

# ROTUNDA

SUMMER 1977 VOLUME 10 NUMBER 2 \$1.50

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Exotic Art in a Rebel Fortress  
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# Exotic Art in a Rebel Fortress

## *A Parthian Mountain Stronghold in Iran*

Two ROM archaeological expeditions to Iran in successive years have uncovered what promises to be one of the most exciting treasure houses of architectural ornament ever found in this part of the world. The ruins of this lavishly decorated building, dating to approximately 1,800 years ago, stand within the walls of a large enclosure which was probably once an area of watered garden and fruit trees. This “paradise” — to use the original pure Persian sense of the word as a gardened enclosure — was set in the heart of a large mountainous tract which someone in antiquity, as yet unidentified, had decided should be turned into an impregnable stronghold and retreat. One of the greatest attractions of the site is not only its rich collection of ornament, but also the possibility that we may one day be able to piece together a picture of how the stronghold actually functioned. It is intriguing to find this wild assortment of carved and painted stucco decorations adorning the walls of a palatial pavilion set in a garden of paradise and surrounded by military fortifications of staggering proportions. The considerable extent of the surviving remains promises to permit us to deduce a great deal more about the reasons for these features, as well as something about the pattern of daily life in the settlement, and the greater role played by its inhabitants in the history of late Parthia (first two centuries A.D.).

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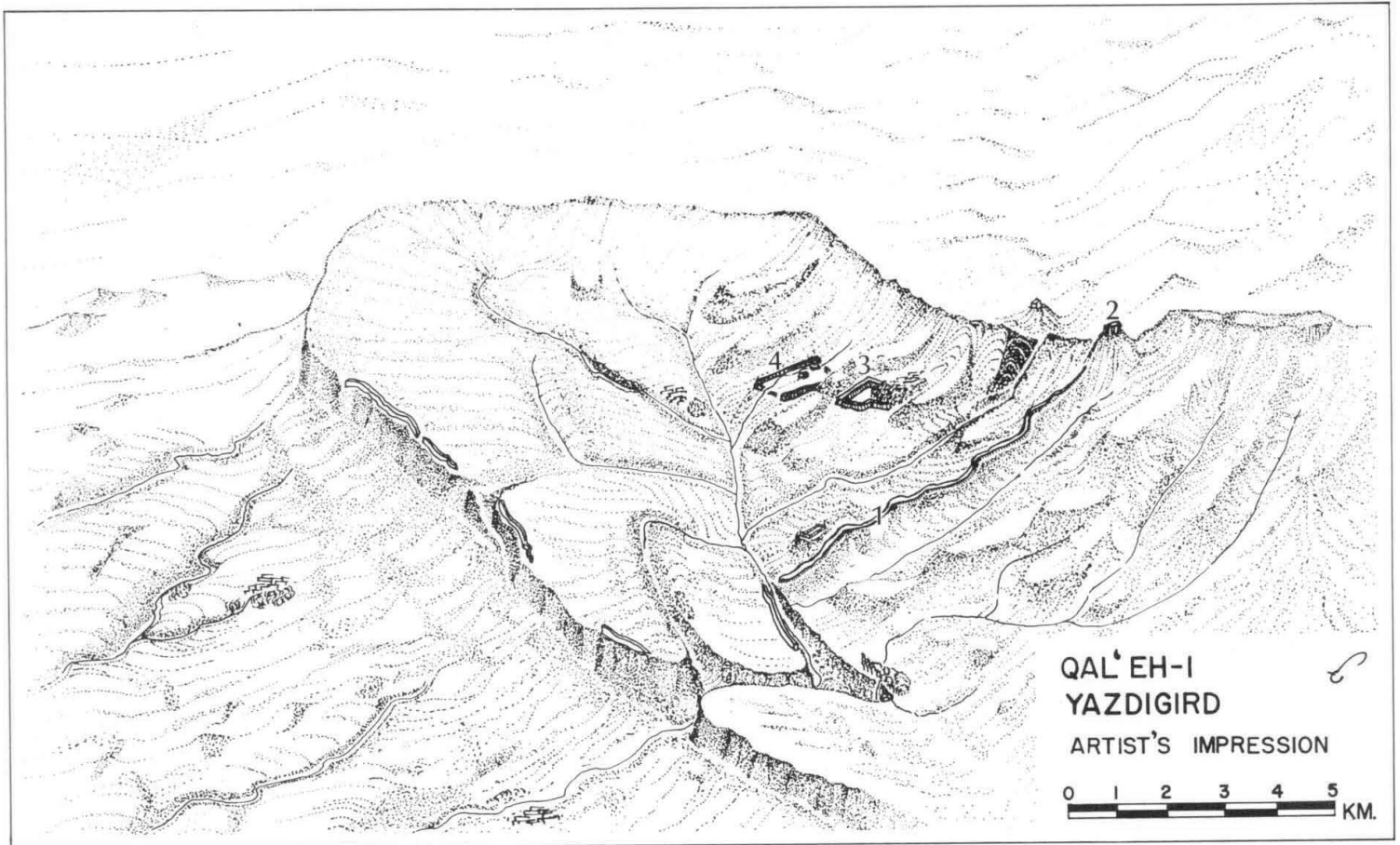
*Above: A worker cleans a decorated wall face of the pavilion in the garden of paradise.*



