

Proposing a Function for Char-Ghapi, Qasr-e-Shirin, Iran: Historical and Archaeological Evaluation

Ali Hozhabri^{1,2*}

1. MA in Archaeology; University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran
2. Iranian Center for the Museum Leadership, Cultural and Historical Properties Expert, Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicraft and Tourism Organization, Tehran, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Qasr-e Shirin owes its prominence primarily to the Sassanian period and the attention the region received from Khosrow Parviz. Khosrow took the first steps to make Qasr-e-Shirin habitable by constructing a complex consisting of a palace, a fortress, a religious building, a defensive wall and a water conveyance system. Later, Qasr-e-Shirin is mentioned in several texts and travel itineraries. The Char-Ghapi complex is generally attributed to the Sassanian king Khosrow II (590-628 A.D.), who allegedly constructed it for her Christian wife Shirin, thus the name Qasr-e-Shirin. Some historical sources make allusions to the buildings in Qasr-e-Shirin (Khosrow's Mansion, Char-Ghapi). Char-Ghapi of Qasr-e-Shirin has a square ground plan with domed roof, known as *chahar-taghi*, which has attracted attention from many scholars, who have described it as a structure from the late Sassanian period. The majority of scholars have characterized its *chahar-taq* or square dome as a fire temple, while some have claimed that it formed part of a palace complex; a few writers have also expressed doubts as to its chronology, suggesting a date in the early Islamic period for it. Therefore, the most important questions about this structure concern its construction date and function. In view of its architectural style, its comparison to the plan of the historical temples, and the political history of the Sassanians, the Char-Ghapi complex might have had a religious function; then, by studying the Christianity in Iran in particular in the late Sassanian period, one may conjecture that Char-Ghapi was probably a church that was never completed. The Sassanian complex in Qasr-e-Shirin was probably partially destroyed during Heraclius' Persian campaign of 628 A.D., which also might have brought a permanent halt to the construction operation there and Qasr-e-Shirin never gained its previous fame again though the name survived as a small village as late as the Qajar period. Several structures lying on the east of the square dome, not to mention its structural differences with the standard fire temple plan, are what cast the most doubt on the idea that Char-Ghapi was a fire temple. Since the meaning of a given building is determined by its similarity to other related structures, the present work aimed to determine the true nature of Char-Ghapi through drawing comparisons with other contemporary structures.

Keywords: Char-Ghapi, Sassanian Era, Fire Temple, Church, Khosrow II

Corresponding Information: MA in Archaeology; University of Tehran, Iranian Center for the Museum Leadership; Cultural and Historical Properties Expert, Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicraft and Tourism Organization,
Email: Ali_Hojabry2010@alumni.ut.ac.ir

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Introduction

Char-Ghapi lies in the northeastern fringe of the present day city of Qasr-e Shirin on a relatively flat mound with mild slopes. According to several Muslim authors, the Sassanian emperor Khosrow II, byname Khosrow Parviz, built a structural complex presumably for his Christian wife Shirin in the midst of the Qasr-e Shirin plain.

Khosrow’s Mansion was probably a large palace and a royal residence. Given its architecture and plan, Char-Ghapi might have been a religious building and Ban Qala was a fort that maintained regional security and presumably also served administrative purposes (Fig.1).

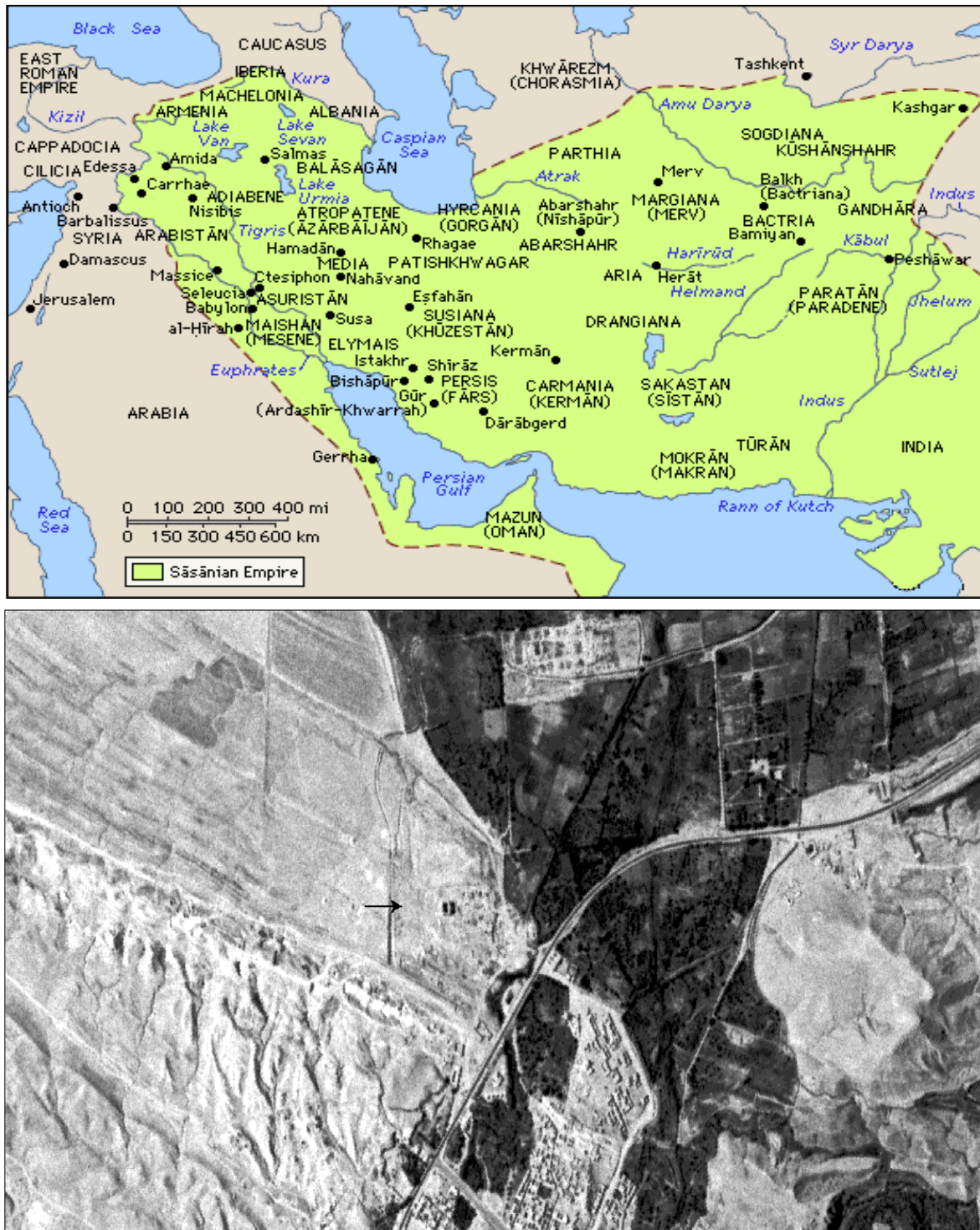


Fig. 1. Up: The position of Char-Ghapi at the Sassanian Empire. Down: Aerial Photos of 1961 (Crona.edu).

