



## Achaemenid Period in the Great Zab and Little Zab Rivers of Iraq

*Irak'ın Büyük Zab ve Küçük Zab Nehir Havzalarında Akhaimenid Dönem\**

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### Abstract

This study focuses on the region's environmental features, topography, and general historical framework, with particular attention to ancient settlements, significant historical developments, and road routes linked to the Achaemenid period, as well as the terrain of the Zagros Mountains in Iraq, as evaluated through historical records. The sources utilized in this study include the Babylonian chronicles and the Behistun Inscription of Darius I (521–519 BCE). These sources have been carefully analyzed to shed light on the Achaemenid period in the region and to provide a clearer understanding of the historical context. Through the study of historical texts, we have shaped our research around notable centers mentioned in records, aiming to obtain detailed insights about these locations. Within the research framework, several key centers recorded in historical documents were examined, and research areas were determined based on these centers. Extensive investigations were conducted in three archaeological sites, some of which had previously been excavated by local and foreign archaeologists. In these investigations, particular emphasis was placed on the artifacts and structures from the Achaemenid period. The studies focused on the social organization, cultural practices, and commercial structure of settlements from this period, with artifacts and structural remains being meticulously examined. The research in these archaeological centers has been carried out in conjunction with studies of other Achaemenid period sites in different regions to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of the Achaemenid Empire on the region. These comparisons aim to illustrate similarities and differences between the periods, providing a broader framework to assess the political, economic, and cultural impact of the Achaemenid Empire on the area.

Additionally, the study explores how trade routes, military paths, and strategically significant crossing points during the Achaemenid period were influenced by the region's topography and climate, examining how these factors played a role in the development of key settlements of the time. In conclusion, the investigations conducted have contributed to a more **comprehensive** understanding of the historical and cultural legacy of the Achaemenid period in this region. The period's impacts have been examined more **thoroughly** in light of historical documents and archaeological findings.

**Keywords:** *Iraqi Zagros, Achaemenid Period, Great Zab, Little Zab.*

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### Öz

Bu çalışmada, Kuzey Irak'ın bölgesi iklimi, topografyası ve genel tarihi çerçevesi üzerinde durulmuş, özellikle Akhemenid dönemine işaret eden antik yerleşimler, tarihsel olaylar, yol rotaları ve Irak Zağrosları'nın topografyası tarihsel kayıtlar çerçevesinde değerlendirilmiştir. Çalışmada kullanılan tarihsel kaynaklar arasında Babil yıllıkları ve I. Darius'un Behistun Anıtı (MÖ 521-519) önemli yer tutmaktadır. Bu kaynaklar, bölgedeki Akhemenid dönemini daha iyi aydınlatmak ve genel durumunu ortaya koymak açısından değerlendirilmiş, bu döneme ait önemli merkezlerin tespit edilmesi ve bu merkezlere dair daha geniş bilgilere ulaşılması hedeflenmiştir. Araştırmalar kapsamında, adları tarihsel kayıtlara geçen önemli merkezler incelenmiş ve bu merkezler çerçevesinde araştırma alanları belirlenmiştir. Yapılan saha çalışmaları kapsamında üç arkeolojik merkezde ayrıntılı incelemeler yapılmıştır. Bu arkeolojik merkezlerden bazıları yerli ve yabancı arkeologlar tarafından kazılmış olup, çalışmalarda Akhemenid dönemine ait bulgulara ağırlık verilmiştir. Özellikle, bu döneme ait yerleşimlerin sosyal, kültürel ve ticari yapısı üzerine odaklanılmış, bulunan eserler ve yapı kalıntıları detaylı olarak incelenmiştir. Bu arkeolojik merkezlerdeki çalışmalar, Akhemenid döneminin bölgedeki etkisini daha iyi anlamak amacıyla diğer bölgelerdeki Akhemenid dönem yerleşimleriyle karşılaştırmalı olarak ele alınmıştır. Karşılaştırmalar, dönemler arasındaki benzerlikleri ve farklılıkları ortaya koyarak, Akhemenid İmparatorluğu'nun bölge üzerindeki siyasi, ekonomik ve kültürel etkisini daha geniş bir çerçevede değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca, Akhemenid döneminde ticaret yolları, askeri güzergâhlar ve stratejik geçiş noktaları gibi unsurların, bölgedeki topografya ve iklimle olan ilişkisi de araştırılmış, bu faktörlerin dönemin önemli yerleşimlerinin şekillenmesinde nasıl rol oynadığı incelenmiştir. Sonuç olarak, yapılan incelemeler neticesinde Akhemenid döneminin bu bölgedeki tarihi ve kültürel mirası daha ayrıntılı bir şekilde aydınlatılmış ve dönemin etkileri, tarihsel belgeler ve arkeolojik bulgular ışığında daha kapsamlı bir şekilde ele alınmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Iraqi Zagros, Achaemenid Dönemi, Büyük Zab, Küçük Zab.*

