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MAGAZINE #79

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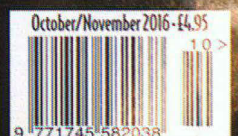
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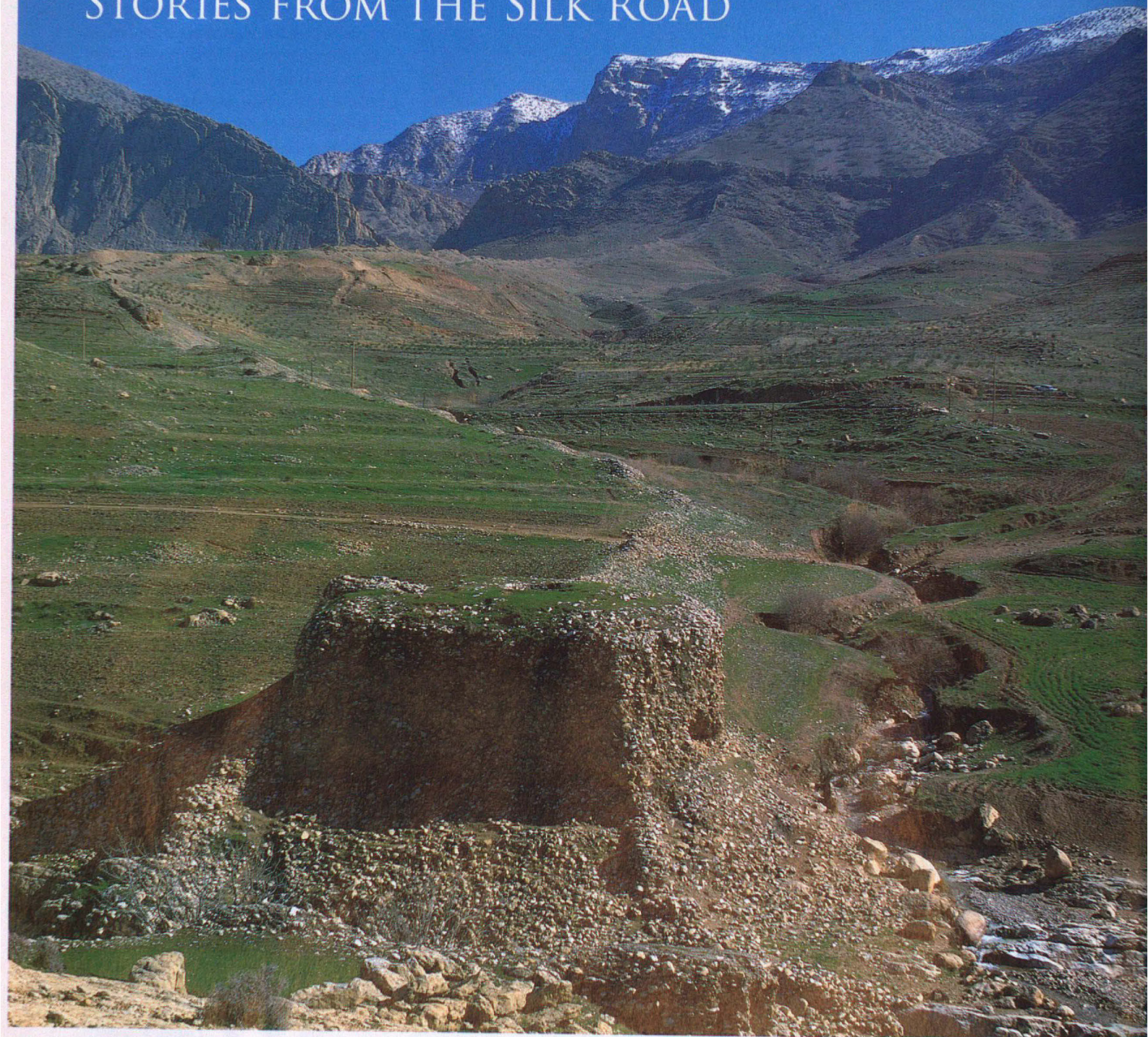
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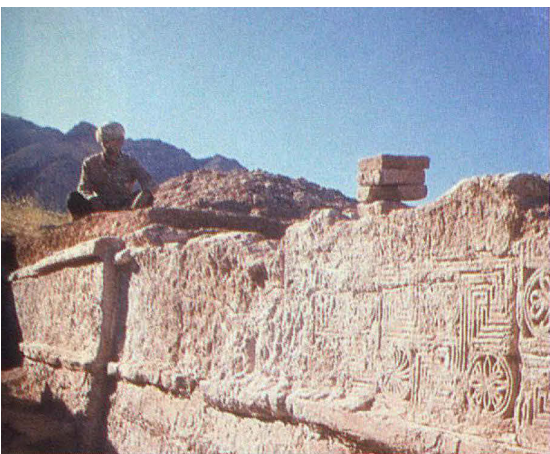
# Excavating Iran

STORIES FROM THE SILK ROAD



When **Ed Keall** first visited Iran, at the age of 24, little did he realise that he was about to embark on an archaeological venture – involving a Persian castle and a fire temple – that has now been 50 years in the making.