The recently discovered defensive wall on the border of two counties of Qasr-e-Shirin and Sarpol-e-Zahab (Hozhabri et.al, 2005) can also be added to the Sassanian complex of Khosrow Parviz. After giving a description of the site founded by Khosrow II, the Muslim historians refer to a vast unique garden of its kind with various species of trees. To irrigate the garden and supply water for the residents of the mentioned structures, Shah-Godar runnel originating from Alvand River was constructed. As Khosrow Parviz had also constructed an artificial forest with diverse animal species in the area, it is likely that the abovementioned wall kept the animals inside the

Khosrauid(owned by Khosrow) zoo besides guarding Khosrauid complex and marking its boundaries. De Morgan published the structures of the Khosrauid complex in 1896 which he had surveyed in 1891 (Fig. 2).

If we accept that the complex was to serve as a residence for the Christian mate of the emperor, can we then assume that the religious building of Char-Ghapi with its square plan and a domed roof, was actually a church for her? Some absolutely rejected the idea that the building was a sanctuary (Scerrato, 2004: 60). (Fig. 3)

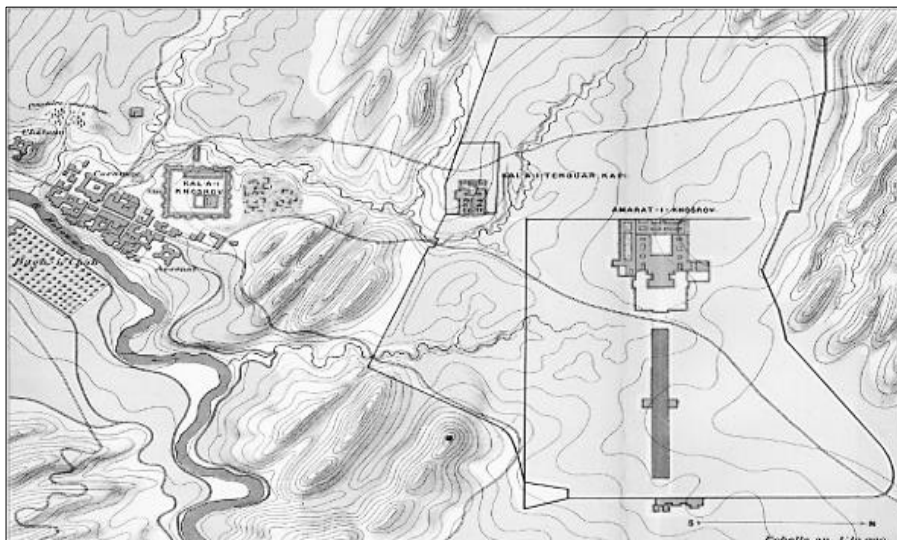


Fig. 2. The Sassanian monuments set in Qasr-e-shirin (De Morgam,1896)



Fig. 3. Inside the building Char-Ghapi, see the East (Author).

Background

Sarre and Herzfeld have described the square dome of Char-Ghapi as a fire temple (Sarre and Herzfeld, 1910: 203) and Scerrato regarded it as a royal seat (Scerrato, 2004: 47). Comparing the structure to the Abbasid palace of Al-Ukhaidir in Iran, Bell dated its original foundation to the early Islamic era (Bell, 1914: 44). Pope viewed the Char-Ghapi complex as the remains of a fire temple in the late Sassanian period (Pope, 1994: 71). Gullini argued that the structure is Sassanian only in its architectural tradition

(Gullini, 1964: 34); whereas, Erdmann (Erdmann, 1941: 30-50), Godard (Godard, 1987: 257), Vanden Berghe (Vanden Berghe, 2000: 98) and Schippmann (Schippmann, 1971: 282) attributed the square dome complex and the surrounding spaces all to this period. Godard suggested that Char-Ghapi was a palace of Khosrow II (Godard, 1992: 14) and its square dome represented a reception hall of the palace (Godard, 1992: 15) (Fig. 5).

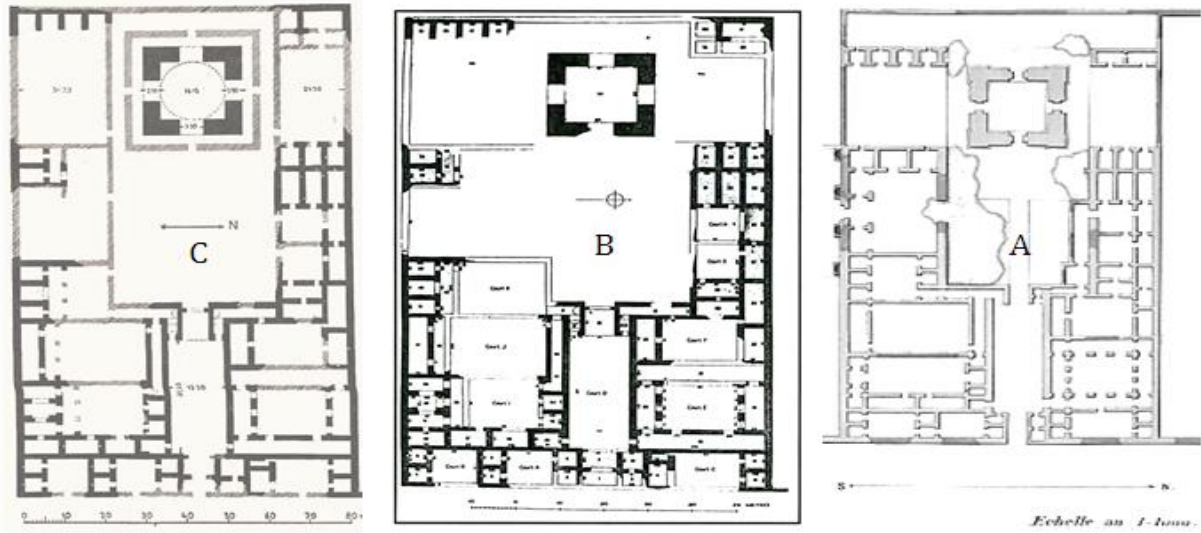


Fig. 4. Plan of Char-Ghapi (A: Hersfeld; B: Bell; C: De Morgan).

Description of the Architecture¹

Standing about 4.5 meters above the surrounding lands and measuring about 150 meters east-west and 50 meters north-south, Tepe Char-Ghapi suffered serious damages during Iran-Iraq war so that today, no standing remains of the architecture that was visible to de Morgan in the late nineteenth century and Bell in the early twentieth century are preserved. In the westernmost part of the mound stands a square structure measuring 24.6 in 24.6 meters in the exterior and 16.15 in 16.15 meters in the interior with four 2.91-meter-wide bays. The southeastern and northeastern piers were badly damaged and compared to what is seen in Bell's photos, the structure has been heavily disturbed. In all of four external corners of the building, an additional mass measuring 1.80 in 1.80 in 0.30 meters was added to strengthen the foundations. (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. Façade of Char-Ghapi by Bell (Bell et.al, 1914).

¹ This section is mainly based on the following unpublished report Hozhabri 1384/2005.

