

QAL 'A-IṢṬAKHR AND THE SI GUNBADĀN

Maria Vittoria Fontana - Sapienza University of Rome

The aim of this paper is to examine the unclear connection between a well-known fortress (Qal' a Iṣṭakhr), located in the Fārs region on a mount not distant from the city of Istakhr, and the Si Gunbadān (three domes), the name frequently given to the three mounts also standing on the plain of Marvdasht. The mix-up over the two subjects - fortress and mount(s) - may have arisen from the shape evoked by the term gunbad.

Keywords: Istakhr, Fars, Iran, fortress (*qal'a*), dome (*gunbad*)

1. QAL 'A IṢṬAKHR IN THE MEDIEVAL ARABIC AND PERSIAN SOURCES

The first mentions of the fortress of Istakhr (on the open Marvdasht plain in the Iranian region of Fārs) were probably made by two 10th-century Arab geographers, Iṣṭakhrī (d. 957) and Muqaddasī (d. ca 990). The first stated that «Istakhr hat ein Schloss [*ḥiṣn*¹] und Festungswerke»;² Muqaddasī was more accurate in his description: «In Istakhr is a great citadel [*qal'a*³], the width of the main part of it a *farsakh*. **In it are water tanks**. A commander is permanently there, as are merchants. A number of kings' storehouses are there, and some pre-Islamic chattels».⁴

Michelina Di Cesare has suggested⁵ that this could be one of the three *ṭwānāt* mentioned by Dīnawarī (d. 894-895 or 902-903) and specifically - as confirmed by Ṭabarī (d. 923)⁶ - the one on the road from Istakhr to Khurāsān.⁷

A text entitled *The Book of Treasures and Gifts* (written no later than 1071) and attributed to an official or administrator of the Egyptian Fatimid court, Aḥmad al-Rashīd Ibn al-Zubayr, reports that the Buyid 'Imād al-Dīn Marzubān (1024-1048) ascended the *qal'a* and **found a tank** and rooms full of precious gemstones.⁸

Furthermore, in the 12th-century *Fārsnāma*, a work ascribed to Ibn al-Balkhī, we read that «Within the circuit of the city [Istakhr] there were three castles, one Qal'ah Iṣṭakhr, the second Qal'ah *Shikastah* (the Broken Castle), and the third Qal'ah *Shakanvān*. These were known as the **Three Domes**».⁹

¹ Iṣṭakhrī (Arabic text 1927), 116.

² Iṣṭakhrī (German translation by Mordtmann 1845), 64; cf. also Tskitishvili 1971, 315.

³ Muqaddasī (Arabic text 1877), 446.

⁴ Muqaddasī (English translation by Collins 1994), 393. The editor added: «Addition / version MS. C. In it are the treasures of the kings of Fārs from the pre-Islamic period. It is a difficult place to approach, well fortified, and with some ponds of water and with the entrenched ruler who will not leave it» (Id., 393-394).

⁵ Di Cesare 2015, 19-20.

⁶ Ṭabarī (Arabic text 1881-1882), 690.

⁷ Dīnawarī (Arabic text 1888), 30.

⁸ The tank was eighty cubits long and very deep (Ibn al-Zubayr [Arabic text 1959], 78-79; cf. Bivar 1998, 643).

⁹ Ibn al-Balkhī (English translation by Le Strange 1912), 25-26. In n. 1 the editor added: «*Sih Gunbadān*. - At fol. 15b of the MS. the author writes that in the castle of Iṣṭakhr Jamshīd kept his treasury [*khazānah*], in the castle of *Shikastah* his storehouse [*farrāsh-khānah*], and in the castle of *Shakanvān* he established his armory [*zarrād-khānah*]. This last name is sometimes written *Shankavān*». The British Museum Manuscript (Ms. Or. 5983) records these statements in the Persian text (Ibn al-Balkhī [Persian text 1921], 32).

The first to affirm that the Istakhr fortress was also known as *Si Gunbadān* (Three Domes) and to attribute to the Buyid ‘Aḏud al-Dawla (949-983) the construction there of a dam and other cisterns - the latter already mentioned by Muqaddasī and Ibn al-Zubayr - was Mustawfī, who composed his *Nuzhat al-Qulūb* in 1340 and, in turn citing the *Fārsnāmā*,¹⁰ stated in the geographical part of his work:

Iṣṭakhr Castle. According to the *Fārs Nāmāh* there is no castle through the land older than this, and every device which a castle can have to strengthen this castle possess. Anciently it was known as **Sih Gunbadān (Three Domes)**, for round and about it stand other two castles, called Shikastah and Shankavān. At this the main castle there is a cleft going deep into the ground, through which the rain water passed, falling out at the further end into the plain. ‘**Aḏud-ad-Dawlah built a dam at this lower end**, and with cement and stones and mortar turned the cleft here into a tank, to which a stairway led down, of seventeen steps. By means of canvas soaked in bitumen and wax, he rendered the cement so impervious that no water could percolate through, and so great a quantity of water used to be collected here, that had a thousand men used of the same for a whole year, its level would not have dropped one single step. **The tank further was set with columns, and roofed over,**¹¹ so that the water was undisturbed by changes of the weather ; and **besides this there were other cisterns** lying beyond and about. The climate of this castle is temperate, and the only weakness of the place is that its fortifications are not quite strong enough to resist an attack.

Iṣṭakhr Yār Castle (the Companion of Iṣṭakhr). This is strongly fortified, and it is thus called because, in its strength, it is the companion of Iṣṭakhr. Its climate is good, and it possesses likewise a cistern, also there are in its circuit springs of living water.¹²

The fortress of Istakhr was also mentioned in the *Shāhnāmā*.¹³

The *Burhān-i Qāṭi* ‘ is a Persian Dictionary compiled in India in 1651 by Muḥammad Ḥusayn b. Khalaf Tabrīzī, whose pen-name was Burhān. In two instances reference is made to a *qal’ā*, situated in the *mulk* of Fārs, called Istakhr since it contains a great reservoir of water.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibn al-Balkhī (Persian text 1921), 156. On *Qal’ā Iṣṭakhr* and the *Si Gunbadān*, see also A.A. Asadi - C.G. Cereti, Two New Pahlavi Inscriptions from Fars Province, Iran: M.V. Fontana (ed.), *Istakhr (Iran), 2011-2016. Historical and Archaeological Essays* (Quaderni di Vicino Oriente), Rome, forthcoming.

