

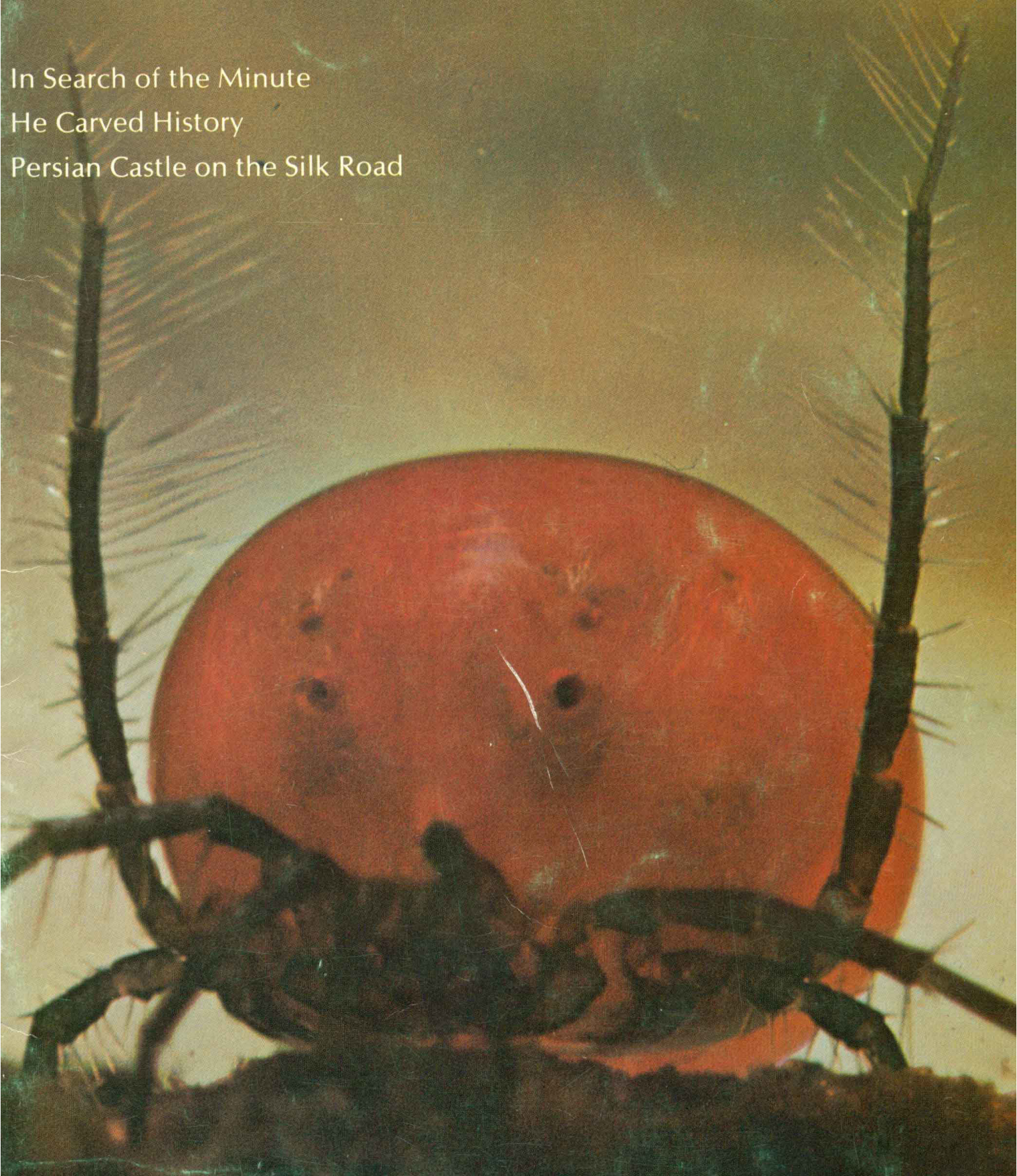
# ROTUNDA

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In Search of the Minute

He Carved History

Persian Castle on the Silk Road





# Persian Castle on the Silk Road

## *Excavating a Sasanian Hunting Lodge*

Edward Keall

In June of 1965 I was a student in Tehran, hotly pursuing “the Sasanians in the Western Zagros”. My fellowship at the British Institute of Persian Studies permitted me the remarkable privilege of studying whatever aspect of mediaeval Persian archaeology I saw fit. At times it seemed like a passport to endless mountains of rice and lamb stew and the dubious honour of hundreds of bone-wearying miles in or on all manner of assorted transports—buses, taxis, trucks, mules, bicycles in every conceivable state of repair, and my own two feet as well.

