

# A Survey of the Archaeology of the Sasanian Period during the past three decades

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A large number of monuments, buildings, rock reliefs, inscriptions, and collections of coins and manuscripts have formed our present image of Sasanian history and culture. The history of the Sasanian empire can be easily written and understood without having resort to archaeological fieldwork. In this regard, the best example is Arthur Christensen's history of the Sasanians, *l'Iran sous les Sassanides*, which was published in 1936 in Copenhagen, a masterpiece that has always been an indispensable source of information for historians and archaeologists. In contrast, the investigation of material culture in the Sasanian period essentially depends on archaeological remains and artifacts. Pioneer attempts to provide a comprehensive survey of Sasanian architecture and pottery, in 1938, clearly reveals the inadequacy of archaeological evidence at that time (Reuther 1938). As Dietrich Huff writes in his excellent survey of the archaeology of the Sasanian period, for a "long time, archeological information was derived from the reports of early travelers in Iran and from the results of the first surveying expeditions, like those of Rawlinson, Flandin and Coste, Dieulafoy, de Morgan" (Huff 1986: 302). It was in the 1920s that the first archaeological excavation of a Sasanian site began at Ctesiphon in southern Mesopotamia (Reuther 1929). More fieldwork was carried out in Iran during the twentieth century, resulting in a better understanding and interpretation of Sasanian material culture. One of the best archaeological fieldwork ever done on Sasanian remains is, indeed, Robert Wenke's surveys of the settlement pattern in the Sassanian period in southwestern Iran (Wenke



1975-76). Archaeological explorations and surveys in Fars and northeastern Iran significantly enriched the body of evidence on the archaeology of the late Iranian empires, in the first half of the first millennium. A comprehensive survey of the archaeological evidence on the Sasanian period available before 1980 has been summarized in D. Huff's survey of the archaeology of the Sasanian period. The present article will attempt to reassess the results that have been obtained from archaeological fieldwork during the past three decades.

The number of archaeological activities in Iran considerably reduced in 1979, and the outbreak of Iran-Iraq war in September 1980 suspended all archaeological investigations in the western and southwestern regions of the country for several years.<sup>1</sup> Among twenty major excavation projects from 1980 to 1990, none was concerned with Sasanian materials.<sup>2</sup>

The archaeological evidence indicates a regional diversity of material culture within the Sasanian empire; such a regionalism can be observed in pottery, construction materials, and even in the settlement pattern. This diversity makes the identification of Sasanian remains difficult; only in southwestern Iran there is a well stratified corpus of artifacts that can be attributed safely to the Sasanian period.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that the study of spectacular monuments has always dominated archaeological research programs and fieldwork, not all of the major Sasanian sites have been fully explored and published. The first capital of the empire, Firuzabad, has been the object of limited archaeological investigations. Other large sites in southern Iran, such as Darabgird and Istakhr, are inadequately known. The destruction of important Sasanian sites in southwestern and western Iran, due to agricultural and urban activities, continue today; the sites of Eyvan-e Karkheh and Qasr-e Shirin were severely damaged in military

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<sup>1</sup> Work on some important Sasanian sites was stopped in 1979. A number of these sites suffered from vandalism and destruction during the war. The excavations at Susa and Qaleh Yazdgird discontinued, while the major sites of Eyvan-e Karkheh and Qasr-e Shirin, both located near the border, were severely damaged.

<sup>2</sup> For a useful table of archaeological activities, see Mousavi 1994: 502.

<sup>3</sup> It is mostly thanks to the excavations at Susa, Ctesiphon and other sites in Mesopotamia.

operations during the Iran-Iraq war; the celebrated site of Gundi-Shapur has been extensively destroyed due to agricultural activities; and the waterworks in Shushtar considerably suffer from the urban development of the modern town of Shushtar.<sup>4</sup>

The archaeological fieldwork related to the remains of the Sasanian period during the past two decades has not followed the traditional trend of archaeological research on major monuments. The majority of large-scale excavations of Sasanian sites were interrupted after 1979. In contrast, the fieldwork on Sasanian sites has focused on regional surveys, limited soundings to clarify chronological problems, and rescue excavations generated by urban development and construction activities (dams, roads, railroads, etc.). The only exception is the site of Bishapur that has been the object of regular excavations. The present survey of the progress in the archaeology of the Sasanian period during the past two decades is presented here in a regional order.

