

PERSIAN SPLENDOUR

Ancient palaces in Iran

BELOW Bardak Siyah, surrounded by the invasive palm trees. The huge column bases are stand surrounded by water that floods into the site.

The Achaemenid Empire was the largest in history, stretching across three continents, its splendour and wealth unsurpassed. Until, that is, the arrival of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC. Archaeologist Hassam Karimian reveals the identity of three palaces close to the Iranian city of Borazjan that bear witness to the Macedonian's destruction of Persian magnificence.





Under the auspices of the mighty Persian religious tolerance thrived, and education and art flourished. It was the Persians who invented the postal system and an integrated road network – for both were need to successfully manage communications throughout such a vast empire. The empire was divided into local kingdoms or regions, overseen by its own satrap, or governor, who regularly toured their territories, staying in elaborate and visually impressive palaces – buildings that served ceremonial, governmental, and domestic functions. These palaces were practical and efficient, but they were also deliberately stunning, designed to impress and intimidate: the Achaemenid kings (see box right) may have been tolerant rulers, but they were very much in charge and these palaces were conspicuous displays of their splendour and might. Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid empire, stands out as a stunning example of the achievement and skill of Persian architects, craftsmen, and builders.

Greek historians record that the Achaemenid court was not held in one place but that it moved from location to location with the king. Only six kingdom capitals have been positively identified to date; but now, recent discoveries near the city of Borazjan show that at least three palaces were established in this area close to the Persian Gulf coast that would have been used by satraps overseeing the region.

Charkhab Palace

The first, Charkhab Palace, was found 40 years ago when a piece of a stone-column base was uncovered while digging a water canal in the city of Borazjan. The ensuing archaeological

TIMELINE

ACHAEMENID EMPIRE – 550-330 BC

Cyrus II (The Great) c.558-530 BC

Cyrus II, a descendent of Achaemenes after whom the empire is name, overthrew his overlords in Medes and went on to found the largest empire the world has yet seen, stretching from the Mediterranean to the Indus River. By the time of his death in battle in 530 BC, he was signing himself 'King of the World'. Cyrus managed this vast collection of disparate peoples by showing tolerance to local religions and customs. The Cyrus Cylinder, created following his conquest of Babylon, is often cited as the first charter of human rights.

Cambyses II c.530-522 BC

Darius I (The Great) c.522-486 BC

Darius was probably the second greatest Achaemenid ruler after Cyrus II. He enacted sweeping administrative reforms, dividing his territory into 20 provinces or 'satraps'. He also built the 1,000-mile Royal Road, cut a canal between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, and introduced coinage to the empire for the first time. The grand ceremonial complex at Persepolis was begun during his reign.

Xerxes I c.486-465 BC

Xerxes is perhaps best known for his campaigns against Greece. He was so determined to bring the Greeks under his control that he led an expedition himself in 480 BC, a campaign which included the Spartans' legendary last stand at Thermopylae.

Artaxerxes I c.465-424 BC

Xerxes II c.424-423 BC

Darius II c.423-404 BC

Artaxerxes II c.404-359 BC

Artaxerxes III c.359-338 BC

Artaxerxes IV c.338-336 BC

Darius III 336-330 BC

Fleeing the Greek army, Darius was taken prisoner and murdered by his satrap and kinsman, Bessus, who was hoping to ingratiate himself with Alexander the Great. Instead, Alexander ordered Darius to be buried with honour, married his daughter, and had Bessus executed.

HELLENIC CONQUEST 330 BC

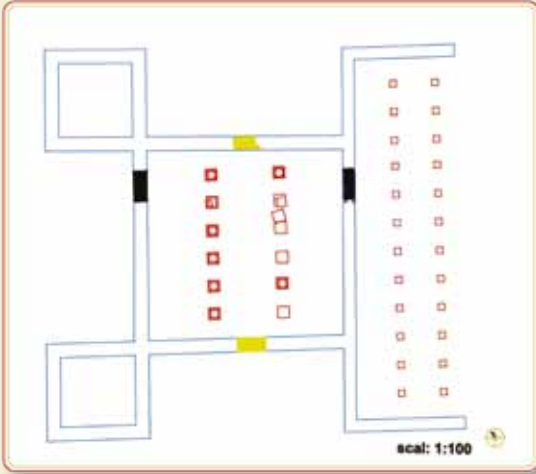
Alexander the Great 330-323 BC

Alexander III of Macedon took power aged just 19 years; two years later, he invaded the Persian Empire with 40,000 men. In 332 BC he reached Egypt where he was welcomed as a liberator; Babylon and Persepolis fell the following year, and by 325 BC he had subdued the whole Persian Empire. A huge admirer of both Cyrus the Great and of Darius I, Alexander adopted many Persian customs, including style of dress. He died at Babylon, aged 33 years.

