



Chesht-e Sharif

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The district of Chesht-e Sharif¹ forms the eastern part of the province of Herat. It encompasses 2,332 km² and is located between the Afghan provinces of Badghis in the north and Ghur in the south. Only in the west it shares a small section of the border with the Herati districts of Obeh and Farsi (Fig. 1).

The area is comparatively sparsely populated²: in 2013, 23,000 people lived in Chesht, without exception in small villages along the mostly narrow river valleys (Fig. 62), and in the administrative centre Chesht-e Sharif, still a small settlement until today.

A substantial part of this area is occupied by the valley of the Hari Rud, which flows through the entire district. Today, one of the two most important major roads of the entire province still leads along the river, beginning in the east of Afghanistan, passing Bamiyan and Chaghcharan on the way to Herat and continuing farther westwards to Iran. In historical times, this route was one of the trails of the Silk Road leading to India. Even more remarkable is the fact that this comparatively highly frequented route has not been tarred until this day and that long-distance traffic from Kabul to Herat is diverted to the 250 km longer route via Kandahar. Even the smaller roads leading into the side valleys are not in a condition that would allow driving at a higher speed than approximately 25 km per hour.

Unlike the western districts, whose topography also has more valleys and plains, Chesht-e Sharif is a largely mountainous region with individual mountain chains, whose sharp ridges and crests reach peaks between 3,000 and 4,000 m in height. The east-west expanse of the district is traversed by the Hari Rud (Fig. 63), which carries water all year and irrigates large

¹ Also: Češt-e Šarīf, Shest, Shest Sharif, Chishti Sharif, Chest-e Sharif.

² Central Statistics Organization. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan - cso.gov.af/Content/files/Herat.pdf.



parts of the valley through numerous channels. There are no other larger rivers and the irrigation of fields draws off so much water from the few watercourses that individual streams at the foot of mountains or after their passage through irrigated areas are completely dried out. Although the water courses from the side valleys still bear water in midsummer, they suffice only for irrigating small agricultural areas that lie directly where the side arms flow into the broad Hari Rud Valley, in the uppermost part of wide alluvial fans (Fig. 64). Where soil profiles can develop, grey and brown soils, characteristic of dry climates, predominate. Despite an altogether low annual precipitation, climate-specific heavy rainfall can cause severe



Fig. 62 Modern settlement in a side val of the Hari Rud



Fig. 63 The Hari Rud Valley with modern settlements



Fig. 64 Contemporary settlement areas on alluvial fans, view from the helicopter



Fig. 65 Northern slope of the Hari Rud Valley, boulders on alluvial fans



Fig. 66 Side valley vegetation

flooding in the strongly profiled topography. Therefore, debris settles unsorted in the alluvial fans, sometimes even huge boulders which impressively illustrate the strong transportative strength of free-flowing water (Fig. 65). In these areas, alluvial deposits have formed into a bulk of conglomerates, which are characteristic of arid regions, with the result that the very deep groundwater in these areas can only be accessed by wells or *qanats*.

The predominantly continental climate with dry summers and cold, harsh winters represents a challenge to the water balance of the plants.³ Tree vegetation is therefore essentially restricted to the alluvial woods along perennial watercourses, where a lush, deciduous vegetation is encountered (Fig. 66), consisting mostly of poplars and willows. The rest of the vegetation corresponds rather to that of a semi-desert landscape, with only a few deciduous shrub species (pistachios, almonds, Judas trees, ash trees) and plants with very small leaves (like certain *juniperus* species and tamarisks); all species have deep-reaching, ramified roots. The number of shrubs is low, comprising solely deciduous kinds with small leaves (in order to reduce water consumption), for example, camel-thorn tree or thistles. Due to climatic conditions, the high consumption of firewood by the ever-growing population has led to extensive destruction of forest vegetation.

At higher altitudes, woodland has also been exploited, since all shrubs have disappeared in the proximity of residential areas. Sheep and goats have had a devastating effect on the already sparse natural vegetation, too. Overgrazing is widespread and, together with deforestation, the reason that only a few perennial plant species remain. That the region originally looked completely different is indicated by often large trees still growing in the direct vicinity of tombs and shrines (Fig. 67). These trees, which in a way belong to the funeral areas and venerated spaces are thus under protection, and often the only witnesses of the natural tree and shrub vegetation once present.

