

PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE  
IV<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM  
ON  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH  
IN IRAN

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QAL<sup>ĉ</sup>EH-E YAZDGERD :  
FIRST SEASON OF EXCAVATIONS, 1975

BY

EDWARD J. KEALL

The first recorded visit of an archaeologist to Qal<sup>ĉ</sup>eh-e Yazdgerd is that of major Rawlinson who mentioned the site in his report of 1839 to the Royal Geographical Society entitled "Notes on a march from Zohab, at the foot of the Zagros, along the mountains to Xūzestān, and thence to the province of Lorestān to Kermanšah". Mention of the site also occurs in Colonel E. I. Tchirikov's published "Journal de voyage du Commissaire arbitre Russe pour la délimitation de la frontière Turco-Persane en 1849-52". Since that time until 1965 there appears to be no mention of the site in an archaeological text, although the name of the site does occur on a map of Herzfeld's.

The two above-mentioned travellers essentially followed the local tradition regarding the history of the site, reporting that Qal<sup>ĉ</sup>eh-e Yazdgerd, as the name suggests, was the Castle of Yazdgerd, the last of the Sasanian kings. This is not an entirely unreasonable proposition in view of the fact that the stronghold is oriented very much towards Iraq and located less than a day's march from Holwan, modern Sar-e Pol-e Zahab, the site of one of the last battle of the Persians against the Moslem Arabs. According to the traditional interpretation, then, the stronghold was Yazdgerd's retreat prior to his final defeat at the battle of Nehavand in 641 A.D.

Local legends have added further colour to the picture, embroidering upon the web of these historically known facts. What has encouraged the telling of these tales (apart from the fact that the historical ruins of Qal<sup>ĉ</sup>eh-e Yazdgerd pervade nearly every aspect of the daily lives of the villagers of Zardeh) is that the villagers are devotees of the Ahl-e Haqq sect. A shrine honouring the grave of the founder of the sect, Baba Yadgar, is located relatively close to the village in a gorge which penetrates the cliffs that form the eastern flank of the Zardeh tableland.

Part of the belief of the Ahl-e Haqq is that the figure of God has been reincarnated 1001 times, of which the reincarnation in the form of the Imām Hossein is considered to have been one of the most important. Yazdgerd enjoys particular reverence in the eyes of the Ahl-e Haqq, since it was reputedly his daughter, Bibi Šahbānou, who married the Imām Hossein, thus providing a convenient link between Iran's ancient past and Islam. Various parts of Qal<sup>ĉ</sup>eh-e Yazdgerd have been labelled by the villagers with names thought appropriate for functions in the life of Yazdgerd. Thus the maidan area is said to be where Yazdgerd reviewed his troops;

the cave of Bibi Šahbānou is where the daughter of the King of Kings (presumably before her marriage to the Imām) took refuge from the Arabs. The Aspaz Gāh describes an area where the kitchens of Yazdgerd functioned; and the Zendān, was his prison; and so forth.

In the autumn of 1964, acting on the instructions of Christopher Weightman, I visited the site. Weightman was actively engaged in research on the Ahl-e Haqq and had visited the shrine of Baba Yadgār, reporting the existence near there of massive masonry, which from his description sounded Sasanian. My research was particularly oriented towards a study of "the typology of Sasanian ceramics in western Iran." Since the site appeared upon first inspection to contain uncontaminated Sasanian material, with significant portions of standing masonry, I requested a sondage permit to work at Qal'eh-e Yazdgerd. In June 1965, accompanied by Mr. Rahnamoun, then of the Archaeological Service, I conducted a three week survey and soundage of Qal'eh-e Yazdgerd. The results of this survey were published in the *Journal Iran*, vol. V, which appeared in the year 1967 entitled "Qal'eh-e Yazdgerd, a Sasanian stronghold in Persian Kordestān".

It may be useful at this point to describe briefly the geographical features of the site, together with a resume of the type of material that was encountered in that exploratory season.