#### *The southwestern and southern Iran*

Bishapur is undoubtedly the most explored Sasanian site in Iran. It has been the object of archaeological investigations and excavations since 1935.<sup>5</sup> The Cultural Heritage Organization of Iran launched a new research project in 1996 with the objective of mapping all the existent structures and of exploring early Islamic remains at Bishapur. A team led by Mohammad Mehryar carried out four seasons of excavations at the site. An early Islamic bath was uncovered and studied carefully during these excavations (Mehryar 1999: 58-60; Shah-Mohammadpour 1999). The most significant work was the excavation of the Governor's Palace, which has been dated to the late 7<sup>th</sup> century. The results show that the city of Bishapur continued to be occupied for years after the fall of the Sasanians (Mehryar 1999: 70-81). The environs of the city were also

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to the efforts sponsored by the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, the waterworks of Shushtar have been presented for the nomination on the World Heritage List of UNESCO, which might prevent further damages to the structures.

<sup>5</sup> A good summary of previous archaeological activities is given by Mohammad Mehryar (Mehryar 1999).

explored, and a number of small Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid sites were detected and documented (Mehryar 1999: 33-46).

The work at Firuzabad was resumed in 2005 with a joint Irano-German team under the auspices of the Cultural Heritage Organization of Iran and the German Archaeological Institute. No report has yet been published, and the following review is based on Iranian news websites.<sup>6</sup> The goal of the new research project was to explore the city of Gur within the circular enclosure. Three areas of the site were selected for fieldwork: the area of the high tower known as *tarbal* or *minar*; the Takht Neshin or the *chahar taq*; and the palace. Research at the foot of the *tarbal* revealed traces of steps belonging to the staircase that once led to the upper levels of the tower. The most outstanding discovery has been a series of wall and floor paintings depicting royal figures. The paintings, found near the tower, show the bust of two young women, a young man, and a boy. The style and treatment of these paintings show the influence of Parthian art still in force in the early years of the Sasanian empire. The figures have been attributed to Sasanian princes or dignitaries.

### **The northeastern and eastern Iran**

Probably the most outstanding Sasanian discovery of the past few years was the site of Bandian, located 2 km northeast of the town of Dargaz in northern Khorassan. The existence of archaeological vestiges was revealed due to agricultural activities in 1990. Archaeological excavations carried out by M. Rahbar under the auspices of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization between 1994 and 1999 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; 1999).

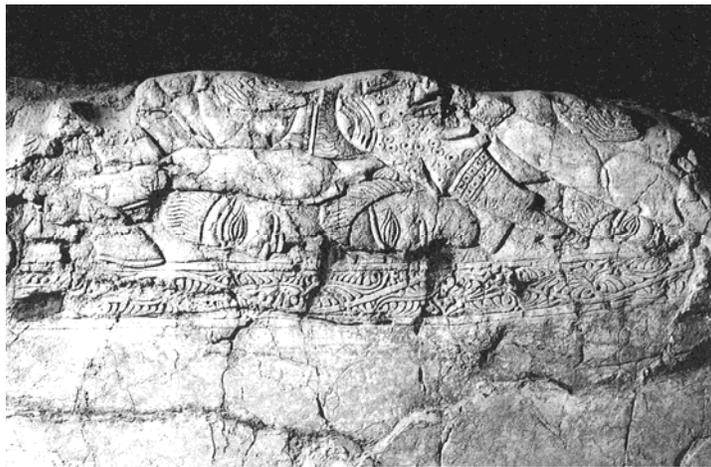
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<sup>6</sup> Iranian Cultural Heritage news: [www.chn.ir](http://www.chn.ir) (29/11/1384 – 5/2/2006).