Small and large river cobbles and half-beaten plaster mortar were used in building the structure. These four bays were covered by a brick barrel vault. From the roofing of the central room, only a squinch survives (Besenval, 2000: 203). The formed vaults by the bricks measuring 37-8 in 37-8 in 8-9 cm had semi-circular arches one and a half brick in thickness and the walls and the floor were coated in a plaster mortar. The strength of the building rested partially on the use of a very hard and cohesive plaster mortar that was prepared by fire at a temperature range of 107 to 200° C (Hammi,1980: 80). Since the heat did not affect the core of the larger chalkstone fragments, they were beaten before firing and these particles which were used as the temper enhanced the resistance of the plaster mortar against moisture; firing had no adverse effects on the chemical properties

of the plaster. The thick plaster that once covered the rough surface of the stone walls had collapsed, leaving the walls exposed. Though unsightly, the exposed walls often add to the splendor of the building because of their plainness and the power of their form and bulk (Pope, 1994: 71) (Fig. 7).

The eastern, western and southern walls have a thickness ranging from 4.15 to 4.50 meters, a discrepancy probably caused by the presence or absence of coating or partial disturbance of the walls; the north wall is 4.50 meters in thickness. Close to the western bay, inside the structure, a stone platform measuring 5.28 in 5.08 meters was raised the surviving height of which is almost 0.6 meter (Fig. 8).



Fig. 6. Brick arch, the eastern gateway, part of the dome (Bell, 1914).



Fig. 7. Modern view of architectural remnants (Author).

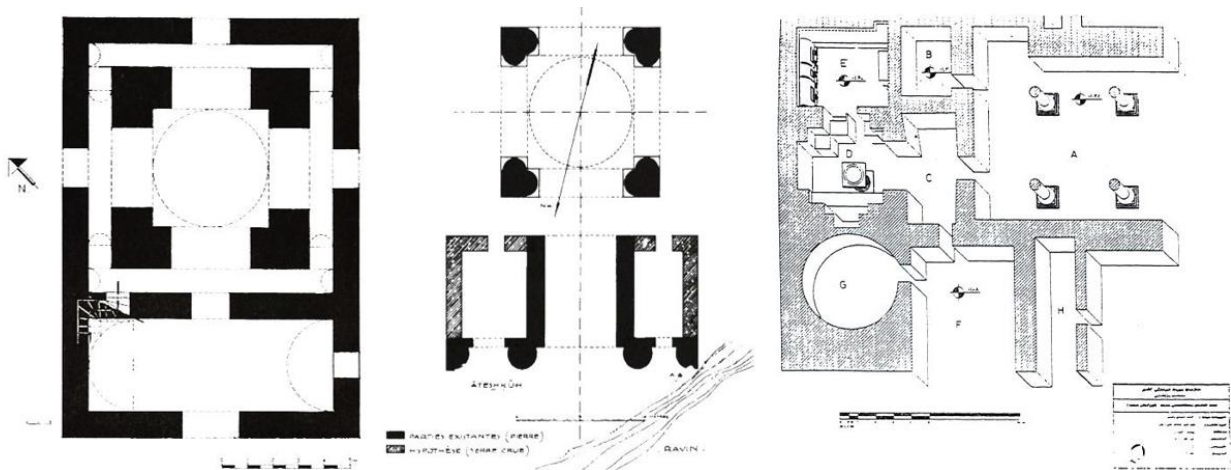


Fig. 8. Architectural model of Sassanian fire temples from left to right: Nigar Temple, Bandian Temple and Atashkuh Temple.

In the southern side of the eastern bay outside the structure lies another brick platform with plaster mortar, measuring 2.55 in 1.44 meters. Both platforms came to light in the 1992 excavations. In building the western platform, a revetment of green dimension sandstones and plaster mortar was formed before filling the space in between with cobbles, rubbles and clay mortar. Some 6.37 meters to the southwest of the square dome, a large

hall, a courtyard, and a passageway were recovered during the organic excavations of 1992 which remain from four small rooms. The question now arises as whether Char-Ghapi had an ambulatory (Scerato, 2004: 60). Given the available evidences, it is not possible to reconstruct an ambulatory for its square dome. (Fig. 9)



Fig. 9. The Existence platform in Char-Ghapi (Author).

Rooms

Room 1 is a rectangle 4.85 x 4.20 m room whose entrance is from the north side. The doorways of the other three rooms face east and only Room 1 gives access to the square dome. Rooms 2, 3, and 4 lead to a vast courtyard from the east which was partially appeared in the course of 1992 excavation. The doorway of Room 1 is 1.15 meters, those of rooms 2 and 3 are 1.20 meters, and that of Room 4 is 1.28 meters in breadth. The western walls of the rooms are formed by a bearing wall ranging between 1.50-1.86 meters in thickness and the partition walls separating the rooms as well as the eastern walls are 1.20 meters thick. Blind arcades, measuring 0.35 meter deep and 1.75 meters

wide and overlooking the courtyard, were added to the facade between the rooms to add some diversity to the otherwise plain walls. Rooms 2, 3 and 4 measure 4.74 in 4.20, 4.80 in 4.20 and 4.20 in 4.20 meters, respectively. To the west of these, lies a large rectangle hall measuring 23.8 in 10.27 meters; its southern wall is 1.75 meters and its western wall is 1.40 meters in thickness. In the southeastern corner of the hall, a bulky round mass of stone and plaster with a diameter of 3 meters is visible. This probably meant to bolster up the foundations. The room had a doorway on the north wall that has totally disappeared.

Though completely missing currently, the dome of Char-Ghapi was probably almost identical with those in

Firouzabad (Godar, 1992:14). As one of the largest known Sassanian domes, it sat on four pointed squinches and like Firouzabad palace constructed four centuries earlier, it was built of unhewn stone set with mortar (Pope, 1994: 71). In view of the observations made by the earlier archaeologists and what was exposed by Chegini in his 1992 excavations, one can define four architectural phases for Char-Ghapi: Phase 1 represents the original construction of the structure with pebbles and half-beaten plaster mortar; Phase 2 marks the addition of a platform next to the eastern entrance and restoration works on the structure; in Phase 3, the structure was abandoned and was later used by a group of shepherds to keep their stocks together; and in Phase 4, some of the bays were blocked using green, dimension sandstones, and another platform was built next to the western bay of the square dome.

Why Char-Ghapi Is not A Fire Temple?

In an independent investigation into the Sassanian fire temples, we were able to distinguish three distinct architectural phases, with each phase exhibiting certain structural changes in the standard fire temple plan.¹ Study of the square domes from the early Sassanian period suggested that: 1) they were invariably square in form, 2) they were all aligned with the intercardinal points; 3) they all had an ambulatory, 4) they all had a dome resting on four piers; 5) for the most part, they had ancillary rooms (Konar-Siyah, Farash-Band, Negar, Kuh-i Khadjeh, Takht-e Suleiman and Bishapur) which in rare cases were later additions (Shiyan, some of the rooms at Kenar Siyah) and sometimes, there were no indications of annexations (Zarshir) or their impressions had escaped attention of excavators; and 6) all were religious buildings and fire temples of the early Sassanian period except for the one that is alleged to have been a church.

