

PERSIAN HISTORY: SASANIAN ART & ARCHITECTURE



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Introduction

This thesis delves into the examination of the art and architecture of the Persian Sasanian empire by critically delving into three iconic artifacts from ancient Persian history: the Relief of Shapur I at Naqš-e Rostam, the Taq-i Kisra - Arch of Ctesiphon, Dish with King Hormizd II / III Hunting Lions and the Anahita Vessel. These case studies have been chosen based on their significance within the literature written about Sasanian history. Through a critical lens, it explores their significance in their historical context. By analysing these artifacts, this thesis aims to unravel hidden layers of history, challenge traditional narratives, and foster a deeper understanding of the enduring impact of Persian civilization on architectural and artistic expression. The literature research will hone in on the artifacts and structures that serve as visual narratives, delving into the stories embedded within them and shedding light on their unique role within the broader tapestry of Persian history; what makes these particularly Sasanian? Or is this Sasanian identity unclear?

The Sasanian Empire, which endured from 224 to 651 CE, emerged as a pivotal period in Persian history, showcasing noteworthy innovations in art and architecture. Rooted in the rich legacy of earlier Persian Empires, particularly the Achaemenid and Parthian eras, the Sasanians exhibited a remarkable synthesis of cultural influences. This synthesis is evident in their art and architectural endeavours, where they skilfully amalgamated diverse elements while also introducing novel features.

The period preceding the Sasanian was characterized by the Parthian Empire, which ruled over vast territories in the Near East from the 3rd century BCE to the 3rd century CE. Parthian society was marked by a blend of Hellenistic and Iranian influences, seen in their art, architecture, and administrative practices, laying the groundwork for the subsequent Sasanian dynasty.

The inclusion of these artifacts in this architectural history thesis serves as a testament to the rich cultural heritage and architectural achievements of ancient Persia. However, beyond mere admiration, it is essential to critically examine these artifacts, considering their broader implications for contemporary architectural practice and societal values. By interrogating the complexities of their historical narratives and cultural significance, this thesis endeavours to shed light on overlooked perspectives and challenge conventional interpretations.

First chapter: Art of the Sasanians, rock reliefs.



Naqš-e Rostam, Relief of Shapur I - Livius. (z.d.). <https://www.livius.org/pictures/iran/naqs-e-rustam/naqs-e-rustam-relief-of-shapur-i/naqs-e-rustam-relief-of-shapur-i/>

Rock relief art flourished in Iranian antiquity, with Iran hosting the largest concentration of ancient rock reliefs in the Middle East. These reliefs depicted themes of power, victory, and religious significance, evolving over a millennium through contributions from various civilizations like the Elamites, Assyrians, Achaemenids, and Sassanids. The photo above is showcasing Shapur I's victory relief at Naqsh-e Rostam, it is one of eight carvings made by the Sasanian people on the cliff below where the four Achaemenid tombs are located. The choice for this case study is based on the fact that it plays a significant role in the written literature about the Sasanian history and the important location where it is situated. Furthermore, the interpretation of the depicted scene is debated among academics and historians which makes it a compelling case for this thesis; we can critically reflect on the literature.

The location, Naqsh-e Rostam, is situated approximately 4 miles from Persepolis, the historical hub of the Achaemenid Persian emperors reigning from 550 to 330 BC. Adjacent to this site lies Ištakhr, which served as the original stronghold of the Sasanian dynasty from AD 224 to 651, maintaining religious and ceremonial significance throughout their reign.



A map showing the positions of Naqš-e Rostam, Estakhr and Persepolis including distance. www.maps.google.nl

There is an intricate relationship between the rock reliefs commissioned by the early Sasanians at Naqsh-e Rostam and the pre-existing Achaemenid carvings. These reliefs contributed to the creation of a unified visual culture, architectural style, and ritual practice; some literature stating blending the legacies of both dynasties (Canepa, M.P., 2010). This deliberate fusion resulted in a seamless integration of symbolism and imagery, blurring the distinctions between the two periods, Canepa argues.

The argument that the Sasanian respectfully admired the Achaemenids and tried to create a certain historically correct lineage is not completely factual. One reason is the point that the Sasanian did not have complete knowledge about their predecessors (Canepa, M.P., 2010). Of course, technological advancements at the time were limited, causing imperfections in the stories told about their predecessors.

Furthermore, while most archaeologists and scholars agree that the Sasanian sought to find inspiration from their predecessors, one could argue they really aimed to fabricate an ideologically coherent and beneficial past. This makes sense since kings of new empires want their name and kingdom to have a certain legitimacy. One of the best methods to achieve this is to integrate yourself within the power proven Persian lineage.

