

Sasanian Archaeology

Settlements, Environment and Material Culture

Edited by
St John Simpson

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Cover: Archaeological excavations and environmental sampling underway in Erk-Kala, the Sasanian citadel of ancient Merv, modern Turkmenistan (photograph: St J. Simpson, 1992).

The first sherd of Sasanian pottery to be published is from Layard's 19th century excavations on the mound of Kuyunjik at Nineveh (British Museum, N.1806)

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General Introduction

St John Simpson

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‘Our knowledge of the pre-Islamic past of Iran can be advanced only by new discoveries, and archaeology is far more important in this land with few written sources than in more favoured regions of the Mediterranean’.

Frye 1976: 93.

The Sasanian empire was one of the great powers of Late Antiquity (Figure 1). Founded in AD 224 by Ardashir I (AD 224–242), an Iranian noble whose family came from the city of Istakhr in Fars province of southern Iran, he adopted the previous Parthian capital of Ctesiphon in southern Iraq as his own. He established a powerful family dynasty and an empire which thrived for four centuries. Political continuity was strengthened by closer integration of the administration of the provinces of Iran, Mesopotamia, and adjacent territories. Rapid military successes by his successor Shapur I (AD 242–272) triggered crisis in the Roman empire, followed by drastic economic reforms and re-organisation of the Roman army to recreate a temporary status quo until a century later when Shapur II (AD 309–379)

aggressively expanded his empire westwards into upper Mesopotamia. The Sasanian threat remained constant and, under Khusrau II (AD 590–628), armies surged across the eastern Roman empire again but now holding onto, and consolidating, their gains for up to a generation. However, brilliant counter-offensives by Heraclius, political implosion in Ctesiphon, and increasingly bold Arab probes along the southern frontiers of both great powers finally led to the collapse of the Sasanian empire during the second quarter of the 7th century.

Sasanian studies have been traditionally dominated by Iranologists, art historians, numismatists and/or scholars most familiar with Classical, Armenian, Jewish



Figure 1. Map showing the extent of the Sasanian empire at its height (drawing: P. Goodhead)



Figure 2. Monumental Sasanian relief at Naqsh-i Rostam showing Hormizd II (photograph: author, 2000)

or later Arab sources. Academic research began as an antiquarian numismatic pursuit with correlations of coin portraits with well known rulers, and thence to create a typology which could be adapted to the identification of individuals on rock reliefs or silver vessels. In the absence of many surviving primary historical sources, numismatic, glyptic, art-historical and architectural studies have defined the field, and discussions of rock reliefs, stuccoes, silver and silks, cut glass, coins, glyptic and bullae have shaped opinions on the development and impact of Sasanian art and material culture.¹

These studies have in turn created the picture of a rich courtly culture with a strong Iranian character moderated in part by Western artistic influences. However, the archaeological evidence 'points to a considerable regional heterogeneity of material culture within the Sasanian empire, although the historical sources indicate a tendency towards political centralism right from the beginning of the state'.² The corresponding consumable culture of the masses is much less understood, as is the economy which not only sustained and supported the Sasanian empire for four centuries but also underpinned its consistent military superiority over its western rivals and effective defence against successive powerful threats along its eastern frontier. Moreover, the glamorous concept of

'Silk Roads' trade in luxury commodities and studies of Sasanian silver coinage have clouded appreciation of the importance of internal trade and everyday transactions. There is increasing interest in these topics, how the empire really functioned and the need for serious historiographic analyses has been reiterated by several scholars.

This collection of essays builds on some of these questions and offers an approach which is based almost entirely on archaeological sources. These have attracted much less attention among non-archaeologists and syntheses of the data, either by region or category, are rare.³ The first attempts to identify archaeological data of this period began with antiquarian travellers passing through the region in the early 19th century. Several observed the eroded remains of the Gorgin wall and its interval forts, the large fortress at Gomish Tappeh and remains of old canals, but most concurred in the opinion that these were built by Alexander, referred to locally as Iskander.⁴ Many others drew attention to Sasanian rock reliefs at Bishapur, Naqsh-i Rostam, Naqsh-i Rajab and another, subsequently erased, at Rayy and speculated on their identifications (Figure 2). A distinctive class of decorated pottery typical of northern Iraq was first recognised as being Sasanian by Claudius James Rich when he found sherds of it on the surface of the important yet never re-investigated site of Eski Kifri

¹ Harper *et al.* 1978; Kröger 1982; Gyselen 1989; Overlaet (ed.) 1993; Whitehouse 2005; Demange (ed.) 2006; Harper 2006.

² Huff 1987: 302.

³ Huff 1987; Mousavi and Daryaei 2012.

⁴ Sauer *et al.* 2013: 4–14, 630–47.



Figure 3. The first sherd of Sasanian pottery to be published is from Layard's 19th century excavations on the mound of Kuyunjik at Nineveh (British Museum, N.1806)

in 1820.⁵ Further fragments were recognised by almost all of the subsequent 19th century excavators of the Assyrian palaces on the mound of Kuyunjik at Nineveh and retained with other diagnostic sherds, glassware, metalwork and coins recovered from the extensive and deeply stratified late period occupation at the site (Figure 3).⁶ Throughout the 19th century, many British political agents, envoys and soldiers also commented on and/or made their own investigations of evidence for Zoroastrian funerary practices found in the form of reused jar or carved stone ossuaries across the Bushehr peninsula (Figure 4).⁷ During the 1920s and early 1930s scholars were presented with a steadily increasing body of archaeological data from this period, firstly from Iraq as excavations there revealed elaborate stuccoes and distinctive types of pottery and glass at Kish,⁸ Ctesiphon,⁹ Nineveh¹⁰ and Nuzi¹¹ (Figure 5).

The abolition of the French monopoly in October 1927 and the ratification of a new Antiquities Law on 3rd November 1930 were followed by a scramble of archaeological activity across Iran. In the following

⁵ Rich 1836: vol. 1, 20; see Simpson 2013a.

⁶ Simpson 1996a; 2005a; 2005b.

⁷ Simpson 2007a; Simpson and Molleson 2014; Simpson 2019c.

⁸ Langdon 1931a; 1931b; 1932; Langdon and Harden 1934; see Moorey 1978: 122–46.

⁹ Reuther 1929; Kühnel 1933; Schmidt 1934; see Kröger 1982.

¹⁰ Thompson and Mallowan 1933; see Simpson 1996a; 2005a.

¹¹ Ehrich 1939; see Potts 1996.



