Qalāt/Qobad Fort: A Sasanian-Islamic Fort in Kavār, Southeast of Shiraz

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Sasanika
Archaeology 13
2013

Abstract

The county of Kavār is located about 50 km southeast of Shiraz, on one of the old caravan routes between Shiraz, the Persian Gulf and the east regions of Iran. An archaeological survey of the Tasūj sub-district of Kavār was undertaken by Parsa Ghasemi in the winter of 2012. Thirty four archaeological sites were identified. One of the most important sites proved to be the fort of Qalāt or Qobād, on the Mount Qalāt, southwest of the Mahārlū Lake, between Sarvestān and Kavār. Surface finds suggest that the fort was in use from the Sasanian (3rd-7th centuries CE) to the Early and Middle Islamic period (7th-12th centuries CE). This paper summarizes the results of the survey of the Qalāt Fort.

Introduction

Geographical sources from the Early to Middle Islamic periods mention the names of several forts and garrisons in the province of Fars, some of which built on the isolated mountains. For example, Estakhri reports, "I heard there were more than five thousand forts in the mountains and towns, some have still not been conquered by any king. They include Ibn-e 'Emāreh, Kāriyān, Sa'īd-ābād, Eškanvān, Jozārz and Al-jess")Istakhri, 1968: 105). Ibn Hawqal records that most of the towns in Fars had forts. He divides them into two classes: Walled forts inside towns and villages, such as Eṣtaxr, Beyżā, Kasseh, Qariyeh As, Šāhmūbez Shiraz, Dārābjerd, Robānj, Semirān, Shapur, Jānjān, Jefteh; and, forts outside towns in isolated locations in the mountains. According to Ibn Hawqal, more than five thousands of the latter type existed in Fars (Ibn Hawqal, 1987: 41-43).
Mostowfi identifies more than seventy forts in the five kurrehs (provinces) of Fars, of which sixteen were most prominent (Mostowfi, 2003: 189). Ibn Balkhi enumerates the followings forts in the regions of Ābādān and Fars: Eškanvān Abraj, Buškanāt, Kharšeh in Jahrom, Rom Ravān in Qandejān, Ābādeh, Xār, Eṣtahbānān, Eqlīd, and Abraj. He makes reference to more than seventy forts in Fars that were destroyed by Atābak-e Čavolī, naming Espahbod Dez, Sahāreh near Firuzabad, Karzin, Semīrān near Joyom Abi-Ahmad, Xowādān, Xerāmeh, Tīrxodāy in Xīreh, Eṣtaxryār or Eṣtaxryār Pīr, Parg and Tārom, Ronbeh, Jonbād-e Molqān and Irāhestān (Ibn Balkhi, 1995: 373-379).

Geographical Location of Qalāt Fort

Qalāt Fort is located on the Mount Qalāt at N29 18 29.2, E52 45 47.5, about three kilometers from the center of Tasuj sub-district of Kavār region and east of the Borki village. The fort is 2126 m above sea level, at an elevation of 626 m above the Tasuj Plain (figs. 1-2). The survived architectural remains of this fort include a wall, 2 meters high, 500 m long, and about 100 m wide. The site surveyed by Parsa Ghasemi in the course of a general archaeological survey of Tasuj sub-district of Kavār region in 2012 (Ghasemi 2012).

