CHAPTER 1

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 (Figures 1.1–1.3) 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; Krebernik 2006: 62–7).

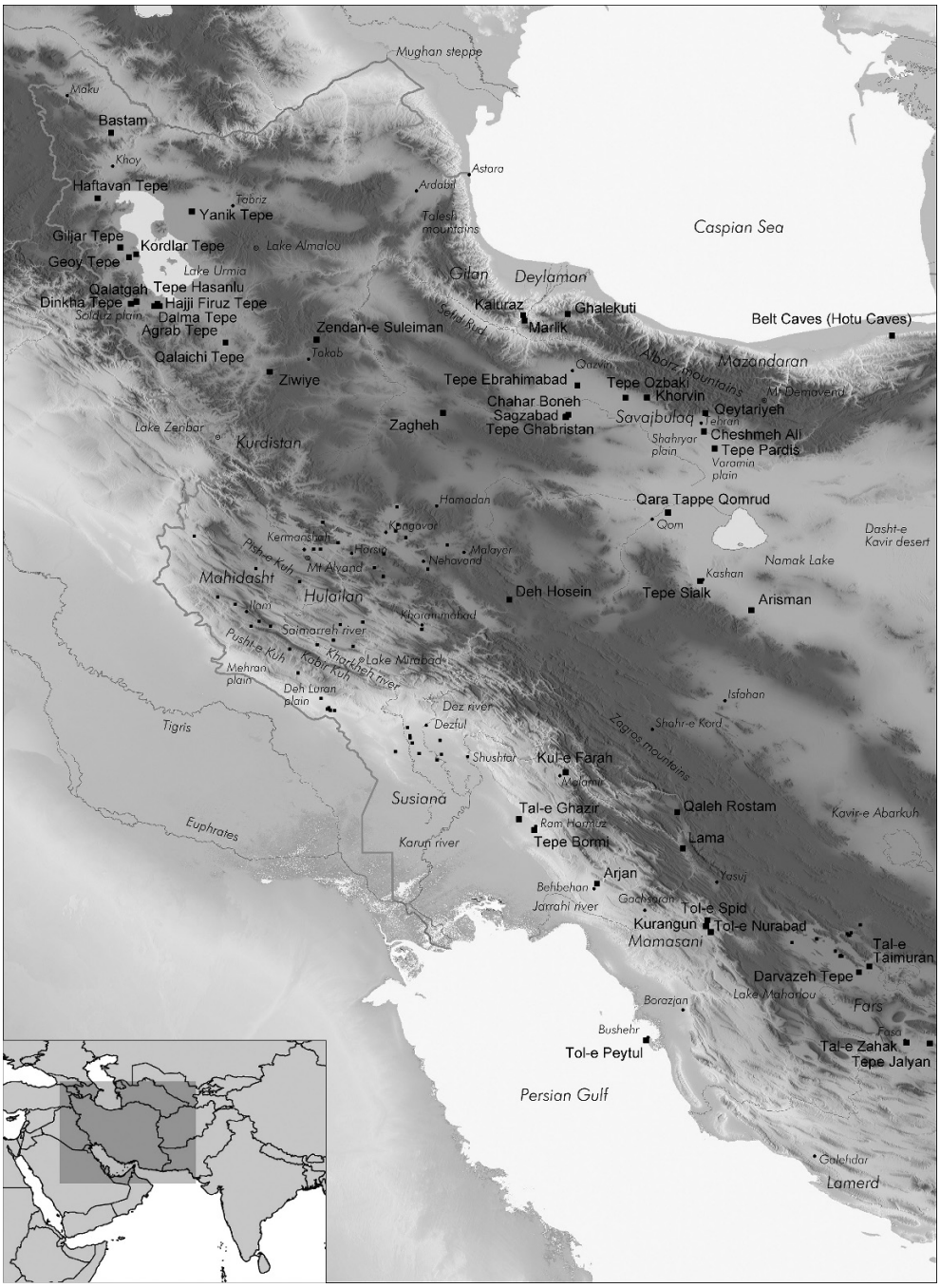

Figure 1.1. Archaeological sites in western Iran, principally of the earlier periods.

