

The Lady of Gōrān

The area of the Zarda basin on the extreme westerly edge of the Zagros Mountains reveals the ruins of a Parthian-Persian fortified town with a network of defences and the defensive Long Wall. A hill-fort on one of its pinnacles is called the “Fortress of Yazdgird” (قلعه یزدگرد).¹ We find the local legend of the death of the last Persian king, Yazdegird, and the suffering of his two daughters. We give here the scanty information about this legend:

1. From Henry Rawlinson²

“Immediately overhanging the town of Zoháb to the east is the fortress of Bán Zardah, or, as it is sometimes called, Ḳalahi-Yezdijird. This is the stronghold of Holwán, to which Yezdijird, the last of the Sasanian kings, retreated after the capture of Ctesiphon by the Arabs, and it is a noble specimen of the labour which the monarchs of those ages bestowed upon their royal buildings. It is formed by a shoulder projecting westward from the mountain of Dáláhú, girt upon three sides by an inaccessible scarp, and defended upon the other; where alone it admits of attacks by a wall and dry ditch of colossal dimensions, drawn right across from one scarp to the other, a distance of above 2 miles: the wall is now in ruins, and the debris have fallen down into the ditch at its foot, but it still presents a line of defence of no ordinary description. The wall is flanked by bastions at regular intervals, and if an estimate may be formed from a part of it, which still preserves something of its original character, it would seem to have been about 50 feet in height and 20 in thickness; the edge of the scarp has also been faced all round with a wall of less dimensions. The hill itself is elevated very considerably above the plain of Zoháb, perhaps 2 000 feet; the slope from the plain is most abrupt, and it is everywhere crowned by a scarp varying from 300 to 500 feet: the northern side of the hill is higher than the southern, and the table-land therefore of the fort, containing about 10 square miles, presents an inclined surface throughout. At the N.E. angle, where the scarp rises in a rocky ridge to its highest point and joins the mountain of Dáláhú, there is a pass which conducts into the fort, the ascent rising gradually along the shoulder; the whole way from the town of Zoháb is easy enough, but the descent on the other side into the table-land of the fort is by a most precipitous and difficult gorge. A wall has been thrown

¹. See Edward J. Keall, "Qal'eh-i Yazdgerd. First season of excavations, 1975", *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Symposium on Archaeological Research in Iran 1975*, Tehran, 1976, 380-390; "Qal'eh-i Yazdigird: The question of its date", *Iran*, 1977, vol. 15, 1-9; "Qal'eh-i Yazdigird: an overview of the monumental architecture", *Iran*, 1982, vol. 20, 51-72; "Qal'eh-i Yazdigird", *Les Parthes: l'histoire d'un empire méconnu, rival de Rome*, *Dossiers d'Archeologie*, Mars 2002, no. 271, 64-71.

². "Notes on a March from Zoháb, at the foot of Zagros, along the mountains to Khúzistán (Susiana), and from thence through the province of Luristan to Kirmánsháh, in the year 1836", *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, IX, 1839, (26-116), 32-3.

across the jaws of the pass; towers have been erected on either side to support it, and somewhat lower down the defile, where the jutting rocks nearly meet, two strong castles have been built opposite each other, which command the narrow entrance, and render it quite secure against attack. Altogether, this fortress may be considered to have been perfectly impregnable in an age when artillery was unknown. In the midst of the gorge is the tomb of Bábá Yádgár, the most holy place among the Kurd mountains, to which I shall presently have again occasion to allude. Lower down there is a natural double cave in the rock, very difficult of access, which is called the Harem-khánah of Shahr-Bánú, the daughter of Yezdijird, who afterwards became the wife of the Imám Hasan: it is a curious place, and looks like the grotto of a hermit. At the foot of the pass, where it opens upon the fort, is the little village of Zardah, surrounded by gardens which are watered by a delicious stream descending from the gorge. Near this there are the remains of two contiguous palaces, named the Díván-khánah and Harem-khánah of Yezdijird: the one is a quadrangular building of about 100 yards square, of which the foundations alone remain and these are now nearly hidden by the gardens of the village of Zardah; the other is an enclosure of 350 paces in length by 150 in breadth; it contains the remains of numerous buildings, the principal of which is a low circular tower of solid masonry, which would seem as though intended for the lease of a pavilion or some other temporary superstructure. The architecture of these buildings is in the same rude though massive style which has been described by Rich in his account of the ruins of Kaşri-Shírín and Haúsh Kerek, and which, indeed, characterises all the Sasanian edifices in this part of Persia. The wall of Bán-Zardah seems alone to have had more than ordinary pains bestowed on it.”

2. From Ziba Mir-Hosseini³

“[In one] genre of Ahl-e Haqq oral tradition, distinct from the *kalām* ..., the major players are the Gurān (a tribal population and their land), and a Sasanian princess:

During the rule of the second Caliph, ‘Omar, Iran was invaded by the Arabs; many Iranians were captured and taken as slaves. Among them were two daughters of Yazdegerd, named Princesses Shahrbānu and Shahrzād. Both were taken to the court of ‘Omar, who out of respect for their noble blood allowed them to choose husbands among the many who were keen to have them. Shahrbānu chose to marry Hossayn ... On the eve of Tāsu‘ā (i.e. two days before he was slain), Hossayn told Shahrbānu: In two days I will be martyred. You must now return to Iran, you are a stranger here.

He then left her in the care of three soldiers. One of these was a black slave of hers, named Aşhāb, who took her back to Iran and chose Gurān, not anywhere else in Iran. First, Gurān territory was the easiest and nearest Iranian destination to reach from Kerbela. Second, he

³. “Faith, Ritual and Culture among the Ahl-e Haqq”, *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, Ph. G. Kreyenbroek (ed.), London, 1976, (111-34), 115-16.

knew that the Gurān had not yet converted to Islam and had sheltered other Sasanian princes. Third, the Gurān had a close alliance with Sasanian kings, as a result of which they suffered most at the hands of the Arab invaders. Sasanian kings used to spend their summer among the Gurān, and some were brought up in the black tents of the Kurds. Yazdegerd had built a castle there, and Anushirwān had his summer court and his famous 'Chain of Justice' in the present location of the village of Qal'e Zanjir, hence the village's name, which means 'castle of the Chain'. The Gurān also resisted Islam longest ...”