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## A RECENT LATE SASANIAN DISCOVERY NORTH OF THE PERSIAN GULF. A REPORT ON THE FIRST SEASON OF EXCAVATIONS AT TOMB-E PARGAN IN HORMOZGAN, IRAN

**Keywords:** Tomb-e Pargan, Fars, Sasanian period, Sasanian pottery

### Introduction

The Bastak district, located in the west of Iran's Hormozgan Province (Ostān-e Hormozgān) is composed of two salty river basins: Mehran in the southwest and Rod-e Shoor („Salty River”) to the northeast. Until an archaeological survey of the district was undertaken by one of the authors in 2007,<sup>2</sup> the area had not been previously researched. A total of two hundred sites and mounds have been noted in Bastak, of which seventy sites were dated to the Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian periods. A preliminary dating of the sites based on pottery assemblages demonstrated an increase in the density of settlements during the Parthian era; a perceptible peak during the Sasanian era; and a near collapse in the Islamic era. During the Sasanian period in the Bastak region, there was a more than two-fold increase in settlements when compared to the Parthian era, consisting of twenty-nine settlements in the plains and foothills, and eighteen

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<sup>2</sup> Asadi 2010.

fortified sites in the mountains of Bastak.<sup>3</sup> However, the preliminary dating of these settlements relied on a slim assemblage of securely dated Sasanian ceramics. Therefore, the author has undertaken a limited excavation at a Sasanian site in Tomb-e Pargan to collect more data from this period. As Derek Kennet stated in his article published in 2002, the exact chronology of Sasanian sites in the whole Persian Gulf region remains uncertain and there is a fundamental desideratum, in reconstructing the culture of the Sasanian period in this region, to find and excavate sites with firmly-dated pottery assemblages.<sup>4</sup> The site of Tomb-e Pargan, which is the subject of this paper, was excavated under this premise. Based on the surface pottery found at this site, it has been identified as one of the sites established in Sasanian times in the Bastak region. In addition, with a lack of any traces of Islamic material on the site, it was clearly a good case for excavation and a probable reference source for pottery assemblages of Sasanian times in the northern Persian Gulf area. The peculiar shape of the mound (see below) pointed to the assumption that it hid remains of governmental structures. The results of the first season of the excavation at Tomb-e Pargan (carried out in April 2012) confirmed the initial dating of the site to the Sasanian period, and have revealed an interesting circular structure from Late Sasanian times.

### **Tomb-e Pargan: General location and description of the mound**

The site lies on a small, uneven plain between the Mehran river to the north and the so-called Namaki (Salty) Mountains which encircle the area of the mound to the south. To the south of the plain where the Tomb-e Pargan is situated, there is a narrow historical passage which crosses the Namaki Mountains leading to the Persian Gulf's coastline. This road is still used by local people. About 100 metres to the east of the mound, there is a seasonal river, which flows northwards to join the Mehran river. In other directions, the mound is surrounded by semi-flat cultivated fields (Fig. 2). Plant cover in the area surrounding the mound is limited to infrequently dispersed trees, tamarisks and date palms.

Tomb-e Pargan is a mound with a relatively regular round shape. The diameter of the mound at the north-south and east-west axes is about 27 m, and at the northwest-southeast direction about 24 m. Traces of a moat with a 10 metre width are visible around the mound and the total diameter of the mound, together with the moat, is almost 50 m. The highest point of the mound is 2.20 m above the moat's bottom today, and 2.40 m above the fields to the north and west sides of the site (Fig. 3). A stream formed from seasonal rainfall has cut through the

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<sup>3</sup> Asadi 2010, 17–18.

<sup>4</sup> Kennet 2002, 15.

surface of the mound on its south side. In the centre of the mound surface are the ruins of a rectangular 70-year-old building (according to oral information obtained from natives).

Apart from the mound itself, a large settlement approximately 5 hectares in area with a similar pottery assemblage was found at a distance of some 100 m to the south-east of the site, which includes the remains of several rectangular buildings visible on the surface.