Qal'eh-e Yazdgerd occupies a naturally fortified position in the Zagros range of mountains of western Iran, 15 km. northeast of Sar-e Pole Zohāb as the crow flies, and 32 km. northwest of Taq-e Girrā, the point on the main Kermānšāh highway where one must turn off to reach the site. The ruins of Qal'eh-e Yazdgerd are spread out largely around the rim, and in the centre of, an elevated tableland which is suspended shoulderlike as a projection on the extreme edge of the Iranian plateau. For over three quarters of its perimeter the edge of the projection is formed by a formidable escarpment overlooking the plain of Zohab, to the west and north. On the eastern side, the tableland merges with the higher reaches of the plateau, but the actual eastern limit of the tableland is formed by sheer cliffs, behind which lie the isolated peaks and pinnacles that form the lower hills of the Mt. Dālāhu range. The massive eastern flank of the tableland would be virtually impenetrable, were it not for the gorge of Baba Yadgar which pierces the cliffs with a narrow difile and also provides the only major source of perennial fresh water for the tableland. To the southeast, the tableland is more open, being readily accessible from the direction of the Rijab trough. By contrast with the escarpment and the cliffs, this ground appears to be relatively flat. But that is deceptive. For this open terrain is deeply cut by broad gullies, which run down from the base of the cliffs on the eastern side and converge in a stream that plummets down by way of a ravine through the escarpment to the plains

below.

The general surface of the tableland is concave, with its rim higher than its centre. From the middle of the tableland one has the distinct feeling of being nestled in a hollow. Following the name of the modern village, this area of some 24 square kilometers can be called the Zardeh basin.

The architects of Qal'eh-e Yazdgerd took considerable pains to prepare the defences of the Zardeh basin. With a strong defensive wall thrown across the open neck of land, measuring nearly three kilometers long, and the escarpment suitably reinforced wherever an ascent could conceivably have been made, the occupants of the stronghold could feel reasonably secure. The only other vulnerable point was the Baba Yadgar gorge which provided access to the basin by way of the tracks leading down from the high ground. In order to protect this flank, as well as the source of the main water supply, an upper castle was constructed upon one of the pinnacles overlooking the gorge. Any attacker reaching the jaws of the gorge would automatically have exposed his flank and rear to the defenders in the upper castle. In addition, two other smaller lookout posts were built upon pinnacles to either side of the upper castle, forewarning of any approach. From then, an extraordinary view was afforded across the Zardeh basin, towards the plains bordering Iraq, as well as in the direction of the Rijab trough. Whoever it was that ordered the construction of these defences wished to render the site incredibly secure. The effort expended verges on that of being paranoid.

Sheltered in the hollow of the basin, and protected by the elaborate defences, are the remains of two major structures. The one, Ja-i Dar, is an L-shaped compound, heavily fortified and buttressed by massive towers. It was probably designed to serve some military function, such as a barracks and stronghold. (Intensive investigations in this area of the site have not yet been made. Probes are hampered by the dense gardens that surround half of the ruins.) The other major monument in the basin is called Gach Gumbad, after the name ascribed to a standing mass of masonry in the more northerly quarter of a long, rectangular enclosure. Current interpretation suggest that the enclosure was a garden of paradise, together with a palace pavillion in the upper part of it. Apart from the ruins of the palace the rest of the enclosure is singularly lacking in traces of ruined masonry. This is largely the reason for calling the area a garden of paradise, presumably containing lush irrigated vegetation. Between the two major monuments, Ja-i Dar and Gach Gumbad, lies a ridge of hills of which the more important is called Tappeh Ras. It is largely a natural spur of land. But the slopes of the (ridge) are liberally covered with potsherds, suggesting traces of considerable occupational debris. Throughout the rest of the basin evidence of occupation is limited to very scattered traces of pottery, in areas where the logical

explanation for that occupation was in the manning of the defences. These were presumably the guard-posts and quarters of the garrison.

Since the objective of the 1965 survey was to obtain a ceramic typology for the site, test trenches were sunk on the slopes of Tappeh Raš. The area where potsherds were found in abundance on the surface of the ploughed fields turned out to be disappointingly lacking in stratified material of any kind, and totally devoid of occupational debris. In fact, in no place was topsoil found to be more than one meter above bedrock. It appeared that ploughing and erosion had removed all traces of whatever occupation had existed. And although the ceramic assemblage seemed to indicate a Sasanian date, there was no pottery found in a stratified context. Consequently the area of Tappeh Raš was abandoned, and attention focused on Gach Gumbad.

