

Review

Fortresses and castles of the first millennium BC on the southern part of lake Urmia, Iran

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ABSTRACT:

For a long time, Northwest of Iran have played a very special role in Iran's history due to its political and cultural importance and mineral reserves. Because of its specific ecological and strategic conditions, this area had experienced many economical and military changes during its history and, hence, was an important target for neighbours' invasions. In the late 9th century BC, Urartu's economic, political and cultural power increased, and they seized part of Manna, a region around Urmia Lake. Urartian influence in northwest of Iran was due to strategic reasons and for preventing a dominant Assyrian power. Since the late second millennium BC and the first half of the first millennium BC, this region have frequently invaded by Assyrians. In order to confront these invasions, Urartian and Mannaeen people constructed many castles in the region. It seems that the castles constructed by people contemporary with Urartians, specially the Mannaeen ones, were imitations of Urartian castles exists.

Keywords:

Northwest of Iran, Urartu, Manna, Castle.

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INTRODUCTION

Northwest of Iran had been the meeting point for different ethnic groups with different cultural and ethnic structures, a crossroad to pass and a hub for trading. In the first millennium BC, the aforementioned area had an important role in striking a balance of power between Assyrian and Urartian empires. In the first millennium BC, Manna appeared in northwest of Iran, near to powerful Assyrian and Urartian empires. Urartian main seat of the kingdom was on the eastern and south-eastern shores of Lake Van. Since 8th century BC, dominance and efficiency of fast-moving Assyrian horsemen diluted significantly due to increased number of Urartian fortresses in northwest of Iran which resisted Assyrian invasions for a half-century.

During 10th to 7th century BC, Mannaeen territory, which was located between Assyrians and Urartians domiciles, experienced serious crises for its environmental features and human characteristics. In the last two decades of 9th century BC, Urartu captured vast territories in northwest of Iran and constructed military and civil facilities therein. Then, Urartu extended its operation to the southern areas. It seems that it was during this operation that Hasanlu site was invaded and destroyed. Inscriptions found from Qalatgah, Kileh Shin and Dash Tepe belong to this period. In 780 BC, early in the reign of Argishti, Manna still was under domination of Urartu. According to the list of Assyrian literature, Manna was under Urartian domination till 734 BC. However, Manna gained independence from Urartu a bit later. Despite that Argishti I and Sarduri II conducted many military campaigns early in 8th century BC, Urartians could not dominate the Mannaeans anymore. This did not last long, though, and Manna was fully dominated by Urartu in the days of Argishti's reign. For a long time, Mannaeen territories have been dominated alternatively by Urartians and Assyrians. With establishing a government, and concurrent with an intensified Assyrian-Urartian conflict, the two dominant power in

the region, Mannaeans were constructing fortifications and unconquerable castles and cities with extreme diligence.

Urartian Castles

Hasanlu

Hasanlu Castle is located in south of Lake Urmia and in vicinity of a village with the same name. Hasanlu Tepe is the largest site in the Qadar River valley and dominates the small plain known as Solduz. The Qadar River rises to the west in the Zagros on the Assyrian frontier, modern border of Iran and Iraq. During 1956 to 1974, fundamental Excavations were conducted under supervision of Dyson. Its Iron Age levels include level V from Iron Age I, level IV with three strata of A, B and C from Iron Age II, and level III with two strata of A and B. Hasanlu IV includes a building complex with pillared halls and lateral rooms, and a warehouse which supposedly had different usages, taking into that many different object found here. Building number 1 is proposed to be a governmental building and the burnt one to be a temple (Dyson and Voigt, 2003). The Building number 5 is proposed to be a temple too (Khatib-Shahidi, 2010). This building complex is surrounded with some walls. Levels IV and IVB is attributed to Mannaeans by American excavation group, however

