

Excavations in Iran *the British Contribution*



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REFLECTIONS ON QAL 'EH-I YAZDIGIRD

In June of 1965 a three week sondage and survey project was conducted at the site of Qal 'eh-i Yazdigird in southern Kurdistan by the writer while holding a Fellowship at the British Institute of Persian Studies. It is hoped to continue the project under the auspices of the Royal Ontario Museum where the writer now holds a post as Assistant Curator in the West Asian Department.

In 1965 inadequate facilities were available to handle the stucco properly. The excavated stuccoes require intensive cleaning before they can be studied. Identifications of the iconography remain uncertain in the light of the encrusted nature of the pieces. Their dating is equally difficult to ascertain satisfactorily. A more thorough programme of excavations is planned so that a definitive architectural study of the site can be presented. The sketch map and architectural details presented in Iran should be regarded as the results of only rudimentary studies. Nevertheless, reflection since that time demands that the following remarks be made.

Klaus Schippmann's observation in *Iran VII*, 1969, 160-2, regarding this writer's tentative association of the site of Qal 'eh-i Yazdigird with the name Madharustan, as mentioned in the Arab geographers, are entirely justifiable. The association was made originally on the grounds that the description seemed appropriate. The less than complete perusal of the source material is inexcusable. Yet Schippman's thorough

examination of the texts prompts one to raise the question of whether such methods alone are the best way to determine a site's identification.

Given the lack of inscriptional material but the comparative wealth of written references, such as those brought to light by Schippmann, it might be preferable to have employed, in addition, some of the techniques currently in use in sociological data processing systems. The principles of locational analysis seem appropriate here. The feasibility of the application of such techniques to archaeological problems has been suggested in an article written by Waldo Tobler and Susan Weinberg that appeared in *Nature*, May 1971. The importance of mathematical models, albeit not yet fully refined for our purposes, is that they provide the most fitting answer to a number of reasonable alternatives, thus reducing the amount of biased choice. These observations are made not in an attempt to squabble about the location of Madharustan, but in order to encourage a broader based approach to the problem, one that avoids identification on the basis of random, isolated textual references. With regard to the iconography of the stuccoes, in their interpretation, we face the embarrassing fact that it is difficult to define what the term "Sasanian Art" really means. For the Qal 'eh-i Yazdigird pieces show many unmistakable Parthian characteristics. The portraits of male, mustachioed heads belong to a class of sculpture for which there are examples in stone from the province of Elymais in



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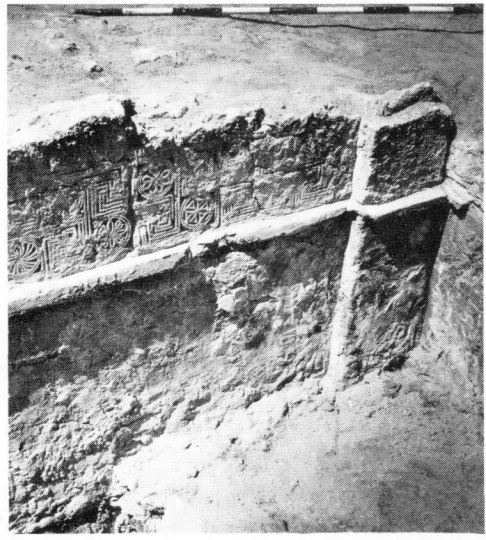


Parthian times. Their presence at Qal 'eh-i Yazdigird can only be explained in terms of an archaising element in the art. There is a strong Mesopotamian flavour too. The nude, standing figures, tentatively labelled hermaphrodites, bear marked similarity to the alabaster statuette illustrated by Legrain in the *Museum Journal*, Philadelphia, June 1928. The statuette is described as a cupid. The strong Hellenistic styling of Parthian figurines and statuettes from Babylonia is well known. The Qal 'eh-i Yazdigird figures are clearly derived from that same tradition. But the question of cupid or hermaphrodite has not been satisfactorily answered. It is not known, for instance, to what extent the Babylonian legend of Ishtar and Tammuz may have merged with the more strictly Greek concepts of bi-sexualism. It is hoped that proper cleaning of the stuccoes will in part lessen the confusion of mythological meaning. The impost block that carries a design of intertwined beasts on the face reveals more of the Mesopotamian element. The beasts have a striking parallel in a pair of intertwined dragons that are depicted on a bronze door-knocker in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin. Kuhnel assigned a thirteenth century date to the door-knocker and a North Mesopotamian origin on the basis of style. Kuhnel noted that parallels to it can be found in Byzantine book illustrations and wall paintings from Turfan. He refers to the Berlin door-knocker with the description "Wechselbeziehungen zwischen

turkisch-islamischer und byzantinischer Formgebung". The Sasanian date would be appropriate at Qal 'eh-i Yazdigird. Another close parallel in the Islamic period is to be found on a marble flagstone in the Cairo Museum. Wiet attributed the piece to thirteenth century Mesopotamia. Given the incompleteness of the study of the Qal 'eh-i Yazdigird stuccoes, as with the site as a whole, it is impossible to avoid the unfortunate fact that no specific items clearly identify the material as Sasanian. Ultimately that classification has to be made on the grounds that it cannot reasonably be anything else. It is to be hoped that continuing the programme at Qal 'eh-i Yazdigird will be a significant contribution towards the understanding of Sasanian material culture.

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Bibliography:
 For a preliminary report see *Iran*, V (1967), 99-121.

Figure 59: Qal 'eh-i Yazdigird—main defensive wall, looking up to an outpost above the plateau.
Figure 60: Qal 'eh-i Yazdigird—fortified castle beyond the gardens of Ban Zardeh.
Figure 61: Qal 'eh-i Yazdigird—sondage with stucco in situ.
Figure 62: Qal 'eh-i Yazdigird—stucco fragment of a human figure.



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