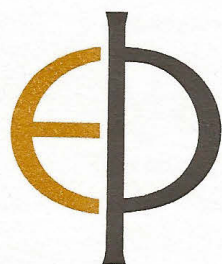


The Making of the Past

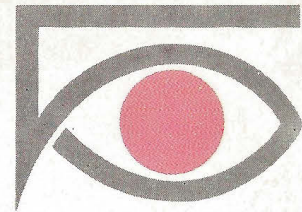
The Iranian Revival

by Georgina Herrmann



ELSEVIER · PHAIDON

The Castle at Qaleh-i Yazdigird



VISUAL STORY

Local legends identify the ruins at Qaleh-i Yazdigird as a refuge of Yazdigird, the last king of the Sasanian dynasty, but recent work there by the Royal Ontario Museum has suggested that the castle was built more than 400 years earlier. The excavator, E. J. Keall, considers that the site was probably occupied only for some 50 years towards the end of the Parthian period at a time when central authority was weak. He sees it as the luxurious mountain retreat of an independent robber baron, plundering the caravans traveling along the Great Silk Road.

The castle at Qaleh-i Yazdigird is situated not far from the Zagros Gates, the pass where the main east-west

highway begins its long descent to the plains below. Located in an elevated tableland with strong natural defenses, it was further strengthened by massive fortification walls. In this spacious and secure mountain retreat, with an upper castle sited on an inaccessible crag (*below*), the lord of Yazdigird built himself a sumptuous palace decorated with a riot of ornate painted stucco.

Work has only just begun at Yazdigird and the incredible quantities of stucco being found will make its excavation a slow and laborious task. But the discoveries made so far have already revolutionized our understanding of late Parthian art.



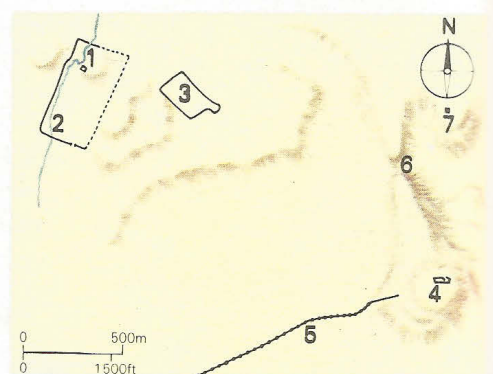


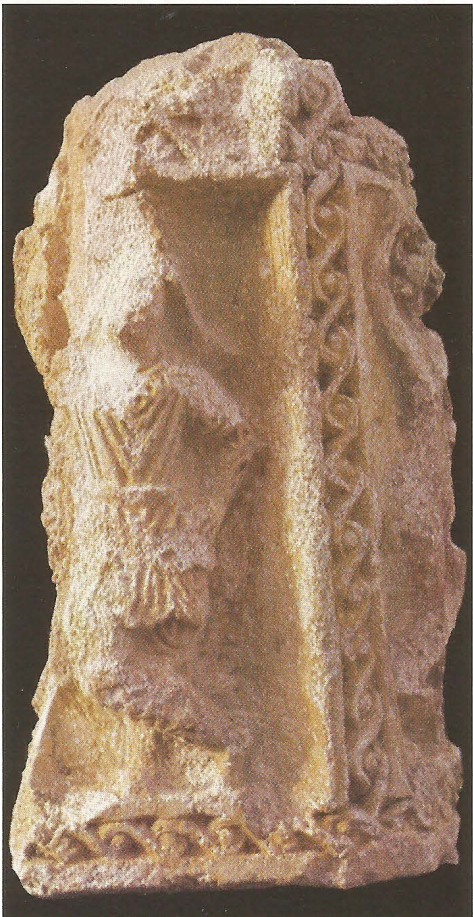
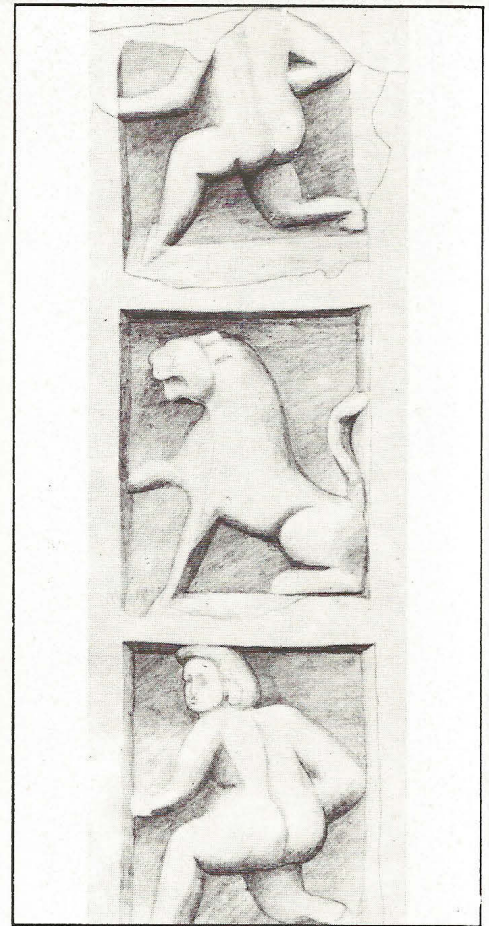
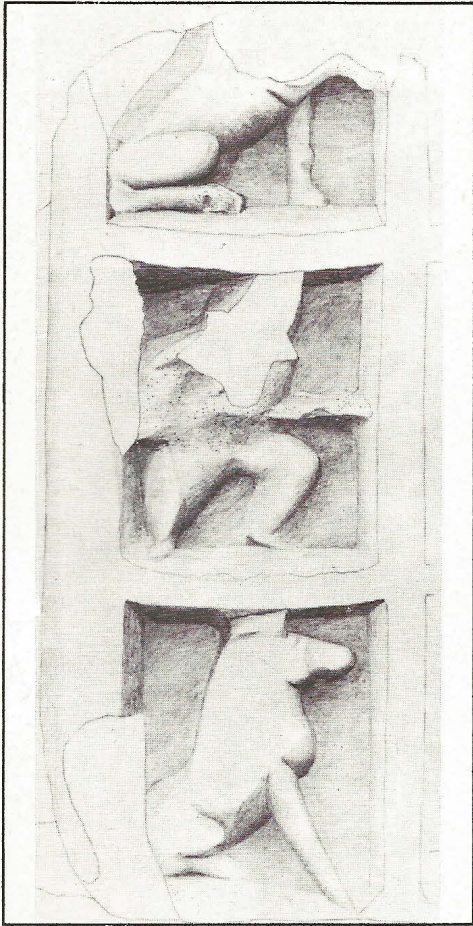
Above: detail of a stylized bud-and-tendrill motif from a niche in Room 5 of the royal pavilion (1 on the plan).

