

Borders

Itineraries on the Edges of Iran

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If these Walls Could Speak The Barrier of Alexander, Wall of Darband and Other Defensive Moats

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Abstract This essay provides a brief discussion of the views of the Sasanians about the limits of their empire from the third to the seventh century CE. The walls created on the boundaries of the empire from the first century of its existence to the final brick in the wall in the sixth provides an image of Iranshahr. The material culture is set aside the literary evidence and their differences and ideological values are highlighted.

Keywords Sasanians. Iranshahr. Defensive moat. Barrier.

In Memory of Gherardo Gnoli

In antiquity, several civilizations built walls for creating a barrier between what they considered their territory and that of the outsiders. The most famous of these are the Hadrian Wall built by the Romans and the Great Wall of China, which protected the Roman Empire from the west and the Chinese realm from the north against the nomadic incursions. A lesser known wall system is the one built by the Sasanians from the fifth century CE onward. Unlike the other two walls, the Sasanians built several walls around their empire, which protected them from the Huns, the Turks and the Arabs. Of course since the Achaemenid Empire, Median *paradaiza* (Old Persian *paradaida*, Greek παράδεισος) has carried with it a huge ideological significance (Panaino 2012, p. 150). In this essay, in addition to mentioning the importance of the walls themselves, the political and ideological significance of such a building project will be discussed. It will be posited that walls not only provided a physical protection against the others, but also suggested a mental projection of those within the civi-

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lized (inside/*ēr*) and the un-civilized (outside/*an-ēr*) realms, something that served to regulate the inevitable interaction between the two.¹

The textual and archaeological data suggest that the Sasanians built four walls: 1) The Barrier of Alexander (Wall of Gorgan); 2) the Wall of Tammishe; 3) the Alān Gates (Darband); and 4) the Wall of the Arabs. Of these walls, three are demarcating the northern (north-west and north-east) limits of the Sasanian Empire and one is a barrier in the south-west. They are mainly next to the two bodies of waters, the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. Thus, seas and walls were the true defense for the limits of the empire.

The two walls in the northwest are known as the Great Wall of Gorgan and the Wall of Tammishe. The Wall of Gorgan, also known as *Sadd-ī Iskandar*, runs across the Turkmen steppe from the Caspian Sea to the mountains. It is about 195 km. long with some 33 forts, along with gates and in fact is the longest continuous wall built in antiquity (Nokandeh et al. 2007, p. 127). Its beginning is dated to the fifth century, continuing into the early sixth CE, no doubt a defensive mechanism against the Hephthalites and other nomadic people pressing on the northeastern borders of the Sasanian Empire (p. 163). We know that in the fifth century CE, the Sasanian Empire faced a difficult challenge from the Hephthalites. The King of Kings Pērōz met a powerful army of the Hephthalites in 469 CE, where his harem was captured. Finally in 484 CE, Pērōz lost his life along with seven of his sons and his entire army (Daryaee 2009, p. 25). No doubt, these events must have prompted the Sasanians to think of a defense mechanism against the invaders; it seems that the walls were indeed an effective security measure against the threats in this region (p. 167).

The Wall of Tammishe is the other important wall in the same region, which runs from the southeast corner of the Caspian Sea into the foothills of the Alborz mountains. The excavation report suggests that it was also built during the Sasanian period (Bivar, Fehèrvéri 1966, p. 40). Textual sources such as Yāqūt and Tabarī associate this wall with the time of Khusro I (mid-sixth century CE). According to Yāqūt, Tamīs was also a city in Tabaristan area close to Sarī. He goes on to describe the place as:

At this place there is a great portal, and it is not possible for any of the people of Tabaristan to depart from there to Jurjān except through the portal, because it extends from the mountains to the sea, (it is made) of baked brick and gypsum. It was Kisrā Anūšīrvān who built it as an obstacle against the Turks and their raids into Tabaristan. (Yāqūt 1866-1873, 3, p. 574, quoted in Mahamedi 2004, p. 147)

1 Contact is inevitable and the gates of the defensive walls simply point to the fact that the Sasanians attempted at maintaining and controlling it.