Figure 4. Re-used Sasanian torpedo jar containing excarnated human remains and found at Bushehr in the 19th century (British Museum, 91952)

year further stuccoes were found decorating a pillared building south of Damghan, investigated as part of the University Museum Philadelphia / Pennsylvania Museum of Art joint project at nearby Tepe Hissar (Figure 6),¹² and during the extensive clearance of the late Sasanian citadel of a small town, possibly that of old Shiraz, at Qasr-i Abu Nasr (Figure 7).¹³ The long-term French excavations at Susa revealed an area of housing in Level IV which the excavator dated to the mid-4th century on the grounds that this equated to the

¹² Pope 1932; Kimball 1937.

¹³ Frye (ed.) 1973; Whitcomb 1985.



Figure 5. Sasanian stuccoes shortly after their discovery at Kish (after Langdon 1931b: fig. 3)



Figure 6. The remains of the columned hall of a small residence near Tepe Hissar with *in situ* stuccoes (after Pope 1932: fig. 6)

occupation destroyed by Shapur II in AD 341, and the city went into decline thereafter until the late Sasanian period;¹⁴ however, many of the early reports of Sasanian structures, tombs and pottery are incorrectly dated and most of the recovered finds poorly stratified.¹⁵ Between 1935 and 1941, the French expedition also excavated at Bishapur where they created the first plans of the

remains and cleared part of the palace complex at the eastern end, revealing mosaics and part of an enigmatic partly sunken structure commented on by many European travellers since 1809 and interpreted by the excavator as a fire-temple (Figure 8).¹⁶

During the late 1950s a trickle, rising to a flood, of Sasanian antiquities and modern imitations began to

¹⁴ Ghirshman 1952.

¹⁵ e.g., de Mecquenem 1931; see Boucharlat 1987; Boucharlat and Haerincq 2011.

¹⁶ Ghirshman *et al.* 1956; 1971; see Frye 1976.



Figure 7. View looking across the summit of the citadel of Qasr-i Abu Nasr with the bastion overlooking the entrance at the rear and modern Shiraz behind (photograph: author, 2000)



Figure 8. View of the so-called fire temple or temple of Anahita at Bishapur (photograph: author, 2000)

enter the art market following a combination of large-scale licensed commercial and illegal excavations in Iran. Most notably, these included large numbers of silverwares and a small number of rock crystal objects (Figure 9).¹⁷ There were also hundreds of Sasanian

cut glass bowls and a much smaller number of closed forms, and most major public and private collections with Iranian interests – from America to Japan – soon acquired examples of these (Figure 10).¹⁸ The Gilan region of north-west Iran was said to be the source

¹⁷ e.g., Grabar *et al.* 1967; Muscarella 2000: 203–205.

¹⁸ e.g., Fukai 1973; 1977; Whitehouse 2005; Goldstein *et al.* 2005.

of these and earlier objects, although this is unlikely to be the only provenance and many silverwares are of dubious authenticity. A small number of helmets, long swords in highly decorated scabbards (Figure 11), and plain or fluted vessels cast from high-tin bronze also appeared on the market,¹⁹ and were reported to come from the Dailaman district of Gilan where one Iranian claimed to have seen children playing with ancient swords during his visit 'to inspect my timber business' in 1951.²⁰ There were strong vested interests in the commercial value of such discoveries and those archaeologists who ventured into this region faced tough challenges. An Iranian archaeological expedition excavating at Marlik in 1961/62 not only witnessed illegal digging around the site before, during and after their work, but on one occasion had their tent slashed at night,²¹ and the Japanese expedition to Dailaman also regularly encountered systematic looting at sites through the region.²² However, both made discoveries that support reports that this region was one of the sources for Sasanian objects circulating on the art market, and several Sasanian dipper jugs found in the disturbed upper layers at Marlik reflect its proximity to a Sasanian fortress.²³ In the meantime, the Japanese mission investigated reports of numerous cemeteries having been recently commercially excavated in the Halimehjan valley: the reported finds included iron swords, glassware, stamp seals, silver plates, gold ornaments and carnelian beads which are consistent with a Sasanian date,²⁴ and a more recent evaluation of these looted sites confirms a large number date to the Partho-Sasanian period (Figure 12).²⁵

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, archaeological fieldwork projects not only had a research agenda but also served as part of a larger package of national promotion alongside the government's ambitious redevelopment and restoration programmes. Large-scale irrigation projects in south-west Iran were accompanied by extensive archaeological surveys, notably of Khuzestan in 1960/61,²⁶ the Deh Luran plain in 1968/69,²⁷ and the Susiana plain in 1973.²⁸ Moreover, research into the Sasanian period was given a high public profile within Iran as it marked one of the high points, alongside that of the Achaemenids, in

¹⁹ e.g., Grancsay 1963; Overlaet 1982; 2004; Melikian-Chirvani 1974; Moorey 1976; Mahboubian 1997: 275, cats 354a-b; see Lang and Simpson, this volume.

²⁰ Mahboubian 1997: 27.

²¹ Negahban 1996: vol. I, 5-11, vol. II, col. pl. VIIIA.

²² Fukai 1968: 4; Ohtsu, Nokandeh, Yamauchi and Adachi (eds) 2006: fig. 22.

²³ Negahban 1996: vol. I, 227-28, vol. II, fig. 22, pls 106-107, nos 542-46; see Simpson, this volume 316, fig. 63.

²⁴ Fukai and Matsutani 1977; 1980.

²⁵ Simpson 2015a.

²⁶ Adams 1962a.

²⁷ Neely 1970; 1974.

²⁸ Wenke 1975; 1975/76.



Figure 9. Late Sasanian silver bowl, said to have been found in Iran (British Museum 133033)



Figure 10. Late Sasanian cut glass vase, said to have been found near Amlash (British Museum 135712)



Figure 11. Late Sasanian crucible steel sword with decorated silver scabbard, said to have been found in Gilan (British Museum 135739 / 135747)

the sequence of pre-Islamic Iranian monarchies.²⁹ As a result, during the military parades held at Persepolis during the Shah's controversial celebration of the 2,500th Anniversary of the Founding of the Persian Empire in October 1971, recreations of Achaemenid and Sasanian army uniforms constituted 38% of the total (Figure 13).³⁰ The site below the Achaemenid royal tombs at Naqsh-e Rostam was partly levelled and formal paths laid in preparation for the associated events, revealing two minor Sasanian rock reliefs on the lower cliff face in the process (Figure 14),³¹ although construction of an access road cut through the massive Sasanian mudbrick fortifications enclosing the site (Figure 15). Ali Akbar Sarfaraz was among those archaeologists at this time who embraced the new nationalist ideology:

²⁹ Abdi 2001: 67.

³⁰ Ministry of Information 1971.

