

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

The Sasanian Empire: An Archaeological Survey, c.220–AD 640

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1 Introduction

A large number of monuments, buildings, rock reliefs, inscriptions, and collections of coins and manuscripts have shaped our present image of Sasanian archaeology. The systematic study of material remains of the Sasanian period began in the 17th century with the exploration of monuments, rock reliefs and sites by European travelers (Huff 1986: 302) but it was not until the 1920s that the first archaeological excavation of a Sasanian site began at Ctesiphon in central Iraq (Reuther 1929a, 1929b). More fieldwork was carried out in Iran during the 20th century, resulting in a better understanding and interpretation of Sasanian material culture. Regional survey in southwestern Iran was initiated by Robert McC. Adams of the Oriental Institute (Chicago) in the 1960s and was later continued by Robert Wenke (1975–6). Archaeological explorations and surveys in Fars and northeastern Iran significantly enriched the body of evidence available on the archaeology of the late pre-Islamic Iranian empires.

Except for major monumental remains such as royal cities, palatial and religious buildings, and rock reliefs, the archaeological evidence indicates regional diversity in material culture across the Sasanian Empire. This regionalism can be observed in pottery, building techniques, and settlement patterns, making the identification of Sasanian remains difficult. Only in southwestern Iran and central Iraq, thanks to the excavations at Susa, Ctesiphon, and other sites in Mesopotamia, is there a well-stratified corpus of artifacts that can be safely attributed to

the Sasanian period. Despite the fact that the study of spectacular monuments has always dominated archaeological research programs, the major Sasanian sites have not all been fully explored and published. The first capital of the empire, Firuzabad, has been the object of limited archaeological investigations (Huff 1971, 1972, 1974); other large sites in southern Iran such as Darabgird and Istakhr are inadequately known (Morgan 2003; Whitcomb 1979). The destruction of important Sasanian sites in southwestern and western Iran, due to agricultural and urban activities, continues today. The sites of Eyvan-e Karkheh and Qasr-e Shirin were severely damaged in the 1980s during the Iran–Iraq war and the celebrated site of Jundishapur has been extensively destroyed by agricultural activities. Similarly, the waterworks at Shushtar suffer from the urban development of the modern town there. Most of the archaeological surveys concentrated in southwestern Iran and southern Mesopotamia have been surface reconnaissances for collecting potsherds, the study of which is based largely on the excavated materials from Susa and sites in the Deh Luran plain (Adams 1962: 116–19; 1965: 71–80; Neely 1974; Wenke 1975–6, 1987). Whereas these surveys provide an important body of information on settlement patterns, the utility of the data depends largely on the excavated ceramic sequence from Susa (the only site that has been extensively excavated), which had already lost its importance by the 4th century – i.e. early in the Sasanian period.

To date, the difficulty of presenting a satisfying picture of the archaeological remains of the Sasanian period has been addressed in two ways. Early attempts to tackle the problem were largely art historical, as illustrated by the pioneering works of L. Vanden Berghe (1959: 235–48), R. Ghirshman (1962), and A. Godard (1965), which emphasize architecture and minor arts, often at the expense of other types of evidence (e.g. ceramics, coins, and settlement patterns). The second approach consists of a regional study of the remains. This is reflected in the only comprehensive survey of the archaeology of the Sasanian period, by D. Huff (1986), and is probably the best way to handle the considerable quantity of archaeological evidence. With an emphasis on more recent research, surveys, and excavations, this chapter attempts to highlight some key aspects and recurrent patterns in the art and archaeology of the Sasanian empire as reflected in excavation reports and general syntheses.

2 Settlement Patterns and Cities

The bulk of our archaeological evidence on urbanization and settlement patterns in the Sasanian empire comes from the western and southern parts of the empire – i.e., Iran and Mesopotamia. In these regions, archaeological surveys and textual records bear witness to a series of intense urbanization efforts combined with the expansion of irrigation and large-scale exploitation of arable land. The urbanization project under the Sasanians brought about an influx of population

and main axes extended beyond the city walls into the countryside, resulting in an intricate pattern of paths with the city as its center. The standing remains of Firuzabad show that Ardashir not only built a city, but that he carried out a program of hydraulic works and land division all over the plain (Huff 1974: 160), confirming later literary tradition. According to the 10th century historian Istakhri, the Firuzabad plain had been a swamp or lake, which Ardashir had to drain before he could build his new city (Le Strange 1905: 255; Mostafavi 1978: 66). The question of water is also addressed in both the *Karnamak-e Ardashir-e Babakan* and *Farsnama* of Ibn Balkhi (Huff 1974: 161; Le Strange and Nicholson 1921: 137–8).

Ardashir's palace was built close to the city, next to a spring rising in the center of a pool, and has been studied many times (e.g. Flandin and Coste 1843–54/I: Pls. 39–43; Herzfeld 1936: 96; Reuther 1964: 534–5; Godard 1965: 191–3). In the 1970s Huff carried out the most recent study of the monument (Huff 1972, 1974, 1978a). The palace covers an area measuring 103 × 54 meters and is divided into two main parts: a reception hall and a residential sector. The entrance is in the form of a great *eyvan*, a typical monumental gate with its opening in the center of the main façade, which gives access to three large, domed halls arranged side by side. Beyond the reception halls lies the residential sector arranged around an internal courtyard. The walls were all plastered. Stucco cavetto cornices above doors and niches decorated the main halls of the palace (Godard 1965: 190–1). The palatial complexes at Firuzabad reveal the earliest examples of domed constructions on squinches above a square hall. The buildings also show a widespread use of barrel vaults (*eyvans*) which became a diagnostic feature of Sasanian architecture (Godard 1965: 191; Huff 1993: 49). A reminiscence of this type of vault is particularly reflected in the building at Sarvestan. The date and function of this “Sasanian palace” are debated. Its layout does not correspond to that of a palace, and its advanced architectural forms and decoration suggest a post-Sasanian date (Bier 1986: 28–50).