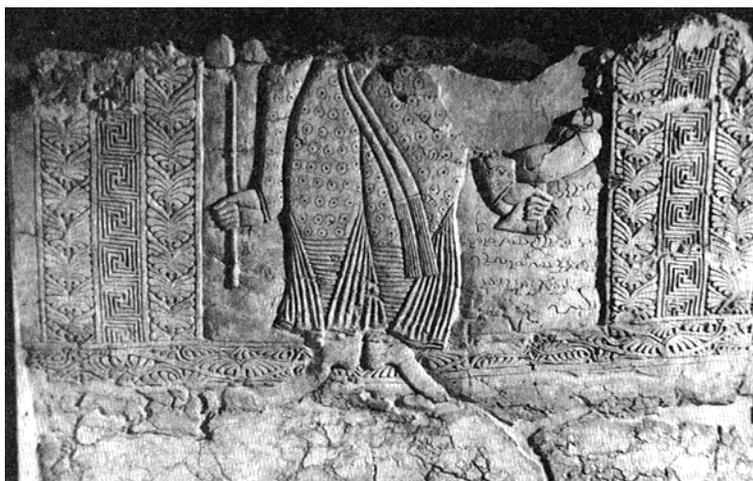
Bandian (after Rahbar)

The Sasanian empire, involved in permanent political and military confrontation with its western rival, the Roman empire, also had to face the invading nomadic peoples of the northeast such as the Hephthalites, Huns and Yue Chis, challenging the supremacy of the Sasanians and menacing the trade routes passing through eastern regions of Iranian territories. The efforts of Sasanian kings for protecting the northeastern frontiers of their empire is the main reason for the presence of monumental and defensive buildings in this region. These invasions are reflected in written and visual records of the time, as the archaeological remains at Bandian have revealed.



Fallen Hephthalites (after Rahbar)

The excavations uncovered three levels all belonging to the Sasanian period, of which the second level is the most important in terms of monumental architecture. The building measures 20 x 21 m, including a columned hall, a fire temple with an altar and an ossuary. The main construction material is pisé; mud-brick is also used to reinforce some structures and foundations.

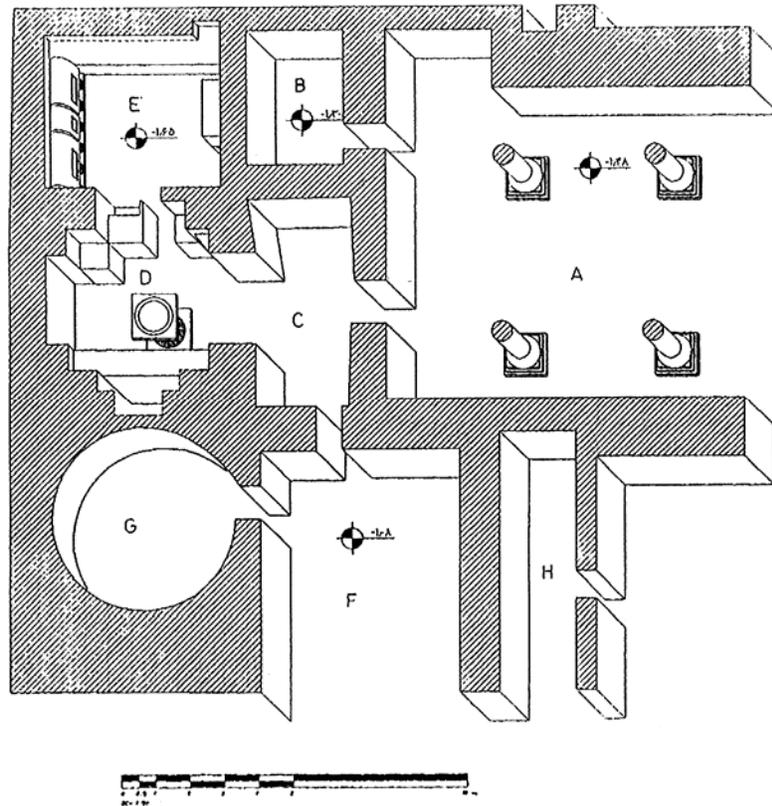


Bandian stucco (after Rahbar)

The significance of the stucco decoration on the interior walls of the columned hall and its variety both in theme and treatment are remarkable. The decorated panels, 33 m long, continue all over the hall. It is unfortunate that the upper part of the panels has not been preserved, but it is possible to reconstitute the panels in comparison with the decorated walls found in Panjkent, in Turkeminstan.