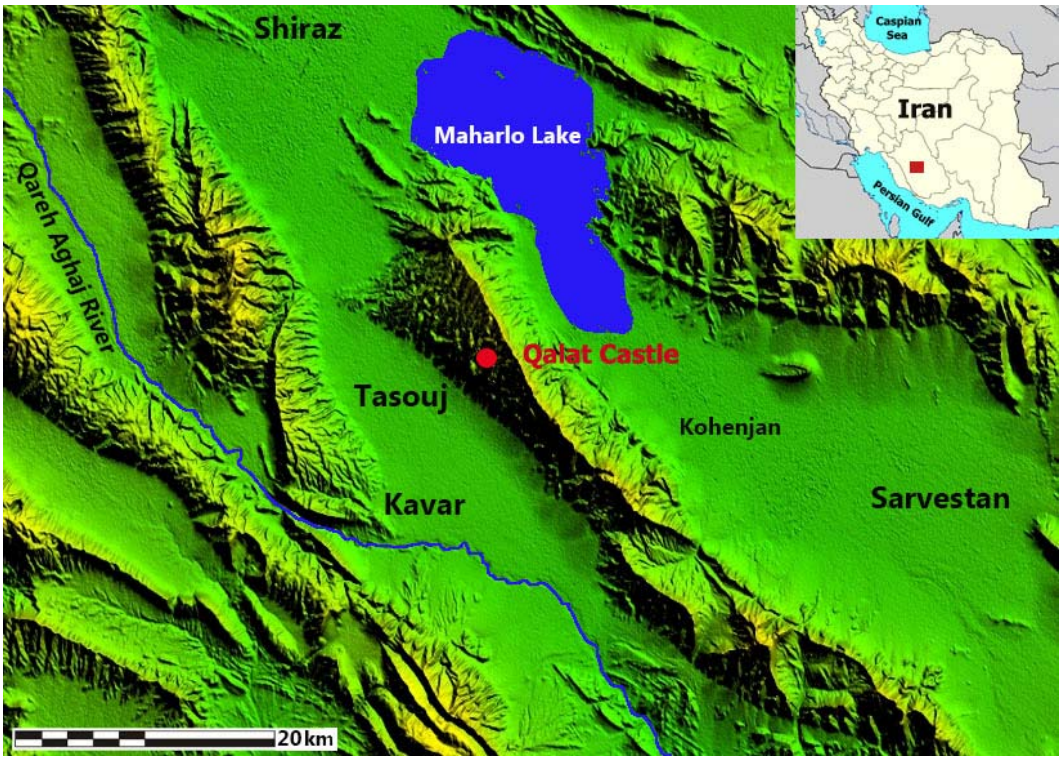

Figure 1. Location of Qalāt Fort on Mount Qalāt

Figure 2. Qalāt Pass and Mount Qalāt Prominence

Archaeological Remains

Archaeological remains of the fort include architectural features, and an assemblage of glass, metal and ceramic artifacts.

Architectural remains include a stairway cut into the natural stone; horizontal hidden passages also cut into the stone; two semicircular watchtowers; rectangular rooms constructed of stone and gypsum mortar; rectangular rooms built of dry stone; nine water cisterns with varying square, rectangular and oval plans; and, a stone well.

The greatest density of stone and plastered architectural features was found at the eastern end of the enclosure and around the entrance of the fort. The main structure consists of a number of rooms on a rectangular plan, also made of stone and gypsum mortar, which has been heavily eroded over the course of time (*Figs. 3 and 4*). Architectural remains are also abundant on the eastern hillside of Mount Qalāt, which suggests a higher population density for this area in addition to the residents of the forts.
Many pits have been dug in and around the fort by looters. These illegal excavations have brought to the surface many pieces of ceramic, glass, brick, stone, plaster and mortar (*saruj*).

Figure 3. Northeast view of Qalāt Mountain and the remains of Qalāt Fort

Figure 4. South to southwest view of architectural features of Qalāt Fort

Access to the Fort

The path to the fort takes about one and half hours, starting from the pass at the top of the Qalāt Valley, heading toward Qalāt spring, and then northeast along the hillside below Qalāt Fort. The track passes over dry stone revetments before arriving at two eroded staircases cut though the mountain rock, which provide access to the fort. The first staircase is cut on a northwest-southeast axis and has 20 stairs. The dimensions of each step are: 80cm long, 27cm wide, 30cm high. This cave-like staircase is 840 cm long, 97 cm wide and 200cm high. At the top of the first flight of stairs is a landing (*pāgard*) with an inclination of about 70 degrees, a length of 1.65m and a width of 80cm. It is roofless and permits the light into the both staircases. After the landing, the second staircase continues upward, on a north-south aixs. It has 25 steps and is steeper than the first one, about 75 degrees. It is 11 meters long and 260 cm wide. At the top of this staircase, before the exit, is found a rectangular space 160cm long, 90cm wide, and 450 cm height. It is not clear exact function this space served, or if this rectangular space would have assisted residents with entering to the fort. Recently, the inhabitants of the nearby Maḥmūdābād-e Se^{h} Dāng village installed a metal stairway here to facilitate access to the fort. After entering the fort the remains of several inscriptions and stonemasons' ciphers carved into the rock can be seen on the right. Perhaps these were inscribed by the builders at the time this roofed stairway was constructed.

