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Ancient cities, fortresses and frontier walls in the Gorgan Plain – the 2008 season on the Gorgan and Tammishe Walls

By Hamid Omrani Rekavandi, Eberhard Sauer, Tony Wilkinson and Ghorban Ali Abbasi

With the kind support of the British Institute of Persian Studies, the AHRC and the ICHHTO, we continued, for a fourth season, our exploration of (1.) the Sasanian walls in the Gorgan Plain and (2.) of monuments in their hinterland.

We were able to record another section through the Gorgan Wall, prior to its destruction through widening of the road from Aq Qala to Incheh Borun. Only parts of the lowest two courses of the Wall were preserved here. By contrast, our diving team was able to demonstrate that the entire Tammishe Wall, albeit collapsed, appears to survive in the Caspian Sea. From a 2m wide partial transect (10m of the 25m wide bank of wall collapse) no less than 1.315 tonnes of bricks were lifted and there were more, too deeply embedded for recovery. This suggests that in the area of this partial transect, some 900m from the current shore, the Wall had not been robbed out prior to being flooded by the Caspian Sea. It runs for at least 1.2km into the Sea.

We continued fieldwork at Qaleh Kharabeh, a large hinterland fortress which dates to the same time span as the construction of the Gorgan Wall (5th or early 6th c. AD), focusing on a raised canal in the interior. C. 2km north of the Wall we explored Ghelich Ghoygh, a nucleated urban settlement of c. 1km diameter. Magnetometer survey revealed its street pattern and the architecture of its houses in unexpected detail. Subsequent excavation showed that the city's houses had been built of rammed earth walls and that nomads had occupied the site repeatedly before the permanent buildings had been constructed, as well as after their collapse. Radiocarbon dating placed the city's occupation within the early Achaemenid, Median or pre-Median period (8th-5th c. BC). No dates are as yet available for Dasht Qaleh, an over 3km² large city in the southern hinterland of the Wall, explored via geophysical survey and a sondage.

The 2008 season has allowed us to make considerable progress in understanding how the Sasanian frontier walls in the Gorgan Plain related to contemporary and earlier sites in their immediate vicinity.

Fig. 1: The Sasanian fortress of Qaleh Kharabeh. Magnetometer survey 2007-2008 by Abingdon Archaeological Geophysics, notably Roger Ainslie, and the ICHHTO.

Fig. 2: Ghelich Ghoygh: a city north of the Wall of the 8th-5th c. BC. Magnetometer survey by Abingdon Archaeological Geophysics, notably Roger Ainslie, and the ICHHTO.

Fig. 3: Excavation at Dasht Qaleh: a brick pillar of a probable bazaar street and a sondage into earlier occupation layers.