³ S.-W. Breckle, Flora and Vegetation of Afghanistan - www.ag-afghanistan.de/files/breckle_flora.pdf.

The most important crops⁴ are fruit and nuts as well as cereals, mainly wheat, cultivated up to an altitude of 3,300 m and, to a limited extent, barley (up to 3,400 m) as well as plants traditionally cultivated in Herat province, such as melons, water melons, pumpkins and fruitwoods, mainly mulberries, walnuts, apricots, grapes and figs - however to a much lesser extent than in the western part of the province.

Recent settlements consist as a rule of mud-brick houses with hardly any external windows (Fig. 68); Most are more or less square farmsteads surrounded by a mud-brick wall over 2 metres high, with a large yard inside and several buildings adjoined to the wall. The settlements are located either next to an artificially irrigated agricultural area in the Hari Rud Valley or in a somewhat higher location directly along tributary vales; only occasionally do they lie within the irrigated area. In these valleys houses of a more open design with porches and large windows are found (Fig. 69). Both types of buildings are usually one-storeyed, and the settlements have grown irregularly.

Present in comparatively fewer numbers than in the western districts of the province are fortified residential areas (*qal'e*), some of them with four round corner towers; yet, here as well they are mostly ruins.

A unique feature in comparison to the other districts of Herat province are the fortifications of Chesht-e Sharif. As in the neighbouring district of Ghur, here larger and smaller defensive towers are present as well as smaller keeps (*donjons*), situated in otherwise uninhabited areas or in the direct vicinity of settlements. The towers stand in a slightly elevated position, on the slopes of narrow valleys (Fig. 71), at the outskirts of villages or the exit of valleys. They are built of large-format mud bricks and show one to three rows of embrasures, one above the other, some with niches, and spiral staircases in the interior. The towers are multi-storeyed, recognisable from the outside by narrow windows on several levels. Like in Ghur, the lower part of the towers

⁴ http://afghanag.ucdavis.edu/country-info/Province-agriculture-profiles/province-overview/IS_Afgh_Herat.pdf.



Fig. 67 Trees surviving deforestation near a venerated tomb



Fig. 68 Present-day houses with only small windows



Fig. 69 Present-day houses with porches and large windows



Fig. 70 Remains of a fortified caravanseray (CS 23)



Fig. 71 Tower controlling a side vale (CS 28)



Fig. 72 Mud-brick tower (CS 20)



Fig. 73 Mud-brick tower with plinth (CS 24)



Fig. 74 Remains of a small mud-brick fort or tower (CS 31)



Fig. 75 Remains of a mud-brick windmill (CS 32)

is often executed as stone plinth (Fig. 73), but in contrast to the towers in the neighbouring region, virtually no decoration is preserved. The outer diameter of round towers measures between 4.0 m and 8.8 m, the maximum height is 11 m (compare to Ghur: 39 recorded round towers, between 4.0 m and 6.0 m high).⁵

W. Herberg writes about the towers in Ghur that they '... rarely occupy absolute valley or summit positions and that they are predominantly placed at the edges of valleys, at the foot of mountains [...] and on mountain ridges. They occur as rarely in clusters of ruins as they do as individual structures [...] almost never further than a kilometre from other structures [...] and always offer good distant views'.⁶

The towers in Chesht-e Sharif are mostly positioned on a slope close to a valley and are rather too small for accommodating a larger number of guards. As they generally offer a long-distance view, they must have functioned as observation points and/or watchtowers.

Today, most of these towers stand as solitary, sometimes quite prominent ruins in the landscape (Fig. 72). A few have already been completely removed, and could be localised only through the information provided by local residents.

Some of the better-preserved towers show remains of adjoining walls, so that they were originally part of a more complex fortified structure. The most obvious example of this likely purpose are the ruins in Borj, Qarye Dehran (CS 21, title image), which is a small oval complex (c. 35 x 10 m) on a mountain spur southeast of the village, it must originally have comprised two towers.

The remains of two of the buildings visited are particularly noteworthy, as they differ from the towers described for various reasons:

⁵ Herberg 1979, 58.

⁶ *daß sie '... selten absolute Tal- wie Gipfellen einnehmen und daß sie überwiegend an Talrändern, am Fuß der Berge [...] und auf Bergnasen platziert sind. Sie treten in Ruinenansammlungen genauso selten wie als Einzelbauten auf [...] fast nie weiter als einen Kilometer von anderen Bauten entfernt [...] und immer guten Fernblick bieten.'* Herberg 1979, 59; 60.