At the time of the archaeological survey of the Bastak district in 2007, another round mound with a moat encircling it was found at a distance of some 40 km to the north of Tomb-e Pargan, which also was called “Tomb-e Pargan”<sup>5</sup> by local people. The resemblance in the shape and the name of the mound may indicate a similar function and nature for both of the structures called Tomb-e Pargan.<sup>6</sup>

### The excavations and their results

Before starting the excavations, a contour survey was performed and a map of the site was made at a scale of 1:100 and with contours of 20 cm vertical intervals (Fig. 4). To measure the level of the trenches, a reference point was established at the top of the mound. The elevation of the reference point was calculated by GPS as being 341 m above sea level. No particular artifact clusters were found on the surface of the site, nor any traces of visible architecture or remarkable concentrations of pottery. In order to investigate the sporadic pottery fragments on the mound surface, the main area of the site was divided into squares measuring 5 x 5 m. After this grid was established, a systematical surface survey was carried out and all pottery sherds in the grid squares were collected. Regular excavations then started with the opening of three trenches in the north and north-western sections of the mound surface, and in the process of the work more trenches were subsequently opened in the centre, east, west and south sides of the site. In all, during the whole excavation season, an area of over 70 m<sup>2</sup> in eight trenches was explored.

The preliminary results from the first season of the excavations at Tomb-e Pargan showed relatively clear evidence of a continuous and unbroken settlement history. The explored complex can be identified as a main architectural structure accompanied by a short-time settlement, established probably after the first phase of the site's cultivation.

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<sup>5</sup> In southern Iran the word “Tomb” (or “Tonb”) means “mound”. Pargan derives from “Pahr” or “Pahre” meaning “guarded” or “protected”. Its roots can be discerned in ancient Iranian languages including Avestan and Middle Persian, and in Sanskrit. This term is still common in India (according to personal communication from Ahmad Habibi, a retired teacher of literature and previous governor of Bastak, as well as a native of the Bastak region).

<sup>6</sup> Recently a similar structure has also been found in Fars (see Ghassemi 2012).

## Period 1: Fortified Building

The first period of Tomb-e Pargan includes the general forming of the complex. After the construction of a platform, as it will be explained below, a first period structure (which is called here the “Circular Building” or the “Fortified Building”) was established. Some parts of this monument were revealed in Trenches A, B, D, E, G<sup>7</sup>, H and probably also in Trench C. We will describe the identified components of the building from its outer to the inner parts. The outer part of the building consisted of a circular mud-brick wall, at least 1 m in thickness. This was revealed in Trenches A, B and D in the northern part of the mound. The discovered wall was built with two rows of mud-bricks (size 42 x 42 x 12 cm). The wall's diameter (according to the present research it appears to be circular) can be estimated as between 21 m and 22 m. Excavations in the northern part of the mound (in Trenches B and D) revealed a semi-oval shaped mud-brick tower, joining the northern face of the circular wall (Fig. 5). The external and internal diameters of the tower are respectively 4 m and 2.5 m. A specific use of two mud-bricks in the internal part of the tower may indicate the existence of a stairway which once led to the tower's roof. In all likelihood, three other projections (detectable on the west, east and the south sides of the mound) are the remains of towers similar to that described above. In the closing days of the excavations, a small (2 m x 1.5 m) trench (Trench H) was opened on the eastern outcrop. The excavations revealed a portion of a plastered floor (size 60 cm x 100 cm, see Fig. 6) from a room. It seems likely that a small room was once situated above of the eastern tower of the fort, which underwent destruction after the tower's body had been destroyed.

Within the brick circular structure (potentially a protection wall with towers?), parts of another circular structure were found. The main evidence for this inner circular structure was uncovered in Trench A. It was a structure composed of isolated wall sections, or pillars, which were aligned in a circular arrangement (Fig. 7). At least four parts of this circular structure were uncovered in Trench A. The excavations showed two entirely revealed parts of this structure that each measured 1.9 m in length and 1 m in thickness. An interval between two parts of the inner circular structure measured 0.55 m. The surface of the isolated walls featured a 30 ° slope inward towards the centre of the circle.