Above left: still in the royal pavilion, this view of Room 1, which measured 10 meters a side, shows the continuous frieze of interlocking swastika and rosette designs set 4 meters above the floor. Above this a complex series of panels included such elements as busts of a Parthian noble (like the one shown *left*) and a possible Dionysiac scene showing reclining figures reaching for grapes, winged youths playing with felines, and Eros figures.

Left: the lord of Yazdigird from Room 1. This bust is typically Parthian in its frontal representation, in the bushy bunches of hair framing the face and in its enclosure within a decorated roundel. A similar bust, but in stone, has been found at Hatra.

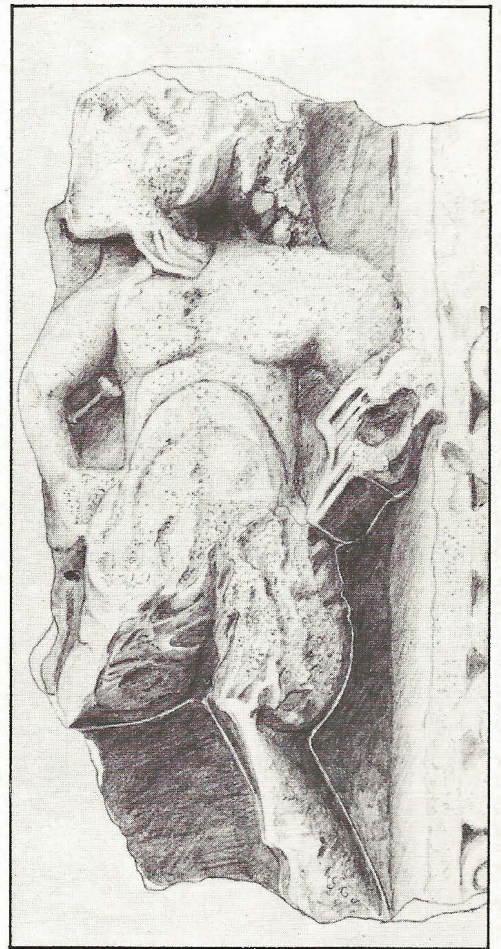
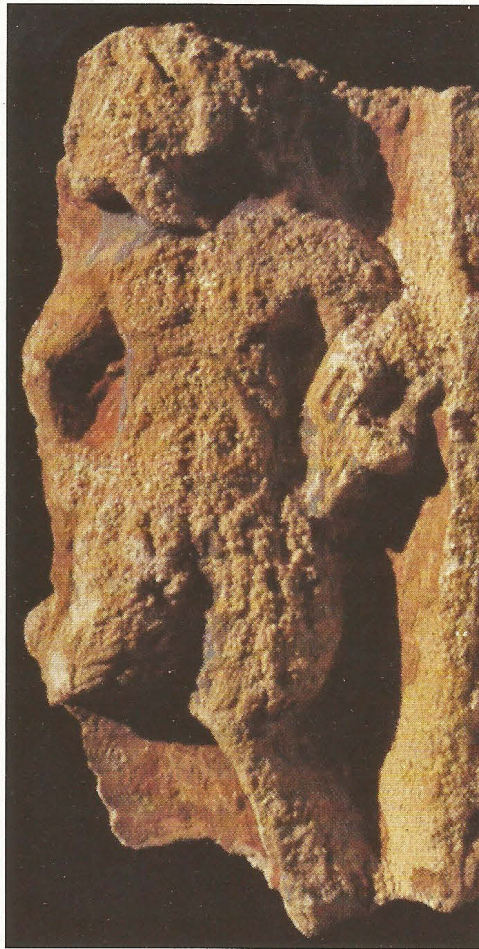
Below: on this plan of the site note 1 Royal pavilion, 2 Palace garden, 3 Stronghold, 4 Upper castle, 5 Defensive wall, 6 Gorge, 7 Look-out post.