¹¹ This evidence has been confirmed by Flandin’s meticulous description in the 19th century (see below).

¹² Mustawfī (English translation by Le Strange 1919), 131-132. In n. 2, in connection with Shankavān, the editor adds: «Also written Shakanvān and Ashkanvān. Of the ‘Three Domes’ the Iṣṭakhr Castle lies 2 leagues to the north of the village of Fathābād; Qal’ah Shikastah (the Broken Castle) is now known as Miyān Qal’ah (the Midmost Castle), and lies 2½ leagues to the north-west of Fathābād ; while the castle of Ashkanvān stands one league south-east of Dashtak, the older Abraj. [...]». And in n. 3, in connection with Iṣṭakhr Yār Castle (the Companion of Iṣṭakhr), Le Strange records: «Probably situated on the hill above Iṣṭakhr (Persepolis)». Cf. also n. 15.

¹³ For occurrences of it in Firdawsī’s poem, cf. Ouseley 1821, 350-357. Cf. also n. 16.

¹⁴ Burhān (Persian edition 1951-1952), 124, 128. Note that the Arabic version of the Persian name Istakhr (استخر) is اصطرخ or اسطرخ. In this regard cf. also Ouseley 1821, 309-311.

2. THE *SI GUNBADĀN*

Although the first medieval sources do not mention “three mounts” or “three hills”, but rather cite only three palaces (*īwānāt*, Dinawārī) or structures (*bunyān*, Ṭabarī) or *qal'as* (Ibn al-Zubayr, Ibn al-Balkhī and Mustawfī), the explanation given by Mustawfī for the words *si gunbadān*, namely «for round and about it stand other two castles», may have led modern local people and, consequently, some European travellers to believe that the *si gunbadān* were each placed on the three mounts¹⁵ or that the *si gunbadān* were the three mounts themselves located in the north-western area of the Marvdasht plain, the closest of them to the city of Istakhr being located 9 km from it.¹⁶ The mix-up over the two subjects - fortress and mount(s) - may have arisen from the shape evoked by the term *gunbad*, literally ‘dome’. As *pars pro toto*, *gunbad* can be referred to both a fortress (a domed *qal'a*) and a mount (a dome-shaped *kūh*).¹⁷

The first to portray the three mounts may have been the German naturalist, physician and traveller Engelbert Kämpfer (d. 1716), who visited the area of Istakhr in 1686 (fig. 1), while the Dutch artist and traveller Cornelis de Bruijn (d. 1726 or 1727), after his travels in 1704, produced two drawings on this subject (figs. 2-3) and a description which clearly alludes to three mounts and as many fortresses: «les trois montagnes, sur lesquelles il y avoit autrefois des forteresses».¹⁸

¹⁵ This opinion is shared by Streck (1978, 221).

¹⁶ Cf. also Le Strange 1905, 276 and Matheson 2001, 115. See the aerial photo taken in the 1930s by Schmidt (1940, pl. 12, in the background; here fig. 6).

¹⁷ See the «cône tronqué» and the «truncated hills» to which Flandin (1843 [T], 71) and Stanley (1895, 380), respectively, make reference (cf. below and fig. 9). Also note the *sa dizh-i gunbadān-i Istakhr* “the three domed fortresses of Istakhr” mentioned by Firdawsī in his *Shāhnāma* (cf. Ouseley 1821, 386). Furthermore Streck affirms: «All three [forts], which lie practically in a straight line, are frequently comprised under the name of Qal'a or Kūh-i Iṣṭakhr, “the citadel” or “the mountain of Iṣṭakhr”, also Kūh-i Rāmdjird, from a district of this name on the left bank of the Kur (into which the above mentioned Pulwar flows). [...] The most important of the three, the Qal'a Iṣṭakhr in the narrower sense, is also called Miyān Qal'a, “the central fort” from its position between the other two» (Streck 1978, 221-222).

¹⁸ Le Bruyn 1718, 294. He stated: «Chapitre LI. *Amandiers, sauvages, & autres arbres. Montagnes sur lesquelles il y avoit autrefois des forteresses. Riviere de Bendemir. Arrivée a Persepolis.* [...] nous entrâmes dans une plaine, où nous vîmes à notre droite, environ à deux lieues de distance, un grand rocher fort élevé sur lequel il y avoit anciennement une forteresse considerable, dont il paroît encore, à ce qu'on dit, quelques restes. On pretend aussi qu'il y a sur le sommet de ce rocher une grande plaine rempli de troupeaux dans la saison. [...] Sur le 11. heures nous passâmes proche de deux autres montagnes assez près l'une de l'autre, sur lesquelles il y avoit aussi autrefois des forteresses, dont il ne reste aucunes ruines. [...] On trouve en cet endroit deux chemins qui conduisent à *Persepolis*, [...] Chapitre LV. *Depart de Persepolis. Arrivée à Zjie-raes ou Chiras. Description de cette ville. Arrivée à Ispahan.* [...] [je] repris le chemin de la plaine [...] Etant parvenu à la moitié du chemin, je dessinai les trois montagnes, sur lesquelles il y avoit autrefois des forteresses, dont j'ai déjà fait mention. La plus grande, & la première, est celle qui paroît divisée par le milieu, & les deux autres, à droite, sont proche du pont de *Jesneioen* : la plus reculée est presque toujours couverte de neige» (Le Bruyn 1718, 258 and 294). Pietro della Valle (1677, 331), who travelled some years before - in 1621 - referred to two mounts and as many castles: «Ma prima di passare il Ponte nella ripa Orientale vn poco lontana, notammo due rupi alte, sopra le quali, nella cima delle medesime pietre tagliate, dicono, che ne' tempi addietro vi fossero due Castelli, vno di essi, il più vicino al Ponte, lo chiamano *Caluhai sachi*, cioè Castello forte; e l'altro più innanzi a Mezo giorno, *Caluhai scechiscèt*, che vuol dir Castello rotto. [...]».

