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Bronze Age Writing in South-Eastern Iran (ca. 3300–1880 BCE)

FRANÇOIS DESSET¹

The Bronze Age of South-Eastern Iran (the current Kerman and Sistan-Baluchistan provinces) can only be understood within the broader context of the Iranian Plateau. The Proto-Iranian writing system is attested in this area in its two stages, the more ancient Proto-Elamite (PE), dated ca. 3300–3000 BCE, and the more recent Linear Elamite (LE), dated ca. 2300–1880 BCE. The area under scrutiny here is huge – 1255 km as the crow flies separates Susa from Shahr-i Sokhta (see *fig. 1* for the sites mentioned in the text). Such distances make it understandable that South-Eastern Iran has specific regional practices and graphic variants distinct from a supposed “Susian norm”. The Proto-Iranian writing system may therefore be considered to consist of a Western variant (Susiana and Fars) and an Eastern one (Kerman and Sistan). Furthermore, Eastern Iran was never subject to any Mesopotamian scribal influence, as the most ancient cuneiform texts in this area only date back to the first millennium BCE.

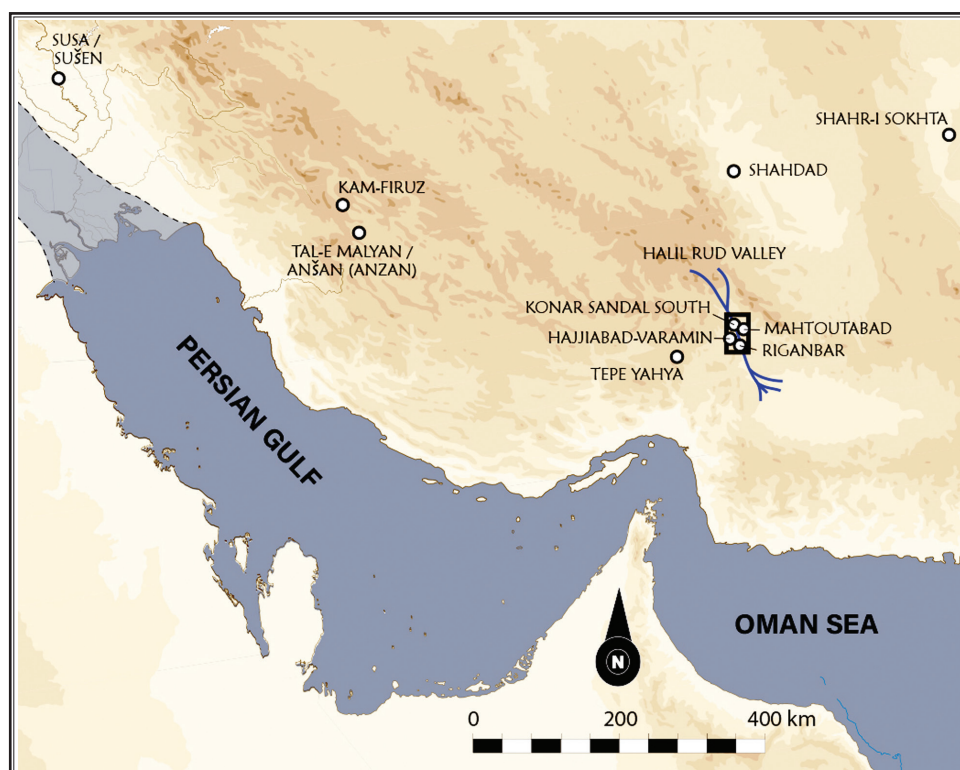


Fig. 1. Map of the sites mentioned in the text.