## Introduction

The Zagros mountainous region in Iraq is located in the north and northeast of the country. This area is located between the Great Zab and Little Zab rivers in northern Iraq. The Zagros mountainous region in Iraq is located in the north and northeast of the country. This area is located between the Great Zab and Little Zab rivers in northern Iraq. The average temperature of this region during the winter season is 10 degrees Celsius. During some days and nights in the region, the average temperature drops below zero. During the summer season, the average temperature in the region is around 15 degrees Celsius. In winter it snows a lot and in some places the snow remains unmelted throughout the year. In the Sari Sakran and Przhe Valleys, for example, the average annual rainfall is around 800 ml.

Based on archaeological and ancient records, this fieldwork brings together and evaluates the findings of the Achaemenid period between the Great Zab and Little Zab rivers in Iraq. We hope that sharing the results of this study will contribute to scholars working on this subject, and we would like to emphasize the importance of new excavations and research. The archaeological centers of the Achaemenid period and the results of our research on these centers are evaluated. These include the Mdjeser Fortress, the Topzawa Tomb, and the Domed Tomb in the Arab Quarter of Erbil.

The existence of the Achaemenid period in northern Iraq has not been extensively researched to date. The most extensive evaluation on the subject was made by John Curtis. In his article published in 2003, Curtis briefly mentions the Achaemenid period in Northern Iraq (Curtis, 2005: 175-195).

The annals of the Babylonians mention the Achaemenid king Cyrus. One record mentions that in 550 BC Cyrus took the Zagros Mountains and all the regions east of the Tigris River under his rule. These regions were under the rule of the Medes. With the fall of the Medes, Cyrus made this region his main center and made the necessary preparations to attack the Babylonians from here (Khalil, 1991: 128-132). In the Babylonian annals (Chronicle 7 II 15-18), which we will discuss below, the Zagros Mountains in Iraq and the entire eastern side of the Tigris River are described in the following document;

*"In April, King Cyrus (II) gathered his army in Persia and marched down the Tigris River towards Arbela (Erbil). In the month of Iyyar he marched on the land of Urartu. He defeated its king, captured what he had, and established his garrison (there). Then the king and his garrison settled there."* (Robert, 2008: 57). The date in question points to 547 BC (Chronicle 7 II 15-18)

The reliefs and inscriptions of the Achaemenid period dating back to the reign of Darius the Great (521-486 BC) on Behistun Mountain are among the oldest examples of rock monuments. These monuments are located on the summit of the mountain and can be seen on the roads leading to Agbatan and Duchoman. In the inscriptions on the rock surface, Darius the Great (521-519 BC) is remembered in the future for his successful suppression of a rebellion against him. One paragraph of Darius' inscriptions describes his crossing of the Erbil Plain to put down the rebellion against him and the tortures he inflicted on the rebels.