The German cartographer and explorer in the service of Denmark Carsten Niebuhr (d. 1815) made a journey to the area of Istakhr in 1765 and recorded three castles, all situated on a single mountain:

Trois ou quatre milles d'Allemagne vers l'Ouest, il y-a encore trois vieux châteaux, qu'on appelle *Kalle Istakr*, *Kalle Schikafé*, et ... [editor's note *a*, Le nom du troisieme château, ne se trouve point aussi dans l'Original T.]. On prétend que l'un est situé au bas, l'autre au milieu et le troisieme en haut d'une montagne haute et escarpée. Comme je n'ai pas été dans cette contrée, je ne saurois déterminer avec certitude s'ils ont été batis par les anciens Perses, ou seulement après par les Mahométans ; selon toute apparence ils sont des premiers et meritent aussi qu'un Européen les aille voir.¹⁹

The British diplomat and traveller James Justinian Morier (d. 1849) referred to only two mounts during his 1811 journey:

In the plain of Merdasht, to the northward, are several conspicuous masses of rock, which are insulated, and unconnected with the surrounding mountains. One of these was pointed out to me as the Rock of Istakhar, [...] In the fore-ground arises another insulated rock, similar to the one on which I stood, on which are the ruins of the Castle of Shahrek. It looks like an immense square turret placed on a tumulus.²⁰

In 1821 James Baillie Fraser (d. 1856), a Scottish traveller and artist, provided his version of the mounts' names:

Before quitting the plain of Merdusht we have to notice certain remarkable castellated rocks near the ruins, which probably formed the defences of the ancient city. We allude to the hills of Istakhar, Shekusteh, and Shemgan, which, with their respective forts, are by Persian writers termed the Seh Goombedan or the Three Domes. The first of these rises nine miles north of the Tucht, [...] As the travellers looked down from this summit, full in front was seen another singular insulated cliff, also crowned with a fortress, and known by the name of Kallah Shareek or the Castle of Shareek, a king or governor of the province, who was killed in defending it against the Arabs in the seventh century.²¹

Jean-Baptiste Eugène Napoléon Flandin (d. 1889), a French orientalist, painter, politician and traveller, sojourned in the area of Istakhr during the last two months of 1840 and recorded the three mounts, both describing and illustrating them (figs. 4-5):

Monts-Istâkhr. Dans la partie occidentale de la plaine de *Merdâcht*, là où elle se rétrécit et se trouve borné par les montagnes du *Louristân* (Pl. LVIII, *here* fig. 4) on aperçoit trois masses de rochers qui se suivent presque en ligne droite, et très-

¹⁹ Niebuhr 1780, 131.

²⁰ Morier 1818, 83, 86.

²¹ Fraser 1834, 138.

rapprochées l'une de l'autre. On les remarque à leur forme singulières et semblables qui, de loin, figure un cône tronqué. **Ces trois éminences portent les noms de Khou-Istākhr, Khâlèh Istākhr**, ou encore *Khou-Ramgherd*, c'est-à-dire *Monts-Istākhr* ou *citadelle d'Istākhr*, ou bien *Monts-isolés*. [...] ²²

Immediately after Flandin's departure, Baron Karl-August von Bode (d. 1887), a member of the Russian Legation at Tehran, arrived and visited the area of Istakhr from 5-11 January 1841. He described the mount of the Istakhr fortress (see below) and mentioned the other two mounts:

This isolated hill of Istakhr is the key of the pass which opens into the plain of Persepolis from the hilly country of Ardekan. *^[23]

Not far from Kuhi-Istakhr, in a south-eastern direction, is another hill which cannot be ascended on account of its steepness ; it is barren, and has a very grotesque appearance.

At the distance of two farsangs to the west, inclining to north, is a third isolated hill, on the summit of which some ruins are seen, said to have been an ancient fort, but time would not allow of my visiting the spot, much to my regret, as hitherto no traveller appears to have described it. **It bears the name of Kuhi-Shahrek.** ²⁴

Two Scottish gentlemen, James Fergusson (d. 1886) - an architectural historian - and Robert Blair Munro Binning (d. 1891) - an orientalist and member of the Madras Civil Service -, who came to the Marvdasht plain in the same years (1851 and 1851-1852, respectively), stated:

Looking up the valley to the right of the spectator standing among the ruins, the flatness of the plain is broken by three singular rocky hills, perfectly isolated from

²² Flandin - Coste 1843 (T), 71.

²³ In his note * von Bode provided a detailed description of the landscape he saw from the Istakhr mount: «I took advantage of the elevated spot on which I stood to mark a few bearings of the compass, relying on the words of my guide, and on my own sight, to determine the relative distances of the several places. *Bearings taken from the south side of Kūhi-Istakhr*. The bridge of Puli-Khan and direction of the river Kūm-Firūz, due south; distance of the former, between three and four farsangs. To the west of the Kūm-Firūz extends the district of *Ramjird*, bounded to the west by a mountainous country, forming the buluk of *Baiza*. To the east of the same river is the district of *Hafrek*. Direction of the hill at Nakshi-Rustam, E. by E.S.E., distant about two farsangs. *Bearings taken from the north-east side of the hill of Istakhr*. The hill of Kuhi- Shahrek, N.W. by W.N.W., two farsangs distant. The Kūm-Firūz flows from the same direction. It has its source in the snowy range of Ardekan, near a place called *Runje- Gambil*, and is the Araxes, or Cyrus of the ancients, which Alexander had to cross before he reached Persepolis. It is joined in the plain by the river Moīn, coming from the village of the same name in a N.N.W. direction. The summer road from Isfahan to Shiraz passes through Moīn. The extremity of the mountain ridge of Husein-Kūh, a continuation of the Nakshi-Rustam hills, lies to the north-west. The villages Germ-abad (one farsang), and Kazimabad (one and a-half farsangs distant) are to E.N.E. by E. The bridge of Puli-no over the Kum-Firuz is situated to the south-east, at no great distance from Kuhi-Istakhr. The bridge Alexander the Great had to throw over the Araxes, before he could enter on the plain of Persepolis, was probably somewhere in the same neighbourhood».