A look into the related buildings from the mid-Sassanian era (Fig. 8-Middle) reveals the followings: 1) they were similarly all aligned with the intercardinal points, 2) the plan no longer included an ambulatory; 3) the square plan with domed roof gave way to the cruciform plan; 4) access to the interior part was usually made through the eastern doorway (Bandian, Turang

Tepe, Shiyan); but, in some cases, typically either through the west (HadjiAbad in Darabgerd) or south (like Takht-e Suleiman); 5) a doorway or doorways led from the interior part of the cruciform room to other separate rooms; 6) in larger examples, such as those at Bandian and Takht-e Suleiman, the fire temple and the external spaces were separated by a rectangle room that prevented direct access to the cellar which in the case of Haji Abad was probably in the form of a passageway; 7) they invariably served as fire temples; 8) the fire altar presumably stood at the center of the cruciform room, e.g. at Bandian and Mele Heiran² (or Heyrana) (Kaim 2001); and 9) one of the surrounding rooms served as “Anahita temple” (e.g. the columned halls at Takht-e Suleiman and Bandian, and Room 114 at HadjiAbad).

Finally, the following points can be made about the fire temples of the late Sassanian period (Pl. 15c): 1) all of them were aligned with the inrecardinal points, 2) a porch was added to the plan; 3) an ambulatory probably continued to be lacking; and 4) the plan again changed into an introverted square dome from an extroverted cruciform plan.

Thus, given its orientation to the cardinal points and the lack of the characteristic components of an ambulatory and porch, Char-Ghapi fails to qualify as a fire temple. Therefore, here an alternative possibility presents itself: Char-Ghapi might be a church.

Why Is Char-Ghapi A Church?³

As the only structure typifying the religious architecture of the ancient Persia (Godard, 1992: 78), the square dome did not disappear after the Muslim conquest of Iran and continued its use in its original form, i.e. four piers with a dome atop squinches. The standardized layout of square domes across such a vast territory and financing their construction and maintenance were most probably, at least for the most part, related to the Zoroastrianism. With their so-called “cross-in-square” outline in the churches of Ctesiphon, Harran and al-Rasafa (Fig. 10) were so closely related to some fire temples that the Christians and Zoroastrians intermittently used the same buildings as they were congruent with the ritual needs of both groups.

¹ The results of this study were presented at the 3rd Congress of Iranian Young Archaeologists, 2006 (Hozhabri, 2006: 38). For more details, see (Hozhabri 2013).

² Mele Heiran settlement is situated in the eastern outskirts of Serakhs oasis.

³ This was presented by the author at the Symposium on the Sassanian Archaeology and Art in February, 2014, and its historical reason has been discussed as a hypothesis in an independent paper (Hozhabri, 2012).

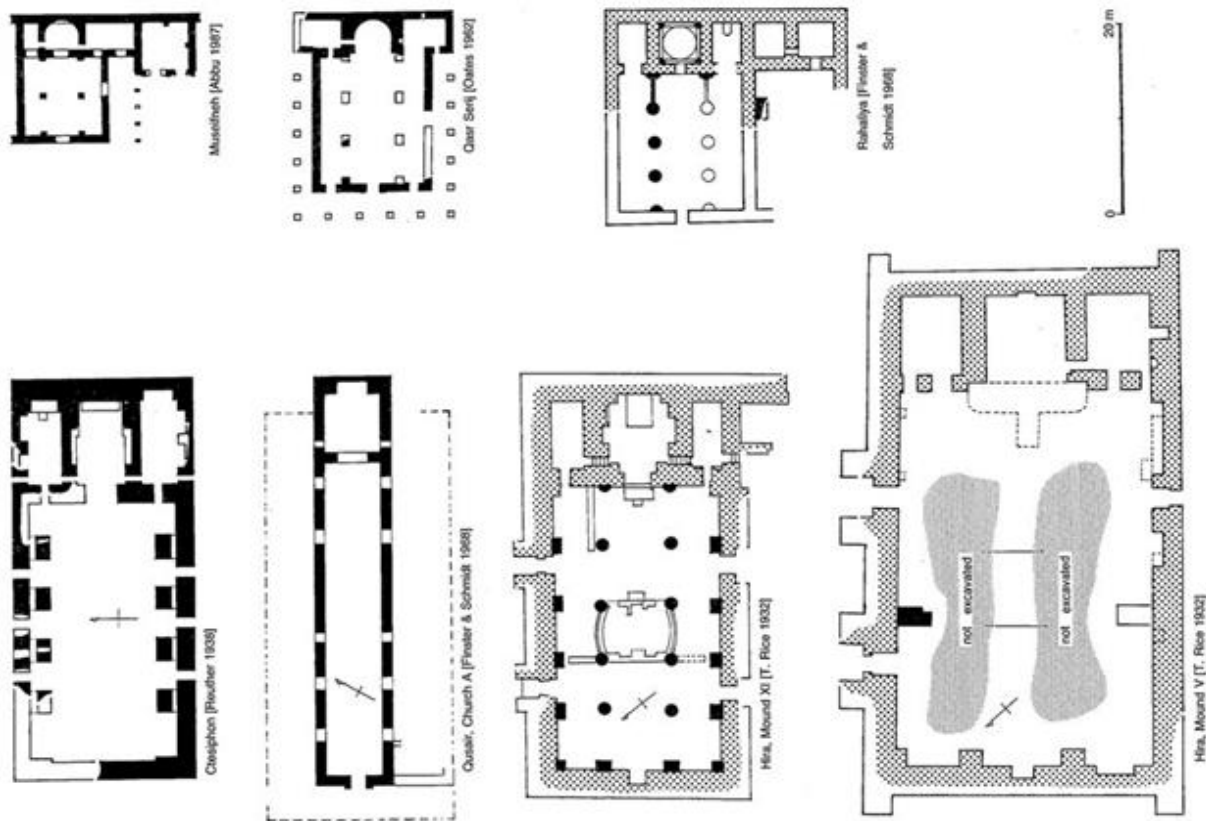


Fig. 10. Churches plan for Iraq during the Sasanian (Okada et.al, 1991)

This appropriation of the Sassanian architecture by Christians was one of the media through which Iranian artistic forms made their way to the Medieval Europe and extensively inspired Roman architecture. The same plan of Sassanian fire temples recurred in a series of churches in Armenia whence it spread to the Balkans. Its influence in Iran has continued into the recent times and it is truly a long-lasting tradition that is still receiving attention (Pope, 1994: 71). According to the documents of the Council of Seleucia, Yazdegerd ordered that all destroyed temples by his ancestors be restored throughout the kingdom in a more splendid manner and all those who were persecuted because of their faith in God get freed, and priests and church heads and members should be allowed to travel freely. Then, it is not surprising if we find churches resembling temples. A story about Narseh the Christian substantiates this: ... with all these Zoroasterian priests, he occupied the church and turned it into a fire temple. ... Much to his surprise, Narseh saw there the fixtures and instruments specific to Zoroastria. Without any doubt, he put out the

fire and cleared the place. Then, he returned the church furniture and performed the rituals (Godard, 1992: 161). Herzfeld reported a square dome from Jareh Valley, Kazerun, describing it a fire temple attributable to Mehr-Narseh; whilst, Godard regarded the structure as a church (Godard, 1992: 64). The controversy arose from the dimensions and size as well as different appearance of this structure from four square domes discovered in Jareh Valley (Godard, 1992: 160). Godard claimed that the small subsidiary domes at the corners which primarily served to support the main dome, for instance, in al-Rasafa¹, Pantokrator Church, and Constantinople Cathedral are justifiable; but, here, located at the end of the hall above its two walls, there was no reason for their existence. He assumed that the domed hall had nothing to do at all with the fire and those unusual columns and unnecessary domes that did not contribute to the equilibrium of the structure; so, they were simply decorative and borrowed from another tradition. Therefore, here, we are probably dealing with a church rather than a fire temple (Godard, 1992: 161). Being the

¹ Al Rusafa ([Arabic](#): الرصافة) or Rasafa is the east-bank settlement of [Baghdad](#), [Iraq](#), or the eastern shore of the river [Tigris](#).

case as such, the structure was a fire temple that turned into a Sassanian church with minor modifications and the Christian bestowers embellished it with certain western architectural forms with which they were familiar. However, despite the changes made in its details to meet the requirements of a Christian building, it is such a representative and typical fire temple that can be safely characterized as a fire temple (Godard, 1992: 64).

