

KHONE-YE DIV

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE FIRST SEASON OF IRANO-POLISH EXCAVATIONS

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Preliminary investigations of a stone structure in the form of a 'chahar taq' located on a remote mountaintop constituted the main objective of investigations by an Irano-Polish archaeological team in its first season in Iran.¹ The work at a site known to the local people as Khone-ye Div (House of the Demon) in North Khorasan yielded evidence of additional features, including a water reservoir, but failed to establish a reliable founding date for the complex. Its abandonment has been placed in the 9th–10th century AD on the grounds of the pottery evidence. It is also suggested based on the results of this short season that the building was a fire temple, but the identification requires further fieldwork to be confirmed.

Khone-ye Div² lies in the mountain chain of Revand (also spelt Rivand), on a rock spur in the Revand River gorge [Fig. 1] (N 36°16'179; E 56°44'594), about 5 km north of the village of Foshtong (also different spellings, including Foshtanq, for example) and 40 km northwest of the city of Sabzewar. The gorge, running northeast–southwest in this stretch, connects the ruins with the village of Revand, which lies 12 km away. There are no remains of any ancient settlements in the immediate vicinity of the site. The ruins are little known not only to the general public, but also to archaeologists, mainly due to the localization in the mountains, relatively far from any roads.

1 The mission, which took place on October 8–28, 2007, and which was organized in cooperation between the University of Warsaw (PCMA) and the Iranian Center for Archaeological Research, was headed by Dr. Barbara Kaim and Hassan Hashemi, and included Maja Kornacka and Marcin Wagner, archaeologists, as well as a group of archaeology students from Azad University of Noshahr and Chaloos.

2 Other names, such as Khune-ye Div, can be found in the literature and on the Internet, but these are merely different spellings of the same Iranian place-name.



*Fig. 1. Ruins of Khone-ye Div, view from the southeast
(Photo B. Kaim)*

ARCHITECTURAL REMAINS

The ground plan of the building is a simple rectangle, 13.29 by 12.46 m, the corners of which are oriented to the cardinal points. The entrance is located on the northeastern side [Fig. 2].

The main room (6.60 m²) is extended to a cruciform plan by four arched recesses, making the building a typical *chahar taq*, in Persian "four arches". The northwestern niche is 2.63 m deep and 4.32 m wide; the southeastern is only 1.31 m deep but 4.32 m wide; the southwestern alcove is 2.56 m deep and some 4.32 m wide. While the area between the northern and eastern piers (4.15 m wide and 2.77 m deep) is open, the other recesses have closing walls of differing thickness: the northwestern wall is 0.80 m in width, and the southwestern and southeastern ones are 0.70 m and 1.20 m wide respectively. On the northeastern side of the

chahar taq there is a very narrow (0.80 m) passageway, which probably gave access to the main room and to the area south of the *chahar taq*. An opening, 1.75 m wide, was pierced in the rear wall of the corridor, falling slightly off axis.

The ruins described above are the remains of the main part of a more complex structure, of which the surrounding walls or subsidiary rooms have disappeared from the mountain surface. The builders had obviously adapted to the topography, placing the *chahar taq* in the most elevated part of the hill and the other structures, the remains of which are still visible, to the southwest, southeast and northwest of it.

The walls of the *chahar taq* rest upon foundation walls or directly on bedrock, as is the case with the western and northern corners, the western wall and the eastern