In paragraph 26 of the inscriptions on Mount Behistun, the subject is treated as follows:

*"Shetrantakhma of the Sagirtian tribe rose up and said, 'I am the king and the grandson of Keyahsar (Keykhsram). Then I raised an army from Midea and Persia and crushed the uprising. I put Takhmas, my servant, at the head of the army. I gave them orders and told them to crush the uprising (those who would not listen to me). Takhmas set out with his army and Abur-u-mazda was behind me in this battle. With the protection of Abur-u-mazda, they crushed the uprising. On the 5th day of Tsbrinton (October) this battle was fought and Shetrantakhma was taken prisoner and brought to me. I cut off his nose, ears, tongue, removed one of his eyes and hung him where everyone could see him. Then I impaled him to death in the city of Arbella and 447 people were freed"* (Von Voigtlander, vol. 2)

The region of northern Iraq, rich in archaeological heritage, likely holds many remains from the Achaemenid period. This assumption is supported by the presence of evidence that highlights the abundance of remains in this area. However, despite this potential, the period following the Neo-Assyrian Empire has not received sufficient scholarly or archaeological attention. As a result, much of the material culture and historical context of the Achaemenid period in this region remains underexplored. Future research efforts could uncover significant insights into this transitional and culturally diverse era.

### **Mdjaser Castle**

Sidekan town in the Soran district of Erbil. In 1961, Taha Bakr and Fuad Safar conducted a visit to Mdjaser Castle. The German archaeologist Boehmer visited the site in 1973 and produced a plan of the castle. Boehmer provides details about two column bases (Figure 1). One of them is attributed to the Urartian period, while the other is dated to the Achaemenid period. These column bases exhibit striking similarities with examples from Persepolis in terms of their overall design. Notably, the general form of the pedestals is bell-shaped. Furthermore, 17 additional column bases were identified in the vicinity of Mdjaser by Marf. Sculptures

These statues were discovered in Mdjaser and are dated to the 6th century BC. They are likely associated with tombs from the Achaemenid period, as they share similar dimensions and artistic characteristics with statues created during that time. The figures depict a bearded man holding a glass in one hand, while placing the other hand on his chest. Interestingly, the statues are unclothed (Marf, 2016b: 139).

### **Topzawa Tomb**

The Topzawa grave is located north of the Çay valley, about 3 km northeast of the village of Topzawa. During road construction activities between Topzawa and Sidekan, a tombstone was found in the northeast part of the Topzawa tomb. It was determined that this tombstone dates back to the Achaemenid period (Danti, 2014: 32). Further investigation revealed that the stone belongs to a grave structure (Figure 2). Three walls of the chamber grave—north, south, and west—were uncovered. The walls were constructed using square-shaped cut limestone blocks (Danti, 2014: 4). The chamber grave has a depth of 2.5m (Figure 1), with the north-south wall measuring 2.2m and the east-west wall 2.25m. The maximum height of the walls is 1.8m. The ceiling featured a hipped roof made of

limestone, constructed with two types of limestone and fine stone materials. This design was intended to protect against external factors like rain (Danti, 2014: 32).

The entrance to the tomb is on the southern side, opposite the Topzawa watercourse. The entrance was sealed with smooth, gray stones. The grave was reused, as evidenced by a 40cm to 60cm soil layer separating the first and second bodies. Human bones were found carefully arranged within this soil layer. After the skeletons were removed, the grave was refilled with soil and stones. Additionally, some human bones were discovered grouped near the wall (Danti, 2014: 33).

In addition to the skeletons, artifacts such as pottery and jewelry (including a bronze necklace, earrings, bracelets, beads, and a crown) were unearthed inside the grave (Figures 2, 3). The bracelet and crown are attributed to the Achaemenid period due to their similarity to artifacts found in the Galakuti and Susa villages during the same era (Haerinck, 1989: 472). Among these artifacts, numerous animal bones were also discovered, including the front teeth of two animals. The pottery fragments found in this grave further confirm its connection to the Achaemenid period (Figures 4, 5). The ceramics found here are similar to those from other Achaemenid sites, including Pasargadae (Ghirshman, 1954: 134), Agrap Hill (Schmidt, 1957: 210), Hasanlu IIIa (Young, 1973: 55), and the Susa Mound (Dyson, 1965: 205-2012).

Unfortunately, the grave walls suffered significant damage due to waterborne stones, which caused serious destruction to the grave's interior. This damage resulted in the exposure of some burial remains and the loss of certain artifacts, as they were taken by local people (Danti, 2014: 32). Radiocarbon dating (C-14 analysis) was applied to the bones and other artifacts, confirming their origins in the late Achaemenid period (359–89 BCE) (Danti, 2014: 32).

