



Edited by:

Seyed Mehdi Mousavi, Shahin Aryamanesh Majid Montazer Zohouri, Morteza Khanipour









1ST BIENNIAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE SOCIETY OF IRANIAN ARCHAEOLOGY: CULTURAL INTERACTIONS, CONTINIUITY AND DISRUPTION

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with contribution
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Life on the Great Wall of Gorgan: Excavations of Sasanian Barracks in Fort 2

Eberhard W. Sauer, Jebrael Nokandeh and Hamid Omrani Rekavandi

It was not until 2006 that geophysical survey and excavations in Fort 4 on the Great Wall of Gorgan brought to light clear evidence for the existence of substantial military barracks (Omrani Rekavandi *et al.* 2007: 113-131; Sauer *et al.* 2013: 178-215). Examination of satellite and drone images has since revealed that all well-preserved forts on the Gorgan Wall contained such barracks, the smaller forts normally a pair of two, the larger forts, four, six or even eight barracks (Sauer *et al.* 2013: 230-234; 2019; 2020).

The discovery and exploration of the Gorgan Wall, other Sasanian linear barriers and vast military compounds in the early twenty-first century, some of them dwarfing even the substantial military fortresses of the Roman world (e.g. Nemati *et al.* 2019), has revolutionised our understanding of late antique warfare and the power balance between Persia and Rome. Earlier scholarship on the Sasanian army was dominated by information provided by ancient Greek and Latin and later Islamic sources as well as surviving works of art and armament. Forts and fortresses (often of course only proven to be Sasanian in recent years) did not feature prominently, if at all, in attempts to reconstruct the strength of the Sasanian army. The prevailing view in scholarship was that the Sasanian army was significantly smaller than that of the Roman/Eastern Roman Empire

(e.g. Börm 2007: 161); indeed some doubted that the Sasanian Empire had a standing army at all prior to Khusro I (e.g. Rubin 1995: 290-291). The tide is beginning to turn, and many scholars now accept that the Sasanian Empire possessed a professional army of substantial size. There is no space here to list the proponents and opponents of this view, the former including notably James Howard-Johnston (2012).

Old myths, however, die hard and even after much new evidence for the existence of large Sasanian barracks has come to the attention of the academic community, some still believe the Sasanian Empire would not have been strong enough to garrison them. As recently as 2017, Kaveh Farrokh (2017: 230) expressed doubts that forts on the Gorgan, Tammisheh and Derbent Walls were permanently occupied: 'Each of these wall-systems had garrisons; however, given the empire's limited resources of professional military manpower, none of these could be permanently garrisoned with a full complement of troops The barracks for these wall-systems could certainly be augmented in times of crisis, when the frontier region was being attacked or under threat of attack.' Mohammad Chaichian (2014: 76-77, 85) similarly acknowledges the existence of barracks, but doubts that forts were permanently guarded, preferring to interpret them as refuges for local people and their livestock during invasions or even 'seasonal flooding'.

Is it true that the barracks on the Gorgan Wall were unoccupied, or partially occupied at best, most of the time and whenever there was no imminent threat? The striking contrast between Sasanian barracks forts on the Gorgan Wall and campaign bases casts doubts on Farrokh's hypothesis. Permanent housing in campaign bases was confined to rooms within the fortress walls or perhaps small citadels (Nemati *et al.* 2019; Sauer *et al.* 2013: 327-330, 364-371) and the vast interior was left empty to provide space for tent cities, traces of which have been found at Qal'eh Kharabeh (Sauer *et al.* 2013: 312-318, 341-349). If forts and campaign bases had both been designed for occupation at times of crisis only, why did the former boast permanent housing filling substantial parts of the interior and the latter no more than secure campsites (plus permanent occupation for a caretaker garrison)? If it was hard to believe that the barracks in the Gorgan Wall forts had been designed to stand empty except at times of war,

excavations in 2015 and 2016 in one of the two barracks in Fort 2 has yielded new evidence for their occupation over a long period.

As our excavations will be published in detail in our forthcoming fieldwork report, we will confine this report to a summary of the main phases of construction and occupation. Our aim is to make our key findings accessible to scholarship ahead of publication of the full report and to do so in a more digestible format, focusing on our key findings.