SELEUCID KINGDOM 323 BC- AD 63

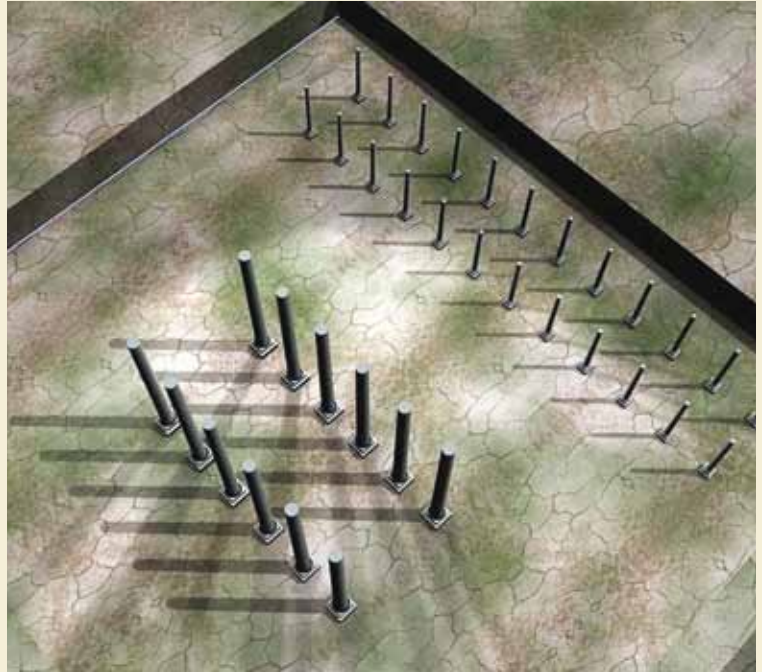
SASSANID KINGDOM AD 224-670

ISLAMIC CONQUEST AD 637-651



ABOVE A plan of the place at Charkhab Palace, showing the position of the pillars in the central hall and eastern halls; note the position of the great doors through the palace, accessing the central hall from those on each side.

ABOVE RIGHT A 3D reconstruction of the palace pillars of Charkhab Palace at Borazjan. Those in the central hall were twice the dimension of those on the eastern verandah.



excavations revealed a hall with lines of columns, but the site was almost immediately abandoned. The excavated area lies in a flood plain and suffered the consequences, becoming covered over by silt; when digging was finally resumed in 2001, archaeologists discovered evidence of pottery and other artefacts that had been washed in from nearby sites to the south-east that date from the much later Sassanid era (AD 224-251). It took a further five seasons before the original hall was rediscovered! Further trial trenches established that all later material had been washed onto the site

“ The palace had been in use only during the Achaemenid era. ”

BELOW Stone quarried from this nearby site was used to fashion the columns of Charkhab Palace at Borazjan.

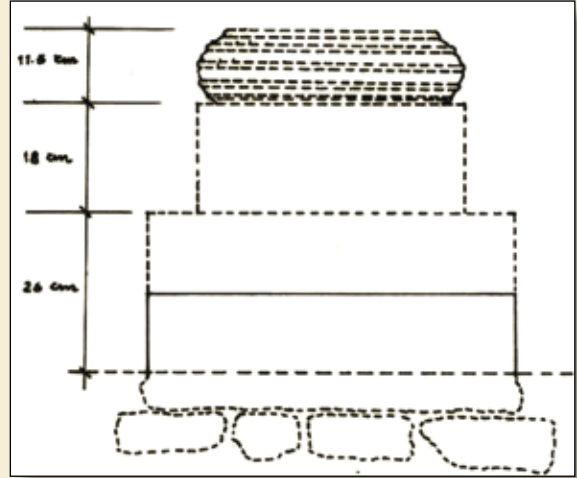


by flooding, rather than originating there, and that the palace had been in use only during the Achaemenid era, after which it was abandoned.

Monumental traces

Charkhab Palace, constructed with stone sourced from a local quarry, had a rectangular-shaped central hall, 45m x 35m, and an adjacent veranda with columns on its eastern wing. The central hall comprised of 12 columns, divided into two rows of six, set 160cm apart. Only the column-bases remain, made up of four (PLEASE CHECK THIS NUMBER?) black and white highly-polished stone segments that have been set in a stepped formation, and fitted together so tightly – without the use of mortar – that they appear almost to be carved from a single slab of black-and-white-striped rock. The skill and craftsmanship required to create this effect is comparable with that seen on the columns at Pasargad, the magnificent palace of Cyrus the Great.