²⁴ De Bode 1845, 122-124.

the rest, and so fantastic in their shapes, that modern Persian writers have peopled them with gins and deevs, whose petrified castles they conceive them to be ; [...].²⁵

and

On the north-west side of the plain of Mervdasht, at a distance of ten miles or more from Jemsheed's throne, are three insulated hills, collectively termed the *sih goombedân* or "three domes," and respectively named, as our guide informed us, Istakhar, Shahrek, and Kom-feerooz. Fraser calls them Istakhar, Shekusteh and Shemgan—on the summits of which, are said to be remains of ancient fortresses.²⁶

In 1870 the Welsh-American journalist and explorer Henri Morton Stanley (d. 1904) interpreted the archaeological ruins of Istakhr as the Istakhr fortress,²⁷ but described the three hills as follows:

From Naksh-i-Rustam we proceed south to Persepolis across the gorge (in the narrowest part and centre of which stands **Istakhr, the fortress**), and over a loamy land intersected and cut up by many scores of canals which water the plain of Persepolis. On our right as we travel stands a group of three lofty and **truncated hills**, which go by the name of **Myûm Kalah** ("Between the Mountains"),^[28] but whose real names, according to Hamdallah the Persian historian, are Istakhr, Schesch, and Skhwan ; on our left is Istakhr, its double pylon, its mounds and ruined halls, and the narrow valley leading to Saidan.²⁹

Lord Georg Nathaniel Curzon (d. 1925), Viceroy and Governor-General of India, stayed in the Persepolis area in 1880-1881; he provided this following description of the three "rocky bluffs":

To a person standing on the platform of Persepolis, and looking over the plain of Mervdasht, the most conspicuous objects in the landscape are three insulated rocky bluffs, rising abruptly at a distance of from seven to eight miles to the north-west. Their lower parts consist of steep slopes, above which a precipitous scarp shoots into the air, terminating in a sharp and jagged summit. These hills are known as Seh Gumbedan, or Three Domes; [...].³⁰

Only a few months later, in 1881, a British official who served with the Bengal Civil Service, Edward Stack (d. 1887), crossing the plain of Mervdasht came in sight of the three hills:

²⁵ Fergusson 1851, 91.

²⁶ Binning 1857, 37-38.

²⁷ «As we study the site and its surroundings we become certain that the position of this fortress commands an entrance to the plain of Persepolis» (Stanley 1895, 374).

²⁸ It is likely that Stanley attributes to the three hills or mounts the name sometimes given to the middle one, on which the fortress of Istakhr is located (cf. «Mijânkale „Mittel-Burg“» in Nöldeke 1887, 145, and above, n. 17: «Miyân Kal'â, "the central fort"», reported by Streck 1978, 222).

²⁹ Stanley 1895, 380-381.

³⁰ Curzon 1892, 136; Curzon continues by listing scholars and travellers who mentioned the three mounts before him.

As if by iron of Nature, the work of monarchs is dwarfed and outraved by three castles of Nature's building, planted on the distant plain. They are three hills, rising 700 feet with steep smooth slope, and then crowned with a wall of crags 300 feet high. It is these gigantic objects which seem the proper guardians of Marvdasht; and to look towards of the vanity of human greatness.³¹

3. THE FORTRESS OF ISTAKHR DURING THE ISLAMIC ERA AND THE ACCOUNTS OF 19TH-CENTURY EUROPEAN TRAVELLERS

We have no reliable information on when the Istakhr fortress was built. Muqaddasī, who was a contemporary of the Buyid 'Aḍud al-Dawla, seems to not attribute it to a pre-Islamic period, since he refers only to "chattels" dated to that epoch.³² In any case the use of the fortress since the time of the Islamic conquest suggests it is an ancient building.³³ As a matter of fact, after the conquest the governors of Fārs used the fortress as a natural defence and after 'Alī's death Ziyād ibn Abīhi (d. 673), governor of Kūfa and Baṣra, chose it as his residence to defend himself against Mu'āwiya.³⁴

As mentioned, important hydraulic works were carried out during the Buyid period. A system of reservoirs has been assigned to 'Aḍud al-Dawla.³⁵ The Istakhr fortress was subsequently recorded over time as a citadel-prison, certainly in use for this purpose at least from the late Saljuq period. There were at least four episodes, the most ancient of which refers to the Saljuq vizier Niẓām al-Mulk who conquered the fortress of Istakhr on behalf of Alp Arslan (1063-1072) in 1067, taking it from the Saljuq 'prince' Qavurt (d. 1073).³⁶ Almost a century later, after the death of the Saljuq Malik Shāh b. Maḥmūd in 1160,³⁷ his son Maḥmūd - who ruled for just three months, in 1152³⁸ - was held prisoner in the fortress of Istakhr by the Salghurid atabeg Muẓaffar al-Dīn Zangī (1161-1175), who considered him a dangerous claimant to the government of Fārs.³⁹

³¹ Stack 1882, 68-69.

³² Iṣṭakhrī - therefore native of the city - makes no reference to the origin of the fortress.

³³ On the Persian legends referring to mythical times cf. Streck (1978, 222), who mentions both Arabic sources and the traditions recorded by William Ouseley. In particular, on the identification of this *qal'a* with the mythical fortress where the *Avesta* would be deposited, i.e. the Castle or Hill of Writing(s), see also G. Terribili, *Istakhr and Its Territory. A Glance over Middle Persian Sources and Sasanian Epigraphic Evidence*: M.V. Fontana (ed.), *Istakhr (Iran), 2011-2016. Historical and Archaeological Essays* (Quaderni di Vicino Oriente), Rome, forthcoming.

