

CAMBRIDGE WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ELAM

FORMATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF
AN ANCIENT IRANIAN STATE

D. T. POTTS

 **CAMBRIDGE**
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Trump Mediaeval 10/13 pt. in QuarkXPress® [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Potts, Daniel T.

The archaeology of Elam: formation and transformation of an ancient Iranian state / D. T. Potts.

p. cm. – (Cambridge World Archaeology)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0 521 56358 5 (hardback). – ISBN 0 521 56496 4 (paperback.)

Elam – Antiquities. 2. Elam – History. I. Title. II. Series.

DS65.P68 1998

935 – dc21 98-41051 CIP

ISBN 0 521 563585 hardback

ISBN 0 521 564964 paperback

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ELAM: WHAT, WHEN, WHERE?

In order to discuss the origins and development of Elam we must first establish where the name comes from and what it signified. This chapter examines the etymology of the name and introduces the reader to the changing nature of its application. It also takes up the fundamental chronological issue which must be tackled before launching into an examination of the material and historical evidence covered here. When do we first find Elam mentioned? How late did Elam exist? Finally, where was Elam? Seeming contradictions between epigraphic, literary and archaeological evidence are investigated which bear on the problem of how ancient observers and modern scholars have located Elam in their treatments of the subject. Finally, the chapter closes with some observations on how and why the meanings of broad geographical and ethnic designations often change in the course of time. For us it is important to realize that the area identified as Elam in one period may not have been the same as that referred to by the same name in another period. These are some of the ambiguities which must be understood before the subject of Elam can be intelligently discussed.

What is Elam?

Elam (Fig. 1.1) is an artificial construct, a name coined by Mesopotamian scribes, gazing across the alluvium towards the Iranian plateau, who imposed it from without on the disparate regions of highland southwest Iran and its peoples. In Sumerian sources dating to the middle of the third millennium BC (see Chapter 4) the name Elam was written with the sumerogram NIM meaning simply 'high', often accompanied by the determinative KI denoting 'land, country'. The Akkadian form used was normally KUR *elammatum* or 'land of Elam' (Quintana 1996a: 50).

The etymology of Elam has been much discussed. Damerow and Englund suggest that Elam 'may be an Akkadianized rendering of both Sumerian and Elamite terms influenced by *elûm*, "to be high"' (Damerow and Englund 1989: 1, n. 1). It was not until the reign of Siwe-palar-hupak, in the 18th century BC, that a name for the land described by Sumerian and Akkadian scribes as Elam appears in the Elamite language as ^{hal}*Hatamti*, *hal Hatamti* or *Hatamti*- (Vallat 1996f: 89; see also 1993a: 90–3). The late Walther Hinz suggested that this term was composed of *hal* 'land' + *tamt* 'gracious lord' (1971b: 644) and it has even been suggested recently that this might be an Elamite contraction of the Akkadian expression *ala'itum matum*, meaning 'high land' (Quintana 1996a: 50), but it seems more likely that Akkadian *Elamtu* derives from Elamite *Ha(l)tamti* (Vallat 1996f: 89). Be that as it may, the fact remains that the

