

Takht-e Suleiman (Iran)

No 1077

1. BASIC DATA

State Party: Islamic Republic of Iran
Name of property: Takht-e Suleiman
Location: Western Azerbaijan Province
Date received: 14 November 2001

Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is an archaeological *site*.

Brief description:

The archaeological site of Takht-e Suleiman, in north-western Iran, is situated in a valley of a volcanic mountain region. The site was the principal Zoroastrian sanctuary, as well as having an Anahita Temple, in the Sasanian period (6th to 7th centuries CE), partly rebuilt in the Ilkhanid (Mongol) period (13th century). The site has important symbolic significance. The designs of the fire temple, the palace and the general layout have had significant influence in the development of Islamic architecture.

2. THE PROPERTY

Description

The nominated site is situated in Azerbaijan province, within a mountainous region, ca. 750 km from Tehran. The site is formed of plain, surrounded by a mountain range. It contains a volcano and an artesian lake as essential elements of the site. The nominated area has a landscape buffer zone, covering ca. 74 km² (about 8 km by 16 km), enclosing the following nominated properties with their specific buffer zones:

- Takht-e Suleiman ('Solomon's throne'), the main focus of the nomination;
- The mountain to the east of the previous served as quarry for the construction of the site;
- Zendan-e Suleiman ('Solomon's prison'), a small volcano with ancient shrines around the top;
- Tepe Majid, an archaeological mound culturally related to Zendan-e Suleiman;
- Belqeis Mountain with a citadel (named after Bathsheba, Solomon's mother);

The area has only been partially excavated, and there is archaeological potential especially in the buffer zone, and also outside. The so-called Ahmad Abad Tumulus to the west of Zendan-e Suleiman has been indicated as an example. The landscape buffer zone also comprises a small village with its potential expansion zone.

Takht-e Suleiman: The site is formed of an oval platform, rising about 60 m above the surrounding valley. The platform measures about 350 by 550 m. It has a small calcareous artesian well, which has formed a lake ca. 120 m deep. From here, small streams bring water to surrounding lands. The Sasanians occupied the site starting in the 5th century, building there the royal sanctuary on the platform. The sanctuary was enclosed by a stone wall 13 m high, with 38 towers and two entrances (north and south). This wall apparently had mainly symbolic significance as no gate has been discovered. The main buildings are on the north side of the lake, forming a nearly square compound (side ca 180 m) with the **Zoroastrian Fire Temple** (Azargoshnasb) in the centre. This temple, built in fired bricks, is square in plan. To the east of the Temple there is another square hall reserved for the 'everlasting fire'. Further to the east there is the **Anahita temple**, also square in plan. The royal residences are situated to the west of the temples. The lake is an integral part of the composition and was surrounded by a rectangular 'fence'. In the north-west corner of this once fenced area, there is the so-called Western Iwan, 'Khosrow gallery', built as a massive brick vault, characteristic of Sasanian architecture. The surfaces were rendered in lime plaster with decorative features in *muqarnas* (stalactite ceiling decoration) and stucco.

The site was destroyed at the end of the Sasanian period, and left to decay. It was revived in the 13th century under the Mongol occupation, and some parts were rebuilt, such as the Zoroastrian fire temple and the Western Iwan. New constructions were built around the lake, including two octagonal towers behind the Iwan decorated in glazed tiles and ceramics. A new entrance was opened through the main walls, in the southern axis of the complex.

It is noted that the surrounding lands in the valley (included in the buffer zone) contain the remains of the **Sasanian town**, which has not been excavated. A **brick-firing kiln** dating from the Mongol period has been found 600m to the south of Takht-e Suleiman. The mountain to the east was used by the Sasanians as a **quarry** for building stone.

Zendan-e Suleiman: This hollow, conical mountain, an ancient volcano, is situated some 3 km to the west of Takht-e Suleiman. It rises about 100 m above the surrounding land, and contains an 80 m deep hole, about 65m diameter, formerly filled with water. Around the top of the mountain, there are remains of a series of shrines and temples that have been dated to the first millennium BCE.

