

# Shahr-e Sukhteh

**Shahr-e Sukhteh** (Persian: شهر سوخته, meaning "[The] Burnt City"), also spelled as *Shahr-e Sūkhté* and *Shahr-i Sōkhta*, is an archaeological site of a sizable Bronze Age urban settlement, associated with the Helmand culture. It is located in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, the southeastern part of Iran, on the bank of the Helmand River, near the Zahedan-Zabol road. It was placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in June 2014.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

The reasons for the unexpected rise and fall of the city are still wrapped in mystery. Artifacts recovered from the city demonstrate a peculiar incongruity with nearby civilizations of the time and it has been speculated that Shahr-e-Sukhteh might ultimately provide concrete evidence of a civilization east of prehistoric Persia that was independent of ancient Mesopotamia.

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## Archaeology


Covering an area of 151 hectares, Shahr-e Sukhteh was one of the world's largest cities at the dawn of the urban era. In the southwestern part of the site,<sup>[3]</sup> is a vast graveyard, measuring 25 ha. It contains between 25,000 and 40,000 ancient graves.<sup>[4]</sup>

The settlement appeared around 3200 BCE. The city had four stages of civilization and was burnt down three times before being abandoned, this abandonment was thought previously to have

### Shahr-e Sukhteh

شهر سوخته





Location in Iran

Location	<u>Sistan and Baluchestan Province</u> , <u>Iran</u>
Region	<u>Sistan</u>
Coordinates	<span><span><span><span><span>30°35′43″N</span> <span>61°19′35″E</span></span></span></span></span>
History	
Abandoned	2350 BCE
Periods	<u>Bronze Age</u>
Cultures	<u>Helmand culture</u>
Site notes	
Condition	In ruins
Public access	yes ( 08:00 -19:00)
UNESCO World Heritage Site	
Official name	Shahr-i Sokhta
Type	Cultural
Criteria	ii, iii, iv
Designated	2014 (38th session)

taken place around 1800 BCE by the Italian archaeological mission there, but new research, based on recently calibrated radiocarbon samples in nearby site **Tappeh Graziani** showed that the site was abandoned actually around 2350 BCE, and the chronology of Shahr-i Sokhta commented by archaeologist Massimo Vidale is as follows:<sup>[5]</sup>

Period	Dating	Settlement size
I	3200–2800 BCE	10–20 ha
II	2800–2600	80 ha <sup>[3]:21</sup>
III	2600–2450	80 ha
IV	2450–2350	

The site was discovered and investigated by Aurel Stein in the early 1900s.<sup>[6][7]</sup>

Beginning in 1967, the site was excavated by the Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (IsIAO) team led by Maurizio Tosi. That work continued until 1978.<sup>[8][9][10]</sup> After a gap, work at the site was resumed by the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization team led by SMS Sajjadi.<sup>[11][12]</sup> New discoveries are reported from time to time.<sup>[13]</sup>

Most of the material discovered is dated to the period of c. 2700-2350 BCE. The discoveries indicate that the city was a hub of trading routes that connected Mesopotamia and Iran with the Central Asian and Indian civilizations, and as far away as China.

## Period I

During Period I, Shahr-e Sukhteh already shows close connections with the sites in southern Turkmenistan, with the Kandahar region of Afghanistan, the Quetta valley, and the Bampur valley in Iran. Also, there are connections with the Proto-Elamite cities of Kuzestān and Fārs.<sup>[14]</sup> Around 3000 BCE, potters in Shahr-i Sokhta reproduced ceramic styles from distant Turkmenistan, located 750 km to the north, and other ceramics were imported from the Pakistani Kech-Makran—Iranian Balochistan area, located around 400-500 km to the south, and ceramics from the Mundigak (Kandahar) region in Afghanistan, around 400 km to the east, were also imported.<sup>[15]</sup> Recent excavations by Enrico Ascalone, in Area 33 of Shahr-i Sokhta, show that the so-called "House of the Architect" and the Eastern Building belong to a layer radiocarbon-dated from 3000 to 2850 BCE.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Period II

During Period II, Shahr-e Sukhteh was also in contact with the pre-Harappan centers of the Indus valley, and the contacts with the Bampur valley continued.<sup>[14]</sup> The ruins of the building called "House of the Courts" was radiocarbon-dated by archaeologist Ascalone to 2850-2620 BCE, and the next layer 2 was considered by him as a "squatter occupation" in Area 33, which he radiocarbon-dated to 2620-2600 BCE.<sup>[16]</sup> But, as per archaeologist Sajjadi, the whole site of Shahr-i Sokhta reached in this period almost 80 hectares.<sup>[3]:21</sup> It seems likely that contacts with Mundigak were close in this Period and that lapis lazuli arrived in Shahr-i Sokhta from

Reference no.	1456 ( <a href="https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1456">https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1456</a> )
Region	Asia-Pacific



Plaque identifying Shahr-e Sukhteh registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site



Entrance to the Burnt City

mines of Badakshan moving through Mundigak, and the relations of both settlements made possible to scholars to speak of a Helmand Civilization.<sup>[14]</sup> Around 2700 BCE, at the end of Phase 7, most of the city was destroyed by a fire, particularly the **Eastern Residential Area** and the **Central Quarters** showed "rooms with burnt plaster, filled with ash and burnt remains of roof beams."<sup>[14]</sup> But during Phase 6 of this Period, the settlement was reconstructed, although some houses which were destroyed were not reconstructed.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Period III

