

# The Bronze Age Center of Shahdad, South-East Iran: “Hollow” vs. Nucleated Early Urban Processes

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L'articolo prende in considerazione vecchie e nuove idee sull'organizzazione urbana del famoso sito di Shahdad, al margine nord-occidentale del deserto del Lut (Kerman, Iran), noto in primo luogo per la ricchezza dei corredi funerari di due principali necropoli datate alla seconda metà del III millennio a.C. Con la scoperta di ampie porzioni dell'abitato antico, a partire dalla seconda metà degli anni '70, gli studiosi si sono a lungo interrogati sull'estensione e la consistenza della città antica, sorta in una regione che oggi appare desertificata e poco adatta all'agricoltura, ma che certamente sorgeva in un importante nodo commerciale e aveva un accesso privilegiato a importanti fonti di rame e pietre semipreziose. Un'esplorazione di superficie effettuata nel 2016, accompagnata da sondaggi sistematici tesi a delimitare la reale estensione delle superfici abitate, ha prodotto l'immagine di una città “dispersa”, fatta di nuclei abitati discontinui e non necessariamente coevi, separati da spazi aperti e aree a destinazione agricola; probabilmente esposti, almeno in un caso, al rischio di distruttive alluvioni.

## *Introduction*

Previous research on the large Early Bronze Age site of Shahdad (Kerman, Iran, on the Western edge of the Lut Desert) (Figs. 1-2), with its sophisticated artifacts in rich burials (Hakemi 1997), fully justified its definition as an advanced early urban center (Eskandari 2019; Vidale 2006-2008). In Late Chalcolithic times, the site grew near the endoreic fan of the Derakhtangan River, moving from the edge of the Lut Westwards, to a much more substantial late 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE settlement in which polychrome Aliabad ware (Eskandari 2017) was fully in use. Further West, a large area of the site is still studded with large amounts or red-colored, unpainted coarse pottery generically dated to the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE. Here, large areas are notoriously covered with manufacturing waste such as copper smelting and carnelian bead making refuse (Salvatori, Vidale 1982). The precise chronological range in which this pottery was used and dumped across the site is still unclear, because systematic studies of its typological variations, so far, were not carried out.

Previous interpretations of the site were centered on the possible roles of this ancient city in the framework of a globalized exchange economy, in a space which has been labeled as the “Middle Asian Interaction Sphere” or MAIS (Possehl 2007). While the idea of a highly dynamic trade network, intensively active in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, remains quite a credible framework, unfortunately MAIS is still poorly defined not only in terms of precise chronological steps and synchronicity, but also of cultural actors, given the fact that entire regions of the Southeastern Iranian Plateau, are still completely unexplored. Moreover, recent evidence and studies have re-examined the role of long-distance trade, as in the crucial case of the Eastern lapis lazuli routes, now more convincingly described mainly