That June I had at my disposal the use of the Institute’s long-wheel-base Land Rover to get to my site. Fortunately for me there were also in Iran at that time two notable ROM archaeologists surveying the western Zagros for pre-Sasanian materials: T. Cuyler Young, Jr. and Louis D. Levine. In a gentlemanly gesture they promised me that if I could get a driver to take the Land Rover to Qaleh-i Yazdigird, they would come and pick me up, vehicle and all, in three weeks. The mission seemed more dramatic when, on the way in, the Land Rover eventually came to a halt in the dung and straw beneath a large plane tree on the edge of the village we were heading for, some eighteen hours drive south-west of Tehran. The villagers stated quite strongly

that we were the first motorized transport ever to enter those precincts. The only other recorded visits of archaeologists were those of Major Rawlinson, during his march through the mountains in 1839, and of Colonel Tchirikov, a member of the commission which surveyed the Turkish-Persian frontier in 1849-52.

I had a *sondage* permit to work near the village at the site of Qaleh-i Yazdigird, a name which means literally “the castle of King Yazdigird”. The permit allowed me to work just long enough to sink a hole and draw a few rapid conclusions, before withdrawing gracefully with plans to return again should the site seem a promising one. I had first heard about Qaleh-i Yazdigird while seated on a Turkish beach in 1964. Christopher Weightman, then also a fellow at the Institute, was in Iran studying the Ahl-i Haqq or “Worshippers of the Truth”, a Muslim sect of Persian dervishes.

During his research he had visited a shrine of theirs in Kurdistan and his talk of an “ancient long wall” intrigued me. It sounded Sasanian from the way he described it. The Sasanians were a Persian dynasty who ruled Iran between the 3rd and 7th centuries A.D. They had a particularly distinctive way of building masonry with rubble stone and gypsum mortar, so that it was



*Peak with remains of a fortress overlooking the archaeological site at Qaleh-i Yazdigird*

*Left: Iranian-Metalwork-Silver: Sasanian Silver Plate: Peroz I shooting ibexes with bow and arrow. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1934*



*Portions of the long defensive wall with the remnants of a guard chamber*

*Right: Detail of a frieze on the stucco wall unearthed at the site of the hunting pavilion*

possible to identify the wall from the descriptions, without having seen it first. On my return to Iran the following year, I managed to reach the site by a three-hour mule ride there and back from the river. The mules were pack animals with no saddles. On the first visit I did not linger long. This brief reconnoitre revealed that the site consisted of a long defensive wall, a residential and an upper castle, a series of look-out posts and garrison quarters, and what was probably once an enclosed garden with a pavilion. The site looked promising enough to request a *sondage* permit.

When the permit was granted I was assigned a Mr. Rahnamoun as the government representative to look after my interests and to make sure that I acted in accordance with the laws of the Iranian Archaeological Service. Qaleh-i Yazdigird is not far from the Iraqi border. Smugglers were reputed to be able to snatch, unnoticed, a blanket from a person sleeping on a roof. How Mr. Rahnamoun would have acted in that eventuality I do not know, but he was also there to assist in the bargaining over how much wheat I would destroy in the course of the work. In fact, the wheat had already been harvested and little compensation had to be paid to the local farmers.

My objective was to dig for Sasanian pottery since there was little known about it at that time. Pottery is the fundamental tool of the archaeologist, for in theory it enables him to date everything else found in association with it. There was ample evidence of pottery in the form of potsherds in the stubble, but none in a stratified context. That is to say that none of it had survived in the ground where it had originally been either deliberately discarded in the rubbish heaps of Sasanian times or accidentally buried in the collapsed debris of the settlement. The pottery visible on the ground was there only because of erosion and the centuries of outwash since the site was abandoned in the

seventh century A.D. The success of the mission seemed threatened unless other diagnostic material could be found with which to date the ruins. The ruins still seemed very Sasanian but there was no firm proof of it yet.

As often happens, the local people know where the goodies are. One of the fields goes by the name of Gach Gunbad, or Plastered Dome. Now unfortunately this name does not reflect the survival of an ancient tradition attesting the existence of a domed building on the spot. Rather it is where the dervish community was in the habit of digging for old plaster to repair the dome of their shrine. They would dig up the Sasanian plaster, fire it in a kiln, and so produce plaster of Paris, whereupon they could use it in the obvious way by simply adding water. Acting on the direction of the locals, I laid out a test trench where fragments of plaster appeared on the surface. Our focus was now on stucco instead of potsherds.

