Tepe Qaterchi: A New Aceramic Neolithic Site in Fars Province, Southern Zagros Mountains, Iran

Mohsen Zeidi, Saman Hamzavi Zarghani and Cyrus Barfi

Introduction

For many years, the transitional period between the end of the Epipalaeolithic and the beginning of the ceramic Neolithic was unknown and considered a large cultural gap in archaeological evidence of human occupation in Fars Province, southern Zagros. Although Vanden Bergh (1954: 396) reported aceramic Neolithic localities in the Kur River Basin, further archaeological surveys of the region failed to relocate them. However, this is not surprising, because the fertile plains in the Kur River Basin have always been under very intense agricultural activities, and low-levelled or open-air sites must have been scraped off. Nevertheless, the 2005-2006 salvage archaeological excavations by the Irano-Japanese team at two cave sites in Tang-e Bolaghi revealed the transitional phase of the early aceramic Neolithic and shed new light on the Neolithisation of southern Zagros (Tsuneki *et al*. 2007; Tsuneki and Zeidi 2008). At the same time, the rescue excavations at Tepe Rahmatabad on the right bank of the Sivand River also yielded late aceramic Neolithic deposits (Azizi Kharanaghi *et al*. 2012a, 2013; Nishiaki *et al*. 2013). Altogether, these findings and other early Neolithic discoveries (*cf*. Azizi Kharanaghi *et al*. 2012b; Tsuneki 2013; Kamjan *et al*. 2018; Nikzad *et al*. 2018; Shidrang and Nishiaki 2019; Khanipour 2020; Zeidi and Hamzavi Zarghani forthcoming), filled an essential gap in the early Neolithic cultural sequence of Fars Province. We can now add Tepe Qaterchi to this increasing list of early Neolithic sites in the Fars Region.

Fig. 1 Map showing the location of the site in Fars Province. (Map: M. Zeidi, Qir-Karzin Survey Project)

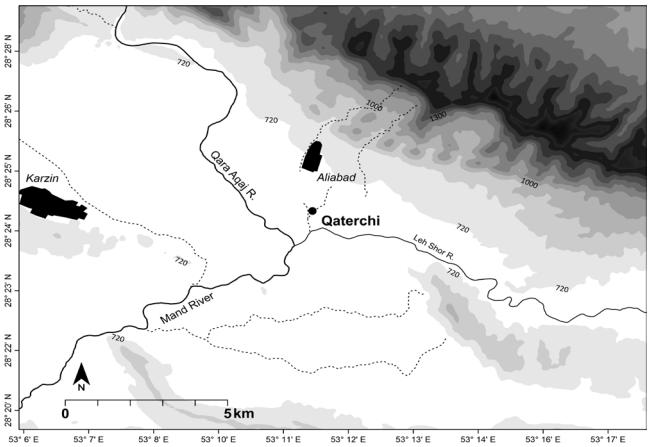

Fig. 2 Map showing the location of the site in the Qir-Karzin District. (Map: M. Zeidi, Qir-Karzin Survey Project)

In autumn 2019, one of the authors (C. Barfi) surveyed the central part of the Qir-Karzin District, with the aim of creating an archaeological map of the region. During this survey, 68 sites were identified from the Stone Age to the Islamic periods (Safarzadeh and Barfi 2020). However, it is worth mentioning that, previously and based on old reports and publications, one of the authors (M. Zeidi), and by using Google Maps, could locate a potential site near Aliabad, where Stein (1936) had reported a locality with flint scatters. We informed the survey team about this site, and with C. Barfi's invitation, M. Zeidi and S. Hamzavi joined the survey team for one day to check if the tell site still exists and if it is possible to relocate it. Fortunately, we could find the tell site that was described first by Stein in 1936 and, later reintroduced by Sumner (1977) as a potential pre-ceramic settlement.

Between November 1933 and May 1934, Sir Mark Aurel Stein (1936: 111) conducted an archaeological exploration through a significant part of Fars Province in southern Zagros. Tepe Qaterchi was discovered during his quick survey in December 1933 on the way to Jahrum. He stated that:

"*After passing Aliabad, the last village of the tract on the route to Jahrum, I noticed a small mound to the south rising about 13 ft. above the level grassy plain well beyond the present limits of irrigation. A number of small worked flints were picked up on the surface, but no painted potsherds such as might have proved prehistoric occupation* (Stein 1936:132)."