At Naqsh-e Rostam, the Sasanian rulers aimed to place themselves within the context of the ancient Achaemenid heritage. This ambition is exemplified by Shapur I's inscription of his accomplishments onto the Achaemenid tower at the site, known as the 'Ka'ba-ye Zardosht', demonstrating a concerted effort to intertwine the Sasanian legacy with that of their predecessors (Zychowicz-Coghill, E., 2022). Describing this as an effort to connect history is an optimistic argument but a more skeptical case can be made by seeing these efforts as altering a part of history or even worse, making structures and art of other dynasty's or empires your own. By imagining current day world leaders inscribing important architectural works from other historical periods with their names and political ideologies we can see that this can be seen as manipulating the past or misusing history to create a false sense of validity.



Ka'ba-ye Zartosht, stone structure in the Naqsh-e Rostam compound beside Zangiabad village in Marvdasht county in Fars, Iran. With inscriptions from King Shapur I of the Sassanids. Diego Delso – Wikipedia.

Whilst Sassanid rulers sought to connect with the Achaemenid legacy, this tradition gradually declined after their era, ending with the Muslim conquest of Persia in the 7th century AD; the Rashidun Caliphate being the first new government after the Muslim conquest of Persia (Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, n.d.). This Muslim era brought with it new styles which did not continue on the tradition of the Sasanians of building upon and incorporating the empire of

predecessors; they rather tried to differentiate themselves. The architectural differentiation still had lots of properties from the Sassanid styles since the Muslims occupied Sasanian land and thus had access to centuries of Persian architectural development but they did not reference Persian empires like the Sassanids did. The reasoning behind this can be seen from several perspectives but from my view the biggest differentiator is religion; Persian Zoroastrianism was replaced with Islam and with that change there was a need for new visuals such as architecture and art. A lot of the rock reliefs portrayed Zoroastrianism such as the portrayal of Ahura Mazda in the case study Relief of Shapur I, this of course did not fit the Islamic reign.



Above are the three big Achaemenid carvings and below are the smaller carvings from the Sassanids, purposefully created in the same location to connect their lineage. File:Naghsh-e rostam, Irán, 2016-09-24, DD 19.jpg - Wikimedia Commons. (2016, 24 september). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Naghsh-e_rostam,_Ir%C3%A1n,_2016-09-24,_DD_19.jpg

Sasanian rock reliefs evolved from earlier Persian traditions, notably influenced by Achaemenid and Parthian precedents (Nabaei, S., & Alipanahi, E., 2020). Achaemenid reliefs focused on royal propaganda and imperial conquests. An example of the rock reliefs from the Parthian empire is the Parthian Stone located in the ancient site of Bisotun in Kermanshah Province. The fragment depicts a Parthian king holding a bowl in his left hand (Canepa 2018). But this interpretation is not set in stone since archaeologists have debated about it throughout the years, even the exact king is not identified definitively.

Some literature states that Sasanian reliefs introduced new motifs and themes, emphasizing the divine legitimacy of the Sasanian kingship and the triumph of Zoroastrianism (Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, n.d.).

Concurrently, it could be argued that the Achaemenids already displayed divine themes and divine legitimacy of the king; above the tomb entrances of the Achaemenids we can see the Farvahr displayed which is a Zoroastrianism deific symbol. Furthermore the royal propaganda as seen with the Achaemenids is also created by the Sasanians; in Naqš-e Rostam, Relief of Shapur I we see the king Shapur I on horseback, with his right hand raised in a gesture of victory, and trampling an enemy (still debated who exactly), symbolizing his control and authority. In my view the differentiation between Achaemenids and Sasanian reliefs in the literature is mostly based on which king or prince is displayed and not so much on themes or visual stylistic differences.



Parthian Stone located in the ancient site of Bisotun in Kermanshah Province.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/b7/%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B4_%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AC%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87_%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B4_1.JPG/800px-%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B4_%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AC%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87_%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B4_1.JPG



On the left one of the four Tomb entrances of the Achaemenid's (https://i0.wp.com/jontynz.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/dsc_0832.jpg?ssl=1) and on the right the Shapur I relief from the Sassanids. <https://www.livius.org/pictures/iran/naqs-e-rustam/naqs-e-rustam-relief-of-shapur-i/naqs-e-rustam-relief-of-shapur-i/>

In comparing the two rock reliefs as pictured above we see the similarities between Achaemenids and Sassanids; They both depict royal and divine themes and they both are carved within the rock with a certain depth. But one could argue that there are still big differences such as the big size difference, the lack of architectural columns and beams in the Sasanian relief and the focus on hierarchy in the Achaemenid relief. These are mostly physical differences but stylistically and thematically they are very much comparable. At the same time the themes depicted on all of these rock reliefs have been interpreted in lots of different ways throughout the years (Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, n.d.-b). This makes it difficult to assess precisely in what ways the portrayal of Shapur I of the Sasanians is uniquely Sasanian. One could make the simple argument it is only the fact that we see a Sasanian king.

