

## PART FOUR

### THE MUSLIM EAST



## Chapter XVIII

### Sarvistan: a Note on Sasanian Palaces\*

Even if we do not necessarily follow Sauvaget's caustic and negative remarks about Sasanian art,<sup>1</sup> it must be admitted that our knowledge of Iranian art in the centuries which preceded the Muslim conquest is still very fragmentary. Only one excavation dealing exclusively with Sasanian remains has been published so far, and even in this instance not entirely.<sup>2</sup> Outside of Bishapur, we have to rely on descriptions by travelers and explorers of varying degrees of reliability and chance discoveries have been the major sources from which scholars have had to draw conclusions about what can be assumed *a priori* to have been one of the most important formative elements of medieval Near Eastern art. The recent revolution in our awareness of Central Asian art before the Muslim conquest has made the poverty of our understanding of Sasanian art all the more unfortunate.

It is not the purpose of this paper to solve the problem, since only properly equipped and serious archaeological expeditions can do that. My aim is rather to illustrate the practical and methodological complexity of the problem by discussing one specific instance of a building which has been assumed to be one of the most important examples of Sasanian architecture. The instance is that of Sarvistan.<sup>3</sup> There is general agreement on the facts that it is a Sasanian palace of the fifth century AD (perhaps even more specifically from the time of Bahram Gur, 420–38) and that its construction and decoration are quite remarkable. There is no argument about this last point, for the building is comparatively well preserved and does exhibit some [2] extraordinary uses of piers supporting vaults, of façade designs, and of stucco coverings. It represents, without doubt, an important step in the

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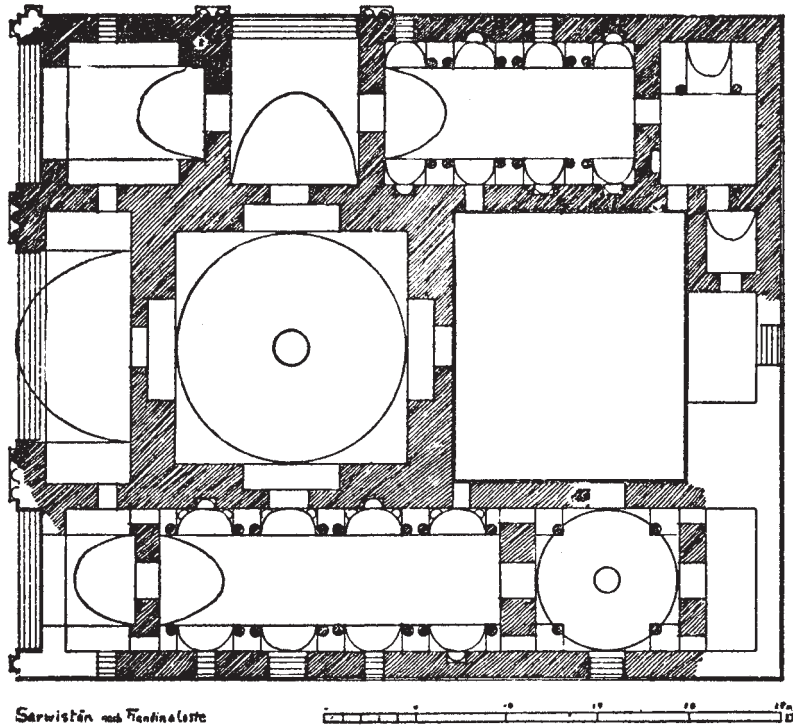
\* First published in *Forschungen zur Kunst Asiens* (Istanbul, 1970), pp. 1–8.

<sup>1</sup> J. Sauvaget, "Remarques sur l'art sassanide," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 12 (1938); cf. also his notes in "Remarques sur les monuments omeyyades," *Journal Asiatique*, 232 (1940–41).

<sup>2</sup> R. Ghirshman, "Les Fouilles de Bishapur," *Revue des Arts Asiatiques* (1936–42).