The etymology of Elam has been much discussed. 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 eighteenth century BC, that a name for the

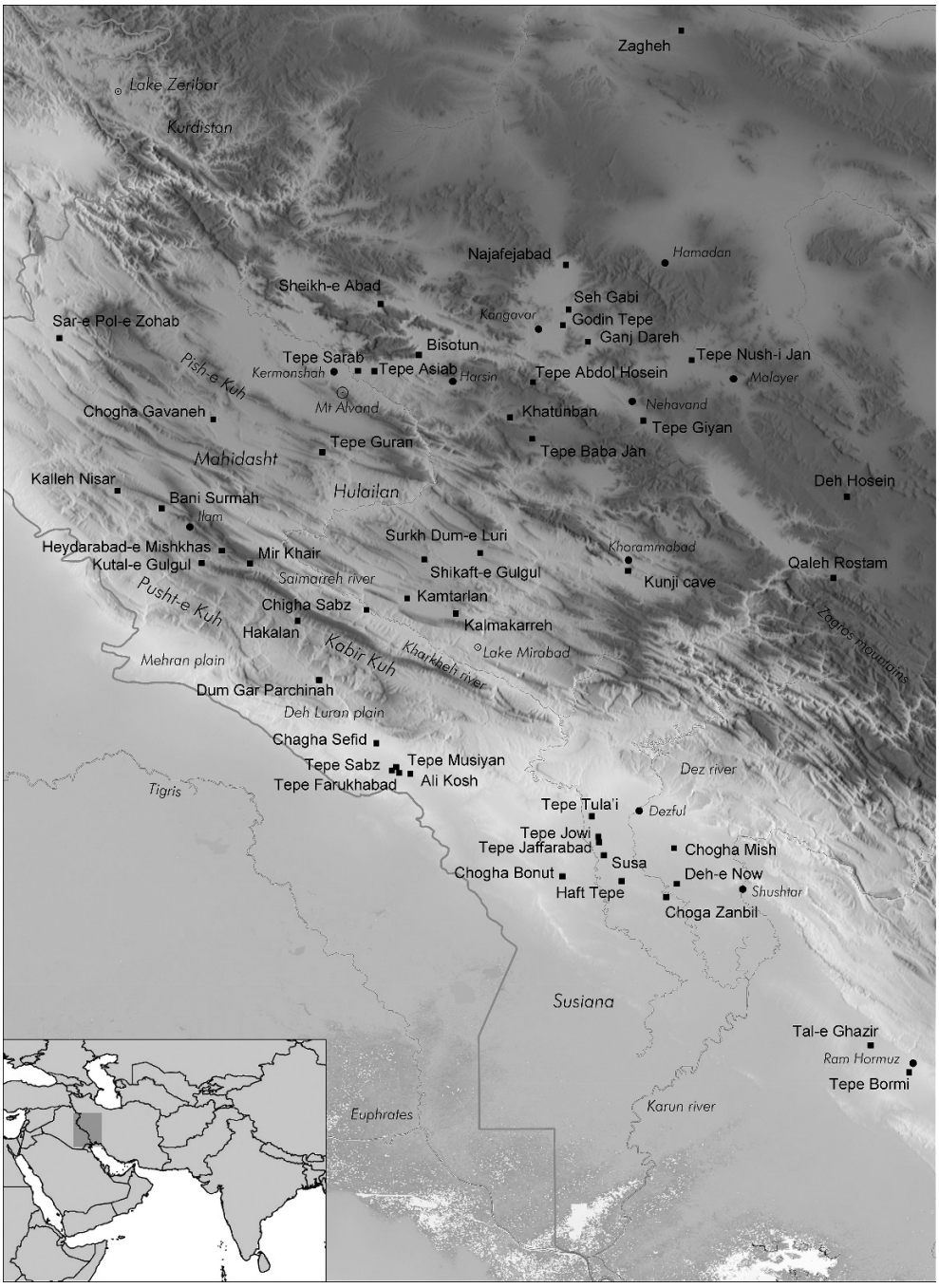

Figure 1.2. Detailed map showing archaeological sites in Luristan and Khuzistan of the earlier periods.