There have been several interpretations of the people depicted in these Sasanian reliefs and in what way they are uniquely Sasanian. In his journal article 'A Reinterpretation of the Sasanian Relief at Salmās', Ehsan Shavarebi explains that throughout the 20th and 19th centuries these interpretations have been discussed and changed. This is mainly due to the fact that there have been many rulers and periods throughout Persian history and new found evidence affects these interpretations.



(Langer, P. (2024, 14 march). People observing the relief depicting the triumph of Shapur I over the Roman Emperor Valerian and Philip the Arabian; Naqsh-e Rostam, Fars Provinc. . . - SuperStock. SuperStock. <https://www.superstock.com/asset/people-observing-bas-relief-depicting-triumph-shapur-over-roman-emperor/1783-13777899>)

The iconography of Sasanian rock reliefs reflects a blend of indigenous Iranian traditions and influences from neighbouring civilizations, usually portraying Sasanian kings as powerful rulers and skilled warriors with divine legitimacy. This can be seen on the Ahura Mazda and Ardashir I rock relief, located in Naqsh-e Rostam. On this rock relief portrays Ardashir I receiving his kingship seal from Ahura Mazda, symbolizing his appointment as Shahanshah of Ērānshahr (Curtis, V. S., & Stewart, S., 2008). This interpretation is not a definitive one since there are also interpretations that this relief shows the peaceful handover of power from the father, Ardašir, to his son, Shapur. Notable features include Ardashir's horse trampling over Artabanus V (still debated detail), the last Parthian king, and inscriptions in Middle Persian, Parthian, and Greek languages, emphasizing Ardashir's divine lineage and Ahura Mazda's significance.

After delving deeper into all the Sasanian rock reliefs we see an often repeated scene structure where we see two persons, facing each other, one offering a diadem, the other accepting it. The literature about these rock reliefs shows clearly a considerable flexibility in the interpretation, sometimes including divine themes. The Achaemenid reliefs often depict larger scenes as seen with the four Tomb entrances of the Achaemenid's. We may conclude that this scene structure with two characters facing each other is in fact particularly Sasanian.



Ahura Mazda and Ardashir I rock relief, located in Naqsh-e Rostam - https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Imp105-Grobowce_Naqsh-E_Rustam.jpg

Sasanian craftsmen employed sophisticated techniques to carve rock reliefs, utilizing the natural contours of the landscape to enhance the visual impact of their artworks. By using high vertical parts of mountains and carving within them the portrayals appear impressive and god-like. These methods were the same in the empires before the Sassanids. High-relief carving using tools like chisels, hammers and picks (Colledge, M. A. R. 1979), intricate detailing, and skillful use of perspective lent depth and dynamism to the compositions, ensuring that the reliefs would command attention and convey their intended messages effectively (Debevoise, 1942).

Overall, Sasanian rock reliefs tell parts of the story of Iran's ancient history, reflecting the evolution of visual culture, religious symbolism, and political ideologies across different dynasties. It is still debateable if these stories told through the Sasanian rock reliefs are accurate or honest. Also contemporary interpretations aren't definitive. Despite debates and interpretations, these artworks remain a testament to the enduring legacy of Persian civilization.

Second chapter: Art of the Sasanians, objects

Ornamental household items such as plates and vases; these objects usually have a story or symbol (Walker, 2007) designed on them so they are good sources for insights into the specific Persian period.



Left: Anonymous. (2024, 4 januari). Dish with king Hormizd II or Hormizd III hunting Lions. Cleveland Museum of Art. <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1962.150>

Right: Anonymous. (2023, 11 december). Anahita Vessel. Cleveland Museum of Art. <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1962.294>

The Dish with King Hormizd II or Hormizd III Hunting Lions, housed within the Cleveland Museum of Art, serves as a vivid testament to the enduring cultural and artistic legacy of ancient Iran. Beyond its aesthetic allure, this artifact offers a profound window into the socio-political dynamics of its time, inviting critical examination into its symbolism and relevance within both historical and contemporary contexts. King Hormizd II or III pulls the tight string of his bow with his right hand, aiming an arrow at a lion about to attack him. He's already shot another lion lying twisted under his horse's hooves. The king wears fancy clothes with lots of layers and ribbons, plus a big crown that holds his curly hair up in a bun. This fancy silver plate shows a perfect picture of a Sasanian king on a royal hunt (Sasanian Art, an Introduction (Article) | Khan Academy, n.d.).