Along the eastern side of this central hall lies a veranda running north to south, 30.63m long by 8m wide. It was built using 24 pillars



ABOVE & RIGHT The skill required in crafting these columns is on a par with those at Pasargad, the palace of Cyrus the Great.

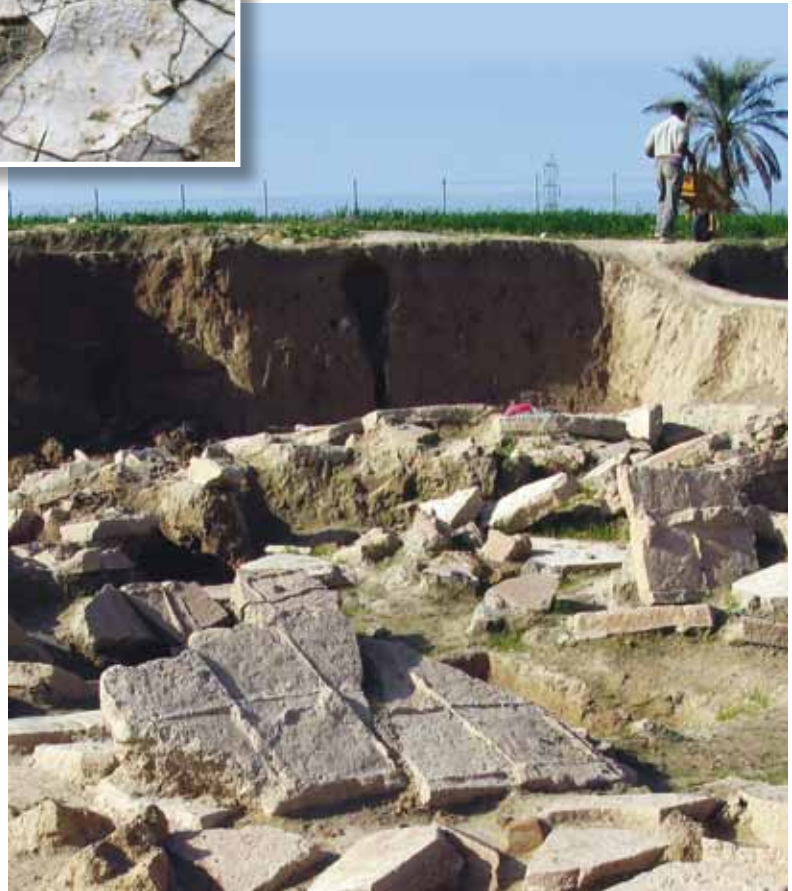


Curiously, concentrated at the northern and southern ends of the central hall and found at a depth of 2m below the surface, were piles of broken pieces of human and animal parts made of either plaster, limestone, or polished stone. These appear to be broken pieces ornamentation and decoration from around the columns, and all date to the Achaemenid period. Most represent teeth or eyes, pupils, eyebrows, and nails, but there are also birds' wings and claws. It seems probable that there was a workshop on the estate specifically tasked with the production of these decorative pieces, although some of the objects are carved from a type of granite that would have to have been imported. The intriguing questions puzzling archaeologists are: who swept up these objects into two piles? And why?



BELOW Slabs of cement once made up the ceiling of the palace at Charkhab, Borazjan.

INSET A white mortar substance was used to coat the floor.



Bardak Siyah Palace

Just 13km northwest of Charkhab is Bardak Siyah Palace, now covered by palm trees – a plant not native to the region but threatening to take over. Again, earlier work was begun in the 1970s but interrupted, this time in 1979 by the Islamic Revolution. Archaeological survey suggested the presence of a building,

“Tucked under the base of one column was a piece of a gold cup and three folded gold plates.”

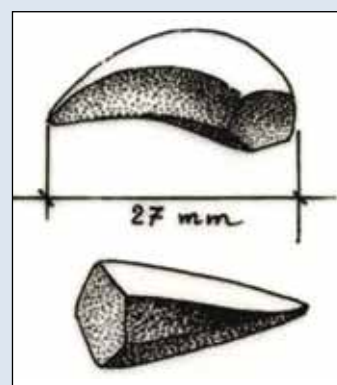
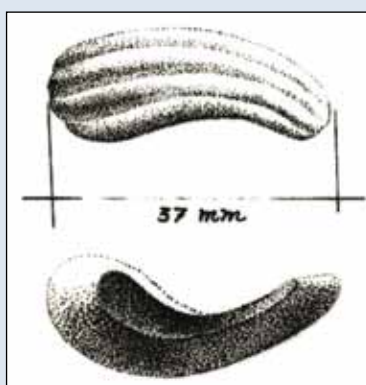
and shallow excavations revealed remains believed to date to Achaemenid era. But, in the intervening years, thick vegetation – including palm trees – swallowed the site, causing serious damage. Adjacent to the excavation and on higher ground, is evidence of another archaeological site that, judging by recent survey and surface finds, dates to the Sassanid period and early Islamic centuries, and suggests, therefore, that the area was used continuously from the Achaemenid era through to the second half of the 1st millennium AD.

