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A PARTHIAN FORTRESS IN THE MOUNTAINS OF KURDISTAN

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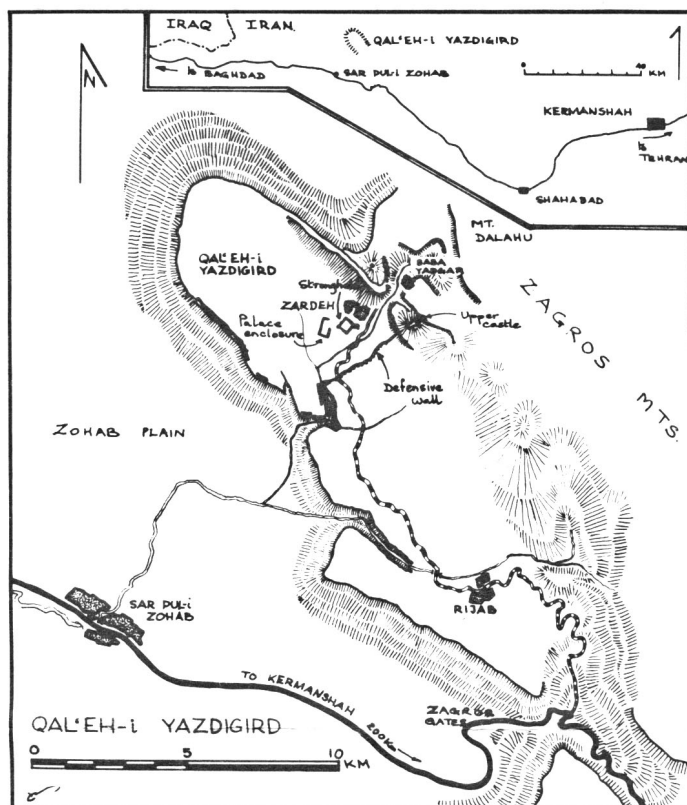


Fig. 1. Map showing location of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird. Drawn by Claus Breede.

"Open up in the name of the ROM" - these words are only a slightly adapted version of those used, during a wild rainstorm, to arouse from his drugged sleep the dervish who tends the shrine of David the Blue Rider located at the mouth of the gorge of Zardeh (scene of a new ROM expedition to the site of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird this past summer). The dervish was to be the expedition's neighbour for the next two and a half months and on this basis it was hoped he would restrain his snarling dogs and open up his doors to four drenched

and mud-spattered wayfarers (plus an infant) who had plodded for over an hour in the dark and the wet after abandoning for the night the entire expedition equipment on a mud slide way back down the unfinished road. The expedition had no permanent base yet, hence the need for the dervish's hospitality.

It was a particularly wet spring this year in Iran and we were to appreciate it later when the sun came out and the fields were full of flowers, the hillsides lush with wild grasses. But for now the rains were a real drag. After choosing our camp site in, around, and on top of a three room cottage which we rented from Rustam, a seventy year old bachelor gardener and bee-keeper, we thought we were all set for work. But there was one more storm which had us scurrying from our tents to seek refuge inside the already cramped cottage. Unfortunately, the flat mud-roof began to leak after exceptionally heavy rains and we spent another damp and uncomfortable night. Tragically, too, when the sun came to dry everything off, it also baked the roof too quickly, causing it to crack. This was to be its own source of discomfort during the course of the summer, for snakes and scorpions got into the cracks from outside, making one look nervously aloft whenever there was a suspicious rustling in the rafters.

To reach Zardeh and Qal'eh-i Yazdigird one must leave the main Tehran-Baghdad highway, just at the point where the road begins to make its final, dramatic descent from the Zagros mountains (Fig. 1). This is the pass known to historians as the Zagros Gates. The road is, of course, the Great Asian Highway or Silk Road of mediaeval times. Beyond the foot of the pass one comes to the plain of Zohab, eventually to the Iraqi border, and ultimately to the plains of Mesopotamia. But by turning off from the road in a northwesterly direction one can hug the edge of the Zagros mountains and, by following the Rijab trough for some fifteen miles, reach the Zardeh tableland, a shoulder of land projecting out from the main range and overlooking Iraq.

The Zardeh tableland is actually basin-shaped, so that its rim is higher than its centre. For over half of its circumference the rim is a precipitous escarpment overhanging the plain of Zohab, with cliffs ranging anywhere from 300 to 1000 feet high, and a general elevation of about 3000 feet above the plain itself. In the northeast segment of the tableland, the cliffs merge with the mass of the main mountain range. This high ground, locally called Mt. Dalahu, adds a protective arm to an already remarkably protected basin.