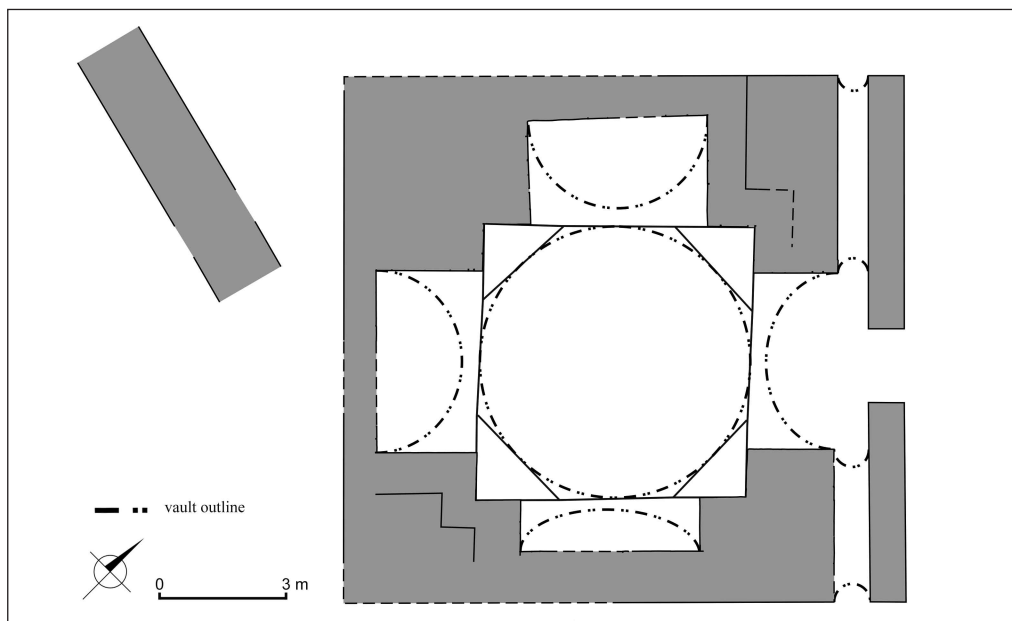


Fig. 2. Plan of the *chahar taq*
(Drawing and digitizing M. Wagner)

part of the southern wall. The foundations are built of big unfaced stones, projecting 0.10 to 0.20 m beyond the line of the interior and exterior wall faces. The area

between the walls was filled up with rubble and earth to level out the floor, which consisted of a rather thick layer of gypsum plaster.



Fig. 3. Masonry in the southern corner of the chahar taq, including close up of the squinch (top left) and of the putlog holes (bottom left) (Photo B. Kaim)

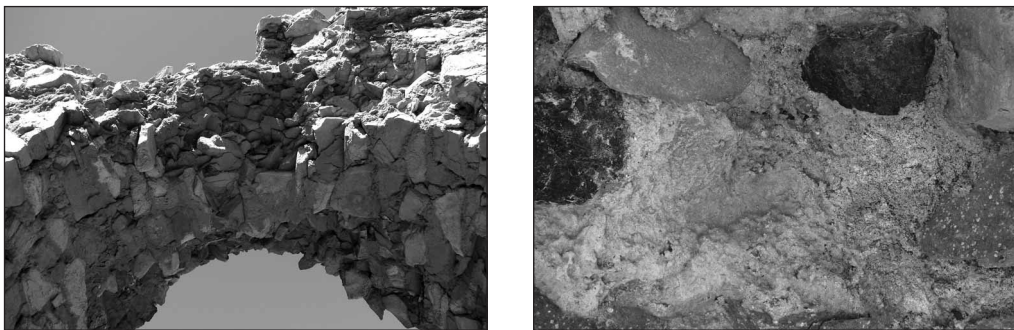


Fig. 4. State of preservation of the northwestern arch (Photo B. Kaim)

Fig. 5. Outer face of the southeastern wall of the chahar taq (Photo B. Kaim)

The walls of the *chahar taq* were erected of mortared rubble and faced with large, roughly shaped stones set in more or less regular courses. The walls were shallowly bonded at the corners: the facing stones of one wall were slightly inserted into the adjacent wall [Fig. 3, right] and their courses in the bonded walls correspond with each other. For the construction of the lower parts of the walls big facing stones were used. Above them, flat slabs mark the transition from a square ground plan to a round dome [cf. Fig. 3, top left]. Two putlog holes in each corner provide evidence that the building was erected with the aid of scaffolding [cf. Fig. 3, bottom left]. Each wall is pierced by two such holes at 2.30 m above the floor.

The squinches for the arches start at 5.90 m above the floor. Here the walls end in a double row of slabs laid flat and projecting from the wall.

Fragments of the squinches can still be seen in the northern and southern corners.

