

ROTUNDA

FALL 1979

VOLUME 12

NUMBER 3

\$2.00

With the People of the Truth

From Fingers to Forks

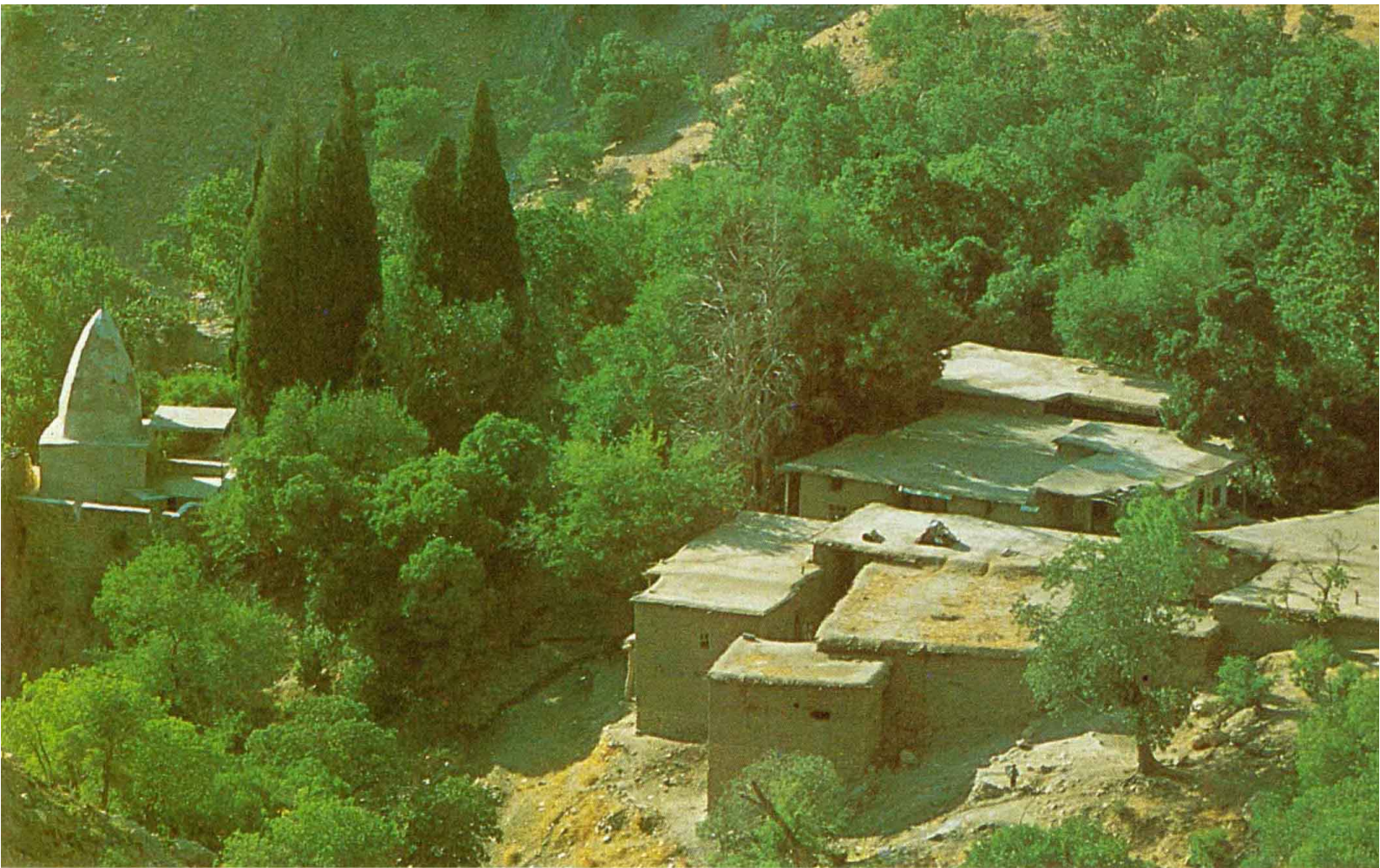
Ontario Expeditions Past and Present

Geometry of Death

Threads of History

Evolution of an Evolutionist





The ROM in Kurdistan

With the People of the Truth

EXPEDITION PROSPERS in mountain retreat." This seemed to be the most succinct way of letting those at home know that the 1978 expedition to Qal'eh-i Yazdigird was functioning successfully, in spite of the chaotic conditions that prevailed around us in Iran this past winter. This was the fourth ROM expedition to excavate the remains of a lavishly decorated mansion set in a fortified retreat of Parthian times, and at our dig in the Zagros Mountains of western Iran we were secure—for precisely the same reason that made the Parthian dissidents decide to fortify the area some 1,700 years ago. It is a natural stronghold, inaccessible except by one or two routes (only one a motor road), and perfect for holing up in and ignoring events on the outside. In the past it was a superb base from which to defy the central authorities not far away on the Mesopotamian plains below.