One of the most important aspect of artworks from the Sasanian era is that they show a notable eccentricity of the Sasanian kings: each king wore a different personal crown and during the four centuries of the dynasty they became more and more elaborate. On the dish with king Hormizd II /

III we can see such an eccentric crown combined with clothes which are unusual for horseback riding. Another artwork which exemplifies this is the plate with a king hunting rams from the Sasanian era, 5th–6th century C.E. This artwork exhibits the same scene; a king hunting, with a few animals still alive and a few already shot down. Also, both artworks are “*court art, that is, luxury objects and royal monuments created and used by the empire’s ruling and elite strata of society.*” (Sasanian Art, an Introduction (Article) | Khan Academy, n.d.). Big difference within this artwork is the halo around the head of the king elevating him to a quasi-divine status (Sasanian Art, an Introduction (Article) | Khan Academy, n.d.).



Plate with a king hunting rams, Sasanian Iran, 5th–6th century C.E., silver with mercury gilding and niello inlay; 21.9 cm diameter (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The act of hunting lions can be seen in many ancient cultures and artworks from several Persian Empires. The empires before the Sassanids as well as the empires after the Islamic conquests continue this trend. The way the king's and horse's gear looks suggests that this dish was created long after he passed away (Dish With King Hormizd II Cleveland Museum Of Art, z.d.). The dish is made from gilded silver; this material has also been used in several different Persian empires. To exemplify these similarities we look at another artifact from the Parthian empire: Gilded silver plate based on a late Hellenistic composition showing the triumph of Dionysus. The stylistic and material similarities can be seen.

One could argue that the only thing particularly Sassanid from the first two art works is the king depicted. Another argument is that the type of scene makes the artwork specifically Sasanian; hunting king wearing a crown and eccentric clothing.



Gilded silver plate based on a late Hellenistic composition showing the triumph of Dionysus, The British Museum https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1900-0209-2

In exploring the imagery of hunting, it is impossible to overlook its symbolic resonance within the socio-political landscape of ancient Iran. The act of hunting, particularly of formidable beasts like lions, was not merely a recreational pursuit for monarchs but rather a manifestation of their authority and divine mandate to maintain order and protect the realm. However, I argue it can also underscores the inherent tension between power and vulnerability, as even the mightiest of rulers were subject to the whims of fate and the inevitability of mortality. Moreover, the dish's portrayal of King Hormizd II or Hormizd III in the act of hunting lions serves as a reflection of broader societal values and ideals. In a society where hierarchical structures and deference to authority were paramount, such depictions reinforced the legitimacy of royal rule while simultaneously reinforcing the defeat of nature to human will.

The Anahita vessel from 300–500 CE derives its name from Anahita, the ancient Persian goddess of fertility, water, and wisdom, revered for her beauty and benevolence. Crafted from silver, the Anahita Vessel features elaborate designs and craftsmanship typical of Sasanian metalwork. Its form, often described as a ceremonial drinking vessel or a libation bowl, reflects the artistic sophistication of the era. Adorned with intricate relief decorations depicting scenes of courtly life, mythical creatures, and religious symbolism, the vessel serves as a canvas for storytelling and cultural expression.

The artistic presentation of characters positioned below a revolving archway surrounding the container is reminiscent of a technique found in modern Byzantine silverware, particularly evident in religious Christian ceremonial items such as the Chalice uncovered within the Attarouthi Treasure. (Sasanian Art, an Introduction (Article) | Khan Academy, n.d.).



Chalice (The Attarouthi Treasure), Byzantine, silver and gilded silver, 500–650 C.E., The Metropolitan Museum of Art

In conclusion, the Dish with King Hormizd II or Hormizd III Hunting Lions stands as a poignant testament to the artistic and cultural achievements of ancient Iran, while also inviting critical inquiry into the broader socio-political dynamics of its time and its relevance to contemporary society. By interrogating its symbolism and significance, we gain valuable insights into the complexities of power, authority, and identity that continue to shape human experience across time and space. The Anahita Vessel not only showcases the technical skill of Sasanian artisans but also provides valuable insights into the religious and cultural beliefs of the time. Its imagery, which often includes depictions of royalty and divine figures, underscores the close relationship between politics, religion, and art in Sasanian society.

