

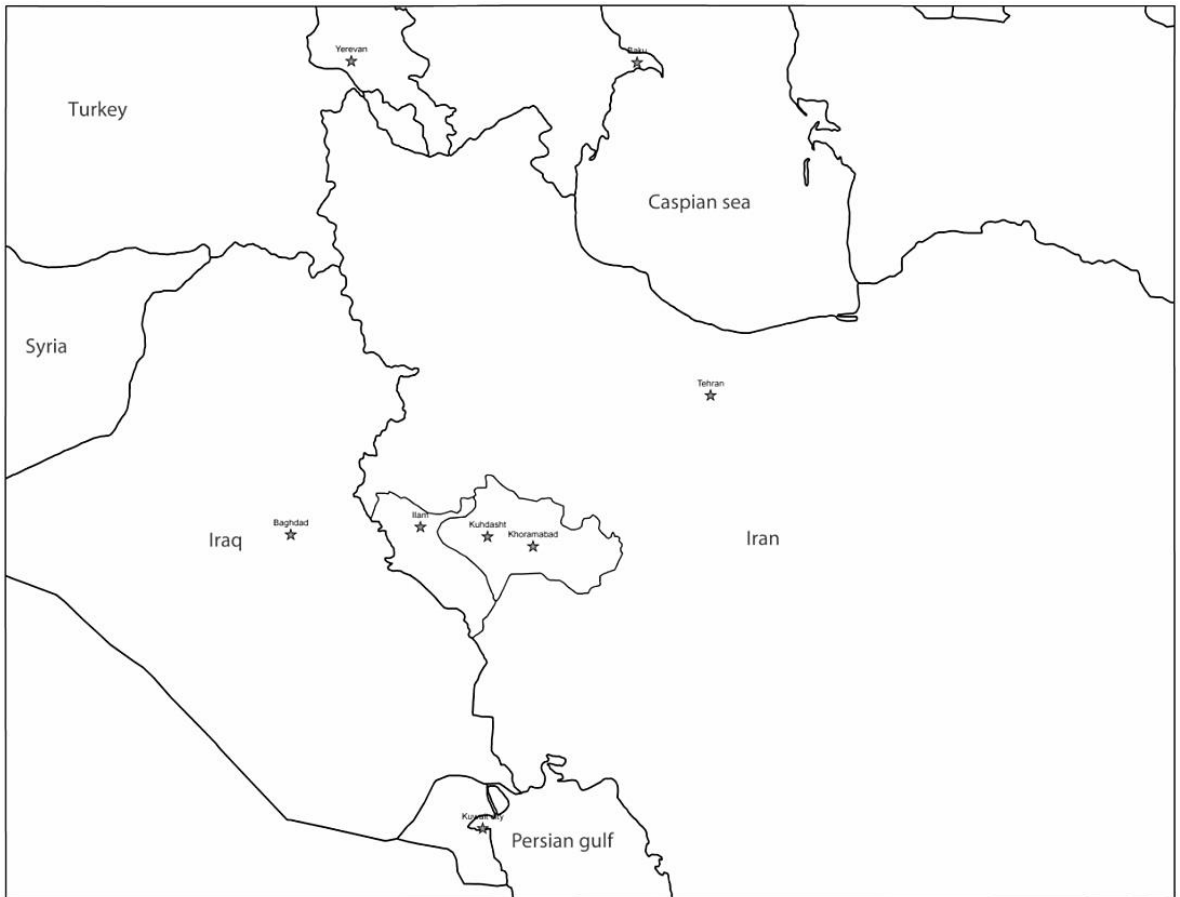
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## Sassanian stucco decorations from the Ramavand (*Barz Qawaleh*) excavations in the Lorestan Province of Iran

**Keywords:** Stucco, Sassanian art, Barz Qawaleh, Lorestan, Bard Qawela, Barz-Q town, ancient Iranian art.

### I. Introduction:

The site of *Barz Qawaleh* (transcription in accordance with the old Lori version of the name) is located at latitude N 47°09'112" and longitude E 33°20'175", in the vicinity of the village Ramavand in Lorestan province, western Iran. The site was discovered in 2007 during the archaeological survey conducted by S. R. Seyedin Boroujani of the *Iranian Center for Archaeological Research*. Proper archaeological investigations were initiated in 2008 by G. Karamian, A. Mansouri and M. Mohamadi. The excavations allowed permitted identification of the site as a late-Sassanian / early-Islamic settlement. The site measures ca. 18 ha, and must have been one of the largest and most important Sassanian settlements in the region of Lorestan.



