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PARTHIAN HIGH LIFE AT QAL'EH-I YAZDIGIRD
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Let me plunge straight in and say that the past ROM season of excavation at Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, has exposed one of the most exciting displays of architectural ornament ever found in Iran from around the beginning of the Christian era. On the basis of earlier probes at the site (see Archaeological Newsletter no. 125, October, 1975) we had always suspected that we would find a rich store of decorative stuccoes. From two previous expeditions to the site (1965 and 1975) it was possible to surmise that there was a lavishly decorated pavilion set at the upper end of an enclosed area of irrigated gardens. Our discoveries, however, exceeded our wildest hopes this year as we came down, within the first week of work, upon a compacted mass of fallen stucco decorations, richly embellished with paint and display-

Fig. 1. Stucco figure of a dancer from a faceted column.

ing all manner of dancing figures and friezes of geometric designs and stylised flower patterns. Primary blues, reds, yellows and greens predominate among the colours used, and one can't help feeling that the original effect must have been a garish nightmare. However, as some of the pieces had clearly been repainted, it is difficult to judge at present whether the original colour scheme was quite as jarring as it now appears.

Work proceeded at a slow pace because of the density of the fallen ornament. Decorative pieces from the walls up to ceiling height were often found still attached to large chunks of collapsed masonry. At times it was virtually impossible to proceed without causing some minor damage to the stuccoes. For instance, if one decided to remove some fallen bricks to release the obvious stucco ornament alongside, it might turn out that the removed bricks also had decoration on the underside.

What makes the finds particularly exciting is that they display a very rich variety of iconography and form. There is an interesting range of architectonic ornament, that is, decoration which apes real architectural form but which has no other function than decorative. This includes engaged columns which are sometimes round and fluted, and sometimes faceted with human figures set in panels on each of the facets. (Fig. 1). There are also engaged pilasters, badly damaged but still intact upon the wall, bearing stylised floral and geometric designs such as a honeysuckle and an interlocking circle motif. These repetitive patterns cover the surfaces of the masonry like wall-paper. Deeply carved and multicoloured as they were, they cannot have failed to dazzle the onlooker with their riot of colour and ornament.

In the course of the season it became clear that one of the trenches was located within a monumental hall lined with decorative niches. Each niche consists of an arch resting upon piers and impost capitals, which function in a purely decorative way. The vousoirs of the arches display a procession of griffons adapted from the art of ancient Babylonia and Assyria. The effect is a fine example of the typical "blind facade" architecture of the Parthian period. Later, as the plan of the building began to emerge, it, too, was seen to be typical of the palaces of that period.

While we have still to expose far more of the plan, and many more stuccoes must be uncovered before the form and function of the building becomes clear, we can already begin to speculate about the milieu in which it was set. We know from earlier investigations that we are dealing with an impressive fortress site set in the mountains on the very western edge of Iran, overlooking Iraq. Seemingly conceived as the secure residence of a dissident Parthian lord rather than as a military outpost of the government, the stronghold comprises ten square miles of tableland protected by spectacular natural and man-made defences. Set within this magnificently defended area -- where one senses almost a streak of paranoia in the mind of its sponsor -- there are the remains of a barracks and inner stronghold, as well as the garden and palace described earlier. It is, essentially, the domain of one man and his followers.