Third chapter: Architecture of the Sasanians



Taq-i Kisra (File:001125-TaqKasra-Iraq-IMG 7945-2.jpg - Wikimedia Commons. (2022, 14 februari). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:001125-TaqKasra-Iraq-IMG_7945-2.jpg)

Taq Kasra, also known as the Arch of Ctesiphon, stands as a symbol of the architectural achievements and cultural heritage of the Sasanian Empire in ancient Persia. Ctesiphon was initially established as the capital of the Parthian Empire, it flourished until its destruction by Rome, only to be resurrected as the capital once again under the Sasanian rulers; first under the reign of Sasanian king Ardashir I. The historical significance and contemporary relevance of Taq Kasra offer a rich subject for analysis, encompassing themes of architectural innovation, cultural resilience, and the challenges of preserving heritage in a changing world. In the following paragraphs, I will critically examine Taq Kasra within the context of its time and the relationship with the periods before and after the Sassanids. The choice for this specific case study is mostly based on it being one of the most significant Sasanian architectures still partly intact today; lots of archaeologists and historians have written literature about it.

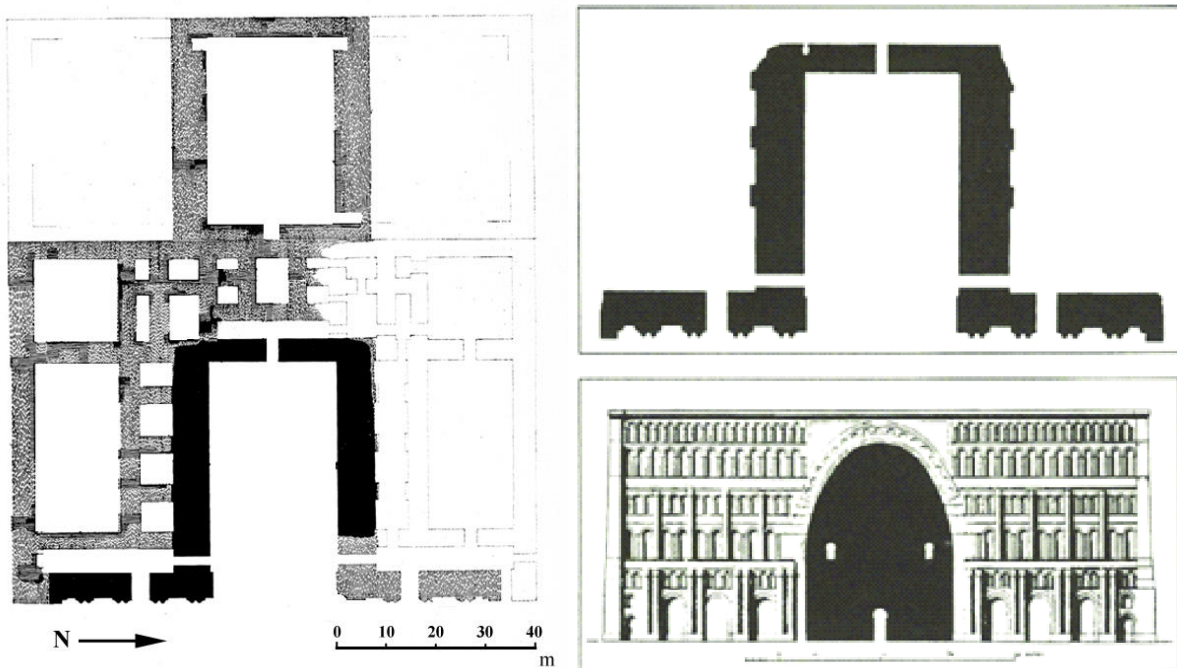
Attributions of the building's construction have varied, with some experts suggesting sponsorship by different Sasanian kings such as Shapur I, Kōsrow I and II. Confusion also arises from medieval writers conflating the Ayyān-e Kesrā with the "White Palace" in Madā'en. There have been arguments ranging from stylistic analysis to historical accounts. Some suggest a sixth-century origin, possibly during the reign of Kōsrow I, while others argue for an earlier date under Shapur I. Evidence from archaeological excavations has provided insights into the monument's history but has not definitively resolved its date or purpose.

For now it is accepted that it is constructed during the reign of the Sasanian Empire in the 3rd century AD. Taq Kasra served as the monumental entrance to the royal palace at Ctesiphon, reflecting the grandeur and power of the empire. Its architectural design, featuring a massive single-span vault of fired brickwork, represents a remarkable engineering feat for its time and even today since it is still the largest single-span vaulted arch of unreinforced brickwork in the world (Mark & Maroulis, 2024). Early Islamic historians and poets recorded how the Sasanians adorned the walls with molded stuccos, mosaics, and wall paintings, and covered the floors with carpets and cushions.

