



## ČOĠĀ BONUT

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**ČOĠĀ BONUT** (CHOGHA BONUT), archaeological site in lowland Susiana, in the present-day province of *Ḳuzestān* in southwestern Iran. Located at 32°13'20" N, 48°30'18" E, the site is about 20 km southeast of the city of *Dezful* and 5 km west of *Čoġā Miš* (FIGURE 1). The importance of the site lies in the fact that, to date, Čoġā Bonut has provided evidence of the earliest stages of settled agricultural life in *Ḳuzestān*. Čoġā Bonut is a small mound; in its truncated and artificially rounded state it has a diameter of about 50 m and rises just over 5 m above the surrounding plain (FIGURE 2). Calibrated radiocarbon date of ca. 7200 BCE makes Čoġā Bonut the earliest agricultural village in lowland *Ḳuzestān*, when the colonization of this region began by early Neolithic farmers/hunters.

Archaeological excavations at the site began in 1976 as a salvage project (Kantor, 1976-77). After the political upheavals of 1978, excavations resumed in 1996 for one season, and the combined results were published in 2003 (Alizadeh). Five phases of occupation were documented at the site: 1) the Aceramic phase, 2) the Formative Ceramic phase, 3) the Archaic Susiana 0 phase, 4) the Late Middle Susiana phase, and 5) the Late Susiana 2 phase.

*The Aceramic Phase: Initial Colonization of Lowland Susiana.* The earliest, basal levels at Čoġā Bonut that did not produce any ceramic vessels comprise the initial Aceramic phase. In this phase, the early settlers of the Susiana plain chose to settle on top of a low natural hill surrounded by shallow marshes at an elevation where dry farming was possible. Even today, when the region is much drier than it was in early Neolithic times, dry agriculture is still



practiced as supplement. The early farmers of lowland Susiana cultivated wheat, barley, and lentils and had domesticated sheep, goats, pigs, and dogs. Hunting and gathering supplemented this mixed subsistence economy. During this initial phase, the chipped stone industry and manufacture of stone vessels were highly developed. In the limited exposure of the 1996 excavations, no traces of solid architecture were found, but fragmentary pieces of straw-tempered mud bricks suggest the existence of solid architecture. Most probably, the early inhabitants of this site came from the highlands, for there is a great similarity between the chipped stone industry, clay and stone figurines, and tokens of Čoġā Bonut, on the one side, and those found at the early sites in the piedmonts of the Zagros Mountains, on the other.

*The Formative Ceramic Phase.* Soon after the initial Aceramic phase at Čoġā Bonut, plain and crude pottery vessels of simple shapes appeared, marking the beginning of the Formative Ceramic phase of the following Archaic period. During this phase, several classes of simple decorated pottery vessels, some with fugitive paint, can be observed (Alizadeh, pp. 43-47). The crude pottery of the Formative Ceramic phase (FIGURE 3) evolved into several outstanding classes of painted pottery, but the straw-tempered ware of the following Archaic Susiana 0 phase continued almost unchanged during the entire Archaic sequence.

The architectural evidence of the Formative Ceramic phase consisted of rectangular small houses with two or three rooms and usually an open court with some fire pits containing fire-cracked rocks. These simple nuclear family residences were built with the characteristic long, cigar-shaped mud bricks that continued to be used until the end of the Archaic period, and even into the Early Susiana period (ca. 5900 BCE). These architecturally awkward bricks have a surprisingly wide geographic distribution from the Susiana plain to southern and central Mesopotamia—for example, they have been found at Tell al-Owayli (Oueili; see Vallat, 1996, pp. 113-15, figs. 2-5) and at Čoġā Māmi (Oates, p. 116, pl. 22:c)—and as far as Central Asia (Masson and Sarianidi, pp. 33-40, pl. 7). In addition to these peculiar bricks, stone and clay T-shaped figurines and a variety of simple coarse ware were shared by a number of early Neolithic cultures of southwest Asia. Exotic materials, not native to the region, consisted solely of obsidian blades and Persian Gulf shells. These non-local items may possibly have been procured by a trickle-down inter-regional exchange system.

No evidence of intramural burial was found at Čoġā Bonut during this and



preceding phase. The absence of this crucial evidence renders it difficult to assess social status solely on the basis of the distribution of other artifacts, which seem homogeneous in all excavated areas. The evidence of architecture, however, points out to some type of social practice that, though not clearly understood, suggests communal activities at this early stage of social development. Two partially preserved buildings are all that were excavated from this phase (FIGURE 4). The better-preserved building may have had a non-domestic as well as domestic function. The plans of the buildings and the presence of numerous fire pits in them suggest non-domestic character or special status of these buildings as well, the nature of which can only be speculated. The possibility that an extended family resided in this building cannot be ruled out, however (Alizadeh, fig. 11).

