

# The Architecture and Status of Iranian Temples in the Sasanian Era

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## **Abstract:**

The present work describes a historical study of Iranian temples in the Sasanian era. The most important questions addressed here are on the way the rituals were performed, the status and significance of the temples in this era and the previous empires as well as architectural arrangement and the most important spaces of these temples mostly referred to as fire temples. Toward this end, first, the most important characteristics of Iranian society in the Sasanian era including the relationship between religion and government and status of the clergy among social classes are studied. Then, the status of temples in that era including the ceremonies and events held in the buildings are addressed. In the third section, architectural arrangement of the Parthian temples will be examined and in the final section, the Sasanian temples, mostly fire temples, are explored. The results indicated that both religious ceremonies including prayers before the sacred fire and ritual festivals and imperial rituals were celebrated in the fire temples. Main spaces of famous fire temples are: Eyvan, dome chamber, and courtyard arranged in a row on an axis.

**Keywords:** Sasanian Government, Sasanian Religion, The Status of Temples, The Architecture of Temples, Fire Temple.

## **Introduction:**

Most archaeological excavation and historical studies of the Sasanian architecture in Iran were carried out in the mid-20th century, almost all conducted by western archaeologists and scholars. The findings of such surveys were published in book or essay form with the general topic of the Sasanian architecture or as isolated monographs. These surveys are not devoid of shortcomings due to the followings reasons: firstly, some monuments were not explored carefully; secondly, some surveys date back to a long time ago and more recent studies contradict some previous findings; thirdly, Most of the scholars were not fully informed of the characteristics of the Iranian society which resulted in some incorrect judgments. Added to these, no comprehensive study has been conducted so far to survey pre-Islamic Iranian temples. In this essay, first, we will address human life in the Sasanian era before analyzing the inherent features of these monuments due to the fact that man built these buildings, lived there, and gave them meaning.

The present essay aims at illuminating the status and significance of the temples in the Sasanian era and the knowledge of the events there in. Furthermore, we attempt to understand their conventional architectural arrangement and the main spaces. Toward this end, first we will study such important features of the Sasanian society as ruling system and its relationship with religion and social classes. Then, we will address the status of the temples in this era including



the ways in which rituals were performed and life in the fire temples. To build a better understanding of the architectural features of the Sasanian fire temples, it is necessary to have knowledge of the temples of the earlier period. Thus, we will address these buildings in the Parthian era in the third section of the essay. The final section is devoted to study of the architecture of the Sasanian temples, mostly fire temples. The concluding words of this research provide a closer understanding of the main spaces, architectural arrangement, and quality of life in these temples. Main sources of information have been used in this essay are surveys and historical accounts written in the contemporary period. In some cases, we draw on historical texts and reliefs.

## **1. Iranian society in the Sasanian era**

The Sasanian began to rule a land which previously, in the Parthian era, lacked political centralization and a state religion. The Sasanian kings believed in a centralized government and they held that God granted them divine rights to rule Iranian land, therefore, considering religion and government mutually necessary for each other.<sup>1</sup> Although they declared Zoroastrian religion as the state religion, other ancient religions continued to be practiced.<sup>2</sup> (fig. 1)

The Sasanian, from the start of their rule, organized the social classes. Some sources report four classes in this era namely: Clergy, Armies, Agricultural Workers, and Manual Workers,<sup>3</sup> though other sources mention another class Dapirs<sup>4</sup> ranking between Armies and Mehna (including Agricultural Workers and Manual Workers).<sup>5</sup> The status of Zoroastrian clergy (Magogs) beneath the position of the king and his family was higher than other social classes. They assumed religious and governmental roles and were dividing Mupat, Herpats and other Magogs in ranking of importance position and function. They were often affluent and played various roles in people's lives. Even according to some researchers, the clergy associated with the court created a new variation in the Zoroastrian religion.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. The status of the temples in the Sasanian era**