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I have proposed dismissing the use of the Mesopotamian toponym *Elam* when one is dealing with the Iranian Plateau, as this is not in accordance with the local documentation and the point of view of the Plateau's own inhabitants (Desset 2017). Using *Elam* as the label, one is no closer to the emic conceptions of the inhabitants of the area than in applying a modern name like the Iranian Plateau; actually one is even farther off, since the term *Elam* misleads us to think that it might have had specific historical value for the people who lived there, while this actually was not the case. Instead, the still somewhat mysterious notion of *Hatamti*, attested since at least the time of Puzur-Sušinak (22nd century BCE), could play the role of a specific cultural, ethnic, and historic referent. For these reasons and with due respect for all the scholars who were and are involved in this field, new terms are proposed in order to be able to study the history of this specific part of the Ancient Near East with less misleading, less biased, and better-adapted tools:

- Proto-Elamite writing > Early Proto-Iranian writing (EPIW)
- Linear Elamite writing > Late Proto-Iranian writing (LPIW)
- Elamite language > Hatamtite language

1. Early Proto-Iranian Writing: The Proto-Elamite Tablets

The Early Pro-Iranian Writing alias the Proto-Elamite script, the Mesopotamian proto-cuneiform and the Egyptian hieroglyphs are the three most ancient writing systems in the world, all dated to the last quarter of the fourth millennium BCE (see Desset 2012: 63–81; 2016: 88–96 for the contemporaneity of these scripts). Only a small fraction of the about 1700 Proto-Elamite tablets currently known have actually been found in Eastern Iran: 26 or 27 tablets at Tepe Yahya [TY-8 to TY-34 in CISI 3.3] in a phase IVC2 building (Damerow & Englund 1989) and one document from Shahr-i Sokhta [SiS-1 in CISI 3.2] (Amiet & Tosi 1978: 20, 24, fig. 16) (*fig. 2*). In excavations of November–December 2021, a fragmentary “accounting tablet” of clay was found from the earliest occupation layers (phase 10, ca. 3000 BCE) of Shahr-i Sokhta; it bears numerous rectangular incisions in regular rows and a seal impression (Tehran Times 23.1.2022). One has to wait for the full publication of the find to decide whether this identification can be confirmed or not.

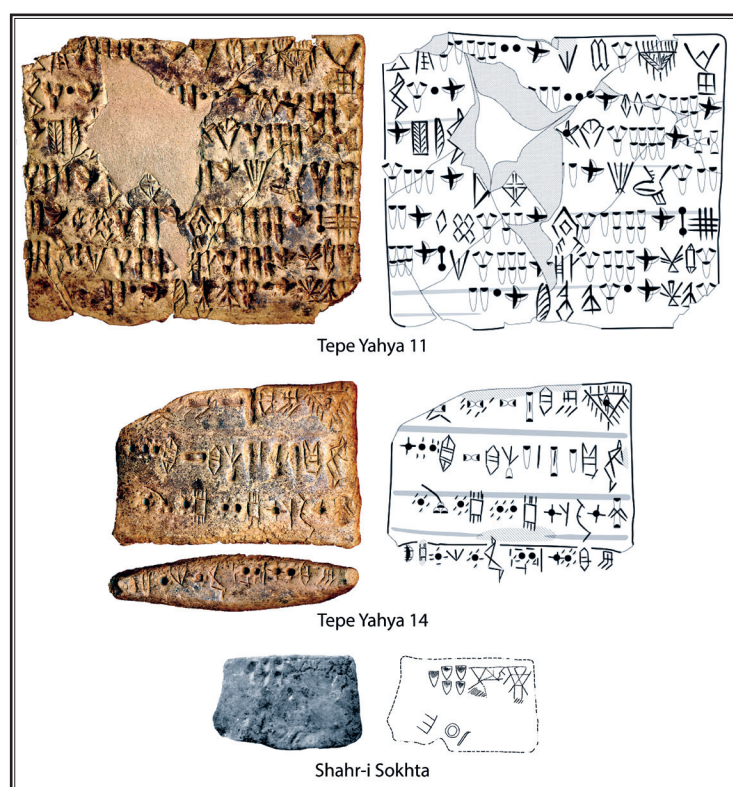


Fig. 2. Some EPIW/PE tablets from Tepe Yahya (Damerow & Englund 1989, pls. 2B and 3B and CDLI) and Shahr-i Sokhta (Amiet & Tosi 1978, fig. 16).