**OPPOSITE** On the Silk Road: the snow-capped mountains of western Iran provide the backdrop to the archaeological area around Yazdigird's castle, the original focus of Ed Keall's research (shown here in 2007). In the foreground is the blockhouse of the castle's defensive wall.

**LEFT** Unearthing a decorated wall from Yazdigird's castle in 1965.

In 1962, I took an adventurous trip to Iran to work with British and American archaeologists, and was immediately seduced by the dramatic landscape and richness of the country's historical culture.

I became buoyed by the idea that I could break into the profession and begin a new career for myself. Resident scholars at the British Institute of Persian Studies advised me to pick an area of specialisation that was not trendy, in order to get my foot in the door. With my background in Classical studies (Greek and Roman), one obvious potential target was the Sasanian dynasty – the Iranians who had plagued the Romans over control of the Euphrates River corridor in the 3rd-6th centuries AD. Dealing with the enemies of Rome appealed to me at that stage in my life.

Most scholars at that time paid little attention to the Sasanians: they were not ancient enough to be interesting to the prehistorians, nor much relevant for the Islamic specialists. The Sasanians became my new focus in life.

The Sasanians were the last Persian dynasty to rule Iran before the Muslim Arabs took over in the 7th century AD. In common parlance, we speak of 'Persian' culture due to how the ancient Greeks saw Iran; 'Iran' is the name of the land, as it is in today's political world. The Iranians saw a world of 'Iran' and 'non-Iran'. In terms of their beliefs, there is a famous rock relief near Persepolis – the capital of the ancient Achaemenid Persians – showing the first Sasanian king of the 3rd century AD receiving his royal diadem (the symbol of his divine right to rule) from the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda. The Sasanians adopted Zoroastrianism formally as the religion of state, displacing the earlier polytheism.

As for their sites, there was one that particularly intrigued me. I first learned

of the legendary castle of Sasanian King Yazdigird in 1964, and then used it as part of a successful application to the British Institute of Persian Studies to study the Sasanians. This feature is an account of what happened next.

### Seeking Yazdigird

The area of Yazdigird's Castle was remote in those days, in the mountains of western Iran, near to the border with Iraq. The site is essentially a thumb-shaped projection, lying as an elevated tableland, on the last ledge of the Zagros Mountains overlooking the plains of Mesopotamia. On my first trip to explore the area, we had to use mules to get there. Even when we were relatively close, it was still daunting to contemplate the climb that remained for us to get up to the pinnacle fort of the

fortified tableland. My plan was to plot the standing ruins, and to try to determine their date through examining the bits and pieces of pottery that could be traced on the surface of the ground associated with the walls.

I was acting on a tip-off from Christopher Weightman, a religious studies scholar resident at the British Institute of Persian Studies. While travelling to study the followers of Ahl Haqq (the so-called 'People of the Truth') who live in the Kurdish area of western Iran, Weightman had seen the impressive fortress associated with the 7th-century AD Sasanian king, Yazdigird.

Yazdigird claimed the title of 'king of kings', implying he ruled over a land peopled by many petty kings. By legend, this last of the Iranian kings before Islam had tried to stem the relentless tide of Arab Islam, building a fortress on the Iranian edge of the Zagros Mountains that face the



**LEFT** The famous rock relief near Persepolis showing the Sasanian king Ardashir receiving the chaplet of divine majesty from Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda.

**BELOW** An area steeped in history: exploring the Parthian defensive walling along the tableland scarp (image taken in 2007).