The Sasanian considered the worship of Ahuramazda and reverence for the fire as Zoroastrian truth cult. Although prayers before the fire were in existence before that date, some believe that until the Sasanian period the rituals were held differently and often in open spaces.<sup>7</sup> The fire temple was a place for the worship of the God of fire, Ahuramazda, and other gods' temples were sometimes called the same. Three main fire temples known as: AzarFarnbagh, AzarGoshnasb, and AzarBorzinmehr were exclusively designated for Clergy, Warriors and royal court, and Agricultural Workers respectively in the Sasanian era.<sup>8</sup> Fire temples were built by the kings, prominent figures, and main clergies. They devoted extensive land extensive land properties, income and taxes for them.<sup>9</sup> Maintenance of the fire temples were Herpat's duty. Furthermore, there were some needed works that some people served for purpose of self-purification or for a religious intention. In these organizations some people worked in the capacity of accountant and administrator of court and religious regulations. The clergy performed religious rituals in the temples including daily religious practices, seasonal, and annual festivals. Prayers before the fire were accompanied by special ceremonies in which some priests cooperated with each other.<sup>10</sup>

As stated in some sources, the clergy were taught theology in special places. Some believe that the fire temples were the centers for teaching such issues to the clergy and common people. Many important sources refer to several places named Magogistan, Herpatistan, Dapirestan, Dapistan, and Farahngistan.<sup>11</sup> It seems that Herpadistans were only located in great temples in such a way that some parts of the building were allocated to prayers and some parts to teaching and the clergy's daily life. Religions ethics were probably taught to the people in all temples, the tradition which continued in Islamic era.

### **3. The architecture of Iranian temples in the empires before the Sasanian Era**

Main Iranian temples, in pre-Islamic empires, were dedicated to three gods: Ahuramazda, Mithra, and Anahita, whose religions were of an Indo-Iranian origin.<sup>12</sup> There is no precise information on the form of the temples and how religious cults were performed the Achaemenian era. However, they had reference for all three mentioned gods and performed the rituals in temples or open spaces. According to historians, in the Parthian era temples were built for the three gods among whom Anahita and Mithra temples were most known. We know several temples belonging to the Seleucids and Parthians such as Ayadana in Susa, Jandial in Taxila Pakistan, and Sahr in Syria influenced, to some extent, by Greek temples. (fig. 2) General architectural arrangement of such temples is as follows: "A portico with two pillars, behind that a further room which leads to the main square-room and, above all, here, as well, is a surrounding corridor."<sup>13</sup> However, these monuments are different in some respects such as having or not having a rectangular antechamber, the quality of spaces, and the type of connection between surrounding corridor and other spaces. We know some temples with Eyvan<sup>14</sup> belonging to the Parthian era such as Masjid Soleyman and Hatra. Some Eyvans and a surrounding sacred room in a corridor comprise the main spaces of Hatra temple. Main part of the temple leads in one end toward the main Eyvan and from the other and toward the open space. (fig. 3) Another important complex is in Kuh-e Khajeh near Zabol, the excavated part of which is known as Qale-e Sam. This building was built in the three levels, the lowest level of which consists of a yard, Eyvans, and other surrounding spaces. The main building of the temple, a domed square-room with surrounding corridor, has located in the highest platform. According to researchers, some constructions were built in the complex in the Sasanian era and the domed room probably belongs to that era.<sup>15</sup> (fig. 4)

Additionally, Mithraic temples located in caves or underground as well as Bagins<sup>16</sup> and Image Shrines are mentioned in some sourced but even still we do not know them well.<sup>17</sup>

### **4. The architecture of Iranian temples in the Sasanian era**

Chahar-Taq is the most well-known kind of structure for which scholars consider a fire temple function. In studying Chahar-Taqs some points must be taken into consideration: first, they all were not built in the Sasanian era; second, most of them were no single buildings; third, all of them must not be considered fire temples. To judge whether they were fire temple we must consider the fact that in Zoroastrianism, sacred fire must be protected and not exposed to direct sun light.<sup>18</sup> However, even if all Chahar-Taqs are not fire temple, it is not far from truth to think that most of them had ritual roles. (fig. 5)

Konar-Siah is a fire temple located on the low lands of a high mountain in Farashband, Fars province, dating back to late Sasanian or early Islamic era. The complex has two Chahar- Taqs,

the surrounding spaces of which were ruined. According to the scholars, one was used to keep sacred fire burning and only the clergy were allowed to enter and the other one for public ceremonies. Furthermore, the complex has some corridors and rooms which probably was the residence of the clergy.<sup>19</sup> (fig. 6)