[The Proto-Elamite tablets from Tepe Yahya have the numbers TY 1 to TY 27 in the edition of D&E 1989. Due to the inclusion of earlier objects from Tepe Yahya, they had to be renumbered in CISI 3.3 as TY-8 to TY-34 (note the dash between TY and the number). Thus TY 11 = TY-18 and TY 14 = TY-21 (for a concordance, see the data list). The tablet from Shahr-i Sokhta is SiS-1 in CISI 3.2 (2019) p. 1.]

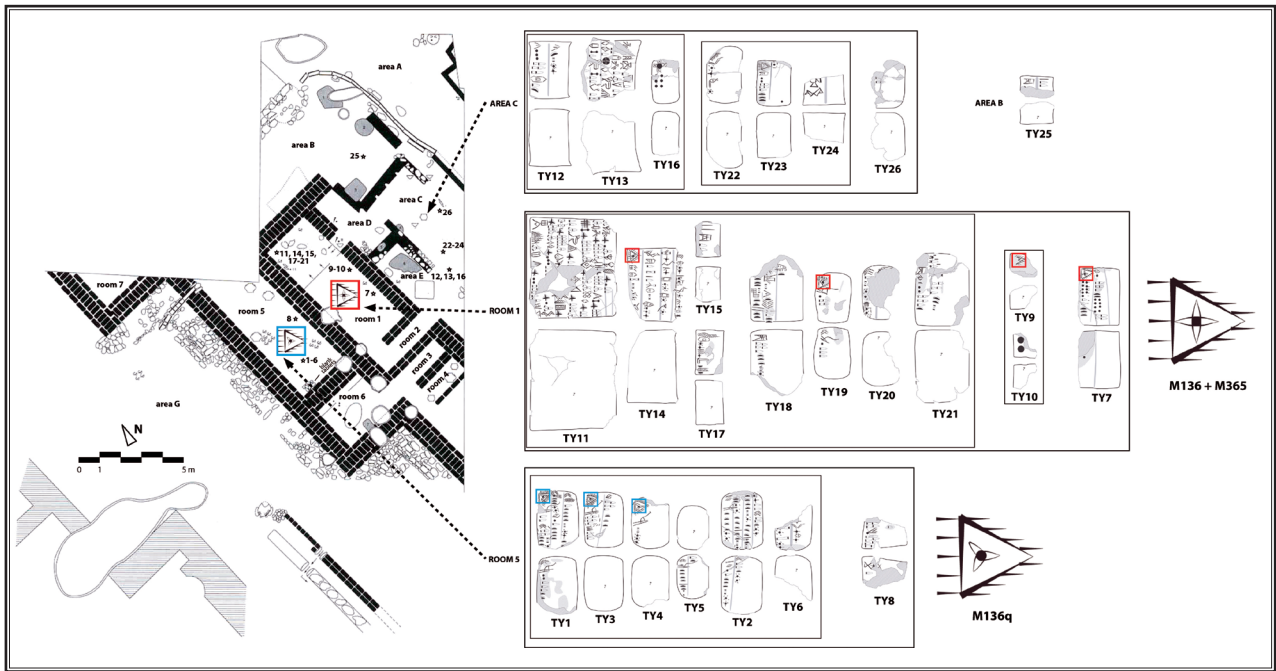


Fig. 3. Discovery context of the EPIW/PE tablets at Tepe Yahya in the phase IVC2 building (Desset 2016, fig. 31).