**Fig.1.** Map showing the location of Lorestan province in Iran.

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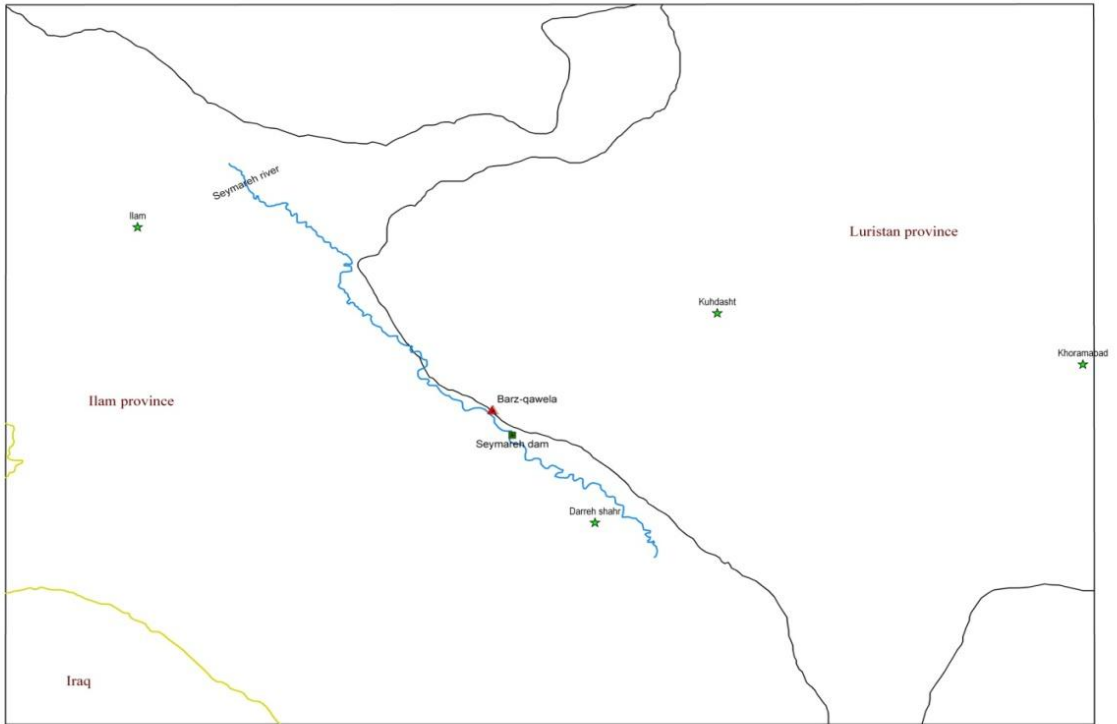


Fig. 2. The location of Barz –Q site in the bank of Seimarhe River in Lorestan (Map by Mahmoodi and Mansouri.)

