



ZIGGURAT

ZIGGURAT (Akkadian *ziqurratu* “temple-tower”), a tower consisting of several stages, on whose uppermost platform existed in all probability a high temple (Roaf, pp. 104-105). According to Wilfrid Allinger-Csollich (p. 319), the high temple is not separate from the ziggurat, and the entire ziggurat should be understood as a raised temple. In Iran there are ziggurats as well as monumental buildings which exhibit similar functions, but it is unclear whether the ziggurats influenced the development of the monumental buildings, or vice versa. The monumental buildings have terraces or platforms, which possibly served as foundations for a ziggurat or a similar high temple (Akkadian *gigunû*, *kukunnû*). At sites such as Ulug Depe (Turkmenistan) there are also terrace-like substructures which supported large representative buildings. Since current research suggests that the representative buildings had absolutely no religious function, these substructures will not be discussed in this entry.

The history of the monumental buildings in Iran can be divided into two phases. The first phase of ziggurat-like structures and platforms dates to the Early and Middle Bronze Age (between the end of the 4th millennium and the 3rd millennium BCE). Slightly smaller monumental platforms which possibly served as substructures for high temples were erected in the Iron Age (between the end of the 2nd and the first half of the 1st millennium BCE), and constitute their second phase.

In Iran, buildings considered ziggurats or high temples can be distinguished from Mesopotamian ziggurats by their means of access. External flights of



steps are always missing from monumental buildings in Iran, yet they are at all times present in Mesopotamia (for [Babylonia](#), see Ur, Babylon, and Dur Kurigalzu; for [Assyria](#), see Assur, Nimrud, Tall ar-Rimah and Khorsabad). In Iran, monumental buildings, with the exception of Choga Zanbil whose construction sets it apart, were accessible by ramps.

Tepe Sialk. Roman [Ghirshman](#) (1939, II, pp. 23-25), the first archeologist to excavate the southern mound, dated the site to the Early Iron Age, and considered the monument a “grande construction.” Based on new excavations in the early 2000s, S. M. Shahmirzadi (2004, 2005) has proposed to consider this site ([Figure 1](#)) a ziggurat dating to the Proto-Elamite Layer IV. But his date is based on pottery uncovered exclusively in the debris surrounding the monument (Pfälzner, p. 422 n. 75), and his interpretation has been widely rejected as pure speculation (Azarnoush and Helwing, p. 226 n. 172). Neither the reconstruction of this monument as a ziggurat nor its dating to the beginning of the 3rd millennium BCE is accepted in the archeological literature.

Choga Zanbil ([Čogā Zanbil](#), Tchogha Zanbil) is nowadays the most famous ziggurat in Iran, and in 1979 it was added to the UNESCO’s World Heritage List. The town (lat 32°00’30.4” N, long 48°31’19.0” E) lies on the river [Dez](#) in the Khuzestan region, and was discovered in 1936. In the 1950s Ghirshman oversaw a French team excavating the site, and since 1997 the German team of [Behzad Mofidi Nasrabadi](#) has conducted further investigations of Choga Zanbil.

The urban settlement was founded by the Elamite ruler Untaš-Napiriša (r. ca. 1340-1300 BCE; elsewhere dated ca. 1275-40 BCE), and the ziggurat was dedicated to Inšušinak and Napiriša, the principal deities of the town and the Elamites, respectively. The ziggurat is separated from the town by a temenos wall, and with a lateral length of 105.20 m it is the largest known ziggurat ([Figure 2](#)). The structure is unique, since the chronological sequences of the building phases, that have been recognised, differ fundamentally from that of other known ziggurats in Mesopotamia ([Figure 3](#)). At the beginning ([Figure 4](#)), a brick formwork (Heinrich, p. 104), which served as a protection against rain water, was set up around a slightly sunken brick floor with stairways to the temples for Inšušinak and Napiriša. Within this mantle ([Figure 5](#)), the ziggurat was built up through the construction of a square core (stage IV) with two enclosing shells (stages II and III). The area between the casing and stage II was steadily filled in and, together with the outer shell, formed the ziggurat’s

stage I, while stage V would have been the high temple of which no traces have remained. Ghirshman (1966, p. 37) could identify this construction method because his team excavated a tunnel which lead into the ziggurat's center. It is likely that a terrace served as the foundation for the above-ground ziggurat, and on all four sides, interior staircases led to stage I. But traces of a staircase to stage II were only found on the south-west side of stage I. In the entire brickwork, in each 11th layer, all bricks are stamped. Decorative wall nails, of which many have been recovered, originally adorned the ziggurat's exterior façade. On each side of stage I, five channels served as a constructional measure for rainwater drainage. Additional channels protected the entire building as well as the temple of Inšušinak, as they allowed for the disposal of water and liquids (Mofidi Nasrabadi, 2007). The absence of monumental flights of stairs furthermore distinguishes this ziggurat from the known stepped towers in Mesopotamia (Kleiss).

