

Qaleh-i Yazdigird, Courtesy of a Kurdish "Robber Baron"

In the mid-1960's the Royal Ontario Museum of Toronto, under the supervision of archaeologist E.J. Keall, carried out excavations on the site of Qaleh-i Yazdigird and found a vast and artistic landmark complex of palaces abandoned by the end of the Parthian era (AD 226). Qaleh-i Yazdigird is situated on a superbly formed high tableland at the edge of the Zagros Mountains north of the town of Sarpuli Zohab in southern Kurdistan. From the height it commands the famous Silk Road. The wealth of plaster decoration and statuary on the site has always been used by local peasants as a ready source of gypsum for construction. Unfortunately, this practice has destroyed untold numbers of cultural and historical treasures of the Kurdish past.

Keall's excavations unearthed a fortress town with palaces, fortifications, temples and the like, all richly decorated. The highly sophisticated artwork at Qaleh-i Yazdigird depicts a wealth of themes representing artistic traditions of the East (stylized animal and floral designs) and West (life-like humans and animals). Among these voluminous decorations was found the earliest evidence for theatrical plays in Kurdistan, as preserved in scenes of acting men, women and pans, some wearing face masks. The finds are so impressive as to belie the traditionally held view of the late Parthian era as a time of deterioration.

Qaleh-i Yazdigird also held coins of a ruler described by numismatists, who examined specimens of his coinage, the "unknown king." He issued coins used exclusively and extensively in the Kurdish highlands around the middle of the 2nd century AD. Keall states: "Whether the 'unknown king' was the one who built and ruled from the magnificent palaces of Qaleh-i Yazdigird, the independent minting of coins reflects the autonomy claimed by a powerful lord." (Keall, 1983:44). Yet, despite these achievements, Keall consistently refers to the king as the "robber barron."

In fact it is not at all difficult to tentatively identify Keall's "robber baron" and the numismatists' "unknown king" in history. He could well have been the father or grandfather of the mighty ruler Haftan -Bukht of the sacred and powerful Kurdish kingdom of Kirm (or Kram) that covered southern Kurdistan, the area of modern Kirmanshah and Awraman. According to historical accounts, Haftan-Bukht's two year defense of his domain and his Kurdish allied kingdoms nearly cost the invading Ardashir I, founder of the Sasanian Persian empire, his life. Haftan Bukht installed viceroys, many of them his own sons, to rule the myriad of mountain provinces and carry his writ, presumably continuing the same administrative structure of the "unknown king" whose coinage carried the economy of the Kurdish mountains. Surviving statuary may well provide an image of this as yet nameless Kurdish king. In addition to his profile which appears on his coinage, a naturalistic frontal depiction is often repeated in the wall decorations at Qaleh-i Yazdigird.

There is no exact date for the sack and abandonment of the Qaleh-i Yazdigird complex. But it is not unreasonable to assume that it too fell victim to Ardasher's wrath. In his battle chronicle, the *Karnamak*, Ardasher boasts of the death and destruction he wrought on the Kurds, their cities and their sacred places of worship in the course of AD 224-226 (*Karnamak-i Artakhsher-i Papakan*, v-xi) It is fascinating that in his *Karnamak* chronicle the first reference to the ethnic term "Kurd" appears in a pre-Islamic Persian source. In fact, the term 'Kurd' is used repeatedly to identify the inhabitants of the Zagros, including Mada (Media, i.e., region of Hamadan), Sanak (region of Sahna), Shahrazor (region of Sulaymania), Barchan (region of Barzan), Hakar (region of Hakkari), Mukran (region of Mahabad) and most importantly Kram, the region of Kirmanshah and therefore Qaleh-i Yazdigird. (These are actual place names which appear in the text.)