- Although the complex at Borj, Qarye Khaje Brahne (*Borğ, Qarye-ye Hāğe Brahne*) is severely eroded, the structure composed of a stone-built base and large-format mud bricks is still well recognisable (Fig. 74). It is the only tower with a rectangular ground plan (c. 10.60 m x 9.20 m). As there is no larger settlement in the immediate surroundings - as is the case with all other fortification towers in the region - it must have been an autonomous fortification. A site where most likely glass or glazes were processed (CS 41), situated more than 600 m southwards down the slope, could have been associated with this complex. Unfortunately, no datable material was found in the immediate surroundings of the fort.
- The name of the site Asiyab Badi (Fig. 75), located at the western side of the valley near the Dare-ye Takht village (*Āsyāb-e Bādī, Dare-ye Taht*), means 'windmill'. These structures with sails rotating around a vertical axis were formerly characteristic of Herat province, especially in the Ghuriyan district. Despite the eroded state of the structure and limited accessibility on the edge of a steep slope, this function is very likely, although it could not be proven with certainty. Unfortunately, not a single windmill was completely preserved in the entire area under study in the province of Herat.

Although not entirely unproblematic, the dates of the towers can be approached on the one hand by architectural correspondence with fortifications in Ghur⁷ and Bamiyan⁸. The former were dated mainly on the basis of historical considerations⁹ rather than on concrete evidence from an associated material culture; on the other hand, by comparison with fortifications in Sistan, which, on the basis of finds, architectural elements and historical evidence have been dated to the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods.¹⁰ In his work on the early Islamic history of Ghur, Bosworth (1961, 118) writes that the region has no significant cities, only agricultural settlements and - 'most typical of the landscape - many fortified places and towers where the freedom-loving people could defend themselves'.

The finds collected during the survey conducted 2004–2006 in the immediate surroundings of these buildings date from the late 9th to the 12th century (CS 20; CS 21; CS 26–28).

⁷ Ball 2002. - Thomas 2018, 105–144. - Comparative examples for fortified towers: south of the Hari Rud near Jam, mud-brick fortifications (Fischer 1978a, quoting Herberg 1979, Fig. 6.22) designated in the text as 'mud-brick watchtowers', forming a fortification line. The tower illustrated by Fischer has a stone base (at least 2 m high) and preserved thereupon are six floors (recognisable by the embrasures). The tower is dated by Fischer to the Ghurid period. He also refers to the Shaharak Valley south of Jam, where numerous pre-Islamic and early Islamic mud-brick ruins are said to be located (Fischer 1969a, 376). 'We know that in the Ghurid period the land route [...] was protected by watch towers and castles of both military functions and artistic importance' (Fischer 1978a, 335) with an illustration of a chain of towers on the slope (Fischer 1978a, Fig. 6.23) and an impressive tower with a stone base and geometrical decoration in Male Alau (Fischer 1978a, 335 Figs. 6.24; 6.25) as well as the picturesque site of Yahan surrounded by mud-brick towers (Fischer 1978a, 335–338 Figs. 6.28–6.30).

⁸ Baker/Allichin 1991. - Ball 2002, 25; 41. - Thomas 2018, 105–144.

⁹ Herberg 1979, 121. - Ball 2002, 42.

¹⁰ Stein 1928, 972. - Fischer et al. 1976, 255. - Now confirmed by Trousdale/Allen 2022; in 2024, they published an immense number of Sasanian fortresses in Sistan.



Fig. 76 Octagonal shrine, Ziyarat-e Khaje Nezam al-Din (CS 4)



Fig. 77 Shrines CS 38 (front) and CS 35 (back)



Fig. 80 Settlement mount (tepe) (CS 16)



Fig. 81 Fortified caravanseray in the Hari Rud Valley (CS 40)



Fig. 78 Chesht-e Sharif (CS 1a; CS 1b), remains of a 12th-century medrese



Fig. 79 Southern headstone of tomb CS 37



Fig. 82 Hill top settlement, dry stone walls (CS 18)



Fig. 83 Larger settlement area, extensively looted (CS 19)