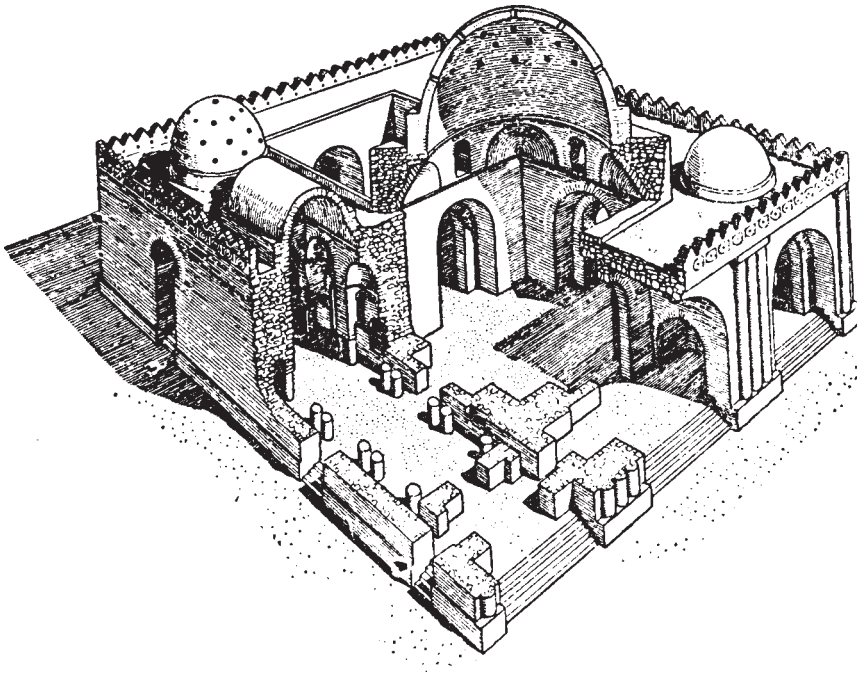
<sup>3</sup> R. Ghirshman, *Parthians and Sasanians* (Paris, 1962), p. 181; L. Vanden Berghe, *Archéologie de l'Iran Ancien* (Leiden, 1959), p. 47, with bibliography; A. Stein, "An Archaeological Tour in the Ancient Persis," *Iraq*, 3 (1936). The most complete study of the building is still by O. Reuther in A. U. Pope, *A Survey of Persian Art* (Oxford, 1939).

1 Sarvistan: plan



development of Iranian architecture, even though the exact position of that step is more difficult to establish because of the uncertainty of our knowledge of other buildings. On the other hand, the questions of the date and of the purpose of Sarvistan do not appear to be as clearly assured as has been assumed so far.

Let us consider first the possible function of the building. Sarvistan (Fig. 1) is a small building, 36 by 42 meters. Its main façade opens to the west and consists of three sets of steps separated by a wall with engaged columns (Fig. 2); the central steps lead into a wide but shallow *eyvan*, the southern steps into a similar, but smaller, *eyvan*, the northern ones into a domed room. The central *eyvan* leads into a large domed hall – almost 13 meters to the side – which is clearly the main feature of Sarvistan, since it occupies nearly a third of the central part of the building. Behind the dome there appears a court followed by a small *eyvan* flanked by two side-rooms. On the north side the central dome opens into an *eyvan* leading to the outside; this *eyvan* communicates also with a long hall which has doors leading outside, into the courtyard, and into a small, almost square, room in the northeast corner; the latter, in turn, is provided with doors into the court and into the side-rooms of the eastern *eyvan*. The southern side of Sarvistan [3] consists of a long and narrow vaulted hall followed by a domed square area; it is provided with three outer doors, one of which is on the axis of the main cupola, and with two passageways into the court.