Unfortunately, he did not provide any other information, and nothing further was known about this site. Later, William Sumner (1977: 293) and during his

 DOI: 10.48632/nl.2022.1.105048

review of early settlements in Fars Province, reintroduced the site that Stein mentioned as a possible preceramic sedentary occupation in the Qir-Karzin region.

Fig. 3 View of the site towards the northeast. (Photo: S. Hamzavi Zarghani, Qir-Karzin Survey Project)

Tepe Qaterchi

Tepe Qaterchi is a small tell site located *c*. 140km southeast of the city of Shiraz and 7km to the east of Karzin (Figs. 1-2). This tell site is situated in an intermountain alluvial plain in the Zagros Crush Zone of central Fars Province, extending over an area of approximately 0.5ha at an altitude of 700m a.s.l. The site is circular and rises *c.* 4m from surrounding fields (Fig. 3). At *c*. 1400m toward the southwest, the Qara Aqaj and Leh Shor Rivers join and form Mand River. These permanent rivers and several other seasonal springs provide the major sources of water in this region. Based on the short description made by Stein (1936: 132), Tepe Qaterchi is the only site that was easily visible from the road near Aliabad village. Other characteristics, such as morphology and find scatter on the site's surface, resembles the description made by Stein during his visit. Nowadays, the site is located in the middle of farming fields and is partially damaged through agricultural activities. Tepe Qaterchi has been looted at its apex with a depth of about one meter, which causes cultural deposits and ashy layers to be exposed. The eastern part of the site has also been damaged by making a road and dredging the base of an old spring water channel where the survey team found most of the Neolithic artefacts. Due to the current utilisation by nomads and local farmers, the site's surface has been cleaned for daily tasks, and it is difficult to find any artefacts. By doing an intensive survey, however, only a handful of lithic artifacts, and grinding stones were collected from the site's surface.

Between the surface finds, there are 11 lithic artefacts (Figs. 4-5) and six grinding stone tools (Fig. 6). The lithic artefacts include eight blade fragments (Fig. 4.1-3,5-9), one flake (Fig. 4.4), and two flake cores (Fig. 4.10-11). One of the blade fragments bears sickle gloss on both lateral edges (Fig. 4.7). Other blade fragments are either unused or have use-wear damage on their lateral edges. All of the blade fragments are made of chert, and grinding stone tools are made of locally available limestone. The grinding stones include grinding slabs (Fig. 6.1,4), a pierced stone (Fig. 6.2), and pounders (Fig. 6.3,5-6). The survey team did not find any Neolithic or later prehistoric ceramics on the site's surface.

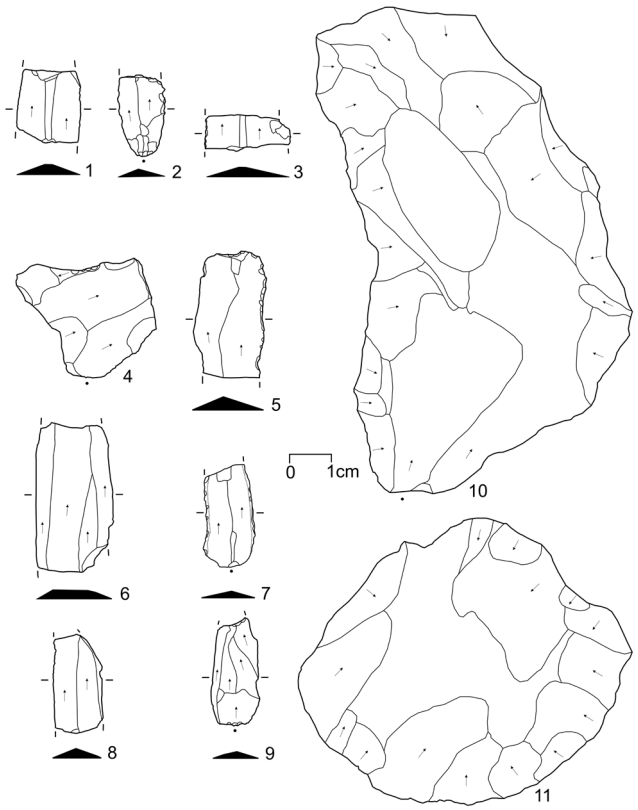

Fig. 4 A selection of lithic artefacts collected from the surface: *1-3*, *5-9* blade fragments (chert); *4* flake fragment (chert); *10-11* flake cores (limestone). (Drawing: M. Zeidi, Qir-Karzin Survey Project)