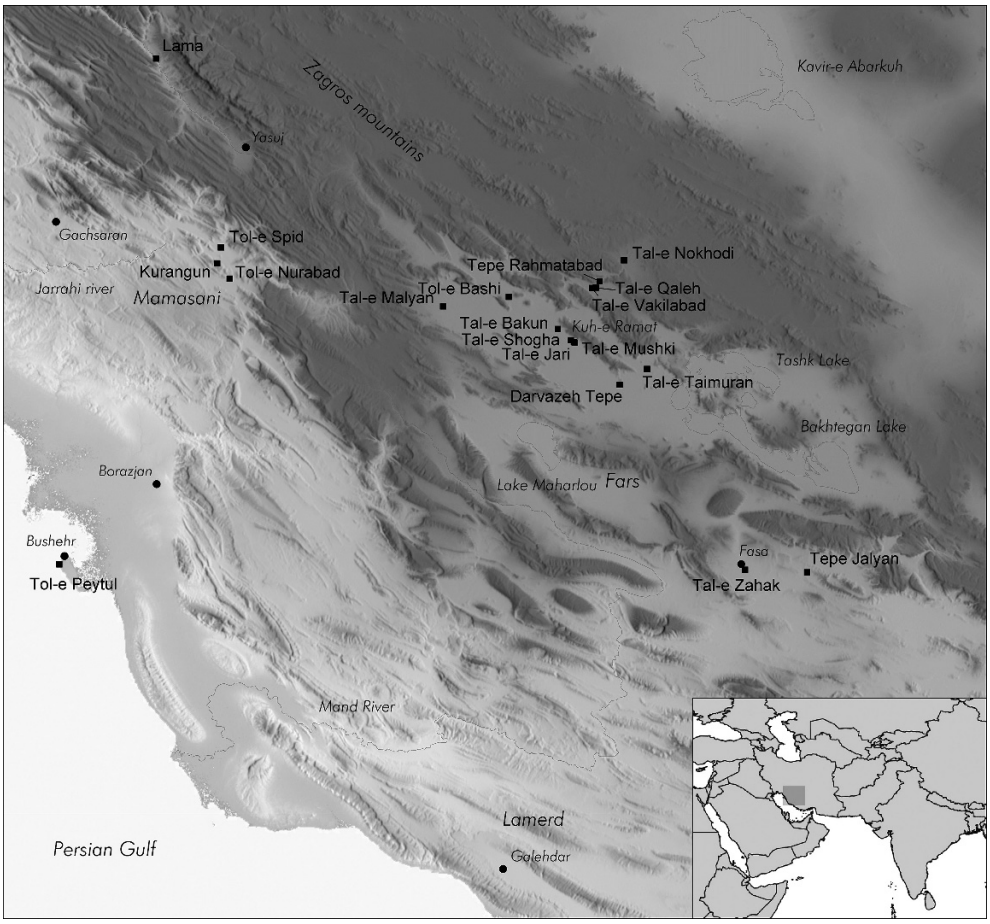

Figure 1.3. Detailed map showing archaeological sites in Fars through the Bronze Age.

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; on the language in general see e.g. Reiner 1969; Khačikjan 1998; Starostin 2002; Stolper 2004; Krebernik 2005). Walther Hinz suggested that this was a composite term made up of *hal* 'land' + *tamt* 'gracious lord' (1971b: 644), and it has even been suggested recently that it might be an Elamite contraction of Akkadian *ala'itum matum,* 'high land' (Quintana 1996a: 50). It seems more likely, however, that Akkadian *Elamtu* derives from Elamite *Ha(l)tamti* (Vallat 1996f: 89). Be that as it may, the fact remains that the 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 region. 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. 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 termed 'illusory' by M.-J. Steve (Steve 1992: 158–9).

Other than scholars, most people, if they have ever heard of Elam, know of it 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 a king of Elam named Kedor-Laomer is mentioned in Genesis 14:1, as well (his realm was interpreted as a reference to Luristan by the French cleric Sanson 1694: 221–2). Elam figures prominently in the forty-ninth chapter of the Book of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 49: 35–9; see also J.A. Thompson 1980: 728–9; Holladay 1989: 387–9). The prophet Daniel 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). Finally, 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. French *huron* denotes a 'rustic rural resident' (Roosens 1989: 99), and, although 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 diminished the intensity of feelings of Huron ethnic identity in the twentieth century (Roosens 1989: 96).

One thing is, in any case, certain. The available written sources which predate the eighteenth 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 (for an early attempt to synthesize the data available on the Zagros peoples, see Hüsing 1908a; see now Balatti 2014). Judging by personal names in cuneiform sources, the linguistic makeup 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 (for alleged ties between Elamite and the Dravidian language family at an unspecified but very early date, see McAlpine 1981; Blažek 1999). 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. Traditionally, the Assyrian conquest of Susa in the seventh century BC was seen by most scholars as the great watershed which marked the end of Elamite history (e.g. Schroeder 1925; König 1938), and the rise of the Persian empire was 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, 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 devoted just three pages to Elam in 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 completely different. Elam's absorption into the Achaemenid empire does not mark the point at which one can conclude an assessment of Elam's history and archaeology. Elam's political status may have differed from what it was during the third millennium BC, but it is clear from a reading of, for example, the late Babylonian astronomical diaries (see Chapter 10) that the region of Elymais and its people the Elymaeans, mentioned in Greek and Latin sources, 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 (see 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 great 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. Thereafter, it was the task of scholars to rediscover and re-create the many Elams of the more distant past.

WHERE WAS ELAM?