When excavation was finally resumed in 2004, the central hall was cleared to reveal a total of 24 column bases laid out in six rows of four, and, alongside it to the south, a second hall of columns. The column bases each comprise three sections of stone set one on top of the other, with a carved round stone placed on top. This design is just like that found at Pasargad, the capital city and burial place of Cyrus the Great. Tucked under the base of one of these columns was a piece of a gold cup and three folded gold plates – apparently deliberately hidden, perhaps from advancing Greek Army?

Part of the excavated south wall of the central hall still retains a fine coat of pale green plaster, giving just a glimpse of how it would once have look when court was held there. The archaeologist leading the excavation, Ismail Yaghmaei, also found a stunning carving on black polished stone of a figure similar to those seen at Persepolis, and a Babylonian inscription carved also into black stone that translates as: ‘theaded ... to ... top ...’ – a possible reference to Achaemenid kings. Clearly, Bardak Siyah was a palace of considerable significance.

Work at Bardak Siyah continues but so far, while decorative statue fragments resembling eyes, eyebrows, and teeth have been recovered, no trace has been found of either the columns that would have stood on the bases, nor of

BOX HEAD FOR HERE IF POSS?



ABOVE Decorative teeth, eyes, eyebrows, and nails that would have been part of the elaborate decorations around the columns of the palace at Charkhab.



the ceiling, as was seen at Charkhab Palace. Nor is there any evidence of floor cover - although the substructure of fine sand, ashes and compact, hard clay suggests the main floor would have been made of brick. However, archaeologists did find considerable quantities of burned and broken stones, and of fire damage to the column bases of the south hall as well as metal arrowheads. Could it be that Bardak Siyah witnessed first hand the destructive arrival of the conquering Macedonians led by Alexander the Great?

Sang-e Siyah Palace

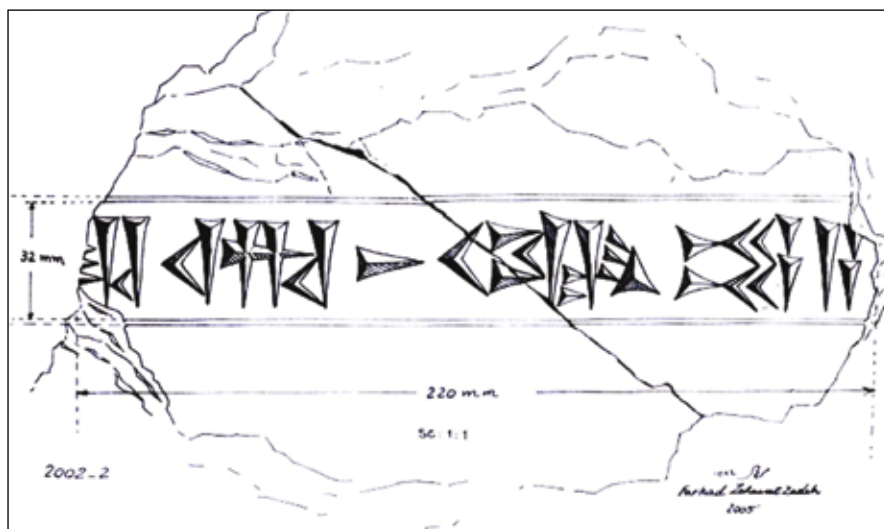
In the hills along the northern borders of the Daleki River, 10km north of Charkhab Palace, sits Sang-e Siyah (Black Stone) Palace - so-called because it was built almost entirely of black stone. Excavations undertaken by Ismail Yaghmaei in 1977 revealed the palace comprised a central hall with adjacent halls on each side reached through entrances placed at mid-point on each wall. The polished stone thresholds

ABOVE The central hall of Bardak Siyah, showing the massive stone column bases - and the encroaching palm trees.