³¹ Roaf 1974.

at Firuzabad (Gur) he cleared part of the Sasanian palace (Figure 16), while at Bishapur a 250 m stretch of the 9 m thick fortifications and the foundations of a triumphal gateway were excavated (Figure 17).³² In 1957 a group from the Fars army concluded several years of work in the Mudan cave at Bishapur by resurrecting the fallen upper part of the carved statue of Shapur I on reinforced concrete legs, with fragments displayed nearby, enlarging the mouth of the cave enlarged and laying out paths (Figure 18). Between 1959 and 1978 the German Archaeological Institute conducted careful excavations and consolidation of the late Sasanian fire-temple sanctuary of Adhur-Gushnasp at Takht-i Sulaiman (Figure 19),³³ following a preliminary survey of the Firuzabad plain in 1972,³⁴ the same institute investigated Ardashir I's palace at Qaleh-i Dukhtar near Firuzabad (Figure 20).³⁵ Between 1968 and 1978, excavations at Haftavan tepe, south-west of Lake Urmia, revealed a number of Sasanian graves on the summit of the mound and cutting an earlier Sasanian phase of occupation when the mound had been crowned by a circular fortification wall with repeating horse-shaped towers projecting from the exterior (Figure 21).³⁶ The appearance of this fort resembles a second discovered on the summit of the steep-sided main mound of Tureng tepe in the Gorgan plain during French excavations there between 1967 and 1975 (Figure 22).³⁷ Meanwhile, between 1970 and 1977, the late M.Y. Kiani was exploring the sites on the Gorgan plain, including the remains of the Gorgan wall to the north: he proposed a Parthian date for this during the reign of Mithradates II (123–87 BC) based on a combination of brick sizes, pottery, and architectural parallels and a misconception over the height of the Caspian sea-level in antiquity, although he admitted the presence of Sasanian occupation and illustrated a late Sasanian faceted glass cylinder vessel from Trench F at Fort 12.³⁸ The British Institute of Persian Studies supported a photographic survey of some of the major rock reliefs,³⁹ and an eagerly anticipated Sasanian origin for the early Islamic Persian Gulf port of Siraf was matched by the discovery of a fortified complex beneath the massive early 9th century Congregational Mosque (Figure 23).⁴⁰ The excavator, the late David Whitehouse, was quoted in *The Iran Tribune* (April 1970) as saying that 'one might speculate that we have here the remains of a port which served that great Sassanian city of Firoozabad' and further evidence for Sasanian involvement in maritime

³² Sarfaraz 1969; 1970; Yasi 1977.

³³ Naumann and Naumann 1976; Naumann, Huff and Schneider 1975; Huff 2011a: 102–105.

³⁴ Huff 1974.

³⁵ Huff 1976; 1978.

³⁶ Burney 1968; 1972.

³⁷ Boucharlat and Lecomte 1987.

³⁸ Kiani 1982a; 1982b.

³⁹ Herrmann 1976.

⁴⁰ Whitehouse 1971a; 2009.

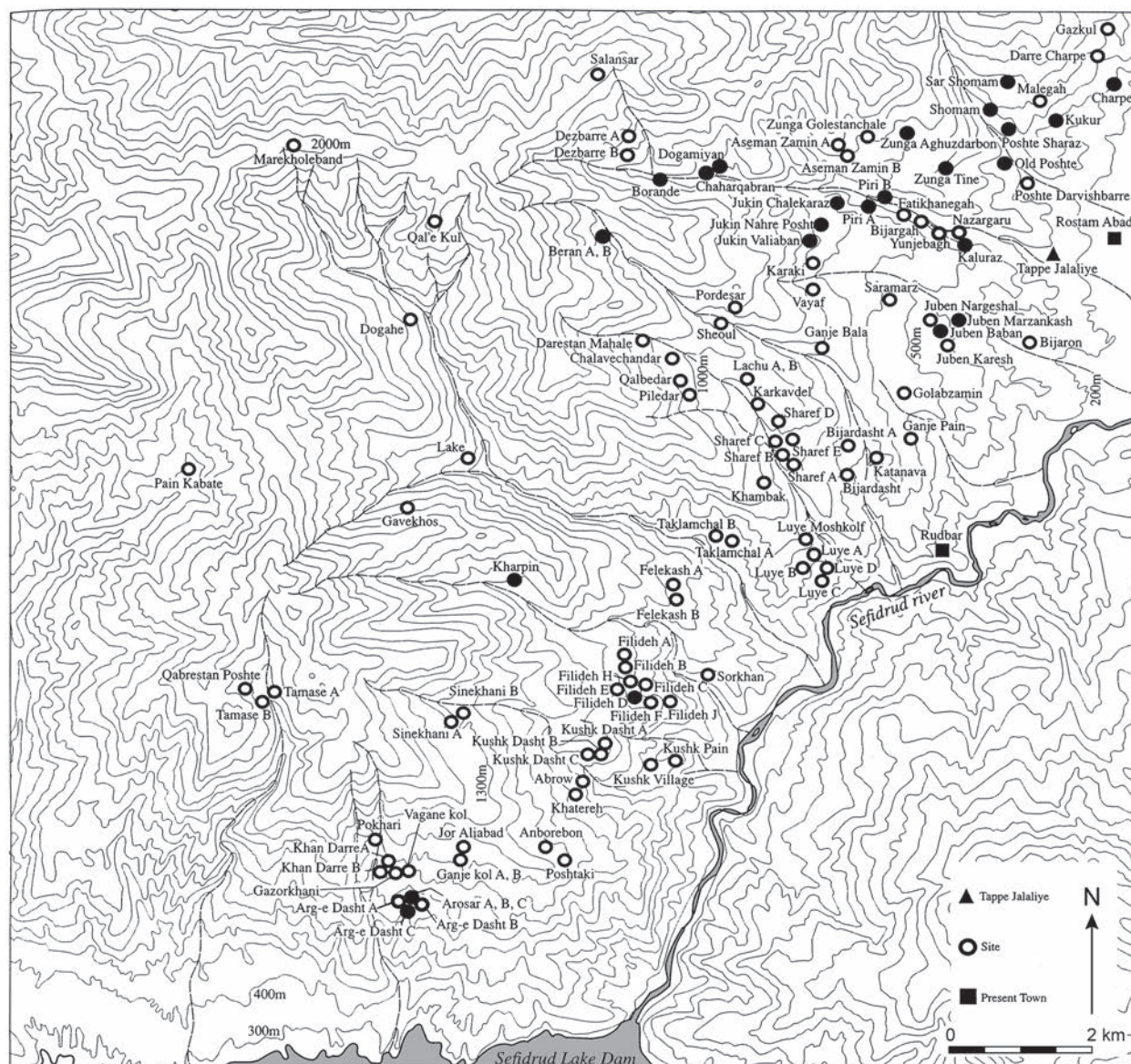


Figure 12. Map of archaeological sites located on the 2001–2006 Iran/Japan archaeological survey of the western Sefid Rud, with Partho-Sasanian sites highlighted as solid dots (after Ohtsu, Nokandeh, Yamauchi and Adachi (eds) 2006: fig. 22)

