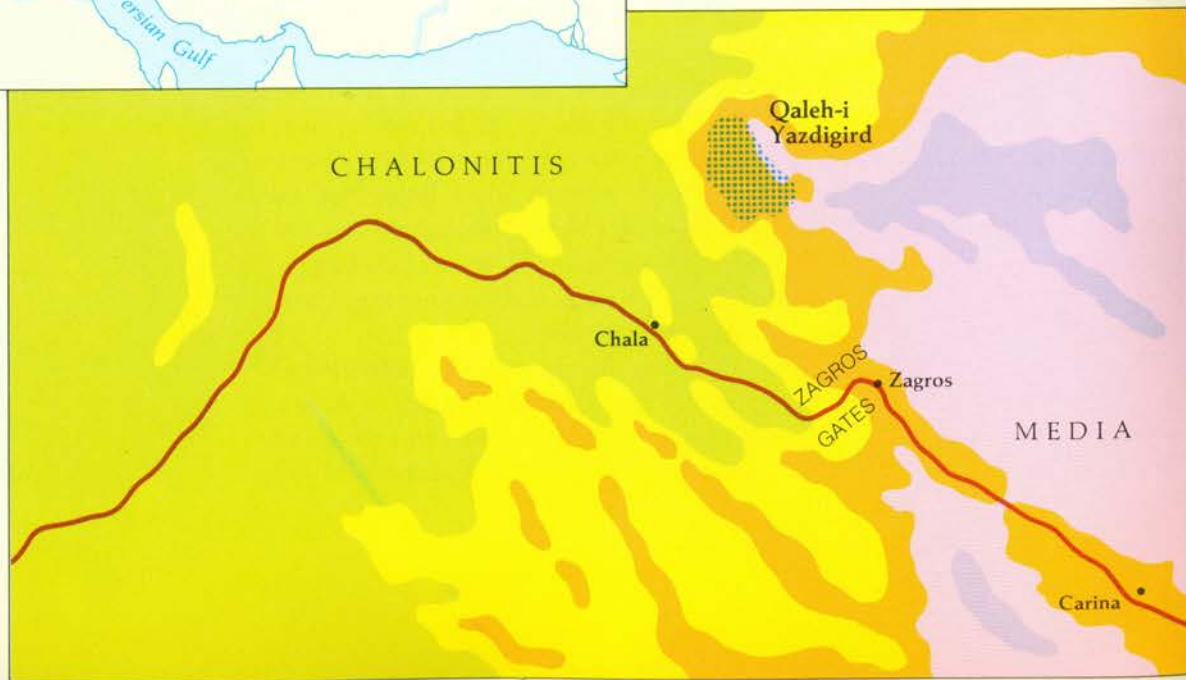

SILK ROADS • CHINA SHIPS



John E. Vollmer E. J. Keall E. Nagai-Berthrong


ROM
Royal Ontario Museum
Toronto, Ontario



Elevations

- Over 2100 metres
- 1500-2100 metres
- 900-1500 metres
- 600-900 metres
- Under 600 metres

A Persian castle on the Silk Roads . . .

In the unremitting search for the past, each new discovery adds to the store of accumulated knowledge. Fresh ground was broken in the continuing study of ancient trade routes when archaeologist E. J. Keall led an exploratory expedition to the site of Qaleh-i Yazdigird in the mid-1960s.

Qaleh-i Yazdigird means “the castle of Yazdigird”, and according to legend the castle was built in the 7th century as a stronghold for Yazdigird, the last king of kings of the Sasanian Empire of Iran. The legend, handed down from generation to generation by the villagers who over the years cultivated the land nearby, accounted for the ruins that dotted the fields.