PHOTO: Yousef Moradi, Iranian Heritage Organization

ALL IMAGES: Edward Keall, unless otherwise stated



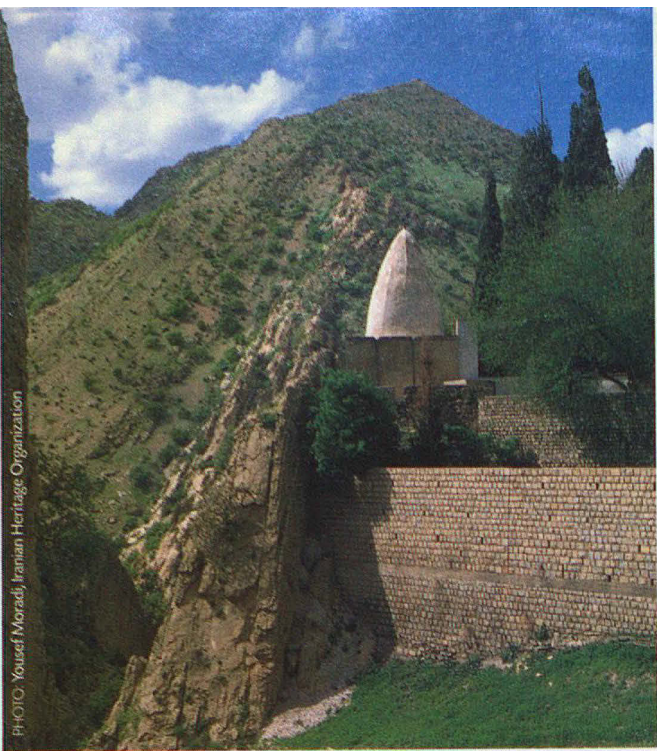


PHOTO: Yousef Moradi, Iranian Heritage Organization

Indeed, the Ahl Haqq tenets promote the idea that god has been reincarnated a number of times in the form of an individual, going back to Old Testament times. For the Ahl Haqq, Ali – the son in law of the Prophet Muhammad – is more important than the Prophet himself. In the 1960s, I was used to greeting people by saying ‘Ya Ali’ (‘Hail Ali’), rather than the universal Muslim ‘Salaam Aleikum’ (‘Peace be with you’). Locally, the most revered figure is not the Prophet Muhammad, but Baba Yadgar, a holy man of the



ABOVE The pre-Islamic legends of Yazdigird are embedded in the local culture. Here women (pictured in 1975) walk to attend an Ahl Haqq annual festival, which also draws on pre-Islamic ideas. LEFT Regional beliefs: the dome of the Ahl Haqq Baba Yadgar shrine (image taken in 2007). Baba Yadgar is the area’s most revered religious figure.

plains of Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). The region’s inhabitants have lots of folklore to associate the ruins seen in the area with this era. There is, for example, a cave where Yazdigird’s daughter Bibi Shahrbanou is said to have hidden for shelter; there is Yazdigird’s parade ground (the Maydan enclosure); and there is a spot along the impressive escarpment fortifications labelled Shah Neshin (‘king enthroned’).

A distinguished British antiquarian – Major Henry Rawlinson (the ‘Father of Cuneiform’) – also happened to have visited the region, as part of a British military mission in the 19th century designed to bolster the fortunes of the Qajar dynasty of Iran, in the wake of Russian and Ottoman intrigues in the region. Rawlinson’s lecture describing his visit was delivered to the Royal Geographical Society in 1838. For me, he conveniently outlined the history of the region and the legends concerning the archaeological site.

As it turns out, as a young archaeological novice, I placed too much reliance on his description of the legends about ruins. Instead, as I later came to realise, these traditions are embedded in the wish of the local people to connect with their Persian past, disassociating themselves from the Arabs. Many of their beliefs and activities – such as their festival celebrations – are derived from pre-Islamic practices. Animal sacrifice is an important part of their religion. They do not participate in most of the standard Islamic rituals that are part of mainstream Iranian Islam.

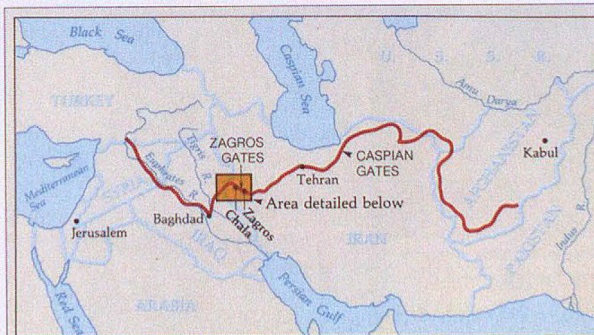
16th century whose tomb attracts pilgrims from across the region.

