

The Defensive Settlements of the Darab Plain in the Sasanian Period

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Abstract

Fars Province has been the cradle of two great Persian empires—the Achaemenid and the Sasanian—throughout Iranian history. The presence of significant historical monuments from these two periods clearly demonstrates the importance of this province. One such region within Fars is Darab, which was home to the city of Darabgerd during the Sasanian period. Despite the historical and archaeological significance of this area within Iran, the amount of research conducted there remains limited. Given the importance of this city in the Sasanian era, this article seeks to clarify the position of the city and the khurrah (or kūra, “administrative district”) of Darabgerd and to reconstruct its defensive structure. Based on recent archaeological surveys in the Darab Plain, the study aims to determine the role Darabgerd played within the Sasanian administrative and political structure and to assess the duration of its importance. Furthermore, considering the fortresses and military fortifications surrounding the city of Darabgerd, the study examines how the defensive and monitoring system of the city and the Darab Plain functioned. At first glance, the ruins of Darabgerd—which testify to its former grandeur—along with the presence of a rock relief, a large and significant mint that remained active beyond the Sasanian period into the early Islamic centuries, and the discovery of seals and clay sealings, all attest to the importance of this geographical area during the Sasanian and early Islamic periods. For this reason, the existence of a coherent defensive structure for both the city of Darabgerd and the Darab Plain was essential. Based on the identification of fourteen fortresses during archaeological surveys of the Darab Plain, this research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, integrating archaeological evidence with historical sources in order to provide a clearer understanding of the defensive structure of the Darab Plain during the Sasanian period. The results indicate that the geography of the Darab Plain played a decisive role in the formation of the city of Darabgerd and its defensive system.

Keywords: Darab County, Darabgerd, Defensive Settlements, Sasanians, Fars, Seals, Coins.



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Introduction

Despite the cultural richness of Fars Province and the extensive history of archaeological research conducted there, some regions have unfortunately been neglected or still require comprehensive and systematic surveys. Although several studies have been carried out in Darab County to date, they are not sufficient to fully illustrate the cultural and historical developments of the region from prehistoric times to the contemporary period. The lack of systematic archaeological research in Darab provides clear evidence of this gap.

The historic city of Darabgerd is located near the modern city of Darab in Fars Province. The earliest archaeological studies at Darabgerd were conducted by Stein in 1933 (Stein, 1936). Subsequently, De Miroschedji surveyed the prehistoric settlements of Darab and Fasa between 1971 and 1972; however, the final results of this survey have not yet been published, and only a general article has appeared (De Miroschedji, 1973). Morgan, from the British Institute of Persian Studies, later conducted a surface survey of the site (Morgan, 2003). Karimian and Seyedein analyzed and reconstructed the spatial organization of the Darabgerd site through a series of surface surveys based on archaeological findings (Karimian & Seyedein, 2009; 2010; 2011). Finally, Alamdari conducted a survey of the Rostaq rural district (Alamdari, 2010).

Given the importance of this city, an archaeological survey of the Darab Plain was conducted in 2018 (Khanipour, 2019)¹. Despite numerous references to Darab in historical texts and the presence of significant historical and archaeological evidence in the region, the research carried out so far remains limited. Moreover, the current conditions of the Darab Plain—particularly the expansion of agricultural activities—have placed many sites located in the central plain and some foothill areas at risk of leveling and destruction. Consequently, focused research on this region is essential. The spatial distribution of Sasanian remains in this region includes settlement sites, fortresses (castles), and funerary structures. These remains are distributed across the central and foothill zones of the Darab Plain as well as the surrounding highlands. Given the importance of this region and the city of Darabgerd, the formation and distribution of defensive settlements around Darabgerd are clearly observable.

To reconstruct the defensive structure of Darabgerd, and based on the archaeological survey of the identified defensive settlements, this article first examines historical and geographical texts that provide valuable descriptions of this historic city during the Sasanian and early Islamic periods. It then investigates the economic and administrative activities of Darabgerd in order to demonstrate the city's status and significance. Finally, the study discusses the defensive settlements established around the city of Darabgerd.

The primary aim of this research is to present a clear picture of the historical landscape of Darabgerd during the Sasanian period. First, the study seeks to demonstrate the status that Darabgerd—and consequently the Darab Plain—held during the Sasanian era from historical perspectives, including political, economic, and administrative aspects, and to examine what information its historical landscape can provide. These findings will help us better identify, understand, and analyze archaeological evidence when it is encountered. Undoubtedly, for historical periods in which written sources and texts are available, it is both necessary and essential to make effective use of them in the analysis and interpretation of archaeological evidence.

Research Questions and Hypotheses: The first and most important question of this research concerns the status of Darabgerd within the Sasanian realm and within Fars—considered the heartland of the Sasanian kingdom—in light of historical and administrative evidence. Given the existence of other major Sasanian centers in Fars, what position did Darabgerd hold during the Sasanian period? How long did Darabgerd maintain its importance and status? What was the pattern of formation and spatial distribution of defensive settlements around the city of Darabgerd? Given the importance of this city, it appears that Darabgerd functioned not only as one of the major political and economic centers during the Sasanian period, but that this status continued even into the post-Sasanian era. This circumstance made the security of the city a matter of paramount importance. The topographical setting of Darabgerd—the dominance of the surrounding highlands over the city on the one hand, and its location along the east–west communication route on the other—provided suitable conditions for the establishment of military installations.

Research Methodology: The structure of this research is qualitative and strategic, and it has been organized and written with fundamental research objectives in mind. From the perspective of research methodology, the approach adopted in this article is descriptive–analytical. In this study, data collection was carried out through both library-based and field methods. Historical texts and published archaeological information related to administrative evidence (such as coins and seals) were examined. The data obtained from these sources were combined with information gathered through archaeological survey and subsequently analyzed and interpreted.

The Historic City of Darabgerd

Despite the scarcity of archaeological sources, many historians, geographers, and travelers have visited the city of Darabgerd throughout history or have recorded accounts of it based on what they observed or heard. Historical texts present various opinions regarding the name of Darabgerd and the date of its foundation. Some attribute it to Darab, the son of Darab, or to Darius the Achaemenid ([Ibn Balkhī, 1995: 159](#);

Bal'amī, 1958: 82; Ibn Ḥawqal, 1987: 47; Muqaddasī, 1995: 508), thereby dating the foundation of the city to the Achaemenid period. Others have mistakenly interpreted the word “Dar” as meaning “to nurture,” and consequently have taken Darabgerd to mean “nurturer” or “the god of water”. According to this view, the name was given because of the abundance of springs and rivers in this kūra (administrative district) (Husaini Fasai, 1988: 1306). Ibn Ḥawqal considers the word “gerd” to mean “built” or “constructed,” interpreting Darabgerd as “that which was built by the order of Darab” (Ibn Ḥawqal, 1987: 47). Ḥamza al Iṣfahānī interprets the word “gerd” as meaning “city,” thus understanding Darabgerd as “the city of Darab (Darius)” (Ḥamza al Iṣfahānī, 1988: 39). Ferdowsi, in the *Shāhnāma*, explains the reason for this name as the circular form of the city’s rampart: “When the city wall was made round, they named it Darabgerd”. The site plan is circular, with a wall approximately 6 km in length encircling the city. A large moat also surrounded the city, although it is now completely dry (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Aerial photograph of Darabgerd (Khanipour, 2019: 14, Fig. 3).