*Left: The defensive Long Wall as seen from the Upper Castle.*

*Opposite page: A nude female figure leaning on a pedestal, from a column of dancers in the stuccoed pavilion.*

A site map of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird. 1, defensive Long Wall; 2, Upper Castle; 3, inner stronghold; 4, garden of paradise with stuccoed pavilion. Drawing by Klaus Breede.



The ground that was chosen for the stronghold lies on the edge of the high Zagros range of mountains that forms the western extremity of the Iranian plateau, overlooking the Mesopotamian plains of Iraq. An elevated tract of land projects out from the main body of the mountains, with a sheer escarpment surrounding it along two-thirds of its perimeter, creating an isolated tableland or mesa which is attached to the main mountain range only by a narrow tract of land. It is a natural fastness even without the man-made defences. The top of the tableland is like a basin, and a perennial spring brings good water to the basin from the high ground. Extensive fortifications were erected across the open neck of land and around the rim of the basin, wherever it was thought the cliffs could be scaled, completing the circumvallation of an area of ten square miles. Lookout posts and an upper castle perched on the cliffs above the

basin protected the water source and provided the garrison with a commanding view across miles of surrounding countryside. Nestled within the hollow of the sheltered basin are the inner fortress and the garden of paradise with its palatial stuccoed pavilion.

The site was first located in 1965, when an exploratory trench had revealed a portion of the stuccoed building. In 1975 the Expedition concentrated upon defining the precise dimensions and layout of the stronghold as a whole, exploring every corner of the site in order to come up with a reasonable estimate of the scope and amount of future work involved (see *Rotunda*, Winter 1975). It was also vital to try to extract as much information as possible about the nature of the settlement from indications left on the surface. After the initial small-scale operation in 1965, in the absence of hard facts, a Sasanian date for the site was arrived at largely through a

process of elimination. Local historical legends associated with the site played a rather dominant role in this interpretation, much as legends of the Round Table continue to attach themselves to sites like King Arthur's Castle. According to very strongly entrenched local belief the stronghold was the retreat of King Yazdigird (thus giving us the name of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, or Castle of Yazdigird). The last of the Sasanian Kings of Kings, he made an unsuccessful bid in this region to halt the inroads of the invading Moslem armies into the highlands of Iran during the early 7th century. Although the legendary association of the site with Yazdigird was taken in 1965 to be no more than a reflection of traditional folklore, a Sasanian date (perhaps of the 5th century) did seem an appropriate deduction. As it turns out, as more objects were uncovered, it has become clear that the Sasanian-looking material real-

ly belongs to the times of an earlier Persian dynasty (that of the Parthians), under which many of the artistic principles associated with the later Sasanians were actually formulated.