But, in spite of the awesome fastness within which the inhabitants could shelter, the architects of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird saw limitations in the effectiveness of the natural defences. Wherever they felt that an intruder could scramble up to the top of the escarpment they ordered the construction of walls to render the defensive system totally secure. Across the open end of the tableland, where it converges with the Rijab trough, the builders constructed an elaborate defensive wall complete with arrow slots, towers and guard chambers. The wall, strategically placed along the edge of a ravine to gain the greatest natural advantage, stretches for over a mile and a half (see Fig. 1), completing the natural and man-made circumvallation

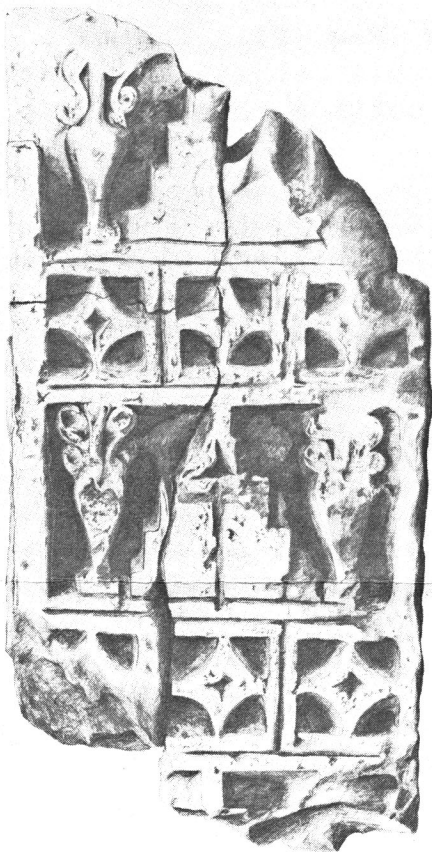


Fig. 2. Parthian architectural stucco decoration. From a drawing by Linda Ritchie

area of watered gardens and shade, for recreation and sport), the palace appears to have been built to accommodate both residential and ceremonial functions.

Limited test trenches sunk in 1965 in the eastern half of the Gach Gumbad complex produced evidence of plaster-decorated walls preserved below ground and fallen stucco statuary - both suggesting a structure designed for ceremonial or at least very grandiose private functions. Exploratory work done in the western half of Gach Gumbad this year revealed a totally different type of layout and structure, one more appropriate for residential purposes and storage facilities. Both areas will be the subject of our attention in future seasons. The work promises to be very rewarding because, while the palace suffered violent damage at one time, probably from an earthquake, not all the buildings appear to have been repaired. That is why the statues and the wall decorations remain to be unearthed by the excavator. But this summer, while investigating an area outside of the walled enclosure, we came across a dump of architectural debris. The dump produced large

of the tableland and enclosing an area of approximately 10 square miles. In addition, an upper castle perched on a pinnacle in the lower reaches of Mt. Dalahu and two other flanking lookout posts, afford an extraordinary view over the surrounding territory and give control over the access routes to the basin from the high ground. The Zardeh tableland is, therefore, a uniquely fortified position, dominating not only the plains below, but also intimately connected with the mountainous interior, and strategically located within reach of the Zagros Gates and one of the main highways of Iran.

Apart from the very elaborate military fortifications, considerable investment went into the construction of two major structures within the basin. The one, Ja-i Dar, a heavily fortified compound, may have been designed as a barracks and stronghold. But the function of other monuments, the Gach Gumbad palace and enclosure, was quite clearly non-military in nature. Set within a long walled enclosure, whose layout seems appropriate for a garden of paradise (an

chunks of decorative plaster-work (some of it painted), fresco fragments, and a small piece of mosaic paving (Fig. 2). The most likely explanation at the moment is that all this debris was cleared from the badly damaged palace and was dumped outside the enclosure, preparatory to making repairs.

So far all mention of the identity of the architects or of the sponsors of the programme which resulted in the building of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird has been deliberately avoided. All that can be said at this point is that the lavishness of the palace seems to speak of the presence of a very important personage, not simply a garrison commander. Though the site was once thought to be Sasanian, there is now increasing evidence to show that it was actually planned and constructed in late Parthian times (possibly 2nd century A.D.), and that it was only re-inhabited under the Sasanians. In the troubled years at the end of the Parthian Empire the most logical explanation for the existence of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird is that it represents the stronghold of a Parthian noble, possibly a rival to the throne of the King of Kings. At the very least it appears to have been someone at loggerheads with the imperial court based at Ctesiphon, near Baghdad. According to this theory the protective walls were designed to keep the resident "Secessionist" secure from any punitive expeditions sent from the capital. Similar acts of independence and gestures of defiance are by no means uncommon for the period in question. And, of course, it was the disunity of the Parthians which made the rise to power of the Sasanians, their successors, inevitable.

But while we can only speculate wildly about such things it is only appropriate that for now the last word be given to the Kurdish villagers of Zardeh who have the history of their site all neatly worked out. To them, as the name suggests, it is the Castle of Yazdigird, the last of the Sasanian kings. Now legend has it that Yazdigird's daughter, Bibi Shahbanu, married the Imam Husein in a union which symbolises the acceptance, by the Persian peoples, of Islam - an originally Arab faith. It is doubly interesting that the Imam Husein enjoys particular reverence in the eyes of the Zardeh villagers. For they are Ahl Haqq - that is, in their heterodox version of the Moslem religion, they believe in 1001 successive incarnations of God, including Moses, David, Jesus, Ali and the Imam Husein. This makes the presence at Zardeh of Yazdigird, the putative father-in-law of the Imam, all the more precious. It is going to be very difficult to convince the local press that the site was built under the Parthians, 500 years before Yazdigird ever lived. The "Kitchens", the "Public Square" (where Yazdigird was supposed to review his troops), and the Cave of Bibi Shahbanu (where she was believed to have hidden from the marauding Arabs) - these and other conveniently labelled parts of the site are going to have to be reinterpreted if the story of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird is going to be written according to the facts.

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