Takht-e Soleiman is the largest known religious complex from the Sasanian era located near Takab in Azarbayjan. The whole complex together with some isolated buildings is surrounded by a large enclosure with two north and south gates and a lake in between. Rudolf Naumann, the first scholar who studied the monument, maintains that the complex has two fire temples separated by a corridor. Great fire temple of Magogs is located in the east, and the western structures was probably used for religious, court, and public functions.<sup>20</sup> On the most important axis of the main fire temple in the direction of center of the lake, stands a deep Eyvan, a domed room for sacred fire, a surrounding corridor, back Eyvan, a yard, and the north entrance. Two other cruciform rooms can be seen in the complex having stone fire altar. Besides, several rooms have been found behind the northeast yard which may have been residence of the clergy. (fig. 7)

Another famous monument is FiruzAbad Fire Temple also referred to as FiruzAbad Palace in contemporary era, although lacking main features of a palace. In front of this building is a square yard in which a circular spring is still flowing. Its symmetrical architectural arrangement is such that a deep Eyvan with three pairs of rather large spaces facing the main axis is in front of a body of still water, after that three dome chambers can be seen in an upperlevel which may have been the place of three sacred fires.<sup>21</sup> If not, the central dome chamber may have been the place of sacred fire and side dome chambers may have been used for other rituals. After central dome, we reach a shallow Eyvan and then a yard surrounded by other rooms. At the end of the yard another eyvan can be seen on the main axis. (fig. 8)

A main recently excavated temple is Bandian fire temple in Daregaz, northeast of Iran, near Turkmenistan border. The spaces of the complex are: Eyvan or a four pillared hall, a room for keeping religious sacrifice and gifts, fire-room, ossuary, Eyvan, open circular room, and service room.<sup>22</sup> Fire-room was cruciform and probably domed, with a fire bowl. Besides fire altar, there is a room which the researcher considers to be a place for keeping ossuary and its presence beside a temple is unprecedented. On the opposite, is an unfamiliar round open space which the researcher calls Barshenoumgah, meaning a place for cleansing. An interesting observation in translation of the inscriptions in the fire temple indicates that Bandian temple had a religious and spiritual function as well as, a place for declaring appointment and dismissal, victories and defeats, announcement of recruitments for military and the number in the war against enemy and probably announcement of tax for every city.<sup>23</sup> (fig. 9)

### **Concluding remarks**

Due to a link between state and religion in the Sasanian ruling system, court, and religious rituals shared many common grounds. Most probably the kings were crowned in both



political and religious courts, in a fire temple before the clergy thus their rule were made legitimate.

In this era, most temples were built for the worship of Ahuramazda and prayers before fire, however, other gods were worshiped in some temples. Fire temples were built by prominent clergies and king. Mopats and Herpats were responsible for their maintenance. Religious rituals of the temples including daily religious practices and various festivals were performed by the clergy. The clergies were trained in Magogistans and Herpatistan, probably placed in large fire temple.

Parthian temples consisted of sacred room, a Surrounding corridor, and a portico in front and some temples had Eyvan. In the Sasanian era Chahar-Taq was the most famous kind of structure in constructing temples often combined with other spaces. According to the studies of well-known fire temples since the Sasanian era we find that simpler in design with only one main space i.e. a domed fire room while other fire temples were more detailed consisting of a dome chamber for the sacred fire as well as spaces for holding other rituals and festivals. From an architectural arrangement point of view, main fire temples often had Eyvan, dome- chamber and a yard often arranged on the same axis.

In conclusion, a main fire temple was not merely a place for prayers before the sacred fire, rather playing such roles as: making the king's rule legitimate, a place for holding imperial formal ceremonies and various festivals, meddling in political administration of a city, state or the country, participating in economic affairs and teaching theology to the clergy and common people, the same roles played by a cathedral and congregational mosque. Furthermore, in the course of time, Zoroastrianism underwent some changes which influenced the form of their temples both in pre-Islamic and Islamic era.