The unique hospitality afforded us by the local Kurdish villagers added to our security. In particular, "our man" in Zardeh, the nearby village, has always been extremely protective of the ROM expedition—to the point of acting like a mother hen. It is hard to explain

Edward J. Keall



Top: White-domed shrine of Baba Yadgar in the gorge behind the ROM expedition house.

Bottom: A Kurdish workman and the author perch on the cliffs forming part of the Qal'eh-i Yazdigird stronghold.

how reassuring such hospitality is, in good times and bad, or even why it exists.

Possibly it stems from the religious beliefs of the people of the area. They are Ahl-i Haqq, that is the Worshipers or People of the Truth, a heterodox Muslim sect with very few of the standard practices of Islam. These people, no matter how religious, never pray in conventional Muslim fashion. For them an act of devotion is signified by a pilgrimage to a local shrine, which can be a daily occurrence, or better still, by a visit to one of the great Ahl-i Haqq shrines of Kurdistan. Our local shrine of Baba Yadgar, which is a stiff half hour's walk up the mountain path behind the dig house, happens to be one of the most important.

The Ahl-i Haqq are a dervish sect, but that is not to say that they are the eccentric, masochistic types to be found elsewhere in Kurdistan. They do not puncture themselves with needles or slash themselves with knives, but they do indulge in mesmerism. There is a special rhythmic music used in secret meetings to help induce a trance—and no doubt they also smoke something.

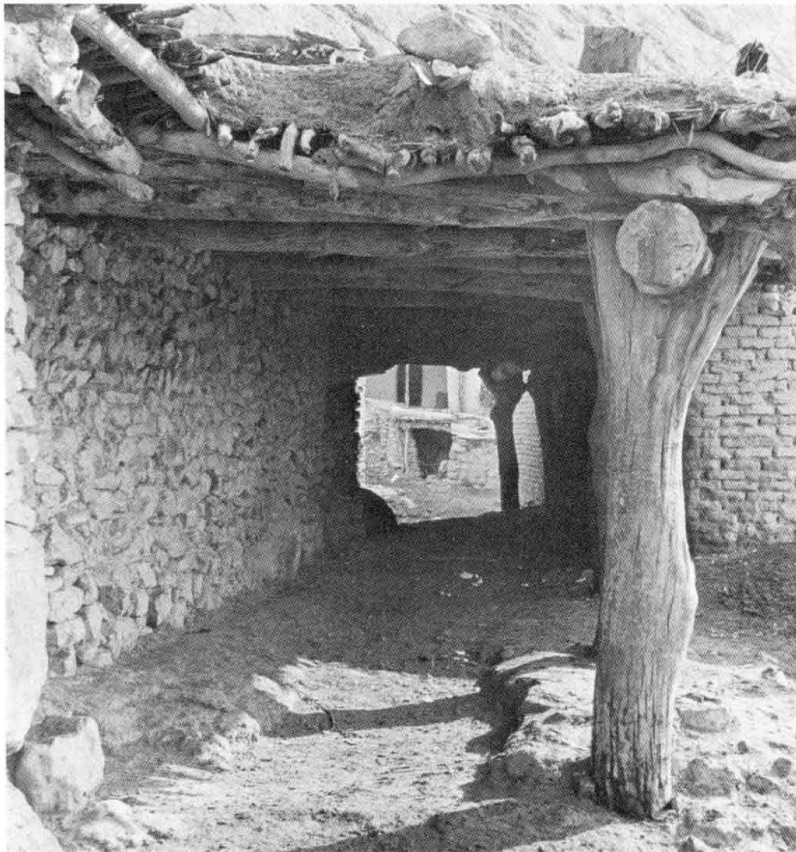
The meeting house for the dervishes in the nearby town of Sar Pul-i Zohab provides a community base for the sect, as well as a station for vehicles going up to the village and the shrine. In 1976 when the meeting house was undergoing renovations (the dervishes were profiting from Iran's economic explosion of the seventies to replace their wood and mud roof with steel I-beams and asphalt), we managed to buy their old roof beams at a good price. They are painted a "devout" green, and the dervishes were persuaded to

sell them to us only because the timber would be returning to the land of Baba Yadgar.