A large circular rampart encircles the entire city. The height of the rampart from the interior of the city is approximately ten meters. Its original height was certainly greater, but it has gradually deteriorated over time. In the northwestern part of the city, a section of this rampart has collapsed, revealing clear remains of mud-brick courses set in clay mortar. The city had four gates, from which the main streets extended. Most historians have referred to the strong, circular rampart surrounding the city (Muṣṭawfī Qazvīnī, 1983: 139; Jayhānī, 1989: 115; Ibn Balkhī, 1995: 309; Ibn Ḥawqal, 1987: 47; Muqaddasī, 1982: 638; Iṣṭakhrī, 1961: 110; Flandin, 1977: 397; Forsat Shirazi, 1998: 153; Husaini Fasai, 1988: 1311). Forsat Shirazi and Husaini Fasai recorded the length of this rampart as approximately one farsakh (about six kilometers) (Forsat Shirazi, 1998: 154; Husaini Fasai, 1988: 1311). At the center of the city lies a natural elevated outcrop upon which

the citadel (arg) was constructed. This rocky hill at the city's center has been mentioned by several geographers ([Abu'l-Fidā, 1970: 379](#); [Ibn Ḥawqal, 1987: 48](#); [Jayhānī, 1989: 115](#); [Iṣṭakhrī, 1961: 110](#); [Forsat Shirazi, 1998: 154](#)). According to Schwarz, the hill located at the center of Darabgerd is known as Kuh e Ma'dan ("Mountain of the Mine") and was presumed to contain copper and iron deposits ([Schwarz, 1993: 129](#)). However, geological surveys indicate that this elevated feature has a salt core². Although historical and mythological texts attribute the foundation of this city to the Kayanid or Achaemenid period, no archaeological evidence—such as ceramic remains from the Achaemenid period—has yet been discovered on the surface of the site. Meanwhile, some archaeologists ([Huff, 1995](#); [Ghirshman, 2011: 324](#); [Herrmann, 1994: 67](#); [Porada, 2004: 263](#)) date the city of Darabgerd to the Parthian period. In Seyedein's surface survey of the Darabgerd site, no Achaemenid-period pottery was recovered from the site surface, and only a small number of Parthian-period sherds were identified ([Karimian & Seyedein, 2009](#)). These limited remains of Parthian pottery suggest that the city was inhabited during the Parthian period. Ceramics dating from the Sasanian period through the early Islamic centuries are also visible on the site surface. Furthermore, buff-painted sherds comparable to those of the Bakun period, as well as stone artifacts from this period, have been observed on the site surface, particularly in its northern sector ([Khanipour, 2019](#)). Illegal excavations on the site surface, the movement of livestock across the area, and natural factors such as wind and rain have gradually contributed to the destruction of the archaeological remains at this site. Although the site was registered on Iran's National Heritage List in 1931 (AHS 1310), it still requires boundary delineation and effective protective measures to prevent further damage. Moreover, systematic scientific excavations could help establish the chronological sequence of this site.

The Administrative and Economic Status of Darabgerd in the Sasanian Period

When discussing the administrative and economic status of a region, it is necessary to rely on evidence related to such activities. For historical periods, sources such as economic texts, coins, and administrative seals are among the most valuable forms of evidence. In the case of Darabgerd and its administrative status, two categories of archaeological evidence demonstrate this position. The first category is numismatic evidence, which indicates the importance of Darabgerd during the Sasanian period. One of the major mints of the Sasanian era was located in Darabgerd. The presence of a mint in a city during various historical periods, including the Islamic period, generally signifies the administrative and economic importance of that city for the ruling authorities. The second category is sigillographic evidence (the study of seals). In this regard, administrative seals bearing the name of Darabgerd have been discovered, further confirming the

city's administrative status during the Sasanian period. Taken together, these sources and pieces of evidence indicate that Darabgerd during the Sasanian period not only functioned as an important city and *kūra* (administrative district) in eastern Fars but also possessed a prominent administrative and economic status. Accordingly, each category of evidence will be examined in detail in the following sections.

The Mint of Darabgerd (d'l'pklt) in the Sasanian and Early Islamic Periods (DA)

The number of Sasanian mints was relatively limited until the end of the fourth century CE and apparently never exceeded twelve (Schindel, 2013: 817). Over time, however, this number gradually increased, so that by the reign of Khosrow II approximately thirty-four mints were active (Heidemann, 2010: 25), or, according to another estimate, about forty mints (Gariboldi, 2010: 55). The name of the historic city of Darabgerd (d'l'pklt) does not appear in any Middle Persian inscription prior to the reign of Bahram IV (388–399 CE). Nevertheless, its importance and status are clearly reflected across the Darab Plain, where the ruins of the city remain distinctly visible in satellite imagery. Like Gur (the center of Ardashir-Khurrah), Darabgerd has a circular urban plan. It is also noteworthy that Ardashir I, before ascending to the throne, served as the *argbed* (fortress commander) of Darabgerd (Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr; Grenet, 2003). One of the most frequently used mint abbreviations is the sign DA (in Pahlavi script: 𐭠𐭥) representing the mint of Darabgerd. The Darabgerd mint is also indicated by the abbreviations DAL and DALAPKR (Schindel, 2004: 134–135), and more rarely by DALAPK. In some cases, the name even appears fully written as d'l'pkrt (/Dārābgird/) on coins of Bahram IV (Gyselen, 2019: 64). The name of Darabgerd, in slightly abbreviated forms such as DA/LAPKR and DA/LAPK, appears on coins of Yazdgerd I (399–420 CE), in addition to those of Bahram IV (388–399 CE), (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Sasanian coins minted at Darabgerd (Yazdgerd I and Bahram IV) (Gyselen, 2019: 64).

The mint of Darabgerd remained active after the fall of the Sasanian Empire, and numerous Arab-Sasanian coins were struck there. The abbreviated mint sign DA (in Pahlavi script: ) appears on many Arab-Sasanian silver drachms and copper pashīz. Some of these coins bear the names of Khosrow or Yazdgerd, while others carry the names of Muslim governors written in Pahlavi script. These include Mu‘awiyya ibn Abī Sufyān, ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān, ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr, ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Āmir, Ziyād ibn Abī Sufyān, ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād, Qaṭarī ibn al-Fujā’a, al-Muhallab ibn Abī Šufra, and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad (see: [Rezai Baghbidi, 2014: 26–29, 44–49, 54, 58, 60, 81, 83–84](#)) (Fig. 3). In the Islamic period, the abbreviated sign DA is sometimes accompanied by an additional sign—either placed after it or inscribed on one side of the fire altar—to indicate a specific locality within the territory of Darabgerd. For example, DA+P, indicating Fasa in Darabgerd, appears on certain silver drachms of Ziyād ibn Abī Sufyān, Samura ibn Jundab, ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr, and al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf (see: [Rezai Baghbidi, 2014: 47, 49, 58](#)). Similarly, DA+G or DA+ghlwm, indicating Jahrom in Darabgerd, appears on certain silver drachms of ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr and Qaṭarī ibn al-Fujā’a (see: [Rezai Baghbidi, 2014: 49, 54](#)). Occasionally, instead of DA+P (Fasa in Darabgerd), the abbreviated sign DP was used, for example on silver drachms of ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Āmir (see: [Rezai Baghbidi, 2014: 25, 46](#); for Arab-Sasanian coins minted at Darabgerd, see also: [Mochiri, 2006](#)). These later coins suggest that districts such as Fasa and Jahrom were also considered part of the territory of the kūra (administrative district) of Darabgerd.



Fig. 3: Arab-Sasanian coins minted at Darabgerd (coin of Mu‘awiyya ibn Abī Sufyān with the right-profile bust of Khosrow II, minted at Darabgerd, year 43 AH; and coin of ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān with the right-profile bust of Khosrow II, minted at Darabgerd, year 60 Yazdgerdi (= 72 AH)) ([Rezai Baghbidi, 2014: 26-27](#)).

