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Qal'eh-i Yazdigird

The first expedition took place in 1965. The results of that brief survey and sondage were published in *Iran V* (1967) with the conclusion that the extensive remains belonged to a single complex of buildings, comprising a palace and stronghold of Sasanian date. The date was derived largely through a process of elimination, for it did not seem possible that a site of such type and dimension could be anything else. The rubble masonry of the fortifications, the seemingly rounded towers, and the vertical-lay brick construction of the palace-pavilion all indicated a Sasanian date. So too did the pottery recovered from the surface. Since the standing monuments seemed to represent the remains of a single period of occupation, it was concluded that the strong Parthian characteristics of the stucco architectural decoration were an "archaising" element, a phenomenon by no means uncommon in this period. As a result of new work, it now appears that the fortifications and palace complex were planned and conceived during late Parthian times, with only a reduced form of occupation surviving into Sasanian times.

Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, located some 30 km. northwest of the gendarme post of Pa-i Taq, occupies an

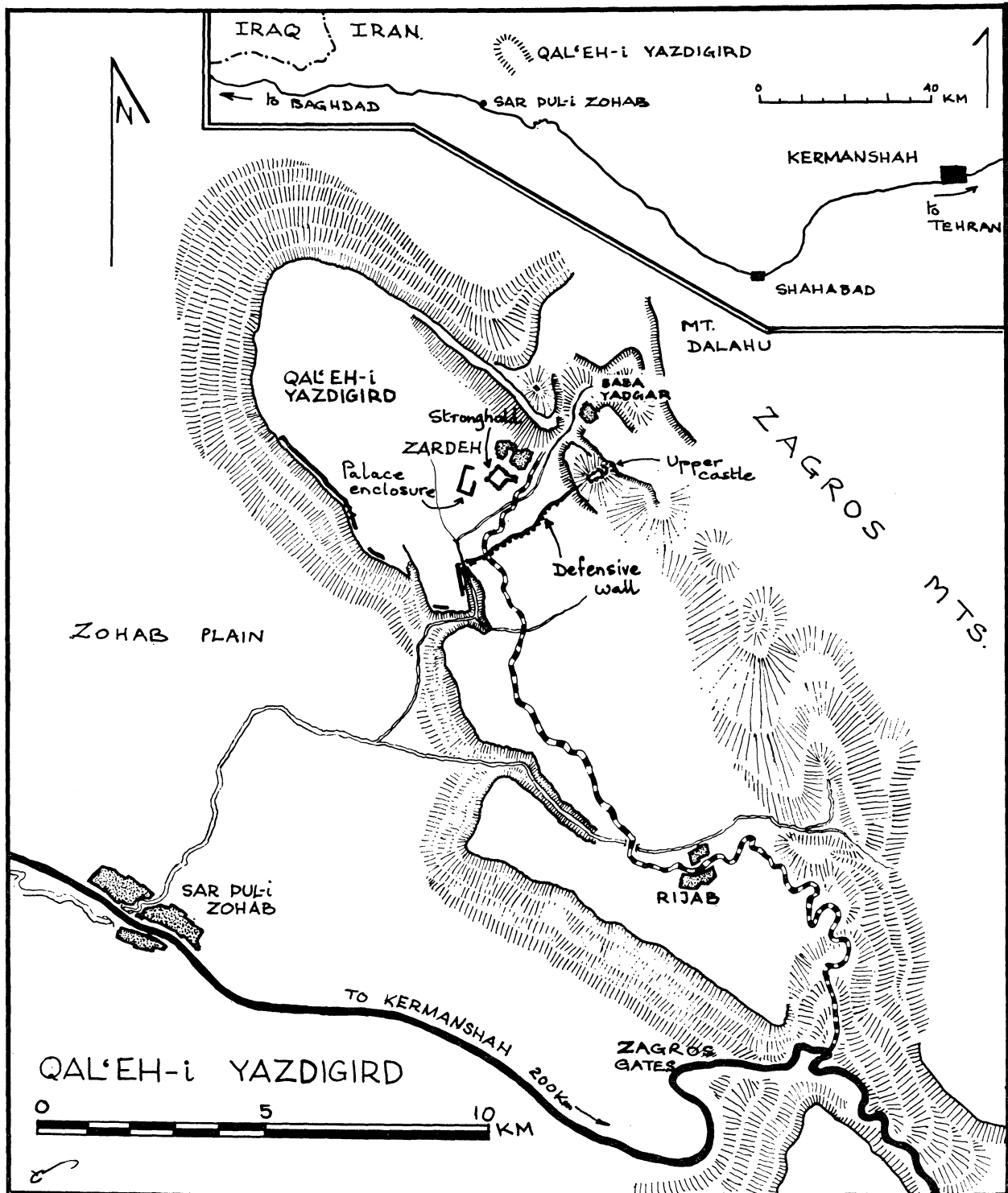


Fig. 2.

area of *c.* 24 sq. km., encompassing essentially the entire area of an elevated tableland on the extreme western edge of the mountains. For over three-quarters of its length the perimeter of the tableland is formed by steep cliffs rising up on the one side, and by a sheer escarpment on the other. The cliffs merge with the higher reaches of the plateau. But the escarpment is the last ledge of the plateau, overlooking the plain of Zohab and the Iraqi border. In antiquity, defensive masonry, together with arrow-slot loopholes, was constructed wherever the escarpment was thought to be an inadequate deterrent. Across the relatively open end of the tableland (on the southeastern side), a more elaborate defensive wall with loopholes and towers was constructed, running from the escarpment in the southwest to the cliffs in the northeast. To protect the tableland from attack from high ground, an upper castle and flanking outposts were positioned on isolated pinnacles, overhanging the gorge of Baba Yadgar and enjoying strategic command over both that access route and the surrounding countryside. Sheltered within the hollow of the tableland and protected by the elaborate fortifications