Introduction

The aim of this work is to examine the history and the development of the urban and material culture of Rayy, from the foundation of the city until the Mongol invasion, utilizing the results of the latest excavations and surveys carried out between 2005 and 2007, and in the light of historical and geographical texts. This excavation was undertaken thanks to the Iranian Centre of Archaeological Research, directed by Dr. Masud Azarnoush and by his successor Dr. Hassan Fazeli. The archaeological mission was in cooperation with Ghadir Afround, archaeologist of Mirās-e Ostān-e Tehrān,1 who moreover carried out a very useful work on touristic land settlement. Thanks to Ghadir Afround, the archaeological site can today be visited and its vestiges appreciated.

This study has emerged from the PhD dissertation which I defended at Aix-Marseille University in 2009. The long original text has obviously been uncluttered of all overly academic matters, and the long analytical section concerning the study of the unpublished material at the Tehran Museum and a smaller part concerning the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (subsequently the Penn Museum) have been omitted. The latter will be integrated into the study of material from Eric Schmidt’s excavations now at the Penn Museum (the ‘Rayy project’), which I am now undertaking with Professor Renata Holod. Data, results and hypotheses, however, follow those in my dissertation.

Rayy was a key site on the Iranian plateau geopolitically. It is located south of the Elborz mountain range and is crossed by the major artery of the Silk Road, and lies between Mesopotamia and the Roman-Byzantine territories on one hand, and the Turkic lands and China on the other. The major interest (and paradox) of this site is in the dichotomy between its long history recorded in ancient and medieval texts, and the absence of a clearly presented archaeological record. The older research on this site focused exclusively on the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, forever leaving a major lacuna between these ancient layers and the more recent periods. The first question to raise, therefore, would be the date of the foundation of the later site, today called Dej-e Rashkān, enclosed within the modern city of Šāh ‘Abd al-ʿAẓīm or Šāhr-e Rayy, and situated in the south-eastern suburb of Tehran. What were the political and economic connections with the different political centres during its history? How did the city develop through the centuries, and when did the city acquire the role of a capital? Was the city one of the key urban centres in the political and administrative formation of ancient Media (or the early Islamic province of Ğibāl)? And did the city play a major role in this region, and in the Iranian and Mesopotamian worlds? What was the material culture specifically belonging to Rayy, and in which way did it contribute to the evolution of material culture in the pre-Islamic and Islamic worlds? To study the numerous questions about Rayy intensively, an archaeological project was initiated in 2005 with the cooperation of the Iranian Centre of Archaeological Research of Iran and the Mirās-e Ostān-e Tehrān. Several archaeological campaigns were carried out through 2007.

The city of Rayy (Šāhr-e Rayy) is today situated in the south-east suburb of Tehran, which has absorbed this site with its tentacle-like network of roads and motorways. Only fifty years ago, Rayy was still completely separated from Tehran by tracts of
large gardens and vast stretches of open country-side. However, the city has been slowly devoured by the urbanising momentum of the capital, which is spreading in all directions without a carefully thought out urban plan to take historical Iranian heritage into consideration. Today everything has been submerged by frenetic human activity.

Rayy appears to have lost its ancient historical identity as an economic and political centre, to be replaced with a more religious recent identity which is crystallised around the mausoleum of Šāh 'Abd al-'Aẓīm, the brother of the eighth Shia Imam, 'Ali al-Riḍā, whose mausoleum in Mashhad is the archetypal pilgrimage site of Iran. Moreover, the waves of urbanization and industrial activity, which have continued since the beginning of the 20th century, have definitively erased certain traces of this historical identity. Today, a few vestiges of the old city still show on the surface, but even those have essentially been continuously exploited by farmers, who use their mud bricks to render the fields more fertile. Formerly the vestiges also provided shelter for refugees.

During recent years the main interest of European, American and Iranian archaeologists and historians in this site, whose history is – as we shall see – brimming with information, was exclusively concentrated on the site of Češmeh ʿAlī, where the traces of the first occupation, dating back to the late Neolithic period, were found, and overall focused on research into the ancient traces of the Avestic Raġā.

This monograph takes into consideration both the site itself and its regional environment. The former has been treated through the archaeological excavation and the second through the study of the regional material culture recovered by our recent surveys as well as by the previous studies, published and unpublished. The excavations were conducted on the citadel and the šahrestān (or lower city), the political and administrative nucleus of the city in all periods. These two urban entities, more so the šahrestān, could be understood as a barometer of the processes of population and depopulation in the urban agglomeration. Several areas have been excavated on the southern part of the citadel, with the collaboration of the Iranian archaeologist Ghadir Aaround, a number around the more ancient rampart of the šahrestān, and a large stratigraphical test-pit was dug into the šahrestān itself. The data acquired through these different archaeological operations brought to light the complete occupation sequence of the city from its foundation in the Iron Age,\(^2\) up to the Mongol invasions and rapid depopulation in the 13th century ce. All these elements come together to complete the historical and cultural framework of Rayy.

This work is divided into seven parts: the geographical setting; the historical setting; the previous works at Rayy; the topography of the site; the archaeological excavation; the ceramic study and the urban development. After having determined the geographical location of Rayy thanks to the latest satellite technologies and aerial photos, an extensive work concerning the history was undertaken. The second part is dedicated to the history of the city beginning from the archaeological discoveries and through the historical sources. Concerning the recent studies, the works of Schwarz (1926), Marquart (1901) and Miles (1938) on numismatic finds were indispensible. This last study was undertaken on the coins recovered during Schmidt’s excavation of Rayy, and deals exclusively with the coins minted in Rayy.\(^3\)

In the third part the previous works carried out at Rayy are examined. Above all, the discovery of plans produced in the 19th century by English and French travellers allowed the verification of the expanse of the city in this period, thanks to the list of the ramparts still standing then. These would correspond to the last urbanisation of the ancient city. Among these cartographical documents, the unpublished ones by the French architect Pascal

\(^2\) The vestiges still visible today and drawn on the plan correspond to the Iron Age I–III and Parthian reconstructions (or refounding) of the city.

\(^3\) In the framework of the ‘Rayy Project’ in collaboration with Renata Holod, University of Pennsylvania.