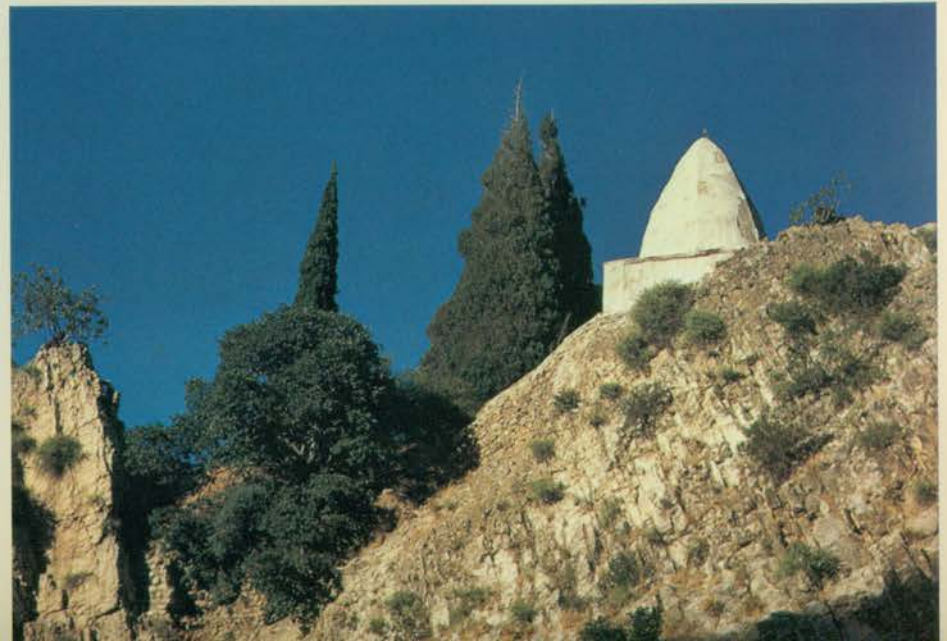
Qaleh-i Yazdigird, situated on a tableland at the edge of the Zagros Mountains in western Iran, overlooks the main East-West trade route. The tableland looms up as the traveller crosses from the west towards the principal pass through the mountains; ancient writers called the pass the Zagros Gates.



Great archaeological finds are often accidental. A Chinese farmer, in the process of digging a well in the 20th century, came upon the first of the army of life-sized clay figures in the tomb complex of Qin Shih-huang-di, China's first emperor. And chance was instrumental in the first discoveries at Qaleh-i Yazdigird. Success in unearthing clues to the history of the ruins was proving elusive—until local villagers suggested a search in a particular ploughed field. Within ten days the expedition had opened up several trenches in the field. A deep sounding revealed that walls of a building stood to a height of more than four metres just below the surface of the ground.



The villagers were in the habit of digging up old gypsum plaster in the field.



Without knowing it, the villagers had been destroying a storehouse of artwork. Remnants of decorated walls, preserved by the debris of the collapsed superstructure, lay only centimetres below the surface. Hidden in the debris were dozens of fragments of plaster wall decorations, encrusted with salts from the damp earth.

In the decorative scheme, motifs were frequently repeated. The drawing represents an artist's reconstruction of the original intact figure of a winged Cupid, based on several incomplete pieces. The motif may owe its inspiration to a Western personification of Sleep.



Artist's reconstruction of winged Cupid. Height of figure 46 cm.



In this fragment of a repetitive figure the wings of a Cupid are discernible.

In this view of the same composition, the column against which the Cupid leans is apparent.

Here the pose of the Cupid is clearly defined: the head is inclined to the left and the right hand clasps the left shoulder.



Massively buttressed walls represent a stronghold within the fortress.



Walls with arrow slots dominate the cliffs that overlook the route.



Traces of guard chambers can still be found along the defensive wall.



According to legend, the upper fort was the ultimate retreat of King Yazdigird against the advancing armies of Islam.

Between 1975 and 1979 the Royal Ontario Museum mounted three full-scale expeditions to explore the entire stronghold of Qaleh-i Yazdigird, which covered an area of twenty-five square kilometres.



The cliffs at the edge provided natural protection for the residence nestled in the hollow of the tableland.



A man-made defensive system designed to reinforce security included a long wall that snaked across the countryside.



- The model of the Qaleh-i Yazdigird complex shows (1) the defensive walls, (2) the lookout posts, (3) the upper fort, (4) the inner stronghold, and (5) the garden of paradise with its ornate palace.