The inner structure was built of middle-sized and small-sized stones and white mortar. The surfaces of the wall sections were plastered with a layer of white mortar and stones. In the southern facade of the two of the isolated wall sections, two small steps (40 x 60 cm) were revealed (Fig. 8). The existence of a layer of plaster between the faces joining the steps and the isolated walls implies that the steps were added to

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<sup>7</sup> In the excavation reports, as well as in this article, the excavated trenches are identified by a combination of the letters “TP” (Tomb-e Pargan) and the abbreviations TA, TB, etc. (for Trench A, Trench B, etc.)

the walls, probably shortly after the building of the main structure. It's not clear at present whether such steps existed in other parts of the inner circular wall structure.

The revealed part of the inner enclosure in Trench A enabled us to estimate an approximate diameter of 18 m (Fig. 9). Based on this measurement, two other trenches on the west and south edges of the mound (Trenches E and G) were opened, to examine if the inner enclosure actually encircled the whole area of the mound surface. In both of these trenches, some more portions of the circular wall structure were uncovered. However, differences were observed in their size, which was incompatible with the measurements estimated from Trench A. In Trench A, the interval between the two portions of the inner wall was about 55 cm, whereas in Trench G (at the southern edge of the mound) it was 1.25 cm. The thickness of the walls in both Trenches E and G measured 80 cm, viz. 20 cm less than of the wall in Trench A (Fig. 10).

In Trench C, a portion of another wall, built of the same material as the inner circular structure, was identified. This seems to be the only remaining part of the first architectural period of the mound. In Trench F, opened exactly in the centre of the inner circular structure, no clear traces of the Fortified Building were found. Instead, an assemblage of stones was revealed there, whose interpretation may be offered after further excavations.

It seems that there was no settlement at Tomb-e Pargan before the construction of the Fortified Building in the first period. In constructing the fort, probably first of all, a platform was built. Although none of the eight excavation trenches opened at the site reached to the virgin soil with certainty (Fig. 11), a very sparse material underneath unit su11 in Trench A implies that the first construction was in fact a 1 m high earthen platform, on which the fort was then built. The encircling moat was certainly dug during or immediately after the construction of the fort. The original depth of the moat could not be estimated and will be investigated in the next seasons of excavation.

## Second and third architectural periods

Evidence of the second architectural period of the site is sparse. Most of the evidence was found in Trench C. In this trench, which is slightly above the level of a supposed wall from the fortified structure of the first period, parts of two walls (su10 and su17) were found next to the north and south sides of the trench. These walls were built of stones and clay and did not reveal any „Saruĵ” or plaster, known to have been used in the first period of the fortified structure. In general, units 4 to 10 in Trench C, composed of mud-brick fragments, small stones and other minor finds, demonstrate a rather low quality of architecture, contrary to the situation observed in the first period structure (Fig. 12). It seems that the second

period of settlement at the site started shortly after the abandonment of the circular structure, while the structure still existed. During the excavations it was not possible to determine irrefutably whether the plan of the circular building was changed or partially adapted by the settlers of the second period; nevertheless, fragments of plaster, found in section su05 of Trench C and probably belonging originally to the first period building at the site can be counted as signs of modification.

The third architectural period of Tomb-e Pargan includes a single small rectangular room, built some 70 years ago by local farmers. A mass of stone was found there. Trench F (2 m x 2m) was opened in this room, partially cutting its northern wall.

## Chronology

As mentioned above, the site of Tomb-e Pargan should be dated to the Sasanian period on the basis of a pottery comparison. Excavation evidence, including architectural elements and especially three coins found in Trench A, confirms this dating. Two well-known Sasanian architectural techniques were used in the circular structure of the first period. The first technique, employed to build the sections of the inner circular wall, is based on placing stones in an enclosed mass of mortar. The second technique pertains to the construction of the semicircular or semi-oval towers. Both techniques were widely used in Sasanian monuments in Fars, e.g. at Bishapur, Firuzabad and at many dispersed Sasanian water structures.