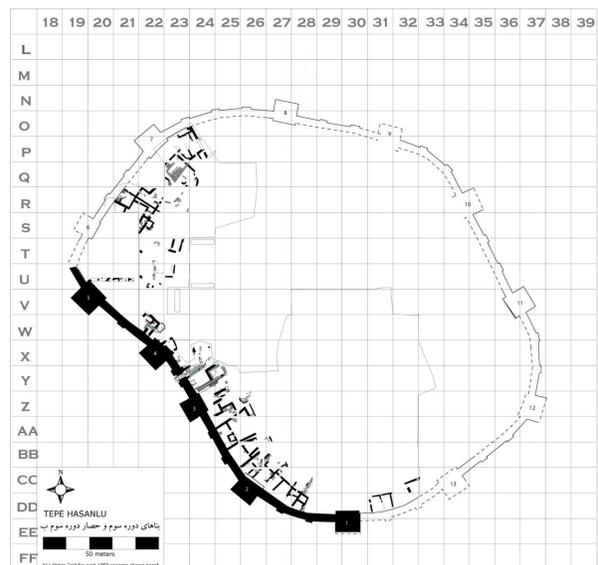


Figure 1. Hasanlu, the Urartian Castle (Kroll, 2011).

there is some doubt about that (Khatib-Shahidi, 2010). The evidence shows that Hasanlu was burnt and destroyed in early 9th century BC by Urartians.

After that, an Urartian settlement was formed. This settlement includes remnants of a castle with a regular circular plan which has 13 towers and a gate (Figure 1 and 7). The gate of castle is located on the western side and supported by two quadrilateral fortified tower on its sides. There are two bastion between every two towers. In addition, there are some bastions between northern towers of the castle which uniformly constructed in all parts. In northwestern wall, there are bastion between towers 4 and 5, because the curtain wall is inclined towards the north, there is no bastion between towers 5 and 6. It seems that this castle was destroyed in 8th Sargon's campaigns.

Qalatgah

It is located in northwestern Iran around the west shores of Lake Urmia, close to the Zagros mountains bordering Mesopotamia and Anatolia. large Urartian fortress and settlement, inscriptions from Men-

ua and Ispuini. Qalatgah is a large and steep site consisting of several high spots. A few hundred meters up from the modern road, two magnificent springs gush forth from a vertical rock outcrop situated behind a cluster of willow trees (Muscarella, 1971).

The remains of one or more buildings are still visible on the surface to the Qalatgah is a stone Urartian observation fortress which is constructed on a mount with the same name as the fort, a few kilometers from Hasanlu. The fortress was fully overlooking the Oshnavieh plain, its incoming/outgoing routes and specially Kileh shin's defile, controlling the beginning of the mountain pass in Qasemlou valley. This site was excavated by Muscarella, a member of Dyson's excavation group (Loon, 1975).

Agrab Tepe

It is a mound located near Hasanlu in Solduz plain. Agrab Tepe is one of three mounds lying close to the modern village of Dalma in northwestern Iran, southwest of Hasanlu in the Solduz Valley. Solduz region contact to north Mesopotamia by Kilishin pass.