Sasanian-era architects crafted grand palatial complexes, centred around a defining feature: the ayvan; as seen in Taq Kasra. The structure itself is a massive ayvan flanked by a blind facade, featuring intricate brickwork and decorative elements. The central ayvan is roofed by a parabolic vault and connected to chambers behind it. The ayvan is a vaulted hall open on one side as seen in the floor plan below. Throughout history it has been a consistent feature of Iranian architecture since Parthian times. It is found in various structures like palaces, houses, mosques, and caravanserais, both within Iran and in regions influenced by Iranian architecture such as Arabic countries (Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, z.d.-c). The king of the Sasanian Empire often employed these ayvans for courtly events and grand spectacles. Following the decline of the Sasanian Empire, the ayvan persisted as a notable element in Iranian architectural styles. It became a prominent component in the construction of mosques in the Muslim era, exemplified by structures such as the Great Mosque of Isfahan.

However, while Taq Kasra's ingenuity is evident, its design also reflects broader influences from diverse cultural traditions, including Persian, Roman, and Mesopotamian elements. This fusion of styles underscores the cosmopolitan nature of the Sasanian Empire and its role as a crossroads of civilizations (Nabaei, S., & Alipanahi, E. 2020). This intricate interweaving of architectural motifs not only speaks to the Sasanian Empire's ability to synthesize various cultural influences but in my view also raises questions about the nature of cultural exchange and appropriation in ancient societies. Indeed, the Sasanians' inclination for adopting and adapting elements from different cultures is evident not only in their architecture but also in their artistic expressions, such as the rock reliefs found throughout their empire as talked about earlier.

This tendency to borrow and integrate elements from other eras and cultures highlights the complex dynamics of cultural interaction in antiquity. The literature often speaks about this in a positive manner but it's crucial to analyse the power dynamics at play. The empire's selective appropriation of prior Persian, Roman, and Mesopotamian elements raises questions about whose voices were prioritized and whose were marginalized in this cultural synthesis, also keeping in mind the Empire's focus on Zoroastrianism. Additionally, the implications of such appropriation extend beyond aesthetics, affecting narratives of identity and heritage, even today. A careful look at how the Sasanian Empire traded cultural ideas makes us face the unfairness in these exchanges and rethink how we tell the stories of cultural sharing.



Left: Floor plan of Taq-i-Kisra - Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation. (z.d.). Welcome to Encyclopaedia Iranica. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/palace-architecture>

Right: Eyvan-i Medayin (Ctesiphon), Iraq, 241.AC - A Syntactic Approach to the Effect and the Role of Hayat and Riwaq in the Geometric Conception of Traditional Housing Architecture in Iran: Tabriz Houses - Scientific Figure on ResearchGate. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Eyvan-i-Medayin-Ctesiphon-Iraq-241AC-4-Eyvan-which-is-one-of-the-main-features-of_fig2_329027850

On these architectural drawings we can see the focus on symmetry, hierarchical composition, and the relationship between floor plan and façade view. This architectural piece of history drew inspiration from both Sasanian and Roman influences. Its construction reflected the Sasanian Empire's inclination for innovation, blending elements of ancient Persian and Parthian heritage with techniques borrowed from Roman engineering such as usage of the columns. Beyond its structural grandness, the Taq Kasra encapsulated the Sasanian ethos of building upon the achievements of the past. It stood as a testament to the empire's ability to draw inspiration from diverse sources while transcending them to create something great.

Because of this tendency one could argue this architectural style is a mix of ones which came before it to create a Sassanid style. The question to ask is; are there any unique elements in this architectural work which makes it uniquely Sasanian? Even the ayvan has ambiguous origins; scholars such as Edward Keall and André Godard, who discuss its origins in Mesopotamia, present-day Iraq. Vaults, composed of arches, distinguish the ayvan from its predecessors, although vaulted ceilings were not exclusive to this architectural innovation. Examples of vaulted structures can be found both within and outside Mesopotamia, including Susa and Nineveh. Beyond Mesopotamia, vaulted structures are also evident in Ancient Egyptian, Roman, and Mycenaean architecture.

The archway was not merely a gateway to the imperial palace but a symbol of power and authority, marking the heart of Sasanian governance. Surrounding the palace were administrative offices, reflecting the empire's centralized administration, modelled after the Achaemenid predecessors. This aim to symbolize power in architecture and physically centralize administration is not strictly Sasanian which can be made into an argument as to why Taq Kasra is difficult to categorize as uniquely Sasanian.