The scenes of the main hall are depicted with several iconographic themes. The south east wall displays a hunting scene with riders following two stags, a favorite theme in Sasanian iconography. The next panel, representing a battle scene, is probably the most important from a historical point of view. It shows the victory of the Sasanian king over an enemy ruler. It is a horse combat, and one can see bodies of the dead laid under the hoof of the horses. The enemy is characterized by its hat, the traits of his face,

eyes and beard, which indicate his Turkic origin. The Iranian king is recognized by the turban attached to his ankle. The following scene represents two individuals: one symbolizes Ahura Mazda, the other shows the triumphant king. The less preserved decoration on the southwest wall depicts a female figure with a long dress pouring the content of a vase on the ground of an adjacent room. It has been identified as the representation of Anahita, and the lily flowers are associated with fertility and birth. In the niche placed in the north of the main hall there are three decorated walls: 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 Vid-Mehr Shapur who was apparently a high-ranked official (Bashash 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, a seated figure is represented which might be the representation of the king himself.



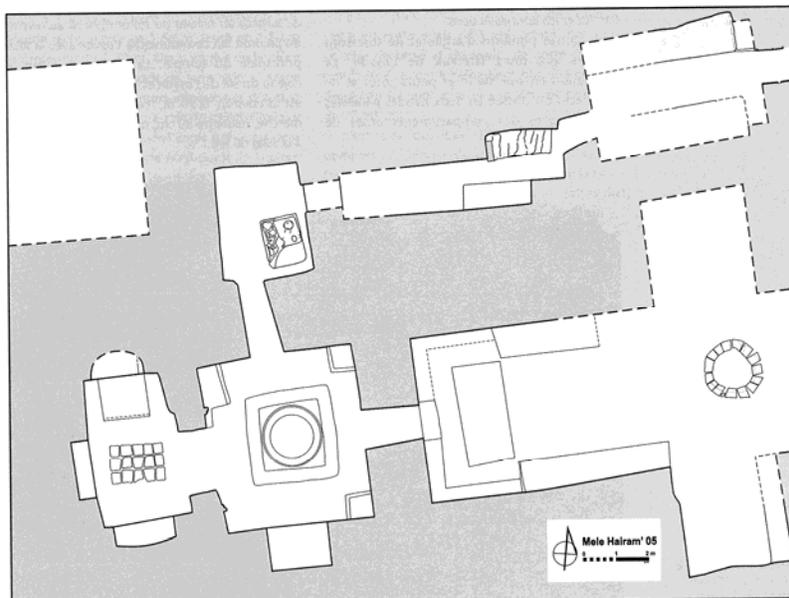
Bandian Fire-temple complex (after Rahbar)

The presence of a fire altar in the complex indicates that the building may have a politico-religious function. According to textual sources, Bahram V (420-438) killed the Hephtalite ruler, and the monumental complex at Bandian may well have been built at the time of this king. After Bahram, Peroz (457-483) was defeated by the Hephtalites and had to pay a ransom and to send his son, Kavard, as a hostage to the court of the Hephtalite king. Humiliated and defeated, Peroz decided to launch another offensive against the Hephtalites, in the course of which he was killed. The Hephtalites invaded northern Khorassan. The destruction of the ensemble at Bandian might be dated to this period.



Mele Hairam Fire-temple (after Kaim)

A similar building was discovered at Mele Hairam, located near Sarakhs in northern Khurassan; the site is now beyond the border, in Turkeminstan. The excavations, carried out a Polish team in 1997, revealed installations and structures of a fire temple comparable to the complex at Bandian and other Iranian sites (Kaim 2004; 2006). The earliest phase of the building may be tentatively dated to the 2nd century. It consists of a main building, the access to which is possible through a large *eyvan* or vaulted hall (7.5 x 5.20 m).