Belqeis Citadel: The Belqeis Mountain is ca 3,200 m high, and is situated 7.5 km north-east of Takht-e Suleiman. On the highest part there are remains of a citadel (an area of 60 x 50m), dating to the Sasanian era, built in yellow sandstone. The explorations that have been carried out so far on the site indicate that the citadel would have contained another fire temple. Its orientation indicates a close relationship with Takht-e Suleiman.

History

Historical background: The Persian Empire was founded by the Achaemenid dynasty (6th to 4th centuries BCE). Subsequently, a new empire was established by the Parthians (2nd BCE to 3rd CE), who were conscious of their Persian identity, even though under strong Hellenistic influence. The following Sasanian Empire (3rd to 7th CE), re-established the Persian leadership in the region, and was successful in forming a counterforce to the Roman Empire. Basing on the Achaemenid heritage and the impact of the Hellenistic-Parthian period, the Sasanians developed new artistic and architectural solutions. Their architecture had important influence in the east as well as in the west; it became a major reference for the development of architecture in the Islamic period.

Religious context: Fire and water have been among the fundamental elements for the Iranian peoples since ancient times. Fire was conceived a divine messenger between the visible world and the invisible (gods). Water was the source of life. Volcanic regions were thus of particular interest, especially when there was the presence of water as it was the case of Takht-e Suleiman.

Zoroastrianism is an Iranian religion, and has its origin in Prophet Zarathustra, who probably lived in the 7th century BCE or earlier. This religion is characterized by its monotheistic aspect related to Ahuramazda, and it recognizes the conflict between good and evil forces. Ahuramazda was worshiped by the early Achaemenids, whose rituals took place in the open on fire altars, without any temples. With the revival of new nationalism, the Sasanians established Zoroastrianism as a state religion, building fire temples for the cult. Zoroastrianism has had an important influence on Christianity and Islam, and it is still a living religion, practised in Iran, India and Central Asia.

The Sasanians also recognized the cult of Anahita, the goddess of earth, associated with water. A temple of Anahita is included in the complex of Takht-e Suleiman.

The early period: The volcanic site where the Sasanians built their sanctuary, Azargoshnasb (Fire temple of the Knights), later called Takht-e Suleiman (Throne of Solomon), has been subject to worship for a long time. The hollow, volcanic mountain, called Zendan-e Suleiman (the prison of Solomon) is surrounded by the remains of temples or shrines, dated to the first millennium BCE. These are associated with the Manas, who ruled the region from 830 to 660 BCE. The crater was once full of water, but has later dried out.

The Sasanian period: With the arrival of the Sasanians (5th century CE), Zendan-e Suleiman lost its importance in favour of Takht-e Suleiman, where construction started in mid 5th century CE, during the reign of the Sasanian king Peroz (459-484 CE). The site became a royal Zoroastrian sanctuary under Khosrow I (531-579) and Khosrow II (591-628), and it was the most important of the three main Zoroastrians sanctuaries. The other two have not been identified so far.

The construction of this temple site coincides with the introduction of Christianity as the main religion in the Roman Empire. The need to strengthen Zoroastrianism can thus be seen as an effort to reinforce national identity as a counterpoint to Christianity in the Roman world. The

importance of Takht-e Suleiman was further increased with the introduction of the cult of Anahita. The royal ensemble was surrounded by an urban settlement on the plain. The site was destroyed by the Byzantine army in 627, a counter measure to the Sasanian attack to their territories.

Mongol period: The site regained importance in the 13th century, when the Ilkhanid Mongols rebuilt part of it as a residence for Ilkhan Aba-Qaan, then the ruler of Iran. The reconstruction phase included the fire temple and the western Iwan, as well as new structures around the lake. The Mongol rehabilitation shows cultural continuity, which is particularly interesting in the revival of Zoroastrian faith in the middle of the Islamic period. Due to its natural and cultural qualities, the site has been associated with various legendary and biblical characters and issues, such as Solomon, Christ, earthly paradise, Holy Graal, etc.