The Name of Darabgerd on Sasanian Seals

Seals and clay sealings constitute the largest group of cultural materials recovered from the Sasanian period and originate from a vast geographical area. In general, the function of clay sealings can be studied on the basis of their archaeological context, the remains preserved on their reverse sides, and historical texts. Harper, in his examination of the clay sealings from Qasr i Abu Nasr, classified some as sealings for goods and merchandise and others as sealings attached to documents (Harper, 1973: 43). Göbl rejected the hypothesis that they were used for sealing goods, arguing instead that Sasanian clay sealings were employed primarily for sealing documents. He maintained that, from a technical standpoint, clay sealings must be regarded as unsuitable for long-distance transport because of their fragility, particularly their susceptibility to abrasion and breakage in their unfired state, since they were attached without any special protective covering (Göbl, 1973). Gyselen, however, proposed that clay sealings were used both for sealing documents and for sealing goods, or for sealing documents attached to goods involved in long-distance trade (Gyselen, 2007).

To date, the name of Darabgerd has been identified on three surviving Sasanian seals. One of these is the seal of the *ōštāndār* (provincial governor) of Darabgerd, at the center of which appears the abbreviated sign DA, with the following inscription around it: *d'l'pklt'y 'wst'nd'l /Dārābgerd ōštāndār/*, meaning “*Ōštāndār of Darabgerd*” (Gyselen, 2007: 220; Gyselen, 2019: 437) (Fig. 4a). On two other seals belonging to *āmārgars* (tax officials), the name of Darabgerd is inscribed as *d'l'pkrt* (Gyselen, 2019: 425) and *d'l'pkly* (Yamauchi, 1993: 48; Gyselen, 2019: 429).

As can be seen, only a small amount of sigillographic evidence has been recovered. On one administrative seal, probably dating to the reign of Khosrow I, Darabgerd is confirmed as a *khurrah* (administrative district). The absence of a seal belonging to a *mowūh* (priestly official) from this province is likely coincidental. In the administrative context of the *āmārgar*, the name of Darabgerd appears either together with the name of *Istakhr* (Fig. 4b) or alongside the names of other districts of Pars—*Ardashir Khurrah* and (...?) (Fig. 4c).

No historiographical source clarifies the history of this region, nor can the relationship between Darabgerd and *Nēw Darāb* (*nywdl'p*, “Good/Beautiful Darāb”) be clearly determined. This name appears on an administrative seal of an *āmārgar* together with the names of two other districts of Pars, namely *Ardashir Khurrah* and *Bishapur*. The name *Nēw Darāb* is otherwise unknown in both primary and secondary sources. Its association with *Ardashir Khurrah* and *Bishapur* suggests that *Nēw Darāb* was located in Pars. The name itself recalls Darabgerd; however, Darāb is written with only one “ā”. It therefore seems likely that *Nēw Darāb* (“Good Darāb”) referred to a new settlement that borrowed its name from the older city of *Dārābgerd/Dārāb*. Daryaei has suggested that *Nēw Darāb* might represent a new name for Fasa, which in the tenth century was the second most important city of the Darabgerd district (Daryaei, 2003: 195). Based

on these interpretations, Nēw Darāb may have been a region distinct from Darabgerd, located to the south and southwest of Darabgerd and to the east of Ardashir Khurrah (Gyselen, 2019: 161) (Fig. 5).

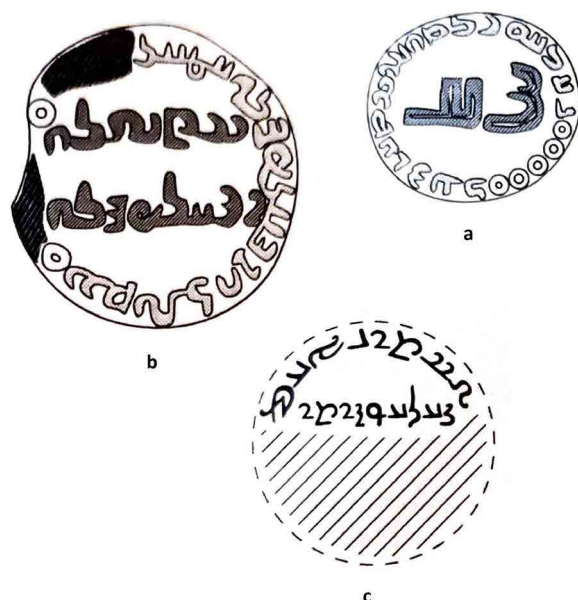


Fig. 4: a: Administrative seal impression of the ōstāndār (Gyselen, 2019: 437); b: The name of Darabgerd on an administrative seal impression of an āmārgar, accompanied by the name of Istakhr (Ibid: 429); c: The name of Darabgerd on an administrative seal impression of an āmārgar, accompanied by the name of Ardashir-Khurrah (Ibid: 425).

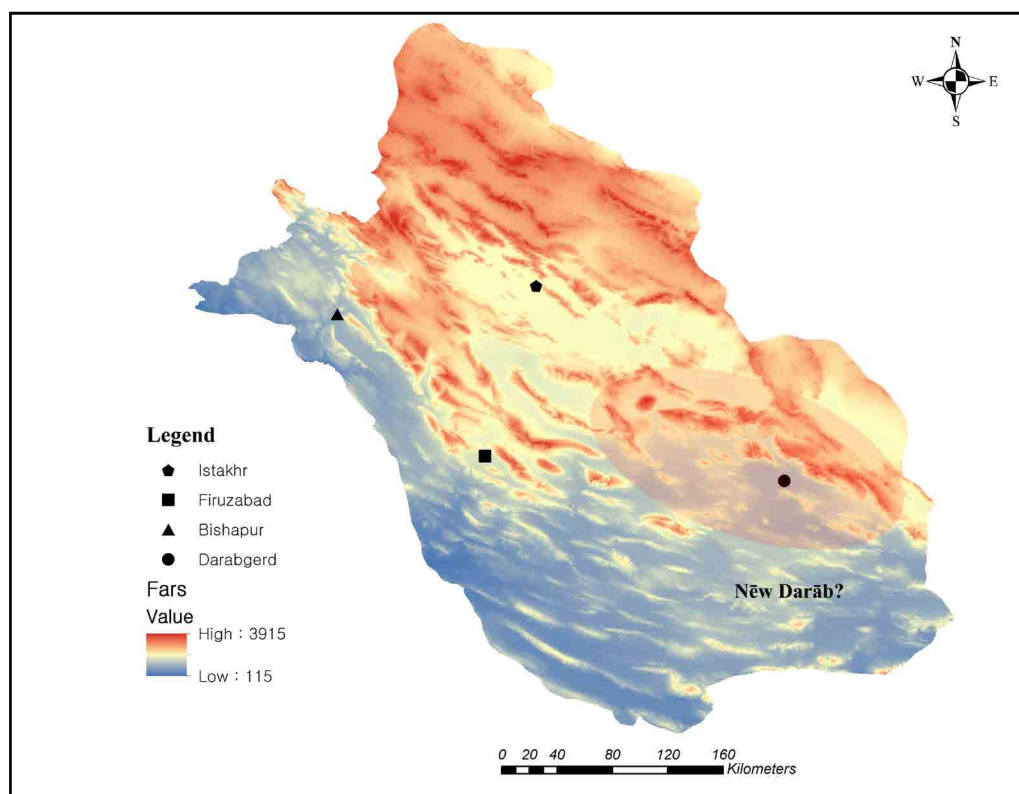


Fig. 5: Administrative district of Darabgerd (Authors, 2024).