The third wall is located on the western side of the Caspian Sea, built by the Sasanians during the reign of Kawād I and later Khusro I in the fifth and sixth century CE (Artamonov 1962, p. 122). The Darband Wall was a project for whose upkeep, the Romans also provided a subsidy, as nomadic raids endangered both empires. The Darband Wall (also known as *bāb al-alān* [Alan Gates]), was at least 40 km long going into wooded areas and impassable mountains. It had seven gates and some twenty-seven towers in the intervals of 170-200 m and its construction was considered by the Arabs as one of the wonders of the world. Its more interesting feature is that it has at least twenty-five Middle Persian inscriptions on it, dated to the sixth century CE (Kettenhofen 1994). We also learn of the name of the accountant (*amārgar*) who commissioned some of these inscriptions, Bazniš ī Ādūrbādagān. Balādhurī states that:

Kisra Anūšīrwān... built the city of al-Bāb u'l-Abwāb, and this name was given to it because its fortifications comprised the gate to several mountain passes. (Mahamedi 2004, p. 151)

This wall was important in that it protected both the Sasanians and the Romans from nomadic incursions into the Caucasus. Priscus in the fifth century CE reports that:

There was also an embassy from the Persian king complaining that some of their people were seeking refuge with the Romans... They also request that the Romans contributed money for maintaining the fortress Iuroepiaach, which is situated by the Caspian Gates, or at least commanded soldiers to its protection because they would no longer bear the costs and protection of the place by themselves. (Dignas, Winter 2007, p. 193)

The last and far less known defensive system is called *Khandaq-ī Šāpūr* in the Perso-Arabic sources and *War ī Tāzīgān* (Wall of the Arabs) in Middle Persian Sources. The *Šahrestānīhā-ī Ērānšahr* mistakenly confuses Šābuhr I for Šābuhr II as the builder and states (ŠĒ 25):

Šahrestān ī hērt šābuhr ī ardaxšīrān kard, u-š mihrzād ī hērt marzbān pad war ī tāzīgān be gumārd

The city of Hīra was built by Šāpūr, the son of Ardaxšīr, and he appointed Mihrzād as the margrave of Hīrā over the Wall of the Arabs. (Daryae 2009, p. 18)

The Sasanians appear to have controlled the region by appointing a margrave (*marzbān*) over the wall, where in the second half of the Sasanian rule, the Lakhmid/Nasrid chiefs also became its protector (Fisher 2011, p. 185). They were placed to defend the area from the Romans and their

client kingdom of the Ghassanids. By such a scheme the Sasanians, no doubt were protecting the agricultural lands of Sasanian Mesopotamia from the Bedouins of Arabia (Bosworth 2003). We should also remind ourselves that Hira is just west of the Euphrates, the river boundary of the Sasanian-Roman world. The Wall of the Arabs was important enough that a *Marzbān* 'Margrave' was appointed to it (ŠĒ 52). Yāqūt states that:

Khandaq-ī Sābūr is in Bariyata al-Kufa, as was dug by the order of Sābūr to separate his (realm) from that of the Arabs, for fear of their raids. Sābūr the Lord of Shoulders (Šāpūr II), built and made frontier watchtowers to protect the areas that laid near the desert, and ordered a moat (*Khandaq*) to be dug from the lower region of the desert to what precedes Basra, and is joined to the sea (Persian Gulf). There, he built turrets and forts and arranged frontier watchtowers, so that the moat could be the barrier between the inhabitants of the desert and the people of as-Sawād. (Yāqūt 1866-1973, 2, p. 65)

I believe that H. Mahamedi has convincingly demonstrated that *khandaq* not only takes on the sense of a 'moat' or 'trench', but also that of the 'wall'. Thus, a wall seems to have been built from the Persian Gulf to the Basra area already in the fourth century CE as the result of Arab Bedouin raids into the Sasanian *Ērānšahr*'s agricultural lands.

The Symbolic and Psychological Meaning of the Wall

I would like to take the discussion into a different direction and propose the ideological meaning and importance of walls for the Sasanians.² The recent work by B. Lincoln has provided a new insight into the mind-set and ideology of the Achaemenid Empire (Lincoln 2012). One of the important observations by Lincoln is that the Old Persian **pariadaida*, a walled garden, not only had a profane meaning, but also carried its sacred connotation, that is a paradise in the Christian sense of the word already in the Achaemenid period (2012, pp. 8-9; Lincoln 2003, p. 145). This paradise, a walled garden, was a cosmographical framing by which the Achaemenids were attempting to spread throughout their empire (Old Persian *būmi*). (Lincoln 2012, p. 194; 2007, pp. 70-71).

2 The author is using some of his experience, as he lives in what is sometimes called behind the 'Orange Curtain', which is really an ideological boundary between the more liberal Los Angeles and conservative Orange County, California.