A few religious structures (mosque, *medrese*, *ziyarat*) are preserved in the district of Chesht-e Sharif, and no major historical secular buildings were located. The outstanding complex in Chesht-e Sharif is situated directly north and northeast of the actual town of the same name. On a long, gently sloping detritic cone on the northern bank of the Hari Rud lies an extensive cemetery with recent and historical graves. Southeast of the cemetery, close to each other, are several *ziyarat*s of completely different design and date. They range from comparatively simple oversized graves with plain bricks, stone border and colourful flags (CS 37; CS 38) to plain rectangular brick buildings, whose façades are structured only through flat blind niches (CS 36; CS 39), and the mausoleum of Soltan Qutb ud-Din Moudud Cheshti (died 1132/33 or 1139/40 CE), an impressive central building with a pointed-arch *iwan* in the centre and two lateral minarets (CS 35, Fig. 77). To the southwest of the cemetery, two ruins stand about 20 metres apart, but they originally belonged to the same complex (CS 1a–b, Fig. 78). The exceptional importance of this architectural complex is underlined by the total absence of other religious buildings in the eastern study area.

An initial comparison with the other districts of Herat Province indicates clear differences in the type and function of the sites. Especially the architecture differs markedly from the historical buildings encountered in other regions. The number of larger religious buildings, such as mosques, *ziyarat*s and shrines increases from east to west.¹¹

There are only two areas of religious significance in Chesht-e Sharif, namely Ziyarat-e Khaje Nezam al-Din (CS 4) and the aforementioned *medrese* and shrines of the district capital (CS 1; CS. 35–39). These two areas, situated

¹¹ Thus, e.g. in the district of Injil such structures represent a third (34.1 %) of all recorded sites, in Ghuriyan 27.5 %, in Pashtun Zarghun 31.8 %, in Obek 30.0 % and 20.0 % in Chesht-e Sharif.

at a distance of more than 15 km from each other, show parallels in other respects as well: both places have an extensive cemetery with historical graves – some of them with marble *spolia* with inscriptions (CS 4), some with large (c. 2 m high) slate slabs as tombstones (CS 38, Fig. 77), comparable to those of the extensive historical cemetery north of the city of Obek.¹² At the fringe of both necropolises a special building is located. In Chesht-e Sharif (CS 1, Fig. 78) these are the ruins of the Ghurid *medrese*, and an octagonal building near Sabars (CS 4, Fig. 76) with a central dome, c. 11 m high, made of fired bricks of equal form and

¹² Cf. Obek cemetery (*Qabrestān Ūbe*, OB 31).

dimensions. Although the ruins of the *medrese* in Chesht-e Sharif were once part of a larger complex and the building near Sabars was from the very beginning designed as a solitary monument, there are nevertheless striking similarities in the dimensional characteristics. Even the clear width of the interior is almost identical in both buildings measuring 6.84 m (CS 1) and 6.80 m (CS 4, Figs. 91; 112).

Another characteristic of the eastern part of the district is the paucity of overlong, venerated graves of prominent persons (e.g. Fig. 67), usually built with stone boulders, now small pilgrimage sites decorated with flags and inscriptions, as they are numerous in other areas of research.

Likewise noteworthy is the low number of mud-brick or *pakhsah* caravanserays, which are quite frequent in the Hari Rud Oasis. Only two of these large quadrangular structures were found in Chesht-e Sharif; the first, Qal'e-ye Sarkari (CS 40, Fig. 81), 2.5 km west of Chesht-e Sharif in the Hari Rud Valley, the second, Qal'e-ye Chawni (CS 23, Fig. 70), in the mountains, south of the river at Qarye Khwarwazar. These caravanserays are located 25 km apart from each other, but have almost identical dimensions



Fig. 84 Archaeological sites flooded by the waters of the Salma dam (2022)

(81 x 73 m and 83 x 72 m), are oriented in the same direction and have the same internal scheme.

Larger cisterns (*houz*), which were or still are used by an entire village or parts of the population, which in Pashtun Zarghun still account for 15.9 % of the sites, were absent in the visited parts of Chesht-e Sharif.

The vast majority of sites in the eastern area are remains of settlements.¹³ A larger part of them are dwellings¹⁴, mostly quite shallow and flat elevations, which would hardly have encompassed more than three to five buildings. Only one small tepe remained intact, presumably because three graves are located on its surface; however, in 2005 it was situated in an area with heavy bulldozing, only to be inundated by the floodwaters of the newly built water reservoir east of Chesht-e Sharif (Fig. 84). Three small, potentially pre-Islamic sites (CS 6; CS 10; CS 13) are also located in the area which is now flooded (see below).