Later phases: After the Ilkhanid period, from the mid 14th century, the site was abandoned and gradually fell into ruins. It was rediscovered by the British traveller, Sir Robert Ker Porter in 1819, followed by other explorers. In 1937, the site was photographed by Erich F. Schmidt, and surveyed by Arthur U. Pope and Donald N. Wilber. In 1958 it was explored by Swedish archaeologists. The first systematic excavation was undertaken by the German Archaeological Institute under R. Naumann and D. Huff, in the 1970s.

Management regime

Legal provision:

The nominated properties are under the ownership of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Takht-e Suleiman was inscribed on the national heritage list of Iran in 1931, and it is subject to legal protection under current legislation: Antiquity Law (1309/1930), Law of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization Charter (n. 3487-Qaf, 1988).

Management structure:

The main excavation on the site has been carried out by the German Archaeological Institute, who has provided the relevant documentation. At present, the preservation and development activities and the management of the nominated area are the responsibility of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization. The provincial office of the ICHO in Orumiyeh is responsible for archaeological excavations and takes necessary safety measures for preservation in the buffer zones. A separate unit has been created for field management within ICHO, namely *The Directorate of the Takht-e Suleiman Development Project*. The purpose of this unit is to give impetus to the decision making mechanism and integrate the activities of various departments, following the example of the successful project scheme at Zogha Zanbil. A five-year management plan has been adopted for Takht-e Suleiman, in 2002. The first section of the plan clarifies the organization and the budget, the second section defines the strengths and weaknesses of the site providing for its maintenance and development. The third section summarizes the activities since 1993, and the fourth section provides the plan for a sustainable preservation and presentation programme in the coming years.

Resources:

The resources for the conservation and maintenance of Takht-e Suleiman are provided mainly by ICHO. The Organization is currently searching for additional funds to sustain the management of the site. The number of visitors is not expected to increase much in the foreseeable future. The current facilities for the reception of visitors are fairly basic, but the future plans foresee an improvement as part of the programmes for the conservation and improved presentation of the site. The pace of development in this region is relatively slow, but the management plan foresees initiatives for raising the awareness of local authorities and the public about the values of the site and the aims and importance of sustainable development.

Justification by the State Party (summary)

The State Party presents Takht-e Suleiman as one of the most important ancient sanctuary sites in the country, characterised by the presence of fire and water (volcano and artesian wells). The site has been a place of worship at least since the first millennium BCE. The main feature is the Zoroastrian Fire Temple that was built by the Sasanian kings. It was the most important of the three main Zoroastrian temples of this period, and dates from the 6th century CE.

The State Party proposes the site to be listed on the basis of *criteria i, ii, iii, iv and vi*:

Criterion i: the site shows creative competence in the use of the sacred lake and its relationship to the Zoroastrian faith and Pre-Zoroastrian beliefs in order to match with geological and natural settings.

Criterion ii: the site demonstrates how different people were able to plan, engineer and use the landscape in accordance with their religion and philosophy regardless of their ethnicity, from early times to Sasanian and Mongol periods. The site was associated with legends and beliefs (Solomon, Christ, Zarathustra); Sasanian kings made pilgrimage to the site after their coronation at Ctesiphon.

Criterion iii: The site provides a valuable insight to Zoroastrianism as an official and royal religion, and the development of Iranian art, architecture, and landscape planning in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods.

Criterion iv: The site reveals one of the great artistic achievements of the Sasanian civilization, and witnesses the organization of landscape and religious activity in perfect harmony.

Criterion vi: Takht-e Suleiman is substantially associated with beliefs of outstanding universal significance, including Zoroastrianism, one of the oldest belief systems today. Its influence on most of the great religions has been recognized.

3. ICOMOS EVALUATION

Actions by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the ensemble of Takht-e Suleiman in September 2002.

Conservation

Conservation history:

The ancient shrines on the mountain skirts of Zendan-e Suleiman were abandoned in the antiquity and fell into ruins. The sanctuary of Takht-e Suleiman was destroyed by the Byzantine army in the 7th century CE, after which it was not used until its partial reconstruction in the Mongol period in the 13th century. From the mid 14th century the site was abandoned, and it was gradually turned into ruin due to natural forces of decay. The first systematic excavation was undertaken by the German Archaeological Institute in the 1970s. The site is currently under the care of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, who is responsible for its consolidation and restoration.