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Period III, in Phases 4, 3, and 2 of this Period, there was a change in the city with large buildings constructed with massive encircling walls. The pottery lost the painted ornamentation of Period II and became standardized, and burials showed socio-economic differences among the population. The goods previously imported from Mesopotamia and western Iran disappear at the end of Phase 4, but the contacts and trade with Mundigak, Bampur and the cities of Indus Civilization continue.<sup>[14]</sup> The "Building 33" also belonging to Area 33 of Shahr-i Sokhta (located between the Central Quarters and the Monumental Area) was radiocarbon-dated by the team of Enrico Ascalone to 2600-2450 BCE.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Period IV

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Period IV was known by excavations in the "Burnt Palace" or "Burnt Building", and archaeologists consider that during this Period Shahr-i Sokhta had contacts with Bampur valley and Kandahar area almost exclusively, this is attested in typical Bampur V and VI pottery. Processing workshops were discovered in 1972 in the western quarters of the city with large concentrations of flint, lapis lazuli and turquoise, these sites are considered unique in the region.<sup>[14]</sup> On the other hand, Enrico Ascalone, in his recent excavations, discovered a phase of abandonment in Area 33 of Shahr-i Sokhta, radiocarbon-dated to 2450-2350 BCE.<sup>[16]</sup> This phase, however, was considered recently by archaeologist Massimo Vidale as the last period of profusely developed urban occupation for the whole settlement of Shahr-i Sokhta.<sup>[5]</sup>

On the other hand, Ascalone, in his lecture admits in a chronological graphic, that after a period of abandonment between 2350 and 2200 BCE the "Burnt Building" in Shahr-i Sokhta was inhabited from 2200 to 2000 BCE, based on calibrated radiocarbon datings presented by archaeologist Raffaele Biscione in 1979,<sup>[17]</sup> but this can be a unique survival of previous urban occupation, as Massimo Vidale comments that the "urban system" did not go beyond 2350 BCE.<sup>[5]:min.11:34</sup> M. Tosi and R. Biscione who excavated many year ago this "Burnt Building" considered it was "destroyed in a ruinous firing" around 2000 BCE.<sup>[5]:min.12:06</sup>

## Sectors of the city

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The area of Shahr-i Sokhta is divided into five main sectors, as mentioned by archaeologist S.M.S. Sajjadi:<sup>[3]:21</sup>

1. **The Eastern Residential Area**, located in the highest point of the site. Some pottery belonging to Period I was found in excavations within this Eastern Residential Area to the north of the Burnt Building.<sup>[18]</sup>

2. **The Great Central Area**, or **Central Quarters**, separated from the western, southern and eastern areas by deep depressions.

3. **The Craftsman Quarters**, found in the north-western part of the site.



Eastern residential area of Shahr-e Sukhteh

4. **The Monumental Area**, located east of the Craftsman Quarters with several high hills representing different architectural buildings. Some pottery kilns were found in the north- western part of the site near and around the Monumental Area, but most vessels were produced out of the town.<sup>[3]:45</sup>

5. **The Graveyard Area**, also called the **Cemetery of Shahr-i Sokhta**, which occupies the southwestern part of the site covering almost 25 ha. The estimated number of graves ranges between 25000 and 40000, and most of the burials are dated to Period I and Period II, although some other few burials are from next two periods.<sup>[3]:75</sup>



Cemetery Shahr-e Sukhteh

## Helmand and Jiroft cultures

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The Helmand culture of western Afghanistan was a Bronze Age culture of the 3rd millennium BCE. Scholars link it with the Shahr-i Sokhta, Mundigak, and Bampur sites.

This civilization flourished between 2500 and 1900 BCE, and may have coincided with the great flourishing of the Indus Valley Civilization. This was also the final phase of Periods III and IV of Shahr-i Sokhta, and the last part of Mundigak Period IV.<sup>[19]</sup>

Thus, the Jiroft and Helmand cultures are closely related. The Jiroft culture flourished in the eastern Iran, and the Helmand culture in western Afghanistan at the same time. In fact, they may represent the same cultural area. The Mehrgarh culture, on the other hand, flourished far earlier.

Shahdad is another related big site that is being excavated. Some 900 Bronze Age sites have been documented in the Sistan Basin, the desert area between Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Finds

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- A recent discovery is a unique marble cup, which was found on 29 December 2014.<sup>[21]</sup>
- In January 2015, a Bronze Age piece of leather adorned with drawings was discovered <sup>[22]</sup>
- In December 2006, archaeologists discovered the world's earliest known artificial eyeball.<sup>[23]</sup> It has a hemispherical form and a diameter of just over 2.5 cm (1 inch). It consists of very light material, probably bitumen paste. The surface of the artificial eye is covered with a thin layer of gold, engraved with a central circle (representing the iris) and gold lines patterned like sun rays. The female whose remains were found with the artificial eye was 1.82 m tall (6 feet), much taller than ordinary women of her time. On both sides of the eye are drilled tiny holes, through which a golden thread could hold the eyeball in place. Since microscopic research has shown that the eye socket showed clear imprints of the golden thread, the eyeball must have been worn during her lifetime. The woman's skeleton has been dated to between 2900 and 2800 BCE.<sup>[24]</sup>



Reproduction of drawing on a pottery vessel found in Shahr-e Sookhteh



Animation of drawing on a pottery vessel found in Shahr-e Sookhteh, now in the National Museum of Iran.



- The oldest known backgammon, dice and caraway seeds, together with numerous metallurgical finds (e.g. slag and crucible pieces), are among the finds which have been unearthed by archaeological excavations from this site.
- Other objects found at the site include a human skull which indicates the practice of brain surgery and an earthen goblet depicting what archaeologists consider to be the first animation.<sup>[25]</sup>
- Paleoparasitological studies suggest that inhabitants were infested by nematodes of the genus *Physaloptera*, a rare disease.<sup>[26]</sup>

## See also

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- Sistan Basin
- Cities of the Ancient Near East
- Mundigak

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## Further reading

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