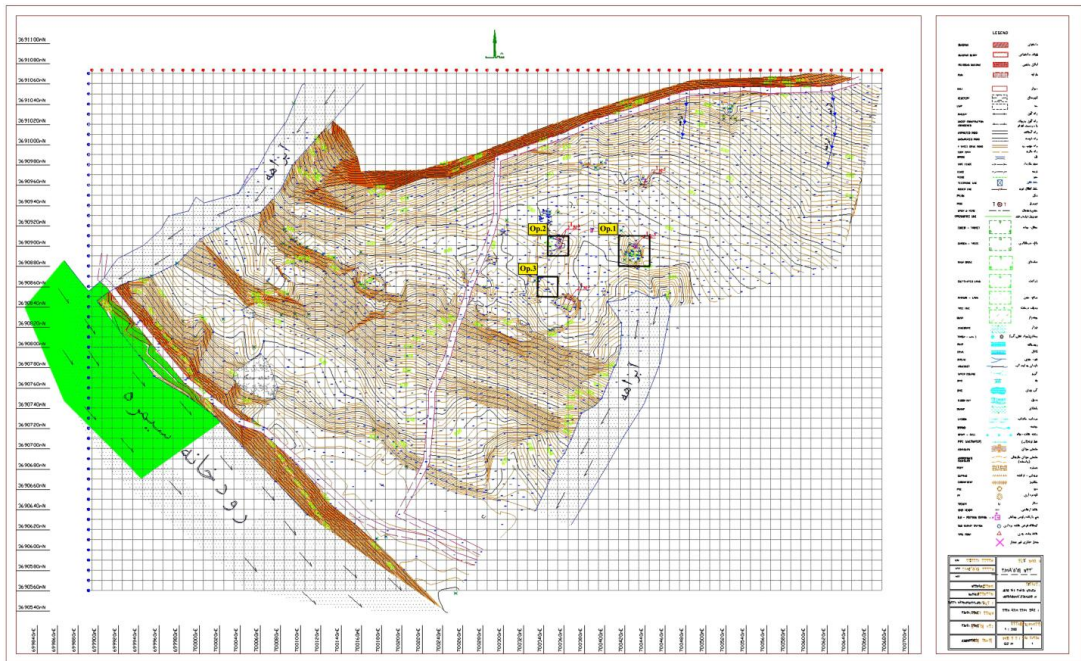


Fig. 3. Topography map of Barz-Q provided by Kamyar Abdi, 2010

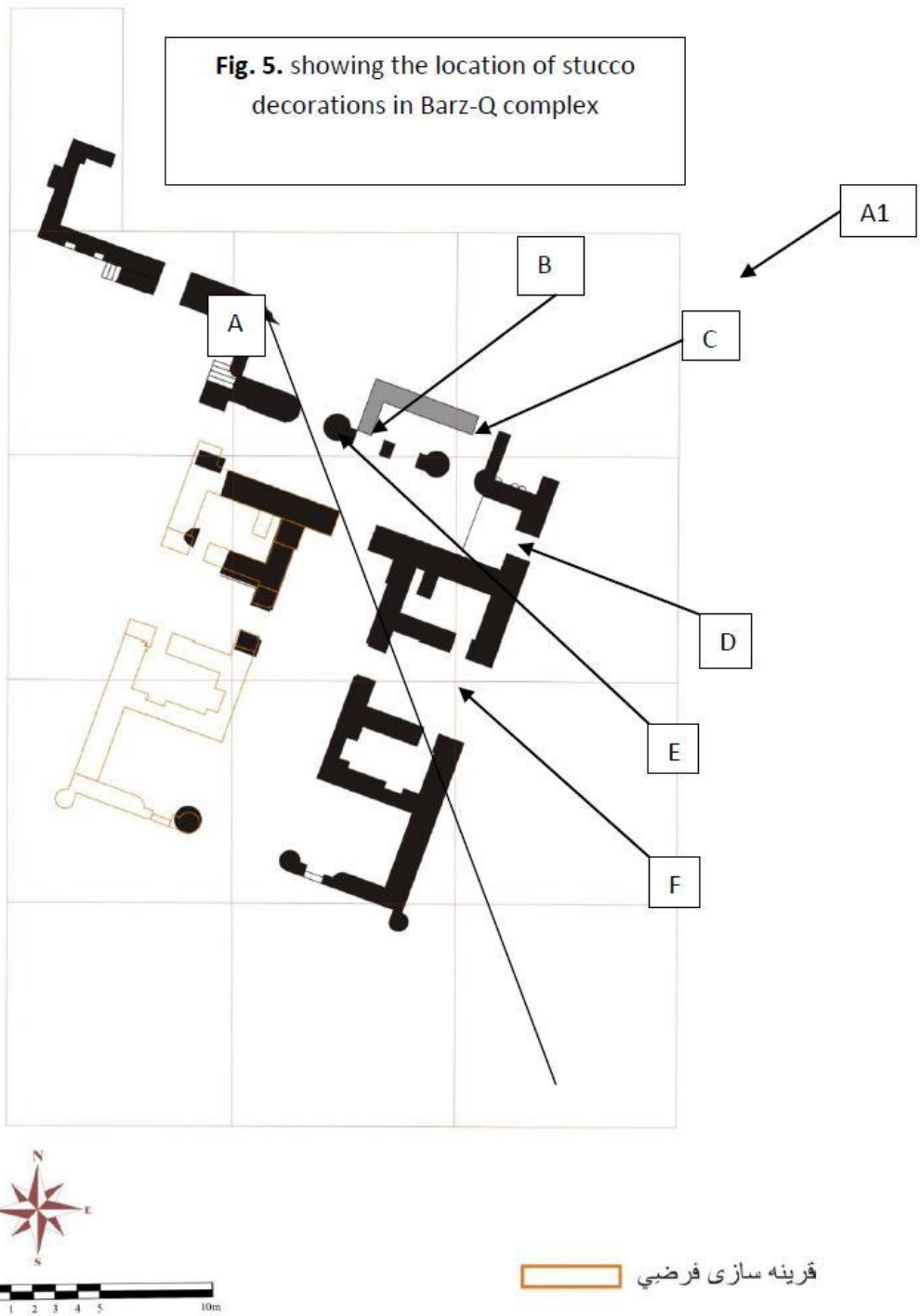
Further field research directed by G. Karamian and K. Abdi, also served the function of rescue excavations. They were conducted in the autumn of 2010, just before the planned opening of the dam on Seymareh river. The excavations, although limited in extent and time, provided important information on architecture and art of the late Sassanian period. Unfortunately, some portions of the site had been looted by robbers before the arrival of archaeologists, and fragments of stucco decoration scattered by the looters were collected by M. Mansouri and transferred to the *Cultural Heritage Organization of Lorestan*.