State of conservation:

The calcareous water pouring from the artesian source and the occasional flooding of the lake have raised the ground level by several meters since the Sasanian period. The water has washed away mortar from the joints and weakened the foundations. The hard climate, snow, ice, and earthquakes have provoked erosion and collapses, aggravated by physiochemical causes, contributing to the collapse of brick and masonry structures. The thick outer walls have lost the upper parts, and the stones have fallen to the ground. The damaged, massive brick structures with their heavy vaults have intrinsic weakness due to their weight. Only small areas remain of surface decoration, which was originally made in stucco, *muqarnas* (octagonal decorative tile) or ceramic tiles. The shrines around the Zendan-e Suleiman and the Belqeis Citadel are in a similar ruined state. The land surrounding the core areas has archaeological potential. It is understood that a Sasanian town existed in the valley, which is now cultivated by local farmers. Furthermore, there are numerous mounds of potential archaeological interest, only partially explored so far.

Management:

The ICOMOS mission to the site considered the management to be organized in a reasonable manner, but recommends that special attention be given to the tools required to carry out the proposed projects. Attention should also be given to guarantee sustainability of the financial resources in the long term.

Risk analysis:

The main causes of decay of the architectural remains relate to seismic action and the atmospheric problems due to heavy winters, water and frost. While tourism is not a major activity at present, there is possibility for increase in the future, which needs to be taken into account in planning and management. There may thus be risks in the buffer zones due to development pressures and the construction of visitor facilities in and around the sites. Furthermore, there is potential conflict between the interests of the farmers and archaeologists, particularly in the event that excavations be undertaken in the fields of the valley.

Authenticity and integrity

Regarding the authenticity of the site, evidence has confirmed the site as the main Zoroastrian sanctuary of the Sasanians. The place is an archaeological site excavated only recently; the restorations and reconstructions are relatively limited so far. A section of the outer wall near the southern entrance has been rebuilt recently, using mainly original stones recovered from the fallen remains. Part of the brick vaults of the palace structures have also been rebuilt, using modern brick but in the same pattern as the original. As a whole, these interventions can be seen as necessary, and do not compromise the authenticity of the place, which retains its historic ruin aspect.

The landscape of the area surrounding Takht-e Suleiman has evolved over time, obtaining its own visual integrity characterised by its rural and agricultural nature. There is also clear structural and functional relationship between the different elements within this ensemble. This concerns also the Belqeis Citadel, which is situated further away from the rest. The citadel however was built in the same period as the main sanctuary, and its location and orientation suggests that it had religious significance related to this. The small village, situated between Takht-e Suleiman and Zendan-e Suleiman, has become an integral part of the visual integrity of the landscape. It is noted however that strict control is required regarding the character and volume of any new constructions, taking into account also their surface materials and colour.

Comparative evaluation

The Sasanian dynasty (ca 224 to 651 CE) governed an empire that extended from Sogdiana and today's Georgia in the north to Mazun region in Arabia, and from the Indus River to the Upper Tigris and Euphrates river valleys. In Iran, the major sites that represent the Sasanian civilization include the palace of the first Sasanian ruler (Ardashir I, early 3rd century CE), at Firuzabad, still basically Parthian. The royal palace at Bishapur was built at the time when the Sasanian army defeated the Roman Emperor Valerian (260), and reflects Greek and Roman influences. The Taq-e Kisra at Ctesiphon, their capital city (in present-day Iraq), is one of the most outstanding royal sites, particularly its famous *ivan* (a brick vault: 75 feet/22.50 m wide, 90 feet/27 m high). The sacred site of Taq-e Bustan, near Kirmanshah in western Iran, consists of two large *iwans*, carved in the rock in the 4th and 5th centuries CE. Many of their fortifications continued to be used in the Islamic period. There also exist a number of fire temples in Iran, but less important than Takht-e Suleiman.