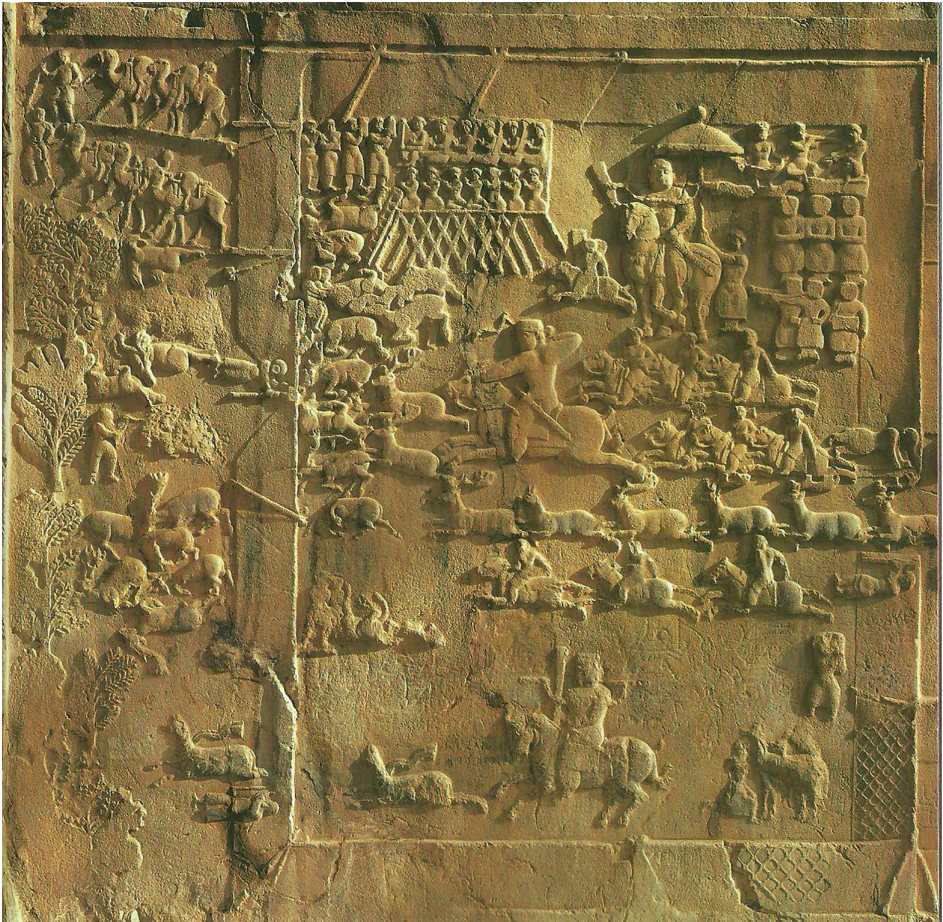


Figure 1. Tāq-i Bustān. Photo by Ali Matin

It is important to note that some notions of *pariadaida*, Persian (*pālīz/ferdows*)³ was in existence in the Sasanian period, where for example in the relief of Khusro II at Tāq-i Bustān, one may have a pictorial imagery of it.⁴ So the concept may also have been in existence in late antiquity. However, protecting such space which was at times imagined as a garden or orchard was only part of the royal realm and the duties of its adminis-

3 Cf. Lincoln 2012, p. 5. One should also notice the Persian *bāy ī ferdows*, a ‘paradise garden’.

4 This may be considered of course a *wiškar* ‘hunting ground’.

trators. Interestingly, in a Middle Persian apocalyptic poem, *bāy ud bōstān* (gardens and orchards) of *Ērānšhar* are alleged to have been confiscated by the Arabs.⁵ I would suggest that ideologically, for the Sasanians, the walls at the corners of the Sasanian world symbolically provided a protected garden or orchard, in fact the empire itself, which they kept safe from outsiders.