The compressed coins, discovered in Trench A, are the most helpful finds for dating the site. They were found at an elevation of 339.54 m slightly above su11, which was supposed to be the main floor of the circular fortified structure. For unknown reasons, the coins were found compressed against each other. One of the coins is a copper-silver specimen attributable to Khosro II and minted in AD 598 (Fig. 13). The coins still await a final study, and it cannot be excluded that they belong to Arab-Sasanian coinage. The fact that the coins were discovered on the approximate floor of the circular fort implies that the building was still in use in Late Sasanian or Early Islamic times. The whole monument may have existed for 50 years or so, and the structures from the first period may belong to the 6th century AD.

## The pottery assemblage and minor finds

Apart of the coins, fragments of stone vessels and a few glass and metal objects, pottery is the most important find. Since the discovered coins have fairly securely dated the mound of Tomb-e Pargan, it can therefore serve as a chrono-

logical point of reference for other Late Sasanian ceramics found in the northern areas of the Persian Gulf basin. A pottery analysis will be crucial for understanding the site's nature.

An assemblage of 1306 pottery fragments were found at the site during the first season of the excavation, including 772 sherds from the surface survey<sup>8</sup> and 534 fragments from the excavated trenches. The colour of most sherds is grey, showing various shades ranging from dark to light (Fig. 14). Fabric observation showed that the assemblage was almost entirely grit-tempered and the decoration techniques of the sherds, similarly to most Sasanian sites, was comprised of relief elements, incised patterns or a combination of these two techniques.

A general statistical study of the pottery assemblage revealed some interesting observations. More than 80% of the sherds were less than 10 mm thick, and sherds more than 2 cm thick made up less than 5% percent of the total assemblage. 85% of the fragments came from vessels with a diameter between 9 cm and 15 cm. It is thus clear that the vast majority of the pottery consisted of containers like bowls, beakers, jugs and bottles. The visible lack of the storage jar sherds, which are one of the most common finds on Sasanian sites, especially in the forts, is noticeable and again implies an unusual function of the structure. By and large, the pottery assemblage and its statistical features indicates that the site's nature in neither the first architectural period nor in the second period was that of a standard permanent settlement with an agriculture-based economy. A table of drawings showing the pottery, selected chiefly from the lower levels of Trenches A and C, is presented here (Fig. 15 and Fig. 16). These sherds were found mainly on the supposed floor level of the circular structure and are almost certainly datable to the Late Sasanian era.

Fragments of stone vessels and some small glass and metal objects were found on the surface of the site, and also in the upper layers of the excavation trenches. These were dated by their stratigraphic context to the time of secondary use of the circular building (Period 2). The puzzling architecture of the site is another task that needs to be investigated in depth.

## Conclusion

The function of the Fortified Building remains debatable, and further excavations will be needed. Before starting the excavations, it had been supposed that the site would probably present a small governmental fort centrally located in the

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<sup>8</sup> The surface survey of the site was not finished, due to a lack of time. At least ¼ of the surface remained unsurveyed.

mound, but the unusual plan of the discovered building and the nature of the pottery assemblage have implied other interpretations. Therefore, the building's function remains obscure. Soundings are intended in other sections of the mound. This particularly applies to the interior part of the inner circular building, which may be the key to understanding the structure. The area between the outer circular mud-brick wall and the inner circular wall (with its isolated sections) also must be further explored, and we hope to locate the entrance or entrances to the structure. Coins and the pottery assemblage both indicate that the building existed in the Late Sasanian period.

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## Abstract

The results of the first season of the excavation at Tomb-e Pargan (carried out in April 2012) confirmed the initial dating of the site to the Sasanian period, and have revealed an interesting circular structure from Late Sasanian times. Apart from the coins, fragments of stone vessels and a few glass and metal objects, pottery is the most important find. Since the discovered coins have fairly securely dated the mound of Tomb-e Pargan, it can therefore serve as a chronological point of reference for other Late Sasanian ceramics found in the northern areas of the Persian Gulf basin.