³⁴ Fraser 1834, 138; Wellhausen 1902, 76; cf. Streck 1978, 222. Curzon (1892, 134) attributes the fortress to Mu'āwiya.

³⁵ On the attribution of the tanks to 'Aḍud al-Dawla also by Ṣādiq Iṣḫānī see the quotation by Ouseley, below and n. 45; cf. also Busse (1975, 281): «The citadel in *Shīrāz* and a reservoir in the castle at *Iṣṭakhr* appear to have been 'Aḍud al-Dawla's only military constructions [...]». For another Buyid ruler, 'Imād al-Dīn Marzubān, who ascended the *qal'a*, see above and n. 8. On the inscriptions engraved in Persepolis upon the wishes of both 'Aḍud al-Dawla (344H/955) - cf. Frye 1962, 251 and n. 31 - and the other Buyid Baha' al-Dawla (392H/1001-2), see Blair 1992, nos. 6-7, 18, respectively.

³⁶ Bosworth 1968, 59-60. Cf. also Bivar 1998, 644.

³⁷ He was the son of Maḥmūd Mughīth al-Dunyā wa'l-Dīn (1118-1131), who was in turn the son of Muḥammad b. Malik Shāh (Ghiyāth al-Dīn Muḥammad, 1105-1118).

³⁸ Lambton 1988, 228, n. 35.

³⁹ Bosworth 1968, 169.

Later Zangī, the son of the Salghurid atabeg ʿIzz al-Dīn Saʿd I (1194-1203), was held prisoner by the Khwarizm Shāhs in the fortress of Istakhr until his brother-in-law, the Khwarizm Shāh Jalāl al-Dīn,⁴⁰ returned from Sind (in present-day Pakistan).⁴¹

In the 15th century three sons of Ḥaydar (d. 1488), the head of the Safavid order in Ardabil, were interned in the Istakhr fortress by the Āq Quyūnlū Yaʿqūb (1478-1490).⁴²

Finally the fortress was demolished by Shāh ʿAbbās I (1588-1629) at the end of the 16th century,⁴³ after Yaʿqūb Khān, the Dhuʿl-Qadr ruler of Shiraz, was forced to leave the fortress in 1590 and move to Shiraz, where he was executed in the same year.⁴⁴

In 1811 two British gentlemen, Ouseley and Morier, visited Istakhr; for the latter it was his second journey. The officer and orientalist William Ouseley (d. 1842) recorded that the geographer Ṣādiq Iṣfāhānī (d. ca 1650) attributed «a reservoir or cistern in the castle of Istakhr»⁴⁵ to the Buyid ʿAḍud al-Dawla, while the diplomat and traveller James Justinian Morier (d. 1849) ascended the “Rock of Istakhar” - he may have been one of the first European travellers to do so - and described the archaeological remains as follows: «part of a gate, the ruins of several turrets, four reservoirs, and the wrecks of many walls»;⁴⁶ moreover he made a drawing of the “The rock of Istakhar” (fig. 7).

The Scottish diplomat, artist and traveller Robert Ker Porter (d. 1842), who visited the area of Istakhr in 1817-1820, affirmed to have only seen a “building” from a distance and demonstrated his knowledge of Mustawfī’s account.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ The Salghurid Saʿd, after his conflict with the Khwarizm Shāh ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Muḥammad (1199-1220), agreed that his daughter, Malika Khātūn, should marry the then Khwarizm Shāh ‘prince’ Jalāl al-Dīn, while his son Zangī should remain at court (cf. also Malcolm 1815, 387).

⁴¹ Malcolm 1815, 387; cf. De Bode 1845, 122. For the same and other episodes related to the Istakhr fortress as a prison, see Ouseley 1821, 371-399 (passim).

⁴² See Savory 1980, 20 and Mitchell 2009, 21. Cf. also De Bode 1845, 122, who attributes the task of imprisonment to the Āq Quyūnlū Uzun Ḥasan (1453-1478), rather than to Yaʿqūb.

⁴³ Matthee 1996, 401 and n. 88.

⁴⁴ Quinn 2010, 219; 2015, 56. The episode is also narrated by the chronicler Afūshā-yi Naṭānzī in his work (*The Choicest of Works in Remembrance of Righteous*) written in 1598 (Quinn 2010, 210 and n. 68). Curzon (1892, 134) stated that «The latter [i.e. the ‘mediaeval citadel of Istakhr on the pointed hill’] was made a state-prison by Atabegs of Fars, and was so used as late as 1576 A.D.». On *Qalʿa Iṣṭakhr* see also Ishrāqī 1974; Bivar 1998, 645 and, more recently, Asadi 2012.

⁴⁵ Ouseley 1821, 183. Ouseley provided a history of ʿAḍud al-Dawla’s cistern (citing both the *Fārsnāma* and Mustawfī) and a detailed description of the reservoir’s construction materials (Ouseley 1821, 313-315).

⁴⁶ Morier 1818, 85. «One of these was pointed out to me as the Rock of Istakhar, on the extreme summit of which I was informed were to be seen the wonderful remains of a castle. [...] We ascended the rock on the N. W. side, winding around the foot of it, through more shrubs than are to be seen in any other part of the surrounding country [...] The rock we were ascending arises abruptly from a steep conical hill. The collected mass, I calculated might be twelve hundred feet in height, the perpendicular of the rock being about five hundred. [...] The remains that are to be seen, are part of a gate, the ruins of several turrets, four reservoirs, and the wrecks of many walls. The rock at its summit exhibits nothing but a few scanty shrubs, and one large fir tree, that is situated near to the largest reservoir, at its southern extremity. It has a gradual inclination from both sides towards the centre, forming as it were a furrow, in which the reservoirs have been constructed. The view from its height commands a great extent of country. I could discover the range of mountains which bound the plain of Shiraz to the south, as also those of the Peer-a-Zun» (Morier 1818, 83-85).