**Fig. 4.** Main façade of Op.1 complex of Barz-Q excavated by Abdi

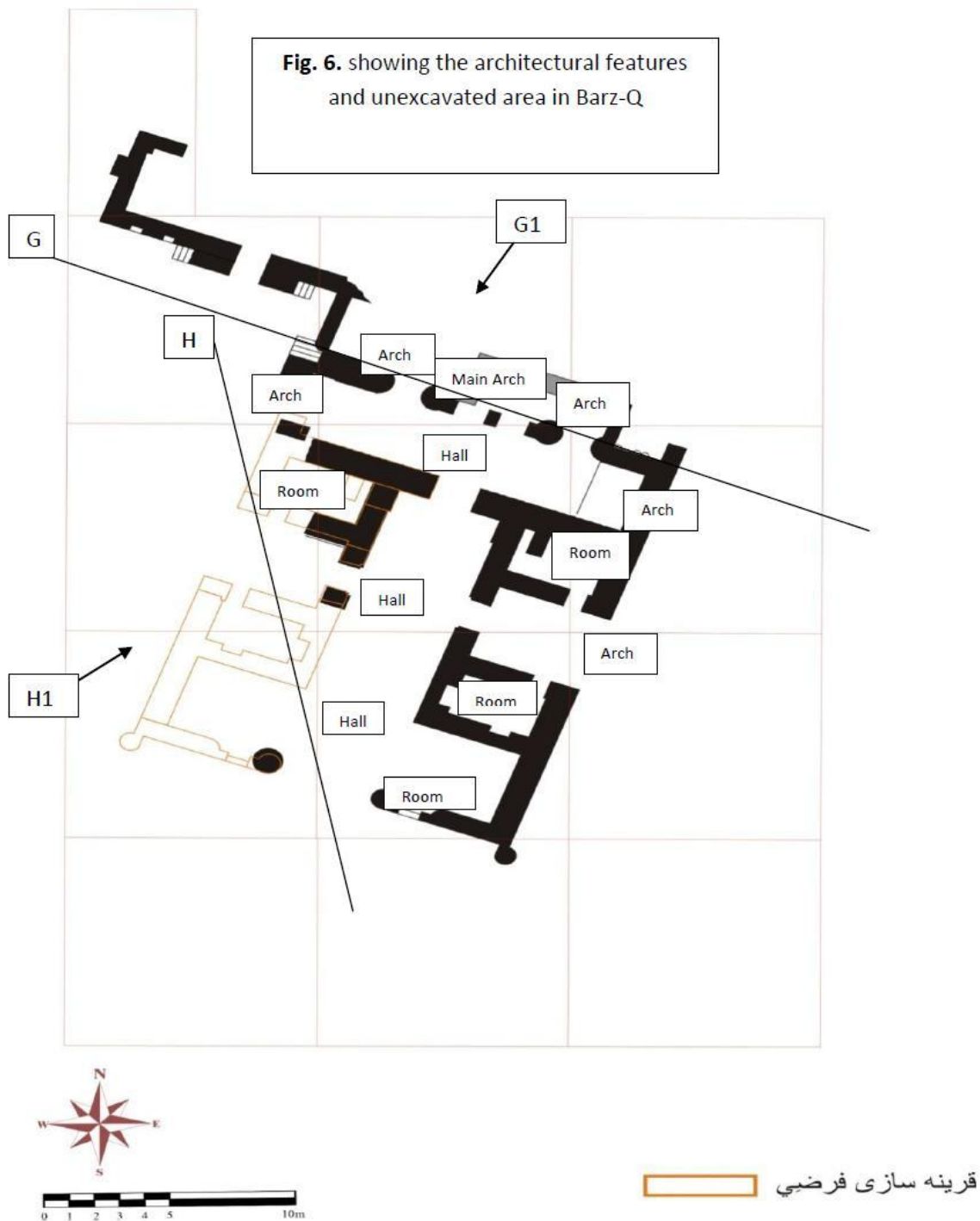
Three trenches (**Operations 1, 2, & 3**) were opened in the northern part of the site. During the excavations archaeologists unearthed monumental architectural remains that will be discussed elsewhere. The present paper deals solely with the stucco ornamentation that once embellished the interiors of these structures.

The main form of architectural decoration at *Barz Qawaleh* was a gypsum coating applied after the construction of the walls. This simple method was used mostly for the walls unearthed in the **Operation 2**. Another, and much more elaborate, method involved a use of moulds that allowed producing multiple plaques or panels with identical pre-fabricated designs and patterns. Many such panels, including some intact pieces, were found inside the structure excavated during **Operation 1** (Fig. 5: D, B, E), and these will be described in detail in the following paragraphs.



- A. Line is showing the location of the finding stuccoes (A1)
- B. Location of intact stuccos with swastika motif in site
- C. Place of finding stuccos pieces with human motifs.
- D. Location of intact stuccos with tulips motif in site.
- E. Location of intact stuccos with floral design (semi cylindrical pattern that applied in the corner of the wall).
- F. Location of winged and boar motifs