Apart from small sites there are also larger settlements (Fig. 83), whose surface area covers 1 ha and more, as in Obbeh and Karukh.¹⁵ These settlements are located at the estuaries of small north-south or south-north oriented side valleys of the wide Hari Rud Oasis, or only a few hundred metres up the valley, usually along small creeks, which still have water in September. All sites are extensively or completely plundered by illegal diggings (Fig. 83). During the survey, looters were still active at some of the settlements. We had the opportunity to take a closer look at the finds from two sites (CS 11; CS 19) during the looting: they included mainly simple glass or stone beads, metal pins and awls as well as small ceramic fragments. The exposed architecture consists mainly of dry masonry and stone foundations with mud walls. The sites mostly have shallow cultural deposits, and are not complex, multi-phased settlements. The pottery spectrum observed at these sites is quite similar.

13 Pashtun Zarghun 22 (50 %), Obbeh 21 (52.5 %), Chesht-e Sharif 23 (51.1 %).

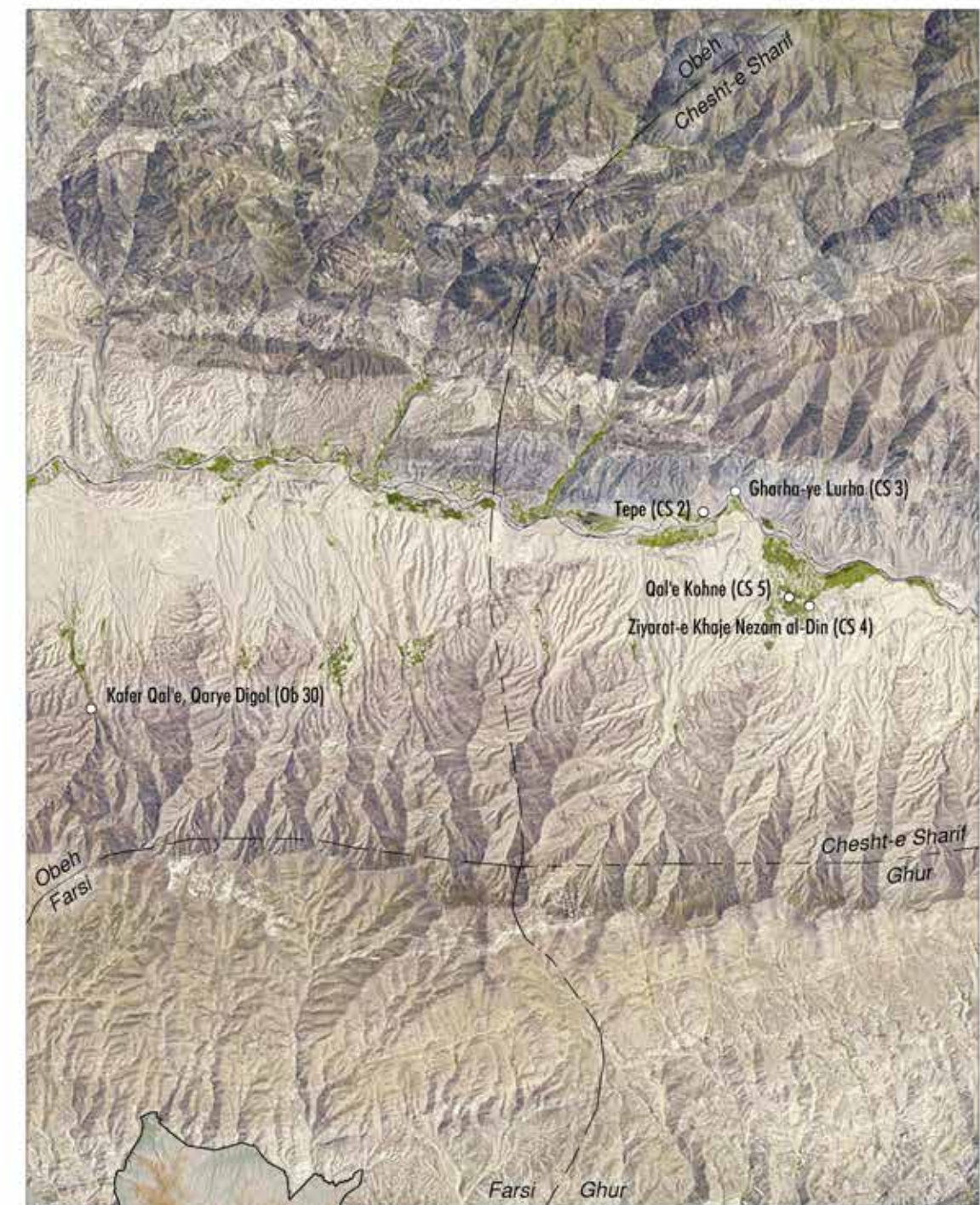
14 Pashtun Zarghun 9 (40.9 % of the settlements), Obbeh 9 (42.9 %), Chesht-e Sharif 11 (47.8 %).