trade was argued by Andrew Williamson.⁴¹ He delivered a lecture on this subject at the British Academy on 21st June 1972, which was attended by Reza Shayegan, the managing director of the National Shipping Lines: the full text was enthusiastically published shortly afterwards in *The Times* and *Kayhan International*. This promotion of the military and economic aspects of the port of Siraf was timely given the Shah's obsession to develop Iran as a major sovereign military power and rival of Iraq, and play a larger role in Middle Eastern politics, develop more Persian Gulf ports and air-bases and safeguard oil exports through the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean.⁴²

During these decades many bridges, weirs, and causeways across Iran were attributed a Sasanian date,⁴³ ruined *chahar taq* structures interpreted as Zoroastrian fire temples,⁴⁴ free-standing rock-cut monuments described as open-air Zoroastrian fire-altars,⁴⁵ and a circular moated rampart at Tal-i Khandagh near Sar Mashhad interpreted as an exposure *dakhma* founded by the powerful Zoroastrian priest Kirdir in the 3rd century.⁴⁶ Alongside these reports, the remains of a large Nestorian monastery on Kharg island was extensively excavated by the French expedition and a preliminary

⁴¹ 202, 252–53, 261, 362.

⁴³ e.g., Stein 1940: 15–16, 48, 71–74, 171–74.

⁴⁴ e.g., Vanden Berghe 1961.

⁴⁵ e.g., Stronach 1966; Trümpelmann 1973.

⁴⁶ Trümpelmann 1984: 317–18.

⁴¹ Williamson 1972; Whitehouse and Williamson 1973.

⁴² Simpson 2019a; cf. Alam 1991: 103–104, 153, 155–56, 176, 180, 200–



Figure 13. Costume for a Sasanian commander in chief, designed for the 2,500th Anniversary of the Founding of the Persian Empire parades held at Persepolis in October 1971 (Ministry of Information 1971)



Figure 14. View of a small Sasanian relief discovered at Naqsh-e Rostam (photograph: author, 2000)



Figure 15. View of the unexcavated Sasanian fortifications around the complex at Naqsh-e Rostam (photograph: author, 2000)



Figure 16. View of the Sasanian palace at Firuzabad/Gur (photograph: author, 2000)



Figure 17. View of the exterior of the excavated Sasanian fortifications at Bishapur (photograph: author, 2000)

report published which interpreted it as evidence for a 6th century Christian presence.⁴⁷ This dating has been regularly repeated in more recent years, as further discoveries of churches and monasteries along the Persian Gulf and in the Iraqi Western Desert have been cited as evidence for the rise of the Nestorian Church during the late Sasanian period.⁴⁸

However, despite these numerous discoveries and reports, the literature is filled with assumptions and unreliable or circular dating. Frye criticised the situation in typical style in the opening words of a paper given at a conference of Iranologists in Munich:

‘During eight years of intermittent residence in Shiraz, I have made many trips to sites and monuments of Fars province. From the beginning of my acquaintance with many structures, I have raised the question: just how do isolated monuments receive a designation as Achaemenid, Sasanian or Islamic when there are no written sources which tell us what the remains were and their dates? Sometimes the identification and dating seemed to have been passed on throughout the years, decades or even centuries, from a chance remark of a traveller rather than from a detailed study on the premises. It is not my intention here to answer any questions regarding architecture, or such technicalities which

⁴⁷ Ghirshman 1960; Steve 2003.

⁴⁸ Bowman 1974; Gropp 1991; Lerner 1992; Hellyer 2001; Elders 2003; Hauser 2007a; Horn and Hunter 2012.



Figure 18. Real postcard photographic print showing visitors admiring the restored statue of Shapur I inside the Mudan cave (EPH-ME 8154, presented by Dr G. Herrmann)



Figure 19. View of the lake and the late Sasanian fire-temple sanctuary of Adhur-Gushnasp at Takht-i Sulaiman (photograph: author, 2004)



Figure 20. General view of Ardashir I's fort at Qaleh-i Dukhtar near Firuzabad (photograph: Paul Gotch, 1966)