Church construction was, therefore, subject to following the already existing architectural forms: they were inspired by basilica style in Rome and by square dome style in Iran. Since the Christians had to conceal their faith for over 300 years, they followed Roman traditions in building their churches after fleeing from Rome to the western areas and before the Iranian architecture began to inspire them. Therefore, even when Christianity was officially recognized in Rome, different situations prevailed in the Roman architecture. From the very beginning, it adopted limited numbers of spatial relations with a highly symbolic nature as the basic church architecture, i.e. the concepts of "center" and "passage," interpreting the fundamental existential meaning from a fresh Christian perspective. Apart from these characteristics, the early Christian architecture is characterized by the ubiquitous importance of interior spaces, an attribute that has retained its significance since that time. Previously, central and elongated spaces had emerged in the most striking manifestations of the Roman architecture. The centripetal space of the Pantheon not only was a universal symbol but also epitomized human's new understanding that he himself was a player in space. The longitudinal space of the Roman basilicas conveyed a similar twofold meaning. In addition, it had the passage element to symbolize the directed nature of human action (Norberg-Schulz, 2009: 135). The early Christian architecture took advantage of both of these forms. The plan of most of earlier churches consisted of a combination of elongation and centralism; elongation dominated the architecture of western churches and central-plan dominated the eastern ones. In the Byzantine architecture of the sixth century A.D., the central-plan was adopted for major churches and the churches typically had also a secondary axis (Norberg-Schulz, 2008: 137). The San Giovanni Cathedral in Laterano, adjacent to the residence of the bishop of Rome, is a vast columned basilica with two east-west oriented aisles between the columns and a high altar at the end; the transept was added in the medieval period (Norberg-Schulz, 2008: 142). Beginning from the time of Justinian I, centralism became the defining feature of

the Byzantine architecture. The earliest example is the octagon, domed Sergius and Bacchus Church, the construction of which began before 527 A.D. The church flanked the Justinian's residence. After the splendid experience of Hagia Sophia, a cruciform domed outline was again used in the architecture of Justinian's church. In this plan, the dome sits atop the nave and transept junction (Norberg-Schulz, 2008: 144). However, with the migration of the sued Christians to the political borders of the Sassanian Iran, they settled initially in the western areas and expectedly, started with the Roman architecture style.

Also, the existence of the rooms at Char-Ghapi, as in the church on the Kharg Island, can be related to the church-related activities. Prior to starting the construction of oil installations on Kharg, Ghirshman completed two seasons of excavations on the island between 1959-1960. Using massive slabs of hewn stones, the Nestorian priests had put up a church with a tripartite nave in Sassanian fashion on the island; the central nave was larger than the lateral ones. The choir, altar, treasury, diaconicon, library hall, assembly hall for priests, and etc. are some of the excavated units within this church. The convent of Kharg may be a unique example from the period of the Christianity revival by Abraham de Kashkar in the sixth century A.D. (Ghirshman et al., 1960)

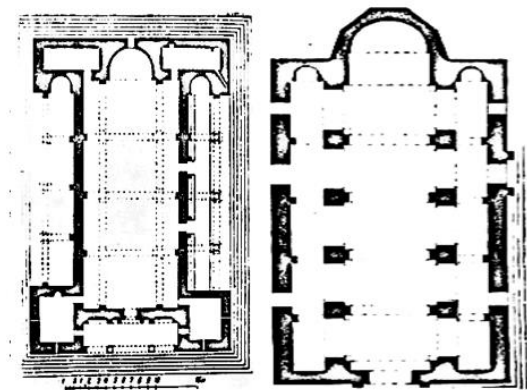


Fig. 11. From left to right; Basilica Churches in Armenia (Geghart; Ereruk).

The analysis of the plan of the churches in the modern Armenia, Iraq and Iranian Kurdistan and Azerbaijan reveals three styles in the church architecture. The first follows the Roman (basilica) tradition, the second represents the Iranian (square dome) tradition, and the third is mainly characterized by the local architectural elements which is quite distinct from the other two. In the Roman tradition, two rows of pilasters turn the church into an elongated hall, with the

mithraeum located at its end. The Iranian tradition, with its four columns at the center of a square structure and a dome above it, resembles the plan of fire temples, particularly those from the early Sassanian period. The

locally inspired tradition represents a style that is distinct from the prevailing national patterns, incorporating specific requirements of the time and incentives of their builders.

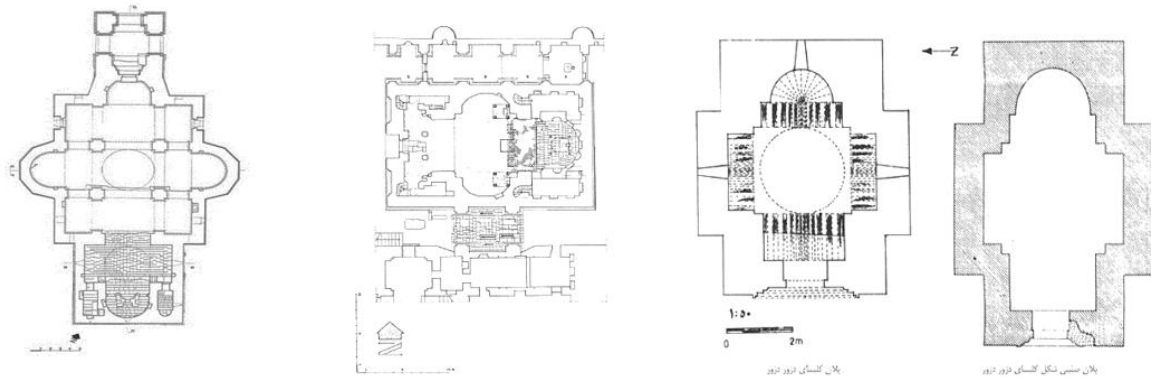


Fig. 12. Church with a cross plan. From left to right: St. Stepanos; St. Thaddeus; Dezur.