ABOVE RIGHT Bardak Siyah sits in the foreground; behind is a later site dating to the Sassanid era and early-Islamic period

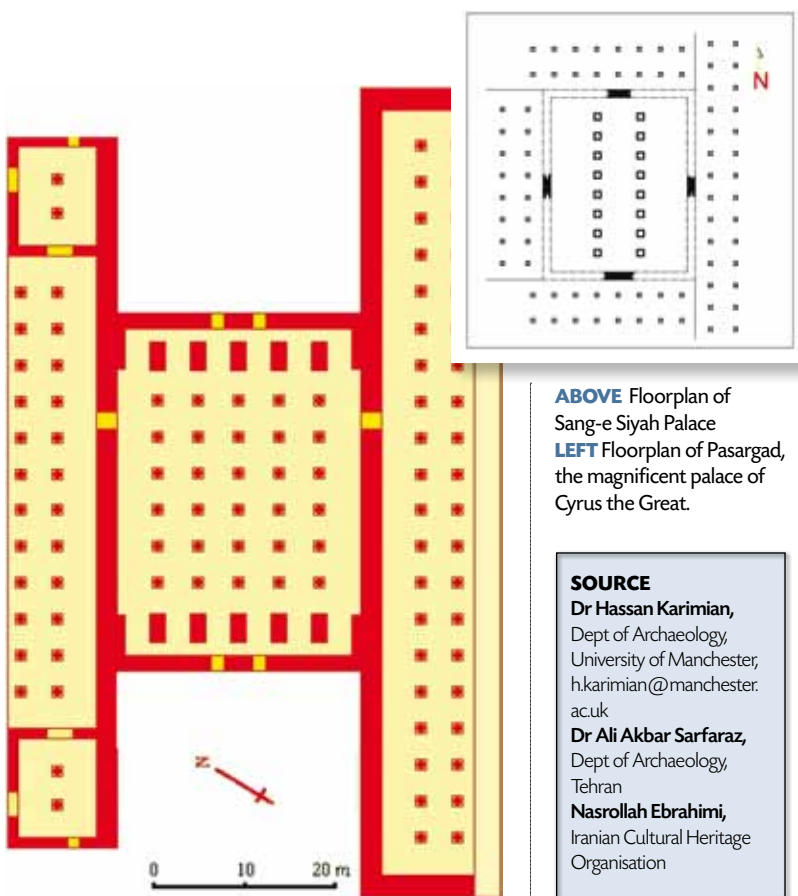
set into these doorways retained the typical Achaemenid-style carved niches into which the wooden door frames would have been set. The central hall has two rows of eight columns, again made up of three (four?) carved stones placed one on top of the other in step-formation, with a black stone at the base and cream above, and, as in the previous palaces, those in the side halls are smaller in dimension. The columns themselves were made of wood which was then coated in plaster. Here at Sang-e Siyah, the eastern hall is the largest, with two rows of 14 columns. The layout is very similar to that of Pasargad Palace, and Yaghmaei believes it may well have been built by the same architect. But was this palace ever finished? The floor was never laid, and there is no evidence of a ceiling. Perhaps, the sudden, unwelcome arrival of Alexander's forces put a dramatic halt to construction. Certainly, the site was abandoned at this time, and there is no archaeological evidence for occupation either before or after this period.

BELOW The Babylonian inscription carved into black rock discovered at Bardak Siyah.





ABOVE LEFT & INSET Carved from black polished stone, this figure discovered at Bardak Siyah palace shows remarkable similarity to those seen on friezes at Persepolis, like this of Darius I (**ABOVE**).



ABOVE Floorplan of Sang-e Siyah Palace
LEFT Floorplan of Pasargad, the magnificent palace of Cyrus the Great.

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Palace blueprint

All three palaces show a remarkable similarity in layout and material to the early Achaemenid palace at Pasargad – capital city and burial place of Cyrus the Great – suggesting they are of the same period, possibly even designed by the same architect. All also show influences in the design and style of the plaster mouldings and decorations that resemble ornamentation found at Persepolis – the Achaemenid capital built by Darius I. They may not have been on the same grand scale – no mighty stone columns – but the stucco-covered wooden uprights decorated with elaborate plaster mouldings of animals, birds and people, would have been an impressive imitation fit for Persian princes and satraps.

But why were these three palaces so abruptly abandoned? Could the destruction seen at Charkhab, and the evidence of fire, arrow heads and hidden gold at Bardak Siyah be clues? Were the residents of these three palaces forced to flee as the relentless Greek army, led by the youthful Alexander the Great, swept through Persia? If so, perhaps, ultimately, the Persians were the true victors as they watched the young conqueror adopt so many of their own customs – much to the horror of his generals. **WA**