To the north of this tomb, four additional tombs of similar design were discovered. These tombs, dating to the Achaemenid period, were remarkably well-preserved, with intact structures and well-maintained bodies. The deceased were placed with their heads facing west (Danti, 2014: 32). Pottery fragments were also found in these graves. Based on the evidence from these tombs, it is concluded that they belong to the Achaemenid period (Danti, 2014: 32).

### **Domed Tomb In The Arab Neighborhood of Erbil**

Although there are a few documents indicating that Erbil came under the rule of the Achaemenids, sufficient data on the Achaemenid traces in Erbil have not been found so far, as there are no excavations. Information about the mention of Erbil in the Achaemenid period is found in the annual records of the Babylonian King (Nabonidus) (Curtis, 2005: 14). It is stated that in 547 BC, King Cyrus and his troops crossed the Tigris River from the region close to Erbil and traveled to Lydia (Grayson, 1975: 107). At the same time, the inscriptions on Behistun Mountain mention Darius Arbella. These inscriptions mention the uprising against Darius in Erbil (Kent, 1995: 124-133). It can be assumed that Erbil was an important center during the Achaemenid period. Indeed, according to the historian Arian (88-60 BC), Erbil was an important city during this period (Van Ess, 2011: 105).

An archaeological excavation in the Arab neighborhood of Erbil between 2009 and 2011 revealed a two-sectioned burial chamber. This tomb was used during the late Assyrian, Median and Achaemenid periods (Van Ess, 2011: 105). The tomb with a vaulted upper cover is located 500 meters northwest of the Erbil fortress. Although the tomb belongs to the Assyrian period, it was also used during the Achaemenid period.

### **Terracotta Sarcophagus**

A large terracotta sarcophagus vessel was found in the center of the burial chamber in Erbil. It measures 1.92 cm. in length externally and 1.82 cm. internally. The sarcophagus was found in a north-south orientation, placed on a mudbrick floor in the room. The dimensions of the sarcophagus prove that it was placed before the construction of the room.

The exterior of the sarcophagus was plastered with mud. Horizontal and vertical incised line decorations were applied on it (Figure 6). The use of this form of sarcophagus, which is an example of thick-sided production, continued in the Assyrian and later Median and Achaemenid periods. A terracotta lid was found on the sarcophagus here (Figure 7).

### **Conclusion**

The thorough examination of archaeological evidence, ancient texts, and material culture from the Zagros mountain range of northern Iraq clarifies the multifaceted role this area played during the Achaemenid period. Situated between the Great Zab and Little Zab rivers, this region emerges as a key component of the Achaemenid Empire's strategic, political, and cultural fabric. Through a synthesis of cuneiform sources, ancient Greek accounts, and archaeological findings, a clearer picture of the Achaemenid presence in northern Iraq has begun to take shape, though much remains underexplored.

Historical records provide convincing testimony to the region's significance. The Babylonian annals reference King Cyrus's campaign in 547 BCE, which utilized the area around Erbil as a strategic base for advancing toward Lydia. This highlights the region's importance as a logistical and military corridor. Similarly, the Behistun inscriptions of Darius the Great document uprisings against his rule in Arbela, emphasizing the city's political prominence during this era. Greek sources, such as the writings of Ariannus, further support Erbil's importance, portraying it as a well-established and key city under Achaemenid administration. These accounts situate northern Iraq not merely as a marginal region but as a hub of political and military activity crucial to the broader imperial framework.

Archaeological findings reinforce the historical narrative by providing tangible evidence of Achaemenid influence. The column bases found at Mdjeser Castle, which bear stylistic resemblance to the bell-shaped bases at Persepolis, are evident markers of the empire's architectural reach. These bases, along with associated artifacts, underscore the integration of this region into the cultural and artistic traditions of the Achaemenid heartland. Similarly, the Topzawa tomb, with its distinctive

chamber structure and the artifacts it contained—including pottery, jewelry, and animal bones—offers valuable insights into Achaemenid funerary practices. The use of limestone blocks, the hipped roof construction, and the layering of burials within the tomb further align with known Achaemenid architectural and burial customs. These findings affirm that the Achaemenid cultural imprint extended deeply into the region.