In 2005 the Cultural Heritage Organization of Iran undertook brief excavations at Firuzabad (www.chn.ir: 5/2/2006) aimed at exploring the area within the city's circular enclosure. Three areas were selected for fieldwork: the area of the high tower (*tarbal*), the Takht Neshin or fire temple (*chahar taq*), and the palace. Research at the foot of the *tarbal* revealed traces of steps belonging to a staircase that once led to the upper levels of the tower. The most outstanding discovery was a series of wall and floor paintings depicting royal figures. Paintings, apparently found on coffins in a subterranean tomb near the *tarbal*, show the busts of two young women, a young man, and a boy. The style and treatment of these paintings reflects the influence of Parthian art still in force in the early years of the Sasanian Empire. It has been suggested that the figures are Sasanian princes or dignitaries.

After the overthrow of the Parthians, Ardashir transferred his capital to Ctesiphon on the Tigris, in central Iraq, where the Parthians and Seleucids before them had their capital city. Little is known of Parthian and early Sasanian

Ctesiphon. The locality is known in Arab sources as Al-Mada'in (“the cities”). The oldest part was the walled city on the east bank of the Tigris, which the Arabs called the Old City (*al-madina al-atiq*). Here the royal residence or White Palace (*al-qasr al-abyaz*) was located (Kröger 1993: 447; Morony 2009). To the south of Ctesiphon lay the sprawling, unwalled residential district of Aspanbar, where the great *eyvan*, baths, treasury, game preserve, and stables were located (Fiey 1967: 28). Excavations in Choche on the west bank of the Tigris revealed the remains of Ardashir's new capital, Veh-Ardashir (“the beautiful city of Ardashir”), which occupied c.700 hectares (Gullini 1966: 26; Negro Ponzi 2005: 150–2, 157–8). During the Sasanian period Ctesiphon developed into a sprawling metropolis consisting of a series of cities and suburbs along both banks of the Tigris, hence the name Al-Mada'in (the cities). In 1616 the Italian traveler Pietro Della Valle correctly identified these ruins with Ctesiphon, describing them in some detail and measuring them by pacing out the remains (Invernizzi 2005: 196–7). Excavations by German and Italian teams have revealed part of the fortifications, artisans' quarters, and residential areas.

In the mid-5th century the course of the Tigris shifted, dividing Veh-Ardashir in two (Gullini 1966: 36; Negro Ponzi 2005: 151–2). Owing to a series of repeated floods that disrupted the city's life, a new Ctesiphon developed on the east bank of the river, south of Parthian Ctesiphon, where the famous Sasanian royal palace with its enormous audience hall, known as Taq-e Kesra, stands. The French art historian Marcel Dieulafoy took the first photographs of this monument in 1883. These show the two lateral façades flanking the great *eyvan* (today only the central *eyvan* stands). The structure was part of a larger complex that included a corresponding building on the east side of a large courtyard. The standing monument consists of a large *eyvan* 43.5 meters deep and 25.5 meters wide, penetrating a blind façade that stretches 46 meters in either direction from the center line of the *eyvan* and was originally 35 meters tall (Keall 1986: 156). The floors and walls of the palace were decorated with marble, *opus sectile*, mosaics, and stucco sculptures. It has been suggested that the complex was built by Khosrow I Anushirvan (531–79), who decorated it with mosaics commemorating his conquest of Antioch (modern Antakya, Turkey) in 540. It is also possible that Byzantine craftsmen sent by the emperor Justinian I (527–65) were employed in its construction (Keall 1986: 157). Medieval historians and geographers described the monument as the most beautiful ever built of brick and plaster (see, e.g., the description by Ibn Faqih Hamadani in Invernizzi 2005: 9–10). In the 10th century, Tabari mentioned details of the throne hall and its amazing treasures that the Arabs captured at the time of the Islamic conquest, in particular a fine “winter carpet” with gold embroidery (Invernizzi 2005: 14–15).

Sasanian Ctesiphon was protected by an enormous city wall, 10 meters thick, the ruins of which, called Al-Sur, rise from the plain as mounds of various heights (Reuther 1929b: 451). Italian excavations at the site revealed the residential and commercial areas of the city as well (Invernizzi and Venco Ricciardi 1999:

42). The discovery of iron and glass slag, and a number of plaster molds, indicates the presence of workshops within the city. According to an early 7th century source prepared for the Chinese court, the population of Sasanian Ctesiphon numbered more than 100,000 households (Simpson 2000: 61). The city was conquered by the Arabs in 639, and gradually lost its importance to the benefit of the newly founded Abbasid capital Baghdad.