In the northern side of the second staircase, above the twentieth stair, another opening provides access to the fort. This passage is smaller than the main stairway, 80×50×50, cm and opens to another hidden passage to the fort which is 600 cm long, 65cm wide and 95cm height. This hidden passage opens into space of 125 long and 100 cm wide, on the walls of which there are holes which would once have supported the ladder into the fort (figs. 5-9).

Figure 5. Eroded paths and steps before the roofed stairway.

Figure 6. The first (right) and second (left) roofed staircase providing access to the fort.

Figure 7. The landing between two staircases (left) and stonemason's ciphers, carved in the external wall of the entrance (right)

Figure 8. Another image of the landing and the first stairway (left) and the hidden passage north of the second staircase wall (right).

Figure 9. Opening at the end of the hidden passage (right), and the newly installed metal staircase (left). At present, t is the only access way into the fort.

Water Supply

Several cisterns in addition to a fifteen meter-deep stone-lined well with a 110 cm×110 cm mouth supplied water for the fort´s inhabitants. The stone well is located on a now inaccessible path outside the fort to the southwest. Inside the fort, there are nine cisterns, of which four were excavated into the solid rock on a rectangular plan. The other five cisterns were also dug into rock but were finished with stone, plaster and concrete-mortar (*saruj*) (fig. 10). To prevent leakage, the interior of each cistern was coated with tar extracted from the same region. Today, the remains of this natural tar can be seen all over the southern and eastern hillsides of Mount Qalāt Fort. Rainwater was probably channeled into the cisterns by means of a system of ditches and raceways. We could not find traces of such channels. Below is a description of thee cisterns numbered from west to east.

Cistern No. 1. The main structure is excavated into the rock on a rectangular plan. It had a barrel vault made of stone and plaster, creating a space that is 770cm long, 470cm wide, and 320cm deep, with walls that were 65cm thick. The roof is now collapsed. The entrance to the cistern is on the northwest corner, 65cm wide.

Cistern No. 2. It has an oval plan, is roofless and was constructed in stone and concrete *(saruj).* It is located 40 m southeast of cistern No 1. The cistern is 880cm long, 310cm wide, and a preserved depth of 150cm.

Cistern No. 3. Excavated into rock, with a stone and plaster roof. The entrance is on the northwest, 150cm high, 60 m wide. The cistern is square, 420cm long and 420cm wide, and 3 m deep. The walls are 25cm thick.

Cistern No. 4. It also was dug into the rock and has a rectangular plan. The cistern is 310cm long, 310cm wide, 260cm deep. The interior of the cistern was water proofed with a coating of concrete *(saruj)*.

Cistern No. 5. It is dug into the rock and had a barrel vault which is now collapsed. The top structure survives to a height of 110cm above the ground level.The plan isrectangular800 cm long, 390 cm deep. The preserved depth is 220 cm. Entrance is on northeast, 95cm wide.

Cistern No. 6. It was excavated into the rock and has a rectangular plan; 600cm, width 290cm and the present depth is 250cm.

Cistern No. 7. It is partially excavated into the rock and completed with stone and concrete *(saruj)*.interior is coated with concrete *(saruj)*. The cistern has an irregular oval plan about 1200cm long, 410cm wide, and a depth of 180cm.
Cistern No. 8. It is dug into the rock and is covered with a barrel vault roof made of stone and plaster. The cistern has a rectangular plan: 920cm long, 500cm wide and f 300 cm deep. The entrance is one the northeast80 cm wide and 183 cm high. The walls are about 50cm thick. It
Cistern No. 9. It is excavated into the rock and has a rectangular plan, 430cm long, 310cm wide, present depth of about 100cm.