The best evidence for the idea that *Ērānšahr* is an enclosure and an orchard which must be defended from others, is provided in the *Šāhnāme* of Ferdowsī in the section dealing with the seventh century Sasanian Empire. The idea of being defended is given as such:

Iran is like a lush Spring garden
Where Roses ever bloom
The army and weapons are the garden's walls
And lances its wall of thorns
If the garden's walls (دیوار) are pulled down
Then there would be no difference between it and the wilderness
[beyond]

Take care not to destroy its walls
And not to dishearten or weaken Iranians
If you do, then raiding and pillaging will follow
And also the battle-cries of riders and the din of war
Risk not the safety of the Iranians' wives, children, and lands
by bad policies and plans
(Omidasalar 2012, pp. 165-166; Ferdowsī 1998-2008, 8, pp. 275-282).⁶

Thus, I would like to propose a mental meaning for walls of the Iranian world, most probably similar to other civilizations that built walls in antiquity, but also modern walls and defenses. Not only Hadrians' Wall, the Great China wall, but also the wall built by Israel and the one in Ireland and more recently the proposed wall by the US with its border with Mexico have huge symbolic, ideological and political meanings. Walls are meant to provide safety from the outsiders, but this 'protection' also attempts to separate those on the other side from those within the walls. Another example is the idea of 'gated community' which now roughly houses ten percent of the American population. The population in these gated communities tends to be not only economically well off, but more importantly

5 For the latest translation of this Pahlavi poem see Daryaei 2012, pp. 10-11.

6 The glossing and changes in the translation of the text in the book and what I have quoted here is done by Omidasalar.

ethnically white.⁷ These gated walled enclosures in a sense attempt to restrict contact with those outside, which in turn tends to make the outsiders demonized.

This idea also bodes well with Jeffrey Cohen's monster theory that those on the outside represent the other (1996, pp. 3-25). A good example can be found in the *Tārīkh-e Sīstān*, where the leader of the Arab armies in the seventh century CE, Rabi', who is set to conquer the province of Sīstān is described as a tall, dark man with big teeth and big lips sitting on corpse (*nasā*) of men. The leader of the Iranian forces sees Arab general and at once suggest that it is believed that Ahriman (i.e., the Evil Sprit), who is thought not have a form, now he has appeared before them in the flesh! (Anon. 1935, p. 82). If we follow Carlo Cereti's reading, the Arabs are also mentioned in Sasanian Middle Persian texts as *gurg ī dō zang* 'two legged-wolves' (Cereti 1995, p. 207), which regardless of its earlier *männerbund* connotation,⁸ here provides an old Iranian topos which may go back to the Avestan interpolation of two legged Marya (*männerbund*) and wolves and other monsters (Yasna 9.18). (Kellens 2007, pp. 59-60; also Pirart 2007, pp. 76-77).

One could suggest that these outsiders or others are simply *an-ēr* were the anthesis of the *ēr* or Iranians, who with their *ērīh* and other values were protected within the walls (Gnoli 1989, pp. 147-148). The nomadic outsiders, be it Huns, Arabs, Hephthalites or the Turks, did not have a similar notion of boundary (Barth 1969, pp. 19-20), but walls built by the Sasanians provided limits for security, as barriers against them (pp. 27-28). These barriers or walls had a psychological resonance. While it isolated the Arabs, Hephthalites and Turks from *Ērānšahr*, it also helped solidify a sense of togetherness in what F. Barth calls a polyethnic social system (pp. 16-17). The late G. Gnoli has written much in regard to the formation of Iranian identity, and according to him it is only from the third century CE on that such an identity, where the ethnic, linguistic and religious values were put into motion in order to created a 'political import' meaning and Iranian empire (Gnoli 2006). He also suggests that it is in the sixth century CE, during the reign of Khusro Anūšagruwān (531-579 CE) that we find the final stage of the political program backed by the aristocracy, warrior class and the Zoroastrian priesthood (Gnoli 2006). Of course, this is the time that walls around the empire are fully built and in operation.

Thus, one can conclude that in a way the walls helped create, or main-

7 For the most recent and fascinating study see, Benjamin 2009. For a brief commentary see his *The Gated Community Mentality*, in *The New York Times* (2012).

8 The classic treatment is by Stig Wikander (1938). The most recent comprehensive treatment in the Indo-European world is by K. McCone (1987).

tain an identity as a place where *ērānagān* (Iranians) dwelled, where sweet orchards existed, while the monstrous 'others' in the Cohenian sense of the word, dwelled at the edges and outside the empire. This vision and attitude made walls a perfect means for boundary and identity maintenance⁹ in the Sasanian period, at a time where the idea of Iran became a political reality and its ideological effect took full form, something that was to last beyond the life span of the late antique empire. What is important is that the wall also provided a psychological and ideological effect for the rulers and those ruled and living within the *Ērānšahr*. This mind-set, although challenged through the ages and after the walls had come down, have provided a sense of being and a mode of differentiation for some on the Iranian Plateau.

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9 For the idea of boundary maintenance in a communal sense see Sizgorich 2009, ch. 1.

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