Above: fragment of an engaged column found in the debris of Room 5. Painted green, the column is decorated with a series of naked hunters attacking wild beasts, perhaps lions, each figure set in a panel. Note how the hunters' spears pierce the frame of the panel – a typical Iranian trait. Modern drawings help to elucidate the detail.

Left: unique faceted columns were set along the walls of Room 11, which was perhaps the entrance *ivan*. These columns were brightly painted and decorated with figures, all set in panels, the borders of which were embellished with a scroll design. Here we see a clothed male who, in his tunic and trousers and high pointed hat, is very much Parthian in inspiration and pose.

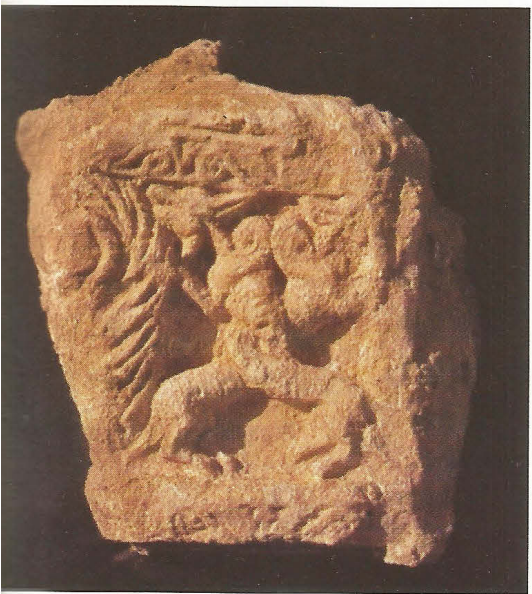


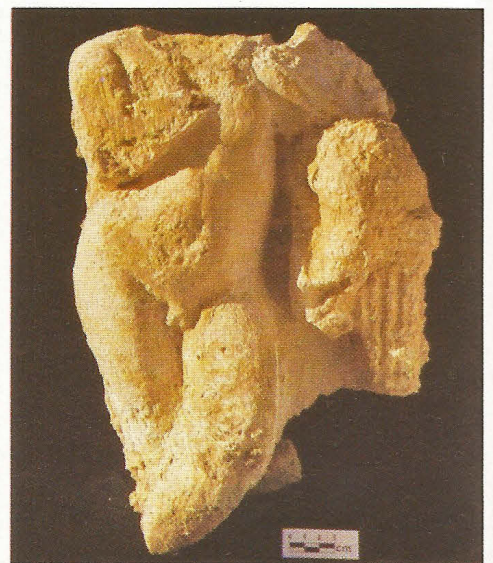
Above: two other figures from the faceted columns from the walls of Room II, a naked dancer and (*above right*) a Pan figure, the latter clearly western in inspiration. As in all the stuccos from Yazdigird, the iconography is mixed.

Below: entwined beasts from Room I of the royal pavilion. These winged mythical creatures, heraldically knotted, belong to an old Near Eastern tradition.



Above: the fragmentary head of a female.





Above: an engaged column capital from Room 1, painted red. A nude female holds a pair of dolphins with voluted tails. The use of such figural motifs on capitals was popular at the time, and capitals with female heads framed by stylized leaves occur at both Warka (*top right*) and Seleucia.

Center right: an Eros figure leaning on a pedestal, Hellenistic in origin, from Room 1.

Bottom right: a winged griffin, also from Room 1. The distinctive pose clearly foreshadows that of the Sasanian *senmurv*, a favorite motif composed of beast and bird and frequently represented on silks, silver and stucco.