15 Eqamatgah, Qarye Kul Ab (CS 17; 1.3 ha), Eqamatgah, Dare-ye Takht (CS 19; 1.6 ha) and Tepe, Qarye Shayr Khaj (CS 30; 1 ha).

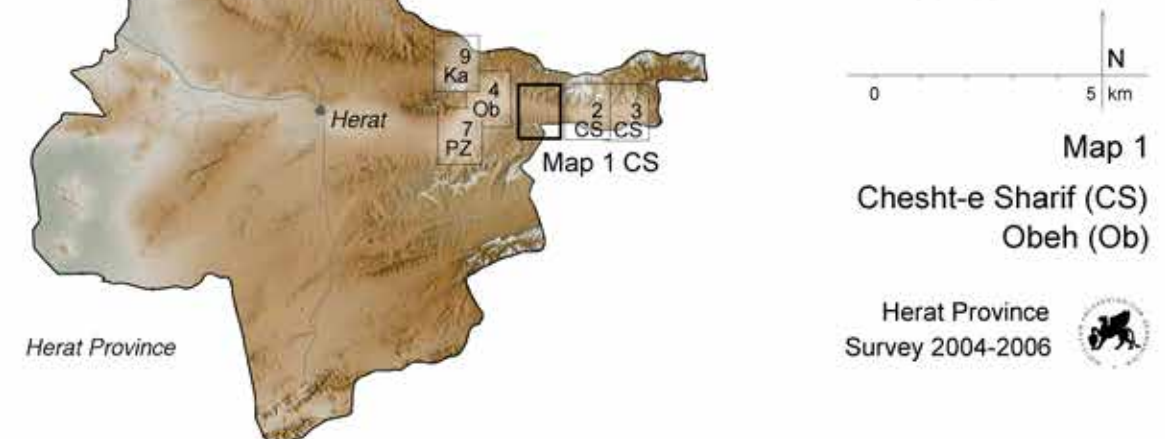
A common sight in Chesht-e Sharif and neighbouring Obbeh are hilltop settlements built entirely of dry masonry, located a few kilometres from the Hari Rud Valley into the tributary vales (Fig. 82). This type of settlement was also encountered e.g. in Karukh (Ghroumbab, Ka 4) and Obbeh (Kafer Qal'e, Qarye Digol, Ob 30) during the survey in 2005. The houses are built on a very steep and hardly accessible ridge, for example in Eqamatgah, Qarye Kul Ab, Dare-ye Takht (CS 17), in a strategic position approx. 75 m above the valley floor. The walls are made up of rough, angular blocks that have been placed by making use of the natural rock formations. A small stream flows at the foot of the settlement, watering adjoining small areas of agricultural land, which are still cultivated today.

In 2006, construction work on the Salma Dam, also known as the 'Afghan-India friendship dam', a hydroelectric and irrigation dam project located on the Hari Rud river c. 8 km to the east of Chesht-e Sharif town was in full swing. Construction had already begun in 1976, but continued only in 2003 and was completed in 2015. With a capacity of 633 million cubic metres¹⁶, the associated reservoir now covers almost all archaeological and historical sites that were located along the original course of the Hari Rud over an extension of 25 km (Fig. 84).

16 <http://www.wapcos.gov.in/upload/AfghanIndiaFriendshipDamBook.pdf>.



satellite image: Atlogis Geoinformatics



Map 1
Chesht-e Sharif (CS)
Obbeh (Ob)

Herat Province
Survey 2004-2006