2 Sarvistan:  
elevation

Tedious though it may have been, this description allowed us to focus attention on a number of peculiarities in the plan of Sarvistan: its openness to the outside with four monumental gates and four minor ones, its complex system of internal communications arranged in such a fashion that from any one defined area one can penetrate into any one of the adjoining ones (the one exception is the southern side-room of the interior *eyvan*), and the central position of a huge dome which serves as the turning plate of the building to the point where the unity of the long southern hall has been broken up for a door centered on the domed room. The axial position of the dome does not appear only in the fact that openings permitted one to move to and from the building in every direction. The position of the passageways also suggests the possibility of movement around the domed hall, a sort of circumambulation of the central feature of the building. The most remarkable feature of Sarvistan's plan lies, however, in the contrast between apparently clear *functions* of parts – central, axial dome and possibility of circulation around the dome – and the asymmetry of the *forms* used. No axis divides the internal arrangement of the building into symmetrical parts, which is all the more peculiar since the façade is quite symmetrically composed. At the same time it can be suggested that almost every one of the definable units of Sarvistan had in fact a precise purpose. This conclusion may be a bit conjectural [4] in the light of the uncertainties of our understanding of Sasanian architectural forms. And yet it is a peculiarity of Sarvistan that almost every one of its halls and rooms is architecturally differentiated from

all the others; there are no two similar units in the whole building. *A priori* and as long as we do not know more about the development of Sasanian architecture, we have to assume that some precise purpose was attached to each unit. This is also the only explanation for the unusual contrast between the symmetrical façade and the asymmetrical internal arrangement.<sup>4</sup>

Thus we may define Sarvistan as a small building, asymmetrically composed of several clearly defined units among which a large dome appears particularly important, with numerous ways in and out of the building, and with a complex system of communications inside the building. Now we may turn to other monuments and see whether they can suggest explanations for the actual purpose of Sarvistan.

The building has been called a palace, but it differs from known palaces in several significant ways. First, its small size is unusual; in fact it could almost be fitted within the great *eyvan* of Ctesiphon, whose dimensions are 43 by 26 meters. The comparison with Ctesiphon is perhaps unfair, but it remains true that Firuzabad is 55 by 103 meters, Qasr-i Shirin over 370 meters long, the excavated part of the so-called Palace II at Kish 45 by 50 meters and the single great hall of Bishapur with its ambulatory occupies an area of some 50 by 50 meters.<sup>5</sup> Hence, if it is to be related to palace architecture, Sarvistan must, on account of size alone, be explained in a manner which would differentiate it from other palaces.<sup>6</sup> Yet it is not only size that is involved. The very facts of the numerous entrances and of the easy communications between parts inside the building sharply distinguish Sarvistan from those palaces – like Firuzabad and Qasr-i Shirin – whose plans are known and in which axial symmetry, a single entrance, and a clear compartmentalization of parts give a totally different impression. Furthermore, the very logic of a palace architecture with its presumed clear separation [5] between public and private parts makes it unlikely that Sarvistan belongs to the main typological series of Sasanian palaces.<sup>7</sup>

This point can be extended into several details. It has usually been agreed that the central feature of a Sasanian palace is the combination of an *eyvan* and of a dome. Some uncertainty exists as to the exact purpose of each of these units, but the existence in Ctesiphon of an *eyvan* without a dome on

<sup>4</sup> An alternate explanation would involve the hypothesis of a series of major reconstructions. As long as the building is not excavated, this possibility must remain open, but, to my knowledge, the existing descriptions have not made it very likely.

<sup>5</sup> All these buildings are discussed in the *Survey* or in the works of Ghirshman and Vanden Berghe quoted in note 3. See also K. Erdmann, *Die Kunst Irans zur Zeit der Sasaniden* (Leipzig, 1943), esp. pp. 19 ff.

<sup>6</sup> This point has been recognized by E. Herzfeld in F. Sarre and E. Herzfeld, *Archäologische Reise im Tigris – und Euphrates – Gebiet* (Berlin, 1911–20), vol. II, pp. 332–3, but his further reasoning is not totally acceptable.

<sup>7</sup> This point is, I feel, quite important, and the easy identification of purposes which has been made for each room of Sarvistan by R. Ghirshman (*Parthians and Sasanians*, p. 281) or by Sir Aurel Stein (*Iraq*, 3, pp. 178 ff.) seems for the time being quite unwarranted.

the same scale and various literary and archaeological documents<sup>8</sup> do suggest that the main unit used for audiences was primarily the *eyvan* and not the dome. Yet the striking features of Sarvistan are the size of the dome and the shrinking of the *eyvan*.