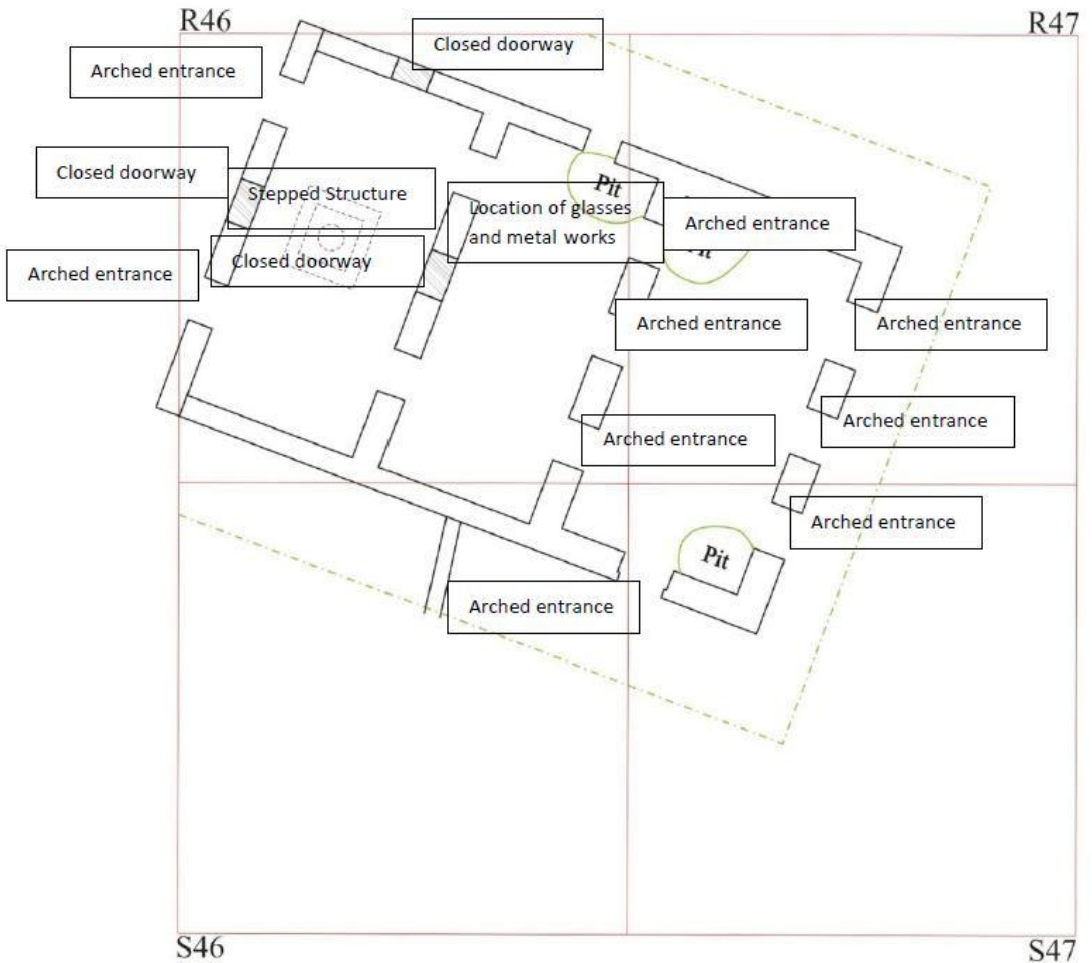
**Fig. 6.** showing the architectural features and unexcavated area in Barz-Q



- G. The line separating the architectural remains after Sassanian period (G1)
- H. Unexcavated area and symmetrical reconstruction (H1)



**Fig. 7.** Area of Op.2 complex excavated by Karamian teams (Supervisor trench Mostafa Rashidy and Masoud Biranvand)



**Fig. 8.** Showing the architectural features in Op.2

## II. Forms of stucco panels:

In terms of form, stucco pieces of the architectural decoration found at Barz Qawaleh may be divided into four groups:

1. Circular forms
2. Rectangular forms (decorative bands)
3. Square forms
4. Semi-cylindrical forms

1. Circular plaques, most often depicting floral designs, were especially popular in the stucco decoration of Barz Qawaleh. It seems that such forms were produced from circular moulds. In some cases circular plaques might have been applied to stucco tiles of other shapes (Fig. 16).

2. Rectangular panels were mostly used to create decorative bands, often with repetitive designs. Such stucco bands were attached to the flat surface of walls. In Barz-Qawaleh they were sometimes found *in situ*, still attached to the wall (Figs. 17, 18, 19, 21).

3. Square panels were decorated with various representations including zoomorphic, anthropomorphic (Figs. 9, 12, 13, 14), floral and geometric designs (Fig. 22). Traces of such square panels were observed in the gypsum mortar on the inner side of the fallen arch discovered in **Operation 1**, but they were also used to decorate walls. Parallel examples of this kind of decoration may be found in the palace of Ashur and the palace of Bishapur in Fars province.<sup>1</sup>

4. Semi-cylindrical pieces of stucco were applied in the corners of interiors. This type of stucco decoration usually depicted floral designs with long stems and leaves (Fig. 23).

## III. Representations on the stuccos from Barz Qawaleh:

In general the main features of the iconography employed in stucco decoration throughout Parthian and Sasanian periods are symmetry and repetitive motifs. The stuccos from *Barz Qawaleh* also follow this basic pattern. They represent a wide variety of themes, including floral, zoomorphic and figural designs that will be described in detail below.

### **The Woman (Fig. 9, 10, 11)**

#### **Dimensions unknown.**

The exact provenance and circumstances of discovery of this extraordinary and intact piece of stucco are thoroughly unclear. The photo published in the present paper (Fig. 9) was provided to the author by a local resident, but neither circumstances nor date of taking of the picture are known. Nevertheless, some broken pieces (Figs. 10, 11) of panels with the identical representation were obtained by archaeologists during the excavations at the *Barz Qawaleh* site.

The panel shows a fully frontal female figure inside an architectural frame formed by an arch decorated with a row of leaf-shaped elements, and set atop a double ledge ornamented with circular elements. At both bases of the arch, on the ledge, sits a bird (perhaps a bird of prey) with closed wings, its entire body turned outward and only its head turned inward. The woman stands on a fluted trapezoidal base, and is flanked by two crouching figures of winged-dogs. Similar to the birds above them, the winged dogs are turned outward and their heads are turned inward. Symmetrically, on both sides of the arch there is a representation of a stylized tree or grapevine in between which a figure of monkey is shown.