In the northern corner, there are nine rows of vertical slabs, while in the southern one only five such slabs have been preserved. As far as it is possible to judge from these remains, the squinches were built of rough stone slabs laid on edge across the corners, successive courses moving in to close the space. The corner of each squinch was filled with flat slabs bonded by relatively thin layers of mortar, progressively projecting inwards to support successive courses of the slabs which were placed standing on edge [Fig. 3, top left].

Inner wall surfaces appear to have been plastered as proven by fragments of gypsum plaster still visible *in situ*. Facing stones on the outer wall surface are often covered by an irregular layer of gypsum. It seems that after the facing stones had been set in place, the joints were pointed with gypsum mortar, the excess of which was carelessly spread over the wall, leaving some stones visible [Fig. 5].

RESULTS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

An assessment of the architectural remains still visible above the ground was complemented with limited excavations checking for the context in which the main building had functioned and investigating the function and dating of the complex. Four test trenches were traced, both inside and around the *chahar taq*.

TEST TRENCH 1

To study the building layout, Test Trench 1 (3.50 by 2.00 m) was opened in the eastern part of the main room of the *chahar taq* [Fig. 6], in a location that promised to reveal stratigraphy undisturbed by digging long ago in unspecified circumstances.

The first layer under the topsoil yielded mixed material from the previous digging,

mostly stones, light-brown soil and chunks of gypsum mortar, dumped on top of dark-brown soil which appeared undisturbed. The latter covered a thick layer of stone rubble and gypsum mortar debris, probably accumulated once the dome and the upper parts of the walls had collapsed. The debris lay on a layer of soil mixed with gypsum/lime particles, below which was a layer of brown soil with a smaller amount of gypsum particles and few stones. This rested upon a layer of soft, brown soil with lenses of black, which could represent the remains of weathered mud bricks. The floor level was traced directly underneath.

The floor was composed of a thick layer of gypsum plaster with uneven surface; the level ranges from 1663.38 m a.s.l. in the

southeastern part to 1663.16–1663.22 m a.s.l. in the northern part. Remnants of two stone platforms covered with gypsum

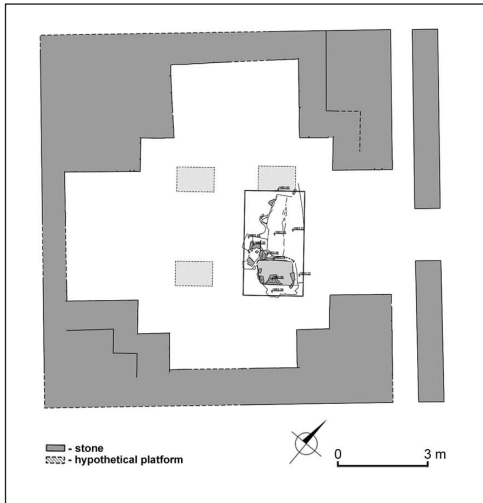


Fig. 6. *Localization of Test Trench 1*
(Drawing and digitizing M. Wagner)

plaster were the only structures found in Trench 1.

The remains of one such structure were uncovered in the southern part of the trench [Fig. 7]. The uppermost part of this rectangular platform (1.36 by 0.96 m) was preserved at 1663.85 m a.s.l. The top had been destroyed by stones falling from a gradually disintegrating dome, making it



Fig. 7. *Remains of a platform in Test Trench 1*
(Photo B. Kaim)