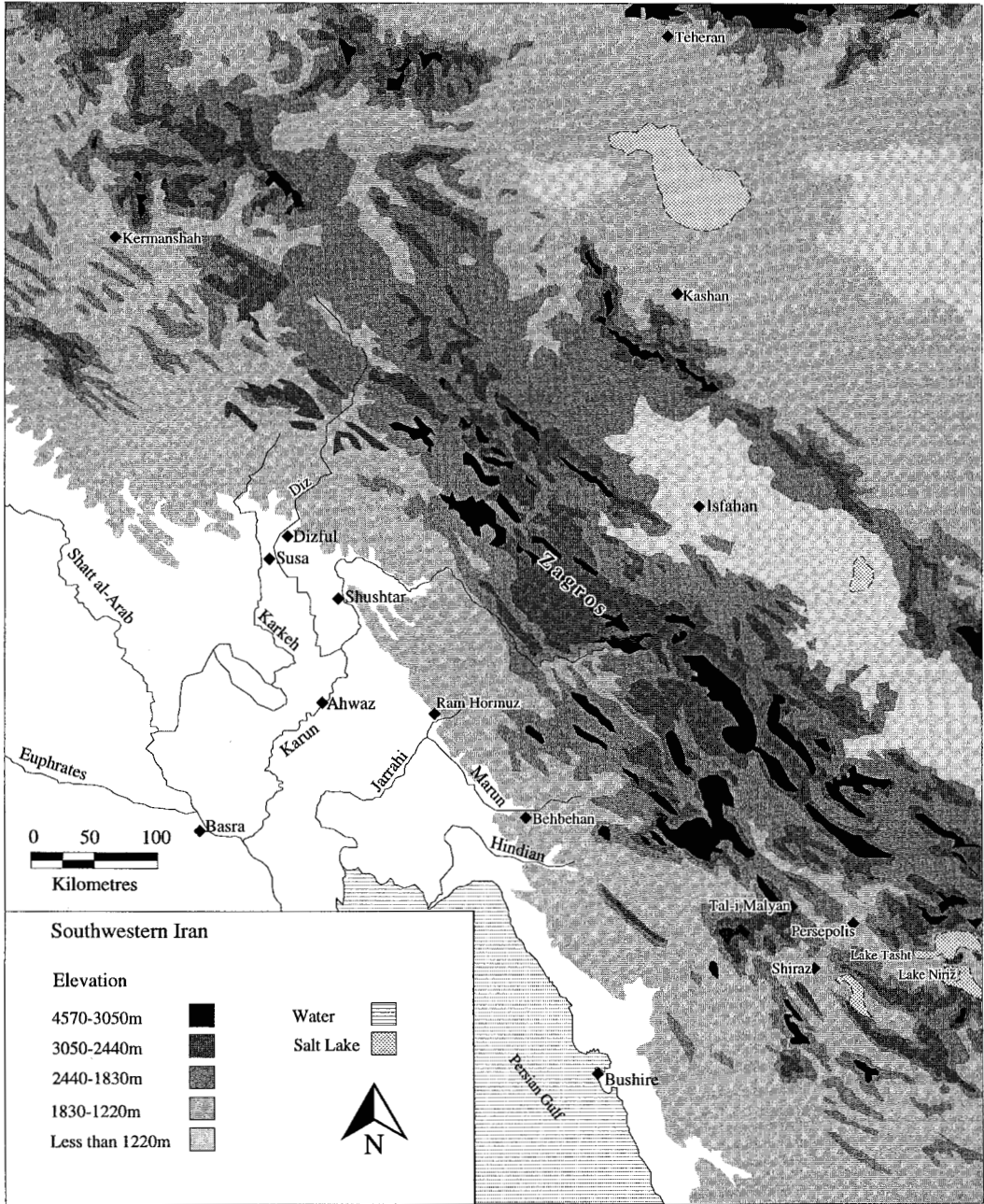


Figure 1.1 Map of southwestern Iran showing the principal sites mentioned in Chapter 1.

apparently first, indigenous name for Elam did not appear until the early second millennium BC and it is doubtful whether the region's inhabitants looked on western Iran as a single, unified country or nation. In the third millennium, when our story properly begins, the peoples of highland Iran, a disparate collection of ethnically and linguistically diverse groups, *never* identified themselves using the rubrics Elam or Elamites. That was a name given to the uplands east of Mesopotamia by Sumerian scribes who were simply referring to it, in a logical way, as 'highland'. As R. Zadok has stressed, by the late third millennium BC the Sumerian designation ELAM(.MA^{ki}) was applied to 'any highlander from the Iranian Plateau and its piedmont' (Zadok 1987: 3). Significantly, however, the sumerogram NIM was *never* used by Elamite scribes when they wrote in Elamite, and the few cases where it is alleged to have been present have all been rejected by M.-J. Steve, who has termed them 'illusory' (Steve 1992: 158–9).