The Defensive Settlements of Darabgerd in the Sasanian Period

Given the foregoing discussion, Darabgerd held considerable political and economic importance; consequently, ensuring its security was essential. Archaeological surveys conducted in the region support this conclusion (Khanipour, 2019). During the survey carried out in 2018 (1398 AHS), fourteen defensive settlements were identified in the Darab Plain (Fig. 6; Table 1).

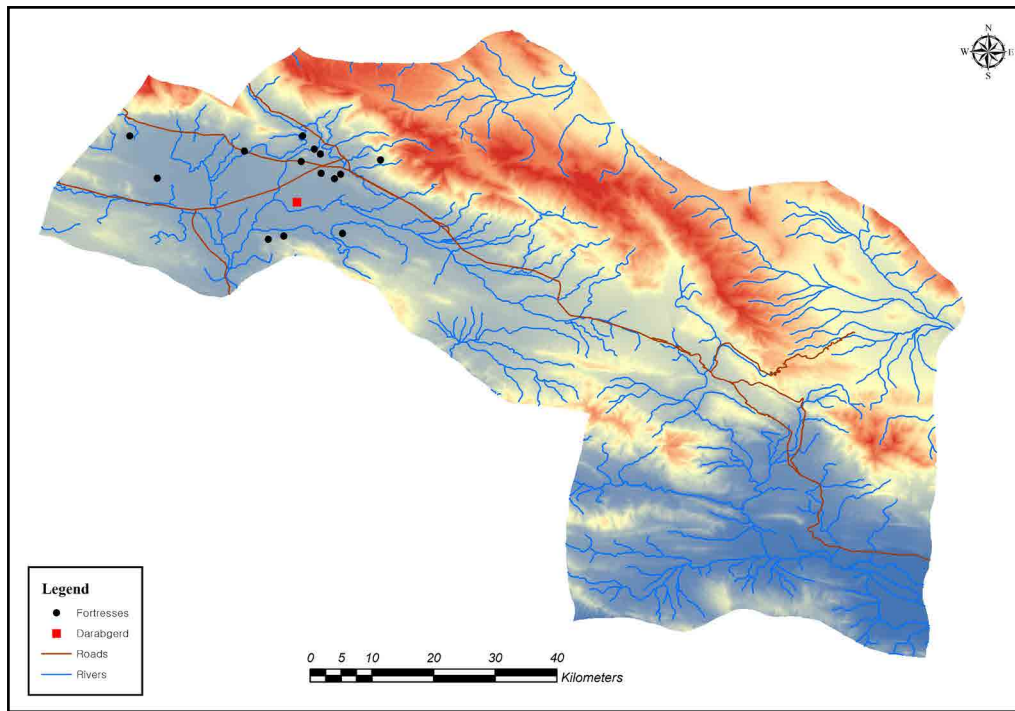


Fig. 6: Location of Sasanian fortresses in the Darab Plain (Authors, 2024).

Table 1: Specifications of the fortresses of the Darab Plain (Authors, 2024).

Area (m ²)	Length (m)	Width (m)	Elevation (m a.s.l.)	X_UTM	Y_UTM	Site Name	Site Code	No.
4771	95	80	1217	259032.8	3180052	Akbarabad Fortress	D29	1
3500	70	50	1149	259978.5	3171210	Kuh Chaleh Fortress	D66	2
47077	325	207	1310	257140.2	3180966	Sangi Fortress	D74	3
2628	60	50	1201	251587.3	3170944	Dahaneh Farakh Fortress	D107	4
2500	55	50	1390	249375.1	3170488	Shahneshin- e Padam Fortress	D108	5
61881	237	160	1198	254334.6	3182947	Pir Murad Fortress	D131	6
15079	160	70	1170	246270	3184807	Shahneshin-e Korsia Fortress	D148	7
650	35	27	1210	257100.1	3184109	Duban Fortress	D213	8
600	30	20	1265	256254	3184915	Qermezak Fortress	D214	9
9800	210	67	1250	230010.5	3187618	Shahrokhi Fortress	D224	10
10359	130	98	1144	233773	3180685	Briskan Fortress	D269	11
2000	45	45	1172	254623.1	3187074	Dashtzar Fortress	D302	12
2000	50	40	1455	265622.9	3182972	Chenari Fortress	D306	13
3100	80	50	1249	259917	3180749	Gabri Fortress	D344	14

In general, the building materials used in the Sasanian fortresses of the Darab Plain consist of stone and mudbrick. With the exception of Dashtzar Fortress (D 302), which is not located on elevated heights overlooking the plain, all the fortresses are situated on heights or natural rock outcrops that overlook the plain. These fortresses are generally constructed either on rock outcrops or on low ridges overlooking rivers or communication routes, such as Akbarabad (D 29), Pir Murad (D 131), Shahrokhi (D 224), and Briskan (D 269); or, like the fortresses of Kuh Chaleh (D 66), Sangi (D 74), Dahaneh Farakh (D 107), Shahneshin e Padam (D 108), Shahneshin e Korsia (D 148), Duban (D 213), Qermezak (D 214), Chenari (D 306), and Gabri (D 344), they are built on heights overlooking the entrances to the plain. Since one of the primary functions of fortresses and military fortifications was to monitor communication routes, it appears that such a function also applied to the fortresses of the Darab Plain. The presence of modern roads near some of these fortresses—such as Akbarabad (D 29), Pir Murad (D 131), Shahrokhi (D 224), Dashtzar (D 302), and Gabri (D 344), which are situated on rock outcrops and low ridges overlooking these roads—may indicate the continued use of these routes from the Sasanian period to the present day. Evidence of water management systems can also be observed at several of these fortresses, including Kuh Chaleh (D 66), Pir Murad (D 131), and Briskan (D 269).

Based on surface evidence—such as the remains of standing walls and the distribution of surface sherds—the approximate area of most of these fortresses is generally less than one hectare. However, four fortresses have areas exceeding one hectare (Table 1): Pir Murad (D 131), Sangi (D 74), Shahneshin e Korsia (D 148), and Briskan (D 269), with areas of 6.2 ha, 4.7 ha, 1.5 ha, and 1.1 ha, respectively. These are considered the largest fortresses of the Darab Plain. Mapping the locations of these four fortresses and considering their size suggests that they were the most strategic fortresses of the Darab Plain (Fig. 7). Based on the technical characteristics of the pottery and comparisons with key Sasanian sites—including the city of Darabgerd ([Karimian & Seyedein, 2009](#)), the city of Istakhr ([Asadi, 2005](#); [Schmidt, 1939](#)), Qasr i Abu Nasr ([Whitcomb, 1985](#)), the Sasanian levels at Tall i Malyan ([Alden, 1978](#)), Ardashir Khurrah ([Montazer Zohouri, 2015](#)), and Qal'eh i Yazdgerd ([Keall & Keall, 1981](#))—these fortresses can be dated to the Sasanian period (Fig. 8; Table 2).