A Parthian date first began to be suspected in 1975 when a close inspection of the ground around the outlying reaches of the defences failed to produce any recognizable Sasanian potsherds or other artifacts. Sasanian material was encountered only in the centre of the site. It now appears that this debris comes from a village of Sasanian date which flourished in this area after the demise of the stronghold, much in the way that the modern village of Zardeh with its 700 inhabitants is the sole permanent settlement of the basin today. The important implication of these findings is that the stronghold was conceived in Parthian times, at least 300 years earlier than was previously suspected. The other valuable piece of information that emerged from the ground survey was the fact that the defences had clearly been manned in Parthian times. Rooms

within the towers of the defensive walls revealed traces of occupation, and the remains of small compounds suggesting barracks-like occupation were uncovered on the inside of the wall. The simple but vital conclusion is that the defensive system actually functioned in the way it had been designed to. This may not seem at all remarkable until attention is drawn to the fact that, all too often in the past, grandiose plans of this sort were conceived but never brought to fruition. The history of ancient Near Eastern civilization is riddled with the construction of follies or elaborate schemes that were never completed because the money ran out or the sponsor died.

We had deduced a Parthian date for the defensive network, but at the beginning of the 1976 season we had yet to discover whether the palatial pavilion was contemporary with the military fortifications. This was of crucial importance, for until we knew whether these two very divergent facets of the site had existed at one and the same time we could draw no conclusions about

the significance of a pleasurable life-style existing amidst such protected surroundings. Proof is still not conclusive, although there are no good arguments to the contrary. Ironically, one of the reasons why it is taking so long to find out is because so much of the stuccoed pavilion has survived. On average the walls are preserved from a depth of twelve feet below ground up to field level. Since the natural way to conduct an excavation is to start at the top and dig down, it means that we are entering the structure just below ceiling height. The walls have been preserved to this height by the protective blanket of the building's own collapsed ceiling debris. Progress through the debris is slow because it involves the careful extraction and preservation of many pieces of architectural ornament. Apart from two deep probes to determine the depth of the floor below ground, none of the floor area has yet been exposed. The best clue to the date of the building remains its partially exposed layout and the stucco decorations, which can be dated on stylistic grounds.



Above: Drawing of miniature head from engaged column capital. Drawing by Linda Ritchie.

Left: Engaged column capital with nude figure (Aphrodite?) holding the tails of a pair of dolphins.



A distinctive feature of the building plan is the presence of broad corridors which surround large square or rectangular spaces. Such corridors are common in late Parthian monumental architecture and may partly be explained by the need to provide buttressing support for the vaulting systems which roofed the large halls. By transmitting the thrust of the vaults to the extra side walls, architects were able to span larger spaces than was previously possible. It was a primitive solution to the problem of a vaulting system, but one which occurred at a formative stage in the development of vaulted space. These corridors may also have encouraged the private nature of activities conducted within the encircled rooms. With few doorways opening off from the corridors, the plan creates a feeling of secrecy and intimacy.

The decoration on the walls of the three monumental rooms encountered so far are of a very repetitive nature, in the sense that patterns are repeated over and over again. One other characteristic, however, which must strike our subdued senses very strongly, is the seemingly confused jumble of discordant elements in all manner of designs and layouts. It is as though the architect had tried to fill the building with every device in his pattern-book. Since the stuccoes were once painted with bright colours, the effect must have been quite garish. It was evidently the

architect's intention, probably in response to the sponsor's wishes, to convey a feeling of richness by the lavishness and exotic quality of the decorations.

The subject matter of the decorations ranges from human and animal figures to geometric and stylized floral designs. The geometric and floral designs are either linear bands of continuously linked motifs, in separate repeated panels, or overall patterns of interlocking designs. Many of these arrangements can be compared with those from Parthian sites in Iraq and eastern Iran. One of the most interesting of these is the design which includes a stepped crenellation (merlon) with arrow slot, together with flanking two-handled vases. The origin of this particular combination of elements is unknown, although the history of the merlon can be traced from Assyrian times centuries earlier. As early as the 7th century B.C. it occurs as a full-scale feature in military defensive works, such as the walls of Nineveh. The device later became translated into a decorative embellishment on the parapets of palaces of the Persian Achaemenid kings. The crenellation occurs, too, as an imperial symbol, apparently meant to represent the king's territorial possessions, in the same way that the city goddesses of Hellenistic times were depicted wearing merlon crowns. In Parthian architectural decoration the merlon appears to have had no significance except as an artistic

device. One cannot assume that it had retained any of the imperial connotations of old. It is, however, an important example of the way in which decorative devices in the Near East enjoy a long and complicated history which makes specific interpretation for any given time difficult.