## Notes

1 . See: *Namey-e Tansar [Letter of Tansar]*, translated by Ibn-e Esfandiar, revised by Mojtaba Minovi, Tehran, 2007, 52; Muhammad ibn Khavandshah Mirkhand, *Tarikh-e Rowzat-o Safa* [historical text], revised by Jamshid Kianfar, Tehran, 2001, 868.

2 . Touraj Daryee, *Shahanshai-e Sasani [The Sasanian Empire]*, Tehran, 2005, 91.

3 . Arthur Christensen, *Mellat va Darbar dar dorey-e Sasanian [L'Iran sous les Sassanides]*, translated by Mojtaba Minovi, Tehran, 2007, 22; Ahamd Tafazzoli, *Jamey-e Sasani [Sasanian Society]*, translated by Shirin Mokhtarian, Tehran, 2006, 14.

4 . They probably wrote governmental rules, religious books, and histories.

5 . A. Masoudi, *Al-Tanbih va Al-Ashraf* [historical text], translated by Abolqasem Payandeh, Tehran, 2002, 97; *Namey-e Tansar*, 55.

6 . Mary Boyce, *Zardoshtian, Bavarha va Adab-e Dini-e Anha [The Zoroastrian: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices]*, Tehran, 133.



- 7 . Andre' Godard, *Honar-e Iran [The Art of Iran]*, translated by Behrouz Habibi, Tehran, 1998, 187.
- 8 . Christensen, *Mellat va Darbar dar Dorey-e Sasanian*, 119-121.
- 9 . Richard Nelson Frye, *Miras-e Bastani-e Iran [The Heritage of Persia]*, translated by Masoud Rajabnia, Tehran, 2004, 279; Ehsan Yarshater, *Tarikh-e Iran az Selukian ta payane Dolat-e Sasani [History of Iran from the Seleucids to the Collapse of the Sasanian]*, Tehran, 2001, 335.
- 10 . See Daryaee, *Shahanshai-e Sasani*, 62; Christensen, *Mellat va Darbar dar dorey-e Sasanian*, 117.
- 11 . Boyce, *Zardoshtian, Bavarha va Adab-e Dini-e Anha*, 168; Frye, *Miras-e Bastani-e Iran*, 353; Daryaee, *Shahanshai-e Sasani*, 144.
- 12 . Boyce, *Zardoshtian, Bavarha va Adab-e Dini-e Anha*, 26; Christensen, *Mellat va Darbar Dar dorey-e Sasanian*, 119-121.
- 13 . Klaus Schippmann, 'The Development of the Fire Temple', 5th International Congress of Iranian Art & Archaeology, Tehran, 1972, 2. In: [www.cais-soas.com](http://www.cais-soas.com).
- 14 . A space has a ceiling and three walls that opens to a courtyard or outside.
- 15 . Mahmoud Musavi, 'Yademan-e Kheshti-e Kuh-e Khajeh-e Zabol' ['The Mud Brick Monument of Kuhe- Khajeh'], First Congress of Iranian Architecture and Urbanism History, 4, Tehran, 1997, 82.
- 16 . Places of statues of the Gods.
- 17 . Boyce, *Zardoshtian, Bavarha va Adab-e Dini-e Anha*, 118.
- 18 . See Hashem Razi, *Vandidad [historical and religious text]*, Tehran, 1998, 1098; Dietrich Huff, 'Gonbad dar Memari-e Eslami' ['Domes in Islamic Architecture']. In: Muhammad Yusef Kiani, *Memari-e Irani Dore-ye Eslami [Iranian Architecture in Islamic Period]*, Tehran, 2004, 408; Christensen, *Mellat va Darbar dar dorey-e Sasanian*, 114.
- 19 . Marijan Mole, *Iran-e Bastan [L'Iran Ancien]*, translated by Jaleh Amuzgar, Tehran, 2007, 120; Muhammad Taqi Mustafavi, *Eqlim-e Pars [Pars Region]*, Tehran, 2007, 105.
- 20 . Rudolf Naumann, *Viraneha-ye Takht-e Soleiman va Zendan-e Soleiman [Suleiman und Zendan-e Suleiman und umebung]*, Tehran, 2003, 22.
- 21 . Muhammad Karim Pirnia, *Sabk Shenasi-e Memarie Irani [The Stylistics of Iranian Architecture]*, Tehran, 2005, 113.
- 22 . Mehdi Rhabar, 'Moarefi-e Niayeshgah-e Makshufe-ye Dore-ye Sasani dar Bandian Daregaz' ['An Introduction to the Discovered Sasanian Temple in Bandian Daregaz'], Second Congress of Iranian Architecture and Urbanism History, 2, Tehran, 1999, 317-321.