The texts of Tepe Yahya come from one of the best archaeological contexts ever documented for EPIW/PE tablets (fig. 3), as they probably partially preserve their original archival arrangement. Tablets with the header (M136+M365) were notably found in room 1, tablets with the header (M136q) in room 5. Like the other EPIW/PE tablets all over Iran, these texts mostly deal with grain (M288) and (M297/M298) management, as proven by the use of the capacity accounting system in some cases (TY 7, 14, 15, 17, 18, 21, 23, 25 [= TY-14, 21, 22, 24, 25, 28, 30, 32 in CISI 3.3], as well as perhaps TY 22 [= TY-29]), and the use of the plough-like sign (M56: surface area?) in some of them (TY 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 19 [= TY-8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 26]). (M219) and (M44) may have played a specific role in the Tepe Yahya grain management tablets. Administration of animal (M346) and (M367) herds is also attested in a few tablets (TY 8 and 11 [= TY-15, 18], as well as perhaps TY 13 [= TY-20]).

Anthroponyms (fig. 4) are attested in TY 11 and 13 [= TY-18, 20]. They display variations compared to the “Susian norm”:

- the sign M388 seems to display Western and Eastern (Tepe Yahya) variants;
- more than 15 of the 21 well-preserved Tepe Yahya anthroponymic sequences are recorded with only two signs (if the sign M388 is not considered as a direct onomastic element in TY 11 [= TY-18]), while they are predominantly (more than 70% of the corpus) recorded with three to four signs in Susa;
- in the whole EPIW/PE corpus, five signs are only attested in the anthroponymic sequences of Tepe Yahya (see fig. 5);

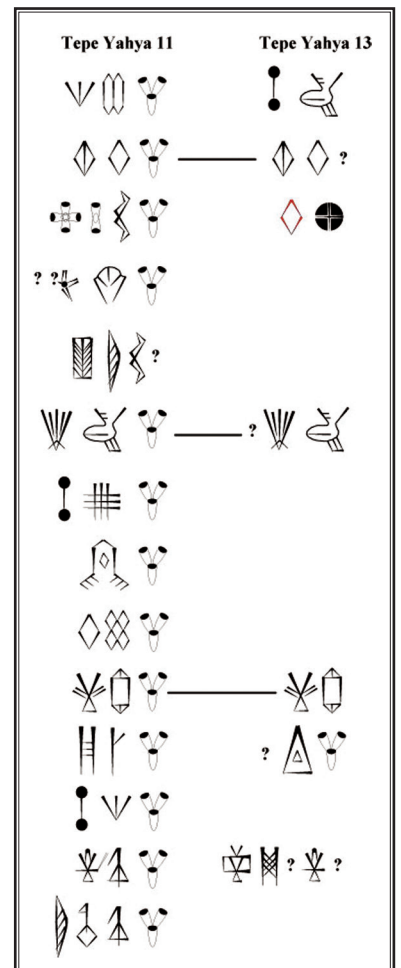


Fig. 4. Anthroponymic sequences attested in the EPIW/PE tablets of Tepe Yahya (to be read from right to left).

Fig. 5. EPIW/PE signs attested only in Tepe Yahya anthroponymic sequences (Desset 2016, fig. 20).



- while the sign M72 ∇ is usually attested in Susa as an accounted sign-object (“female slave/low-status worker?”), it is used in Tepe Yahya as an element of two anthroponymic sequences in TY 11 [= TY-18];
- besides the anthroponymic notations, some of the numerical signs used in the capacity accounting system at Tepe Yahya display also minor graphic variants (Damerow & Englund 1989: 22, 30).

While some of these discrepancies may be explained as due to diverging scribal practices, others could point to real differences in the linguistic background of South-Western and South-Eastern Iran.