Yet most people, if they have ever heard the name Elam, know of it not from the cuneiform sources of the third or second millennium BC but from scattered references in the Bible. Elam appears in the Old Testament Table of Nations (Gen. 10.22; see also Simons 1959: 27–8; Nöldeke 1874: 187–9), and an Elamite king whose name has come down to us as *Kedor-Laomer* is mentioned in a later chapter of Genesis (14.1), as well. Elam figures prominently in the forty-ninth chapter of the Book of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 49.35–39; see also Thompson 1980: 728–9; Holladay 1989: 387–9). Daniel of lion's den fame dreamt that he was 'at Shushan in the palace which is in the province of Elam' (Daniel 8.2), also the scene of the principal events described in the Book of Esther (Esther 1.1). And Jews from Elam, present in Jerusalem at Pentecost, are mentioned in the New Testament (Acts 2.9).

The late appearance of an 'indigenous' name for Elam in Elamite sources and the possibility that Elam might even be a loanword from another language may seem bizarre, but throughout history people and regions have been identified by names other than those which they and their inhabitants themselves used, and comparable examples of what could be termed 'imposed ethnicity' abound in the more recent past. The Inuit of Canada and Greenland, whose name means simply 'the people' in their own language, have been known for centuries by the term 'Eskimo', a European corruption of a Native American term meaning 'eaters of raw flesh' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Similarly the Huron were so named by French colonists. The French term *huron* means a 'rustic rural resident' (Roosens 1989: 99) and even though the Huron were part of a larger group calling themselves 'Wendat', the name Huron was eventually adopted by the Wendat and continues to be used to this day. Moreover, it is instructive to note that neither the demise of the Huron language nor the eradication of most Huron traditional customs have diminished the intensity of current feelings of Huron ethnic identity (Roosens 1989: 96).

One thing is, in any case, certain. The available written sources which pre-date the 18th century BC give absolutely no indication that the diverse groups inhabiting the Iranian Zagros and plateau regions *ever* identified themselves by a common term as all embracing as Elam. Dozens of names of regions and population groups (see Chapter 5) attested in the late third millennium sources (principally in the Ur III period,

2100–2000 BC) give us a good impression of the heterogeneity of the native peoples of western Iran, all of whom were simply subsumed under the Sumerian rubric NIM and the Akkadian term KUR *elammatum*. Nor did the peoples of these diverse regions all speak a common language which, for lack of an indigenous term, we may call Elamite. Judging by personal names in cuneiform sources, the linguistic make-up of southwestern Iran was heterogeneous and the language we call Elamite was but one of a number of languages spoken in the highlands to the east of Mesopotamia. Yet it is not the preponderance of Sumerian, Akkadian and Amorite personal names in texts from Susa, a product of long periods of political and cultural dependency and the widespread use of Akkadian, which justifies our speaking of linguistic heterogeneity in southwestern Iran. Rather, it is the plethora of indigenous, non-Elamite languages attested to mainly by the extant corpus of Iranian (geographically, not linguistically) personal names in Mesopotamian cuneiform sources. Individuals are known from Anshan, Shimashki, Zabshali, Marhashi, Sapum, Harshi, Shig(i)rish, Zitanu, Itnigi, and Kimash with names which cannot be etymologized as Elamite (Zadok 1991: 226–30).

When did Elam exist?

As we shall see in Chapter 4, there is no certainty that the sign NIM was used by Mesopotamian scribes to refer to Elam until the middle of the third millennium BC. Some of the earlier occurrences of the sign might have had the meaning Elam, but there is no way of demonstrating this conclusively. On the other hand, the lack of a Mesopotamian term for the peoples of the eastern highlands in no way implies that the area was uninhabited, but until we find the word NIM/Elam we cannot prove any link between the archaeological assemblages of the region and the later Elamites. For this reason, if we adopt a ‘minimalist’ position, as is done here, we cannot in all honesty speak of Elam before c. 2600–2500 BC.