Tureng Tepe. A raised terrace, which dates to approximately 2000 BCE, was exposed in Layer III C1, where it forms the core of the main mound. To the south, two stages and a ramp, providing a way up to stage I, could still be identified, and the structure is similar to a ziggurat in its construction. Since decorative pillars similar to those known from Altyn-Depe ([Altin Tepe](#)) were found on the terrace, the entire structure has been compared with the approximately contemporaneous raised terraces in Altyn-Depe and Mundigak (Deshayes, 1975, 1977).

Mundigak. Jean-Marie Casal referred to a large building that was found in Layer IV of Mound C and which dates to the first half of the 3rd millennium BCE as “temple.” Its exterior façade was decorated with triangular pillars. In Mound A, a large building with a structured façade (“monument massif”) in Layer V had been erected atop a building (“palais”) in Layer IV.

Nad-i Ali (Nād-e ‘Ali). The monumental platform of this site in Sistān in today's Afghanistan is approximately dated to the second half of the 3rd millennium BCE. Even now, the structure of solid mud brick rises more than 35 m above the ground. Ghirshman (1942) distinguished two phases, which he dated to the [Achaemenid](#) period (Phase I) and the 9th and 8th centuries BCE (Phase II). During Phase II the platform was square (ca. 50 x 50 m), and Ghirshman compared it with the structure in Tepe Sialk. George F. Dales cut a trial trench (Operation B) and a tunnel (Operation D) on the platform, and conjectured a main occupation phase in the [Median-Achaemenid](#) period and a reoccupation in the [Arsacid](#) or [Kushan](#) period possibly up to the [Sasanian](#) period. Yet



Roland Besenval and Henri-Paul Francfort reclassified the monumental structure, arguing that the rectangular size of the bricks, used for the platform construction during Phase II, and a large storage vessel, already excavated by Ghirshman, placed the building in the period between 2500 and 1700 BCE.

Shahr-i Sokhta (Šahr-e Sokhta). On the site there is a monumental structure with a platform (9.6 x 9.8 m, called Building 1, that was built atop of one of the highest points of the entire north-west area, approximately 13 m above the plain (Mariani 1989). It seems possible that this structure is the substructure of a raised structure, since a small room on the platform's east side could be interpreted as a stairwell or stairway.

Susa. The remains of a raised structure on Susa's acropolis (lat 32°11'20.43" N, long 48°14'55.07" E) was first noticed by Roland de Mecquenem (p. 65). Although de Mecquenem had already identified an artificial platform (Niveau 10), the secure identification of the remains only occurred after 1965 on the basis of systematic stratigraphic excavations (Steve and Gasche, p. 41). Today this monumental structure, which possibly corresponds to an early type of ziggurats, is approximately dated to the end of the 4th millennium BCE (Figure 6). Only the southern side of the structure has been excavated. While stage I is definitely preserved (Steve and Gasche, p. 41), an identification of the possible remains of a stage II for a structure of 88 x 72 m has been suggested (Canal, 1978a; 1978b). The exterior wall of the above-ground building was decorated with clay nails, which have survived in great numbers. The remains of a second platform ("massif funéraire") have been identified south of the high terrace in Niveau 11 (Canal, 1978a; 1978b), and the two platforms were built in related settlement phases (Niveaux 10B and 10A, Strata 40 and 38). Inscriptional evidence for the ziggurats in Susa dates to the Neo-Assyrian period. In the *Rassam Cylinder* (Streck, II, p. 53), *Aššurbanipal* (r. 666-625 BCE) boasted that he had destroyed the ziggurat of Susa, built from lapis-lazuli bricks, and broken off its horns of gleaming bronze.

Choga Mish (Čoġā Miš). Only a few traces of a terrace have remained in the area between trenches VI and IX (squares J-K14). The structure is dated to the 4th millennium BCE, and its polygonal platform had been built with very hard mud bricks (Kantor and Delougaz, p. 32). No traces of superstructures have survived.

Jiroft. Two superimposed platforms are located on the mound Konar Sandal North (Madjidzadeh, 2008, pp. 88-89). The upper structure measured 150 x 150

m and the lower 300 x 300 m, so that this monumental structure covered almost the whole mound. While these platforms form a stepped massif which recalls the ziggurats of Mesopotamia, Youssef Madjidzadeh (2008, p. 89) warned against interpreting this monumental structure as a ziggurat as its function is not known.