### Figures



Fig. 1. Location of Tomb-e Pargan, in the north of the Persian Gulf area

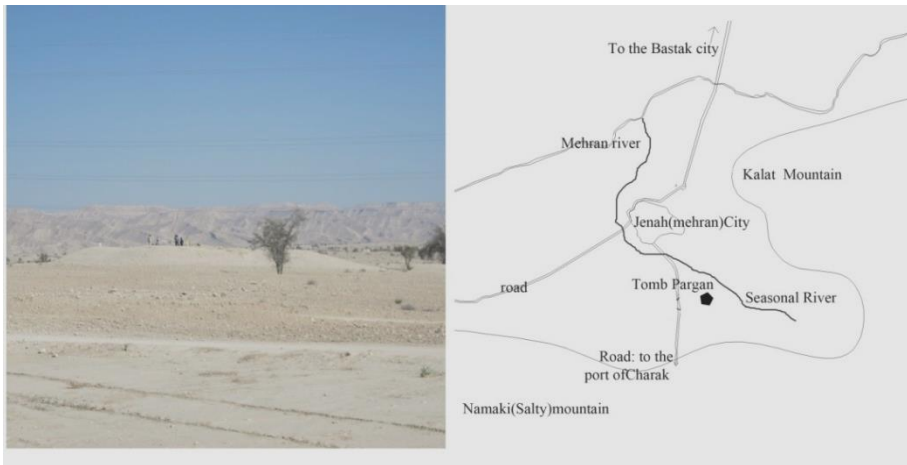
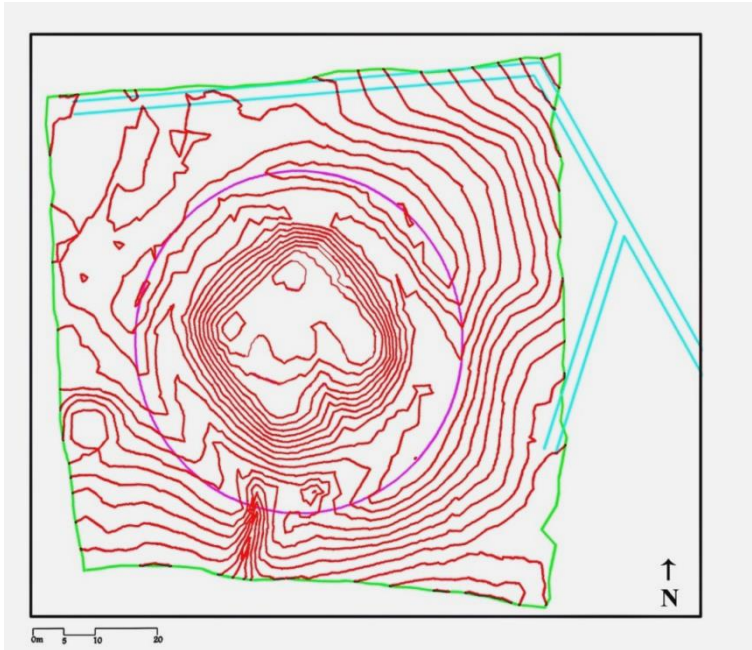


Fig. 2. Tomb-e Pargan: Sketch map (right) and view from the southwest (left)



Fig. 3. Tomb-e Pargan: Surface of the mound (left) and the moat (right)