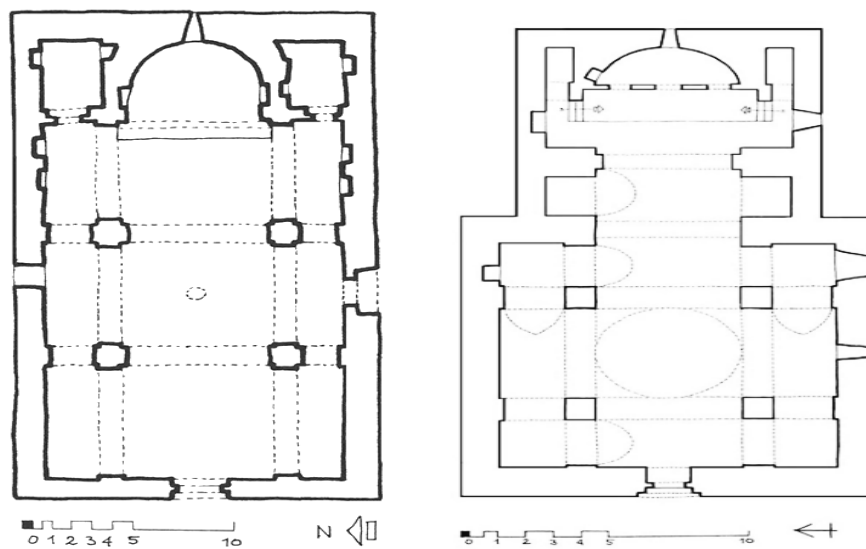


Fig. 13. Plan of four columns churches. From left to right: St. Herepsime; St. George.

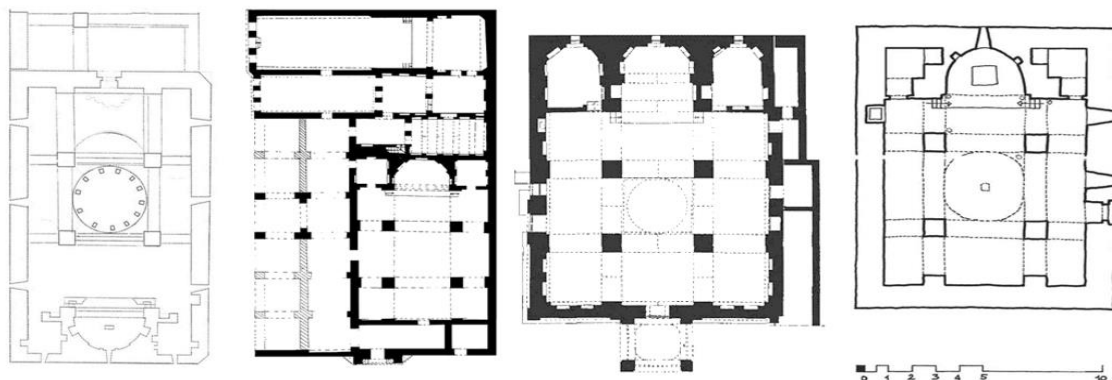


Fig. 14. Plan of four-column- churches. From left to right: St. Mary, Shām Valley (1518); B: Church of Saint Mary, Djolfa (1681); St. Hovans (Djolfa, Safavid era); St. Georg Church (Qarebagh, Urmia; Safavid)

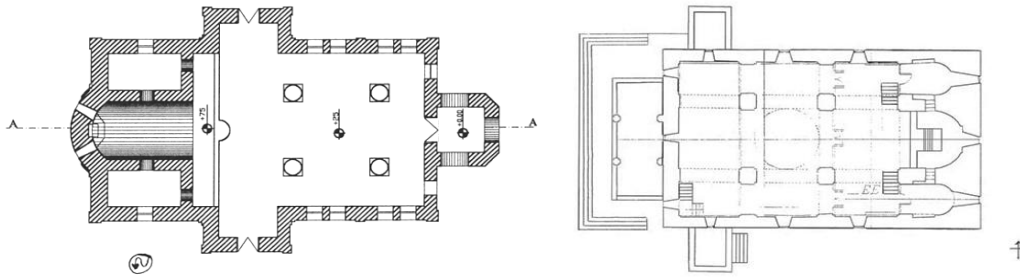


Fig 15. Plan of four-column churches (18 & 19th centuries). Left to right: Nestorian Church of Mār-Georgis (1830); B: St. Mary, Tabriz (1785).

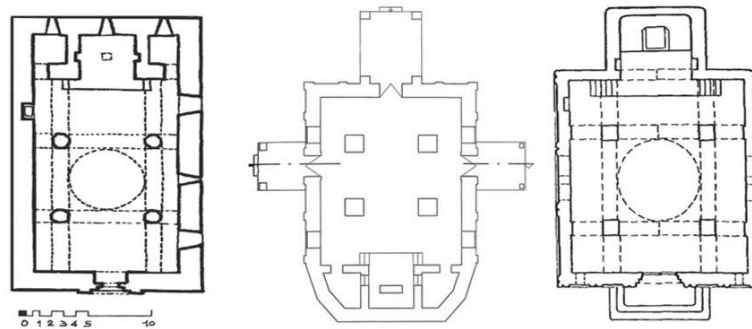


Fig. 16. Plan of four-column churches (the late 19th century & 20th century). Left to right: St. Mary: Akhe-Khane – Salmas (1893); B: St. Mary: Anzali Harbor (1885); C: St. Shughagat (1940)

Why Char-Ghapi Dates to the Sassanian Period?

The chronology of Char-Ghapi can be approached from two different directions: Exploring historical sources and archaeological evidences.

Historical Analysis

In the Sassanian era, Nestorians were in majority among Iranian Christians (Schipmann, 2004: 67). Nestorius proclaimed that the Christ's divine nature and human nature were distinct. Emphasizing the human nature, he argued that Mary should be considered simply the Mother of Christ not the Mother of God (Yarshater, 2002: 388). Nestorius believed in no oneness other than the union of the natures, i.e. God with his entirety dwelt in the human Christ as if he resided in a sanctuary. The oneness was simply embodied in the unity of the will, which gradually evolved in Christ's life and culminated after the resurrection. It was only after the resurrection that the human nature shared in God's immutability and preponderance became worthy of devotion. The Antioch (Nestorian) School made use of the historical-linguistic approach (Yarshater, 2002: 389). Nestorius and his disciples attributed two quite distinct dimensions to Christ, thus earning the title of "Dyophysites". In contrast, the Jacobites hold a Monophysitic view, believing that two divine and human natures of Christ

were combined to form a unified nature. The advocates of the Nestorian church generally refer to themselves as "Messihaye," but the moniker never came into vogue and the church was typically called "Assyrian Church" (Molland, 2002: 80). Nestorian Church was named after its founder, Nestorius (ca. 381–451 A.D.), a Syrian monk and a prominent preacher. Nestorius was selected as the patriarch of Antioch in 428 A.D. (Ehrman, 2004: 182). His principal teaching concerned "the existence of two distinct natures" in Christ. Accordingly, he regarded Christ a human in whom the divine Logos or God dwelt (Lane, 2001: 92). As already mentioned, he rejected the title Theotokos, Mary Mother of God, insisting on Mary Mother of Christ (Baun, 2003: 23). In 435 A.D., when Nestorius was exiled to Rome, many of his disciples departed for Iran (Badr, 2001: 237); thus, the Nestorianism became the formal faith of the Persian Church (Miller, 1981: 299).