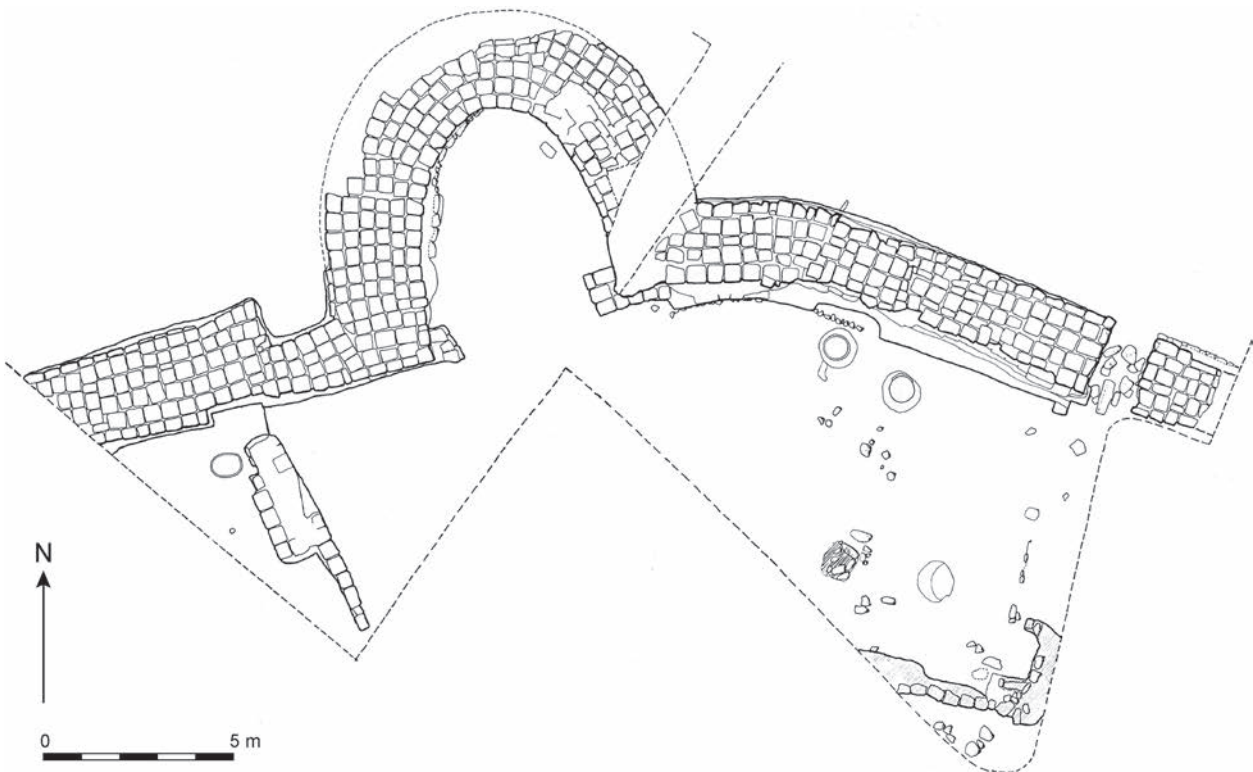


Figure 21. Plan of the excavated section of a Sasanian fort on the summit of Haftavan tepe in north-west Iran (after Burney 1973: fig. 10)



Figure 22. View of the main mound crowned by the Sasanian fort at Tureng tepe in north-east Iran (photograph: author, 2004)

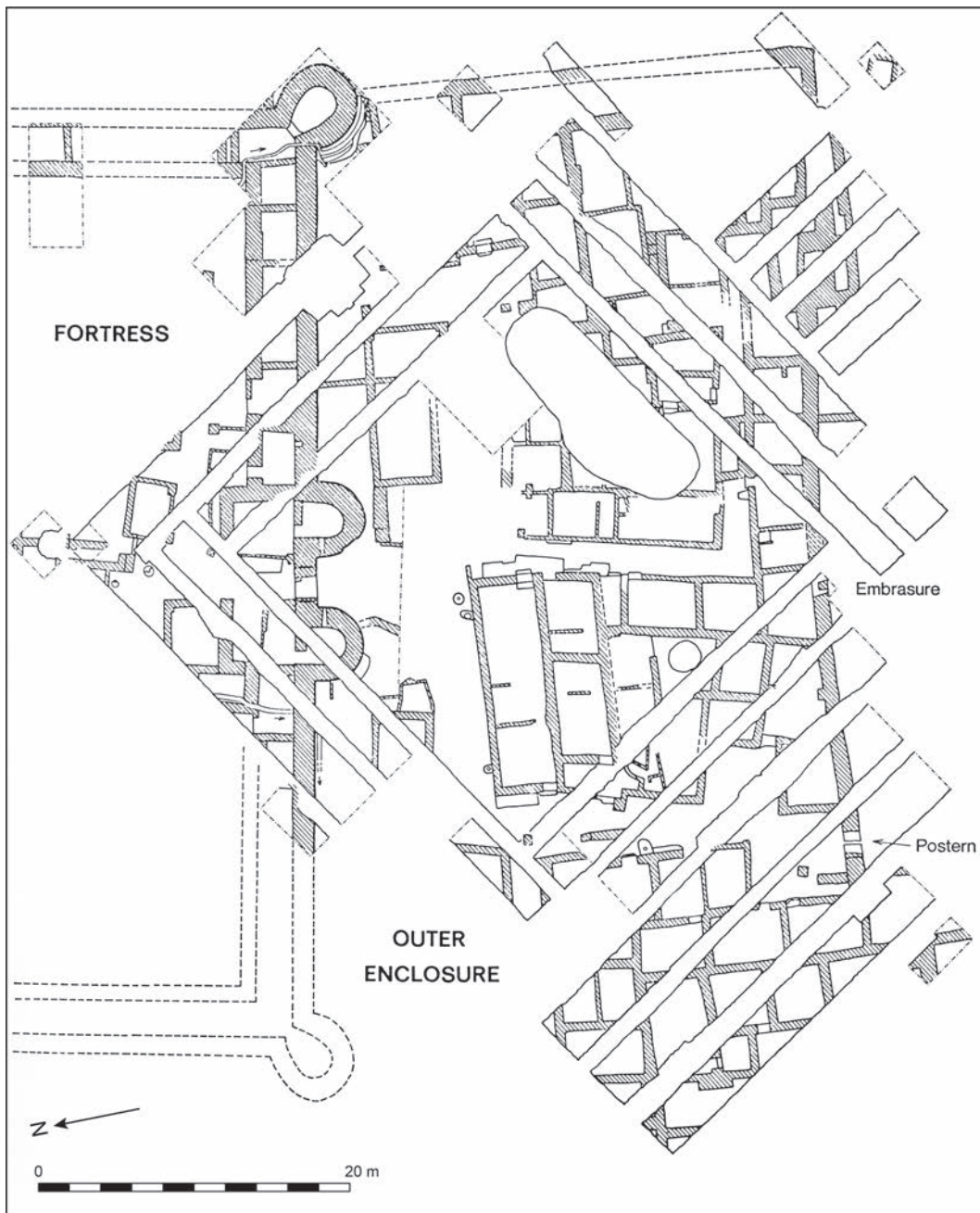


Figure 23. Plan of the so-called Sasanian fort and enclosure at Siraf (after Whitehouse 1972: fig. 3)



Figure 24. View of the exterior of the so-called Sasanian palace at Sarvistan (photograph: author, 2000)

are the province of the archaeologist, for I am quite unqualified to even use a sextant in the field much less to analyze squinches or arches. Rather I wish to raise questions which I believe need answer and perhaps thus stimulate an interest in the historical remains of Fars province, the homeland of the Achaemenids and the Sasanians. In many cases, how can we distinguish between the original construction of a building or a dam, repairs made later, or extensions or radical changes in the plan or execution of the structure? One observation I have made which has impressed me over the years is the continuity in methods and types of construction in Iran throughout the centuries. Such statements that smooth and fine stone work on an isolated, ruined structure, must be Achaemenid because the Sasanians or the Iranians of Islamic times never did, or could not execute, comparable works, in my opinion, should be discarded'.⁴⁹

The small vaulted building at Sarvistan is a good instance of this (Figure 24). This structure was first recorded by European travellers in the mid-19th century, and as early as 1910 was interpreted as the remains of a minor Sasanian palace on the basis of a literary reference by al-Tabari (d. AD 923) to the construction of a palace near Fīrūzabad by Mihr Narseh, the vizier of Varahran V (AD 421–438). A number of later scholars have questioned this interpretation and dating, including Bier who argued for a considerably later – mid-8th to mid-10th