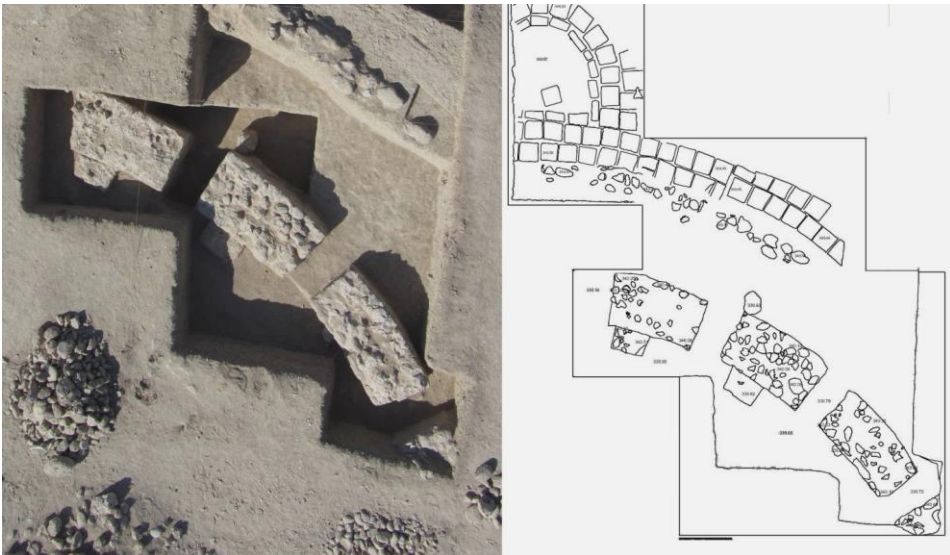
**Fig. 4. Topographical map of the mound**



**Fig. 5. Vertical view of the outer circular mud-brick wall and tower on its north site**



**Fig. 6. Trench H: Floor of the small room**



**Fig. 7. Inner and outer enclosures: Picture and plan**



Fig. 8. Part of the inner circular wall structure with the adjacent step on its southern side

