

EXCAVATIONS AT QALEH-I-YAZDGIRD

I had known about a place called Qaleh-i-Yazdgird for well over a year before I was able to visit it and examine the ruins which, by the name, purported to have been the residence at one time of that last king of the Sasanian Persians, who in the seventh century A.D. fled before the conquering Arab armies and abandoned the Persian Empire to the conversion of Islam.

The information about this castle had not come to me through any lengthy research in the ancient record books, but from a fellow passenger of mine, as we were travelling back to England along the southern coast of Turkey three summers ago. After a year of the arid wastes of the Iranian plateau, the Mediterranean, with its deep blue waters is overwhelming—the ledge-like road sliced out of the side of the precipitous cliffs is bordered by pine and oleanders that thrive on the spring-fed rivulets. But the Iranian plateau has a charm of its own, and I was already making plans to return.

My fellow traveller, CHRISTOPHER WEIGHTMAN, had recently been engaged in research on the “Ahl-Haqq”, or “Worshippers of the Truth”, an unorthodox sect which thrives in parts of Kurdistan and north-western Iran. Amongst their creed is a belief that God has been reincarnated seven times, along with five angels who accompany him. The reincarnated figures include David and Benjamin of the Old Testament.

The shrine of Baba Yadgar, who, though not actually included in the list of reincarnated figures, is honoured in pilgrimage by the devotees of the sect, is situated in a beautiful gorge at the extreme western edge of the Iranian plateau. It is in this region that the main road from Baghdad climbs up away from the Iraqi plains, following the route of the ancient highway that linked Mesopotamia and Media. Within a distance of fifty miles there is a complete contrast of vegetation from date palm to scrub hazel, and snow can be expected as late as April.

The castle of Qaleh-i-Yazdgird and its neighbour, the shrine of Baba Yadgar, lie midway between these two extremes. For when I made my own pilgrimage, acting on Christopher's information, I found that the site is naturally protected on the one side by a sheer escarpment that falls away to the plains below, and on another by the steep cliffs that build up into the higher reaches of the Zagros massif. The result is a saucer-like plateau which serves as a catchment area for the streams that derive from the higher ground. The waters of these are exhausted in irrigation for the most part of the year, but with the melting of the snows in early spring, they have worn a precipitous ravine through the scarp, plunging down to join the main stream of the Alwand river.

On the one side that is open to approach, a long wall has been constructed over a mile or more, making the site readily defensible. It runs right across from the escarpment up to the cliffs, and culminates above these in the castle that has given its name to the whole complex. In the well of the plateau below are the traces of the barracks area, the dwellings of the servants dependent upon the palace, and the palace itself. For there is a huge residential castle, strongly fortified with a regular series of towers and heavy walls, indicating a royal retreat. It is now partly covered by the orchards of the modern village.

But the most interesting ruin is the one which has least remaining to indicate its importance. A thin wall traces a line for some five hundred yards down one side, enclosing a large rectangular area which corresponds to the gardened paradise so favoured by the

Sasanian royalty, and where the king may even have provided "tame" game for the pleasure of his visitors. Shooting preserves exist for the same purpose today in this country.

The most famous of all royal huntsman, Bahram Gur, immortalized by Omar Khayyam and Persian miniature painters, is reported by the medieval Arab geographers to have built a palace in this area. And it may be that this is the work of his hand.

Of course the name attributed to the site now does not necessarily have any historical significance, but I am intrigued by the possibility that the name survives through the daughter of Yazdgird, Shahrbanu; for she was married to Imam Husain, the son of Ali and the grandson of the Prophet himself. Now Ali is particularly revered by the Ahl-Haqq, even more so than Mohammad; and Baba Yadgar (though he died in the sixteenth century) in their eyes is the reincarnation of Husain. So it would be natural for them to be particularly aware of the part that Yazdgird played in this region. And he would indeed have found the castle a comforting place to await the news of the last battle, before he decided that the odds were too great and fled to Merv.

The only other archaeologists to have visited the site seem to be confined to those who were connected with the programme that revolved round the delineation of the Perso-Turkish frontier in the mid-nineteenth century: Major RAWLINSON, the distinguished scholar who successfully deciphered Old Persian cuneiform; Colonel TCHIRIKOV; and Baron C. A. DE BODE. Subsequent visitors were more interested in the shrine than in unravelling the story behind the ancient ruins.

I felt that the site deserved further attention, and acquired permission from the appropriate authorities to conduct a trial excavation. A year later I returned. My first visit had been by mule, but since that time the villages had scratched out a track which would carry motor vehicles. This is perhaps one of the more notable effects of Land Reform, that simple progress of this type is no longer confined to those spheres which served the selfish interests of the landlord. However it was a very rough track, and we almost manhandled the Land Rover over the last few miles. But there was some slight satisfaction in being in the first vehicle ever to have reached that particular village where we were to spend the next three weeks. The permit had arrived just in time to fit in three weeks' work.