Dadisho, the patriarch of the Persian Church, held the position till 456 A.D. In Edessa, there was a very famous theological school. As the ideas of Nestorius began to spread, they aroused enthusiasm in this school. In 457 A.D., since Monophysitic tendencies predominated in the region, the students who had received Nestorian education were all expelled. Upon his return to Iran, Barsauma attained a high position in

the court of Piroz, the Sassanian king, as he was an eminent scholar and had shown high competency. He was the bishop of Nisibis. In 486 A.D., another council headed by Acacius was held as a result of which the Persian Church completely separated from the western church. The council had two major acts: 1) Nestorius' teachings were recognized as the formal faith of the church of Sassanian kingdom; and 2) Priests and bishops were allowed to be married. In 489 A.D., the Edessa School was closed by the Byzantine emperor because it promoted Nestorianism and its students took refuge in the Persian Nestorian Church. Barsauma and Narsai, the directors of the Edessa School accepted them and established a school for them and other pupils within the Sassanian territory. In 571 A.D., a theologian named Henana of Adiabene was elected as the director of the theological school in Nisibis. Influenced by his trainings, he became entranced by the Monophysite doctrine, which had already been spread throughout Syria by Jacob Baradeus. Henana began to teach the doctrine to the pupils of the School of Nisibis. In the meantime, Gabriel, the physician of Khosrow Parviz, abandoned Nestorianism for Monophysitism, inducing Queen Shirin to follow his example. When the patriarch of the time died in 608 A.D., Khosrow refused to refill the position, which remained vacant up to 628 A.D. The refusal was rooted in his concerns over the tendencies of the Iranian Christians towards the practiced Christianity in Rome. Therefore, at the same time, he had to devise a plan to prevent the religion from fraternizing the adherers of a single faith in two hostile empires. Khosrow put up the Sassanian complex of Qasr-e-Shirin for his consort in an area probably called "Beth Lashpar" in Sassanian times. Shirin was an Aramean Syriac Christian (Urhay in Syriac, Ar-Ruhā in Islamic sources, modern Urfa), located in modern northern Iraq, was a major Syriac settlement. In the second century A.D., the city became a major center of Christianity and the first Persian Christian Church was established there (Badiei, 1994: 194). Soon after, apart from that in Jerusalem, other churches would emerge across Judiah. Another church was put up in Samarra, as was in Antioch, though the latter was actually turned into a staging post for the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul (Thiessen, n.d., 299-300). Among other major Syriac centers was Nisibis (modern Nusaybin), the spiritual city of the Eastern Christians. Also, in the Sassanian period, Halwan was the center of a namesake county with five small districts (*Tasuks*), including Shad Peroz (Kavadh), Kuhestan (Jibal), Tamra, Erbil, and Khanaqin. In 553, 588, and 605 A.D., Halwan, as a parish (Kolesnikoff, 2010: 186)

and an important market, was also a major base for the spread of Christianity in Mah Province (Yarshater, 2002: 163). Furthermore, Christianity was the major intellectual force at that time. The cult, which was the faith of the opponents of the Roman empire and its disciples prior to this, was subject to persecution and pressure and as a result of these became strictly organized and considerably influential. In the provinces adjacent to Iran as well as within Iran itself, bishoprics emerged in 225 A.D. (Lukonin, 1993: 115). By 225 A.D., over twenty bishoprics existed in Iran and Mesopotamia (Miller, 1981: 269). There are indications that Christianity commenced first in Jazireh and Mesopotamia and then in Kurdistan and western Iran in the early Christian centuries (Hekmat, 1992: 240). The first persecution of the Christians in Iran began under Shapur II in 339 A.D. and had political derives for it was in the same period that Constantine declared Christianity as the formal religion of the Roman empire (Frye, 1998: 359). However, on the other hand, the harsh stance of the official church of Constantinople towards the disciples of other Christian churches made them began to seek the support of the Persian empire, where different Christian faith groups had more tranquil lives (Kolensikoff, 2010: 147) because the tough Christian teachings of the time were not able to compete with the Gnostic philosophy and other teachings; it may be due to the same reason that those such as Saint Augustine converted to Manichaeism (Lukonin, 1993: 125). The break with other Christians in the fifth century A.D. enhanced the status of the Nestorians in Iran (Frye, 1998: 359). The Persian Church became Nestorianized in about 484 A.D. (Miller, 1981: 298). The favorable conditions under Hormizd IV (579-590 A.D.), to the dereliction of which al-Tabari testifies, came to an end in the reign of Khosrow II, when Monophysitism emerged under the auspices of Shirin and Gabriel. Internal strife, which to some extent was directly correlated with this new racemose theological association, weakened Nestorianism but did not bring about its fall. These conflicts were evident in the Synod of Mar Hazqiel (576 A.D.) and escalated in the Synod of Mar Iso'yabh (586), Synod of Mar Saurisho (596 A.D.), and Synod of Mar Grigor (605 A.D.) that marked the beginning of a hiatus during which the office of catholicos remained unfilled. The hiatus only ended by Khosrow's death in 628 A.D. after which Iso'yabh II became the catholicos. However, in this same period, Marutha of Takrit (d. 649 A.D.) established a Monophysite hierarchy in Iran. Once this was officially recognized, he earned the title of Maphrianate (appointer, inseminator) of Antioch. The

Eastern Christian Church (Orthodox denomination) had to put all its force to quell the ever increasing influence of these heretics (Yarshater, 2002: 393-394). In 614 A.D., Iranian army opened Jerusalem after 20 days of siege (Schippmann, 2004: 69; Kolesnikoff, 2008: 146). The Holy Cross was among the booty that was brought to the royal treasury of Khosrow. Capturing this cross comprised the most important political idea of Khosrow II, i.e. affirming his sovereignty over the entire Christian world¹ (Kolesnikoff, 2010: 146). Destruction of Jerusalem in the seventh century A.D. reaffirmed the position of the Church of Antioch as the central church of the Christianity; it represented the first non-Jewish church. The Jacobites or those who believed in “one nature” of Christ took advantage of the internal conflicts of the Nestorius’ disciples and began to propagandize. Intense competition continued between the two sects (Ghadyani, 2002: 157). Archaeological evidences suggest that the religious influence of Nestorians also penetrated the eastern regions at the archaeological site of Gawurgala (or Gyaur-Kala) [Turkmen took it from Persian “Gabr Qala” (Fortress of the Zoroastrians in ancient Merv)], apart from two structures probably relevant to Zoroastrianism, there was also a Nestorian convent within the fort dating back to the fifth century A.D. (Seyed Sajjadi, 2004: 169). In light of the above discussion, it is my contention that Char-Ghapi was a church that Khosrow put up in response to the potential danger of the Roman Christianity but failed to complete because of the lack of religious tolerance on the part of the Zoroastrian priests in the imperial court who finally

conspired to dethrone and kill Khosrow by one of his sons. It appears that the Heraclius’ Persian campaign of 622 brought to a halt the construction project of Qasr-e-Shirin complex and resulted in the partial destruction of the existing structures. Also, in the wake of the Muslim Arab invasion of 16 A.H., after the supposed completion of the unfinished structures in the early centuries of the Islamic era, a new function was likely assigned to the complex. However, Al-Yaqubi speaks of the ruins of the complex² and Ibn Athir argues that the walls of Qasr-e-Shirin were cracked in the earthquake of 345 A.H. Thus, the complex would have remained abandoned as late as 4th century A.H.

Archaeological Analysis

Relative chronology of Char-Ghapi in view of the archaeological evidences, including pottery and architecture reveals the construction date of the structure. As already mentioned, some have ascribed the building complex of Qasr-e-Shirin to the early Islamic era. We would expect pottery of this period within Char-Ghapi if it had been occupied in this timespan. From the Umayyad pottery tradition, limited but still considerable remains are available. As with the earlier periods, particularly in Iran, pottery was not highly valued and was mainly for the practical purposes (Ettinghausen and Graber, 2003: 113). The Abbasid ceramics show advances in the pottery traditions of the Umayyad period. However, the shred assemblage collected during the surface survey of Char-Ghapi contains even not a single glazed fragment (Fig. 17).