In a letter of 21 October 1621, the Italian traveller Pietro della Valle reproduced five cuneiform signs from an inscription of Xerxes (XPb) at Persepolis (reprinted in della Valle 1845: 253). In this he was followed in 1626 by Sir Thomas Herbert, the fourth edition of whose travel account, published in 1677 (Herbert 1677: 142), included 'some copies of cuneiform signs . . . the first that had been published in England'. As R.W. Rogers noted in 1900, however, 'unhappily they did not form a complete inscription'. Rather, 'The first two lines come from one inscription, and the third from another, and the copying was not very well done' (Rogers 1900: 23). Similarly, in 1667 an English East India Company agent named Samuel (or Stephen? see Sainsbury 1916: 239) Flower visited Persepolis in company with a Polish draftsman and artist (Birch

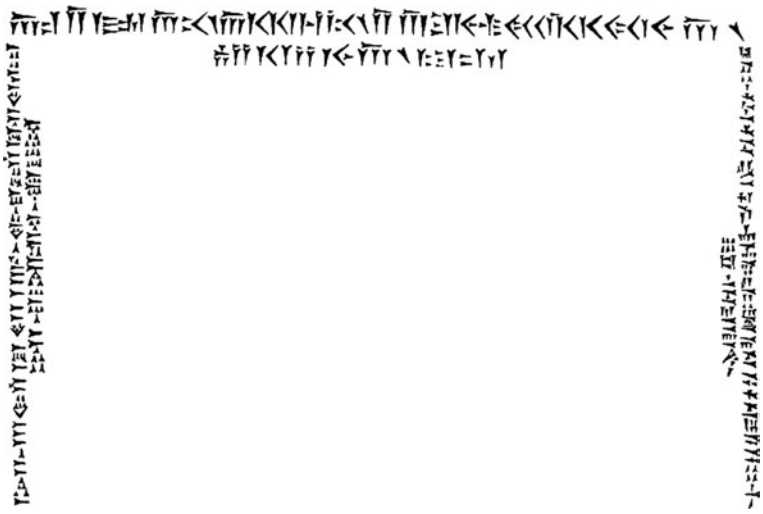

Figure 1.4. Jean Chardin's copy of DPc (after Rogers 1900: 24).

1756: 324) who presumably made the copies of random cuneiform signs that were subsequently transmitted to the Royal Society via Benjamin Lannoy (fl. 1660–8), the English consul at Aleppo (Flower 1693). These, too, originated in different inscriptions, and the sequence in which Flower reproduced them, separated by full stops, was entirely artificial (Rogers 1900: 77). The first coherent copy of an Elamite inscription (Figure 1.4) was made by Jean (Sir John) Chardin, who visited Persepolis three times between 1667 and 1674 (Langlès 1811: 320, and Atlas Pl. 69; Rogers 1900: 24) and whose copy of what was actually a trilingual inscription at Persepolis was published in various editions of his travel account beginning in 1686. It took almost a century, however, before Carsten Niebuhr recognized in 1778 that the Persepolitan inscriptions were written in three different languages. Thereafter, 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 (Lenormant 1874; Sayce 1874; cf. Reiner 1969: 54). Eventually, it was realized that some of the signs copied by Flower and Chardin were Elamite (Rogers 1900: 74–83; Pallis 1954: 24), and their copies can rightly be considered the first tangible evidence of Elam found outside the pages of the Bible. 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

Plate 1.1. Château Susa, the fortified excavation house begun on the Acropole by Jacques de Morgan in 1898 (photo: author).

into play. In the twelfth century Benjamin of Tudela visited the ruins of Shush and identified them correctly with Biblical Shushan, ancient Susa (Asher 1840: 117). Subsequently, however, many eminent scholars doubted the identification (Kinneir 1813: 99ff.; Forbiger 1844: 585 for a bibliography of the dispute into the mid-1840s; thoroughly discussed in Potts 1999b), preferring to identify ancient Susa with modern Shushtar, on the Karun River. In 1800 the geographer John Rennell argued the case again favouring Susa (Rennell 1800: 203; cf. Long 1833; Layard 1842: 104; Layard 1846: 61), although some authorities remained unconvinced until W.K. Loftus excavated the first bricks and clay cones with Elamite inscriptions at Shush in 1852. These included, amongst other things, remnants of a trilingual inscription of 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 (Boucharlat and Labrousse 1979). From this point onward 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 in the late nineteenth century of investigations at the site by French excavators (J. Dieulafoy 1888; M. Dieulafoy 1885, 1893; de Morgan 1905; see also Harper, Aruz and Tallon 1992: 20–4; Nasiri-Moghaddam 2004; Chevalier 1997, 2010; Mousavi 1996, 2013) (see Plates 1.1 and 1.2).

By extension, therefore, there could be no doubt that the name Elam referred to Khuzistan, for did not Daniel (Plate 1.3) 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

Plate 1.2. View over the site of Susa taken from the Château (photo: Professor Machteld Mellink, courtesy of Bryn Mawr College).

Plate 1.3. View from the site of Susa towards the reputed tomb of the prophet Daniel (photo: Baroness Marie Thérèse Ullens de Schooten, courtesy of Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University).