Almost immediately we encountered courses of baked brick, just inches below the surface. Our first impression was that the wall had toppled over, for

the bricks were laid on edge. But that just happened to be the peculiar way they had built the wall—in vertical lays, with each course laid at right angles to the preceding one. The bricks one saw were, in fact, the top of the wall buried below ground. Large pieces of plaster began to appear as we dug lower alongside the wall. Gradually it became clear that not only was the top of the wall decorated with a broad frieze of geometric and stylized floral patterns, but broken plaster and stucco statuary had fallen down beside the wall, probably during an earthquake. The collapsed rubble had helped preserve the wall in its own debris. We reached the original floor over ten feet below present ground level.

That was all we managed to do in the time allotted by the *sondage* permit. The rest of the three weeks was spent surveying the ruins standing above ground and measuring, amongst other things, the long wall (2½ kilometres) with the aid of army compass, fifty-metre tape, and one of the crew, Muhammad Ali, who held the end of the tape.

Muhammad Ali was also the local huntsman. One evening he

came back with a partridge which he had shot on the cliffs above the village, using a fire-arm practically Sasanian in age. I have a great deal of respect for this type of huntsman. I had accompanied others on the other digs in Iran in search of gazelle or mountain sheep. Such hunts usually took one into wild mountain country, over scree and up ravines. Mountain leopard is not unknown. The best part of the hunt was the eating of the gazelle liver, spit-roasted on the spot. Then would come the chore of hauling the prize down the mountain on someone's back. The hunter really paid for his triumph.

There are more game laws in Iran now than there were in 1965. Muhammad Ali's gun has been confiscated by the government as part of the general programme to disarm the tribespeople. One must also have a licence to shoot game. It is a creditable attempt to conserve Iran's dwindling wildlife. But it takes game out of the hands of those who hunt for food and gives it to those who hunt for sport.

Other evening activities of the workmen at Qaleh-i Yazdigird, even after a full day's work, involved the wheat harvest. When



Iranian workmen back-filling the excavation to preserve the site until the next dig



I visited the site in December 1973 the winter wheat was already springing up in the fields. Ploughing for spring sowing was in full swing. Harvest is in mid-June. The orchards produce cool-weather crops like walnuts and apples, but the climate is mild enough to allow pomegranates to be grown. The grapes are delicious. During the summer many of the women and children move up to the pasture in the mountains with the flocks, while the men stay behind for the harvest. It is a pattern of transhumance probably followed in Sasanian times. The fat-tailed sheep of this area produce the cooking oil which is famous throughout all Iran. Vegetable shortening has been introduced on a large scale, but the traditional Iranian favourite is still *Kerman-shah roghan*.

The portion of the site which we excavated, as already explained, is called locally Gach Gunbad. It seems that here, originally, there was a pavilion set within an enclosed garden. It was a *paridaeza* or garden of paradise in the traditional Middle Eastern sense: an area of irrigated gardens, surrounded by a wall, and contrasting with the harsher and at first hostile environment of the open terrain or wilderness. It is in this sort of environment that the mediaeval Persian nobility were accustomed to sit and be entertained by music and the recitation of poetry. Stories would relate the heroic exploits of the huntsman and his noble attack upon the

savage prey. More true to life, the captive game would be driven into the enclosure to be shot ignominiously by the pampered potentate. The decadent life-style associated with these pastimes, attended by partying and entertainment after the hunt, will probably be revealed as further excavations uncover the decorations that adorned the stuccoed pavilion.

We get some measure of the amount of pomp and circumstance at the Sasanian court from an Arab chronicle in which there appears a description of a Sasanian king's audience chamber. It would be more correct to speak of a "King of Kings", since the empire of Iran at this time consisted of many small kingdoms as well as the central provinces governed from the capital. The whole agglomeration fell under the sway of one imperial majesty. The text, written by Ibn Ishaq some two hundred years after the fall of the Sasanian dynasty, in the ninth century A.D., nevertheless gives a colourful picture of the legendary pomp at the Sasanian court. The passage relates how "Khosrow I, Anoshirvan, used to sit in his audience hall where was his crown, like a mighty bowl set with rubies, emeralds and pearls with gold and silver, suspended by a chain of gold from the top of the arch in this his audience hall, and his neck could not support the crown, but he was veiled by draperies till he had taken his seat in this his audience hall, and had introduced his head within his

crown, and had settled himself in his place, whereupon the draperies were withdrawn. And no one who had not previously seen him looked upon him without kneeling in reverence before him."