## A warlord twist

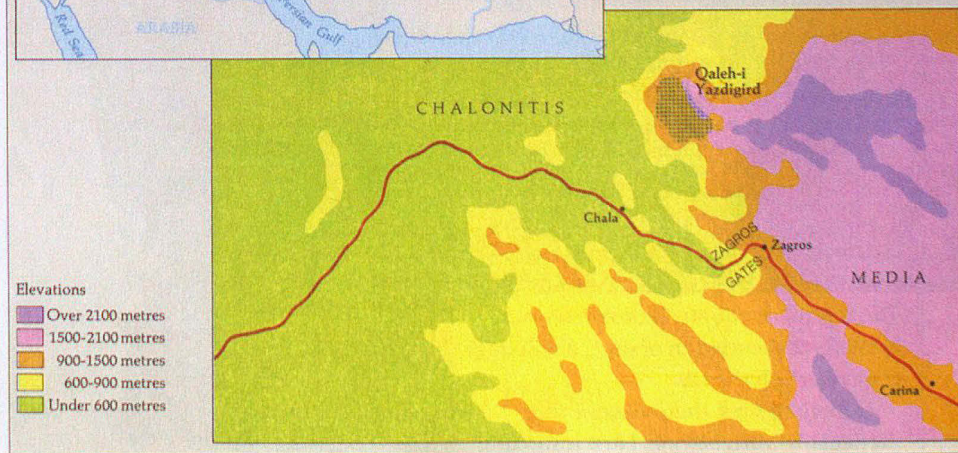
But back to my research into Yazdigird’s castle: a year later, in 1965, permit in hand from Iran’s Archaeological Service, I set out to explore the 25 square kilometres of ruins and to open test trenches to unearth pottery that I hoped would help me date the site. Unexpectedly, in my choice of a place to excavate this pottery, I exposed numerous pieces of plaster architectural ornament, but not the pottery that was my target.

Although it was obvious that the legends of Yazdigird were to be taken with a pinch of salt – notably that King Yazdigird had only weeks to make his last stand against the Arab armies of Islam, not the decades that the extensive ruins appeared to demand for their construction – I nonetheless tried in my first report to find a way to justify associating the extensive architectural ornament with the Sasanians. At that time, I was still swayed too heavily by the historical legends.

Sadly, the British Academy declined to fund further research at



LEFT & BELOW Map of the Silk Road below the tableland approaching the Zagros Gates, which lie near to Yazdigird’s castle.







LEFT Yazdigird's castle is surrounded by some 25km<sup>2</sup> of ruins. Here we can see part of the Maydan fields (said to be Yazdigird's parade ground) where the team unearthed numerous pieces of architectural ornament (Google satellite image, 2014).

Qaleh-iYazdigird, but in 1971 I began working at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). In Canada, I was now eligible for funding to resurrect my old project in Iran, and the Iranian archaeological authorities were sympathetic to my resuming the work at Qaleh-iYazdigird. With the greater expedition resources and a larger team to document the finds, it soon became obvious that the Sasanian date for the artwork was fallacious. It was best paralleled by architectural ornament dating to the Parthian era, some five hundred years before the time of King Yazdigird.

The great challenge therefore became how to explain an ornately decorated palace set in the heart of a formidably fortified stronghold. For besides a pinnacle castle, the decorated palace lay on an elevated tableland, protected by defensive walls to fend off would-be attackers.

**BELOW** Aerial view of the field in which the team found the ornately decorated palace.

**CENTRE** View looking up at the tableland of Yazdigird's castle from the plains of Mesopotamia (photo taken in 1975).

**RIGHT** Close-up of an ornamental capital from the palace.

Given the weakness of the central government at this time – the 2nd century AD – it is inconceivable that this was a stronghold designed for the Parthian king. But we also know that this was the heyday of commercial trade between the Mediterranean and China, and of great caravan traffic along the Silk Road.

The proximity of the fortified stronghold to a strategic pass through the mountains – the so-called Zagros Gates – is, I believe, the basis for a convincing argument to conclude that the palace was not home to King Yazdigird, but to a warlord who extracted tolls from the highway to support his lavish lifestyle, remaining secure in his stronghold from government interference.

### Finding a fire temple

Another twist to the story emerged in 1978 when the Iranian Revolution was swirling around us. The ROM expedition compound wall we had built was not secure, and we were vulnerable to attacks by people hostile towards us.

Our compound was made from local stone, gleaned from the immediate

hillsides. We employed men from the village to build in their traditional way. Its roofs were flat, built with the heavy beams of locally grown poplar trees. We even enjoyed the bonanza opportunity to buy old beams from the community centre of the Ahl Haqq in the nearby town of Sar Pul-iZohab. They were remodelling their building and happy to think that their elderly beams were going back to their original home in the land of Baba Yadgar. We still needed to build our compound walls higher, but there were no fieldstones left for the purpose. So our contact in the village – Dawar Karimkhani – offered stones from a huge pile that lay in one of his fields. After we started to pull the pile apart, we discovered that the heap covered the stub of a buried building. Our compound building-stone operation turned into a bona fide archaeological excavation programme.