Figure 10. Some of the cisterns built to secure the fort's water supply.

Ceramic Finds: Determining a Chronology for Qalāt Fort

The ceramics, in both form and technical characteristics, are comparable with the ceramics of the Sasanian and early to medieval Islamic periods. In addition to the ceramic finds, three pieces of glass and three pieces of metal ware were collected. Both glazed and plain ware were collected. The glazed wares have a buff-colored paste, with green, blue and grey glaze. These ceramics are decorated with parallel horizontal wavy lines, impressed vertical and horizontal cordage designs, and wavy under-glaze incised/sgraffito designs.

The plain wares have either buff, grey or red bodies, fine and medium sand, and sometimes white limestone grit. Some have red or grey clay slips applied to both the interior and exterior surface of the vessels. As with the glazed wares, the decorations on these plain wares include impressed rope designs, parallel and diagonal sgraffito lines, and wavy horizontal incised designs. All the ceramic finds were wheel-made and all and well-fired.

The three glass include part of a black glass bangle, and two rim pieces from a small vessel. One of three metal finds is part of a bronze bracelet (figs.11-13. tables 1-2). Architectural evidence and the ceramic finds suggest that the fort was built in the Sasanian period and remained in use until the medieval Islamic period.

Figure 11. Ceramic and the other surface finds collected from the fort

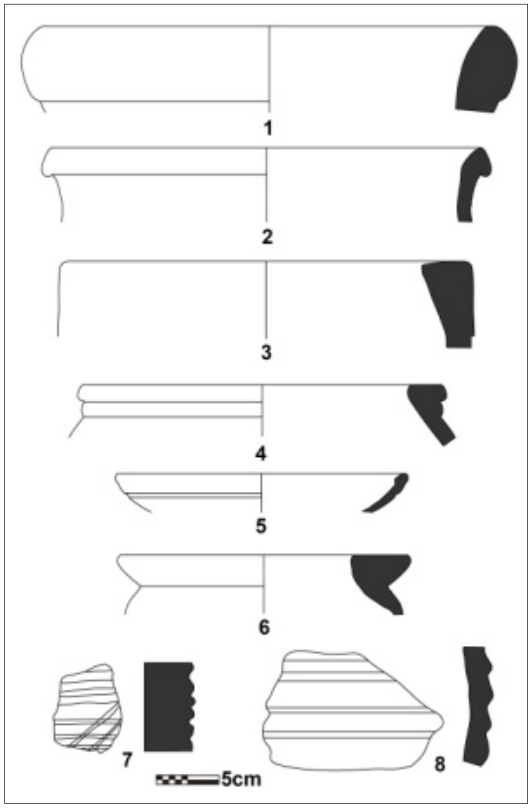

Figure 12. Profiles of diagnostic ceramics from the historical/classical periods.

Table 1. Diagnostic ceramics from the historical/classical periods.

Number	Type	Details (Fabric, Firing, Clay color, Temper, Glaze/slip, Decoration	Dating	Comparison Source
1	Rim	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand, inner and outer water clay slip		
2	Rim	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand and straw, without slip	Sasanian	Kennet 2002, fig4:86
3	Rim	wheel-made, well-fired, light grey, fine sand, without slip		
4	Rim	wheel-made, well-fired, fine sand, without slip, pea green		
5	Rim	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand, inner and outer green glaze	Early Sasanian	Kennet 2004, fig5:97
6	Rim	wheel-made, well-fired, grey, fine sand, without slip	Classical	Kleiss 1987, fig Abb22: 1
7	Body	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand, inner and outer pea clay slip, decorated with horizontal parallel lines		
8	Body	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand, inner and outer brown clay slip, decorated with parallel horizontal grooves		