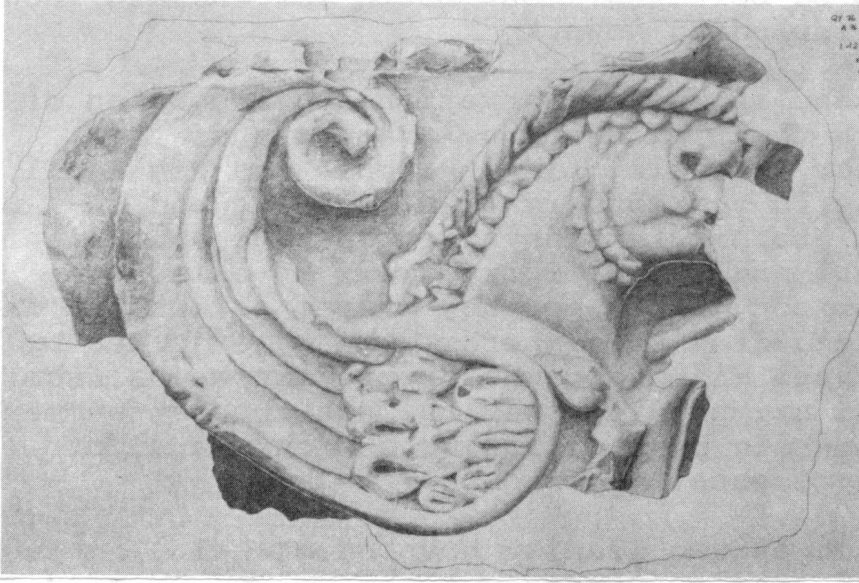


Fig. 2. Fragment of a stucco frieze depicting the winged "Dog Bird".

Here, against a background of lavish and somewhat gaudy ornament, and facing a refreshing view over a richly green garden, we can envisage the lord of the manor reclining in comfort, entertained by dancers and enjoying the fruits of the harvest. It is probably not without reason that we find friezes ornamented with scenes of a reclining Dionysus-like figure, attended by his Eros-like companions who sport with a lion and pluck grapes from a vine.

The iconographic origin of such a scene is obviously the Classical Mediterranean world, but what, one might ask, is Roman art of this sort doing in a country which was supposed to be the arch-enemy of Rome? One should hasten to add that in the same room appear portraits of a male, rendered in what one might call the purest of all Parthian styles. There is, too, a Senmurv or "Dog Bird", whose hybrid origins lie in the traditional mythology of ancient Persia (Fig. 2). It is, in fact, in the milieu of the Levant that we find the type of cultural interaction which permitted the amalgamation of so many different iconographic themes.

There were many contacts between Parthia and Rome across the Syrian desert as traders moved merchandise from the looms, workshops and produce of the East to luxury markets in the West. It may, in fact, have been this trade which made it possible for the lord of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird to maintain himself in such splendid style. His stronghold dominated access to one of the most important passes onto the Iranian plateau from the Mesopotamian plains and he may easily have controlled, for his own purposes, the movement of traffic along this highway. His charges upon, or plundering of, the caravans may have provided the means both to build the elaborate fortress and to sponsor the artists who decorated the palace with styles culled from East and West.

Our season's activities were involved almost entirely with the partial uncovering of the palace and the extraction and preservation of its stuccoes. Life was by no means easy. The luxury of a house to ourselves with space to breathe and to do the work that needed to be done was not lost on those who had endured the cramped quarters of Rustam's cottage last year. We would not, in fact, have been able to cope without the new dig house which was built in the spring. But it was hot and there were two cases of sun-stroke even with people wearing hats. The sheer physical exhaustion

of dragging one's bones up and down the Kurdish mountainside in the hot sun has to be felt to be believed. Our motto for the dig should be "Everything is uphill including down."

Some of our staff had a hand in the preservation and recording of the stuccoes as well as in their excavation. Veterans of the previous expedition - Peter Mitchell, Linda Ritchie and Peg Keall - were involved respectively in the conservation, drawing and registration of the finds. Stephen Lumsden acted as site supervisor, Bill Pratt as photographer, and Krysia Spirydowicz as chief conservator. An itinerant Briton, Peter Morgan, played saxophone, did a little bit of digging, and drew some sherds. We were joined by architectural student Michael Milojevic who dropped in on us from his Grand Eastern Tour and stippled his way through the hot summer. We were also joined for a while by two Iranian students and, of course, the government representative.

Plans for the future, which assume Iranian government help, include the roofing of part of the site to preserve the stuccoes in situ. It will be an enormous task, but it will ensure that the monument will become for the visitor, as well as for the scholar, one of the most spectacular remains of the entire Parthian realm.

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The illustrations are from drawings made by Linda Ritchie.