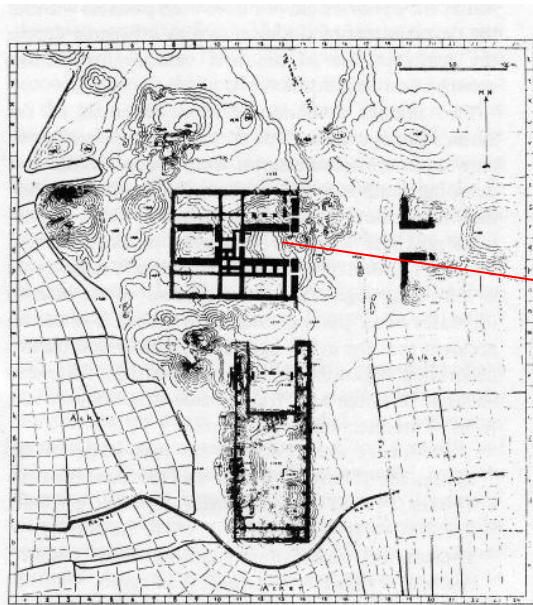
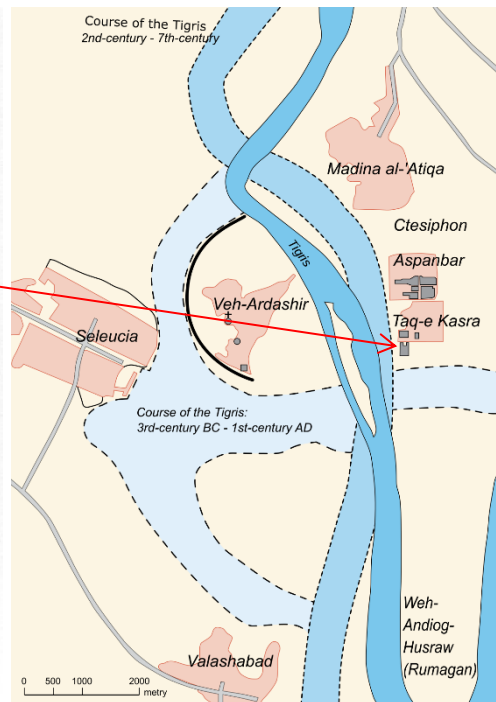


Figure 2. Plan of Ayvān-e Kesrā and adjacent features.
From "The German Excavations," *Antiquity* 3, 1929



Left: Plan of Taq Kasra with surrounding excavations - Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation. (z.d.-b). Welcome to Encyclopaedia Iranica.
<https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ayvan-e-kesra-palace-of-kosrow-at-ctesiphon>
 Right: Map of metropolis Ctesiphon - https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ctesiphon_map-en.svg



(A reconstruction of Taq Kasra Ctesiphon as it may have appeared in the 6th and early 7th centuries CE - Farrokh, K. (z.d.). New Restoration Works to Repair the Sassanian Wall of Ctesiphon. Dr. Kaveh Farrokh. <https://www.kavehfarrokh.com/news/new-restoration-works-to-repair-the-sassanian-wall-of-ctesiphon/>)

Despite its historical significance, Taq Kasra has faced numerous challenges to its preservation over the centuries, including neglect, environmental damage, and the ravages of war. The region surrounding Taq Kasra has been plagued by conflict and political instability, leading to the destruction of many cultural sites and artifacts. As told by Elizabeth Neuffer in her article 'War in Iraq Could Be Final Straw for Some Already Burdened Ancient Artifacts' the USA – Afghanistan war has caused cracks in this architectural masterpiece. This raises important questions about the ethical and practical considerations involved in preserving cultural heritage in the face of geopolitical turmoil. Furthermore, the symbolic value of Taq Kasra as a cultural icon adds another layer of complexity to the preservation efforts, as it becomes intertwined with contemporary political and cultural narratives.



(A reconstruction of Taq Kasra Ctesiphon within its context. Photo found on x: . https://twitter.com/Molla_Nasraddin/status/1379700268254826496/photo/1)

In today's globalized world, Taq Kasra holds significance beyond its historical context, serving as a potent symbol of cultural memory and identity. Its enduring presence reminds us of the rich cultural heritage of ancient Persia and the contributions of the Sasanian Empire to world civilization, even is the Sasanian qualities are unclear and debated. Moreover, the preservation and restoration of Taq Kasra can serve as a catalyst for broader discussions about the importance of cultural diversity, historical consciousness, and the role of architecture in shaping collective memory. Despite the passage of time and the eventual decline of Ctesiphon, the legacy of the Taq Kasra endures. This historic piece of architecture continues to captivate historians and enthusiasts alike, serving as a reminder of the remarkable achievements of the Sasanian Empire.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this thesis has delved into the art and architecture of the Persian Sasanian Empire by critically examining three iconic artifacts: the Relief of Shapur I at Naqš-e Rostam, the Taq-i Kisra (Arch of Ctesiphon), and the Dish with King Hormizd II / III Hunting Lions. Through a comprehensive analysis, it has unravelled layers of history, challenged traditional narratives, and fostered a deeper understanding of the enduring impact of Persian civilization on architectural and artistic expression.