⁴⁷ «At about a farsang’s distance from hence [Takht-i Rustam], rises a pointed hill, on which is the appearance of a considerable building. This, I concluded to be one of the three fortresses mentioned by the Asiatic author Hamdollah [Mustawfī], under the names of Istaker, Chekesch, and Chekwan, and which of old formed the great bulwarks of the plain. But the people of Hadjee-abad, and Kanarah, seemed to know nothing of the

The already mentioned Scottish traveller, James Baillie Fraser, did not visit the fortress, as a matter of fact he located it on the top of the “first” of the “Three Domes”, nevertheless he described it as follows:

On the top, which is marked by a single fir-tree and some bushes, are four reservoirs, part of a gateway, and several broken turrets and walls, - the remains of a fortress constructed by the Arabian general Zeid.⁴⁸

The most detailed description of the reservoirs and some information on other remains of the fortress of Istakhr, arising on the top of the middle of the three hills he named “*Khâlèh-Serb, forteresse du ciprès ou du cèdre*”, were supplied by Jean-Baptiste Eugène Napoléon Flandin in 1840 (see above).

Monts-Istâkhr. [...]

La première de ces éminences, celle qui est la plus rapprochée des ruines de la ville d'*Istâkhr*, en est à neuf kilomètres environ. Elles sont espacées entre elles de deux à trois kilomètres. Dans les intervalles qui les séparent, on retrouve, même quelques parties de murs qui s'élèvent au-dessus du sol. On doit, après cela, présumer que ces espèces de citadelles naturelles se reliaient entre elles au moyen de murailles, et avaient dû être utilisées pour la défense du territoire de la ville d'*Istâkhr*.

En approchant de ces rochers, l'aspect conique qu'ils présentent se modifie ; leur base forme un plain incliné ou la terre se maintient encore et recouvre suffisamment le roc pour que quelques rares arbrisseaux y attachent leurs racines.

Au-dessus s'élève à pic une masse de pierre entièrement dénudée. Le périmètre de la base, comme celui de la partie supérieure, se rapproche de la forme circulaire.

Ces trois monts, bizarres de forme, ne présentent pas d'ailleurs un grand intérêt archéologique. Cependant celui du milieu que les habitants désignent sous le nom particulier de *Khâlèh-Serb, forteresse du ciprès ou du cèdre*, porte encore en son sommet des vestiges qui ne laissent pas que de mériter quelques attention. Peu importants par eux-mêmes, ils attestent néanmoins l'existence passée d'ouvrages qui avaient dû être exécutés dans un but de défense, et qui devaient se rattacher à un système de fortifications que les princes *Achéménides* avaient voulu donner pour rempart à leur capitale et à leur trône. Celui de ces trois monts, désigné par le nom de *Khâlèh-Serb*, porte, en effet, sur un plateau élevé de quatre cents mètres, les restes d'une construction solide, en pierre de blocage, revêtues de moellons smillés (Pl. LXII [lower], here fig. 8). Le sol, qui est incliné vers le centre, est coupé par des réservoirs destinés à recevoir en même temps les eaux du ciel et celles d'une petite source voisine. Ils ont été construits en maçonnerie revêtue d'un ciment très-dur. Ils étaient placés les uns au-dessus des autres, de façon à ce que le trop plein se déversât successivement de l'un à l'autre, pour arriver à celui du centre qui est le plus grand et forme la piscine principale. La première a trente-six mètres cinquante centimètres de longueur sur quatre mètres de largeur et quatre

matter, when I enquired particularly about the most famed of them all, that of Istaker» (Porter 1821, 575-576). Cf. also Curzon 1892, 136: «[...] and their [the Three Domes] names have been returned by Hamdallah [Mustawfi] in the fourteenth century as Istakhr, Shekesteh, and Sangwan; [...]».

⁴⁸ Fraser 1834, 138. Concerning his latter assertion, see, above, n. 34.

mètres cinquante centimètres de profondeur. La seconde, avec la même largeur et la même profondeur, a une longueur de quarante mètres. Le bassin principal, où affluaient les eaux des deux autres, a quarante-trois mètres de longueur sur seize mètres de largeur et huit mètres cinquante centimètres de profondeur moyenne. Auprès de ce bassin est l'arbre vert qui a donné son nom au rocher. A ses branches projetées horizontalement, il nous a paru être un cèdre, et si l'on juge par la circonférence du tronc qui est de quatre mètres, il doit être très-vieux. L'existence de cet arbre et la place qu'il occupe de manière à couvrir de son ombre le bassin auprès duquel il a été planté, doivent faire penser que si ces réservoirs sont taris aujourd'hui, ils ont dû être entretenus et contenir de l'eau bien de siècles encore après la ruine de *Persépolis* ou d'*Istâkhr*. Ce fait paraît d'ailleurs confirmé par une assez grande quantité de débris de briques répandus sur ce sommet, et dont la surface émaillée prouve qu'elles sont d'origine moderne.

Cette position, qui réunit toutes les conditions désirables dans un poste militaire, a dû certainement en être une importante dans les temps anciens. L'escarpement et la hauteur de la partie supérieure devaient en rendre autrefois, comme aujourd'hui, l'approche des plus difficiles.

Pénétrés des difficultés de la construction d'une citadelle sur ce plateau presque inabordable, les Persans disent que ce sont des chèvres qui y portèrent tous les matériaux. Il est certain qu'aujourd'hui, dans l'état où sont les côtés de ces éminences, d'autres animaux auraient la plus grande peine à y parvenir si toutefois ils y réussissaient.⁴⁹

In January 1841 Karl-August von Bode (see above) provided a very interesting description of his visit to the "rock of Istakhr":

Among other excursions, I had in view to perform a trip to the hill of Istakhr, which reared its brow at a distance in a north-western direction from Persepolis, [...]. Independently of the splendid sight I anticipated to behold, the height and situation of the **isolated rock of Istakhr** were such, [...].

The ascent was steep and difficult, [...]