2. Late Proto-Iranian Writing: The Linear Elamite Texts

After an apparent gap, the Proto-Iranian writing system is attested in Eastern Iran in its more recent Linear Elamite stage dated to ca. 2300–1880 BCE (see *fig. 6*). Short LPIW/LE inscriptions are reported from Shahdad (inscription S; *fig. 7*) [Shd-1 in CISI 3.3] and Konar Sandal (B', C', D' and E' [KSS-381, 382, 383, 380 in CISI 3.3]; see below *figs. 11–12*), while two unprovenanced seals with LPIW/LE inscriptions (*fig. 8*) can be ascribed to the Persian Gulf (V) and to Central Asia (G') on the basis of their inner features and iconography.

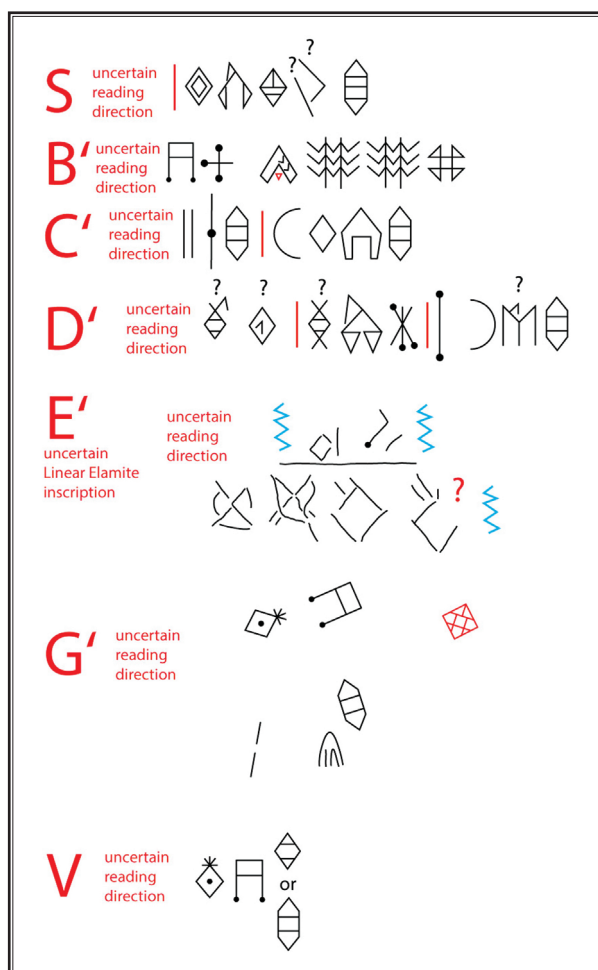


Fig. 6. Eastern Iran LPIW/LE inscriptions: S is from Shahdad [Shd-1], B', C', D' and E' from Konar Sandal / Jiroft [KSS-381, 382, 383, 380]; V is related to the Persian Gulf area, while G' displays Central-Asian iconography (Desset et al., in press b).

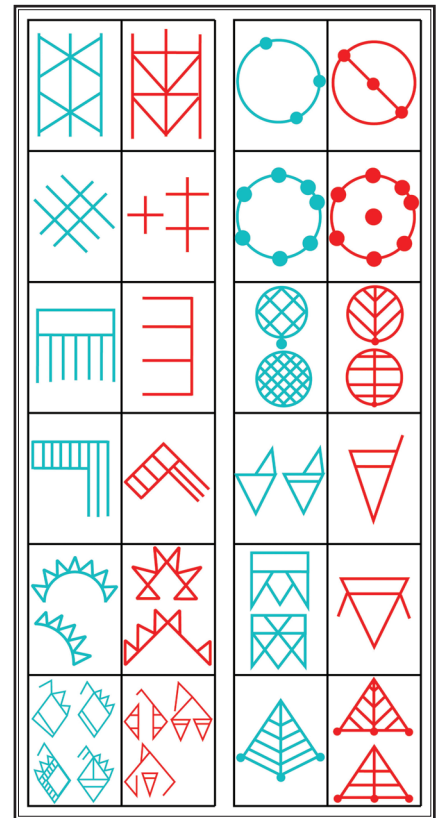


Fig. 7. A ceramic vessel from Shahdad, graveyard A, grave 30 (Hakemi 1997: 182–183), bearing the LPIW/LE inscription S [Shd-1] (National Museum of Iran; Desset et al., in press b).