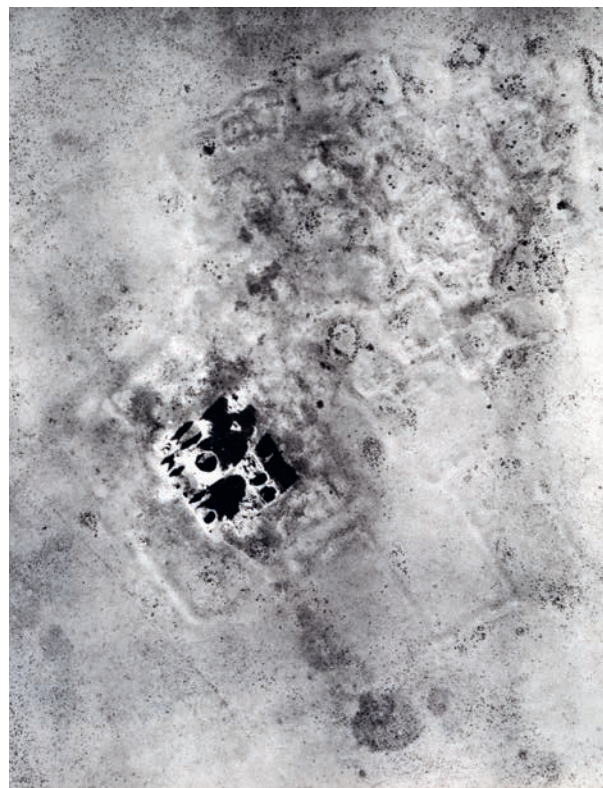


Figure 25. Aerial view of the same building taken in 1936 (after Schmidt 1940: pl. 21)

⁴⁹ Frye 1979: 335–37.

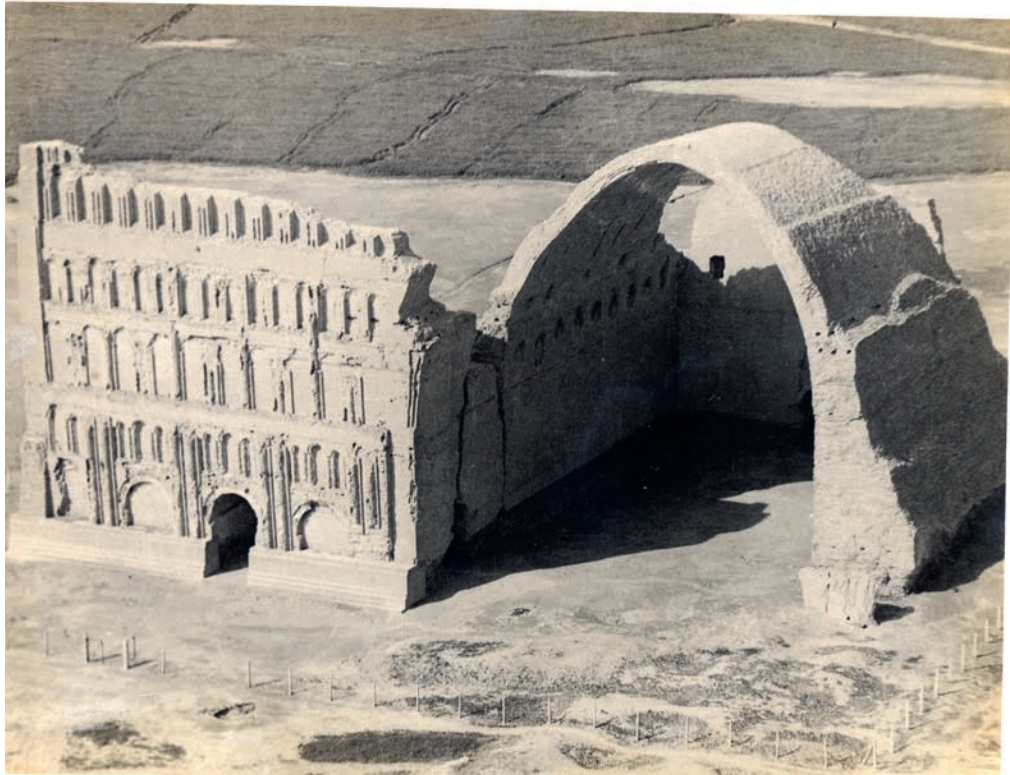


Figure 26. Aerial view of the Taq-i Kisra (British Museum/Middle East archives)

century – date on the basis of architectural features, and suggested that it may have been a Zoroastrian fire sanctuary rather than a palace.⁵⁰ Stein commented on how the building ‘now rises in splendid isolation, but the amount of broken pottery, much of it glazed green ware, strewn around it over a considerable area shows that habitations of a humbler sort must have stood near by’.⁵¹ A number of walls in this area are visible on aerial photographs taken by Schmidt in March 1936, leading Whitcomb to reiterate that it was part of an urban complex rather than an isolated monument (Figure 25).⁵² These outlying remains have since been largely destroyed by agricultural works, but soundings excavated around the main building in 2002 suggest a possibly late Sasanian foundation although the most significant phase of occupation was indeed in the early Islamic period.⁵³

The Taq-i Kisra near Ctesiphon provides another good example (Figure 26). This monument corresponds to the ‘great *iwān*’ of Arab Conquest historians such as Yaqubi which he specifies as being in the royal city of Aspanabr (or Aspanbor) and which lay the equivalent of a mile [1.6 km] south of Ctesiphon.⁵⁴ This area is said to have

been residential during the reign of Kavad (AD 488–496, 499–531), Khusrau I (AD 531–579) constructed a palace here with the assistance of ‘Roman expertise’ and ‘Greek marble, building experts, and craftsmen skilled in ceilings’ which were supplied by Justinian,⁵⁵ and another description refers to Khusrau commissioning a palace mural commemorating his sack of Antioch in AD 540.⁵⁶ A royal aviary, game reserve, stud, treasury and church are also attested in written sources, a bath-house has been partially excavated a short distance due west of the Taq-i Kisra, and the foundations and platform of a large building originally decorated with stuccoes located immediately to the south at the spot known today as Tell ad-Dhabai.⁵⁷ Pottery and coins found in the vicinity of the *iwān* suggest a late Sasanian date of construction but piecemeal planning and construction of the surrounding complex was suggested by the early excavators and may explain some of the discrepancies between later Arab authors.

Within highland Iran, the ‘fire-bowls’ have now been proven to simply be the remains of *astodans* which have lost their lids,⁵⁸ many of the *chahar taq* structures demonstrated to be much later *imamzadehs*,⁵⁹ and

⁵⁰ Bier 1986.