Now it is doubtful whether Qaleh-i Yazdigird was ever the property of the King of Kings, or even that of a king. But it is likely that ceremonies conducted in the castle and garden pavilion mimicked in some way those at the imperial court. There is even a passage in one of the 13th-century Arab geographies by Yaqut which seems to refer to an estate in the general area occupied by the ruins of Qaleh-i Yazdigird. "At this place there is a large *eyvan* (vaulted chamber) and a great terrace in front of it, and the traces of a ruined garden built by Bahram Gur. They declare that the snow falls in the quarter of the hilly district; but never falls on the side which faces Iraq." The Arab writers had a tendency to extol the greatness of Sasanian monuments since it was that empire which the Arabs had so dramatically defeated in the seventh century. But it is particularly interesting that the legend should associate an estate in the area with Bahram Gur, the King of Kings. For it was he above all who was immortalized in Persian poetry and art as a great hunter. He actually met his death while hunting—in pursuit of the wild ass.

The reference to snow in the

chronicle just mentioned is also interesting. For again, when I visited Qaleh-i Yazdigird in December it was crisp, sunny, and mild, while an hour's drive away, higher up on the Iranian plateau, the cloud hung low and the ground was covered with frozen snow. Qaleh-i Yazdigird is on the border between the hot lands and the cold. The site was in all probability the estate of a feudal lord, a self-contained residence, supporting itself by agriculture and by taxation of the surrounding lands. It is unlikely that we shall ever find a royal audience-hall or a jewel-studded crown. Apart from the pleasure pavilion or hunting lodge, the rest of the site contains traces of garrison quarters, look-out posts, and massive defences. While that seems very mundane it is also true that in all likelihood the elaborate defences of Qaleh-i Yazdigird were in part designed to protect the great highway which runs below the site and from whose traffic the route took its exotic name of "the Silk Road".

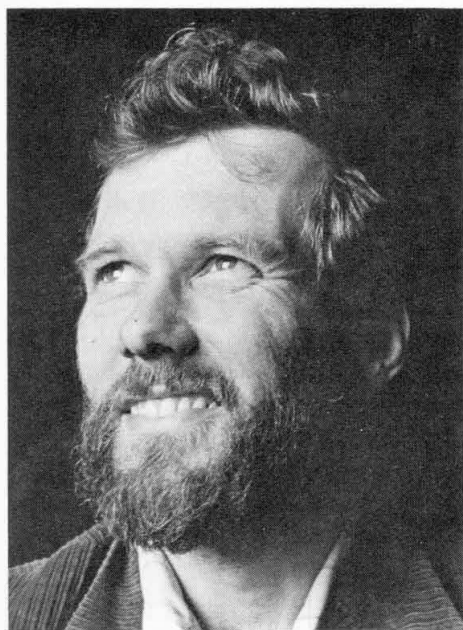
Meanwhile, we should return to the story of the excavations. An inventory of the stuccoes taken from the wall was made and photographs were taken. The workmen were paid off, and on the horizon appeared, as promised, my rescuers in the

second vehicle ever to visit Qaleh-i Yazdigird. It was being driven by T. Cuyler Young and Lou Levine who were surveying the area for other sites which might be of interest to them to dig. Their subsequent exploits on behalf of the ROM have been amply documented in the pages of *Rotunda*. We all spent the night on the roof of the one-room school house, carefully clutching our blankets around us to foil the smugglers. Next day, after an uneventful night disturbed only by the mosquitoes, we loaded the stuccoes into the Land Rover, the large pieces bedded in straw and the small pieces in two suitcases, and made the tortuous journey back to the great highway.

Crossing the ford was a nightmare. Should the vehicle stall it would quickly fill with water and irreparable damage would be done to the Sasanian stuccoes. We would eventually be left with a shapeless mass of plaster of Paris. Happily, we emerged safely and delivered the stuccoes intact to the Iran Bastan Museum in Tehran. We plan to return to Qaleh-i Yazdigird in the spring of 1975 under the auspices of the ROM to learn more about this mediaeval Persian estate and hunting lodge, and hope that the pursuit will not be in vain.



*The author and local huntsman Muhammed Ali with the fruits of a hunt near the site*



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