Istakhr can only be ascended by one path, like Kal'eh-Send, in the country of the Mamaseni, from the north-eastern side ; everywhere else it is so steep, and in many places so nearly vertical, that an involuntary shudder comes over one, on looking down into the plain. A stone wall, now partly overthrown, formerly ran across the path, and defended the approach to the summit. On arriving at the top, **I found a dilapidated tower, with heaps of broken bricks, tiles, pottery, and glass strewed about, as likewise a few ruined habitations, denoting that this had in former times been the inhabited part of the hill.**^{50]} [...] Further in the interior of the hill, where a declivity exists towards the east, I found **an immense reservoir for water, divided into three compartments** ; the banks are lined with stone, and the floor paved. The breadth is unequal, but it measures 205 paces in length. The melting snow of winter, and the rains at other seasons of the year accumulate in this and another reservoir on the south side ; this was the only means the inhabitants had of procuring water at so great an elevation, the hill

⁴⁹ Flandin - Coste 1843 (T), 71-72.

⁵⁰ At present, apart from the more evident remains of the reservoirs, only ruins of the fortress still appear (fig. 10).

possessing no springs. It has, however, several oak trees, if I recollect right, and the crags and caves abound with wild goats and rams.⁵¹

The famous orientalist Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930) left us the following description of the fortress:

Die „Burg von Istachr“ spielte aber noch in der islāmischen Zeit wiederholt eine Rolle als starke Festung. Dies ist die mittlere und grösste von den drei schroffen Felshöhen, welche sich in einiger Entfernung westlich oder nordwestlich von Nakschi Rustem aus dem Kur-Thale erheben. Die Höhe wird jetzt von ihrer Lage Miĵānkale „Mittel-Burg“ genannt. Aeltere Schriftsteller und Reisende geben andre Namen an, wie denn die Benennungen in diesem Theile Persiens sehr viel gewechselt haben. Der Name „Burg“ oder „Berg von Istachr“ scheint übrigens noch nicht ganz verschollen zu sein.⁵²

Lord Curzon - after recalling that the fortress had been ascended by Morier, von Bode and Flandin, and the latter gave «a plan of the three tanks or reservoirs» - paused to describe the other emerging ruins:

Upon the same rock are remains of a gateway, and of the walls and towers of the ancient castle; similar ruin being visible upon the adjacent rock of Shahrek. Its summit is 1,200 feet above the plain.⁵³

4. CONCLUSION

Most likely built in the pre-Islamic era, the fortress of Istakhr is connected to a certain number of historical episodes which took place in Fārs from the Islamic conquest of that region onwards. At the same time it is part of the legendary repertoire involving the mythical Iranian kings whose stories are skilfully told in the *Shahnāma*, and in Arabic and Persian sources. *Qal'a Iṣṭakhr* is on the top of the middle of the three mounts located on the Marvdasht plain with the rocks of Naqsh-i Rostam behind it. Its form - most probably featuring a domed hall - generated an overlap between the *qal'a* and the upper and dome-shaped part of the three mounts, so a double belief was established over time under the appellation of *Si Gunbadān* (three domes): the latter are three fortresses, each on the top of a mount, or the three mounts themselves.

⁵¹ De Bode 1845, 116-122.

⁵² Nöldeke 1887, 145. Cf. also Nöldeke 1911 [1st edition 1885], 186: «The “castle of Istakhr” played a conspicuous part several times during the Mahommedan period as a strong fortress. It was the middlemost and the highest of the three steep crags which rise from the valley of the Kur, at some distance to the west or north-west of Nakshi Rustam. We learn from Oriental writers that one of the Buyid (Buwaihīd) sultans in the 10th century of the Flight constructed the great cisterns, which may yet be seen, and have been visited, amongst others, by James Morier and E. Flandin. W. Ouseley points out that this castle was still used in the 16th century, at least as a state prison. But when Pietro della Valle was there in 1621 it was already in ruins».

⁵³ Curzon 1892, 136. As Curzon (1892, 136, n. 2) already observed, the statement by Fergusson (1851, 91) «[...] no trace of building however, I believe, exists upon them, though their form would almost justify the Persian tradition» appears groundless.

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celles du Fameux Palais de Persepolis. Que les Perses appellent Chelminar. Le tout dessiné d'après la route qu'a suivie Mr. Isbrants, Ambassadeur de Moscovie, en traversant la Russie & la Tartarie, pour se rendre à la Chine, Et quelques Remarques contre M^{rs}. Chardin & Kempfer, Tom II., Ches les Freres Wetstein, Amsterdam 1718.

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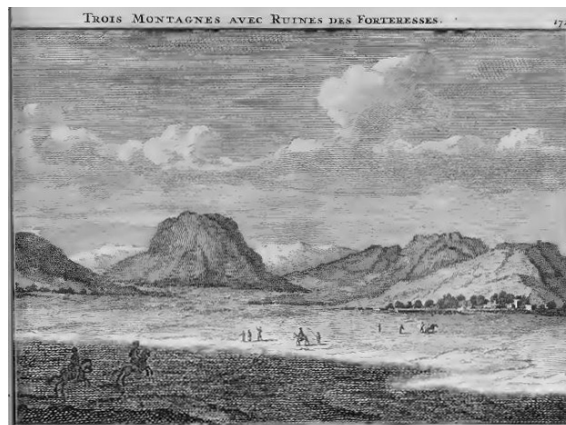
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Fig. 1 - Drawing (1686) illustrating the three mounds of the Marvdasht plain; on the right, in the foreground, the two fire altars of Naqsh-i Rostam (Kämpfer 1712, ill. between pp. 386 and 387, upper).



Figs. 2-3 - Two drawings (1704) illustrating the three mounds of the Marvdasht plain (Le Bruyn 1718, ill. on p. 259 and ill. [172] between pp. 294 and 295).