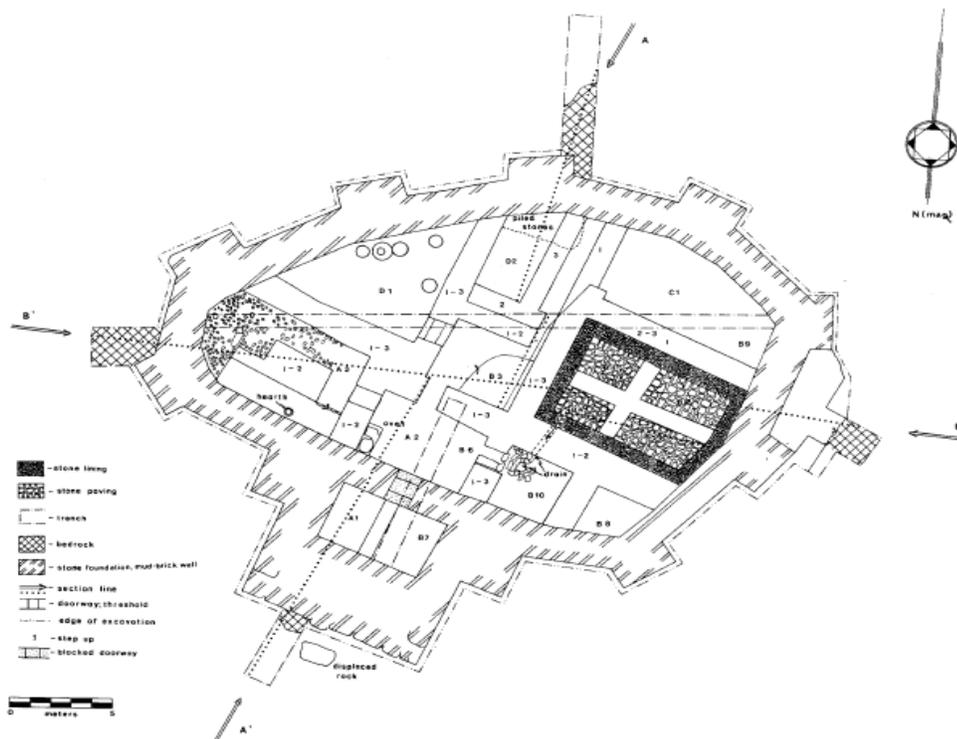


Figure 2. Agrab Tepe (Muscarella, 1974)

The site located in foothill, which abounded by mountains. This site was survived and excavated by American group during implementing project Hasanlu and remnants of a small Urartian fortress was identified (Muscarella, 1974).

This fortress have an irregular elliptical plan. Ten bastions were constructed on the surrounding curtain wall in determined distances, each with 2.50m width and an 80cm projection. There are 5-6 m distance between bastions, with walls made of rubble. A 1.80 m wide gate is located on southern part of the fortress, supported with two large projected walls. In terms of dimensions, towers of the gates are about two times larger than projections of surrounding wall (Figure 2 and 8).

Esmail Aqa castle

It is located near Urmia close to Iran and Turkey border. The most important Urartian place at this time is the double-fortress of Ismail Agha Qaleh in the Orumiyeh region, it is located at the edge of the Urmia Plain, high on a protruding mountain above a river, thus controlling the entire plain around. and was one main Urartian centers in century 9th and 7th BC. This castle includes upper castle in southern part, lower castle in

northern part, and a domicile (Kleiss, 1991). In 1978, a part of the castle was survived by an Italian group. There are some facilities in the two domicile's gate, indicating that there was a route in the lowest part of the domicile, extended from southeastern part of Lake Van to Urmia plain. This site is about 230*250 m (Figure 3 and 9).

Ahoo Darreh castle

It is located between Salmas and Urmia, on a height at a residential area. Among its remnants, the surrounding wall of the castle is clearly recognizable. This residential site and facilities of the castle, along with pre-Urartian remnants of a residential site, cannot be dated precisely. This site is not measured (Kleiss, 1972).

Kamana castle

It is located on western shore of Lake Urmia and constructed on a High cliff. The Castle has been built on the western heights of Urmia Lake with a view on the most important passageways in northwest of Iran. This passageway connect Urmia plain to Salmas plain and then, to Caucasia. There are many houses below the cliff that formed a residential area belonging to the 8th and 7th century BC. Houses have rectangular plan, com-

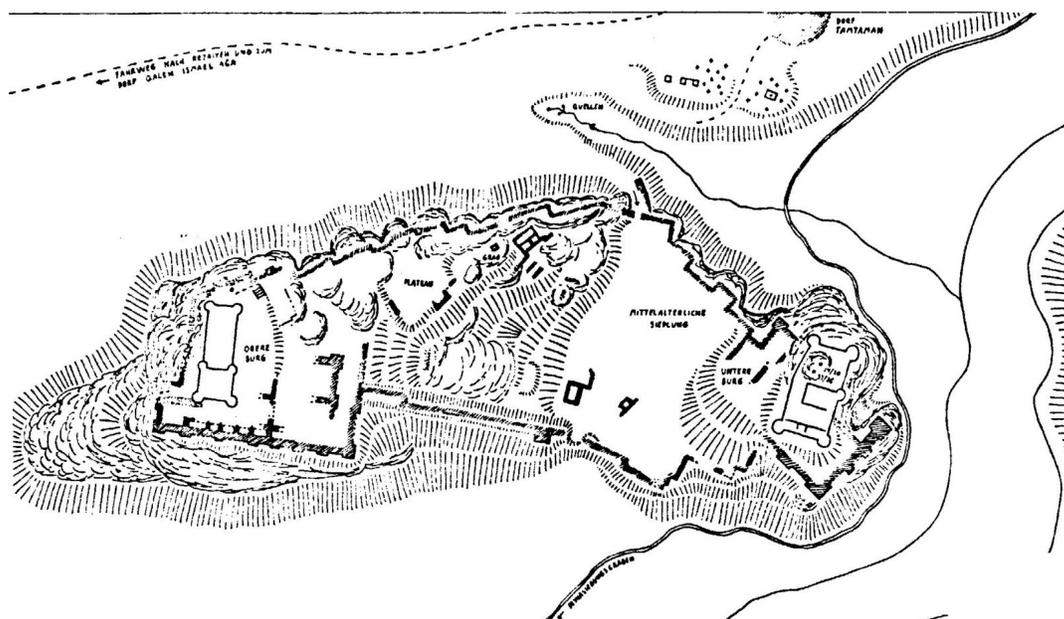


Figure 3. Esmail Aqa castle (Kleiss, 1991)