We lurched to a halt in the rubble and dung that littered the ground beneath a huge walnut tree, the focal point and nerve-centre of the community. The harvest was in progress, and mules brushed past, laden high with straw. Labour was at a premium. Since land reform, these peasants own their individual plots of ground. The winter rains had produced a good crop, and everyone was out working from first light to dusk, reaping in the fields, or working the threshing floor with ox or horse. The animals are held by a long rope and made to wheel round and round, trampling over the wheat, like a circus act with the ring-master calling out the tune from the centre of the ring.

I hired the local huntsman, Mohammad Ali, to help me with the survey work—that is to hold the other end of the 50-yard tape—and we spent ten days traipsing up and down, measuring interminable walls, and gazing down from frightening heights. I was usually exhausted by the end of the day, with enough energy only to sit on the roof of the house and wait for the mosquitoes. But Mohammad Ali would often climb up to a favourite spot of his above a spring, and less often come back with a delicious

partridge. He must have been a remarkable shot, for his gun was at least a hundred years old, of the muzzle-loading type.

Then the excavation. The usual haggling over wages, the soft talk to the landowner to convince him that his crop is not worth half what he would like to think—and with a bit of luck you get away with paying about twice its real value—and then in goes the first pick, nice and soft like a knife in butter. It's always an anticlimax really, after all the preparation. But this was the first excavation that I had controlled single-handed. I celebrated my birthday, which falls on Waterloo Day, with the first fatal stroke. And it nearly was my Waterloo.

For with only ten days to go, we had landed upon what seemed like the collapse of an enormous wall—as though the whole thing had gently toppled over. Adjacent areas showed the same story. This is perhaps the most intriguing part about excavation, that the picture always turns out to be different from what one had visualized. The prospect of removing this vast collapse with the aid of a handful of workmen seemed an overwhelming problem. Close examination and a little patience however revealed that the bricks were actually *in situ*. In fact they were in a peculiar type of lay where the bricks are laid on edge, turned in alternate courses through ninety degrees as though one were building a wall with dominoes placed on edge. The whole mass is bound tight with a strong bonding of gypsum mortar.

As it turned out, these walls were standing twelve feet above the original floor level, with their tops just slightly below plough soil. The surface of the wall was covered with a layer of stucco plaster, which towards the top carried a panelling of key pattern design, interspaced with rosettes and geometric designs. And fallen down from a height greater than this, possibly from a cloister or a balustrade that surrounded the court at a higher level, there turned up a series of naked hermaphrodite goddesses; fragments of plaques bearing the portrait of bearded figures; a sadly battered, but recognizable, female form in typical pose of Anahita, goddess of fertility—that is cupping her breasts with her hands; parts of a frieze depicting a reclining figure behind whom stands a winged character who is pulling the tail of a lion; and a pilaster capital showing two intertwined beasts, which perhaps reflects the conflict of the forces of good and evil, that was such a disputed theory in Zoroastrian religion.

The sudden windfall of this remarkable collection of statuettes and wall panellings forced me to close down the excavation. For I was unable to cope single handed with such a weight of material. But before my departure I was fortunate in witnessing a strange sacrificial rite that is performed annually by the Worshippers of the Truth. The entire village moves up to the shrine, and spends the whole day until dusk encamped in the shade of the walnut and cypress that abound in the gorge of Baba Yadgar. A number of sheep are slain, blessed, and then prepared for the consumption of the people. The use of any spice is forbidden at this ritual, the sheep being cooked in large copper cauldrons as boiled mutton.

At a later stage in the proceedings the young men of the village assembled in the fore-court of the Imamzadeh where they were presented with sugar, figs, bread, and apples. This they blessed in the usual way by kissing and pressing to the forehead, to the accompaniment of exhortations to Ali, "Ya Ali, Ya Ali". We reclined beside the stream that issues from the mountain at this point, where there are metal bowls, some with inscriptions, which the devotees use to drink the holy waters which they believe

hold healing properties. I even saw one of the dervishes who tends the shrine kiss the occasional tree as he walked along the path to the holy spring. The dome of the shrine itself sticks up through the shady cypresses; it was once described as "an ostrich egg sitting on a mouse nest". Inside, there is just enough room to accommodate a wooden sarcophagus and the carpet surround.

The following day we filled the Land Rover with straw, and fitted in the objects from the excavation, wrapping up each piece in bedding or old socks. And then followed a nightmare journey back to the main road. For we had to cross a swift and deep-flowing stream, which would quickly seep inside the vehicle if it stalled, reducing a rather splendid hoard of stucco statuary to a shapeless mass of plaster of Paris. Fortunately I had not incurred the wrath of the ghost of Baba Yadgar, and I hope to be able to return to continue the work already commenced, this time with a properly equipped expedition.

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