Haft Tepe (Figure 7). The site's two large structures are known as Terrace Complex I and II. They were presumably erected under the Elamite king Tepti-ahar. Terrace Complex I is almost square, and had a lateral length of more than 100 m. In the southern area a bit of excavation has been conducted. Northeast of the first structure, archeologists found a cluster of rooms and a large hall separated from each other by a courtyard. The orientation of Terrace Complex II deviates about 15 degrees from that of Terrace Complex I. As Terrace Complex II is higher than the first structure (Negahban, p. 19), it presumably belongs to a later building phase (Mofidi Nasrabadi, 2003-04, p. 236). Both terraces might have served as platforms for temples. They are located on the east and south corners of a large courtyard, on whose north and west corners two smaller terraces could have been erected (Mofidi Nasrabadi 2004, p. 300).

Altyn-depe (Altin Tepe). In 1968, excavations revealed a stepped construction on this site in modern Turkmenistan. As its shape is reminiscent of the ziggurats in Mesopotamia (Masson, 1981; 1988), it is commonly referred to as a terraced structure. For this monumental structure of the Namazga V type, three building phases can be distinguished. Phase I comprised four stages each of which reached a height of 6 m. The exterior of the second stage was decorated with pilasters, which themselves were designed as three stages. During phase II a platform (2 m height) and a second stage (2.5-4 m height) were built. The platform, with a north-south orientation, had a lateral length of 45 m, and served as this phase's foundation. As in phase I, three-stage pilasters served as the decoration of the second stage. Moreover, a tower, whose structure indicated the structural remains of the early ziggurat, was erected south of the ziggurat during phase II. The ziggurat's total height during phase II is estimated to have been 12 m. Phase III was characterized by a gradual deterioration which in turn was followed by individual restorations. During the last phase, a building, that is now known as the "Corner House," was erected on the ziggurat's south side.

Koktepe. On this site in modern Uzbekistan, two monumental platforms D and E of mud brick are identified in the Iron Age layer IIIa. They had either



religious or political functions (Rapin, p. 36). The eastern platform E is a two-stage construction, and measured 11,000 m³; Claude Rapin (p. 38) considers this platform a reduced ziggurat.

Representations. On a vase discovered in a grave at Susa, André Parrot (p. 39, fig. 6) considered three of the represented objects as reminiscent of a stepped tower and interpreted them as ziggurats. One of these is a two-stage ziggurat, and the other two are three-stage ziggurats; people are sitting atop of all three architectural structures.

A late-Uruk-period seal rolling from Susa shows a large monumental building that either stands on a platform or is surrounded by a wall. A similar image has been preserved in a rolling from Choga Mish. But on the Susa rolling there are three horns on each side of the building, and it is unresolved whether this rolling depicts an early representation of a ziggurat or that of a fortified building (Amiet). In both rollings, however, the monumental building appears within a scene of military conflict. In the rolling from Choga Mish the stepped building of the rolling from Choga Mish, there are people atop the stepped building, throwing objects (stones?) at attackers, seemingly to defend themselves. In another late-Uruk-period seal rolling (Louvre AO 29389), people seem also to have assembled atop a stepped building for defensive reasons.

Architectural representations have been preserved on several stone vessels made from steatite (for the differences between chlorite and steatite, see [CHLORITE](#)). On a vessel ascribed to [Jiroft](#) (Madjidzadeh, 2003; see [Figure 8](#); cf. [JIROFT iv. Iconography of Chlorite Artifacts](#), fig. 10) and on two fragmented stone weights from Tepe Yahya and the Kerman province, the architectural representations are referred to as ziggurats because of their step-like construction.

A Neo-Assyrian relief in Niniveh, which is today in the British Museum, shows a stepped monumental building. As the relief is dated to the time of Aššurbanipal, it raises the question of what the ziggurat of Susa looked like in the 1st millennium BCE. While Walter Andrae (p. 38) questioned that this relief shows a ziggurat at all, Theodor Dombart (1926, 1929) considered it a representation of the ziggurat of Susa, since the stepped monumental building supports a high temple with horns, such as those mentioned in the inscription of the Rassam Cylinder.

A bronze model with the three-dimensional representation of a cult scene (see [ELAM vi. Elamite Religion](#)) was discovered in the northern area of the so-called Ninhursag temple on the acropolis in Susa between 1904 and 1905. Because of the extant inscription of Šilhak-Inšušinak, the model is known as *sit-šamši* (lit. “sunrise”), and dated to the 12th century BCE. In its center two naked, shaven men sit opposite each other. They are flanked by two square, stepped objects. While the taller object has three steps and some kind of staircase leading up to the second stage, the other object has only two steps and its sidewalls are decorated with incisions reminiscent of gated entrances. This three-dimensional representation of a cult scene is unique within the Near East, and the interpretations of the stepped objects range from altar (Grillot, p. 12) to ziggurat (Parrot, pp. 42-43).

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