Archaeological Excavations in the So-Called "Palace of Sāsān" at Sarvestān, Fars

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Sasanika
Archaeology 3
2012

Introduction

Sarvestān is a township en route from Shirāz to Dārāb. This township serves as the first rest-stop along the route from Shirāz to eastern Fārs, some 65 km to the east of Shirāz. Both Shirāz and Sarvestān are located in one the more fertile NW-SE plains in the southern Zagros Mountains. The large Mahārlou Lake (also known as the "Salt Lake") is located in the middle of this plain. The water from streams in Shiraz flow into the northern parts of the latter lake. The Mahārlou Lake divides the plain into two northern and southern parts. The city of Shirāz is located in the northern half and the township of Sarvestān in the southern part, some 20 km to the southeast of the Lake.

For its close proximity to Shirāz, the political, economic, and cultural center of the Fārs province, Sarvestān has enjoyed a considerable population growth. Fertile grounds as well as ample water supply have also helped turning Sarvestān into an agricultural center.

The so-called "Palace of Sāsān" (Fig. 1) is located in the southern part of the Sarvestān Plain. The plain is 130 km long and over 30 km wide and generally flat, especially its southern part which is also lower in elevation than its central and northern parts. The Structure is therefore visible from almost every corner of the plain.

Fig. 1

The so-called “Palace of Sāsān” has been cited by many travelers and archaeologists as a landmark in Iranian architecture. Many early explorers, e.g., Eugene Flandin, Pascal Coste, Marcel Dieulafoy, Jacques de Morgan, Aurel Stein, and Ernst Herzfeld have attributed this building to Sāsānian period. These scholars have either used their own observations or accounts by early Muslim writers to reach this conclusion.

Oscar Reuther was the first person to carry out a thorough study of the building who also reached the conclusion that it belongs to Sāsānian period. But in recent decades a number of researchers with new approaches expressed reservations about the date of some structures previously dated to Sāsānian period and their function as fire-temple, or manor house, or palace. One example in case is Lionel Bier’s study of Sarvestān structure. In his comprehensive study that formed the basis of his PhD dissertation, Bier argued that the Sarvestān structure is not a Sāsānian palace – as previously thought – but a Zoroastrian fire-temple of early Islamic period. He based his argument on similar constructions in Iran and Mesopotamia.

The first series of archaeological investigations were carried out in the year 2002 in and around the building in order to determine its occupational phases and relative chronology. To arrive at this objective, several test trenches were placed in various locations in and around the building (Fig. 2). In the meantime, a conjoined ecological-archaeological study was carried out on the environmental setting of the site in order to determine its function in different periods and correlate them with the pertinent written documents.

Fig. 2

The Environmental Setting

The fertile Sarvestān plain consists of multiple alluvial layers, deeper than 35 meters in some places. This alluvial soil makes the plain a very fertile land for cultivation. The plain enjoys a mild, but semi-arid weather, with an annual precipitation level of 227 mm. The so-called "Palace of Sāsān" is located in the southeast part of the plain where two mountain ridges come together. A spring, locally known as Tazang is located in the eastern foothills of the plain, some 7 km from the site. Water from this spring irrigates most of the land in this part of the plain. Another important feature of this part of the plain is multiple series of qanāts. Due to the depth of the alluvial surface soil, wells reach underground water tables at depths of 50 to 80 meters.

One can see traces of multiple irrigation canals leading from the Tazang spring to the lands surrounding the Sarvestān building, suggesting that water from the latter spring was used to provide water for the building and the area around it. The large number of abandoned canals indicates that the water has changed its course several times over the centuries, but every time the destination has been the Sarvestān building. This spring and the adjoining canals should therefore be considered as part of the greater landscape of the site.

Description of the Building

The imposing building (Fig. 1) consists of several domes, iwans, arches, and doorways built with cobbles, gypsum mortar, and sometimes with baked brick. The building is composed of several occupational spaces, carefully designed and built to form a well-integrated construction. Five iwans, two domed halls, two columned halls, three rooms, and a central open courtyard form the main components of the building. The building is 45 by 37 in dimensions.

Fig. 3

The area around the building have been leveled over the years and turned into agricultural fields. But, about 300 meters to the NW of the building, one can see a low archaeological mound with traces of boulders and gypsum mortar on its surface. An aerial photograph taken by Erich Schmidt in the 1930s (Fig. 3), reveal traces of multiple structures to the north and west of the main building. Most of these structures, however, been leveled and turned into agricultural fields ever since. Furthermore, previous reconstruction attempts at the site have modified the inner part of the main building, in some places removing the top one meter of the archaeological deposits and replacing them with gravel. Our team therefore had a difficult time finding relatively intact places to put test trenches.

Straitgraphy and Phases of Occupation

Over a three month field season of in 2002, several stratigraphic cuts were placed in various places at the site. The primary goal was to determine the stratigrpahy of the site and therefore to figure out the phases of occupation. Once the inner periodization of the building was determined, it was corroborated with the off-site and regional settlement pattern of the plain.

A total of eight test trenches were placed in different parts of the site: three inside the building: T(est) T(renches) 1, 2 (Fig. 4), 3 (Fig. 5), two in the mound to the NW of the site, one to its north. Two to the north and south of the building. Furthermore, six test trenches were placed in the areas where we suspected running into the wall surrounding the complex (Fig, 6), where one could see a west-east feature in the aerial photograph. All test trenches were excavated to the sterile soil.

Fig. 4

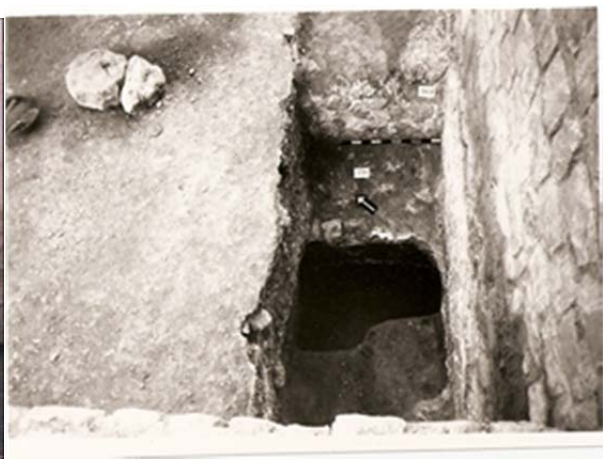

Fig. 5

Test excavations determined five phases of occupation, confirmed by comparative study of recovered pottery:

1. Late Sāsānian: Remains of this occupation phase were encountered in TT1, 2, and 4. Two ostraca with Pahlavi writing discovered in TT2 (Fig. 5) belong to this occupation phase.

Fig. 6

2. Late Sāsānian-Early Islamic Transitional: encountered in TT2, 4, 6, 7, and 8.

3. Third-Fourth centuries AH (Buyid and Abbasid periods): in TT1, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

4. Fifth and Sixth centuries AH (Seljuq period?): only in TT2.

5. Seventh and Eighth centuries AH (Muzzaffarid and Ilkhanid periods): only in TT4, 6, and 7.

To sum up, while the test excavations confirmed a Late Sāsānian date for the construction of the building, the main occupational phases at the building date to Islamic period, especially to the fourth century AH where the occupation seems to have reached its maximum extent. Occupation at the site seems to have continued through eighth century AH when the site was abandoned and occupation has, apparently, shifted to the town of Sarvestān, mentioned in the ninth century AH Rozat-ol-Safa as a prosperous town.