Sangi Fortress (D 74)

This fortress is located approximately 500 meters from the modern city of Darab and is built on a high mountain beside which the modern Darab road passes. From this position, it overlooks the ancient city of Darabgerd. The fortress has an irregular circular plan, and the remains of its defensive walls are still visible. In some sections, these walls are double layered, with a narrow corridor approximately one meter wide running between them. The surviving walls have a thickness of roughly half a meter and are constructed of rubble stone, which is abundantly available on the mountain. The identifiable entrance

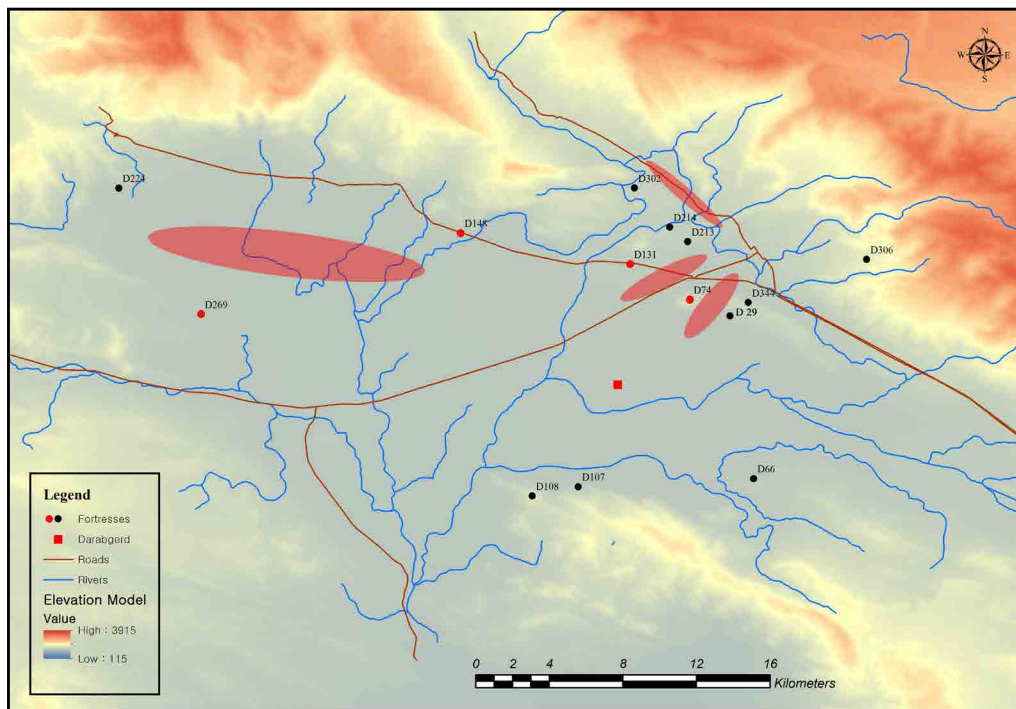


Fig. 7: Distribution of Sasanian fortresses in the Darab Plain; the main passes/routes are marked in red (Authors, 2024).

is located on the western side of the structure and is approximately one meter wide. Within the enclosed area, there is almost no clearly identifiable interior space. Only in the central part are a few small circular structures visible, built from the same stones found on the surface and probably constructed using dry stone (mortarless) masonry. Unfortunately, illegal excavations have been carried out inside these features, resulting in their destruction. To the west and southwest, near the mountain's promontory, there is a crescent shaped stone built feature that appears to have served as a water reservoir (Fig. 9).

Pir Murad Fortress (D 131)

Pir Murad Fortress is located 110 meters west of the shrine of Pir Murad and 300 meters north of the Darab–Fasarud road, overlooking the city of Darabgerd. It is built on a relatively low hill with steep slopes on the eastern, southern, and western sides; access is possible only from the northern side. Remains of a wall are visible on the northern side, which likely marked the entrance to the fortress.

The fortress consists of two parts. The upper part—the so called shahneshin—is situated on the relatively flat surface of the hilltop and is enclosed by a dry stone wall bonded with sārūj, approximately 1 meter wide, of which only the foundation survives (Fig. 10). In this section, a water basin measuring 3×2.5 meters, with walls approximately 70 cm thick, is located at the highest point of the hill. The basin is plastered and waterproofed with sārūj. Approximately 15 meters east of this basin, there is another basin that is now filled with soil. The upper part of its eastern wall, about

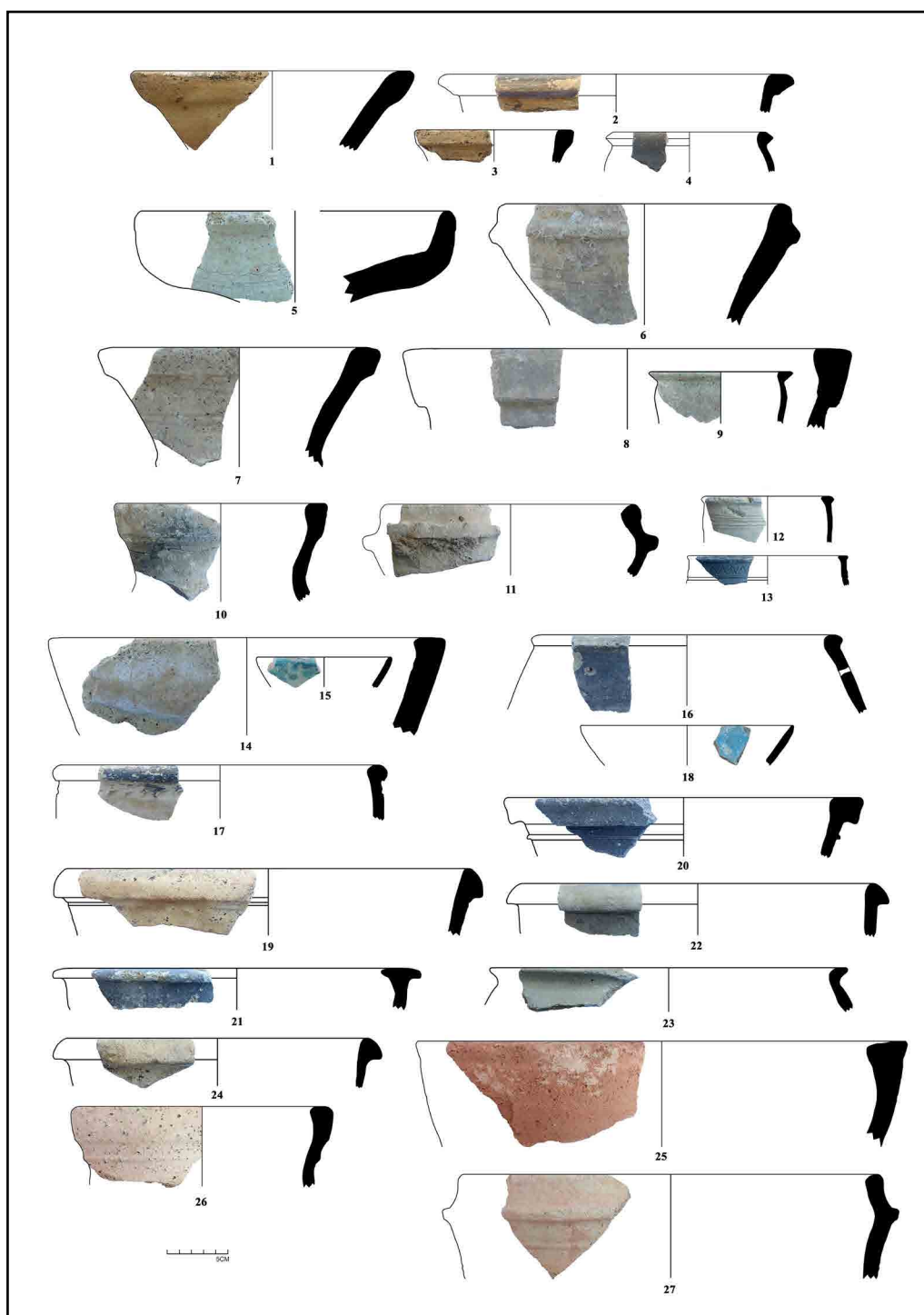


Fig. 8: Surface sherds from some of the fortresses of the Darab Plain (Authors, 2024).