Concluding remarks

Neither Stein in 1933 nor the survey team in 2019 could find any prehistoric ceramics but just stone artefacts at the site. Tepe Qaterchi is the southernmost aceramic Neolithic site known to us in Fars Province, southern Zagros Region. The Neolithic lithic artefacts and grinding stone implements collected from the site indicate an aceramic Neolithic occupation in the Qir-Karzin District. However, systematic excavation at the site will help us to determine the nature of occupation at this tell site. Overall, the increasing number of early Neolithic sites in Fars Province has changed our previous thoughts about the Neolithisation processes in the southern Zagros and suggests that this part of the Zagros Mountains was continuously occupied throughout the early Holocene.

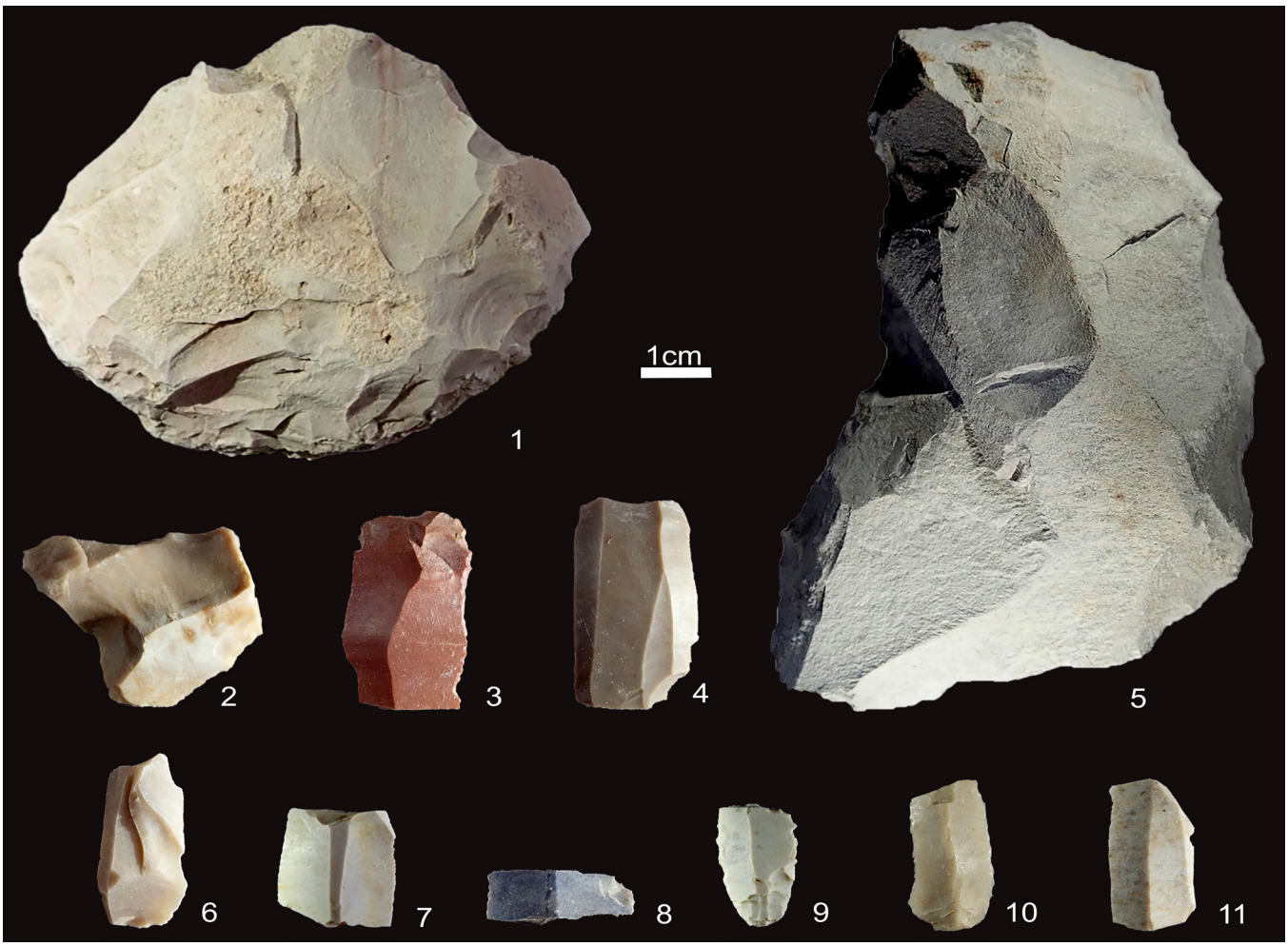

Fig. 5 A selection of lithic artefacts collected from the surface (Photo: M. Zeidi, Qir-Karzin Survey Project)

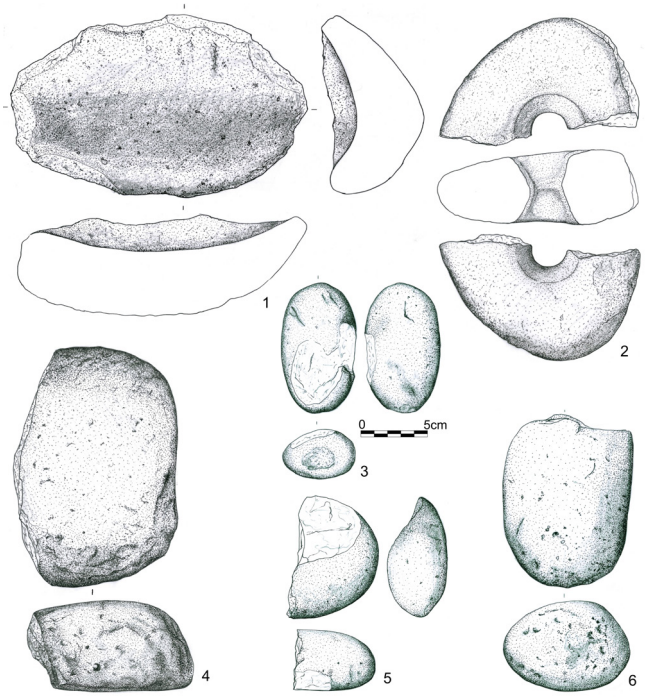

Fig. 6 Grinding stone tools collected from the surface. *1* saddle grinding slab (limestone); *2* pierced stone (limestone); *3, 5-6* pounding elements (limestone); *4* grinding slab (limestone). (Drawing: M. Zareh Khalili, Qir-Karzin Survey Project)

Acknowledgements: We thank the Iranian Centre for Archaeological Research and the Cultural Heritage Office of Fars Province for their support. We would like to thank the survey team, and all other people who helped with the survey project; Saeid Safarzadeh, Samira Jafari, Mohsen Mosadegh, Mohammad Hasan Paknejad, and Reza Bidari. The Cultural Heritage Office of Fars Province funded the survey project.

Mohsen Zeidi
Department of Early Prehistory and Quaternary Ecology, Tübingen University and Senckenberg Centre for Human Evolution and Palaeoenvironment at Tübingen University
mohsen.zeidi@ifu.uni-tuebingen.de
(Corresponding author)

Saman Hamzavi Zarghani
Department of Early Prehistory and Quaternary Ecology, Tübingen University
saman.hamzavi-zarghani@uni-tuebingen.de

Cyrus Barfi
Bishapour Research Foundation, Kazerun
cyrusbarfi@gmail.com

References

Azizi Kharanaghi H., Fazeli Nashli H. and Nishiaki Y.
2013 Tepe Rahmatabad: a Pre-Pottery Neolithic site in Fars Province. In: R. Matthews and H. Fazeli Nashli (eds.), *The Neolithisation of Iran: The formation of new societies*: 108-124. Oxford: Oxbow.