The Sasanian Empire, spanning from 224 to 651 CE, marked a pivotal period in Persian history, showcasing remarkable innovations in art and architecture. Rooted in the legacies of earlier Persian Empires, particularly the Achaemenid and Parthian eras, the Sasanian displayed a unique synthesis of cultural influences. This synthesis is evident in their art and architectural endeavours, where they skilfully amalgamated diverse elements while introducing novel features. Their motives for doing this are ambiguous and morally debateable. Within the literature it is often spoken about with a positive tone because it implies a certain respect the Sasanians had for the Achaemenids. But I argue this conclusion is subjective since we know kings throughout history focused on power, legitimizing themselves and convincing the public through propaganda.

The artifacts examined in this thesis serve as historically significant reminders of Iran's rich cultural heritage and the enduring legacy of its ancient civilizations. The rock reliefs, such as the Relief of Shapur I, reflect a blend of Iranian traditions and influences from neighbouring civilizations,

portraying scenes of royal investiture, military victories, and religious motifs. Similarly, ornamental household items like the Dish with King Hormizd II / III Hunting Lions provide insights into the socio-political dynamics and values prevalent in ancient Iranian society. The categorization of these items into separate Persian Empires is obvious if focused on the rulers and the timeline. But if we focus on themes, stylistic choices and materials, these classifications become blurred and debateable.

Among these artifacts, the Taq-i Kisra stands out as a symbol of architectural achievement and cultural resilience. Constructed during the reign of the Sasanian Empire, this monumental arch served as the imposing entrance to the royal palace at Ctesiphon. Despite its historical significance, Taq-i Kisra has faced challenges to its preservation over the centuries, including neglect, environmental damage, and the ravages of war. Yet, its enduring presence serves as a potent symbol of cultural memory and identity, reminding us of the rich cultural heritage of ancient Persia.

In today's globalized world, the preservation and restoration of Taq-i Kisra can serve as a catalyst for broader discussions about the importance of cultural diversity, historical consciousness, and the role of architecture in shaping collective memory. By engaging critically with Taq-i Kisra and other ancient monuments, we gain insights into the complexities of cultural heritage preservation and its significance in shaping our understanding of the past and present.

Personal reflections

Seeing these works of art can evoke feelings of sadness in Iranian people; seeing the country being misused by the current government and comparing this with the grandeur of old Persia is a big contrast. But what most Iranians forget is the socio-political functions of these remnants of Persian Empires. The images, art and architecture can be seen as very powerful tools of propaganda. This circles back to propaganda being used just as much or even more in current day Iran.

The shifts to religious themes throughout the periods of Persian empires is comparable to current day Iran; The Iranian Revolution of the 1970s was a popular uprising against the autocratic rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the monarch of Iran, who was supported by the United States. Led by a diverse coalition including religious figures, students, and intellectuals, the revolution sought to establish an Islamic republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Rakel, 2007). The revolution culminated in the overthrow of the Shah's regime in 1979 and the establishment of an Islamic republic. With this shift the new rulers were praised and imagined themselves to have divine legitimacy, similar to the Sasanian kingship. They marginalize other religions and political themes, just like the Sasanians did.

The effects of these divine motifs and the importance of Zoroastrian faith can still be seen today. Iranian people, living in Iran or elsewhere, often try to depict their Iranian pride with images of the Faravahar (Yousofi et al., 2019). This is interesting because most Iranians who use this imagery put emphasis on it representing positivity and the old powers of Persia. But it still is a religious symbol and the recent extreme inclusion of religion in Iran's policies have mostly brought negativity to millions of Iranians (Boroujerdi, 1997).

The case study of the Sasanian rock reliefs extends beyond its historical context, resonating with contemporary debates surrounding identity, nationalism, and cultural heritage in modern Iran. As the nation grapples with the complexities of its past and seeks to assert its place on the global stage, artifacts such as this serve as tangible reminders of Iran's rich cultural heritage and the enduring legacy of its ancient civilizations. However, they also prompt critical reflection on the role of heritage preservation in shaping national identity and fostering a sense of collective memory in an

increasingly globalized world. An example of this tension is the threats from former US president Trump, who tweeted that the U.S. had identified 52 Iranian sites, including cultural ones, and that they would be targeted if Iran retaliated for Soleimani's death (Jacobo, 2020).

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