The circular urban plan seen at Firuzabad was later abandoned for a geometric layout or Hippodamian plan. Shapur I, whose victorious battles against the Romans were described and illustrated at Naqsh-e Rostam, intended to found a new capital city, this time in southwestern Fars. Bishapur or Veh-Shapur is another *ex nihilo* foundation in the western foothills of Fars. The city – as described in Shapur's inscriptions – was built by Roman engineers captured after the defeat of Valerian in 260 (Ghirshman 1971b: 11; Daryaei 2009: 7). Indeed, some of the architectural remains at Bishapur reflect the influence of these Roman prisoners, particularly the celebrated *eyvan* of Roman-style mosaics excavated before and during World War II by Roman Ghirshman (1962: 141–7, Figs. 180–6). Other architectural components excavated by the French include a fire temple and a spacious, cruciform palace with a huge cupola, the walls of which were probably decorated with mosaics and stucco. Half a kilometer to the south of the fire temple lies another building in which two votive columns stand. The inscription on one of the columns bears the name of Shapur and dates the building to 266 (Ghirshman 1962: 151). The city was well protected by a fortress named Qaleh Dokhtar (not to be confused with the fortress of the same name near Firuzabad) on its eastern side, giving access to a gorge (Sarab-e Qandil) where an important Sasanian rock relief of Bahram II was carved (Hermann 1983: Pls. 33–40). The northern edge of the city was protected by the Shapur river, while a thick city wall enclosed its southern and western sides. An Iranian team, under A.-A. Sarfaraz, excavated portions of the northern city wall where the river imposed an irregular boundary on the otherwise rectangular city plan (Sarfaraz 1970). The wall was punctuated by an evenly spaced series of rounded towers at intervals of less than 1 meter, a technique that may have been derived from an ancient model known in the Roman Empire, but whether this reflects the work of Roman prisoners or not is unknown. Recent excavations of the Governor's Palace, dated to the late 7th century, and an early Islamic bath (Mehryar 2000: 58–60, 70–81) suggest that Bishapur continued to be occupied after the fall of the Sasanian Empire.

4 The Lowland Settlements: Shushtar, Jundishapur, Eyvan-e Karkheh, Susa, and Mesopotamia

The Sasanians, whose economy depended largely on agriculture, developed large irrigation systems in Iran and southern Mesopotamia. Waterworks from this period, especially bridges and dams, can be seen in Khuzestan and Fars. Bridges

were necessary for crossing the major rivers in Khuzestan (Karun, Karkheh, and Ab-e Diz) and it is here, too, that most of the known canals, tunnels, and mills are located. The focal point of this activity was at Shushtar, where a number of waterworks built in the Sasanian period, such as the Shadorvan weir (see below), still function. Road construction was also related to the improvement and exploitation of watercourses in the region.

Besides putting them to work on the construction of Bishapur, a number of Roman prisoners were employed by Shapur I (c.240–72) in the construction of waterworks, dikes, and weirs at Jundishapur, Shushtar, and Dezful. Some of these were described by medieval Arab and Persian historians and geographers (Le Strange 1905: 235–6), but none has yet been the object of thorough investigation save for the pioneering survey by Graadt van Roggen (1905), the Dutch engineer of the French Delegation at Susa, who explored the hydraulic structures of Susiana in the early 1900s. The World Heritage nomination file of the Shushtar waterworks presented to UNESCO in 2009 provides a complete list of the Sasanian-era hydraulic structures (bridges, dams, canals, watermills, etc.) in the region.

Shushtar is situated on a cliff at the northern extremity of an island formed by the Karun River to the west and the Ab-e Gargar canal on the east (Curzon 1882: 371–87). Its position offers considerable commercial and strategic advantages. The town has long been celebrated for a number of major waterworks there. The Ab-e Gargar canal (the Mashreqan of medieval sources) ran from the left bank of the river (about 500 meters north of the town) southward along the east side of the Shushtar cliffs, before rejoining the Karun at Band-e Qir. The great barrage called Band-e Qaysar or Band-e Valerian (the “dike of Caesar/Valerian”), also known as Band-e Mizan, runs across the principal arm of the river, which is here called the Shuteit. It is located east of the town and is about 350 meters long. This barrage supports a bridge that connected the town with the west bank. It is still extant, although there is now a considerable gap in it. The Mian Ab canal begins above the barrage in the form of a tunnel cut out of the rock on the western side of the town. It turns southwards and irrigates the land south of the town. In Shushtar, part of the riverbed was leveled and paved with stones by order of Shapur, and called in consequence Shadorvan (Curzon 1882: 374; Kramers and Bosworth 1996: 512). Aside from its roles in irrigation and flood control, the Shadorvan bridge-dam also functioned as a city gate in the road from Shushtar to other towns like Dezful. In order for the dam to be built, the riverbed was emptied, its water diverted into a diversion canal. Afterwards, construction progressed in a multi-staged procedure with the building of temporary dams (Roggen 1905: 183–4).

Jundishapur is a site of extensive ruins c.14 kilometers southeast of Dezful. Both it and Eyvan-e Karkheh (see below) have a similar plan. Today the site consists of a series of mounds in a vast quadrilateral measuring 3,400 × 1,500 meters. In the 1930s Ghirshman studied the remains of the city and noted that

it had been built like a Roman military fort: a rectangular walled city, with the longer northern and southern sides c.2 kilometers long and the shorter eastern side 1 kilometer long, and streets arranged in a grid system, just as Hamza Esfahani (894–970) described it (Ghirshman 1971b: 138; Shahbazi 2002). In 1963, on behalf of the Oriental Institute (Univ. of Chicago), Robert McC. Adams and Donald P. Hansen undertook soundings in the ruins, recognizing the “rectangular outline of the city” and “a grid pattern suggesting regularly placed intersecting streets” on aerial photographs (Adams and Hansen 1968: 55–62). None of the soundings produced “positive findings of inherent importance” in that they did not yield any significant Sasanian remains, other than pottery (Adams and Hansen 1968: 55).