are the remains of two major structures. The one, Ja-i Dar, is a heavily buttressed structure, partially covered by the gardens of Zardeh, but clearly forming an L-shaped compound. The structure has yet to be probed in detail, but its massive towers and military character reveal it to be the central castle of the stronghold. The other major feature is a long, rectangular enclosure in which a free-standing block of masonry at its upper end gives it the name locally of Gach Gumbad. Current interpretation suggests that the Gach Gumbad enclosure represents a garden of paradise, with a palace-pavilion at its upper end. The 1965 sondage exposed a small portion of the walls and architectural decoration of this pavilion (*Iran V*, pl. IV). The area between the two compounds is taken up by a largely natural ridge (Tepe Rash) whose slopes are liberally covered with sherds. The ridge would have been the logical place for the supportive structures of the palatial complex. Preliminary tests had already indicated that the depth of the archaeological debris is slight, if it exists at all. Erosion and farming has disturbed all but the most substantial remains of this part of the settlement.

The objectives of the second expedition were threefold: to study more precisely the nature and the density of occupation; to determine the date of the monuments and supportive structures, with a view to judging whether the site had witnessed more than a single period of occupation; and to interpret the function of the site and judge its role in historical terms, in the light of the first two inquiries. We are attempting to analyse the nature of the occupation of the settlement as a whole, and not to restrict the study to an exposure of the decorated pavilion alone. During the past season, in fact, we deliberately avoided the pavilion since the workmen had not yet acquired the skills to cope with the stuccoes, and the expedition did not have the facilities to handle the quantity of material that might be expected. To achieve the objectives of the season, then, three methods of approach were taken. The first was a topographic survey designed to determine the total limits of the site and to plot all visible architectural features. The second was to conduct an intensive surface survey, involving collection and analysis of all sherds found. The third approach was the use of limited test trenches, designed to articulate some of the architectural features, determine dimensions where crucial, and in general to gauge the depth of the archaeological debris.