Phasing was not easy. Twenty radiocarbon samples were processed, but 18 of these (i.e. 90%) fell within a well-known plateau of radiocarbon calibration curve. These 18 samples dated (with a probability of 95.4%) to a period between the AD 410s to 430s at the earliest and the 530s to 630s at the latest. Just one yielded a *terminus post quem* after the AD 430s, dating to AD 568-645. A further sample, of a rodent perishing between AD 1330 and 1438, was clearly intrusive and irrelevant for the chronology of the barracks. These samples provide powerful evidence for occupation of the barracks in Fort 2 from the fifth to the late sixth or (more probably) early or mid-seventh century. Yet, with virtually all of them overlapping in time, they are of little help in establishing the exact chronology of successive phases of occupation.

Table: Radiocarbon samples from Trench d in chronological order (sorted by the earliest likely date). The *terminus post quem* and *terminus ante quem* for each sample are at 95.4% probability. Cases where there is a strong likelihood of a sample dating to a narrower range have been noted in the comments column.

Deposit and find no.	t.p.q.	t.a.q.	Comments
d.186/674	410	536	n/a
d.226/739	410	536	n/a
d.150/547	421	537	n/a
d.252/854	421	538	n/a
d.070/313	425	538	n/a
d.045/251	425	549	n/a
d.233/756	425	551	n/a
d.090/S3	427	542	n/a
d.250/843	427	549	n/a

d.041/205	427	570	n/a
d.214/789	427	571	n/a
d.044/211	428	549	n/a
d.184/862	428	580	n/a
d.165/649	428	583	n/a
d.239/797	430	605	74%: 530-605
d.132/501	430	617	78.7%: 530-617
d.223/S7	432	606	79.5%: 532-606
d.024/103	435	631	90.3%: 534-631
d.004/16	568	645	n/a
d.040/183	1330	1438	91.8%: 1396-1438 (rodent, intrusive)

Deposits often showed no strong variation in colour and composition and were mostly found in one room only, making it difficult to be sure about the relative or absolute chronology of deposits and structures in adjacent rooms. Despite these caveats, we observed similar structures at similar levels in adjacent rooms, which enabled us to reconstruct successive building and occupation phases with a high level of confidence. If uncertain, we allow for a structure to belong to more than one phase (e.g. 2.2-4.2 means it could date to as early as phase 2.2 or as late as phase 4.2).

Phase 1 (Figs 1-2)

The initial barracks (phase 1.1), probably built in the fifth century, consisted of two rows of rooms of a combined width of 11.35m. The barracks may have been c. 90m long, containing 16 pairs of rooms, i.e. 64 rooms in the two barracks combined, not counting a possible second storey which would have doubled the number of rooms. Later (in phase 1.2-1.3) annexes were added in the west and east. These were less solidly built than the original barracks. The annexe in the east was better preserved and probably of more solid construction than the annexe in the west. Room divisions of the eastern annexe are clearly defined, and it appears that rooms were of greater (double?) north-south extent than those of the original barracks. After the addition of the annexes, the barracks were c. 28.80m wide. We found two ovens and two fire-places, all in the annexes and none in the rooms of the

original barracks. This suggests perhaps that the original barracks served as bedrooms and cooking took place in the annexes. After the addition of the annexes c. 40% of the interior of the fort was covered by barracks (not counting a possible second storey of the original, solidly-built, barracks). It is hard to imagine that so much indoor living and working space would have been created for the occasional contingent of troops passing through. The fort was clearly designed to be occupied permanently by a substantial number of people.

Phase 2.1-2.2 (Fig. 3)

In phase 2 three storage pits were dug, all in the annexes and none in the original barracks. Three of the cooking facilities of phase 1 may still have been in use, but at least one was destroyed by pit d.064. The linings of two more storage pits were found outdoors, west of the barracks. These are strikingly similar to pits in Fort 4 (Sauer *et al.* 2013: 200-201, 206-209), undoubtedly also used to store food. Evidently, the fort contained a permanent garrison, storing substantial quantities of staple food and probably preparing meals in the annexes.