The vast city of Eyvan-e Karkheh was founded to the northwest of Susa by Shapur I. With its rectangular shape (4 × 1 kilometers) and its impressive remains of a monumental *eyvan*, the site soon attracted the attention of French archaeologists working at Susa. Dieulafoy took the first and still best published photographs of the ruined *eyvan* in 1884 (Dieulafoy 1884–9/V: Pls. 7–9). Ghirshman undertook soundings at the site in the fall of 1950 and published a succinct report on his work (Ghirshman 1951: 296–7). Excavations in the southeastern part of the palatial complex uncovered two of four halls, each 30 meters long and 6 meters high. Other trenches near the city walls revealed semi-circular towers reinforcing a massive, 8 meter thick wall. Another trench in the central mound revealed the remains of a triple *eyvan* of baked brick, the walls of which must have supported a vault 12 meters high and 8 meters wide. The walls were probably decorated with painted frescoes over plaster (Ghirshman 1951: 294; Gyselen and Gasche 1994). Illustrations of the finds have never been published in full. Adams’ survey of the region in the early 1960s confirmed that these new foundations, Jundishapur and Eyvan-e Karkheh, both depended heavily on intensive irrigation and water management for their livelihood. In addition, a series of vented tunnels were dug specifically for Jundishapur as an alternative source of water. Adams suggested that their construction may have been related either to an increasing need for water in the summer, or to the need for assuring winter irrigation during periods when the weirs near Dezful were inoperative due to washouts (Adams 1962: 118). Adams also produced a map of Jundishapur from aerial photographs (Adams 1962: Fig. 7). This is particularly valuable given the regrettable fact that the site was largely destroyed in the early 1980s during the Iran–Iraq War. Wenke surveyed these sites and their environs in the 1970s, concluding that an increase in population density accompanied the rebuilding of Eyvan-e Karkha around 525 by the late Sasanian king Kavad I (Wenke 1975–6: 137–8).

Ghirshman also explored the Sasanian remains at Susa in his large trench A in the Ville Royale (Boucharlat 1987a: 359–60; 1993: 44–5; Vallat 2002: 516–17). Sasanian remains were found in three levels. Level V contained destruction layers corresponding to the Partho-Sasanian conflict in the early 3rd century. Level IV dated to 341 when Shapur II (309–79) captured the city and persecuted its

inhabitants. This was capped by an important destruction layer containing a number of graves, jar burials for infants, and bronze crosses, attesting to the Nestorian Christian presence in the city so well attested in literary sources. For the excavator, this was clear evidence of the massacre and destruction ordered by Shapur II. Level III, dated to the 5th–6th centuries, including a dozen inscribed bullae mentioning the name of the city and province. Coins were rare at Susa. Most were found in hoards, but unfortunately almost all (96 percent) date to the reign of one king, Khosrow II (591–628).

Excavations in the 1970s in the Ville Royale, *chantier* II, provided an almost continuous sequence of occupation from the 2nd millennium BC to the late Parthian period, followed by a hiatus until the Islamic era (Boucharlat 1987a: 359). Archaeological evidence and textual records point to a city in decline as early as the 3rd/4th century and a revival in the late Sasanian period. As Boucharlat noted, with the foundation of new, competing settlements such as Jundishapur and Eyvan-e Karkheh, Susa was marginalized. Moreover, Susa’s decline was also exacerbated by the deliberate actions of some kings, like Shapur II, who destroyed Susa in 341 (Boucharlat 1987a: 363). The use of adjacent areas to boost agricultural production was also prominent in the late Sasanian period, as can be seen by the evidence of agricultural intensification in the Deh Luran plain to the north of Susa (Neely 1974).

Sasanian levels have been reported at Mesopotamian sites such as Babylon and Uruk, but the best-known architectural remains were found at Kish, where five domestic structures were excavated, three of which were well-preserved buildings with abundant stucco decoration, including a bust of king Peroz (457–84). These buildings have very distinctive layouts with columned halls, *eyvans*, and rooms arranged around a central courtyard and basin. They have been dated to the 5th century AD or later (Watelin 1964; Moorey 1978: 122–4, 141–2).

5 Fire Temples and Sanctuaries: Takht-e Suleiman, Bandian, Mele Hairam, and Kuh-e Khajah

Sasanian religious remains and cult buildings consist mostly of fire temples, a large number of which are still visible in Iran; fire altars; *dakhmas* (circular “towers of silence” for the exposure of corpses and their excarnation); and ossuaries. The most significant of these remains is the *chahar taq* – a building with a central domed square and four arches. Fars is dotted with numerous *chahar taqs* from Darab and Bishapur in the south to Yazd-e Khast in the north. These monuments have been frequently explored (Godard 1938; Vanden Berghe 1961, 1965, 1984; Schippmann 1971; Huff 1998; Boucharlat 1985a, 1999).

The most distinguished of all fire temples is the religious complex at the World Heritage site of Takht-e Suleiman in Azarbaijan. This impressive site lies 30 kilometers north-northeast of Takab, at an elevation of c.2,200 meters above sea

level, on top of a 60 meter high natural hill situated in a broad mountain valley. The hill was built up by the sedimentation of calcium-rich water, the overflow of a thermal spring-lake located on the site. Its growth was only interrupted when the overflow was conducted away from the hill by artificial canals. Occupied sporadically between the 4th century BC and the 4th century AD, Takht-e Suleiman became the site of monumental structures in the second half of the 5th century. Literary sources and archaeological finds identify these buildings as the ruins of the fire temple of Atur Gushnasp ("fire of the stallion"), one of the three most revered Zoroastrian fire sanctuaries in the Sasanian empire (Naumann 1965: 25; 1977: 70–1, Fig. 47; Huff 1978b: 778). Medieval geographers and travelers such as Abu Dalaf, who left a detailed description of the site in the 10th century, knew it by the name of Shiz (Naumann 1965: 23; Huff 2004: 462). Sir Robert Ker Porter published the first modern description of the site following his visit there in 1818 (Ker Porter 1822: 556–62). In the account of his journey from Tabriz to Takht-e Suleiman, Henry C. Rawlinson described the ruins in detail, but erroneously identified them with the Median capital Hagmatana/Ecbatana (Rawlinson 1840: 47–54). In the early 20th century, A.V. Williams Jackson published a thorough description of the ruins, collecting all medieval sources describing the site (Williams Jackson 1906: 124–43). In 1937 Arthur Upham Pope and members of the American Institute for Iranian Arts and Archaeology briefly surveyed Takht-e Suleiman (Pope et al. 1937). Their report served as the basis for V. Minorsky's fascinating, but now refuted, thesis that Takht-e Suleiman may have been the Parthian site of Phraaspa captured by the Romans in 36 BC (Minorsky 1944). Between 1959 and 1978 the German Archaeological Institute in Tehran carried out several seasons of meticulous excavations, resulting in the correct identification of the site as Sasanian Ganzak, with its fire temple Atur Gushnasp.