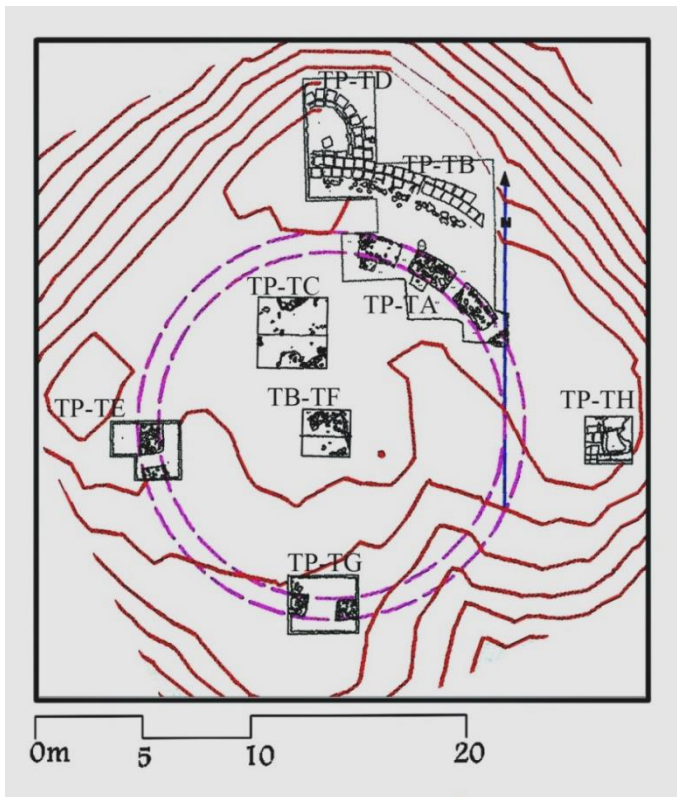


Fig. 9. Topographical map of the site with the excavated trenches



**Fig. 10.** Final situation of Trenches E (left) and G (right)



**Fig. 11.** General aerial view of the excavated trenches (looking from the north of the mound)



Fig. 12. South wall of Trench C with marked stratigraphic layers



Fig. 13. Coins discovered in Trench A



Fig. 14. Pottery from Trench A , su07

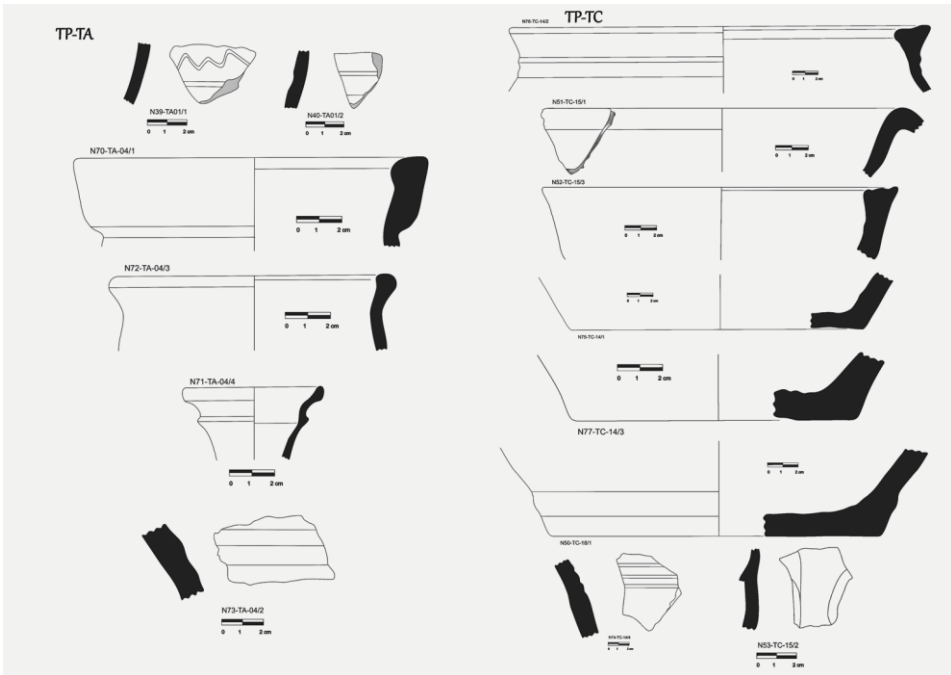


Fig. 15. Pottery drawings from Trenches A and C

Sherd	Settlement Phase	Description	Chronology	Reference
N39-TA01/1	Second Phase	Grayish slip on exterior, grit temper. Wavy carved lines on exterior.	Late Sasanian	Whitcomb 1985, Fig. 42, f & e Fig. 45, f
N40-TA01/2	Second Phase	Grayish slip on exterior, grit temper.	Late Sasanian	
N50-TC18/1	First Phase	Red ware, grit temper.	Late Sasanian	Whitcomb 1985, Fig. 47, o
N51-TC15/1	Second Phase	Gray ware, course grit temper.	Late Sasanian	
N52-TC15/3	Second Phase	Orange on exterior, brown fabric with grit temper.	Late Sasanian	Azarnoush 1994, Fig. 171, l & p
N53-TC15/2	Second Phase	Grayish brown on surface, gray fabric, grit temper.	Late Sasanian	
N70-TA04/1	Second Phase	Light gray on exterior, grit temper.	Late Sasanian	Whitcomb 1985, Fig. 42, f
N71-TA04/4	Second Phase	Gray on exterior and fabric, fine grit temper.	Late Sasanian	Azarnoush 1994, Fig. 177, a
N72-TA04/3	Second Phase	Grayish brown on exterior and gray in fabric, grit temper.	Late Sasanian	Whitcomb 1985, Fig. 48, k
N73-TA04/2	Second Phase	Grayish brown on exterior and interior, fine grit temper	Late Sasanian	Whitcomb 1985, Fig. 42, e
N74-TC14/4	Second Phase	Grayish brown on exterior, dark red in fabric, grit temper. Carved lines on exterior.	Late Sasanian	Whitcomb 1985, Fig. 47, p
N75-TC14/1	Second Phase	Dark gray on exterior and interior, grit temper.	Late Sasanian	Azarnoush 1994, Fig. 186, g
N76-TC14/2	Second Phase	Grayish dark on exterior, gray fabric, fine grit temper.	Late Sasanian	Azarnoush 1994, Fig. 174, g
N77-TC14/3	Second Phase	Dark orange on exterior, grey in fabric, grit temper.	Late Sasanian	

**Fig. 16. Description of the pottery presented in Fig. 15**