Another significant discovery is the domed tomb in the Arab neighborhood of Erbil, located near the city's fortress. Though originally an Assyrian structure, its subsequent use during the Median and Achaemenid periods demonstrates the continuity and transformation of cultural practices over time. The terracotta sarcophagus found within the tomb, with its distinctive dimensions and decorative elements, matches burial traditions of the Achaemenid period. This continuity of use suggests not only the durability of earlier structures but also the Achaemenid ability to assimilate and reconfigure pre-existing cultural elements, blending them into their imperial framework.

The evidence from northern Iraq also contributes to a broader understanding of the Achaemenid Empire's administration and cultural policies. The artifacts from Mdjeser Castle, Topzawa, and Erbil reveal a region deeply engaged with the artistic and administrative traditions of the empire. Furthermore, the strategic positioning of this area emphasizes its role as a critical nexus for trade, communication, and military operations. The proximity of Erbil to key routes leading to Lydia and other western territories underscores the region's importance in the Achaemenid military campaigns and territorial expansion. This strategic significance, coupled with the wealth of material evidence, reinforces the role of northern Iraq as a key western frontier of the empire.

However, despite these compelling findings, the Achaemenid period in northern Iraq remains significantly under-researched. Compared to the Neo-Assyrian period, which has received substantial scholarly and archaeological attention, the Achaemenid era in this region is poorly understood. This lack of exploration leaves major gaps in our understanding of how the Achaemenid administrative, cultural, and military systems were implemented in this area. Future archaeological projects, particularly systematic excavations and advanced analyses, are critical for uncovering further evidence. Techniques such as radiocarbon dating, material analysis, and spatial mapping could provide more refined insights into the temporal and cultural layers of this historically rich region.

In conclusion, the Zagros region of northern Iraq stands out as a focal point of Achaemenid influence, bridging the empire's central territories with its western frontiers. The historical records and archaeological findings collectively highlight its strategic, political, and cultural significance during this era. Despite the wealth of material evidence, much of the Achaemenid period's legacy in this region remains to be uncovered. The archaeological record, though fragmented, suggests a rich tapestry of cultural interaction, continuity, and imperial integration. As research progresses, the region promises to offer transformative insights into the dynamics of the Achaemenid Empire, illuminating the interplay between local traditions and imperial structures in one of its most strategically vital regions.

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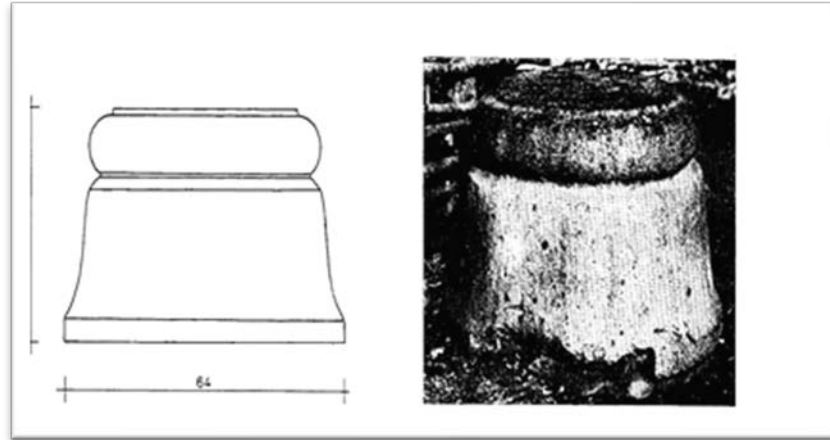