Takht-e Suleiman consists of an oval platform, c.350 × 550 meters, rising c.60 meters above the surrounding valley. It has a small, calcareous artesian well that has formed a lake 120 meters deep. From here, small streams bring water to the surrounding lands. The temperature of this deep, mysterious lake is 21°C. It is the focal point of the site and its existence was without doubt the reason for the construction of the Sasanian fire temple and palaces there (Naumann 1965: 24; Huff 2004: 462). The lake is also an integral part of the layout of the monumental complex and was surrounded by a rectangular "fence." To the north are the Sasanian sanctuary and its components, flanked originally by two monumental *eyans* (only a single wall of which remains today). The sanctuary was enclosed by a massive, 13 meter high stone wall with 38 towers and two entrances (north and south). This wall was apparently of mainly symbolic significance, as no gate has been discovered. The main buildings are on the north side of the lake, forming a square around a square, baked brick Zoroastrian fire temple in the center. To the east of the temple is another square hall reserved for the "everlasting fire." The royal residences are situated to the west of the temples. In the

northwest corner of this once enclosed area are the ruins of the Western *eyvan*. In front of the southern entrance of the temple (southern *eyvan* of the temple complex) is a rostrum with a monolithic stair at the eastern side. The blocks of hewn stone are worked in a careful manner which is not found in any of the other buildings, suggesting that it is most probably the king's *takht* or throne, reminiscent of Khosrow II Parviz's (590–628) celebrated Takht-e Taqdis (Naumann 1977: 42–3, Figs. 20–21; Huff 1978b: 786).

Takht-e Suleiman was destroyed by the Byzantine army in 627 as a counter-measure to a Sasanian attack on Byzantine territory (Naumann 1977: 69). The site was revived in 1256 when it became the summer palace of the Mongol ruler, Abaqa. In the past decade, limited excavations were undertaken by the Cultural Heritage Organization of Iran, but no substantial report has yet been published. Dozens of seal impressions and bullae were reported to have been found near the northern city gate (Moradi 2003). Some 8 kilometers northeast of Takht-e Suleiman, on top of the Belqeys mountain, are the remains of a fort known as Takht-e Belqeys. Measuring 60 × 50 meters and built of yellow sandstone, the fort was explored by the German team working at Takht-e Suleiman. It may have been an outpost associated with the defense of the fire temple situated 1,000 meters below (Naumann 1977: 115–18).

Probably the most outstanding Sasanian discovery of recent times is the site of Bandian, 2 kilometers northeast of Dargaz in northern Khorasan, where archaeological remains were revealed by agricultural activities in 1990. Excavations carried out by M. Rahbar (1994–9) under the auspices of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization resulted in the discovery of an important architectural ensemble with a number of highly interesting stucco reliefs that decorated the interior walls of the main building (Rahbar 1997, 1998, 1999b). The Sasanians' desire to protect the northeastern frontiers of their empire from invasion provides the main justification for the presence of monumental and defensive buildings in this region. Such invasions are reflected in the written and visual records of the time, as the archaeological remains at Bandian have shown. The excavations uncovered three levels of Sasanian occupation, the second of which is the most important. Here a building was excavated measuring 20 × 21 meters, which included a columned hall, a fire temple with altar, and an ossuary. The main construction material used was *pisé* (packed mud). Mudbrick was also used to reinforce some of the structures and foundations. The stucco decoration on the interior walls of the columned hall is remarkably varied both in theme and treatment. The 33 meter long decorated panels cover the walls of much of the hall. The upper parts of the panels were not preserved, but it is possible to reconstruct the scenes depicted at Bandian through comparison with the decorated walls found further north at Panjikent in Turkmenistan (Rahbar 1999b: 64). On the northeast panel a standing individual is represented holding an incense burner, above which there is an inscription in Pahlavi. According to this text, the name of the person is Weh-Mihr Shabur who was apparently a high

ranked official (Bashash Kanzag 1997; Gignoux 1998). On the central wall the decoration shows a fire altar placed on a platform; on each side of the altar there is an individual holding incense burners and sticks – another inscription was found here. The southwest wall shows a man holding a horse ornamented with necklace of pearls. A third inscription is placed on the body of the horse. There is also an investiture scene represented on the northern wall of the columned hall with four figures. To the right of this scene is a seated figure, which might be the representation of the king himself.

A layout similar to that of the Bandian complex was previously observed in a manor house at Hajiabad, near Darab in Fars, where M. Azarnoush's excavations in 1978 revealed an especially rich figural program. The stuccos of ladies in niches were interpreted by the excavator as evidence of a cult of Anahita. Busts attributable to Shapur II and Bahram Kushanshah led the excavator to date the building to c.359 (Azarnoush 1994). The house included a residential and a religious area. According to Azarnoush (1994: 50–1), the religious part of the building was meant to be decorated with stuccos, a project that was never completed. Other sites with rich, decorative stucco remains include Chal-Tarkhan near Rayy and Tepe Hissar near Damghan (Kröger 1982).