Ethnic Kurds are thus identified as the inhabitants of the region of Qaleh-i Yazdigird at the time of its destruction in this chronicle of the man who was in all likelihood its destroyer. Consequently, there is no doubt that it is the artistic heritage of these same ethnic Kurds that has been unearthed at Qaleh-i Yazdigird. Interestingly a representation of a peculiar pointed hat (apparently made of felt) is indetical in its configuration to a modern Yezidi felt hat now on display in the Kurdish Museum in New York. The artistic repertoire of Qaleh-i Yazdigird is crucial for the new light it sheds on the origins of some the most famous Persian Sasanian motifs. For example, a senmurv griffin appearing on its plaster wall decorations is almost identical to that executed at the grottos of Taq Bustan near Kirmanshah four centuries later by order of Chosroes II Aperves, a descendant of Ardasher. Yet the griffin motif has been considered a hallmark of Persian Sasanian art. The Keall excavation at Qaleh-i Yazdigird reveals that this motif was in fact borrowed from the Kurdish artistic repertoire, possibly a representation of ancient Anzu (predecessor of the Yezidi bird-angel, Anzal.) Furthermore, the square-shaped column capitals at this Kurdish site also anticipate those of the Sasanians, which came later.

Despite this formidable evidence of highly sophisticated art and culture, an organized state apparatus issuing currencies for its integrated economy within the Zagros folds - much of which is paradoxically revealed thanks to Keall's own excavations - Keall deliberately and consistently refers to the illustrious Kurdish statesman and ruler of Qaleh-i Yazdigird as a "robber baron." Take this statement, for example: "This stronghold may well have been the luxurious mountain retreat of a robber baron bent on plundering, or exacting booty from caravans travelling the Silk Roads." Yet he never offers a single shred of archaeological or historical evidence to prove that his unknown monarch was a bandit. In fact, the complexity and sophistication of his own findings is the best evidence to refute the archaeologist's characterization. It is tempting to conclude that this defamatory label for the king may well derive from Keall's assumption that the lord of Qaleh-i Yazdigird was a Kurd and therefore, as a Kurd, must have been a robber or a predator. This is not a farfetched hypothesis considering that as recently as 15 years ago 'Kurd' was defined by the *Oxford Standard Dictionary of the English Language* as "one of a tall, pastoral and predatory people" - until it was revised thanks to the efforts of the founder of the Kurdish Library in New York.

When in history has a highway robber leading a band of brigands had the time and the talent to gather sophisticated town planners, skilled architects and artists to create an entire city (in which local and Greek theatrical plays were performed), establish an integrated administration over a vast region for which his own treasury minted coins as the primary currency? Were not such "robber barons" called kings and emperors in the past? Why then is this ancient Kurd, this lover of art, this able administrator, this master builder and town planner defamed and diminished?

Unfortunately, Keall's facile conclusion simply follows the long trail of researchers who continues to obscure and to derogate highly original contributions of the now stateless Kurds. This must be criticized as an insufferable affront to the cultural heritage of this ancient nation.

Months ago, writing this same journal on the topic of the discoveries at Godin Tapa (130 miles east of Qaleh-i Yazdigird), I made reference to the chronic tendency of archaeologists to ascribe the source of any and all things of importance that are found in the Zagros to outside cultures, even when none were available. The character and contribution of the patron-builder of Qaleh-i Yazdigird is simply one more example of this inexcusable ignorance of scholars and scientists who know virtually nothing of the people from whose earth they excavate these archaeological treasures. Consequently, still the Kurds are a non-people, even a race of ancient criminals, to those who excavate the rich archaeological sites of Kurdistan. Ironically, it is these digs that will provide irrefutable proof that in Kurdistan originated many of the achievements for which ancient traditionally recognized cultures outside the mountains have been given, or have taken credit.

Casual characterizations might be amusing were they not trivializing the artistic heritage and thus the history of the Kurdish nation. They are more disconcerting coming from the archaeologist responsible for unearthing groundbreaking evidence indicating that the arts of the early Kurds significantly influenced the later and much heralded Sasanian Persian school of art.

Qaleh-i Yazdigird remains a masterpiece of classical Kurdish urban planning and monumental architecture, a treasure trove of art, a history book waiting to be read, courtesy of the cultured ancestors of the Kurds, the "robber barons."

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E. J. Keall, "A Persian Castle on the Silk Roads," in J. Vollmer & E. J. Keall et al, *Silk Roads, China Ships* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1983).