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Figures



Map. 1. Centers where traces of the Achaemenid Period are seen



**Figure 1:** A column base from the Achaemenid period found in the fortress of Mdjeser. (Marf 2014:fg 6,13)



**Figure 2:** View from the excavation of the Top Zawa grave (Danti 2014: fig 12b).



**Figure 3:** Bracelet from the Topzawa tomb -Achaemenid period (Danti 2014: fig 14b).

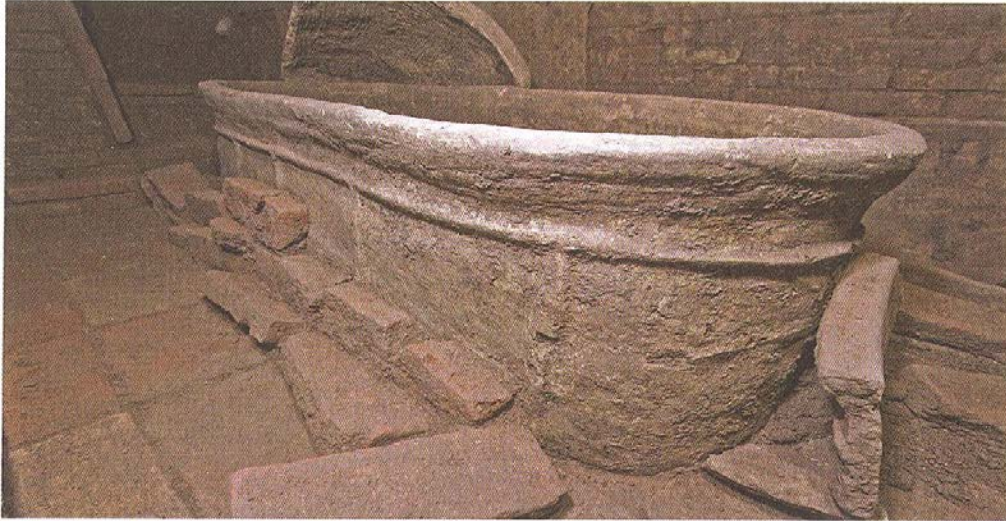


**Figure 4:** Jugs and jars from the Topzawa tomb- Achaemenid period (Danti 2014:Fig 17a).

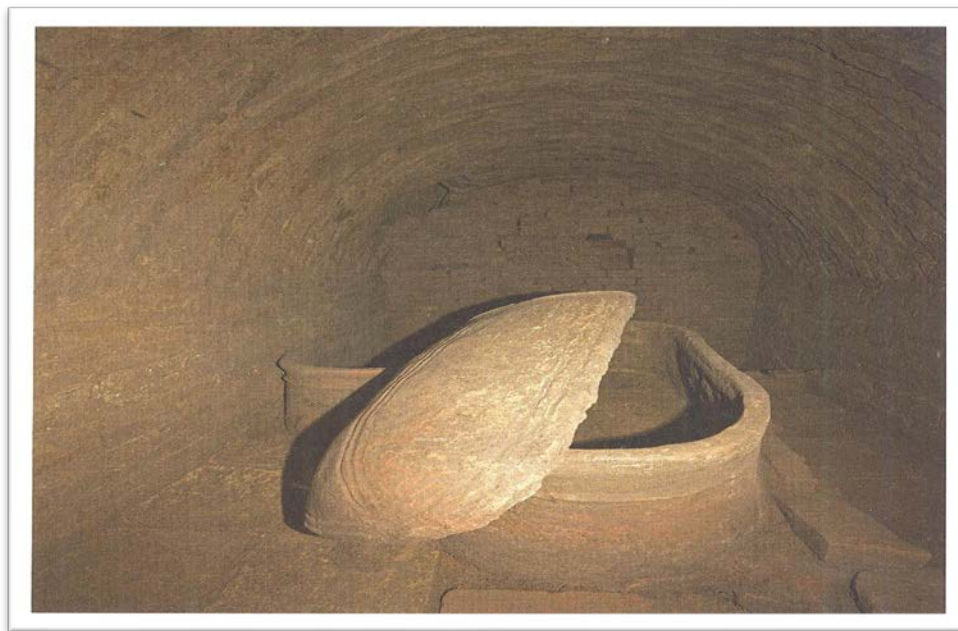


**Figure 5:** A sherd of pottery with a spout found in the Topzawa tomb, Achaemenid Period (Danti 2014: Fig 17b).





**Figure 6:** Exterior decorations of the Erbil Tomb sarcophagus (Van Ess, et al, 2012: Fig 10).



**Figure 7:** Terracotta sarcophagus and its lid (Van Ess,et al,2012: Fig 10,107).