60 cm thick, remains visible, and traces of sārūj plaster can still be observed. Due to the damage sustained in this shahneshin area, no other clearly identifiable architectural remains are visible.

The second part of the fortress lies at a lower elevation than the first and is enclosed by a wall, of which only the foundation remains. Most of this section extends across the western and northern slopes of the hill. The eastern and southern slopes, being precipitous,

Table 2: Technical specifications of surface sherds from some of the fortresses of the Darab Plain (Authors, 2024).

Period	Description	Fortress	No.
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, red paste, clay slip on interior and exterior, wheel-made, well-fired, coarse, mineral temper	Sangi Fortress	1
Sasanian	Rim, grey exterior, buff paste, clay slip on interior and exterior, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Sangi Fortress	2
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, buff paste, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Sangi Fortress	3
Sasanian	Rim, grey exterior, grey paste, wheel-made, well-fired, fine, mineral temper	Sangi Fortress	4
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, buff paste, clay slip on exterior, handmade, well-fired, medium, geometric decoration, mineral temper	Duban Fortress	5
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, buff paste, clay slip on interior, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Duban Fortress	6
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, buff paste, clay slip on interior, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Duban Fortress	7
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, buff paste, clay slip on interior, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Duban Fortress	8
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, buff paste, clay slip on interior, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Duban Fortress	9
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, buff paste, clay slip on interior and exterior, incised decoration on exterior, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Qermezak Fortress	10
Sasanian	Rim, brown exterior, brown paste, clay slip on interior and exterior, incised decoration, impressed on exterior, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Qermezak Fortress	11
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, buff paste, clay slip on interior and exterior, incised decoration on exterior, wheel-made, well-fired, fine, mineral temper	Qermezak Fortress	12
Sasanian	Rim, grey exterior, grey paste, clay slip on interior and exterior, incised decoration on exterior, wheel-made, well-fired, fine, mineral temper	Qermezak Fortress	13
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, buff paste, clay slip on exterior, handmade, well-fired, coarse, mineral temper	Shahrokhi Fortress	14
Sasanian /Islamic	Rim, green exterior, buff paste, green glaze slip on interior and exterior, wheel-made, well-fired, fine, mineral temper	Shahrokhi Fortress	15
Sasanian	Rim, grey exterior, grey paste, clay slip on interior and exterior, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Shahrokhi Fortress	16
Sasanian /Islamic	Rim, brown exterior, buff paste, clay slip on interior and exterior, incised decoration on exterior, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Shahrokhi Fortress	17
Sasanian /Islamic	Rim, green exterior, buff paste, green glaze slip on interior and exterior, wheel-made, well-fired, fine, mineral temper	Shahrokhi Fortress	18
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, red paste, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Briskan Fortress	19
Sasanian	Rim, grey exterior, grey paste, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Briskan Fortress	20
Sasanian	Rim, grey exterior, grey paste, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Briskan Fortress	21
Sasanian	Rim, grey exterior, grey paste, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Briskan Fortress	22
Sasanian	Rim, grey exterior, grey paste, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Briskan Fortress	23
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, buff paste, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Briskan Fortress	24
Sasanian	Rim, red exterior, red paste, wheel-made, well-fired, coarse, mineral temper	Gabri Fortress	25
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, buff paste, relief decoration on exterior, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Gabri Fortress	26
Sasanian	Rim, buff exterior, buff paste, clay slip on interior and exterior, incised and relief decoration on exterior, wheel-made, well-fired, medium, mineral temper	Gabri Fortress	27



Fig. 9: Remains of the wall of Sangi Fortress; the city of Darabgerd is visible in the background (Khanipour, 2019).

were not suitable for extensive construction; the limited remains in these areas consist of traces of spaces with unrecognizable plans. In the southern part, several interconnected basins are located along the edge of the precipice and were used for collecting and storing water. These basins were constructed on a bedrock foundation, with the natural bedrock of the mountain forming the floor. The walls of these basins are approximately 30 cm thick and were plastered with sārūj. The largest basin in this complex, located at the edge of the precipice, is oriented northeast–southwest, with its southern corner projecting over the precipice. The interior of this basin measures approximately 8 meters in length and 2.5 meters in width and contains six semi circular buttresses. This fortress is located on the northern side of the Darab Plain, approximately 5 kilometers from the city of Darabgerd. Based on its location and construction techniques, it likely had a military function, serving to protect the entrance leading into the Darab Plain (Fig. 10).

Shahneshin e Korsia Fortress (D 148)

On the northern mountain overlooking the village of Korsia, approximately 1,176 meters west of the city of Darab, there are architectural remains that local inhabitants refer to as Shahneshin. Access to this site is possible only from the northeast. This structure can be considered the largest fortress in the Darab Plain and, after Bahman Furg Fortress, the second largest fortress in Darab County. The site was visited by Huff and De Miroschedji (Huff, 1995: 416; De Miroschedji, 1980), and Mortezaei and Zabanavar have suggested that the structure functioned as a fortress protecting the Āzarju Fire



Fig. 10: Architectural remains of the upper part (right) and remains of water reservoir basins of Pir Murad Fortress (Authors, 2024).

Temple (Mortezaei & Zabanavar, 2017). Given the topography of the mountain, the fortress was constructed on several levels according to a specific plan. The westernmost section lies at a lower elevation, where remains of a wall-oriented east–west are visible; this wall is approximately 40 meters long and includes three semi circular towers. At a higher elevation, remains of another wall with semi circular towers can be seen. In this section, a flat surface is visible where the main central building of the fortress once stood. Today, this area is completely covered with rubble, although stone architectural remains are still clearly visible.

On the northern side, where the mountain slope is gentler, two massive stone walls can be identified. The outer wall measures approximately 170 meters in length and about 2 meters in thickness and incorporates five circular towers. Although Huff depicted the main platform as square with an extension to the south, it should be noted that, due to the uneven terrain, the overall plan of the fortress is polygonal. The fortress has a maximum length of 320 meters, a maximum width of 170 meters, and an area of approximately 27,250 m², oriented east–west. It appears that the fortress contained a central space surrounded by several peripheral spaces, each separated by walls and towers, so that access to the central area required passing through multiple defensive walls. The fortress completely overlooks the southern plains, while the Darab salt dome lies to the west of the site (Fig. 11).

Huff visited this site and described it as follows: “The doubt that the rock fortress in the circular city of Darabgerd was truly the original seat of the ruling prince of the region is further increased by the fact that about 12 km northwest of the circular city, on a rock at the edge of the mountains, there is a large, strategically situated fortress. This fortress is distinctly named Shahneshin; it has also been called Gur, most likely because of the large tombs (dakhmas) on the side of the rock. The extensive platform on the summit is covered with the debris of a stone building. From the east, south, and west, platforms with large circular fortresses, situated at a lower level, are attached to it. To the southwest of the large platform there is a gateway with two circular towers on either side. Below it lies another fortress that extends to the foot of the mountain. Since

abundant springs flow from the foot of the rock, it is clear that this place is among the most important and oldest inhabited sites of the Darab Plain. It is probable that in the pre Islamic and historical periods this was the seat of the ruling prince of the region, meaning that this was where the young Tira and Ardashir had their seat of government”. Huff provided a detailed description of the fortress and produced a plan of the site. Although Mortezaei and Zabanavar interpret this structure as a military fortress associated with the Āzarju Fire Temple, the architectural layout suggests that—consistent with Huff’s interpretation—the fortress more likely served as a governmental seat rather than as a purely military installation intended to protect the fire temple.