A building like that at Bandian was also discovered at Mele Hairam, near Sarakhs in Turkmenistan. Excavations carried out by a Polish team in 1997 revealed installations and a fire temple (Kaim 2004, 2006). The earliest phase of the building is Parthian and may be tentatively dated to the 2nd century. It consists of a main building, the access to which is through a large *eyvan* (7.5 × 5.2 meters). Two layers of wall paintings were found in the vaulted entrance, depicting a series of floral and geometric motifs. Inside the building were several small mudbrick platforms. The fire temple is a square room (5 × 5 m) with an altar in the center.

The monumental complex at Kuh-e Khajeh, 30 kilometers southwest of Zabol on an island in the middle of Hamun Lake, is the easternmost Sasanian building ever found. The mountain of Kuh-e Khajeh, situated 600 meters above sea level, has a diameter of 2–2.5 kilometers. The ruins, first reported by Beresford Lovett, a British army officer, were explored in 1915 by Sir Marc Aurel Stein, who claimed that “the extensive and well-known ruins situated on its eastern slope proved to be the remains of a large Buddhist sanctuary,” a view that has not been entirely shared by other scholars (Stein 1916: 221; Kawami 1987: 20–5). The site was later excavated by Ernst Herzfeld who discovered a number of magnificent wall paintings. Further investigations were carried out by Giorgio Gullini in 1960 (Gullini 1964). Mahmoud Mousavi resumed excavations (1990–2) at Kuh-e Khajeh (Mousavi 1999a) with a view to restoration and the preservation of the mudbrick structures at the site. The complex consists of a large esplanade, access to which may have been by a steep path. Access to the Central Courtyard was via a monumental gate composed of a vestibule and an elongated hall, decorated with wall painting and covered originally with a mudbrick cupola c.8 meters

high. Unusually, the lower part of the hall was made of baked brick, indicating its importance. The Central Courtyard (20 × 20 meters) is flanked by painted galleries, two *eyvans* and vaulted halls. To the north is the Painted Gallery that leads to the highest point of the site, where Herzfeld found frescoes depicting human figures as well as geometric and floral motifs. It is clear that the area underwent a number of changes. In view of the fact that there are two small mounds at each end of the gallery, Herzfeld reconstructed a double staircase, giving access to the gallery in the first phase; he then thought that in the second phase the front of the gallery had been changed, and envisaged a simple staircase in that phase. The new excavations uncovered only traces of a single, axial staircase perpendicular to the gallery. The mounded areas located on either side of the gallery may have been buttresses to strengthen the fragile mudbrick buildings. The excavations also revealed painted stucco in this area. Radiocarbon dates confirm Herzfeld's proposal of two phases, the earlier dated to c.80–240 and the later to c.540–650 (Ghanimati 2000: 145). Thus, the foundation of the monumental complexes dates to late Parthian or very early Sasanian times. The site was occupied until the late Sasanian period (Mousavi 1999a: 84).

6 Sasanian Fortifications and Castles: Gorgan Wall and Qaleh Zohak

Stretching from the Kopet Dag mountains to the shores of the Caspian Sea, the mudbrick structure known as Sadd-e Eskandar (“Alexander's Wall”) or Divar-e Gorgan (“Gorgan Wall”) is at least 200 kilometers long and can be clearly seen in the northern part of the Gorgan plain, bordering the Turkoman steppe. This structure consists of a thick, mudbrick wall or embankment with some 33 forts of varying shape and size (120 × 120 to 300 × 200 meters) along it. The wall was built as a bulwark against invaders from the north, much like the Roman *limes* in Europe. As far as is known, the eastern end of the wall joins the mountain range at Pishkamar, 58 kilometers northeast of Gonbad-e Qabus. Any further prolongation to the east is doubtful (Adle 1992). The wall is at present 2–5 meters high and about 10 meters wide. A 3 meter deep, up to 30 meter wide ditch runs along the outer (northern) side of sections of the wall. The wall is constructed of both unbaked mudbricks (50 × 50 × 10 centimeters) and baked bricks (40 × 40 × 10 centimeters). In 1978, M.Y. Kiani excavated parts of the wall and one of the forts. He attributed its foundation to the early Parthian period, specifically the reign of Mithridates II (123–88 BC) (Kiani 1982: 38). A joint team from the Cultural Heritage Organization of Iran and the University of Edinburgh carried out three seasons of exploration and excavation under the direction of Eberhard Sauer, with the aim of clarifying the chronology of the wall. Radiocarbon dating suggests that it was constructed and expanded in the 5th century during the reign of Peroz (457–83) in the context of his wars

against the White Huns or Hephthalites (Nokandeh et al. 2006; Omrani Reka-vandi et al. 2007).

Qaleh Zohak is located 50 kilometers east of Mianeh in Azerbaijan. The castle sits on top of a high mountain surrounded by two rivers and is one of the largest fortresses in the region. First visited by Colonoel Monteith in 1830, Qaleh Zohak was later explored by M.T. Mostafavi, K. Schippmann (1967), and W. Kleiss (1973). It was excavated (2000–4) by a team from the local office of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization based in Tabriz. The complex is made up of two areas: a fort on the south side of the mountain and a palace on the north side. The most prominent remains are those of a *chahar taq* of baked brick measuring 8.5×8.5 meters and standing 9 meters high. The original height of the monument is estimated at 12 meters, including the crenelated upper part of the façade. The building was decorated with stucco and molded brick, fragments of which litter the foot of the monument. The existence of a columned hall is also indicated by fragmentary column bases that have often been compared with those from the Parthian site of Khorkhe in central Iran (Kleiss 1973: 172–8). Excavations have revealed stucco fragments and a series of wall paintings (Qandgar et al. 2004: 202–3). The finds tend to date the main period of the fortress of Qaleh Zohak to the late Parthian/early Sasanian period, although it continued in use during the Buyid and Saljuq periods (10th–11th century).