Mele Hairam Fire-temple (after Kaim)

Two layers of wall paintings were found in the vaulted entrance, depicting a series of floral and geometrical motifs. Further in the building there are small platforms in mud-brick. The fire temple is a square room (5 x 5 m) and has an altar in the centre. There other also a number of adjacent small pieces.



Mele Hairam stucco (after Kaim)

It is in the same region that the site of Tuzandegan, near Sabevar, is located. In the early 1980s, clandestine excavations yielded a number of bronze objects that might be part of a throne similar to the known Sasanian type (Mousavi 1990).

The third major fieldwork in the region is the exploration and partial excavation of what has been known under the name of Sadd-e Eskanadar (Alexander's Wall) or Divar-e Gorgan (Gorgan Wall). The Wall is at least 200 km long, stretched from the mountains to the shore of the Caspian Sea. It can be seen in the northern part of the Gorgan Plain, bordering the Turkoman Steppe. This impressive structure has been the object of archaeological surveys and excavations in the 1970s, but its exact date and attribution have since remained unclear. A team joint team from the Cultural Heritage Organization of Iran and the University of Edinburgh carried three seasons of exploration and excavation under the direction of Eberhard Sauer with the aim of clarifying the chronological problem related to the construction if the Wall. The carbon-14 dating results tend to confirm that the Wall was constructed and expanded in the 5<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Peroz (457-483) in his wars against the Hephtalites (Sauer 2006; 2007).

The last significant discovery in this region to this date is the fragmentary fire temple installations at a locality known as Kaka, 15 km south of Gonbad-e Kavous. A short excavation was carried out at the site in 2005, on behalf of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization. The site consists of a series of five low mounds, and the excavation of one of these mounds yielded a number of mud-brick walls and floors, and a complete fire altar in gypsum with fluted decorations (Mortezai 2006).