We began the ROM dig house in 1976, using local materials and traditional Kurdish building methods. In this part of the country, buildings are generally constructed of stone, since the scarcity of soil tends to preclude the use of sun-dried bricks. In any case, the stone provides a better footing for the walls in wet weather. The roughly trimmed stone, quarried from nearby exposed limestone scarps, is laid with small stone packing and mud-straw mortar. Once dry, the clay-filled mortar gets as hard as rock in the hot summer sun. It becomes alarmingly tacky, however, after prolonged winter rains, and driving wet winds begin to dislodge pieces of the mortar. The available soil is reserved for the roofs, which are flat and capped with mud, a perfect medium for most of the year since it is cheap and provides insulation. However, if the roofs and walls become saturated with water, entire villages sometimes collapse.

In Kurdistan there is no tradition of dome building in domestic architecture, as there is on the desert side of the mountains where trees are scarcer. Domes in Kurdistan are reserved for shrines. For the houses, flat wooden beams are placed directly on top of masonry walls. Oak beams used to be culled from the natural forest, but now it is easier to grow poplar near the village than to haul lumber down from the mountains by mule.

In this region of Iran the rains traditionally cease 40 days after the spring equinox, and there will not be a drop of rain until the following November. It is when



Post-and-beam construction in a covered passageway in Zardeh.

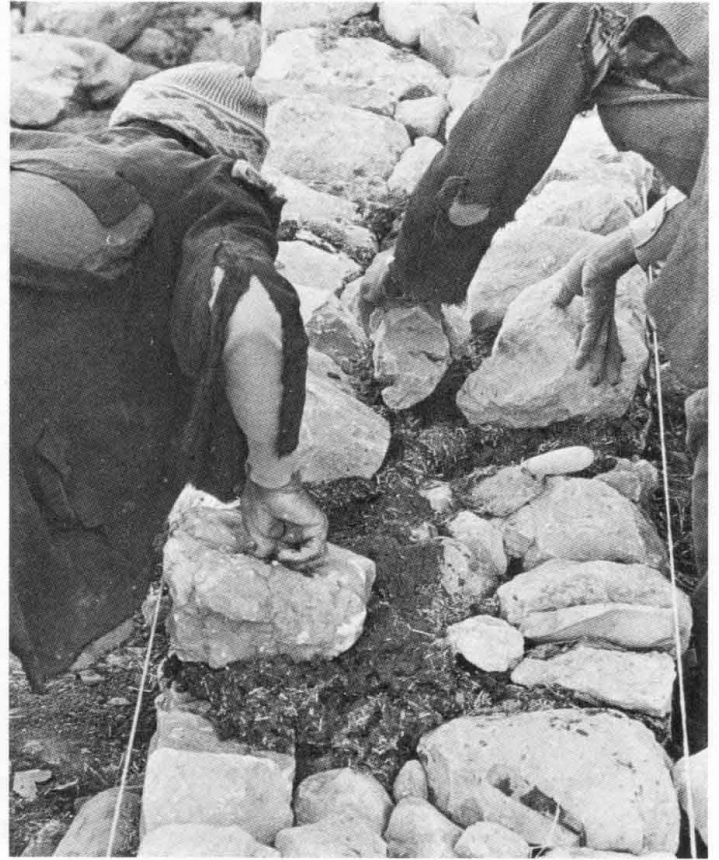
the spring rains end that half the village sets out with the sheep to the summer pasture in Dalahu, the high mountain reaches behind the village. The sheep must be moved to fresher pasture on high ground so that they will keep producing milk. Since goats can produce milk on much scrubbiere vegetation, some of them are left behind to support the villagers who stay to tend the wheat fields and the orchards. The tent people return in autumn, grazing the stubble before the rains drive them down to the village, where the cycle of ploughing and sowing begins once more.

Cultivation plays an important role in the lives of the villagers. The poplar groves provide roof beams, and the orchards yield a late summer harvest of grapes, figs, walnuts, and pomegranates. The fruits are dried and stored to add an all-important dietary supplement to the whole-ground wheat which is the main food staple. Diets are also given a boost in spring when wild onions and other greens are gathered in Dalahu before the flocks denude the landscape. Rice is a luxury, and meat is rarely eaten. It is ironic that the meat producers eat little of the meat they raise. Animals are kept for their milk and wool, or for cash sale.

Wool is one of the most important products of the flocks. Tartan blankets and *kilim* mats are made by the women of the village, while the raw material for shepherds' felt coats and for pile rugs is taken to town to be manufactured into the finished items by male craftsmen. Incidentally, in their relations with the townspeople, the villagers make every effort to deal only with people of their own religious persuasion and background.