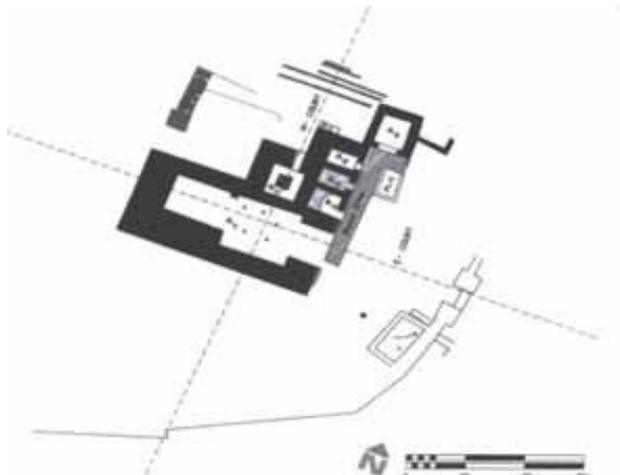


Figure 4. Plan of Qalaychi site (Kargar, 2004)

parable to Bastam and Turki Tepe's houses (Kleiss, 1978).

Mannaean castles

Mannaean civilization appeared in northwest of Iran and in the vicinity of then two great powers: Assyrians and Urartians. The kingdom was situated east and south of the Lake Urmia, roughly centered around the Urmia plain. The Mannaean kingdom began to flourish around 850 BC. The Mannaeans were mainly a settled people, practicing irrigation and breeding cattle and horses. The capital was another fortified city, Izirtu. Beginning around 800 BC, the region became contested ground between Urartu, who built several forts on the territory of Mannae, and Assyria. During open conflict between the two, ca. 750–730 BC, Mannae seized the opportunity to enlarge its holdings. The Mannaean kingdom reached the pinnacle of its power during the reign of Iranzu. There are many references to Manna in Mesopotamian literature. Mannaean field studies begun with



Figure 6. Ziwyeh Tepe

excavation of Tepe Hasanlu in Sulduz plain. Ziwyeh, Zendane Soleyman, Kul tarike cemetery, Qalaychi Tepe, and Rabat Tepe are among Mannaean excavated sites.

Qalaychi is the most important site excavated so far (Yagmaei, 1985). Discovering a stone 150*80 cm inscription in Aramic is the most important finding here. Aforementioned inscription refers to Haldy and Hadad, The Mannaean gods, and to Izerto, Mannaean capital (Lemaire, 1988; Bashash, 1996). Qalaychi has a cultural level with three strata which are la, lb and lc from top to bottom, respectively (Kargar, 2004). According to pottery evidence, lb belongs to late 8th century BC and includes a building complex at the center of the mound in which the largest unit is a pillared hall, located at southern part of the site. There is a stone slope east of the hall at the end of which there is a gate with two cube-shaped bastions. There are 5 rooms north of the hall. In one room, with a north-faced entrance, there is a large stone

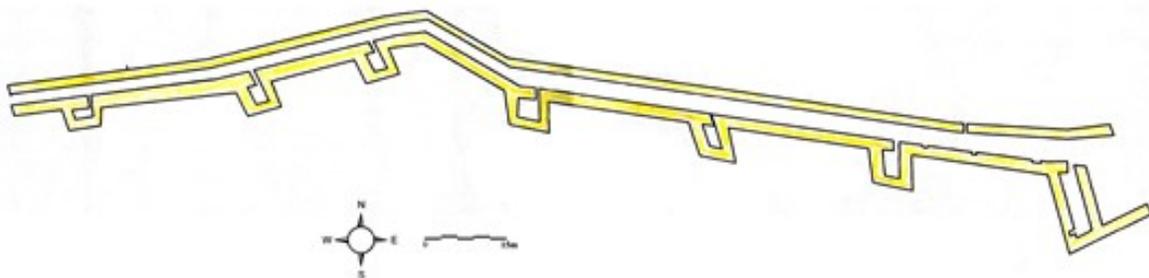


Figure 5. Jan Aqa castle (Binandeh and Kargar, 2008)



