of approx. 1.20 m still substantial intact Parthian and perhaps Seleucid levels were encountered. Bedrock is only at 3.20 m depth; so at least some 2 m intact levels are likely to have been preserved. At 1.08 m a small “clinky” pottery vessel containing eleven Parthian silver drachms were found under a floor of a Parthian construction (Pl. 16). These coins range between the beginning of the 1st c. AD, and somewhere in the first half of the 2nd c. AD. They are to be attributed to different kings between Vonones I and Vologases III and were all minted at Ecbatana/Hamadan (Pl. 17). Below this floor, still more layers were evidenced and a largely preserved, small spouted and painted vessel was excavated (Pl. 8, top).
Quarries

The stones used at Nahavand, for any period, were most likely extracted from two main sources. The most important one is likely the large rock cliff called Choqa near Dokhaharan and Pa Qaleh (Pl. 18); the other one is situated along the Nahavand-Malayer road, to the NE of Nahavand city. In both places there are wedge sockets and shallow channels for placing wedges and guiding the splitting of the rock. The color and quality of the discovered architectural remains are very much like the stone to be found at Choqa rock cliff.

Conclusion

The discovery of several architectural elements in such a small area in the NW of Nahavand is very encouraging and promising for future research. It is quite likely that one should look for the remains of the Seleucid temple or other Seleucid and Parthian buildings along the eastern parts of Dokhaharan neighborhood, i.e. between Kucheh Derazeh, Pa Qaleh Square and Hosseinieh Dokhaharan. It is, however, not sure if the disturbances over centuries will have left anything recognizable.

We should also draw attention to the fact that the bases found so far have different sizes. The question remains whether they belong to one and the same building (they could belong to a porch, pronaos or colonnade), or that they come from different buildings/sanctuaries of the Seleucid or Parthian periods in the same sacred area. Though, as shown, the area is very disturbed and a large area with modern houses should be demolished and cleared to make way for further excavations.

The archaeological explorations have just begun in Nahavand, but the information gained during these two seasons of survey has unfortunately not yet helped to find the precise location of the temple for Laodike. However, the results of this research have increased our limited knowledge about Nahavand significantly. New information and older documents show that the temple of Laodike is likely to be located somewhere along Emamzadeh Dokhaharan. Seleucid and Parthian remains like the Greek inscriptions, the stone altar, the bronze god figurines, the stone column bases, the Ionic capital and the pottery of this period were discovered in this area. They all indicate that there was at least one major structure located in this part of Nahavand.
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References


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Pl. 1. Aerial view of Nahavand with indication of the area where the excavations took place in 2005 and 2011.
Pl. 2. Objects said to have been found in the vicinity of Nahavand: no 1 & 2: silver vessels (Herzfeld 1928, Pl. A, B, D & E); no 3: gold buckle (British Museum; after Curtis 1989: 71, fig. 18) & bottom: stone altar found at Nahavand (Ghirshman 1963: 19, fig. 24).
Pl. 3. Top: two Greek inscriptions found at Nahavand (left: photo authors; middle right: Rougemont 2012, fig. 67); bottom: six bronze figurines: five to the left: Ghirshman 1963: fig. 23; one to the right: Rahbar 1976: 253).
Pl. 4. Objects found at Nahavand by locals, prior to the excavations.
Pl. 5. Collection of “festoon ware” sherds found at Nahavand.
Pl. 6. Drawing of collection of “festoon ware” sherds found at Nahavand (n° 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13 = Pl. 5: n° 6, 20, 4, 17, 5, 7 & 12).
Pl. 7. “Festoon ware” found at Nahavand prior to the excavations (Herzfeld 1933: Abb. 3 & Herzfeld 1941: Taf. XII).
Pl. 9. Collection of “clinky ware” sherds found at Nahavand.
Pl. 10. Ionic capital discovered at Nahavand.
Pl. 11. Ionic capital discovered at Nahavand.
Pl. 12. Column bases discovered at Nahavand.
Pl. 15. Architectural remains discovered at Nahavand.
Pl. 16. Trench 11/2011 with architectural remains and a small “clinky ware” spouted vessel containing eleven Parthian coins (see also Pl. 17).
Pl. 17. Eleven Parthian coins (1st. c. AD. to somewhere in first half of the 2nd. C. AD.; minted at Ecbatana/Hamadan) found in a small “clinky ware” spouted vessel in Trench 11/2011 (see also Pl. 16).
Pl. 18. Quarry at Nahavand.