The topographic survey mapped no major features not already known from the first survey, but it produced a more accurate map. While the objective of the survey of surface materials was to cover the entire basin, this season's work was concentrated in the areas adjacent to the monumental features and the fortification wall. Outside the two monumental enclosures, and apart from the dense sherd concentration on the slopes of Tepe Rash, the heaviest sherddage was encountered in a flattish area alongside the main fortification wall. Elsewhere on the site the sherddage was scattered and sporadic. The lack of any material earlier than Parthian was confirmed but what was unexpected was that seemingly Parthian pottery appeared consistently in the areas of both densely concentrated and lightly scattered sherd coverage. Characteristic post-Parthian features were encountered only in the area of Tepe Rash. Some Islamic sherds were recovered from the Upper Castle, where there have been some obvious later building repairs. As far as the history of the site is concerned, then, one might suggest that the fortifications and palatial complex were conceived in late Parthian times, and that some form of occupation continued on a limited scale in Sasanian times, with the Upper Castle serving as a retreat probably as late as Mongol times.

In the three areas examined by test trench the same picture emerged. First test: two towers and the intermediate length of curtain wall at a point along the fortification wall were probed for dimensions. As it turned out, the towers were square in plan, and not rounded as indicated in the first report. Already one of the strong Sasanian leads was destroyed. In addition, a Parthian date was tentatively confirmed by the sherds found in association with the wall. It was apparent that the inner face of the wall had suffered damage and had been repaired. Neither this repair work nor the occupation associated with the small chambers within the towers could be dated to anything other than Parthian. In addition, the flattish area adjacent to the wall was tested for remains which might have suggested the presence of a garrison. Low wall stubs and bell-shaped chambers cut into the bed-rock were all that could be found in the limited probe but from these and the numerous storage-jar rim fragments found it was clear that a reasonably permanent type of compartmentalized settlement had existed here, such as would have been appropriate for a garrison.

Second test: an area in the north-west corner of the Gach Gumbad enclosure was examined where surface features indicated the presence of a series of chambers around a central courtyard. The three deep chambers which were exposed were virtually devoid of any occupational debris, with only small fragments of fallen plaster revealed in the bottom of the fill. A thick layer of sterile mud comprised most of the fill. The amount of preservation and the depth of the fill is the most interesting aspect of the work accomplished here so far. There is nothing yet to indicate the function of the layout, though the surface indications suggest that it represented the residential and service quarters of the palace. No non-Parthian material was recovered.

Third test: an area outside of the Gach Gumbad enclosure was examined where brick-bats, plaster fragments, and broken roof-tiles suggested the presence, outside the gardened enclosure, of a building in the same style as the stuccoed pavilion. However, excavations soon revealed that it was a dump of architectural debris cleared from a ruined building. Of course, the logical source of this material was the stuccoed pavilion, for the dump is close by, though tastefully set on the other side of the garden wall. We know that the pavilion suffered severe damage at one time. It was thought after the 1965 sondage that this damage caused the terminal destruction of the building, but now there is every prospect that we shall find traces of damage caused to the structure, clearance of debris, and repairs made to the building. In view of the nature of the finds from the dump—including carved and painted stuccoes, fresco or painted plaster fragments, and a small portion of mosaic paving—this prospect is an exciting one.

The surface survey and the test trenches confirm that the site represents the residence of an important dignitary in a palatial setting, together with all the accoutrements needed to support him in this idyllic, but intensely defensive setting. Since there is strong evidence that the entire complex was conceived in Parthian times, though some features are reminiscent of a Sasanian tradition, it might be logical to place the history of the site in a late Parthian/transitional Sasanian context. It is this period above all which sees the deep fragmentation of empire and the proliferation of petty dynasts who refused to acknowledge the power of a central government. In its defensive position Qal'eh-i Yazdigird makes sense as the home of a feudal lord, thumbing his nose at the King of Kings, and maintaining himself in his gardened enclosure with the luxuries afforded by plundering the highroad at will without fear of reprisal.