Top: Roughly trimmed limestone is set in mud and straw mortar for the ROM expedition house.

Bottom: Flat roofs of the nearby Kurdish village of Zardeh.

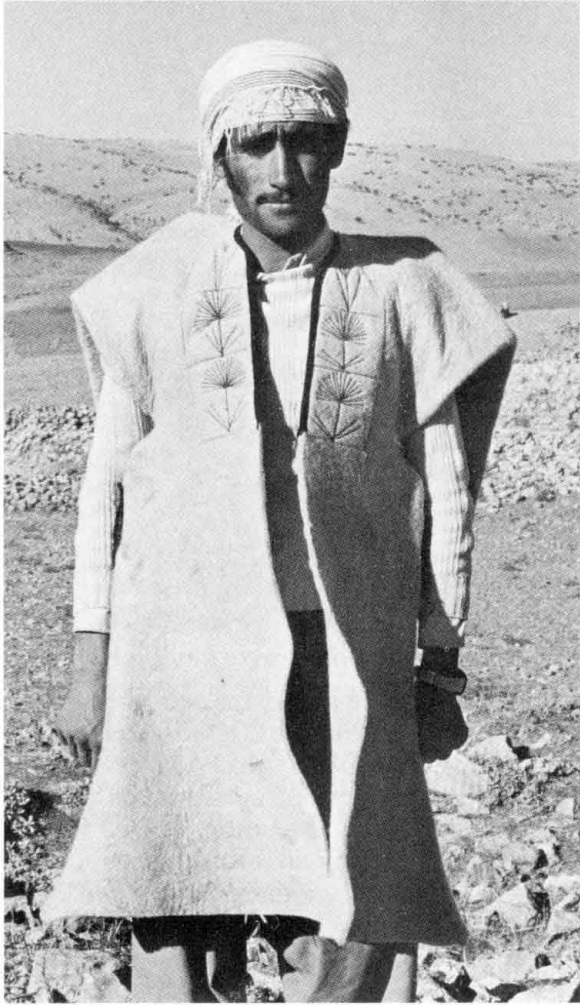




Above: Ritual festival in the open-air shrine at the foot of the gorge behind the expedition house.

Right: Funeral procession of dervishes to the shrine.





Left: Shepherd's felt coat (faranji) worn by one of the expedition's workmen.

Below: Sheep and the expedition jeep compete for space along the lane through the orchards.



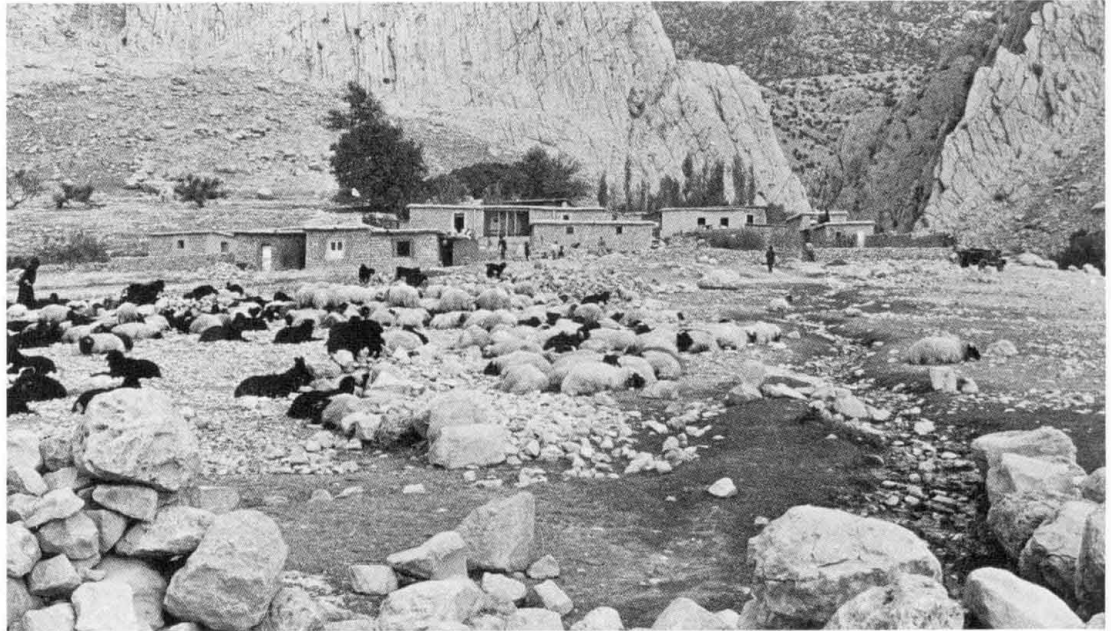
Strangely enough, Iran's rampant development of the seventies has affected even the villagers of this remote area. There are two villages in our immediate neighbourhood—Zardeh, which should be richer because of its good water supply, wheat fields, and orchards; and Sayyid Muhammad, which should be poorer because it has no water in summer and is entirely transhumant. Under present conditions, the reverse is true. Inflation and consumer demand have increased dramatically the price of fresh meat—and in particular the price of *roghan*, the traditional cooking oil which comes from fat-tailed sheep. Although the country is now dependent upon vegetable shortening, *roghan* is considered a luxury and brings very high prices at market. Thus it is the inhabitants of the seemingly poorer village who have benefited most from the inflationary trend since they farm nothing but flocks of sheep and goats and have good grazing in spring right outside their back door. To reach open pasture, the people of Zardeh must drive their flocks past orchards and fields for more than an hour. The milk yield is poorer, the lambs fatten less well, and generally the animals are less productive than their cousins at the far end of the valley.