⁵¹ Stein 1936: 179.

⁵² Whitcomb and Sumner 1999: 215–16.

⁵³ Askari Chāverdi 2010; 2012.

⁵⁴ el Ali 1968/69: 426.

⁵⁵ Theophylact Simocatta *History*, V.6.10.

⁵⁶ Shahid 1995: 235–36.

⁵⁷ Kröger 1982: 18–37, pls 3–5.

⁵⁸ Huff 1998; 2004.

⁵⁹ e.g., Huff 1974: 157.



Figure 27. View of the excavated early medieval monastery at Sir Bani Yas (photograph: Emma Thompson, 2009)

the site of Tal-i Khandagh (described above) is more likely to be a fortified site.⁶⁰ The historically attested importance of the Persian Church is unchallenged but its architectural footprint is now nebulous as the monasteries on Kharg island and Sir Bani Yas, as well as the parochial churches at al-Qusur on Failaka and Akkaz island, have been convincingly re-dated to between the late 7th and early 9th centuries.⁶¹ Moreover, they have been shown to be part of a wider development of coenobitic monasticism and proselytisation on the desert margins of Arabia following a period when evidence for permanent settlement is remarkably scarce (Figure 27).⁶²

Beyond the modern Iranian borders other important discoveries were being made during this period. Extensive archaeological surface surveys begun in Iraq in 1956 demonstrated large-scale Sasanian water engineering works across the Mesopotamian alluvial plains, leading Adams to conclude that this was 'the apogee of ancient developments on the central Euphrates floodplain'.⁶³ One implication of these results was that the Sasanian state had invested sufficiently heavily in the region to indicate that they regarded it as an integral part of its empire and, although the ceremonial heart of the dynasty lay on the plateau, Mesopotamia was a major economic and cultural centre.

The shift to the west in the political power-base is also reflected in the increased number of building projects in western and north-west Iran. In 1964, the Italian archaeological expedition to Iraq began investigations in the Seleucia/Ctesiphon area. Directed first by Gullini, then by Invernizzi, these were the first excavations to be conducted at the political centre of the Sasanian empire since 1931. Among their important results was clarification of the urban topography, confirmation that the 'round city' next to Seleucia was the remains of Veh Ardashir rather than Ctesiphon, and the exposure of large areas of vernacular architecture and workshops within the curving fortifications (Figure 28).⁶⁴

Archaeology abroad is always at the mercy of foreign politics. The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 was followed by the long Iran-Iraq war. Although local Iranian archaeologists persevered under difficult conditions, all foreign archaeological projects in that country stopped for many years. Many of these archaeologists moved across the Persian Gulf to work on earlier periods in eastern Arabia, particularly the United Arab Emirates, where as early as 1972 Beatrice de Cardi had published evidence for a small Sasanian settlement on an islet near the tip of the Musandam peninsula which she interpreted as the remains of a 'a military outpost to watch movements of shipping in the

⁶⁰ Ghasemi 2012a.

⁶¹ Kennet 2007; Carter 2008; Simpson 2018a.

⁶² Payne 2011.

⁶³ Adams 1981: 200.

⁶⁴ Gullini 1966; Invernizzi 1976; Gullini (ed.) 1985; Simpson 1997a; 2015b.

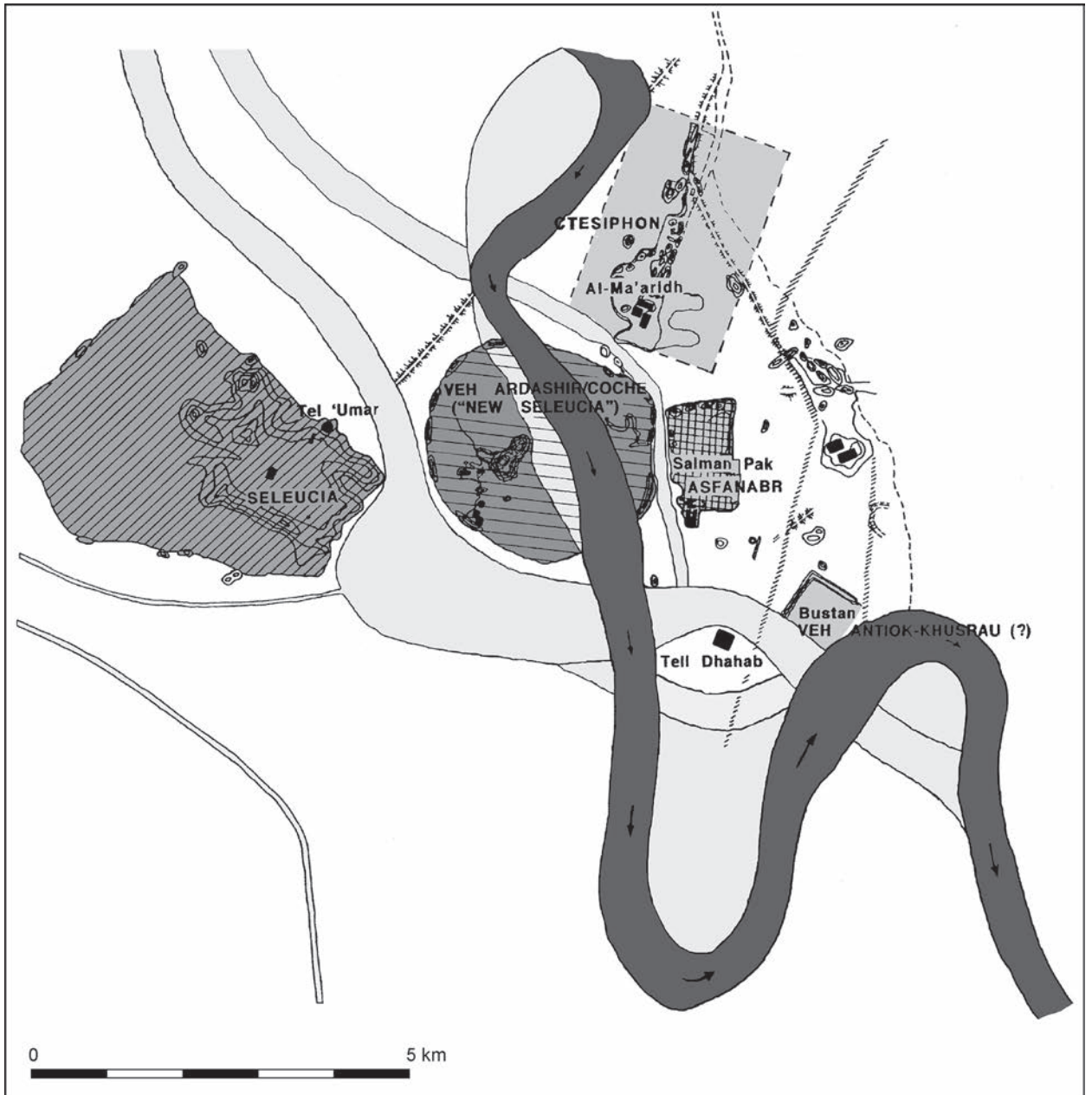


Figure 28. Plan showing the relationship of some of the sites forming the Ctesiphon conurbation (reconstruction by the author)

narrow Strait of Hormuz'.⁶⁵ Ironically, the site has been levelled since as part of construction associated with a small naval station.