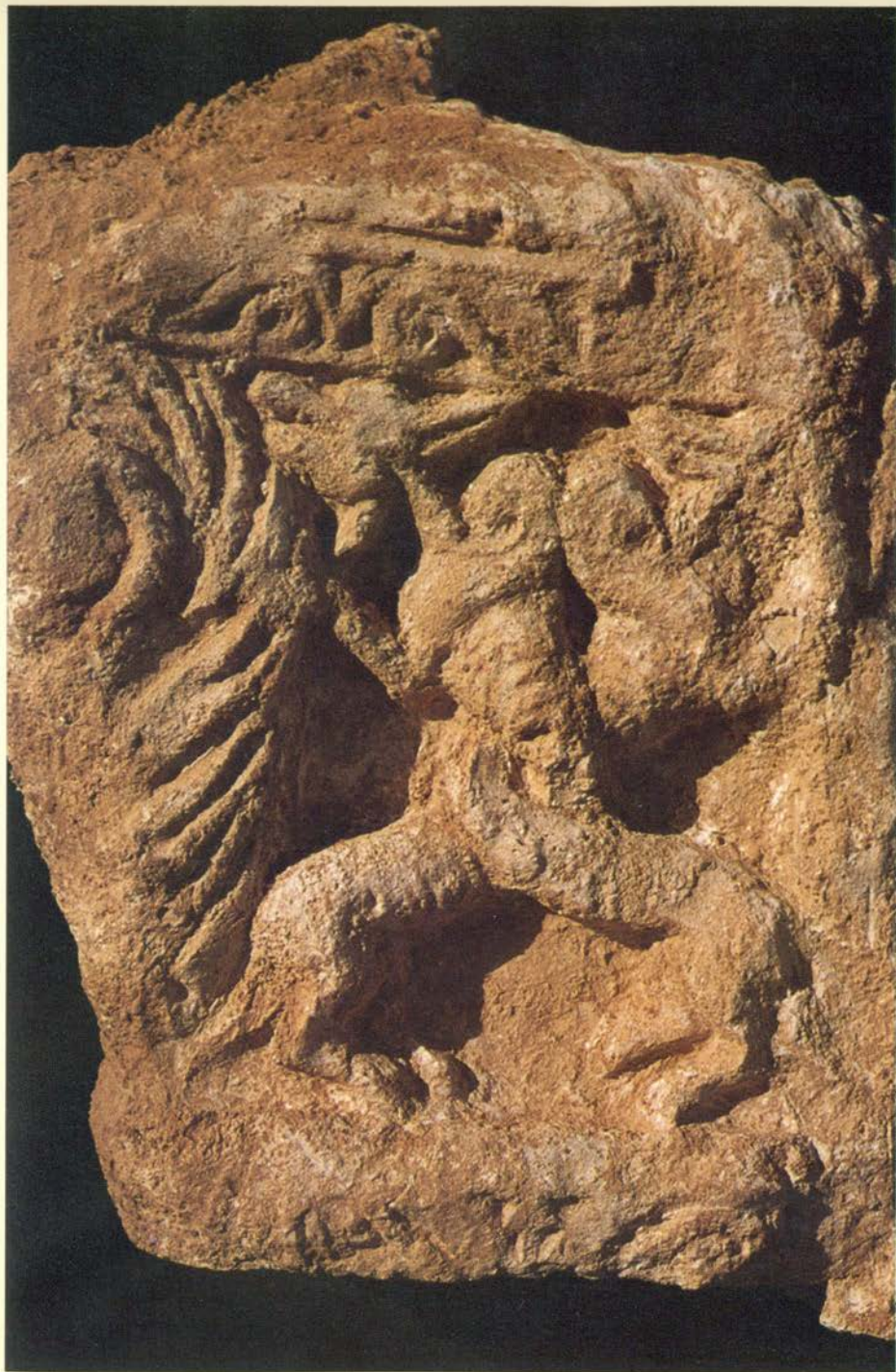
The rather unexpected fact that emerged in the study of the masses of architectural ornaments recovered from the site is that the decoration does not support the legend that Qaleh-i Yazdigird was a remote military outpost built in Sasanian Iran in the 7th century. In fact, the decorative style indicates that the palace set within a garden of paradise and protected by an elaborately fortified stronghold was a creation of 2nd-century Parthian Iran, contemporaneous with Han China and Imperial Rome.



This stylized flower-bud motif, painted in bold colours, was part of a repetitive design on a wall panel—a typical Parthian decorative element. Height of flower 12 cm.



This remnant of a brightly painted wall column carries a male figure that is obviously Parthian in inspiration and pose; he is dressed in trousers, tunic, and high-peaked hat. Height of figure 28 cm.



The pair of intertwined beasts on this capital are reminiscent of ancient Mesopotamian traditions. Height of capital 35 cm.

The artwork from Qaleh-i Yazdigird presents a rich variety of themes from both Eastern and Western artistic vocabularies. The richness belies the traditional view of the period of late Parthian history as a time of deterioration.

By the 2nd century Parthia was under attack from Rome, and central control in the empire was weak. But the Iranian highlands prospered from the decline, since they remained for the most part independent of the Parthian king of kings. Overlooking the strategic trade route through the Zagros Mountains, Qaleh-i Yazdigird was remote enough from the Parthian capital to discourage punitive missions. The stronghold may well have been the luxurious mountain retreat of a robber baron bent on plundering, or exacting booty from, caravans traveling the Silk Roads.