How late did Elam exist? This is less clear-cut than might seem to be the case from a perusal of some of the standard texts on the subject. The Assyrian conquest of Susa in the 7th century BC is seen by most scholars as the great watershed which marks the end of Elamite history (e.g. Schroeder 1925; König 1938), and the rise of the Persian empire is often taken as the beginning of a new era. Thus, G.G. Cameron’s 1936 *History of Early Iran* explicitly sought to present ‘in a comprehensive fashion the history of the Iranian plateau *before* Cyrus attained mastery’ (Cameron 1936: vii). Although he believed that ‘Elam still had an important role to play’ in the Achaemenid empire, W. Hinz also used the fall of Susa to the Assyrians and the rise of the Medes and Persians as the cut-off point in his synthesis of Elamite history and archaeology (Hinz 1972: 160), as did E. Carter and M.W. Stolper, who offer just three pages on Elam during the Achaemenid, Seleucid and Parthian periods in their synthesis of Elamite political history and archaeology (Carter and Stolper 1984: 57–9).

The approach taken here is quite different. Elam’s absorption into the Achaemenid empire and its legacy in the Achaemenid period in no way mark the phase at which one can legitimately conclude an assessment of Elam’s history and archaeology.

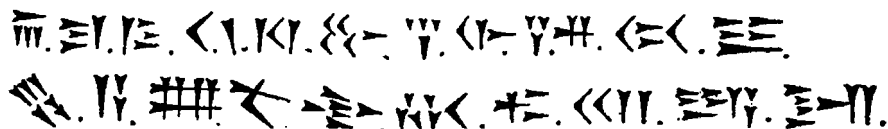


Figure 1.2 Samuel Flower's copy of an Achaemenid Elamite inscription (after Rogers 1900/I: 75).

Elam's boundaries and political status may have changed considerably from what they were during the third millennium BC, but it is clear from a reading of, for example, the late Babylonian texts which discuss the numerous incursions of Elamite troops, some of whom were commanded by officers with Elamite names (Chapter 10), that the region of Elymais and its people the Elymaeans, mentioned in Greek and Latin sources, certainly represented latter-day incarnations of Elam and the Elamites. Similarly, during the early Islamic era we continue to find the name Elam used to denote an ecclesiastical province in what is today the Khuzistan province of south-western Iran (Chapter 11).

Elam was no less an entity with a particular linguistic and cultural character in the post-Assyrian period than it had been in more remote antiquity. At no point in Elam's history were its boundaries fixed, and Elam's absorption by the Persian empire no more signalled its demise than had its suppression by the Old Akkadian or Ur III empires in the late third millennium BC. These and other episodes of political diminution certainly meant that Elam figured less prominently in written sources, but the consistent reappearance of Elam following periods of political reversal show that the essential independence – linguistically as well as culturally – of Elam and the Elamites is a phenomenon of incredible longevity. Elam and the Elamites periodically underwent a process of transformation until the disappearance of the name from Nestorian ecclesiastical sources well after the Islamic conquest. After that, it was the work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars to rediscover and recreate the many Elams of the more distant past.

Where was Elam?

In 1667 an East India Company agent named Samuel Flower made the first copies of cuneiform signs (Fig. 1.2) at the Persian Achaemenid city of Persepolis and at nearby Naqsh-e Rostam. Later, it was realized that some of these belonged to the Elamite version of a trilingual inscription in Old Persian, the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian and Elamite (Rogers 1900: 74–83; Pallis 1954: 24). Even if the signs were not yet recognized as Elamite, their copies could be said to represent the first tangible evidence of Elam to have been found outside the pages of the Bible. It took more than a century, however, before Carsten Niebuhr recognised in 1778 that the Persepolitan inscriptions were written in three different languages. Following this realization it became conventional to refer to the Elamite column as the 'second type' of Achaemenid inscription, and to designate the language represented by it as Elamite, Susian or Scythian (Reiner



Plate 1.1 Aerial view of Susa (from an original in the Susa Museum).