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<sup>1</sup> GHIRSHMANN (1962) 140, fig. 179; KRÖGER (1982) 195-196.



**Fig. 9.** Human motif Stucco frame from Barz-Q. With the exception of this picture all the following photoes have taken by the author in 2010

The woman is dressed entirely according to Sassanian fashion: *i.e.*, in a long draped dress with long sleeves, a girdle on her waist and a long shawl hanging from her shoulders. Her hair is braided neatly on both sides of her head. She wears a necklace of eight round elements that encircle her neck, and three other in the middle, which have a teardrop shape and hang down to her chest. On her wrists are plain bracelets, whereas her ankles are decorated with bracelets of small oval elements.

The bare feet of the woman are turned outwards. Her arms are bent at the elbows and her hands are level with her shoulders. In her left hand, the lady holds a three-branched plant with flowers of five petals. On her right hand, with closed palm, rests a relatively small bird of unknown specie that has slightly spread its wings.

One of the broken pieces of the stucco (Fig. 10) discovered during **Operation 1** depicts the figure of the woman from knees upwards, with a part of the arch above her head. The second one found nearby shows the complete figure of a winged-dog (Fig. 11). However, both pieces do not come from the same panel.

Similar representations of a woman standing under an arch may be found on Sasanian silver vessels located at the Hermitage Museum.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> TREVER, LUKONIN (1987) figs. 19, 80.





Fig. 10.



Fig. 11.

**Peacock (Fig. 12)**  
**Length 30 cm, width 30 cm.**

Among the stucco panels from Barz-Qawaleh several bear an image of peacock. The one reproduced in the present article is shown inside a circle formed by two rows of small round elements. The corners of the panel are decorated with a floral pattern. A similar decorative frame may be found in the stucco designs from Ctesiphon.<sup>3</sup> In his beak, the peacock holds an object resembling a necklace with three oval stones hanging in the middle.



**Fig. 12.** Peacock motif from Barz-Q stucco

These representations are very similar to the peacocks depicted on the dresses of the bride's entourage from the palace of Afrasiab in Samarkhand, dated to ca. 6<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>4</sup>

The peacock was one of Anahita's holy creatures but it may be also found Greco-Roman and Christian art, where the bird symbolizes a soul drinking water from the fountain of life.<sup>5</sup> The Iranian peacock derived from this same background: Just when or how it was absorbed into Iranian iconography has not been precisely determined. It seems likely, however, that this occurred via the figure of Anahita who was the Iranian goddess of water and fertility. A certain passage in the account of Tabari leads us to believe that the peacock remained a sacred bird until 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. In the above-mentioned passage, Tabari mentions a fire temple in Bukhara, adjacent to which there was a building where peacocks were kept.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> KRÖGER (1982) 54, fig. 24.

<sup>4</sup> FELTHAM (2010) 20, fig. 12.

<sup>5</sup> GELFER (1986) 131.

<sup>6</sup> GELFER (1986) 131.

**Boar's head (Fig. 13)**  
**Length 30 cm, width 30.1 cm.**

Wild boar representations appear in various branches of Sasanian art. The boar's head motif from Barz Qawaleh is turned toward the right, and is surrounded by a circular frame decorated with grapevines. It may be easily compared with stucco panels from Tepe Hesar at Damghan (Pennsylvania Museum of Art).<sup>7</sup> The latter, however, is turned toward left, and the grapevine motif surrounds the circular frame.



**Fig. 13.** Boar motif from Barz-Q

The boar is often considered as a symbol of victory and protection for the one who possesses *xwarreh*. It is said to be a representation of Verethragna, god of victory.<sup>8</sup> This example of the use of zoomorphic imagery supports the theory that Sassanian artists intentionally replaced anthropomorphic images of deities. A ram, a boar, and the *sēn-murw* are recurrent motifs in the art of the Sasanian period, and even later on, as they are found on silk clothes from western China through Sogdiana to medieval Byzantium.<sup>9</sup>

The ram and wild boar, common motifs in Sassanian stucco, were deemed the sacred animals of the war god *Verethragna*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> SCHMIDT (1937) 333, fig. H1323 and POPE (1938-1939) 177, fig. 4.

<sup>8</sup> ROSE (2010) 106.

<sup>9</sup> ROSE (2010) 106.

<sup>10</sup> HOFFMAN (2007) 44.

**Duck (Fig. 14)**

**Length 29.3 cm, width 29.1 cm.**

The figure of a duck is depicted in the middle part of stucco piece. The main motif is placed within a geometrical frame consisting of overlaying rectangles and circles. Button and hatch motifs are depicted on a rectangular shape. In the star shape lies a circular shape, which covers the main duck motif. Since the Barz Q site sits on the ancient Seymareh river, the bird motif in this artwork may be related to the bio-environment of the ancient site. The duck motif also has a mythical significance in the rites of the Sassanian period: One of the documents, The Sacramentary of Gellon, which shows the duck as a sacred symbol passes from Sassanian to Christian religious texts: The Sacramentary of Gellon was most probably written and decorated at the monastery of the Holy Cross at Meaux, 44 km west of Paris, at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>



**Fig. 14.** Stucco piece with geometrical designs and duck motif in the center from Barz- Q

<sup>11</sup> BALDWIN (1970) 3, figs. 1, 2.

