Preface

The author's interest in the prehistory of northeast Iran began following occasional visits to the Shahroud area in the early 2000s, accompanied by my friend and colleague, Hasan Rezvani Nikabadi. Hasan has been working in Semnan Province since 1988. Over the years, he conducted numerous excavations, short reconnaissance missions, and field visits across the province, especially in Shahroud County. Following initial visits to some prehistoric sites and their landscapes in the area between 2000 and 2003, I proposed a program of archaeological reconnaissance for Shahroud County to the Iranian Center for Archaeological Research in the summer of 2004, to systematically study the ancient sites and their natural settings. Our fieldwork was conducted in February-March 2005 in two separate parts of the county: first, as a settlement survey in the foothill plains of Shahroud and Bastam, and second, as a survey of certain localities on the northern edge of the Dasht-e Kavir Desert in search of ancient mines and slag sites. The survey identified 51 settlement sites in the Shahroud and Bastam Plains, more than 270 ancient mines (mainly copper, but also lead and possibly iron), and over 40 slag sites (Roustaei 2012a, 2012b).

Before our survey, only three Neolithic sites in the Shahroud area were known: the twin mounds of Sang-e Chakhmaq, Deh Kheir, and Siah Rigi; Hasan Rezvani discovered the latter in the 1990s (Rezvani 1999). During this survey, we identified three additional Neolithic sites (Kalateh Khan, Qaleh Tappeh, and Kheir Abad) that are contemporary with the Sang-e Chakhmaq East Mound (Roustaei 2016a). Tappeh Sang-e Chakhmaq, comprising two adjacent mounds, was extensively excavated by a Japanese team in the 1970s and served as the primary reference for the Neolithic period in the northeast region (see Chapter 4). Just before conducting this survey, the author had gained close acquaintance with the Neolithic material of the Shahroud area through stratigraphic and delimitation sounding at Deh Kheir, directed by Hasan, in December 2004 and January 2005 (Rezvani and Roustaei 2016).

In February and March 2006, the author made a small stratigraphic cut at the newly discovered site of Kalateh Khan. Our primary objective in excavating Kalateh Khan was to obtain representative, ^{14}C-based archaeological and bioarchaeological samples from which we could obtain information on the settlement's material culture, chronology, and subsistence (Roustaei 2016b). The data recovered from Kalateh Khan suggest that the site belongs to the latter part of the Neolithic sequence in the region (ca. 5600–5300 BCE); therefore, the earlier part should be sought at another site with a more extensive sequence. Amongst the Neolithic sites identified at the time in the Shahroud area, the twin mounds of Sang-e Chakhmaq were the best candidate because they span a long cultural sequence from the aceramic/proto-ceramic to ceramic Neolithic. Of the extensive Japanese excavations at the site, no detailed account was available except for a few preliminary reports, leaving many archaeological inquiries unanswered (see Chapter 5). Therefore, excavating Sang-e Chakhmaq could provide valuable information on the West Mound's apparently aceramic deposits and the 6-m-thick Ceramic Neolithic sequence of the East Mound. This volume is the final report on our 2009 stratigraphic excavations at the twin mounds of Sang-e Chakhmaq.

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