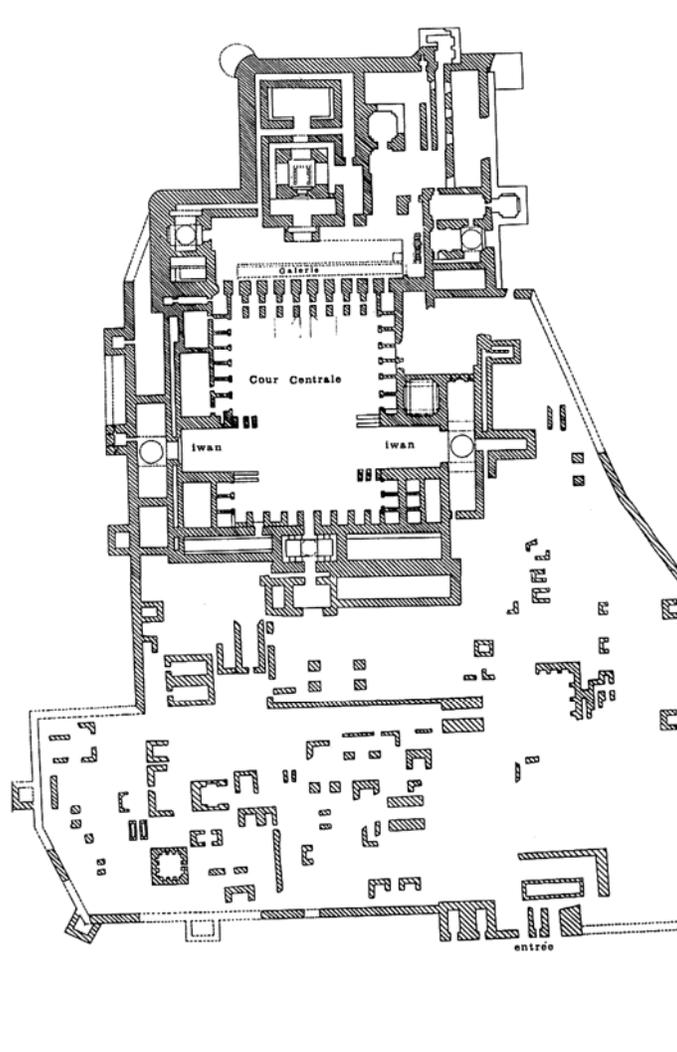
### **Southeastern Iran**

Kuh-e Khajeh is a mountain located 30 km southwest of the town of Zabol in an island in the middle of Hamoun Lake. The mountain, situated 600 m above sea level, has a diameter ranging from 2.0 to 2.5 km. It is the only natural height today in Sistan. The Kuh-e Khwajeh historical complex is one of the most important archaeological sites in Iran and the largest monumental ensemble in mud-brick. The site is composed of three monumental ensembles located on the southern flank of the mountain.



Kuh-e Khajeh (after Mousavi)

The ruins, first reported by a British army officer, Bresford Lovett, were explored in 1915 by 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.<sup>7</sup> The site was later excavated by Ernst Herzfeld who discovered a number of magnificent wall paintings at the site. More investigations were carried out by Giorgio Gullini in 1960 (Gullini 1964).



Kuh-e Khajeh plan (after Mousavi)

<sup>7</sup> Stein 1916: 221. For a discussion on different aspects and functions of the monumental complex, see Kawami 1987: 20-25. It should be noted that only one of the three archaeological components, named Gaga Shahr, has so far been the object of archaeological investigations.

From 1990 to 1992, in view of restoration and preservation of the mud-brick structures at the site, an Iranian team under the direction of Mahmoud Mousavi resumed the excavations at Kuh-e Khajeh (Mousavi 1995 and 1999). The project also attempted to elucidate a number of questions related to the plan and reconstruction proposed by Herzfeld who had distinguished two construction phases, one in the late Parthian period, the other in the early Sasanian period. The complex consists of a large esplanade, the access of which may have been an abrupt path. The excavations revealed structures related to the main entrance to the esplanade. Heaps in this area indicate the presence of unexplored vestiges. Access to the Central Courtyard is, in fact, a monumental gate composed of a vestibule and an elongated hall, which was originally covered with a mud-brick cupola some 8 m high. This hall was decorated with wall paintings. The lower part of the hall was exceptionally in baked brick, indicating the importance of this part. The Central Courtyard (20 x 20 m) is flanked by painted galleries, two *eyvans* and vaulted halls. To the north is the Painted Gallery that leads to the highest level of the entire place, where Herzfeld had found frescoes depicting human figures, geometrical and floral motifs. It is clear that the area was undergone 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 for that phase. The new excavations uncovered only traces of a single, axial staircase perpendicular to the Gallery. The heaps located on each side of the Gallery may have been structures used as buttresses to strengthen the fragile nature of the mud-brick buildings. The excavations also revealed painted stuccos in this area. Results of carbon 14 tests confirm the existence of two phases: the first sample provided a reading of 80-240 A.D.; the second sample provided the dates 540-650 A.D. (Ghanimati 2000: 145). Thus, the foundation of the monumental complexes may have

belonged to late Parthian/early Sasanian times; the site was occupied until the late Sasanian period as the recent excavations have demonstrated (Mousavi 1996: 84).