Fig. 8. On the left, drawing of the Persian Gulf related seal bearing the LPIW/LE inscription V (Winkelmann 1999: 25, figs. 1–2); on the right, drawing of the impression of the Central-Asia-related golden seal with the LPIW/LE inscription G' (Mäder 2021, fig. 1).

Fig. 9. Main Western (blue) and Eastern (red) LPIW/LE sign variants.



Theoretically the LPIW/LE writing works with some 77 signs (5 vocalic, 12 consonantal and the corresponding 60 syllabic signs; see Desset et al., in press a & b). The few inscriptions known from Eastern Iran help in identifying graphic variants specific to this area for a dozen signs (see Desset 2018, fig. 3 for sign *n*; and above fig. 9). These variants made it possible to determine the geographic origin of five unprovenanced inscriptions, previously known (W and A'; Mäder et al. 2018) or to be published (M', N', O'; Desset et al., in press b), all inscribed on metallic vessels (see fig. 10 for O'). Due to their variant signs, these five inscriptions (M', A', O', N' and W) can all preliminarily be ascribed to Eastern Iran.



Fig. 10. A newly “discovered” LPIW/LE inscription, O', probably related to Eastern Iran (Desset et al., in press b).

3. The “Geometric” Documents of Konar Sandal South

The text fragment bearing the inscription E' (see *figs. 11–12* [KSS-380 in CISI 3.3]) was found in 2005 at the entrance of the architectural complex crowning the southern *tepe* of Konar Sandal (Madjidzadeh & Pittman 2008: 81; see Madjidzadeh 2011 and Desset 2014 for the circumstances of this discovery). Previously described as a brick fragment, its width (between 3 and 3.5 cm) and the size of its signs (only slightly larger than the other three texts) indicate that it was perhaps the top right-hand or bottom left-hand portion of a large tablet. After this discovery, a villager gave the tablet bearing the inscriptions γ /D' (measuring 11.5 x 7 x 1.8 cm) [KSS-381] to the archaeological mission, and showed the location in his garden where he found it in 2001. In November/December 2006, Trench XV (5 x 5 m; approximate geographic coordinates 28°27'16" N, 57°46'45"E), was opened in this garden, 550 m northward from Konar Sandal South; tablets α /B' (18 x 10 x 2.2 cm) [KSS-382] and β /C' (13.5 x 8.5 x 2.2 cm) [KSS-383] were discovered in this excavation at a depth of 1.10 m, near a rectangular bipartite kiln and a piece of an unbaked blank tablet. As three out of these four documents (E', α /B' and β /C') actually come from regular excavations, there can be little doubt of their authenticity (contra Lawler 2007).



Fig. 11. The Konar Sandal/Jiroft tablets (Desset 2014, pl. 1; B', C', D' and maybe E' are LPIW/LE inscriptions; α , β and γ display “geometric” signs).

[In CISI 3.3, these tablets from Konar Sandal South are, in the order of *figs. 11* and *12*, KSS-382, KSS-383, KSS-381 and KSS-380.]