Fig. 1. The relief that shows Ardeshir I take the crown from Ahuramazda in FiruzAbad, photo by author.

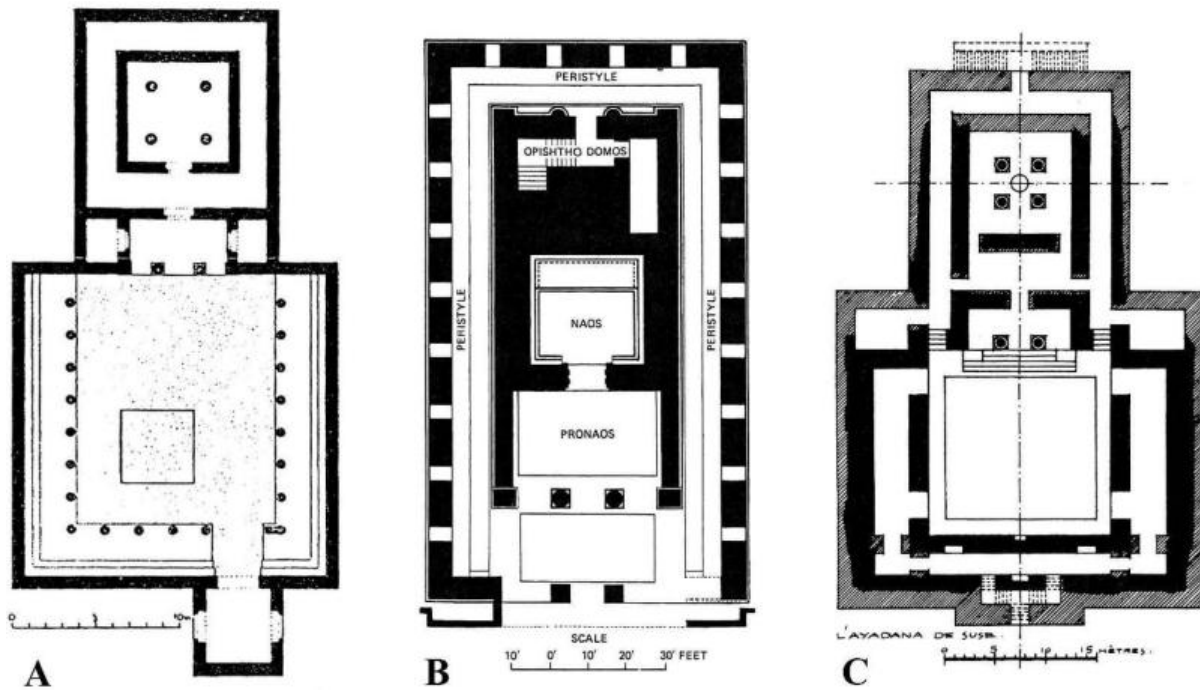


Fig. 2. A) Sahr temple in Syria; B) Jandial temple in Taxila; C) Ayadana temple in Susa, Oscar Reuther, 'Parthian Architecture'. In: Arthur Upham Pope, A survey of Persian Art, vol. 5, 1958. London: Oxford University.