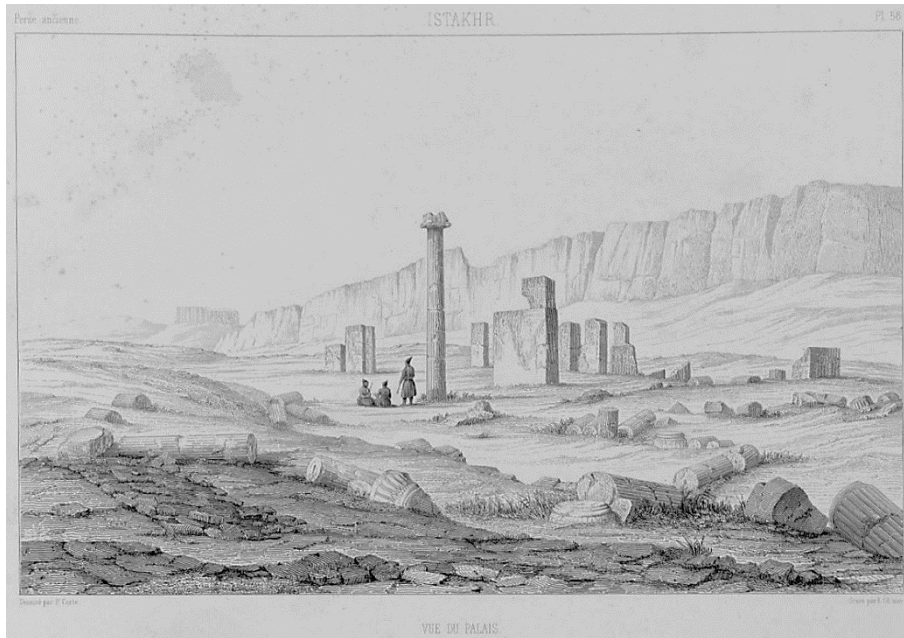


Fig. 4 - Drawing (1840) illustrating the ruins of the city of Istakhr and, in the background, on the left, the closest of the three mounds of the Marvdasht plain (Flandin - Coste 1843 [PI], pl. 58, upper).

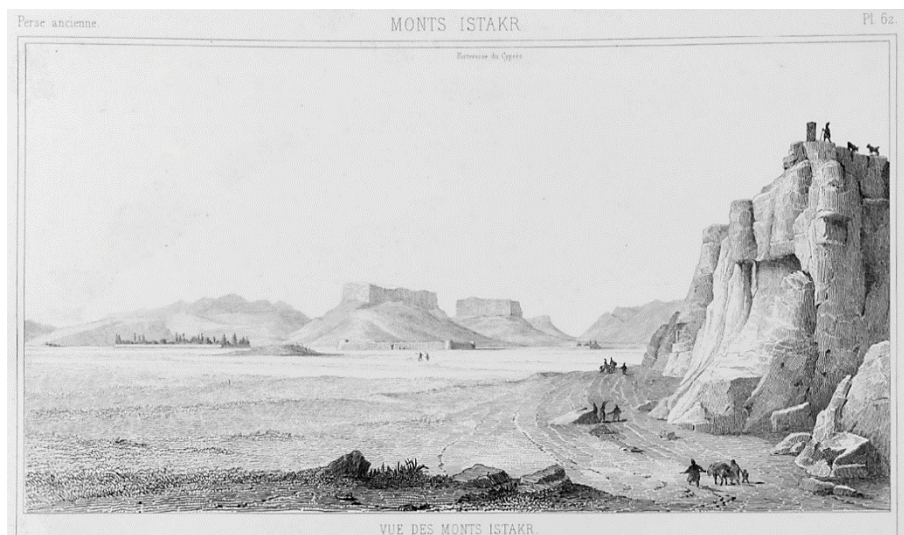


Fig. 5 - Drawing (1840) illustrating the three mounds of the Marvdasht plain in the background, on the left (Flandin - Coste 1843 [PI], pl. 62, upper).



Fig. 6 - Aerial photo (1930s) showing the rocks of Naqsh-i Rostam and, in the background, the mounts of the Marvdasht plain (Schmidt 1940, pl. 12).

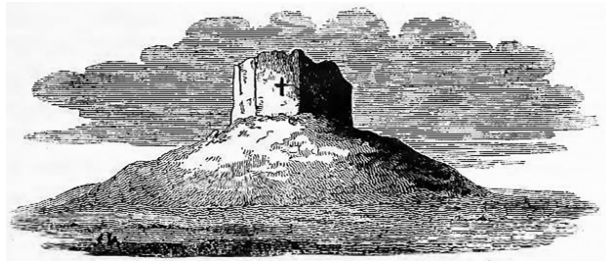


Fig. 7 - Drawing (1811) of “The rock of Istakhr” (Morier 1818, ill. [16] on p. 85).

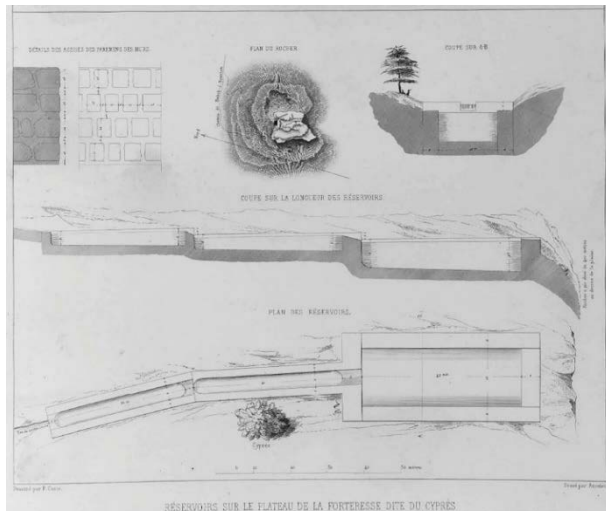


Fig. 8 - Drawing (1840) of the reservoirs on the plateau of the Istakhr fortress (Flandin - Coste 1843 [Pl], pl. 62, lower).



Fig. 9 - The mount where *Qal'a Iṣṭakhr* was located (photo © C.G. Cereti, 2017).



Fig. 10 - *Qal'a Iṣṭakhr*, the archaeological remains can be seen in the background (photo © C.G. Cereti, 2017).