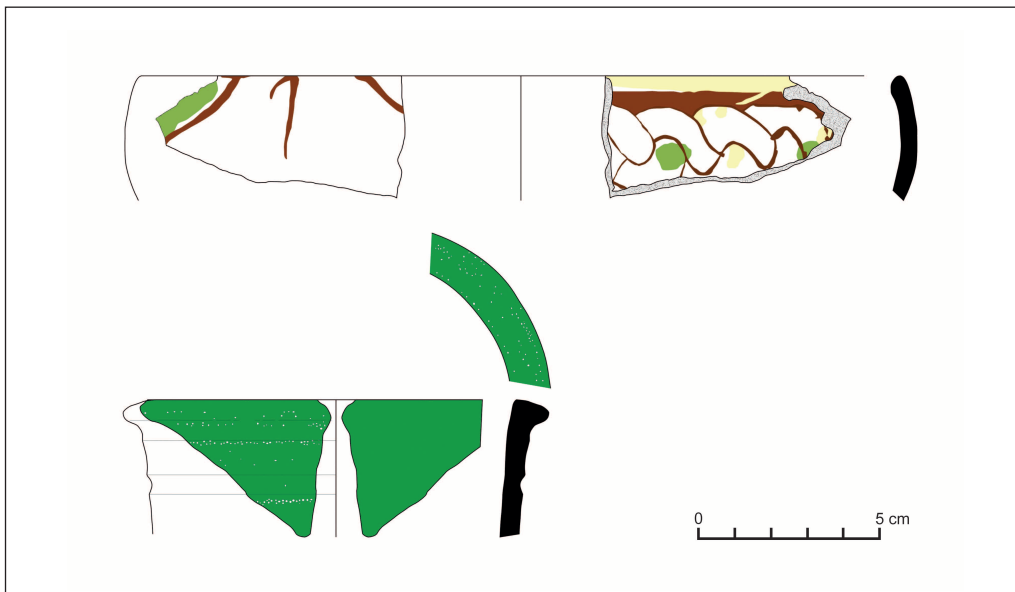


Fig. 8. *Fragments of Neyshabur-type glazed pottery*
(Drawing and digitizing M. Wagner)

impossible to reconstruct the original height. The other platform, or rather meager traces of it, was identified in the northern part of the trench. Earlier digging had all but destroyed it, but the mere fact of its presence suggests that the *chahar taq* might have once housed four such platforms in symmetrical arrangement.

Neyshabur-type pottery [Fig. 8] found above the floor level of the *chahar taq*, in a layer of soft soil already corresponding to the abandonment of the building, indicates that the temple was no longer in use after the 9th–10th century AD.

TEST TRENCHES 2 AND 3

A closer look at surface features east of the *chahar taq* combined with surface cleaning



Fig. 9. Floor of the water reservoir in its southern corner in Trench 2 (Photo B. Kaim)

confirmed the existence of a square structure on the easternmost edge of the summit [Fig. 10]. To identify the structure, the method of its construction, as well as the state of its preservation test trenches 2 and 3 were opened. The structure was revealed as an almost square reservoir (4.20 by 4.30 m) cut in the ground [Fig. 9]. At the moment of discovery, it was filled with a compact layer of soil, gravel and pebbles. The walls were made of roughly hewn stones bonded with soil and plastered with

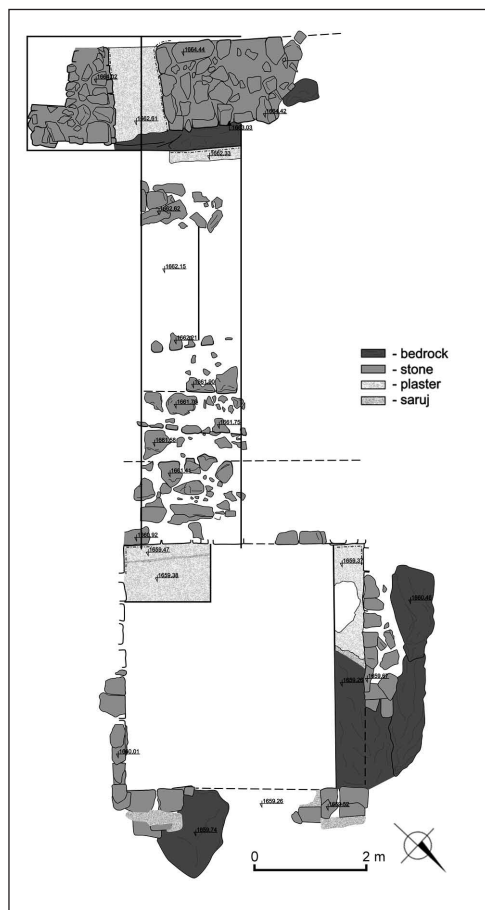


Fig. 10. Plan of structures northeast of the *chahar taq* (Trenches 2 and 3) (Drawing and digitizing M. Wagner)

waterproof material locally known as *saruj*, which is a kind of strong mortar containing gypsum, small stones, gravel and crushed bricks or ceramic vessels

TEST TRENCH 4

Just next to the reservoir there is the easternmost of a series of steps leading to the *chahar taq* [cf. *Fig. 10*]. The step is about 0.50 m wide, and lies at 1661.57 m a.s.l. The second step measures 0.75 m in width and is 0.18 m high. The topmost one is 3.50 m wide and 0.40 m high.