Fig. 17. Pictures of potteries according to surface surveys (Hozhabri, 2005).

¹ “With the Cross falling into my hands, I acquired a supremacy over them. I did not give it back to them,

² [because] so long as we have this Wood in our hands and our treasury, we will be superior to them and they will be servile and vanquished” (Bal’ami, 2006: 811)

One can, therefore, get closer to the historical truth of the structure by combining the absolute and relative chronologies.

During a revisitation to Char-Ghapi in the summer of 2013, two originally used bricks in the vaults of the bays of the square dome were sampled to be dated by thermoluminescence technique. The first brick was sampled from the interior part of the structure, from the mass that Chegini had been left there as the evidence of his recent excavations at the site; while, the second was taken from the section of the southern trench. The samples were analyzed by Faranak Bahrololumi from the Research Center for Preservation and Restoration of the Iranian OCHHT Research Institute, giving the following results; the first sample belongs to 1350 ± 75 years BP and the second to 1370 ± 70 years BP (Fig. 18).

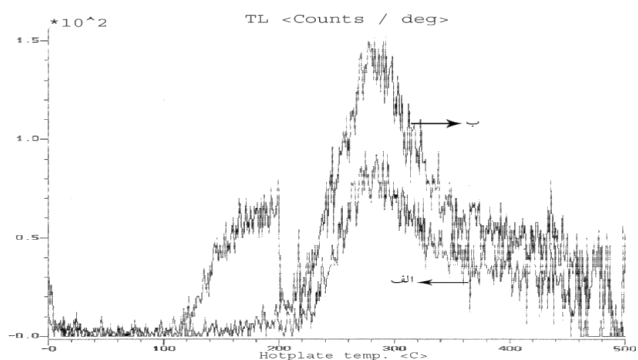


Fig. 18. Result of Thermoluminescence dating test. No.1 (1350 ± 75)

A.D. (573-713 A.D.) by the second sample. Combining these thermoluminescence dates with the data from the political history resources will give a date between the reigns of Hormizd IV (579-590 A.D.) and Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (724-743 A.D.), i.e. the late Sassanian to the late Umayyad period on the basis of the first sample, and between the reigns of Khosrow I (531-579 A.D.) and Al-Walid I (705-715 A.D.). i.e. the late Sassanian to mid-Umayyad period based on the second. So, the thermoluminescence dates for Char-Ghapi do not go beyond the Umayyad period (750-680 A.D.). Since the major construction works of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties were mainly clustered in present day Syria and, to a lesser extent, in Iraq, the late Sassanian period seems the more likely date for the construction of Char-Ghapi.

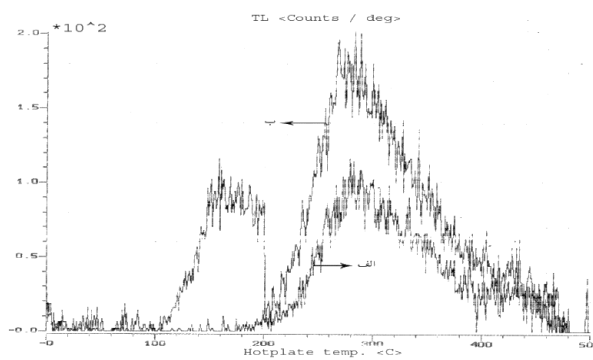


Fig. 19. Result of Thermoluminescence dating test. No.2 (1370 ± 70).

Therefore, the date suggested for Char-Ghapi is 663 ± 75 A.D. (588-738- A.D.) by the first and 643 ± 70

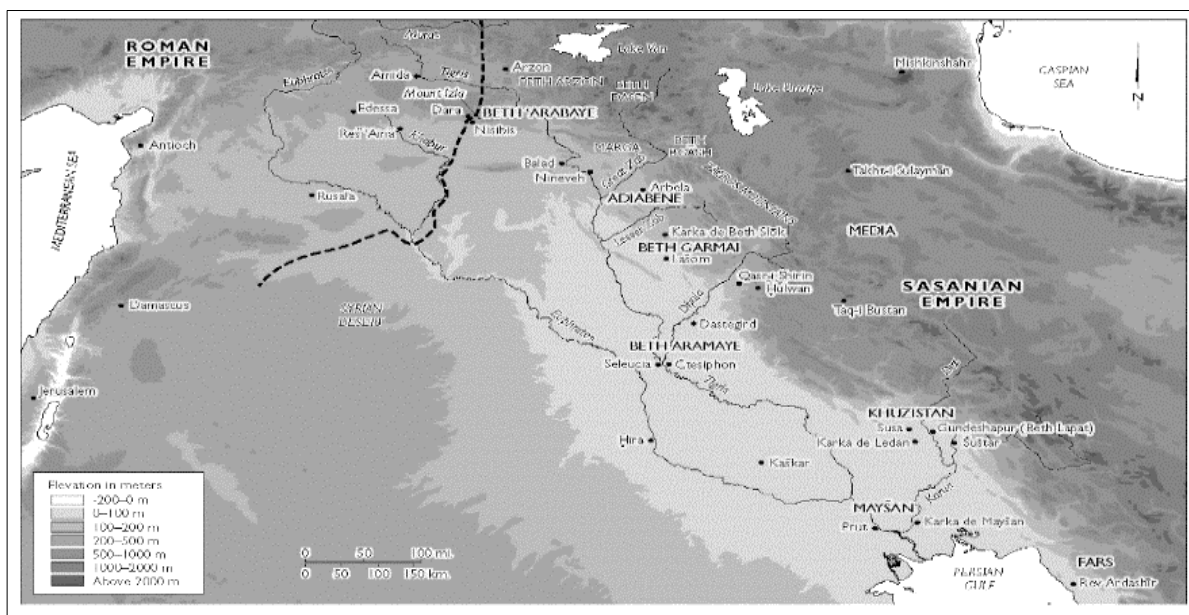


Fig. 20. Christian places' locations in the sixth century A.D. (Walker et al, 2006)

Conclusion

Char-Ghapi is a *Chahār-tāqi* or a structure with a square plan with a domed roof. As discussed earlier, the Sassanian fire temples were all aligned with the intercardinal points; whereas, Char-Ghapi was oriented to the cardinal points, a situation that is seen in one other category of the sanctuaries: churches. We similarly argued that in almost all of the churches, the mithraeum lays at the west end and this is represented at Char-Ghapi by a platform in the west. Since Khosrow Parviz failed to install a bishop from the death of the patriarch in 607 A.D. up to his dethronation in 628 A.D., having the True Cross among his booties from Jerusalem, it appears that he was disposed to institute a Persian version of Christianity against the Roman version and attempted to assign a second official religion for the empire although

he failed as a result of a conspiracy by the Zoroastrian priests and statesmen and was finally put to death. Thus, Char-Ghapi must have been founded in this timespan as a part of Khosrow's aspiring ambitions, which were never achieved. The conversion of Shirin and Gabriel was probably the effect of these ambitions as well as the pressure put on them by the courtiers and Zoroastrian priests who assumed that they had induced Khosrow to convert discreetly. Also, the region had already a particularly important place in the Christian realm.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declared no conflict of interest.

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