7 Rock-Reliefs

To date, a total of 39 Sasanian rock-reliefs have been discovered, most of which are located in Fars apart from one at Salmas, northwest of Lake Urmia (Vanden Berghe 1983: 67); six at Taq-e Bustan, near Kermanshah (Vanden Berghe 1983: 92–5, Pls. 36–40); and one at Rag-e Bibi in northern Afghanistan (Grenet 2005). A relief of Shapur I at Rayy was destroyed in the early 19th century (Ouseley 1823: Pl. 65). The reliefs in Fars include nine carved below the Achaemenid rock-cut tombs at Naqsh-e Rostam (Schmidt 1970: 122–37, Pls. 80–95), two at Naqsh-e Rajab, 2 kilometers north of Persepolis (Schmidt 1970: 123–7, Pls. 96–101), two at Barm-Delak, near Shiraz (Vanden Berghe 1983: 80–1, 136–7), one at Guyum, also near Shiraz (Vanden Berghe 1983: 77, 137), six in Tang-e Chowgan, near Bishapur (Vanden Berghe 1983: 72–4, 131–4), one at Tang-e Qandil, 15 kilometers northwest of Bishapur (Vanden Berghe 1983: 80), one at Sarab-e Bahram, near Nurabad-e Mamasani (Vanden Berghe 1983: 78–80, Fig. 10), two at Tangab, Firuzabad (Vanden Berghe 1983: 62–6, Figs. 8–9), one at Sar-Mashad, between Kazerun and Bushehr (Vanden Berghe 1983: 80, Pl. 29), and two at Darabgird in southeastern Fars (Vanden Berghe 1983: 72, 108). Most of these reliefs, placed high up on cliffs, were meant to be viewed from below, not frontally. This explains why individuals and animals are represented with their bust and head larger than the lower parts of their bodies (Haerinck

1999: 57). Some reliefs, such as the victory scenes of Shapur I, bear inscriptions in Middle Persian, but a large number are devoid of any text, and in this case the identification of royal figures is based on the crowns and other royal attributes of specific kings as represented on their coins (Vanden Berghe 1983: 60–1; Her-mann and Curtis 2002). Sasanian reliefs were highly personalized and their locations were significant. Locations such as the lower part of the cliff at Naqsh-e Rostam, the gorge at Naqsh-e Rajab, or the cliffs on the rivers banks of Tangab and Bishapur were favored because of their symbolic value (Canepa 2010: 114–16). No Sasanian relief is ever associated with the buildings of that period. As Herzfeld rightly pointed out some 70 years ago, painting was the source of inspiration for Sasanian rock sculpture. This is why the bas-reliefs stand independent of Sasanian architecture.

Most of the Sasanian rock-reliefs belong to the first 75 years of the period. After a gap of some 70 years, Shapur III (383–8) placed the panel depicting the image of his father and himself at Taq-e Bustan, near Kermanshah. The last rock-reliefs were carved more than 200 years later at Taq-e Bustan by Khosrow II (610–28). The reasons for this hiatus are unclear, but it seems that crucial political events such as royal investiture and military victories occasioned the realization of rock reliefs (Vanden Berghe 1983: 57–8). No major relief was carved after Shapur II, whose reign was marked by a number of military triumphs. Surprisingly enough, no reliefs are known from the reigns of Kavad or Khosrow I, whose reigns were also full of military exploits.

8 Ceramics

The pottery of the Sasanian period poses a number of problems owing to its diversity and lack of formal and decorative motifs. In the excavation of large settlements such as Ctesiphon and Bishapur, there has been a tendency to concentrate more on luxury objects and fine art (mosaics, stucco, glass, coins) than evidence for everyday crafts such as pottery. As a result, pottery assemblages from the excavations of important centers have been inadequately examined and published. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that Sasanian ceramics were mass-produced. There are fewer distinctive types and the lifespan of different vessel types varies from region to region (Trinkaus 1986: 49). There are also considerable differences in ceramic tradition across the Sasanian Empire, dividing Mesopotamia from the Iranian plateau and the northeastern frontier of the empire. R. Boucharlat and E. Haerinck published the first comprehensive regional study of Sasanian pottery (Boucharlat and Haerinck 1991). Their study shows a neat difference between the regions. In the lowlands, excavations at Susa provide the only stratified assemblage that is linked with the corpus of ceramics in Mesopotamia (Boucharlat and Haerinck 1991: 306). These assemblages are important for the dating of sherds picked up on surface surveys in Khuzestan.

The best-known type is a blue/green-glazed pottery, very common in Sasanian Mesopotamia but scarce on the Iranian Plateau (Huff 1986: 307). In Fars, a recent surface collection at Darab is said to include Sasanian ceramics, but these remain unpublished (Morgan 2003: 333, and n35). In some cases, as at Qasr-e Abu Nasr, in Fars, a meticulous re-examination of finds and excavation reports has produced interesting information with regard to ceramics (Whitcomb 1985: 47–40). The most distinctive Sasanian type in Iran and Mesopotamia combines simple decorative patterns, including raised bands, horizontal grooves, and wavy and cross-hatched incision, often from combs (so-called “comb-incised” technique) (Huff 1986: 307; Adams 1965: 131; Venco Ricciardi 1967: 93–4). Excavations at Khirbet Deir Situn in northern Mesopotamia yielded an assemblage of late Sasanian stamped ceramics, but this seems to be only a regional variant (Simpson 1996: 99–101).

The lack of a reliable ceramic typology for the Sasanian core areas creates difficulties in the identification of Sasanian sites throughout the empire and has led to detailed studies in the periphery of the Sasanian world. For example, in the Oman peninsula a thorough examination of excavated ceramics resulted in a primary classification of the ceramic assemblages from the Sasanian period (Kenner 2002). In the Merv Oasis, an analysis of the ceramics from various excavations enabled G. Puschnigg to distinguish three pottery groups which are representative of different phases in the development of Sasanian Merv (Puschnigg 2006).