Phase 2.2-4.2 (Fig. 4)

Following a raising of the floor surface across the barracks, all ovens and fire-places of phase 1 must have been abandoned and were replaced by new ovens in phase 3. We found seven new ovens and one fire-place. As those of phase 1, these were located exclusively in the annexes and none was in the original barracks. The storage pits in the west may have continued to be used, but the two storage pits in room 5CS in the eastern annexe was replaced by a much larger storage pit (d.130). A gully in the same room may have served drainage purposes. In room 1CS the two ovens of phase 3 were destroyed in phase 4 in the wake of a transformation of this room into a storage facility. Twelve large storage jars were now placed in this room. Some of these were inserted in pits cutting earlier walls, as has also been observed at Tureng Tappeh (Boucharlat and Lecomte 1987: 18-20, 51, 72, 118-119, 197-198, pls 35, 132-133). One is inclined to attribute this phase to the sixth century. One wonders if there might be a link with Khusro I's famous reforms to provision the army, but this cannot be proven.

Phase 3-5 (Figs 5-6)

At some stage between phase 3 and 5 the western part of the western annexe was paved with bricks. Around this time, various basic fired brick structures were erected. Some of these brick alignments (notably d.016) lined old walls, others (e.g. d.014) may have subdivided rooms. Two late fire-places (d.021 and d.258) overlie earlier walls, suggesting that these had at this stage been partially demolished, if the cited brick alignments suggest that the original room divisions were still largely respected. It is also in this late phase that we see evidence for textile production: 11 spindle whorls, one iron sowing needle and a possible stone loom weight. None of these finds need be earlier than phase 4 and most are no earlier than phase 5. Like the late fire-places, some were found on top of earlier walls. It appears that in the latest phase of occupation, probably in the late sixth/early to mid-seventh century, fort occupants became involved in textile production, perhaps indicating that they could no longer rely on being supplied by the state with all the necessities of life.

Conclusion

The barracks in Fort 2 were less well preserved than those in Fort 4, the walls surviving to a maximum height of just under 1m, whereas those in Fort 4 survived to over 3m height. Yet the original barrack walls were of similar width (c. 1.20-1.25m) suggesting that it is indeed poorer preservation rather than less solid original construction. Perhaps this was a result in part of windborne erosion, perhaps also in part of ancient demolition. Future excavation on a similar scale in Fort 4 might provide us with deeper insights into late occupation levels that appear to be better preserved at Fort 4 than at Fort 2. At Fort 4, we also recovered radiocarbon samples of the early to mid seventh century (Sauer et al. 2013: 192-194, 211-215, 600-601), whereas the latest levels appear to be more disturbed at Fort 2. Despite imperfect preservation, all the evidence points to intensive occupation over generations: the construction of solid barracks, the addition of annexes more than doubling and almost tripling their width, the creation of at least 15 ovens and fire-places belonging to three successive phases (including one oven, probably of phase 1.3 or 3, destroyed by a modern robber trench), not to mention the large storage pits and the finds from the

interior. The barracks in Fort 2 were no empty facilities used solely at times of crisis and left unoccupied for long periods in between. As our earlier excavations in Fort 4 have also brought to light much evidence for intensive long-term occupation, it is clear that the forts on the Gorgan Wall were permanently occupied by troops (and probably dependents). The Sasanian army was numerically far stronger than previously thought. Largely unnoticed by ancient authors, the Sasanian Empire not only boasted a mobile field army, but also formidable frontier garrisons.

Acknowledgements

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The plans of Trench d have originally been recorded by Maryam Hossein-Zadeh and her team and edited by Dr Silvia Perini and the authors of this report, who also allocated phases to the numerous contexts and structures unearthed. None of this could have been achieved without the members of our team, notably Esmail Safari Tamak whose unique skills in excavating mud brick walls were essential to the success of the project. Lana Chologauri, Ana Gabunia, Dr Eve MacDonald and Bardia Shabani have also made a crucial contribution to our excavations of Trench d, notably to the diligent recording of contexts. Numerous other team members contributed to the successful excavations and their help will be fully acknowledged in the final report.