The steps lead to an entrance area (1662.62 m a.s.l.; 0.90–1.20 m wide) framed by two structures made of stones laid in clay mortar. The northern one is for the most part visible on the surface. It was probably a small room, the eastern wall of which (approx. 1.50 m wide and preserved up to a height of 1664.34 m a.s.l.) was constructed directly on bedrock (1663.06 m a.s.l.). Of the southern structure only a corner has been preserved, formed by two walls, each 0.85 m wide. This building is even more enigmatic and requires further investigations.

BUILDING DATE AND FUNCTION

The first season of research in the ruins of Khone-ye Div did not yield any evidence of the construction date. Sasanian stone architecture is generally little known, hence no comparative analysis of the mode of construction and the ground plan of Khone-ye Div with other similar stone buildings in Iran, especially in Khorasan, is possible.

The isolation of the monument, apparently not associated with any important settlements, increases the difficulty of establishing a context in which it had functioned and thus of understanding the building's original purpose. There are, however, a few features hinting at some aspects of usage.

The presence of a water reservoir indicates a need for collecting water on the spot instead of bringing it from the nearby stream. The localization precludes any regular household function, leaving two possibilities for consideration: ceremonial and military. The latter would be acceptable were the building in any kind of strategic position. But there are no cross-mountain roads in the vicinity of Khone-ye Div. The presence of at least two large platforms (considering that there were most likely four originally) in the

central unit is also in contradiction to this hypothesis.

On the other hand, the platforms and water reservoir match the ritual requirements of the Zoroastrian fire temple cult. Zoroastrians make offerings of water as well as fire. They pour it on the ground before making a sacrifice and at the beginning of certain acts of worship. Water is used as a means of ritual purification, too. Nonetheless, a hypothesis that a temple of fire was constructed and maintained here, although very plausible, needs to be supported by further data. There remains also the question of what kind of fire temple was constructed in this particular place where a regular presence of worshippers could not be counted on.

The location of the temple on a mountain hill may have been dictated by the ancient Iranian tradition of going up to high places for communal worship. This tradition persists to this day and mountain sanctuaries for festive gatherings were constructed both in ancient times (Takht-e Suleiman, Kuh-e Kwajah, to name a few) and in the last century (by the Zoroastrians of Yazd). However, as an ever-burning fire

needs constant fuel and its servitors likewise require sustenance, there could never have been a question of establishing eternal fires at remote and completely inaccessible sites. And, while the access to Khone-ye Div is difficult, the place is reachable, especially walking along the Revand River bed from the village of Revand. Thus, if the function of the building called Khone-ye Div as a temple of fire is accepted, its use as a pilgrimage center must also be considered.

Among the temples of Khorasan known from written sources, Adur Burzen Mihr established on Mount Revand certainly must have attracted numerous pilgrims. According to a Zoroastrian Pahlavi

scripture, the Greater *Bundahishn*, Adur Burzen Mihr (one of the three most sacred "Royal Fires"), was placed in that temple by the legendary Vishstaspa, the first king converted by Zoroaster (GBd XVIII.14). The epic story *Vīs u Rāmīn*, regarded to be of Parthian origin and probably dating from the 1st century AD, says that Vīs was buried close to the Burzen fire and Rāmīn retired there in his old age.

If the identification proposed here of the ruins called Khone-ye Div as a temple of fire and a pilgrimage center is correct, it is also possible to see in it the temple of Adur Burzen Mihr which is known from the written sources. This hypothesis, however attractive, still needs to be confirmed.

REFERENCES

Primary sources

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Vīs u Rāmīn = *Vīs and Rāmīn*, by Fakhr al-Dīn Gurgānī, translated from Persian by G. Morrison, New York 1972