The discoveries of this limited excavation in Gach Gumbad have been documented briefly in the article in the journal *IRAN*, vol. V, which has already been mentioned. It is sufficient to say here that portions of baked brick architecture were encountered, standing intact as much as 4 m. high buried below ground. A plastered wall face was discovered, of which the upper part carried a long frieze of repetitive meander and interspaced rosette patterns. Along side the wall were discovered numerous stucco statues and other pieces of architectural decoration. Again, there was a repetitiveness to many of the pieces and it appeared that they had originally been positioned in a row and had tumbled down, probably during a violent destruction caused by earthquake, from a point higher than the top of the preserved wall. No pottery was discovered in the limited area of the excavation beside the decorated wall. The date of this structure depended, then, upon an analysis of the architectural material.

Parallels to the distinctive method of constructing a baked brick wall found here - that is, with the bricks laid on edge in vertical lays, and with alternating rows at right angles to each other - have been found in late Parthian levels at Tel Umar (Seleucia) and Ashur in Iraq; in the foundations of the Sasanian Tāq-e Kasrā at Ctesiphon; in the piers of the Sasanian palace at Dāmḡān; and again at Dāmḡān, in the Islamic eighth century Tārik Xāneh, in which other Sasanian characteristics are particularly strong. This technique of vertical-lay brick construction appears, then, to be associated with the Sasanian era and short period of time on either side of it.

The motifs of the stucco decoration have a very strong western classical influence in their form, though less so in their composition, which has a much more "oriental" flavour. Parallels can be found particularly in the late Parthian stucco decoration of Iraq. If the site were to be Sasanian, the Parthian style of the stuccoes

could be explained as an "archaising" element. The deduction that a Sasanian date should be ascribed to the stuccoes was influenced heavily by one of the pieces which shows a pair of intertwined beasts, for which the only known parallels are bronze door-knockers from thirteenth century Iraq. Although there is clearly no direct connection between the two sets of objects, a "late" date, i.e. Sasanian, is suggested rather than an "early" (Parthian) one.

Qal'eh-e Yazdgerd appeared on first examining to be a single period site, consisting of an intricate set of fortifications, lookout posts, barracks, palace and garden of paradise. It was thought that the architecture, the pottery, and the stucco finds should all receive a common date. The rubble and mortar masonry of the fortifications, seemingly rounded towers, the pottery from Tappeh Raš, and the late style of one of the stucco fragments seemed to point to a Sasanian date. By the time of the Oxford Congress in 1972, (for the catalogue printed for the exhibition of British Archaeological activity in Iran), I still clung to a Sasanian date "largely because it could not logically be anything else". Massive military fortifications on this scale simply did not seem to be typical of the Parthians in Iran. The Islamic presence was minimal, being limited to a scatter of sherds in the upper castle.

The objective of the 1975 expedition of the ROM to Qal'eh-e Yazdgerd was threefold: first, to determine the absolute limits of the fortifications as well as that of the structures in the centre of the basin, and to define whatever traces of settlement could be found in the outlying area of the fortified basin; second, to attempt to establish a more thorough ceramic typology from surface finds, with a view to establishing better dating evidence for the site; and third, to examine certain features in selected areas by way of test trenches, in order to better judge the depth and extent of the archaeological overburden.

Accordingly, a mapping survey was started with a view to providing plan of the site that was more accurate than the one made in 1965. It was a formidable task given the size of the site (some 24 square kilometers) and it was hampered by the lack of aerial photographs which are unavailable for this area so close to the border. A special work of thanks should go to Claus Breede, the project surveyor, who covered an enormous amount of ground, up hill and down dale, on foot, in preparing the map.

At the same time, a survey of the ceramic material was begun, with total pick-up of all sherds found. We concentrated initially on the area alongside the long defensive wall, looking for traces of occupation that might reflect the manning of the defences. Large storage jar rims predominated amongst the sherds and all sherds seemed to be concentrated in one area where the ground was most level, around

the middle of the wall.

It was decided to examine by excavation two of the most promising towers and their intermediate length of curtain wall located nearest this concentration of sherds. What became abundantly and embarrassingly clear soon after the beginning of the excavation was that the towers were quite square, and not rounded, as their eroded outlines had once suggested. One of the strong factors pointing to a Sasanian site was already shattered.