1969: 54). Although the nineteenth century witnessed the documentation of numerous trilingual Achaemenid inscriptions (Pallis 1954: 52–3), as well as many attempts at their decipherment, the Elamite versions of these texts were not satisfactorily deciphered until 1890 when F.H. Weissbach published his PhD dissertation on them (later appearing in revised form as Weissbach 1911).

The fact that the first Elamite texts found were discovered in the highlands of Fars province ought to have pointed the way towards the recognition of the highland nature of Elam, but here an accident of archaeological discovery came into play. In 1813 John Malcolm Kinnear published an extensive description of the site of Shush (Pl. 1.1) in lowland Khuzistan, arguing against older authorities that this was the site of Biblical Shushan, rather than Shushtar, another town in Khuzistan with a name similar to Shushan (Kinnear 1813: 99ff.). Opinion on this point remained divided for many years (see Forbiger 1844: 585 for a bibliography of the dispute into the mid-1840s). A.H. Layard favoured the identification of Shush with both the Susa of the Greek and Roman authors and with Shushan of the Bible, whereas H.C. Rawlinson, while accepting the identity of Shush and classical Susa, held that a site called Shushan, north of Shushtar, was the site of Daniel's dream (Layard 1842: 104; 1846: 61). When W.K. Loftus excavated the first bricks and clay cones with Elamite inscriptions at Shush in 1852, however, including amongst other things remnants of a trilingual inscription of



Plate 1.2 Château Susa, the fortified excavation house begun on the Acropole by Jacques de Morgan in 1898.

Artaxerxes II (404–359 BC) – identified by some with King Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther (other scholars believe Biblical Ahasuerus to have been Xerxes, e.g. Heltzer 1994) – mentioning the palace of Darius which had burned in the lifetime of Artaxerxes I as well as the new palace built by Artaxerxes II, there was no longer any doubt about the identity of modern Shush and Biblical Shushan (Curtis 1993: 22, 31–2), and indeed this was the basis for the resumption of investigations at the site by the French expeditions (Dieulafoy 1888; 1893; see also Harper, Aruz and Tallon 1992: 20–4) of the late 19th century (Pl. 1.2).

By extension, therefore, there could be no doubt that the name Elam referred to Khuzistan, for did not Daniel dream that he was ‘at Shushan in the palace which is in the province of Elam’ (Daniel 8.2)? Of course, the controversy over the identification of Shushan and by extension the ‘solution’ of the problem of Elam’s location happened long before cuneiform scholars had realized that the sumerogram NIM implied a highland rather than a lowland setting for Elam. Yet confirmation of the lowland identification of Elam seemed to be provided by extra-Biblical sources, such as the eighth century Armenian translation of Cl. Ptolemy’s *Geography* by Moses of Khorene, where we read, ‘A land of Asia is that of the Elymaeans, that is Khuzastan, which the Greeks call *Šošanik*, after the city *Šošan*’ (Marquart 1901: 137).

A very different notion, emphasizing the distinction between Elam and Susiana, i.e. the district of Susa, can be found, however, in other sources. After describing Susis (Susiana) and an adjacent part of Babylonia, the Greek geographer Strabo wrote, 'Above both, on the north and towards the east, lie the countries of the Elymaei and the Paraetaceni, who are predatory peoples and rely on the ruggedness of their mountains' (*Geog.* xv.3.12). Thus, it is clear that Elymais (the land of the Elymaei, as the Elamites were called in the last centuries BC), and Susiana were viewed by Strabo as two different geographical regions (see also Hoffmann 1880: 133). Moreover, although later Jewish writers, such as Sa'adya Gaon (c. AD 985) and Benjamin of Tudela (AD 1169) followed the Book of Daniel in equating Khuzistan with Elam, the Talmud scrupulously distinguished lowland Be Huzae, or Khuzistan, from Elam (Neubauer 1868: 325, 380; Obermeyer 1929: 205).