As it turns out, it is the inhabitants of Sayyid Muhammad who have the capital to invest in government loan schemes to buy tractors. Although

ploughing is still done with mules by the poorer villagers, and in those areas inaccessible to tractors, mechanized ploughing (and threshing) has become a way of life in the past two years. The services of a tractor are rented out by the acre. Now that new families are getting richer, there is a danger that the new wealth will be put to increasing the size of the flocks. Larger flocks would seriously jeopardize the delicate balance of the environment. As it is, in dry years shepherds resort to cutting branches from the forest to keep the sheep in milk. With larger flocks there will be severe overgrazing and soon nothing left to support them.

The shrine too is benefiting at the moment from the recent economic growth. With better roads and transportation there are more pilgrims from outside. Interestingly enough, dervishes make money not so much from the donations as from a secondary source—the sale of the skins of the animals sacrificed by the pilgrims. Such sacrifices are the most conspicuous of the Ahl-i Haqq practices. They are performed at weddings and funerals, and at the four summer festivals celebrated by the entire village in the open air at designated locations near the village. A subclan of the village—the Sayyids—performs the necessary rituals for baking the special bread and preparing the meat. Small pieces of the sacrifice, wrapped in a flat pancake of bread (leading to our irreverent term “sacrifice

Flocks waiting for water to be diverted down the jube (channel at right) in front of the ROM expedition house.



sandwich”) are given to anyone in the community. Anyone who does not wish to have a “sacrifice sandwich” should not throw it away but should give it instead to some other appreciative person. The recipient kisses the offering as a blessing.

Kissing plays an important role on pilgrimage. Various boulders and trees are kissed along the journey up to our local shrine. This is not the worship of idols, but rather a gesture to mark a significant stage in the journey, such as the first sighting of the shrine’s dome. The white dome has a curious connection with the antiquities of the site, for in the past when the dome needed a facelift, the Head Dervish would exhort the villagers to dig up some of the stuccoes which the ROM is now involved in excavating. The stuccoes were smelted down and used as fresh plaster. Today the villagers are still reluctant to whitewash their houses for fear that they might seem to be imitating the custom of the shrine.

A smaller open-air shrine marks the source of one of the springs that provides the village with most of its water, and offerings are often placed in the water itself. A branch of the stream, called a *jube*, runs through the ROM compound. The branch is an artificial watercourse, subject to being switched on and off by the *jube-man*, who diverts water as prescribed on a weekly cycle to the various orchards and fields. In winter there is a surplus, so that there is always a trickle of water in our channel. But in summer there are times when the water has to be diverted completely by the *jube-man*. Freshwater crabs scuttle under large boulders to take shelter. Then, with an unannounced rush, the full force of the stream is felt in another field as it becomes the recipient of the life-giving water. When it comes down to it, putting politics and religion aside, it is the *jube* that is the mainstay of the lives of the People of the Truth.

Edward J. Keall, who joined the ROM in 1971, is Associate Curator in the West Asian Department. He first put Qal’eh-i Yazdigird on the archaeological map in 1965 when a Fellow of the British Institute of Persian Studies. The first ROM expedition to the site was in 1975, and in the following year the dig house was begun. The most recent season of work, supported in part by a generous grant from the Canada Council, ran from October 1978 to January 1979, continuing until after the Shah had left the country. The Kurds of Zardeh are keen to see the ROM return, and the author is hopeful that eventually this will be possible through normal diplomatic channels.