A series of arrow slots was found along the curtain wall, similar to those standing intact above ground in other parts of the site. In the case of both towers a small chamber was found enclosed within their mass, connecting by means of a narrow doorway to the inside of the defensive wall. One room contained a pot stand. The other room showed considerable traces of burning beneath the collapsed masonry fill. Since there were no pots or artifacts, and virtually no sherds found on the floor, as well as the fact that the ashes could have come from a number of open fires, it would seem more logical to suggest that the burning was the trace of squatter occupation, and not that of destruction. However, the inner face of the wall had clearly been repaired at one stage. Whether this damage was the result of an earthquake or an enemy attack remains to be determined. A small number of sherds was found in the ramp of red earth that was banked up against the inside face of the wall repair. The sherds all showed markedly Parthian characteristics. Based on that fact, and the square towers, it began to appear, then, that the long defensive wall was of Parthian construction. Work on the wall then ceased, with a view to a more thorough investigation later.

Meanwhile the surface survey was beginning to reveal that in the outlying areas the pottery was also consistently Parthian, with only a heavy concentration of Sasanian material in the area of Tappeh Raš. It is hypothesised, then, that the system of fortifications was conceived and executed during the Parthian period and that the Sasanian presence was restricted to limited occupation in the centre of the site.

There remained two areas where it was important to gather information with a view to being able to plan properly for future seasons. The first was a spur of ground to the west of, and therefore outside of, the Gach Gumbad enclosure. Fragments of baked brick, plaster, and roof tiles were in abundance on the surface. It seemed possible that a structure similar to the sort uncovered in 1965 might lie beneath the ground. Accordingly test trenches were laid out in this area to define the limits of the structure. Immediately we encountered masses of broken baked brick and large pieces of plaster and mortar. A small pocket of fresco fragments was



also discovered. But there were absolutely no floors encountered and no trace of intact masonry. In fact, we were digging in a dump. The logical explanation was that a mass of architectural debris had been cleared from a palatial building and dumped on this spot. The Gach Gumbad palace seemed the obvious source. The dump lay, in fact, in the nearest area outside of the walled enclosure. The implication for the palace is that we can expect to find evidence of repairs made to the Gach Gumbad structure, in addition to the type of collapsed debris that was uncovered in 1965. Whether the repairs were executed in only part of the palace remains to be seen.

The other area which called for attention was the northwest portion of Gach Gumbad enclosure, located to the west of the gulley which separates it from the Gach Gumbad block. The dense heaps of rubble were grouped in such a way that depressions on the surface appeared to indicate the presence of a regular series of rooms positioned around a courtyard. Three of these "rooms" were chosen to test this hypothesis. They were indeed rooms, in the sense of being area surrounded by walls. But their function is difficult to determine. A heavily plastered floor was reached 4 m. below ground. But no other floors were encountered in that depth except for the vague lines which separated the different sections of fill. The lower 2 m. were filled with fine plaster fragments mixed with water-laid deposits and plain silt. It appeared that we were dealing with deep chambers that saw little occupation and which became filled at some time with flood-borne deposits. It is possible that this occurred after the collapse of the palace structure and adjacent courtyard complex. Large fragments of roof tiles were found in the bed of the gulley, beneath a considerable depth of rubble and dirt fill.

One interesting aspect of the probe into the deep chambers was that the soil deposits were far finer than that seen in the present-day fields. It is also clear from the surface survey that the Zardeh basin was not inhabited in any permanently settled way prior to the construction of the stronghold. The basin was probably densely forested at the time construction began. (Traces of the forest still exist today.) But the construction work involved the clearing of land for defensive purposes, housing and farming, as well as the use of timber for the smelting of the tons of plaster and mortar, and the baked bricks and roof tiles used in the building programme. This sudden deforestation on a large scale may well have set in motion patterns of erosion that caused the silting-up of the deep chambers after their abandonment. Such fine topsoil that was not trapped in these deep chambers has long since been washed off the tableland to the plains below. This, of course, is only a hypothesis at this point and serious work by a geomorphologist remains to be done.

Tentative conclusions following the first season of excavations are that the stronghold and palace of the site of Qal'eh-e Yazdgerd were built during

late Parthian times. This is based on an analysis of the surface pottery, as well as a redefining of the architectural forms. The strong Parthian characteristics of the decorative stucco need no longer be explained away as an archaising element. It is hypothesised, too, that the site witnessed occupation during the Sasanian period, but on a limited and concentrated scale. Mediaeval Islamic occupation was restricted to activity in the Upper Castle where considerable repairs were undertaken on the structure. (Here there are clearly round towers).