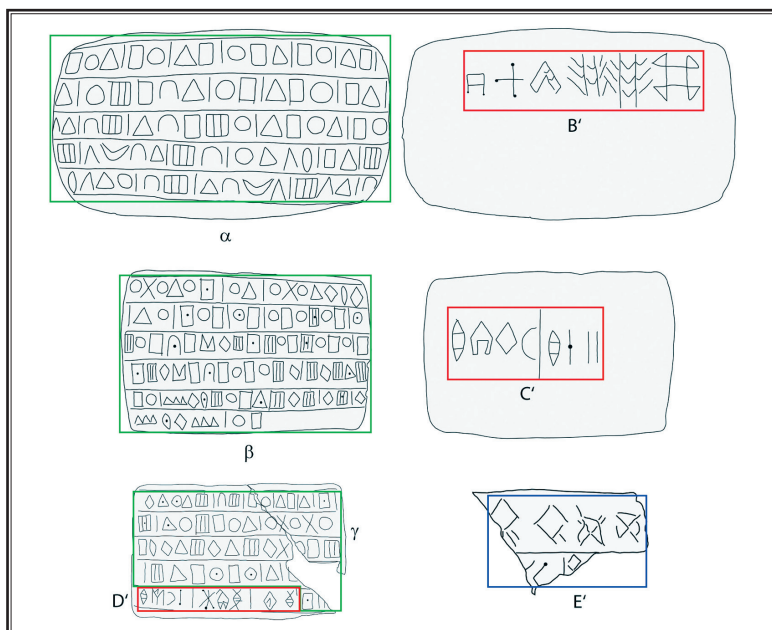


Fig. 12. The Konar Sandal/Jiroft tablets (Desset 2014, pl. 2; in green the “geometric” system; in red LPIW/LE script; in blue possible LPIW/LE script).

These four tablets, attributed to the 2nd half of the third millennium BCE, display short LPIW/LE inscriptions (B', C', D' and perhaps E') along with a “new” system with 19 documented “geometric” signs (Desset 2014). The layout of the “geometric” signs in inscriptions α and β seems to follow a pattern of doubled sign sequences (see *figs. 13–14*); thus the signs were inscribed in boustrophedon fashion, that is, the direction of writing/reading changes line after line, from left to right then right to left. Semantic units might consequently have stretched over two lines.

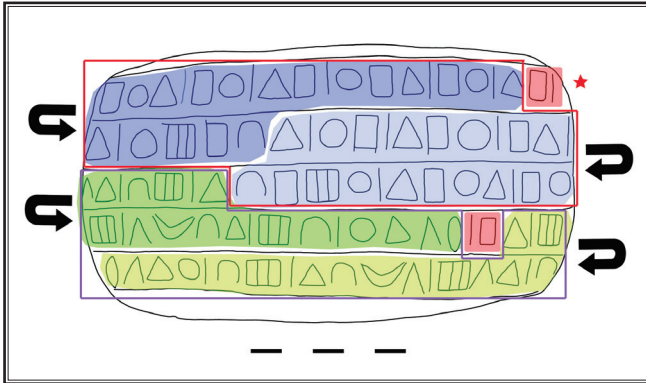


Fig. 13. Semantic structure of α , with sign sequence repetitions and boustrophedon writing (Desset 2014, pl. 10).

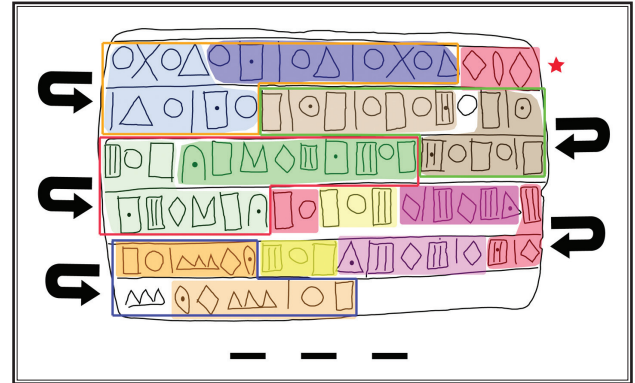


Fig. 14. Semantic structure of β with sign sequences repetitions and boustrophedon writing (Desset 2014, pl. 11).

