



SHIR-E SHIAN

SHIR-E SHIAN (Šir-āšiān), a prehistoric site located 15 km southwest of Damghan (*Dāmḡān*) in northeastern Iran. The site was first discovered by Erich F. Schmidt (1897-1964) in his 1931 survey of the Damghan region, and then excavated in July of 1932. The site was again identified by Kathryn Trinkhaus in the 1976-77 Damghan Survey ([FIGURE 1](#)). A short description of Schmidt's excavations at the site was published in his *Tepe Hissar* monograph (Schmidt, p. 17), but a complete report based on archival data was only recently published (Dyson Jr. and Thornton).

The site itself consisted of a surface scatter of prehistoric ceramic sherds on top of four natural mounds covering a total area of 310 x 210 meters. Despite extensive excavations (some 500 square meters), Schmidt was never able to identify any obvious architectural remains. In fact, of the four mounds, only the central mound produced any archeological finds, including a single burial (BT4 x-1) with a small ceramic cup located only 60 cm below the surface. A similar small cup was found nearby and at a depth of only 50 cm below surface. Given that this second cup was found near the sides of the trench, it is presumed to have come from a burial left undiscovered in the baulk (Dyson Jr. and Thornton, p. 9).

Given the lack of architectural remains and the shallowness of the deposit, Schmidt argued that Shir-e Shian was a temporary campsite occupied for only one period (Schmidt, p. 297). It is also plausible, given that burials were often placed below the floors of houses in prehistory, that the mounds of Shir-e Shian had simply been heavily eroded over time. If this was the case, then any



architectural remains, which in this period would most likely have been made out of mud brick or “chineh” (*pisé* or packed mud), would be directly on the surface, if not completely destroyed. This would explain the heavy surface scatter of sherds that originally drew Schmidt to this site, and the presence of burials so close to the surface.

The dating of Shir-e Shian is a matter of some conjecture and debate (see Dyson Jr. and Thornton). Schmidt compared the ceramics from this site with those of the earliest levels at Tepe Hissar (Period IA), although no description of the sherds is given (FIGURE 2). The few small finds found at this site were also comparable to Hissar Period I small finds. Similarly, the skeletal position of burial BT4 x-1 is directly paralleled in burials from Hissar IA (FIGURE 3).

However, the painted motifs on the sherds from Shir-e Shian are not found in the Hissar Period I corpus. Instead, they are directly comparable to sherds found in excavated contexts in north-central Iran (late Sialk II phase) and in southern Turkmenistan (Anau IA phase; see Dyson Jr. and Thornton). These two phases have both been radiocarbon dated to the mid-fifth millennium BCE. Thus Shir-e Shian probably represents a single-period habitation site (whether village or campsite) dating to the transitional period between the Sialk II and Sialk III periods in north-central Iran, directly preceding (perhaps overlapping with) the beginning of the Hissar IA period in northeastern Iran.

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