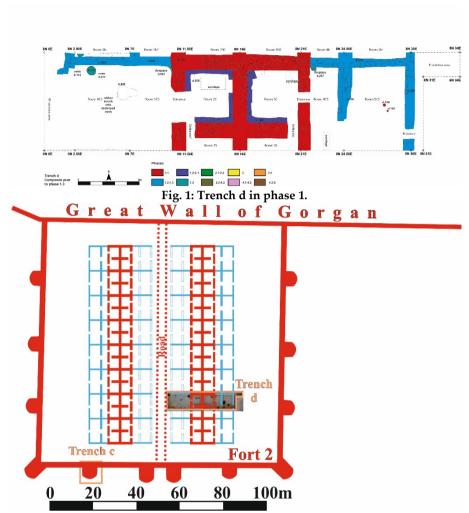


Fig. 2: Plan of Fort 2: the location of walls and towers of the fort is based on magnetometer survey (by Dr Kourosh Mohammadkhani and Soroush Mohammadkhani) and excavations (Trench c). Magnetometer survey revealed few traces of the barracks, and the reconstruction is based largely on our excavation of Trench d, the assumption that rooms were arranged symmetrically and satellite and drone images (for the approximate size and location of the two barracks). As in the Trench d plans, the original barracks are plotted in red (as well as the defences), the annexes in blue.

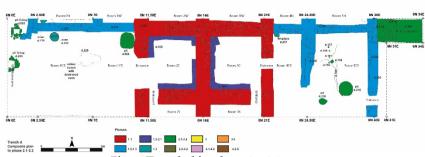


Fig. 3: Trench d in phase 2.1-2.2.

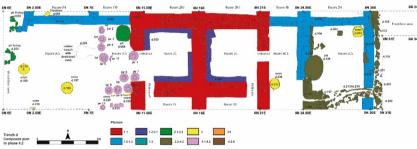


Fig. 4: Trench d up to phase 4.2.

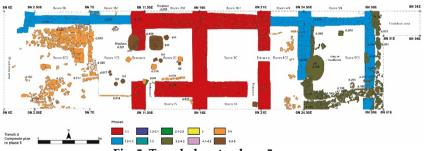


Fig. 5: Trench d up to phase 5.

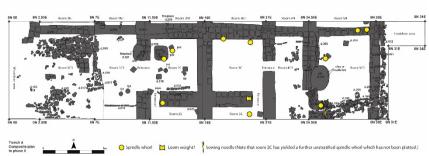


Fig. 6: Implements used for textile production found in Trench d. (These belong mainly to the latest phases of occupation; the colour legend for phasing does not apply to this plan.)

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انتشارات آریارمنا

مجموعه مقالههاى نخستين همايش دوسالانة بينالمللى انجمن علمى باستانشناسى ايران

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: همایش دوسالانه بینالمللی انجمن علمی باستانشناسی ایران (نخستین : ۱۳۹۸ : تهران) سرشناس سرشناسه : ههایس تورسود: : مجموعه مقالههای نخستین همایش دوسالانه بین المللی آنجمن علمی باستانشناسی ایران/ به کوشش سیدمهدی موسوی، شاهین آریامنش مجید منتظرظهوری؛ [برگزارکنندگان] گروه پژوهشی عنوان و نام پديدآور بأستان كاوى تيسافرن، انجمن علَّمَى بأستان شناشي ايران؛ مشاوران علَّمي سيدمنصور سيد سجادي ... [و دیگران]. : تهران: آریارمنا، ۱۳۹۹. مشخصات نشر : ۶۵۲ ص. : همایش ۳ مشخصات ظاهرى فروست 978-622-97183-2-2 : شاًىک وضعیت فهرست نویسی : فیپا بادداشت : کتابنامه. ىادداشت : باستانشناسی -- ایران -- کنگرهها موضوع Archaeology -- Iran -- Congresses: موضوع : موسوی، سیدمهدی، ۱۳۴۶-، گردآورنده شناسة أفزوده شناسه افزوده : منتظر ظهوری، مجید، ۱۳۵۹-، گردآورنده : آریامنش، شاهین، ۱۳۶۳ -، گردآورنده شناسه افزوده شناسه افزوده : خِانی پور، مرتضّی، ۱۳۶۴-، گرُدآورٌنده : گروه پژوهشی باستان کاوی تیسافرن شناسه افزوده ست... شناسه افزوده : انجمن علمي باستانشناسي ايران DSRFF: رده بندی کنگره 900/008: رده بندی دیویی ۷۳۶۲۰۸۲ : شَماره كتَابِشنَاسَى ملى : فييا وضعيت ركورد

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به کوشش دکتر سیدمهدی موسوی، دکتر شاهین آریامنش، دکتر مجید منتظر ظهوری و دکتر مرتضی خانیپور

و همکاری دکتر جواد حسینزاده و دکتر مصطفی ده پهلوان

