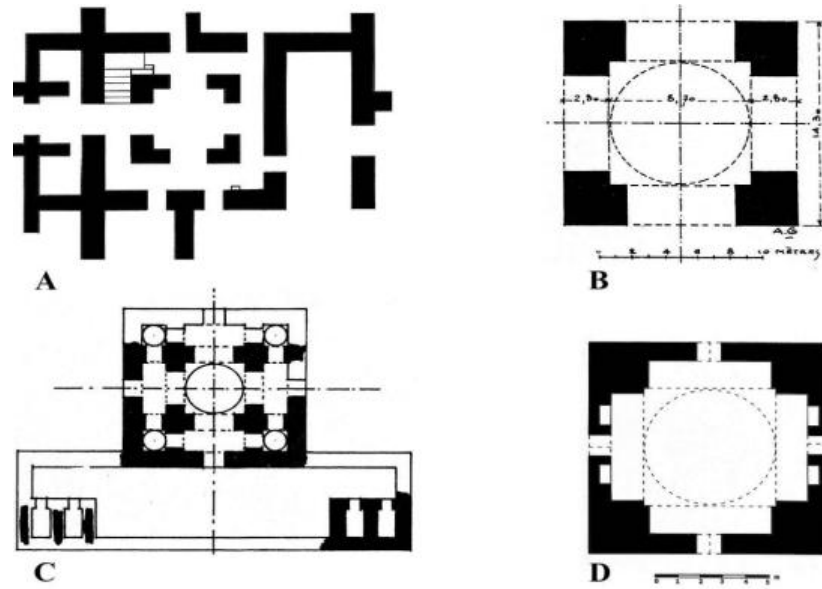


Fig. 5. A) Kohnaru Chahar-Taq; B) Gereh Chahar-Taq; C) SarMash'had Chahar-Taq; D) Tang-e Atashgah Chahar-Taq, Andre' Godard, Athar-e Iran, vol.1, 2006. Mash'had: Bonyad-e Pajuhesh-e Eslami.

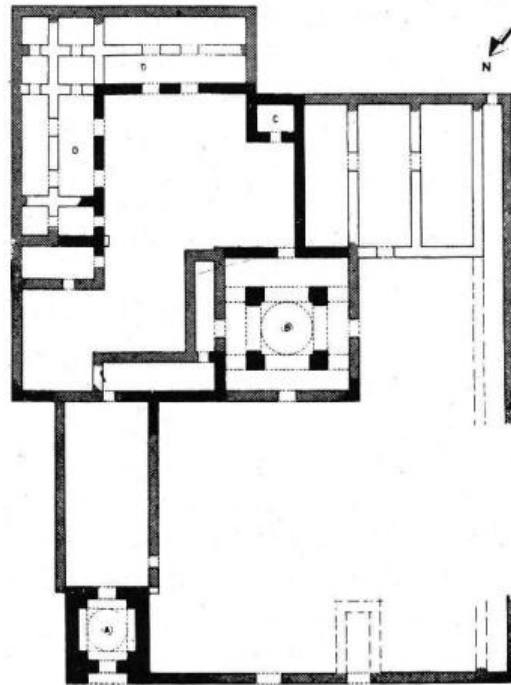


Fig. 6. Konar-Siah fire temple, Marijan Mole, Iran-e Bastan, 2007. Tehran: Tous.