Sasanian architecture is characterised by its structural solutions, and especially the vaults built in brick or stone, or carved in rock, and decorated with monumental sculptures. Some of these features were inherited from the Achaemenids and Parthians, but Sasanians gave their architecture its own, strongly Iranian identity. Their buildings were an important reference for the development of the early Islamic architecture, and their influence was felt even in Europe, for example, in Romanesque architecture. It is also interesting to note that the chapels of a square plan built by the Religious orders in Mexico correspond exactly to the scheme of the Sasanian fire temple.

Within this context, Takht-e Suleiman is distinguished as being the principal Zoroastrian sanctuary in the Sasanian civilization. The site is a mature expression of Sasanian royal architecture, and the fire temple is the oldest and largest in existence.

Outstanding universal value

General statement:

The site of the ensemble of Takht-e Suleiman and Zendan-e Suleiman is remote and protected by mountains. It has not been subject to major developments recently, and has thus kept its integrity. It has strong symbolic and spiritual significance, related to fire and water, the principal reasons for its occupation from ancient times. Takht-e Suleiman is the principal Zoroastrian sanctuary. It is also a mature architectural expression of the Sasanian civilization, which had significant influence on the development of Islamic architecture. The site has important archaeological potential.

Evaluation of criteria:

Criterion vi: The ensemble of Takht-e Suleiman consists of several elements, which together contribute to spiritual significance of the site. The beginnings of the appreciation of the site are documented in the shrines around the top of the ancient volcano, Zendan-e Suleiman, dated to the early first millennium BCE. The spiritual significance was further reinforced when the Sasanians built there the principal sanctuary to Zoroastrianism, an early monotheistic religion, which has influenced other world religions, such as Islam and Christianity. The presence of the Anahita Temple, ancient Iranian goddess of waters, fertility and procreation, gives added value. The symbolic meaning of the site is stressed by the Mongol rehabilitation six centuries later, and by the association of legendary and biblical figures with the site, such as Solomon, Bathsheba, and Christ. Takht-e Suleiman has also been identified as a representation of earthly paradise.

Criteria i and iv: Takht-e Suleiman offers significant evidence to the mature phase of development in Sasanian architecture. This is documented in the royal complex designed around the lake. The fire temple can be seen as a prototype; it is the largest and the oldest preserved structure. While various types of buildings, such as the brick *ivan* or the water and fire temples, can be found in other Sasanian sites, Takht-e Suleiman provides an outstanding example of their combination into a whole, which is not found elsewhere.

Criterion ii: Takht-e Suleiman is recognized to have influenced the development of Islamic and Christian architecture. The architecture that forms the complex of Takht-e Suleiman, the square structure of the fire temple, the massive vault of the *ivan*, and the open court around the water source, are clearly reflected in the architectural composition of Islamic mosques and shrines. Some relationship can also be seen with early Romanesque churches in Europe.

Criterion iii: The region of Takht-e Suleiman is rich in ancient settlements, of which many are still unexplored. The site provides exceptional evidence to the development of cult and religious practices from the 1st millennium BCE

to the 14th century CE. The site of Takht-e Suleiman itself was surrounded by a town, which is now covered by agricultural land.

4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation with respect to inscription

That the site be inscribed on the basis of *criteria i, ii, iii, iv* and *vi*:

Criterion i: Takht-e Suleiman is an outstanding ensemble of royal architecture, joining the principal architectural elements created by the Sasanians in a harmonious composition inspired by their natural context.

Criterion ii: The composition and the architectural elements created by the Sasanians at Takht-e Suleiman have had strong influence not only in the development of religious architecture in the Islamic period, but also in other cultures.

Criterion iii: The ensemble of Takht-e Suleiman is an exceptional testimony of the continuation of cult related to fire and water over a period of some two and half millennia. The archaeological heritage of the site is further enriched by the Sasanian town, which is still to be excavated.

Criterion iv: Takht-e Suleiman represents an outstanding example of Zoroastrian sanctuary, integrated with Sasanian palatial architecture within a composition, which can be seen as a prototype.

Criterion vi: As the principal Zoroastrian sanctuary, Takht-e Suleiman is the foremost site associated with one of the early monotheistic religions of the world. The site has many important symbolic relationships, being also a testimony of the association of the ancient beliefs, much earlier than the Zoroastrianism, as well as in its association with significant biblical figures and legends.

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