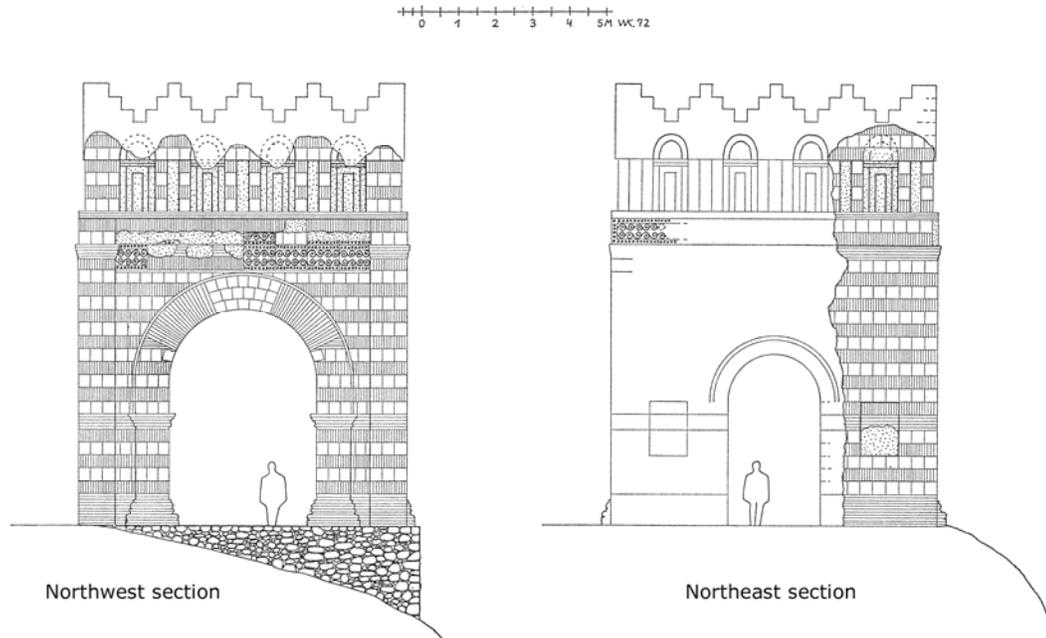
### **The northwestern and western Iran**

The site of Takht-e Suleiman has been the object of excavations by a team on behalf of the Cultural Heritage Organization of Iran during the past few years, but no report has so far been published. Dozens of seal impressions and bullae were reported to be found in the proximity of the northern gate of the site.



Qaleh Zahak (after Kleiss)

There have been four seasons of excavation at another site of the region, Qaleh Zahak, located 50 km to the east of Mianeh. Qaleh Zahak is situated on top of a high mountain surrounded by two rivers, and is one of the largest fortresses in the region. Qaleh Zahak was first visited by Colonel Monteith in 1830, and was later explored by M. T. Mostafavi, K. Schippmann (1967) and W. Kleiss (1973). The site was excavated between 2000 and 2004 by a team of the local office of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization based in Tabriz. The fortress is composed of two areas: the fort in the south, and the palace in the north side of the mountain. The most prominent remains are those belonging to a *chahar-taq* or pavilion in baked brick. The monument measures 8.50 x 8.50 m with a height of 9 m; the original height of the monument is estimated 12 m, including the crenelated upper part of the façade. The building was decorated with stuccos and molded bricks, of which fragments can be seen at the foot of the monument.



Qaleh Zahak plan (after Kleiss)

The existence of a columned hall in this area is also known from fragmentary column bases that have often been compared with the Parthian site of Khurheh in central Iran (Kleiss 1973: 172-178). The excavations revealed more stucco fragments and a series of wall paintings (Qandgar and Rahmatpour 2004: 202-203). The finds, including pottery fragments, tend to date the fortress of Qaleh Zahak to the late Parthian/early Sasanian period. The fortress was in use long after the fall of the Sasanians, during the Buyid and Saljuq periods (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century).

Rescue excavations at a locality named Shiyan, 45 km west of Kermanshah, in western Iran, revealed the existence of Sasanian fire temple. The excavations were sponsored by the Iranian Minister of Energy and Cultural Heritage Organization of Iran, in 2004 and 2005. According to H. Rezvani, the excavator, the building measured 23 x 14 m, and was decorated with stuccos. A series of decorated fire altars and column bases are among the main architectural features of the building; the small finds consist of gold plaques and silver coins. The date of the fire temple at Shiyan ranges from the reign of Shapur I to the fifth and sixth centuries; a series of coins dated to the reign of Khosrow II and later confirm the existence of building in the late Sasanian and early Islamic periods.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [www.chn.ir](http://www.chn.ir) (13/09/1384-23/12/2004)

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