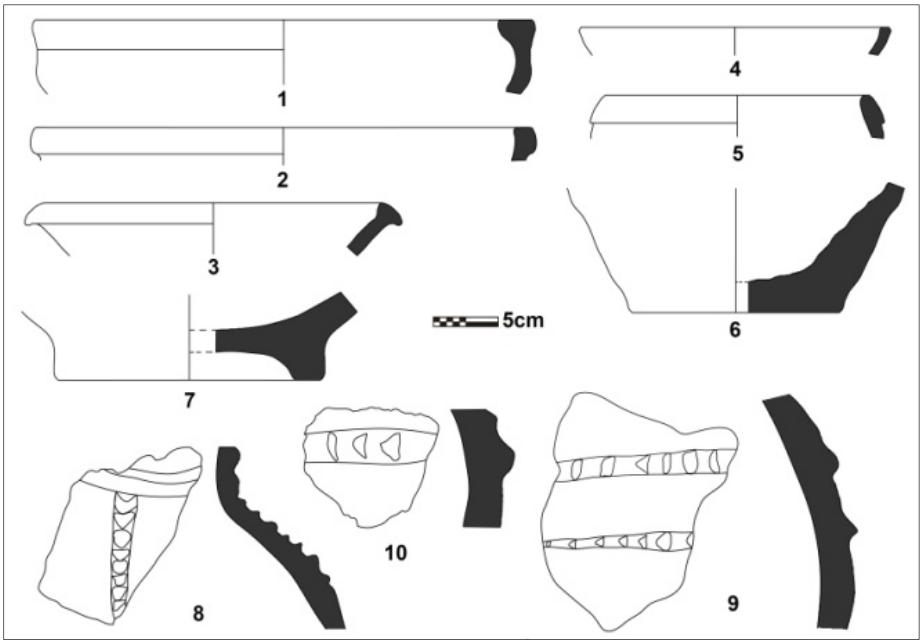

Figure 13. Profiles of diagnostic ceramics from the Islamic periods

Table 2. Diagnostic ceramics from the Islamic period.

Number	Type	Details (Fabric, Firing, Clay color, Temper , Glaze/slip, Decoration	Dating	Comparison Source
1	Rim	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand, inner and outer green glaze		
2	Rim	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand, inner and outer green glaze		
3	Rim	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand, inner and outer azure glaze		
4	Rim	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand, inner and outer green glaze		
5	Rim	wheel-made, well-fired, ?, fine sand		
6	Rim	wheel-made, inwell-fired, orange, fine sand and straw, without slip		
7	base	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand, inner and outer brown clay slip		
8	base	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand, inner and outer green glaze	Islamic	Kleiss,1983, fig Abb9: 17
9	Body	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand, inner and outer green glaze, decorated with crinkle design		
10	Body	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand, inner and outer green glaze, decorated with decorated with cordage pattern		
11	Body	wheel-made, well-fired, brown, fine sand, inner and outer green glaze, decorated with cordage pattern		

Conclusion

The fort on Mount Qalāt is strategically located on a defensible area and dominates the fertile Tasuj Plain and the old caravan route from Shiraz. The main disadvantage of the site was lack of a natural water source to overcome this deficiency, an elaborate system of cisterns was built to ensure the year-round water supply. These cisterns have different plans and construction organization. This could suggest that they were not built at the same time and represent different phases in the life of the site. The interior of some cisterns preserves evidence of water-proofing Tar coating. Future research questions include identification of the local Tar sources and the organization involved in the extraction, transfer, and use of this material. Also, it will be important to know if the fort was part of defensive system managed by the central government or was built and managed at local level. In any case, the architectural remains and surface ceramic finds suggest that the structure was built in the Sasanian period, and remained in use until the medieval Islamic period. A future sounding and excavation program would contribute to a better understanding of this historical monument.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank our colleagues in the Fars Province Cultural Heritage, Handcrafts and Tourism Organization, and to Reza Nourozi, Leila Ghasemi, Taher Qasimi, Arman Vafaee, Haj Qasem Zare, Hajj Akbar Shams, Ruhollah and Mohammad Bordbar, Mr. Hadadi and Mr. Khalile Dibavar. Without their support and cooperation, it would have been impossible for us to complete this project. Finally we would like to thankDr. Touraj Daryaee and Dr. Fereidun Biglari.

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