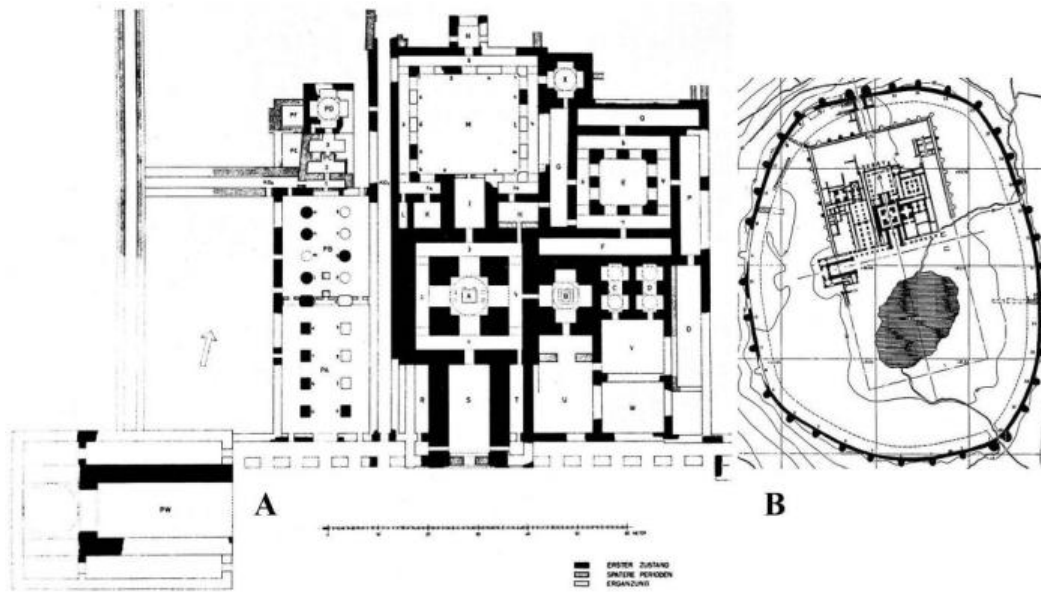


Fig. 7. A) Takht-e Soleiman fire temple; B) Takht-e Soleiman enclosure, Rudolf Naumann, *Viraneha-ye Takht-e Soleiman va Zendan-e Soleiman*, 2003. Tehran: Iranian Cultural Heritage organization.

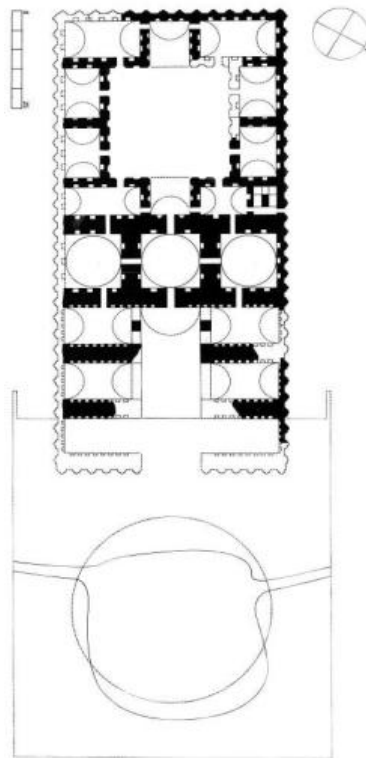


Fig. 8. FiruzAbad fire temple, Hans Hugi, *Qale Dokhtar-Atashkadeh*, 2000. Tehran: Iranian Cultural Heritage organization.

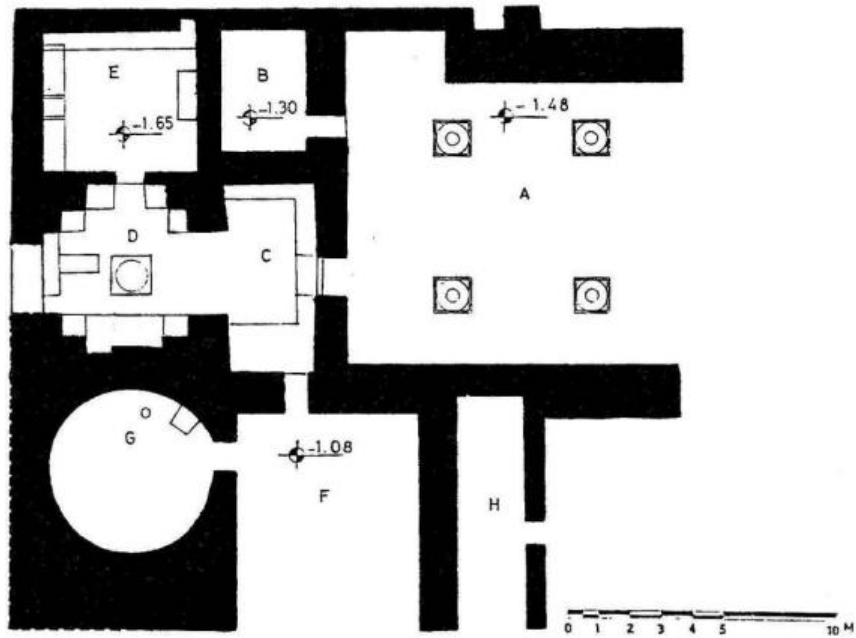


Fig 9. Bandian Daregaz fire temple, 'Moarefi-e Niayeshgah-e Makshufe-ye Dore-ye Sasani dar Bandian Daregaz', Second Congress of Iranian Architecture and Urbanism History, vol. 2, 1999. Tehran: Iranian Cultural.