Although less well appreciated in the context of Sasanian studies, important discoveries have been made in the last few decades in the southern Caucasus and Central Asia. Within the former region, Sasanian silverwares have been found at Shemakha in Azerbaijan, and Mukuzani and Mtskheta in eastern Georgia.⁶⁶ Excavations in the old city of Dvin have apparently produced evidence

for glass production, and the range of cut, moulded and plain glass vessels illustrated from excavations at sites in Azerbaijan, eastern Georgia and Armenia suggest that this was a major centre for Sasanian glass in parallel with Mesopotamia.⁶⁷ It is no coincidence that both regions border the eastern Roman empire and cross-cultural influences are therefore likely to have stimulated fashions and industries in both regions. All of the Sasanian finds from the Caucasus have been found at sites within the territory of the kingdoms of Iberia and Albania which became satellite kingdoms in

⁶⁵ de Cardi 1972: 308; 1975: 30–34.

⁶⁶ Khalilov 1985; Soltes (ed.) 1999: 201, 204–205, cats 98, 104.

⁶⁷ Simpson 2015a.



Figure 29. Oblique aerial view of the ancient city-site of Merv: the Sasanian and earlier city is on the right and its medieval successor is on the left (Google Earth, 2009)

the 3rd century and were finally absorbed as provinces of the Sasanian empire in the 5th and 6th centuries. This region offers a much more likely place of production for the complete glass vessels reportedly found in graves in the Gilan region of north-west Iran for this was, to adapt Adams' catchphrase for the Diyala, 'the land behind the Caucasus' in this period, as it was before.⁶⁸

On Iran's interface with Central Asia, evidence for Sasanian activity north of the Kopet Dagh was regularly encountered by Soviet archaeologists during their surveys and excavations in southern Turkmenistan. The strongly Marxist-influenced ideology resulted in this period being interpreted as a feudal society following the so-called 'period of slave-owning society' which was equated with the Parthian period. The frequent occurrence of low-denomination coins was used to help secure the dating and important

excavations carried out in parts of the city-site of Merv led to significant discoveries of monumental and domestic architecture, most notably a Buddhist monastery founded in the 4th century (Figure 29).⁶⁹ More recent analyses of the previously excavated coins have led to many re-attributions, entailing a re-dating of the associated stratigraphy in many cases,⁷⁰ and the employment of more careful excavation and the recovery of environmental remains for the first time have added considerable new information about the development of the city and the surrounding oasis during this period.⁷¹

The interpretation of archaeological data is as subject to the paradigms of the day as the analysis of historical sources but, as this short review attempts to show, this alternative set of evidence offers an important avenue

⁶⁸ Simpson 2014a; 2015a; Shikaku 2013: 357; 2019.

⁶⁹ Pugachenkova and Usmanova 1995.

⁷⁰ Loginov and Nikitin 1993.

⁷¹ Simpson 2008a; 2008b; 2014b.

for examining the achievements and development of Sasanian society, its economy and its material culture. Mapping these in detail against historical developments remains a great challenge, and both greater control of the dating and more cautious interpretation of how the archaeological evidence reflects specific historical events, as opposed to cultural-economic developments, is required in future. The need for syntheses of the data, as well as more critical editions, has been called for by historians and archaeologists alike in recent years.⁷²

The development of the present volume has had a gradual evolution, rather than a sudden birth, and has taken much longer to publish than intended, but the publication still seems to be the right thing to do at the present time. It was inspired by the results of several specialist workshops held at the British Museum in connection with post-excavation analyses arising from the author's excavations at Merv, as well as related research on the Sasanian collections, and was developed to include the present set of contributions. The editor is very grateful both to the contributors for submitting their papers and for their huge patience while this volume was assembled, and to the reviewers for their comments on the contents.

This publication follows several international exhibition on Sasanian luxury arts,⁷³ two published conferences devoted to Sasanian history and archaeology,⁷⁴ and the first formal catalogues of Sasanian glass in public or private collections.⁷⁵ The results of major research projects at Merv (present-

day Turkmenistan), Gorgan (Iran) and Kush (United Arab Emirates), also offer new avenues for exploring survey and excavation data for this period.⁷⁶

The approaches taken by the contributors to the present work vary necessarily according to the data they are concerned with, but in order to place them within a wider research framework, this monograph is divided into three parts in order to address some of the key archaeological issues. It begins with a selection of essays dealing with sites and landscapes in different regions of the Sasanian empire. This is followed by two further sections, one dealing with aspects of the agricultural economy and the other on how studies of surviving material culture help inform our ideas of craft and industry. Each section is preceded by a short introduction outlining some of the most important relevant textual and archaeological background to these broad topics. There are many areas which could be included but which have not. This is not an attempt to create a systematic overview, let alone the 'inventory of all archaeological sites [which] should be established as a first measure toward the critical assessment of the archaeological data' that one writer has proposed.⁷⁷ It is intended instead to explore some fruitful avenues of academic discussion and includes research by different international scholars, some well established and others at early stages of their careers. It should go without saying that some statements and conclusions may prove to be wrong, but without publication and discussion there is intellectual sterility.

In memoriam: V.A. Zavyalov

You were one of the finest archaeologists to work in Central Asia, and one of my closest and longest friends and colleagues, with almost 30 years of work together in Central Asia, Russia and England. I value your experience, scholarship, humour and company to the end, remember that everything must be logical, and dedicate this work to your memory.

⁷² e.g., Shayegan 2003; Morony 2008; Bakhos and Shayegan 2010; Mousavi and Daryaei 2012.

⁷³ Demange (ed.) 2006.

⁷⁴ Sarkhosh Curtis and Stewart (eds) 2008; Kennet and Luft (eds) 2008.

⁷⁵ Whitehouse 2005; Goldstein *et al.* 2005.

⁷⁶ Sauer *et al.* 2013; Simpson *et al.* forthcoming a; forthcoming b.

⁷⁷ Shayegan 2003: 368.