Azizi Kharanaghi M.H., Khalouei F., Khanipour M., Khosravi S., Razi S., Komijani S. and Tahmasebi M.
2012b The first season of archaeological excavation at Tell-e Qasr e Ahmad, Kavaar District, Winter 2011, Fars. In: A. Moghaddam and K. Roustaei (eds.), *11th Annual Symposium of Iranian Archaeology. Abstracts volume*. Tehran: Iranian Cultural Heritage Handicraft and Tourism Organisation (ICHHTO).

Azizi Kharanaghi M.H., Nishiaki Y. and Khanipur M.
2012a Tepe Rahrnatabad, Pasargadae: the absolute and relative chronology. *Iran Nameh* 27(2-3): 78-101. (in Farsi)

Kamjan S., Mashkour M., Mohaseb F.A., Fathi H. and Azizi Kharanaghi H.
2018 Zooarchaeology of the Pre-Pottery and Pottery Neolithic site of Qasr-e Ahmad (Iran). In: C. Çakırlar, J. Chahoud, R. Berthon and S. Pilaar Birch (eds.), *Archaeozoology of the Near East* 12: 27-40. Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing and University of Groningen.

Khanipour M.
2020 Excavations at Toll-e Sangi in Pulvar River Basin, Fars Province. In: R.A. Shirazi, M. Khanipour and O. Ghafuri (eds.), *Proceedings of 18th Annual Symposium on the Iranian Archaeology: A collection of archaeological finds from excavations in 2019-2020*: 293-300. Tehran: Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism. (in Farsi)

Nikzad M., Moradi H. and Emadi H.
2018 Qal'at Surmagh: a Pre-Pottery Neolithic site from Neyriz Plain, eastern Fars, Iran. *Neo-Lithics* 18: 12-16.

Nishiaki Y., Azizi H. and Abe M.
2013 The late aceramic Neolithic flaked stone assemblage from Tepe Rahmatabad, Fars, south-west Iran. *Iran* 51: 1-17.

Safarzadeh S., and Barfi C.
2020 Short Report on the Archaeological Survey in Qir and Karzin County. In: R. A. Shirazi (ed.), Proceedings of 18th Annual Symposium on the Iranian Archaeology, 2019: 519-524. Tehran: Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism. (in Farsi)

Shidrang S. and Nishiaki Y.
2019 Short report on the first season of excavation at Anjiri Cave, Marvdasht, Fars Province. In: R.A. Shirazi (ed.), *16th Annual Symposium on the Iranian Archaeology (a collection of short articles, 2016-2017)*: 223-226. Tehran: Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism. (in Farsi)

Stein M.A.
1936 An archaeological tour in the ancient Persis. *Iraq* 3 (2): 111-225.

Sumner W.M.
1977 Early settlements in Fars province, Iran. In: L.D. Levine and T.C. Young Jr. (eds.), *Mountains and lowlands: essays in the archaeology of Greater Mesopotamia*. Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 7: 291-305. Malibu: Undena Publications.

Tsuneki A.
2013 Proto-Neolithic caves and Neolithisation in the southern Zagros. In: R. Matthews and H. Fazeli Nashli (eds.), *The Neolithisation of Iran: The formation of new societies*: 84-97. Oxford: Oxbow.

Tsuneki A. and Zeidi M.
2008 *Tang-e Bolaghi. The Iran-Japan Archaeological Project for the Sivand Dam Salvage Area.* Al-Shark 4. Tsukuba: University of Tsukuba.

Tsuneki A., Zeidi M. and Ohnuma K.
2007 Proto-Neolithic caves in the Bolaghi Valley, south Iran. *Iran* 44: 1-22.

Vanden Bergh L.
1954 Archaeologische navorsingen in de omstreken van Persepolis. *Jaarbericht Ex Oriente Lux* 13: 394-408.

Zeidi M. and Hamzavi Zarghani S.
forthc. The human use of cave and rock shelters in the Neolithic period of southern Zagros Mountains, Iran. In: K. Taheri, C. Groves, Z. Mohammadi, F. Biglari, A. Sharifi and R. Khosh Raftar (eds.), *Caves and karst research in Iran.* London: Springer Nature.