*The Archaic Susiana 0 Phase.* The appearance of the Painted-Burnished variant of ware, a new class of painted pottery that provides antecedent for the entire Archaic Susiana ceramics, marks the transition to the Archaic period. Another site, Tappe Tule'i (named after an edible tuber), southwest of [Andimešk](#) in northwestern *Ķuzestān*, is the only other site in ancient *Ķuzestān* that was occupied during this phase (Hole, 1974; Idem, 1975). The fact that neither Tappe Tule'i nor Čoġā Bonut was located close to any detectable canal or source of water may be an indication of sufficient precipitation for dry farming. Faunal, floral, and phytolith (fossilized pollen) evidence from Čoġā Bonut indicated the presence of marshes in upper Susiana during this phase (Redding and Rosen in Alizadeh, pp. 129-49).

Evidence of gazelle, onager, and domesticated sheep, goats, and dogs, as well as that of wheat and barley points to a mixed economy of farming, herding, and hunting in this phase. In addition to these species, the presence of bones of the giant Indian gerbil and bears at Čoġā Bonut also indicates the wetter climate in this region during the initial phases of the Archaic period.

The Painted-Burnished variant ware is fully represented at Tappe Tule'i, but is rare in the nearby [Dehlorān](#) (Deh Luran) plain to the north (FIGURE 5). Apart from this distinct class of early Neolithic Susiana pottery, the stone tools, chipped stone industry, and small objects such as T-shaped human figurines and animal figurines are almost indistinguishable among the two Susiana sites and [Čoġā Safid](#) and ['Alikoš](#) in Dehlorān. The great similarity in the objects other than pottery suggests that while the stone industry and the manufacture of small clay and stone objects found at these sites may have had a shared origin, the Painted-Burnished variant ware was developed in Susiana proper.



The architecture of the Archaic Susiana 0 phase at Čogā Bonut consists of two separate buildings, but their complete plans cannot be restored (Alizadeh, fig. 10). A rather large rectangular structure is all that was left of one building that, based on its comparatively large size, must have been a hall or courtyard of a much larger structure. The three surviving walls are neatly made of long, cigar-shaped mud bricks laid as stretchers. Two platforms or buttresses, made of the same construction material, were built against the outer face of its southern wall. The western portion of this building, where the living quarters had been presumably located, was entirely destroyed, but the presence of two rows of headers, one slightly higher than the other, could have provided access to the rooms on this side. The other, smaller building was better preserved. The building material was the same as for the larger structure, but the neat division of space and the straightness of its walls indicate a certain degree of architectural sophistication, if not specialization, even in this early phase of architecture in Susiana.

For reasons not known, sometime during the Archaic Susiana 0 phase, Čogā Bonut was deserted and did not become reoccupied for at least a thousand years.

*The Late Middle Susiana Phase.* Čogā Bonut was resettled in the Late Middle Susiana period (ca. 5200 BCE). The mound was deserted around 4800 BCE and was reoccupied during the Late Susiana 2 phase, by the end of which, around 4000 BCE, it was abandoned again. The uppermost parts of the mound preserved the remains of a settlement of the Late Middle Susiana phase. The architecture of this phase lay directly on top of debris and eroded walls of the much earlier Archaic Susiana period.

Within the limits of the excavated area, a number of rectangular multi-room houses with courtyards were discovered (Alizadeh, pp. 22-30). Altogether, five complete buildings were excavated. These buildings were clustered around a large open space that was paved with stone pebbles. This open area contained at least 16 kilns for baking pottery and a circular platform on which other related industrial activities were performed (Alizadeh, fig. 6). The large number of industrial installations at a small village with less than 200 residents suggests that during the Late Middle Susiana phase Čogā Bonut had become a specialized site for manufacturing pottery vessels and a satellite of the much larger settlement of Čogā Miš.

*The Late Susiana Phase 2.* All the archaeological evidence pertaining to this

phase (ca. 4400-4000 BCE) comes from scattered potsherds and a deep well (K22 in Alizadeh, fig. 6) in the middle of the settlement. Because some 2 meters of the site had been razed by a bulldozer before it was rescued in 1976, it is impossible to ascertain the extent of the last occupational phase at this site. But judging by the extant remains of the preceding phase, the settlement in the Late Susiana 2 phase could not have been larger than 1/3 of a hectare. Like many other 5th-millennium BCE settlements in eastern Susiana, Čogā Bonut, too, became abandoned and was never resettled.

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