**Wing (Fig. 15)**

**Length 23.2 cm, width 12.2 cm.**

One of the unique stucco motifs at the Barz Qawaleh site is the eagle half-wing; the only one obtained from excavations. Fortunately, a full sample of the motif was already found in *Ctesiphon* and has since been used as the logo of Tehran University.<sup>12</sup>

The eagle is one of the holy and mythical symbols in Sassanian art. In many Sasanian scenes, eagle-wings play important roles; eagle-wings also are represented in the crowns of the Sassanid kings.<sup>13</sup>



**Fig. 15.** Fragment from Barz-Q

A Sassanian motif that often occurs in Islamic ornaments of the eight-century is pair of wings originally symbolizing the divine power of Sassanian kings.<sup>14</sup> According to Hoffman, “the wings, arranged in pairs, were shared with the goddess Anahita”.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> KRÖGER (1982) 53, fig. 24.

<sup>13</sup> DMITRIEV (2004) 1-7.

## Floral Pattern

Floral motifs generally played an important role in Sassanid architectural decoration, and in Barz-Qawaleh in particular. These motifs can be divided into two distinct types:

The first type includes leaves and branches that are of a natural and simple design.

The second, and more complex, type include the following features: vine leaves which run along the frieze; floral and fruit motifs consisting of different forms of flowers, acanthus leaves, palmettos, and lotus flowers (with variety in number of petals); pine tree fruit; grapes and pomegranates. The second type of design is sometimes used in combination with geometrical patterns. Similar motifs at *Ctesiphon* and *Kish* archeological sites have also been found.

Sometimes plant motifs are combined with Sassanian symmetrical wings, which probably represent the eagle.<sup>16</sup>

### Lotus (Fig. 16)

Diameter 12 cm.

The stucco frame with lotus motif is seen in different forms at Barz Q. The lotus motif is hemi concentric, sometimes seen in the form of 6-petal or 8-petal shapes. These stucco motifs can be compared to Lotus shapes on Sassanian stucco from Mesopotamia; There is also similar stucco from the *Chal e Tarkhan* site now located in the Iranian National Museum.<sup>17</sup>



**Fig. 16.** Lotus motif from Barz Q

<sup>14</sup> DIMAND (1933) 79-81.

<sup>15</sup> HOFFMAN (2007) 44.

<sup>16</sup> BALTRUSAITIS (1938) 608-609.

<sup>17</sup> KRÖGER (1982) 152, fig. 72.

**Pine-cone (Fig. 17)**

**Length 29 cm, width 20.5 cm.**

Stucco with pinecone and leaves (like acanthus leaves) with symmetrical shapes on either side were found. The motif of a pinecone also appears on a stucco relief from *Ma'arid*, but mainly in early Islamic decoration.<sup>18</sup>

Religious meaning was attached to pine cones in antiquity.<sup>19</sup> The shapes were employed by various cults as a familiar sign of rebirth.<sup>20</sup> A pinecone, often appearing in association with grape vines, and thus suggestive of Bacchus, wine and fertility in classical art.<sup>21</sup>

Pinecone designs were used by the Romans as the symbol of generation;<sup>22</sup> while for early Christians (who had originally placed in it forecourt of Old Saint Peter's) it symbolized the promise of eternal life.<sup>23</sup>



**Fig. 17.** Motif of pine cone from Barz-Q

**Flower motif (fan-like form) (Fig. 18)**

**Length 25.1 cm, width 17.9 cm.**

Figure 18 is a stucco frame with 6-petal, 5-petal and 3-petal flowers that approximates an overall floral shape. The bigger motif is a fan-like one with two parts. The upper part has five petals and the lower part has three petals like the tied stems of a bunch of flowers. These stucco motifs are comparable with similar evidence from *Ctesiphon*.<sup>24</sup> There also exists similar evidence from *Hajiabad* in the Iranian National Museum in Tehran.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> KRÖGER (1982) 124, fig. 67.

<sup>19</sup> FINCH (1991) 16.

<sup>20</sup> FINCH (1991) 16.

<sup>21</sup> BLYTHE (1981) 59, 82.

<sup>22</sup> LOSH (2001) 681-687.

<sup>23</sup> LOSH (2001) 681-687.

<sup>24</sup> KRÖGER (1982) 95, fig. 51.

<sup>25</sup> AZARNOUSH (1987) 114.



**Fig. 18.** Stucco fragment from Barz-Q

According to Bivar, ‘the motif has a long history in ancient oriental art. It was popular in Neo-Assyrian art, whence it passed through Achaemenid tradition, becoming a favorite decoration upon Persian metal works of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. In its fully developed form, dissimilar flowers alternate upon the stem, blossoms and buds or lotus and palm-frond being found.’ Our examples also show this feature. Finally, the design is also found in an elaborate form, in several branch of art from the Achaemenian era. There is an example in felt appliqué, probably of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, from the second *Kurgan* in *Pazirik*. This is perhaps a nomad copy of late Achaemenian designs. Examples closely approximating those under discussion are also found in Sassanian period, in stucco decoration from *Ctesiphon* and *Kish*, and as late as the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD in bas relief decoration at *Taq-e Bustan*.<sup>26</sup>

**Flower motif (3-petal flower) (Fig. 19)**  
**Length 25 cm, width 14.9 cm.**

Figure 19 is a stucco with a 3-petal flower (perhaps a tulip). There is parallel evidence in *Kish* located at the Museum of National History in Chicago and was also reported in *Ctesiphon*.<sup>27</sup>



**Fig. 19.** Tulip motif from Barz-Q

<sup>26</sup> BIVAR (1954) 182-183..