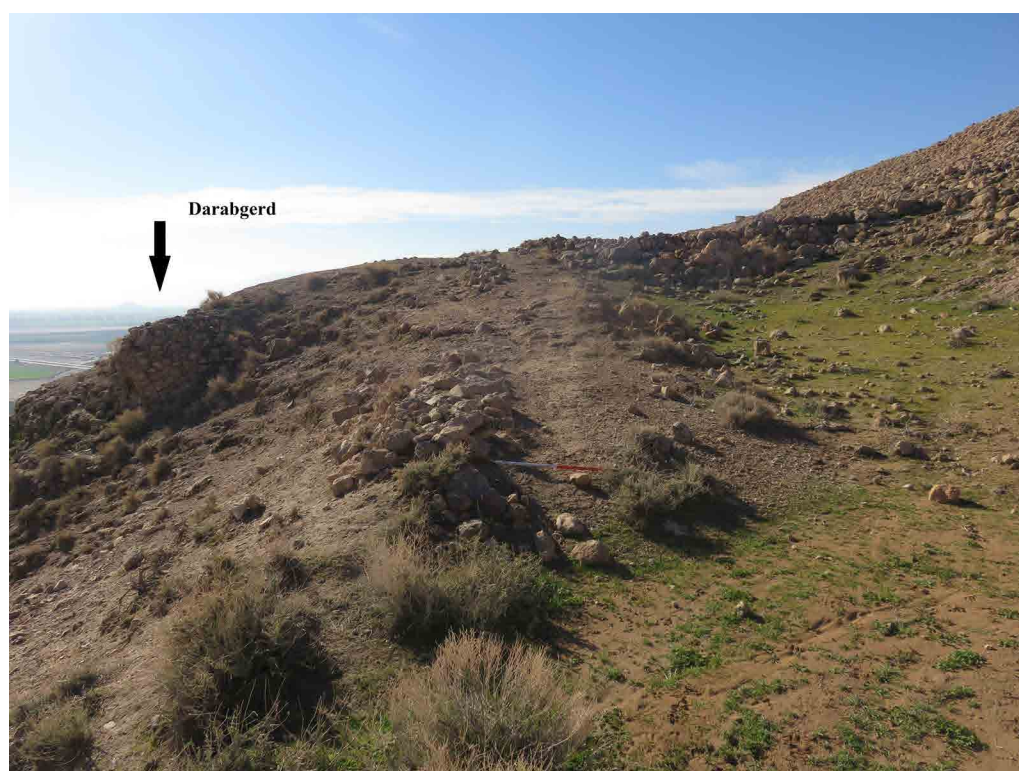


Fig. 11: Remains of the wall and tower of Shahneshin-e Korsia Fortress, and the view of the city of Darabgerd from atop this fortress (Authors, 2024).

Briskan Fortress (D 269)

This fortress is located near the village of Owbad, approximately 500 meters west of the village, on the summit of Kuh e Briskan at an elevation of 1,144 meters above sea level. The cemetery and the chahartaq of Owbad are situated on its southern slope. Among the surviving remains are two well shafts located at the highest part of the peak, one on the eastern side and the other on the western side. Around the eastern well shaft, traces of a wall approximately 37 cm thick are visible. This wall extends from the north of the eastern well shaft toward the southwest and then turns at a right angle westward across the site. At the lower slopes of the fortress, an unpaved road runs from the west and connects to the main road linking Briskan to Dowlatabad (from the south) and Briskan to the Fasārud region. On the northern side, an asphalt road connects the site to the main

communication route. Illegal excavations have been carried out along the eastern and southeastern slopes up to the main fortress. In addition, a deep well shaft approximately one meter in diameter has been created on the western side of the mountain. Another deep illegal excavation has been made on the northern side of the fortress, where solid rock has been cut to form a large pit. Kuh e Briskan forms part of a mountain range that begins in the northwest and extends across the plain through a series of small and large hills, terminating near the village of Briskan (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12: Remains of the wall of Briskan Fortress (Authors, 2024).

Discussion and Analysis

Sasanian imperial investment led to an unprecedented increase in the number of settlements in Mesopotamia, the Khuzestan Plain, and Fars. Kilometers of qanats, large irrigation canals, and massive stone dams were constructed to secure and expand agricultural production and to supply the needs of newly established urban centers. Much of the work on the design and construction of these irrigation systems was carried out by captured Roman engineers. Extensive agricultural investment also occurred in the Dehloran region, where the population reached unprecedented levels (Johnson, 1987: 291). These developments demonstrate the Sasanian ambition to establish themselves as a major world power. Therefore, it is not surprising that in Fars we also encounter cities which, at first glance, appear truly magnificent.

As discussed above, Ardashir, the founder of the Sasanian Empire, served as the argbed of Darabgerd before ascending to the throne as Sasanian king. This fact itself indicates the importance of Darabgerd within the Sasanian administrative structure. The circular city of Darabgerd was probably the third experiment in Sasanian circular

urban planning. Surface pottery indicates that occupation of the city continued until the twelfth century CE ([Morgan, 2003: 333](#)). Although the circular plan offered certain military advantages and was more economical in terms of building materials, it also created challenges for architectural organization within the city. Consequently, most later cities adopted rectangular urban plans. It is likewise unsurprising that the Darab region, given its strategic location along the communication routes leading to the eastern and southeastern parts of the Sasanian realm, as well as its natural resources—such as water sources and fertile agricultural land—received considerable attention from the Sasanian kings and later from Islamic caliphs. An examination of the map of the Sasanian kuras (administrative districts) in the province of Fars—the heartland of the Sasanian Empire—shows that Darabgerd, together with Istakhr, Bishapur, and Ardashir Khurrah, forms the vertices of a quadrilateral that appears to have been strategically positioned to protect the province of Fars. In light of this, it becomes clear that Darabgerd and the Darab Plain occupied an important position within the political, security, and economic structure of the Sasanian Empire. Historical sources, including the accounts of travelers and geographers preserved in historical texts, further support this interpretation.

Additional evidence supporting this interpretation is the presence of a royal mint at Darabgerd. Together with the city's distinctive circular layout, this suggests that Darabgerd functioned not only as the administrative center of the kura of Darabgerd but also maintained close administrative connections with other important provincial and imperial centers. Consequently, ensuring the security and protection of the city was of paramount importance.

An examination of the distribution of the fortresses indicates that their primary function was to protect Darabgerd and to monitor the communication routes. Sangi Fortress (D 74), Pir Murad Fortress (D 131), Shahneshin e Korsia Fortress (D 148), and Briskan Fortress (D 269) were the largest and most important fortresses of the Darab Plain. In addition to monitoring communication routes, they were responsible for protecting both the plain and the city of Darabgerd (Fig. 8). These fortresses commanded extensive views over the Darab Plain and were positioned in such a way that their garrisons could observe the status of neighboring fortresses and communicate with one another in the event of danger.

The fortresses of Dahaneh Farakh (D 107) and Shahneshin e Padam (D 108), located in the southern part of the Darab Plain, not only overlooked the plain but also had a clear view of the important northern fortresses of Darab, including Pir Murad (D 131), Qermezak (D 214), Duban (D 213), Sangi (D 74), Akbarabad (D 29), Gabri (D 344), and Chenari (D 306) (Fig. 13). Thus, during the Sasanian period the Darab Plain appears to have contained a coordinated network of fortresses arranged within a complex defensive system designed to ensure the security of the city of Darabgerd.