Although the elaborate fortifications of Qal'eh-e Yazdgerd would seem appropriate for the presence of a garrison with its commander, the lavish quality of the palace would speak for the presence of a much more important and even princely personage. The focus of the defences seems to be directed very much towards the main highway approaching the Zagros Gates. The location of the site might be interpreted as being intended to defend the borders of Iran against invasion from the Mesopotamian plains. But both areas were part of the same empire and were controlled, in theory, from the capital at Ctesiphon. Yet a noticeable phenomenon of late Parthian times was the lack of a strong central control and the many attempts either to overthrow the throne or to gain independence from it. It is entirely feasible that Qal'eh-e Yazdgerd represents the rebel stronghold of a Parthian noble or prince.

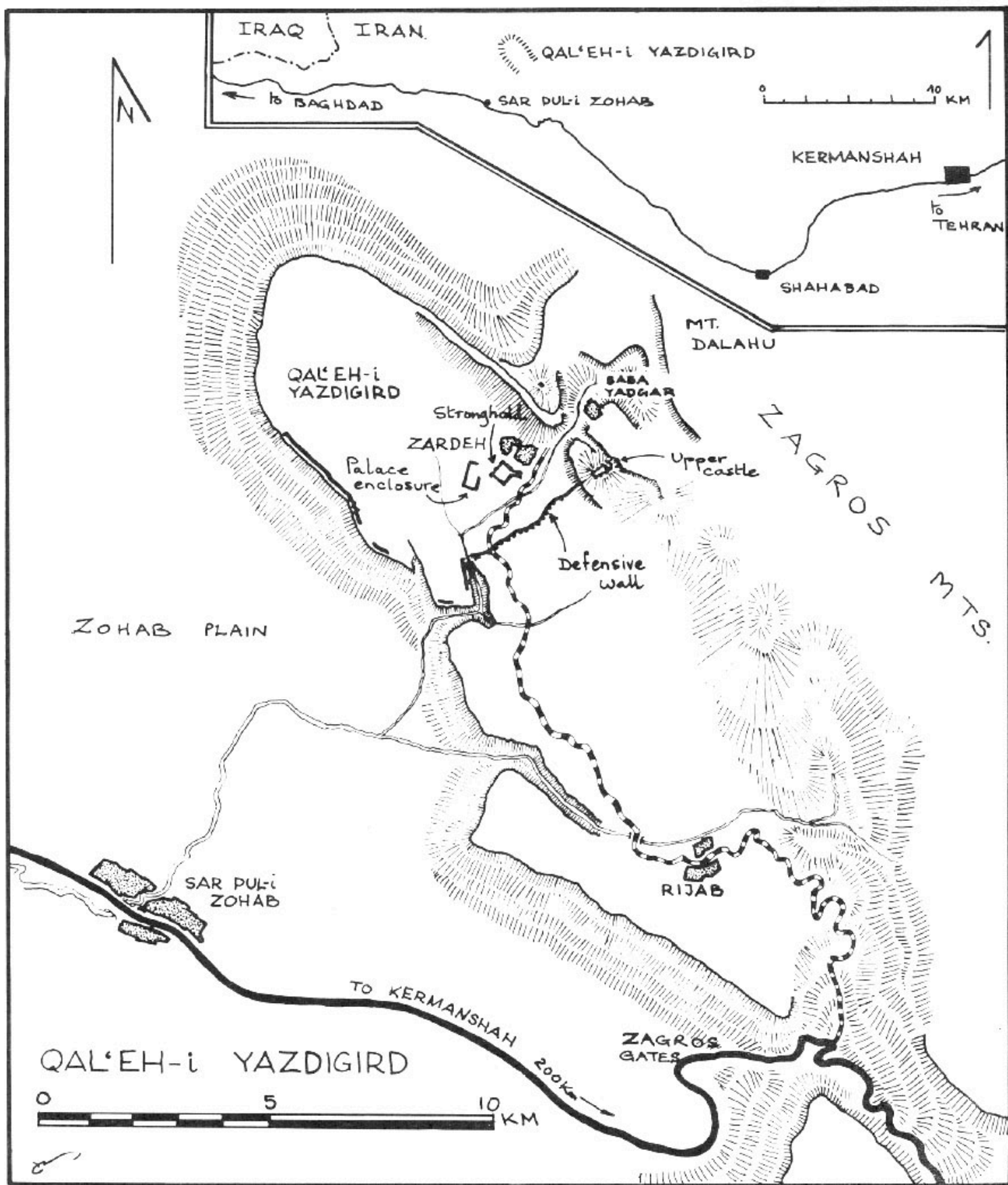


Fig. 1 - Map showing location of site at Qal'eh-e Yazdgerd.