Comparing the plan of the previously buried building with those of other known Sasanian structures, it soon became clear that we had found a Zoroastrian fire temple. Zoroastrians revered fire as a holy element, and their reverence of it included presenting a sanctified fire on a fire altar inside a temple complex. The fire burned perpetually, maintained by priests, using specially sanctified wood. Aside from this religious and liturgical ritual, fire temples also served the needs of local communities for social activities, such as celebrations of traditional festivals, as well as providing a place of pilgrimage for travellers.

The most plausible explanation for a fire temple on the grounds of the ▶







**FAR LEFT** Looking down on the Canadian expedition compound on the bare hillside. The year is 1978 and the Iranian Revolution is gaining momentum. The team needed to build up the compound walls, which led to the remarkable discovery of a Persian fire temple.

**LEFT** It would not be long before the dormitory rooms of the Canadian expedition compound fell to ruin.

Parthian stronghold is that it represents the warlord's demise – namely, that the Sasanians were making a clear statement about who was in control now of the region and its all-important Zagros Gates pass.

## Changing times

There is still a small Zoroastrian population in Iran today, though many have opted over the centuries to escape harassment by Iran's Islamic regimes. The largest diaspora population is in India, where they are known as Parsees – a name that is closely linked to the sense of their 'Persian' past. Reconstructing the Zoroastrian past using the archaeological record is difficult. For the prophet Zoroaster preached his message almost three thousand years ago. Only a thousand years after that were his preachings committed to writing (9th century AD). In the meantime, a lot of the old Iranian religious beliefs had been brought back into practice by a conservative priesthood.

However, I am happy to report that some years after we had been forced to abort the ROM programme in Iran, the

**BELOW** The fully exposed ruins of the fire temple, as found beneath a heap of stones in Dawar's field – now flanked by a school playground.

national Iranian Heritage Organization resumed work at the site, directed by Yousef Moradi. Extraordinarily, the ruins have since been moved from the farmer's fields and now sit next to a schoolyard. For the land where our ROM compound once sat isolated on the open hillside is now enveloped by dozens of new houses, built by the villagers presumably because that area offers them better amenities and access for vehicles – which the old village did not have.

Ironically, when I bought a plot of land to build the Canadian compound, I chose a spot that had no agricultural value. Also, I wanted to be away from the village where our strange ways of life might not have been all that acceptable. I was warned that the area was exposed to violent winds and was not suitable for settlement. I went ahead anyway. I must admit I am sad that the cosy dig-house that we built has largely been demolished, with only ruined walls remaining.

I know that the Iranian military occupied the region in the 1980s, as part of their effort to halt the invasion of Saddam Hussein whose Iraqi forces were at one time entrenched below the tableland, threatening to breach the Zagros Gates pass and fight their way onto the Iranian plateau. Apparently, the Iranians even

used the fortifications of the tableland for machine-gun emplacements to prevent that happening – an echo of their original intent. The fields around the fire temple were bulldozed for a military encampment and bulldozed debris was dumped on top of the partially excavated Sasanian fire temple.

## The future of the past

Iran is to be credited with the fact that, during the 1980s when it benefited from the income from the high price of crude oil, it spent large amounts of capital on cultural and infrastructure programmes. Thankfully, the cultural programmes included the eras from before Islam, due to a proud sense of an important national past. The work of the Iranian Heritage Organization in the region of Qaleh-iYazdigird resulted in significant preservation of ancient monuments. In addition, the Ministry of Environment engineered a canal that brought water to the Zardeh tableland so that an irrigation system for olive-tree plantations could be set up.

Despite the trauma that the notorious delivery of poison gas had caused during the Iran–Iraq War, my friends back in Iran have emphasised to me that the lives of some of the local residents were enhanced by this national investment. It seems extraordinary to view the passage of events over the past 50 years, and to see all these twists and turns. As to the future, it is to be hoped that, with the recent softening of hostilities between Iran and the West, there can be renewed focus on the wonderful ruins of Yazdigird's castle. ▣

**SOURCE** Dr Edward Keall is a British-born archaeologist who is Curator Emeritus of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada. He was director of the Iranian work detailed here, and has led major projects throughout the Middle East, notably in Yemen.

The editor sends added thanks to Susan Cantan for her help in securing images.