Another detail derives from the point made earlier that almost every one of the halls in Sarvistan has clearly differentiated architectural characteristics. None of the rooms has features which could be explained as part of a residential complex and it is difficult to imagine that the small rooms in the back of the court (3 meters by 4 meters) could be so interpreted. On the contrary, every unit of Sarvistan seems to have had some precise ceremonial or symbolic meaning. One way of solving this problem, while maintaining the aulic character of the building, would be to suppose that it belonged to a type of royal building which was not primarily residential. The pavilion in a garden could be such a building. The assumption of gardens around Sarvistan has been made by several writers,<sup>9</sup> although it is by no means proved archaeologically; and the existence of pavilions is ascertained in medieval Islam and fairly likely in Sasanian times.<sup>10</sup> We are [6] unfortunately totally uninformed about the likely size of such pavilions, but the openness of Sarvistan and the central position of the domed room make the interpretation possible. The rooms in the back could be considered as service-rooms, while the two long halls would fulfill secondary ceremonial functions, such as banqueting. The whole building would then be a prime example of what may be called an architecture of pastime and a major prototype, in function if not in form, of later Islamic monuments.

There are, however, uncertainties and difficulties about this interpretation. The main uncertainty resides in the fact that no clear palace parallel can be brought to strengthen an explanation of Sarvistan as a garden pavilion. Another uncertainty lies in the problem of explaining the differentiation of

<sup>8</sup> It is not possible as yet to write a history of Sasanian ceremonies, but a number of arguments do exist to suggest that the prince, when appearing officially, was sitting in the *eyvan*. The assumption of the domed room as the place for the enthroned king is, first of all, difficult to visualize architecturally, for these rooms have usually very thick walls with four small openings and, therefore, the king could hardly be visible to more than a minute fraction of the audience. Furthermore, the ceremony of the lifting of the curtain in front of the king does not make sense if there are four doors to the room in which he sits. Finally, it does seem from literary sources that the announcement of the appearance of the king was made to throngs gathered outside, in the open air. See Mas'udi, *Prairies d'Or*, vol. VII, pp. 264–5; Ferdosi, *Shah-nameh*, tr. J. Mohl (Paris, 1876–8), vol. VI, pp. 290, 139–40, etc. Admittedly these texts are late and their usefulness limited, but they do fit with evidence derived from an observation of the architecture. It would follow that the dome fulfilled either some other royal purpose such as that of private audiences or some non-royal purpose; cf. below.

<sup>9</sup> Herzfeld, *Reise*, II, pp. 332–3; Erdmann, *Kunst*, pp. 31–2.

<sup>10</sup> The only clear archaeological evidence is that of the celebrated plate in the Berlin Museum (*Survey*, IV, pl. 237), for whose interpretation we accept Pope's hypothesis as in "A Sasanian garden palace," *The Art Bulletin*, 15 (1933), although other explanations also exist: *Survey*, pp. 554–7.

parts and the asymmetry of the building, for these features suggest a more complex purpose to Sarvistan than that of a simple pleasure pavilion. These uncertainties are compounded when we consider the further point that the characteristics of Sarvistan can, in part at least, be related to a totally different and comparatively well-documented series of buildings, the fire-temples.

The best-known *type* of Sasanian fire-temples is the *Chehar-taq*, the simple domical structure open on four sides.<sup>11</sup> Its central feature is a cupola, just as in Sarvistan.<sup>12</sup> What is more significant, however, is that simple domes were not the only type of Sasanian sanctuary. Already in Qasr-i Shirin such a dome is set inside a large (80 by 120 meters) enclosure which contains courts, apartments and halls, and which is provided, insofar as limited surface surveys allow us to judge, with a complex system of passageways.<sup>13</sup> A more remarkable religious building was discovered by L. Vanden Berghe at Kunar Siah; its fire-temple is surrounded in very irregular fashion by a whole series of courts and halls and the asymmetry of the composition is striking.<sup>14</sup> An equally asymmetrical composition involving many different parts was excavated at Takht-i Sulayman and its component units, like those of Sarvistan, have very elaborate architectural characteristics.<sup>15</sup> To be sure, in all these examples the main domical sanctuary is provided with an ambulatory, but we have seen that the possibility of walking around the domed room is [7] clearly provided at Sarvistan. Furthermore, a recent study of legal Pahlavi texts pertaining to sanctuaries has clearly shown that there were several different kinds of temples and that different functions and purposes were attributed to each kind.<sup>16</sup>