9 Bullae and Coins

The Sasanians used stamp seals. Bullae (clay balls) were used to seal packages destined for caravan or maritime trade (Frye 1970b: 79, 84). Bullae with seal impressions provide insights into Sasanian administrative institutions and imperial organization both in the cities and in the provinces (Göbl 1971). This evidence throws light on the involvement of the priesthood in administration (Frye 1970a: 240; 1974a: 68; Gyselen 1989); the scope and degree of economic activity; who was in charge of these activities; and where they took place (Gignoux 1980: 299–314; Gignoux and Gyselen 1982, 1987). In terms of economic activity, we can tell that there was a vibrant domestic exchange, since bullae and seals often carry the names of cities, districts, or provinces. While there have been many publications of bullae acquired on the antiquities market, and hence of unknown provenance, at least four major storehouses of bullae have been excavated, including those at Takht-e Suleiman, Qasr-e Abu Nasr, Aq Tepe (Afghanistan), and Dvin (Armenia). Sasanian bullae have even been found at the coastal site of Mantai in Sri Lanka (Bopearachi 2002: 110).

Literary sources suggested that, administratively, four chanceries (*diwans*) were created for the empire, a fact confirmed by the numismatic evidence (Gurnet 1994: 36–7). G. Gnoli suggested that there certainly was a military

quadripartition as well, in which the entire empire (*Eranshahr*) was placed under the control of four generals (*spahbeds*) as a reaction to foreign incursions from the four corners of the Sasanian Empire (Gnoli 1985: 265–70). R. Gyselen (2001) corroborates the literary evidence on the military division of the Sasanian Empire in the 6th century and provides a wealth of information about administrative and military offices throughout the empire (Gyselen 2007).

The Sasanian imperial administration imposed standardization in weights and in the minting of coinage. The units and types of coins struck by the Sasanian government were the gold *denar* (from Latin *denarius*), the silver *drahm* (from Greek *drachma*), the silver *dang*, and the copper *pashiz* used in local, daily transactions. The use of copper coinage certainly indicates that during the Sasanian period, especially in its later stages, there was a move toward a monetary economy. While the increase in the use of copper and bronze coinage in certain parts of the empire attests to an increase in trade and governmental control, silver coinage was much more common. Among the coins, the most widely minted and attested in documents is the silver *drahm* weighing about 4.25 grams. From the time of Ardashir I we find coins with this uniform weight, which vary typologically. On the obverse, we find the portrait of the *shahanshah* (“King of Kings”) along with a name and title, such as “Ardashir King of Kings of Eran whose race (is) from the Gods.” On the reverse of the coinage is a fire altar, either alone or flanked by two attendants.

Until the late 5th century mint names were not put on Sasanian coins, making it difficult to gauge the activity and output of mints across the empire. While more than 100 mint marks are known, fewer than 20 mints produced the majority of coins that circulated in the Sasanian empire (Göbl 1983: 332). The situation prior to the advent of mint names on coins is unclear, but there may have been as few as three different mints in operation, mainly in Fars and in the capital Ctesiphon (Reider 1996: 10–11).

With the introduction of mint marks on the reverse and the regnal year of the king in which a coin was struck, we begin to have an idea of the periodicity of minting and of which mints were the most productive and stable. Certainly, those that were close to economic centers like Fars had a huge output which supported the Persian Gulf trade (Daryaee 2003: 1–16), while the mints of Media had much smaller outputs. In times of war, however, mint productivity increased enormously. Thus, during the reign of Khusrow II (590–628) a huge quantity of coins was minted, largely to finance the long war with Byzantium.

Sasanian silver *drahms* were so well known that they were imitated in places as far away as India, clearly attesting to the economic power and/or prestige of the Sasanian Empire in the eyes of its neighbors. The purity of Sasanian coinage also gives us indications about mines and where coins were minted. For example, we know that coins produced in the northeastern part of the empire were purer than those from other regions and thus, even when coins lack mint marks, it can be assumed that those of particularly pure silver were minted from silver mined

in this region. In fact, Islamic sources confirm that the silver mines of the north-east were heavily worked by the earlier Islamic dynasties which came after the Sasanians. Of these, none produced silver as pure as Panjshir in modern-day northeastern Afghanistan.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

A number of good works exist which provide general orientation on Sasanian history and archaeology. See, e.g., Schippmann (1990) and Daryaei (2008 and 2009). Sasanian political history is reviewed concisely in Frye (1983).

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

Christianity in the Late Antique Near East

Cornelia Horn and Erica C.D. Hunter

1 West of the Euphrates

Introduction

Ancient Christian archaeology in the Near East is a fascinating and challenging subdiscipline. In general histories of the field it does not readily receive the attention it deserves (Frend 1996). Both biblical archaeology and early Christian archaeology are in the process of overcoming misleading assumptions that have impeded the reception of data, one of which is that data derived from archaeological work supplements and supports historical reconstructions that derive from reading sacred or otherwise authoritative texts, primarily the Bible and writings of patristic authors. Yet such literature does not necessarily or intentionally present the historical situation. Not infrequently it offers interpretative constructions that may be idealized and tendentious. Therefore, Christian archaeology has to strive to take into consideration the widest possible network of ancient textual sources, Christian and non-Christian, to overcome the limitations inherent in the phenomenon of the (attempted) erasure of alternative voices ("orthodox" vs "heretical") and the tensions between literature and religious practice (Wharton 1995: Ch. 1; Snyder 2003: 15). The best approach to Christian archaeology is one of constant, inclusive, and comprehensive dialogue between material data, ancient texts, and methodological developments in the constituent fields (MacDonald 2001: 663; Humphries 2008; Jensen 2008: 104–7).

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