Conclusion

Around 2000 BCE, the Mesopotamian cuneiform writing continued its geographic expansion, spreading from Northern Syria to Anatolia, from Mesopotamia to Western Zagros and to the Persian Gulf and from Susiana to Fars, cuneiform documents being attested then in Tal-i Malyan. It is probably at this phase that the cuneiform was adopted as a writing option for recording also the Hatamtite language in South-Western Iran (along with the traditional LPIW/LE writing). This ushered in a transitional period from 2000 to 1850 BCE during which both systems were considered as adequate to record the Hatamtite language. The LPIW/LE writing system was finally abandoned in the 19th century BCE, probably due to the then growing favour of the cuneiform writing among the Hatamtite scribes (as illustrated by the Hatamtite cuneiform inscriptions of Širūk-tūh and Sewe-palar-hūhpak in the late 19th/early 18th centuries BCE; see Desset et al., in press b).

More or less at the same time, around 1850/1800 BCE, the eastern part of the Ancient Near East experienced an unprecedented urban collapse (end of the mature phase of the Ancient Greater Khorasan/Oxus civilization; end of the Indus civilization; urban collapse of all Eastern Iran) which probably explains the disappearance of both the Eastern tradition of the LPIW/LE and of the Indus script. The increased influence of the Mesopotamian cuneiform in South-Western Iran and the almost simultaneous urban collapse in Eastern Iran thus brought to an end the age of other writing alternatives in the Near East. The cuneiform writing would dominate for the next 1000 years, save for the development of the Luwian hieroglyphic system in mid-second millennium BCE Anatolia and the alphabetic innovations in the second half of the second millennium BCE Levant.

The spread of the cuneiform writing in Susiana around 2250 BCE and in Fars around 2000 BCE opened the way for a succession of Western-derived writing systems used in the Iranian territory since then: the cuneiform, the Greek alphabet, and the Aramaic-derived alphabets (Parthian, Pehlevi, Avestan), the Arabic-derived alphabets, and the Latin alphabet (the current *Finglish* phenomenon). Consequently, after 1850 BCE, no writing system used in Iran can really be qualified as Iranian any more, in the full sense of the term, as a creation of the native societies who occupied this territory.

Acknowledgments

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Basic data for the objects illustrated

Scaling and labelling of the images. Inscribed sides (here: sides with a motif) of an object without any size specification are in 200% size, the other sides in 100% size; deviations from this scheme are specified. If the measures are unknown, this is indicated with “(scale?)” Codes for the object sides: A = obverse, B = reverse, sides around A: C upper side, D right side, E bottom side, F left side. The three sides of triangular prisms are A, B, C.

Abbreviations and bibliography

??? = data not available

— = no number available

AAV = (photo/drawing by) Ali A. Vahdati

Afghanistan 2001 = Afghanistan: Une histoire millénaire. Barcelona: Fundación “la Caixa” – Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2001.

AIS = Archaeological Institute, Samarkand

AL = (photo by) Alessandra Lazzari

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AMIT = Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan

AMNH = The American Museum of Natural History, New York

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- MP = (photo by) Marcello Piperno
- MS = (photo by) Mohammad Sheikh
- MSH = Museum Sherabad
- MT = (photo by) Maurizio Tosi
- MTogh = (photo/drawing by) Mahmoud Toghraei
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- NMAT = National Museum of Antiquities of Tajikistan
- NT & NF = (photo by) Neda Tehrani & Nima Fakurzadeh
- OG = (photo by) Omran Garajian
- OG & MAb = (photo/drawing by) Omran Garajian & Mohammad Abdullahzadeh
- P&S 2007 = Piperno, Marcello & Sandro Salvatori 2007. *The Shahr-i Sokhta Graveyard (Sistan, Iran): Excavation Campaigns 1972–1978*. (ISIAO Reports and Memoirs, New Series, 6.) Rome: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente.
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pr = plot record

PRWB = Plain Red Ware Bowl

- PRWJ = Plain Red Ware Jar
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- RMS = Registan Museum Samarkand
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- SMS = Sarazm Museum, Sarazm
- SPACH = Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage, Kabul
- SS = (photo by) Sandro Salvatori
- st. = steatite
- TAM = Termez Archaeological Museum
- t.c. = terracotta
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