Altogether, then, basing ourselves on the certain variety of religious buildings existing in Iran and on the peculiarities of the functions suggested by the architecture of Sarvistan, we can suggest that it was some sort of sanctuary, for which side-rooms and halls were used for precise ceremonies, whose characteristics are still quite uncertain.<sup>17</sup> And the very peculiarity of the composition as well as its asymmetry could be explained by the fact that much in the religious development of Iran under the Sasanians involved new practices and new forms. Several years ago Monneret de Villard had already brought attention to a Syriac text which relates how, when no one

<sup>11</sup> Basic bibliography in K. Erdmann, *Das Iranische Feuerheiligtum* (Leipzig, 1941); A. Godard, "Les monuments du feu," *Athar-é Iran*, vol. III (1938); and below.

<sup>12</sup> The matter still needs investigation, but one may wonder whether the domed room behind the characteristic *eyvan* of so many palaces is not a small sanctuary.

<sup>13</sup> *Survey*, I, p. 553.

<sup>14</sup> L. Vanden Berghe, "Découvertes de Monuments Sassanides dans le Fars," *Iranica Antiqua*, 1 (1961), pp. 175 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Preliminary report in *Archäologische Anzeiger* (1963), p. 637.

<sup>16</sup> J. P. de Menasce, *Feux et fondations pieuses dans le Droit Sassanide* (Paris, 1964).

<sup>17</sup> Most recent study on these problems in M. Molé, *Culte, Mythe et Cosmologie dans l'Iran Ancien* (Paris, 1963).



had a clear model for the building of a church, palace features were used.<sup>18</sup> Sarvistan could thus be considered as an instance in which a courtly architecture was transformed for religious purposes.

Between the two possible interpretations of Sarvistan a specific choice is difficult to make. While we would tend to favor the second explanation over the first, the main point of this discussion lies elsewhere. On the one hand, it suggests that no final conclusion can be reached on the purpose of Sasanian buildings without full excavations. On the other hand, we hope to have made the methodological point that a building must be clearly understood in all of its component parts, and each part, as well as the whole, must be related to appropriate typological series before one can possibly try to explain its function and its purpose.

A similar kind of problem is posed by the date to be given to Sarvistan. The attempt by Herzfeld to relate Sarvistan to a very specific group of constructions erected under Bahram Gur and described by Tabari<sup>19</sup> is based only on the fortuitous coincidence of the meaning of the word "Sarvistan," "gardens of cypresses," and the mention of such gardens in the text. There is little doubt, of course, that the technique of construction of Sarvistan is more developed than that of the better-dated (c. AD 230) Firuzabad and of Bishapur (late third century), but beyond that we have almost no data [8] to judge the possible development of Sasanian architecture and the rhythm of its growth. Even the apparent lack of major stucco decoration, which would seem to separate Sarvistan from known monuments of the sixth and seventh centuries, is not entirely valid as an argument if we are right in thinking of it as a religious structure rather than as a palace.

Altogether, then, this note concerning a moment of Near Eastern art which had been of so much concern to the late Kurt Erdmann would have fulfilled its purpose not so much if its conclusions are correct as if it challenges scholars to look anew at the still badly known and badly understood monuments of Sasanian Iran.

## Postscript

Since the writing of this article L. Bier has concluded a thorough survey of the site and come to some conclusions comparable to mine but to a different and much more likely date. L. Bier, *Sarvistan, A study in Early Iranian Architecture* (University Park, 1986).

<sup>18</sup> U. Monneret de Villard, *La Chiese di Mesopotamia* (Rome, 1940), p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Tabari, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber*, tr. Th. Nöldeke (Leiden, 1879), pp. III–12.