The decoration of this engaged column capital—a nude female holding a pair of dolphins with voluted tails—reflects Mediterranean traditions. Height of capital 47 cm.

The use of a variety of motifs, typical of the period of Parthian history when artistic ideas were as mobile as the trade, reflects the work of an architect who had been exposed to foreign influences. The lord of Qaleh-i Yazdigird would have been in a position to sponsor such an architect, as would the many other robber barons of the day. In spite of the eclecticism, however, the decorative scheme at Qaleh-i Yazdigird is totally Parthian.



The two griffins in this heraldic scene are portrayed in the archaic mode of ancient Mesopotamian art. Height of figures 12 cm. Reproduction cast.



The motif of this fragment from a frieze, showing two Cupids wrestling with a feline beast, has been represented as part of the Western Dionysiac tradition. Height of figures 20 cm.



This single griffin is portrayed with diminutive body and ornately curled wing, in a manner reminiscent of the later *senmurv* tradition of Sasanian and Islamic Persian art. Height of figure 24 cm. Reproduction cast.

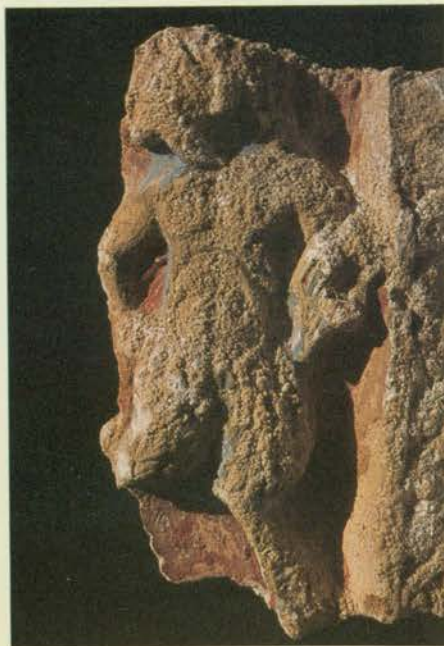


The artist's reconstruction of the Dionysiac frieze was pieced together from several overlapping fragments. Reproduction cast.

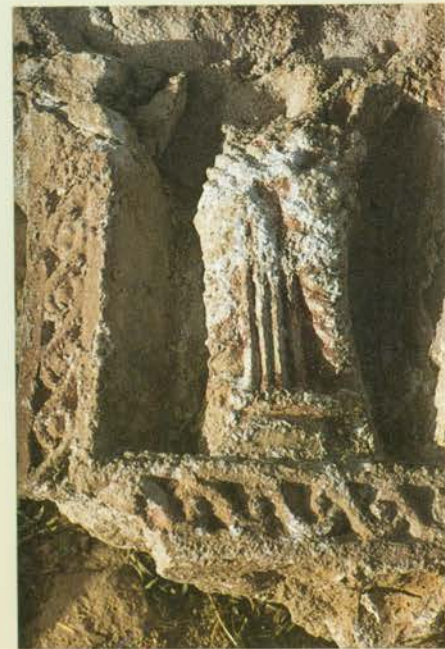


Nude female leaning against a column.
Height 28 cm.

The three figures illustrated here, along with the man in the high-peaked hat, were part of a repetitive scheme of decoration that once covered a wall column at Qaleh-i Yazdigird.



Personification of Pan. Height 28 cm.



Female in long Greek robe. Height 28 cm.

- An artist has reconstructed part of the column from diverse clues. Reproduction cast.

On the obverse of the coin is depicted a man referred to by numismatists as the “unknown king”, who it is recognized issued coins, only in the Iranian highlands, about the middle of the 2nd century. Whether or not the “unknown king” was the robber baron of Qaleh-i Yazdigird, the independent minting of coins reflects the autonomy claimed by powerful lords along the Silk Roads throughout their history.



- Obverse of silver coin found by a villager in the fields of Qaleh-i Yazdigird. Diameter 1.9 cm.

This bust is repeated many times in the wall decorations at Qaleh-i Yazdigird. The style of frontal representation, bouffant hairstyle with diadem band, and enclosure in a decorated roundel is typically Parthian. It is tempting to think that the bust represents the resident robber baron.



One of many fragments of the male bust. Maximum width of bust 26 cm.