<sup>27</sup> BALTRUSAITIS (1938) 608, fig. 184; KRÖGER (1982) 69, fig. 34b.



These motifs not only were installed as stucco decoration on walls, but also were common motifs on Sasanian seals, like the samples from Moore's Collection of seals. One seal in this collection contains tulip and a patronymic with the word "Boar," a common word in the Sasanian period, both as a name and as a symbol indicating courage.<sup>28</sup> Baltrusaitis believes this type of floral motif is a form of lotus blossom that has three petals.<sup>29</sup>

### **Pomegranate and vine leaf (Fig. 20)**

**Length 21.3 cm, width 10.2 cm.**

The subject is a vase with two branches on either sides. Two pomegranates on the right and two vine leaves on the left. There is similar evidence of this type of motif from the Sasanian site of Kish in Mesopotamia.<sup>30</sup>

Pomegranates are popular in oriental art; they survived in Sasanian art and continued to early Islamic art to play prominent in *Omayyad* decorations: For instance, in a Jerusalem wood carving in *Al Aksa* mosque in Mashtta featured in combination with pinecones.<sup>31</sup>



**Fig. 20.** Pomegranates and grape leaves from Barz-Q

### **Floral designs inside heart panels (Fig. 21)**

**Length 25.5 cm, width 14.9 cm.**

Figure 21 is a stucco design with a combined heart and floral design. It is a fragment of a decorative band. Similar samples have been already reported in palaces of *Kish* and *Ctesiphon* in Mesopotamia.

In designs at *Kish* and *Ctesiphon*, the inverted hearts alternate with a single pointed leaf, which fills the space between them, thus giving the design continuity.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> BRUNNER (1979) 40.

<sup>29</sup> BALTRUSAITIS (1938) 606.

<sup>30</sup> KRÖGER (1982) 67 fig. 32; BALTRUSAITIS (1938) 609, fig. 186.

<sup>31</sup> DIMAND (1937) 301.

<sup>32</sup> BALTRUSAITIS (1938) 616-617, figs. 195, 196.



**Fig. 21.** Floral designs with combined hearts from Barz-Q

**Meander motif (Fig. 22)**

**Length 36 cm, width 26.2 cm.**

Stucco pieces with these motifs are juxtaposed artistically. Meander motifs at *Barz Qawaleh* are similar to other Sassanian contexts. This motif sometimes occurred in conjunction with floral designs. Meander symbols from *Barz Qawaleh* are similar to samples discovered at *Ctesiphon* and *Kish*.<sup>33</sup>



**Fig. 22.** Sawastika with floral motif from Barz-Q

<sup>33</sup> KRÖGER (1982) 102, fig. 56; BALTRUSAITIS (1938) 606, fig. 181.

#### IV. Conclusions:

Conclusions from research can be divided into two categories as follows:

1. Sample stucco motifs from *Barz Qawaleh* are similar to those stucco motifs found in other Sassanian sites (sites like *Hajjiabad* in *Fars*, *Tepe Hissar* in *Damghan*, *Ctesiphon* and *Kish* in Mesopotamia). Based upon evidence of similarity with other Sassanian sites, the *Barz Qawaleh* stuccos can also be linked to the Sassanian period. The variety of stuccos from the site makes it one of the finest informational resources for the study of Sassanian art and a useful site for the study of Iranian historical geography.

2. The above-described architectural designs hint that structures at the site were a significant place of habitation. On the other hand, the motif of what may be a sacred goddesses also suggests that *Barz Qawaleh* may have functioned as a religious monument.



**Fig. 23.** Stucco piece with leaves-&-stem decoration from Barz-Q

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## Summary

Sassanian stucco decorations from the Ramavand (*Barz Qawaleh*) excavations in the Lorestan Province of Iran

*Barz Qawaleh* (also known as *Bard Qawela* or “Barz-Q” town) is an ancient site located in the vicinity of the village of Ramavand in Iran, in the Kounani region of the Seymareh river basin. The ancient site should be considered as one of the largest and most important Sassanian settlements in Lorestan, Iran. The present paper and accompanying photographs introduce some elements of the stucco decorations discovered at Barz Qawaleh, which constitute remarkable evidence of Sassanian art.

Apart from introducing the findings from archeological, this paper offers some interpretations of the motifs and designs represented by the stuccos, some of which may be found also in materials from other Sassanian sites in Iran and Mesopotamia.

**Keywords:** Stucco, Sassanian art, Barz Qawaleh, Lorestan, Bard Qawela, Barz-Q town, ancient Iranian art