It is equally difficult to decide upon the real significance of the figural subjects. These range from nude heroes engaged in combat with beasts of prey to dancers fully clothed in colourful attire. They range in iconography from strictly western Classicising subjects, such as a possible Dionysus and Cupid composition, to formal presentations of a male bust which may even be taken to represent the owner of the mansion. The iconographical compositions of the animals, too, are taken from every part of the then known world. There are griffons in traditional poses marchant; heads and foreparts of griffons which are predecessors of the future Sasanian *senmurvs* (hybrid, mythical beasts comprising dog's head and peacock tail); intertwined dragons which may possibly be derived from Central Asian prototypes; and quite naturalistically represented animals of the hunt, such as lion and hyena.

It is difficult, given the infant state of our knowledge about Parthian art, to decide whether there is any meaning to the iconography of the decorations other than the richness which they are meant to re-



*Left: Fragment of repetitive panel with vase and merlon motif.*

*Opposite page: Drawing of engaged column capital with intertwined dragon beasts. Drawing by Linda Ritchie.*

flect. For instance, from one room there are examples of decorated engaged-column capitals (architectonic features which have no practical function other than decoration). On one of these there is the intertwined dragon composition; on another, the scene of a nude female (possibly Aphrodite) holding the tails of a pair of dolphins. The latter is clearly a story whose origins lie outside of the realm of Persia. Narrative themes are not very common at all in Parthian art. But chances are that the various scenes displayed here are stereotyped references to well-known stories which need no further explanation to those who see the capsulated images, just as to a child today a ginger-bread house can conjure up the entire tale of Hansel and Gretel. Each of the images in the pavilion, then, can be assumed to have had some meaning to the observer, even though we cannot always be sure what that precise meaning was. One cannot fail to be struck, however, by the wide variety of subjects and styles, an interesting reflection of the eclecticism of Parthian art. Again, one cannot be sure that any of the images can be related to the sorts of activities that went on in the large halls. As suggested before, they may simply have been inspired by the desire to create an exotic setting of colour and shapes. This was done in the international vocabulary of artists, who were able to travel freely around in a world in which commerce flourished, and who were able to cater to whatever needs money could satisfy.

The Qal'eh-i Yazdigird stronghold exudes defensiveness from every segment of its perimeter fortifications. From its Upper Castle and flanking outposts the garrison could command a view across miles of terrain, able to spot in daylight an approaching force at a day's march away. Mobile troops — synonymous with Parthian warfare — could be summoned quickly to any part of the defences to counter the attack of any force, whose first major challenge, even before reaching the defending forces, was to

scale the formidable cliffs. One need not go far in this part of the world to find a feasible explanation for this aggressive defence. One of the major highways of antiquity ran just a few miles distant and is visible from the lookout posts. The route is still one of the few logical ways to approach the highlands of Iran from the plains below. The strategic importance of the pass, which forces traffic to climb onto the plateau at this point, earned it in antiquity the name of Zagros Gates, or gateway to Iran. The richness of the cargoes that were transported along the route in mediaeval times led it to be called the Silk Road. In the 2nd century A.D. when the stronghold seems to have been built, there was no exception to this pattern of international traffic. It could be argued that the fortress must have been built to protect the caravans climbing the pass from interference by unruly tribes in the interior, and thus to preserve the sources of revenue for the imperial Parthian government seated in Ctesiphon in Iraq. But there are several considerations that make this theory unlikely. Apart from the fact that the stronghold is set just a little back from the highroad and appears to threaten it rather than protect it, the Parthian government was so politically weak at this time it is doubtful that it had the resources to set up a whole network of defences designed to protect the caravan traffic.

The strongest objection to the theory of an imperial outpost is the lavish nature of the stuccoed pavilion. Even if one could justify the idea of the presence of a military governor, sent out there by the Parthian King of Kings, the richness of the building could only be taken as evidence of gross misappropriation of military funds. On the contrary, rebelliousness and dissension were so much a part of late Parthian history that one need have no qualms about fabricating the legend of a dissident noble or robber baron, extorting taxes from the great Asian highway, and thumbing his nose at the imperial administration on the plains below.



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