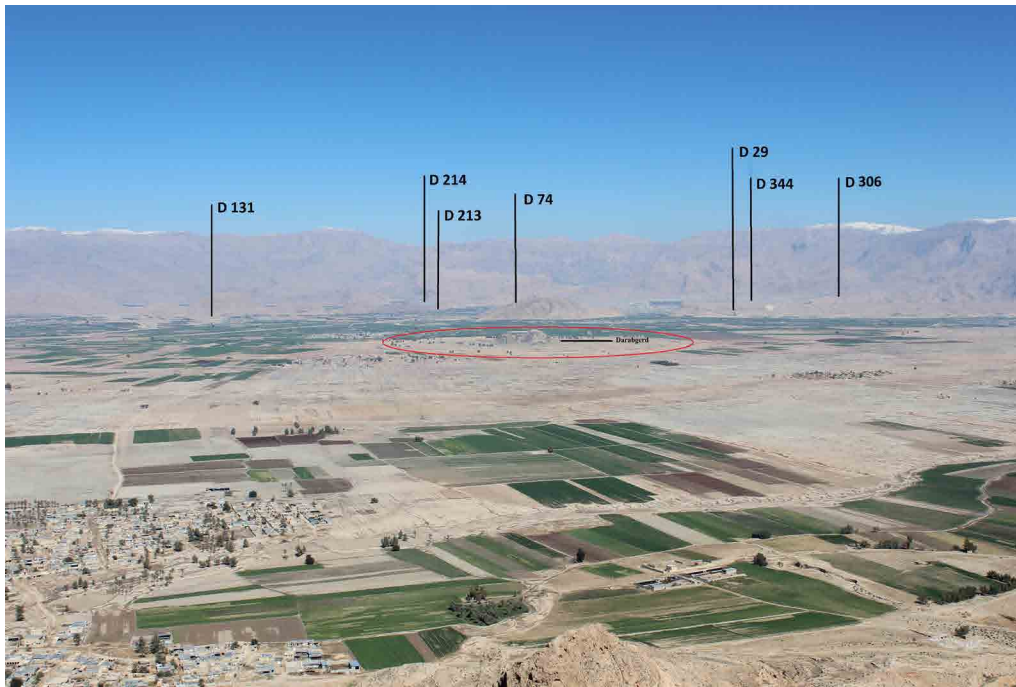


Fig. 13: View of the Darab Plain, Darabgerd, and its key fortresses from Shahneshin-e Padam (Authors, 2024).

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing discussion, the Darab Plain, owing to its strategic geographical location, attracted the attention of the Sasanian kings from the early stages of the formation of the Sasanian Empire. The presence of a large salt formation (diapir) in the Darab Plain—providing a source of salt on the one hand and serving as the central core of a major city on the other—further enhanced the importance of both the plain and the city of Darabgerd. For these reasons, Darabgerd, as one of the Sasanian administrative centers in Fars alongside Ardashir Khurrah, Bishapur, and Istakhr, became the site of one of the major Sasanian mints. Historical texts from the Islamic period indicate that this status continued even into the post Sasanian era. Surface ceramic remains likewise attest to this continuity.

These factors made the security of the city a matter of paramount importance. The topographic setting of Darabgerd—the dominance of surrounding highlands over the city on the one hand and its location along the east–west communication route on the other—provided favorable conditions for the establishment of military settlements. The distribution pattern of these fortresses was also influenced by the location of the city of Darabgerd and by the geographical features of the plain. The primary function of these fortresses was to protect the routes leading to Darabgerd and to control the east–west communication corridors.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have adhered to ethical standards in publishing and referencing and confirm that there are no conflicts of interest.

Endnote

1. During this survey, diverse cultural remains including settlement sites, burials (tombs/graves), and military fortresses were identified. The examination of these findings, together with the previously identified rock reliefs of Sasanian kings, can provide researchers with a clear picture of the cultural events that took place on this plain during the Sasanian period.

2. When salt is displaced under the influence of applied forces, it creates large-scale landforms studied within the fields of structural geomorphology and tectonics. The upward movement of salt from depth to the Earth's surface produces distinctive topographic features known as salt diapirs or salt domes (see: Belenitskaya, 2018). The Darab Plain, with its six salt domes named Sachun (southeast of the plain), Baynuj (south), Darabgerd (center), Korsia (north), Tang-e Charkhi (southwest), and Gud-e Shaneh (west), is among the regions exhibiting this phenomenon. The Darabgerd salt dome has two peaks, with the height of the taller peak rising approximately 50 meters above its base. Its composition consists of dark-colored, malodorous dolomites, formed through evaporitic processes. Like other salt domes of the Hormuz Series, the Darabgerd salt dome dates to the Cambrian geological period (approximately 550 million years ago), having penetrated through the overlying sediments and layers to reach the surface. Given that the Hormuz Series is a complex assemblage of evaporitic and magmatic rocks, magmatism has also played a role in the formation of this phenomenon (Shayan et al., 2011: 7) (Fig. 1).

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استقرارهای دفاعی دشت داراب در دوره ساسانی

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چکیده

استان فارس خاستگاه ظهور دو شاهنشاهی هخامنشی و ساسانی در تاریخ ایران بوده است. وجود آثار تاریخی مهم از این دو دوره در فارس آشکارا جایگاه این استان را نشان می‌دهد. یکی از این مناطق در فارس، داراب است که محل قرارگیری شهر دارابگرد در دوره ساسانی بوده است. به نسبت اهمیت این منطقه در سپهر تاریخی و باستان‌شناسی ایران، پژوهش‌های صورت‌گرفته، اندک به نظر می‌رسد؛ با توجه به اهمیت این شهر در دوره ساسانی، در این پژوهش تلاش گردیده تا تصویری روشن از جایگاه شهر و خوره دارابگرد ترسیم و ساختار دفاعی آن بازسازی گردد؛ این پژوهش بر آن است تا با توجه به بررسی‌های باستان‌شناسی اخیر در دشت داراب دریابد که دارابگرد دارای چه جایگاهی در ساختار اداری و سیاسی ساسانیان بوده است و تا چه زمانی این اهمیت تداوم دارد؟ هم‌چنین با توجه به وجود قلاع و استحکامات نظامی پیرامون شهر دارابگرد، ساختار دفاعی و نگهداری از شهر و دشت داراب چگونه عمل می‌کرده است؟ در نگاه نخست مشاهده ویرانه‌های شهر دارابگرد که بیانگر شکوه گذشته آن است از یک سو و وجود یک نقش برجسته، ضرابخانه بزرگ و مهم که پس از دوره ساسانیان و در قرون نخستین دوره اسلامی نیز فعالیت داشته و هم‌چنین مهرها و گِل‌مهرهای به دست آمده اهمیت این محدوده جغرافیایی را طی دوره ساسانی و اوایل دوران اسلامی نشان می‌دهد. به همین دلیل وجود یک ساختار دفاعی منسجم برای شهر دارابگرد و دشت داراب ضروری است. با توجه به شناسایی ۱۴ قلعه در بررسی‌های باستان‌شناسی دشت داراب، این پژوهش با رویکرد توصیفی-تحلیلی شواهد باستان‌شناسی را در کنار شواهد تاریخی قرار داده است تا بتواند درک درستی از ساختار دفاعی دشت داراب در دوره ساسانی ارائه کند. این پژوهش نشان می‌دهد که جغرافیای دشت داراب در شکل‌گیری شهر دارابگرد و ساختار دفاعی آن مهم‌ترین نقش را داشته است.

کلیدواژگان: شهرستان داراب، دارابگرد، استقرارهای دفاعی، ساسانیان، فارس، مهرها، سکه‌ها.

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