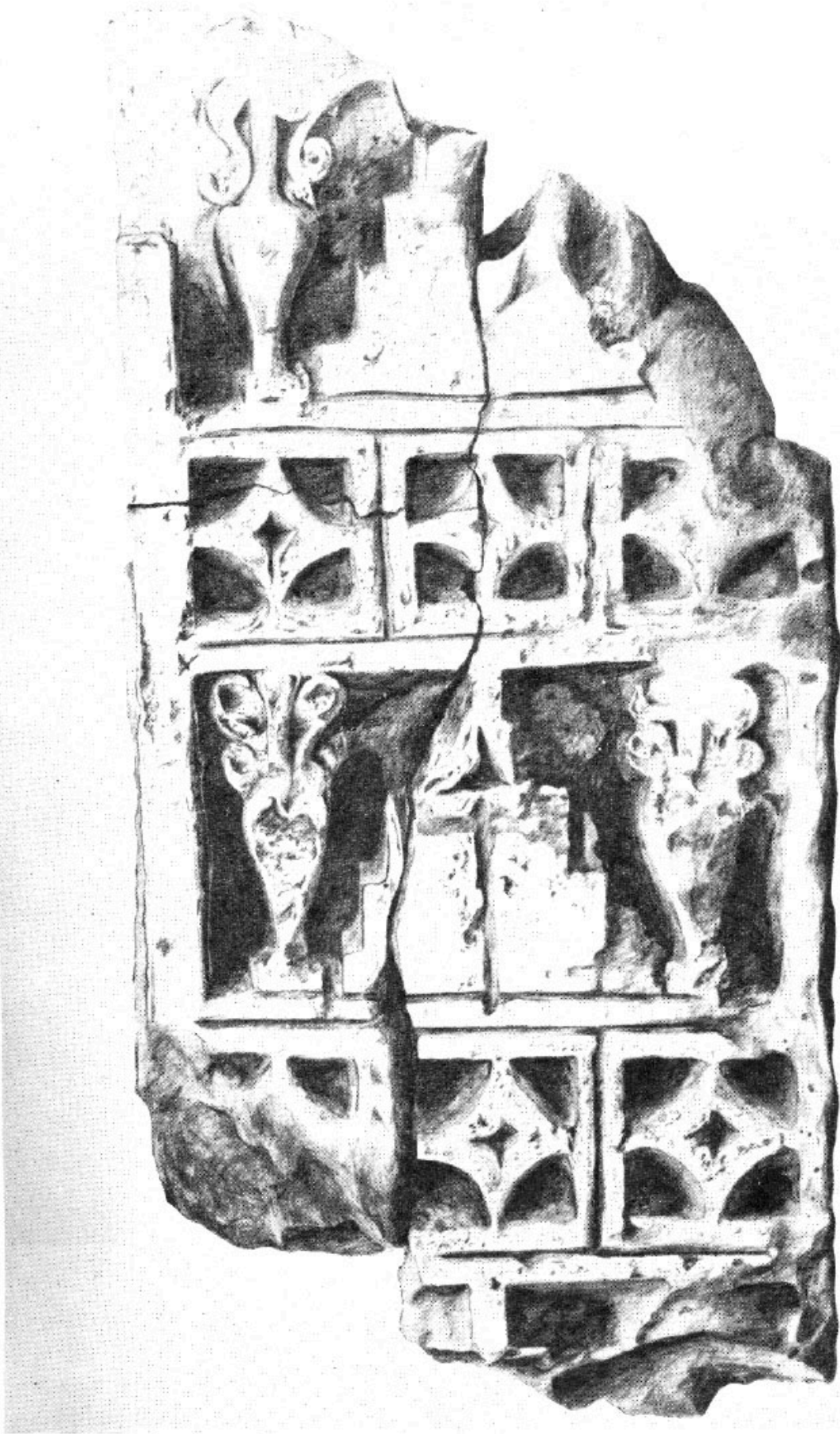


Fig. 2 - Stucco from dump of architecture debris.



Fig. 3 - The long defensive wall seen from upper Castle.