In the early 1970s inscribed bricks were discovered at the archaeological site of Tal-i Malyan near Shiraz in the highlands of Fars province which proved that it was the ancient city of Anshan (Reiner 1973a). This led, several years later, to a complete revision of thinking on the location of Elam, spearheaded by the French scholar F. Vallat, who argued that the centre of Elam lay at Anshan and in the highlands around it, and not at Susa in lowland Khuzistan (1980a). The periodic political incorporation of the lowlands, and the importance of the city of Susa, had given the impression to the authors of Daniel and Esther that Elam was centred around the site and coterminous with Khuzistan. The preponderance of inscriptions written in Elamite at Anshan, and the overwhelming domination of texts written in Akkadian at Susa, with largely Semitic personal names, suggested to Vallat that Elam was centred in the highlands, not in lowland Susiana. One could even suggest that ancient observers had applied the *pars pro toto* principle (Eilers 1982: 10) when it came to the use of Elam in the Bible, whereby a name which had originally designated only an area around Anshan in Fars came to be used for a geographically much more extensive state which held sway over areas well outside the original Elamite homeland. In order to distinguish between these two Elams, one might even be tempted to use terms like *Elam Minor* (for the original Elamite homeland in Fars) and *Elam Major* (for the wider state, which sometimes approached the status of an empire, created by the Elamites).

In fact, this would be wrong, and it is equally misleading to suggest that Elam meant the highlands of Fars with its capital city Anshan. For as outlined above, Elam is not an Iranian term and has no relationship to the conception which the peoples of highland Iran had of themselves. They were Anshanites, Marhashians, Shimashkians, Zabshalians, Sherihumians, Awanites, etc. That Anshan played a leading role in the political affairs of the various highland groups inhabiting southwestern Iran is clear. But to argue that Anshan is coterminous with Elam is to misunderstand the artificiality and indeed the alienness of Elam as a construct imposed from without on the peoples of the southwestern highlands of the Zagros mountain range, the coast of Fars *and* the alluvial plain drained by the Karun-Karkheh river system. For although cuneiform sources often distinguish Susians, i.e. the inhabitants of Susa, from Anshanites, this in no way contradicts the notion that, from the Mesopotamian perspective, the

easterners – lowlanders and highlanders alike – were *all* Elamites in the direction of Susa and beyond.

Conclusion

All too often we take for granted the identity and ethnicity of the archaeological and historical cultures which we study, without considering whether discrepancies exist between our definitions and the self-definitions of the peoples being studied. In the case of Elam, it is now clear that we are dealing with a notion imposed by Mesopotamian scribes, not one which had any basis in indigenous notions of ethnic and linguistic self-definition. Diverse groups in southwestern Iran were subsumed under this foreign label, but at a certain point the label was adopted for it clearly served a purpose in a different context of self-definition. Elam is both a name and a concept. How these changed through time will be explored in the chapters which follow.

In a recent study of Austrian identity, Franz Mathis notes, ‘When the term “Austria” in the form of *Ostarrichi* was used in a document in 996, it referred to a certain area in today’s Lower Austria, which the people used to call *Ostarrichi*, a land in the east. At that time this land was ruled by the house of Babenberg. Later on, the name was gradually applied to all the lands that the Babenbergs acquired on both sides of the Danube before the end of their rule in 1246. It was not, however, applied to Styria, which had been added in 1192 . . . it was not extended over the lands that the Habsburgs acquired during the following centuries: these retained their former names such as Carinthia, Tyrol and – much later – Salzburg’ (Mathis 1997: 20–1). Mathis goes on to analyze the eventual substitution of the name Austria (Österreich) for that of Habsburg, the very late adoption of that name for areas to the west and south of the original *Ostarrichi* domains, and the feelings of identity, or lack of identity, with the geographical entity so named on the part of the people who lived there. Much of this analysis of Austria and Austrian identity strikes a chord in anyone who has grappled with the problem of defining Elam in its various forms through time and will hopefully do the same in readers new to the subject as they work their way through this book.