



ARDESTĀN

ARDESTĀN, a town of central Iran between Kāšān and Nāʾīn, lying on the very border of the Dašt-e Kavīr.

i. Geography.

ii. Monuments.

i. Geography

The town is undoubtedly a very ancient one, and its name should probably be explained not as Moqaddasī (p. 390) would have it from the whitish color of its soil compared to flour (*ārd*), but, following Jackson's suggestion as derived from Old Persian *ardastāna* (*aθaⁿgaina*, a stone construction) attested in Achaemenid inscriptions. Arab geographers located there the birth-place of ʔosrow I Anōšīravān and also a fire-temple, the foundation of which was attributed to Bahman, son of Esfandiār. During the Middle Ages the town was one of the most flourishing of the region, renowned for its pomegranates, its silk production, and the activity of its weavers. Although Arab geographers eulogized its population, which counted many intelligent and well-informed men, in the 17th century it was regarded as prone to anger and violence (Mīrzā Moḥammad-Šādeq, *The Geographical Works of Sādik Isfahāni*, London, 1832, p. 62). Travelers of modern times describe it as a pleasant agglomeration sheltering among its wide-spread irrigated gardens. (The town, surrounded by



a wall during the Middle Ages, is at present composed of six different greatly dispersed wards.) The population estimated at 500 houses in the 16th century (Josaphat Barbaro, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, Hakluyt Society, London, 1873, p. 82) was evaluated to 12,000 inhabitants by Sykes at the end of the 19th century, and to 6,645 by the census of 1966, and 13,696 by that of 1976 (with a total population of 42,484 inhabitants in the entire *šahrestān*). Agricultural activity based on *qanāts* is still largely preponderant. The organization of the irrigation is purported by local tradition to go back to Hūlāgū, grandson of Jengiz Khan, and to have been regulated at the time by Našīr-al-dīn Ṭūsī (cf. A. K. S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*, London, 1955, p. 218).

The surrounding countryside counts numerous villages (some fifty in the 14th century according to the *Nozhat al-qolūb*) often unstable and poor, owing to the scarcity of water on the outskirts of the desert. One of these, Zavāra, today half ruined and buried in sand, was a lively town during the Saljuq period and has some important ruins.

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(X. De Planhol)

ii. Monuments

Ardestān possesses one of the best preserved of the major Saljuq mosques in Iran. Yet even here the Saljuq structure, dated 553/1158 and 555/1160, overlies earlier elements and was later modified. The resultant pattern of accretion is typically Iranian. The earliest surviving section is a fragmentary, perhaps Buyid, tunnel-vaulted arcade bearing an incomplete Koranic text in Kufic script. Little more than the *be'sm allāh* remains. Its style, notably its punched ornaments and foliations, has affinities with the Nā'īn inscription, datable ca. 390/1000. Its associated joint plugs, however, suggest a later date. The stucco decoration, with its floral and interlace motifs and calyx capital, could all be Buyid. The arcade rests on disengaged piers which recall Buyid work at the Isfahan Jāme'. Some, following 'Abbasid precedent, are lobed; others are circular or octagonal in plan. The latter types carry brackets at the diagonals, while their surfaces are regularly pockmarked with recessed slots. No plan of this original Jāme' has been published, but it clearly included an arcaded sanctuary; there is no evidence of a dome, though Schroeder argues for a *qebła ayvān*. Presumably tunnel-vaulted arcades rather than *ayvāns* articulated the other courtyard facades. The high quality of the early decoration challenges pre-Saljuq work at Isfahan and shows that the Isfahan area was an important architectural center long before Malekšāh.

During the Saljuq period this early mosque vanished almost entirely in a major remodeling of the structure. The modifications have been variously interpreted. Godard proposed that the dome chamber, standing isolated, was inserted into the early mosque ca. 493/1100 and that subsequent campaigns from before 553/1158 until 555/1160 added its present decoration and gave the mosque its 4-*ayvān* form. Sauvaget justly preferred to see dome and *ayvān* as part of the same building campaign, but complicated the issue by suggesting that the builders changed their minds between 553/1158 and 555/1160 and made the mosque into a *madrassa*. His evidence is two-fold: a Koranic reference to *maqā'eb* in the inscription of the *qebła ayvān* and the domed chambers on the east side. But the inscription (Koran 2:256) is one of the



commonest of all in mosques; the domed chambers could appropriately serve numerous purposes, including funerary ones, in the multi-functional Friday mosque of medieval times; and the mosque acquired a *madrassa* in the Safavid period, a curious addition if the entire building already served as such. Moreover, no trace of another Friday mosque remains in this town, which was large and prosperous in the Saljuq period. The natural presumption, then, must be that when the early mosque was rebuilt it remained a mosque and that the rebuilding was effected between 553/1158 and 555/1160, beginning with the dome chamber. Such an interpretation accords with both epigraphic and archeological evidence.

The inscriptions state that the Saljuq rebuilding was due to Abū Ṭāher Ḥosayn b. Gālī b. Aḥmad and that it was executed by Ostād Maḥmūd Eṣfahānī, who is presumably identical to the Maḥmūd b. Moḥammad Bannā' mentioned elsewhere in the inscriptions. A Safavid inscription dated 946/1539-40, in the name of Ḥaydar-ʿAlī, *me'mār* Ardestānī, survives.

Parts of the mosque were carefully planned; thus, on the *qebla* axis the *ayvāns* match precisely in their dimensions, as do the narrower lateral *ayvāns*. Nevertheless, in comparison with the near-contemporary mosque at Zavāra close by, the Ardestān Jāme' has a curiously irregular layout. A major and apparently unnecessary imbalance between east and west sides maintains itself throughout the structure, though the courtyard facades harmonize well. Above all, both Saljuq and Safavid architects remained quite careless of the appearance of the exterior perimeter. Chamfered and rounded corners, projections of various kinds, diagonally aligned walls and salient portals all break up the facade. A cramped and irregular site would help to explain these features, but the uneven interior is mainly the responsibility of the Saljuq architect. Around 946/1539-40 the mosque was greatly enlarged. Schroeder argues that the north, east and west *ayvāns* date entirely from this period, though they were more probably remodeled then. Their decoration features some rather humdrum "sunburst" vaulting. Other additions include the eastern corridor and the unsightly triple abutment of the main dome chamber, elements which suggest that the ambitious reshaping of the mosque was abandoned uncompleted. A detailed examination of the mosque, with sondages, is long overdue.

Most of the Saljuq decoration is concentrated within the sanctuary. The dome chamber closely follows the pattern of the Isfahan school in its multiple lower openings and its zone of transition. But its three *meḥrābs* are an unusual



feature, as is the use of stucco as a kind of openwork floral embroidery in high relief intended to blend with, not obscure, the underlying brickwork. This plaster decoration makes lavish use of inscriptions and its fresh colors—including purple, yellow, white, and blue—are again hard to parallel in other Saljuq work. This sustained emphasis on color, achieved without recourse to tilework, is best seen in the dome chamber. Here the brickwork, highlighted in red and luminous white, argues continued upkeep over the centuries.

Near the Friday mosque is the ruined Masjed-e Emām Ḥasan, a Saljuq building notable for a very early twin-minaret portal, datable ca. 550/1152 and containing a glazed Kufic inscription. Within the flat-roofed pillared sanctuary—there is no courtyard—remains a fine stucco *mehṛāb* closely related to those in the Jāme'. Godard identified the building as a *madrassa* but cited no supporting evidence.

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