Figure 7. Hasanlu, the Urartian castle (Dyson and Voigt, 2003)

table located at the center. There are some stone terrace at the northern slope (Figure 4 and 10). Kargar believed that Qalaychi is comparable to Mannaeen and Izerto. Qalaychi was supported by and observed from surrounding castles (Kargar, 2004). Kul tarike cemetery shed some light on Mannaeen burial practice and beliefs (Rezvani and Roustaei, 2007). Mannaeen Territory was confined to Qezel Ozan Valley in the east, current border mountains of Iran and Iraq in the west, Sanandaj in the south, and mount Sahand in the south (Nobari and Mollazadeh, 2004). Swiny tried to identify Mannaeen borders too (Swiny, 1973).



Figure 8. Agrab Tepe (Photograph by the authors)

Jan Aqa

This being of military importance, is a stone fortress located in the vicinity of east plain of Miandoab and by the shores of Siminehrood. The fortress, which is located on the crest of the mount in an east-west direction, is one of famous Mannaeen fortresses in the region. The fortresses is surrounded with deep, terrible precipices, only accessible from the southwest side due to a mild slope. The linear defensive curtain wall includes two parallel walls with a width of 6 m, and its quadrilateral, hollow towers, which are located at irregular distances, have a height of 8.50 m and width of 6.30 m (Figure 5 and 11). In addition to strengthening the curtaining wall, these hollow quadrilateral towers were used for logistics and soldiers rest (Binandeh and Kargar, 2008).

Ziwyeh castle

It is located 45 kilometers southeast of Saqqez and is 140 m above the surrounding ground. The east side is easier to climb than the other sides. This castle is built on a hill which is located to the south-east of this city, looks over the surrounding area. A lot of things have been written about the importance and greatness of this hill (Figure 6). Accidental discovering of its treasures in 1946 as well as other archaeological findings made it famous. Surrounding walls are made of brick and are very thick, as it is common in 1st millenni-



Figure 9. Esmail Aqa Castle (Photograph by the author)



Figure 10. Plan of Qalaychi site

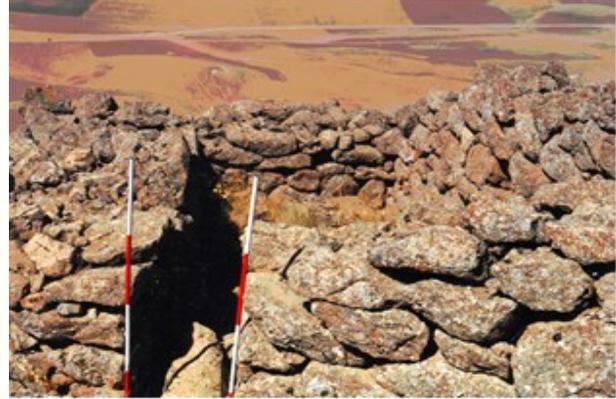
um BC architecture style. In particular at the top of the mound, walls are thicker due to subsequent additions. After a few stone stairs, the entrance gate appears. The fortress three-floor landscape, located at the top of the slope, resembles to the Mannaean-Median castles, carved in Assyrian reliefs, having strong intricate walls (Motamedi, 1997).

Bardine castle

It is located between Ziwyeh and Qalaychi on a high mound, with a very good view of its surroundings. The castle is accessible only from one side. In addition to its natural and built fortifications, the castle have a pool for reserving water, and some canals for leading the sewage out of the castle. According to the pottery evidence and architecture style, Bardineh is a Mannaean castle.

Josh Ato

It is three Kilometers from Shindej and in vicinity of Josh Ato village. The fort is named so after a -site located in the hillside of the Maghāreh mountain. The small river of Khalaj flows towards the north and a smaller and seasonal river flows south of the latter mountain. Adjacent to the south side of the Maghāreh Mountain, there are several springs that for the high quality of their water, residents of the surrounding areas, such as the town of Šahindezh, come to procure water. There is a stone, high curtain wall in eastside which has structurally-consistent features. This rampart was con-



**Figure 11. Jan Aqa castle
(Binandeh and Kargar, 2008)**

structed using large stone blocks and currently only a semicircular tower remained with a diameter of 16m and a width of 4m. Unlike Curtain wall of Uartian Fortifications, which had quadrilateral solid towers, semicircular solid towers in strengthened fortresses like Joshato indicated that Mannaean military architecture was more sophisticated than Uartian one (Firoozmandi and Alizadeh, 2013).

Lowlands in northwest of Iran, with uneven lands and a favorable climate, were active settlement centers in 1st millennium BC. Even in these lands, there was a great structural difference between mountain heights and the plains. This inequality in land use in mountains and plains caused human activities to be concentrated into the plains.

In North-Western Iran the natural environment is difficult, but not hostile to human settlements. In the wide plains agriculture and animal breeding has played a major role for millenia. In the plains and in the valleys around Lake Urmia concentration is on agriculture. In the higher regions, in Kurdistan, Eastern Azarbaijan, Ardabil or in the Northern part of Western Azarbaijan, there is more concentration on breeding sheep and goats while agriculture is less important. In winters the average. Heights and mountains were covered with oak and pine trees, where wild game could be hunted. Wood for construction purposes was abundant. Above the forests green yaws fed herds of sheep and goat, mainly during

summer time. So it is not surprising, that all these regions enjoyed some kind of wealth. And it is not surprising either, that mighty neighbors, like Assyria, always were tempted to get a share of this wealth, if not willingly then through force.

Based on local environmental features, fortresses often were constructed in impassable mountains and with a view of neighboring plains, and large stone blocks were used to covering the vulnerable points, constructing strengthened often dry stoned walls with a smooth face. The southern Urmia lake basin, particularly the basin of Zarrine Rud, has been occupied by various human groups since prehistoric times, thanks to its plentiful sources of water, fertile soil, pastureland, and a variety of animals and plants. In the first millennium BCE, this region witnessed the formation of the Kingdom of Mannea, which had an important role in the cultural and political course of the region till the rise of the Median empire. Josh Ato, Govur Qale, Qum Chay, Qizlar qalasi, and Zehak are among Mannaeen fortresses with strengthened stone walls. Buildings were constructed on the cliffs or with stone substructure and brick or mud-brick superstructure, and the outer walls were thicker, which is a common architecture style in 1st millennium BC. In steep and uneven surfaces, ground was leveled prior to constructing architectural spaces. Ziwyeh was a prominent example of this. Semicircular solid towers (in Josh Ato, Kimchi Way and Tabat, for example) and tower-like small rooms (Zendane Soleyman and Govur Qale, for example) and sometimes buttress were used to increase the strength of curtain walls.

In comparison to neighboring nations like Urartians, with their solid quadrilateral towers (curtain wall of Hasanlu), constructing the semicircular solid towers is a distinct feature of Mannaeen defensive architecture. Urartian influence in northwest of Iran was due to strategic reasons and for preventing a dominant Assyrian power. Since the late second millennium BC and

the first half of the first millennium BC, this region have frequently invaded by Assyrians. In order to confront these invasions, Urartian and Mannaeen people constructed many castles in the region. It seems that the castles constructed by people in contemporary with Urartians, specially the Mannaeen ones, were imitations of Urartian castles.

According to the theoretical and observed distribution we must conclude that the fortifications under the control of Qal'eh Ismail Aqa were more autonomous than in the previous two cases. The deduction is that the degree of control of Qalatgah over the dependent fortifications was stronger than in the case of Qal'eh Ismail Aqa. Data for Urartu in Iran are clear and allow us to put forward hypotheses and interpretations. The problem is whether the other regions of the Urartian kingdom are structured as precisely and as clearly as north-western Iran, that is to say whether we can extend to the other regions of Urartu (Biscione, 2007).

CONCLUSION

These fortresses in all parts of the country give the impression that the entire region was ruled by many small rulers. This situation is reflected in the Assyrian sources of the same period, which concerning the mountain countries speak of numerous small territorial units. The Urmia Lake basin has been potential for human groups. Food resources, Good environmental condition for agriculture and husbandry attracted concourse in first millennium BC.

The Castles have been built on the heights of Urmia Lake basin with a view on the most important passageways in northwest of Iran. Those passageways connect Urmia lake basin to Caucasia and Mesopotamia.

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