



# CHRISTIANITY II. IN PRE-ISLAMIC PERSIA: MATERIAL REMAINS

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## CHRISTIANITY

### ii. In Pre-Islamic Persia: Material Remains

Apart from literary sources, evidence for Christian communities within the Sasanian empire is scarce. Although Christians may have been among the deportees from Roman Syria who worked on the monuments of Šāpūr I (240-70 c.e.) at [Bīšāpūr](#) and the dam at Šūštar (see [deportations](#)), nothing identifiably Christian has been excavated in Persia itself. Archeological remains on the Persian Gulf island of Kārg, northwest of Bushire ([Būšeher](#)) and opposite [Bahrain](#), attest to a Nestorian Christian community there from the 3rd to the 7th century (Bowman; Ghirshman, pp. 11-14, 17-22; Haerinck, pp. 159-66; Herzfeld, pp. 103-04; Matheson, pp. 245-49). In the center of the island, near the remains of a fire temple and associated with rock-cut Zoroastrian tombs that served as ossuaries ([astōdāns](#)), are several large man-made eaves with rectangular entrances, each with a cross engraved above it (Haerinck, pp. 162-64; Herzfeld, p. 103). There is no evidence, however, that nearby two Palmyran-style tombs, used for multiple burials, were Christian catacombs, as Ernst Herzfeld thought (pp. 103-05 and pls. XVIII and XIX). Instead, they may have served as hypogea for a colony of 3rd-century Palmyran traders, who



most likely used the island as an entrepôt in their trade with India (Haerinck, pp. 138ff.). On the western side of the island were discovered the remains of a church and monastery, built mainly of dressed stone (Ghirshman, p. 24 pl. 15; Persian excavations reported by Bowman; Matheson, pp. 248-49). The triple nave of the church was probably roofed by three barrel vaults; the walls were decorated in stucco, much of it similar in style to the late Sasanian decoration at Ṭāq-e Bostān. The monastery, which formed an outer wall around the church, contained some sixty cells, each consisting of three small chambers. Also associated with the site were several small ruins, each surrounded by a wall, which may have housed the married Nestorian clergy (Matheson, p. 249).

More clearly identifiable Christian remains have been discovered farther west. A private house at [Dura-Europos](#) on the Euphrates river provides the earliest archeological evidence of a Christian community in the Near East, built, or at least adapted, for Christian worship in 232 c.e. (Kraeling, pp. 34-39, 140). It is the best-preserved example of the *domus ecclesiae* that was in use before the universal adoption of the basilica during the reign of Constantine in the 4th century (Kraeling, pp. 127, 139-41). The church proper, which was entered through a portico and courtyard, consisted of a rectangular assembly hall with a raised platform at its eastern end and a sacristy. The vestibule west of the courtyard served as a place of instruction for catechumens and neophytes; behind it, northwest of the courtyard, was a baptistry, which contained a font covered by a baldachin and was richly decorated with painted scenes from the Old and New Testaments—Adam and Eve, David and Goliath, the women at the tomb, Christ’s meeting with the woman of Samaria, the healing of the paralytic, the rescue of St. Peter from the Sea of Galilee, and, directly above the font, the Good Shepherd. The building served Dura’s Christian community until the destruction of the city by Šāpūr I in 256 (Kraeling, p. 34).

In Iraq remains of Christian basilical churches survive from the Sasanian period. Two such churches, of mud brick, were excavated at Ḥīra the seat of the vassal Lakhmid dynasty, on the Euphrates river southwest of [Ctesiphon](#) (Rice, 1932a; idem, 1932b; idem, 1934). One resembled the church on Kārg, with three aisles separated by columns of baked brick and roofed by three barrel vaults, whereas the other was apparently roofed by a single span (Rice, 1932b, pp. 280 fig. 1, 281 fig. 2; idem, 1934, pp. 53 fig. 5, 54 fig. 6). At the east end of each church were three chapels, with straight, rather than apsidal, eastern walls. The central chapels were squares with niches on the interior walls; the flanking chapels were rectangular. Fragments of painted plaster



found in the chapels show that they had been decorated with Christian symbols: crosses and possibly an orant figure (Rice, 1932b, pp. 282-83, fig. 3; cf. idem, 1934, pp. 54-58). Small stucco plaques with elaborate designs, including prominent crosses, incised or in relief, were also found in the churches, which are of the 7th, or possibly the 6th, century and were still in use after the Muslim conquest (Rice, 1932b, p. 279; idem, 1934, p. 54).

At Ctesiphon itself, which had been the seat of the Nestorian catholicos at least since the 5th century (see i, above), a monumental brick structure was identified by German excavators as a church (Meyer, p. 23; Reuther, p. 450). The nave without aisles was probably roofed with a barrel vault supported on rectangular pillars aligned close to the sidewalls (Meyer, p. 23 fig. 12; Reuther, p. 49 fig. 1). Like the church at Ḥīra it had three rectangular rooms at its eastern end, the middle one broader than those flanking it. In the middle room four round holes formed a square in the floor in front of a step on the eastern wall; they may have been emplacements for the supports of a ciborium. An earlier, unfinished structure was discovered beneath this building (Reuther, p. 49 fig. 2). It consisted of a narrower nave, with thick, rounded pillars on square bases along the sidewalls. An ostrakon found in the middle chapel of the later building bore an inscription in Syriac, calling upon the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Fragments of a nearly life-sized male sculpture, of painted stucco in high relief, were found in the same chapel; the drapery recalls that of late antique togated figures (Meyer, p. 25 fig. 13; Reuther, pl. VI). Pieces of painted and gilded ornamental stucco, including half-columns decorated with zigzag patterns and palmettes, were associated with the figure.

Another church, similar to the barrel-vaulted building at Ḥīra, with a triple-aisled nave and piers of baked brick, was discovered in the oasis of Raḥḥāliya, 110 km southwest of Baghdad (Finster and Schmidt, pp. 40-43). Three chapels without apses occupied the eastern end; as at Ḥīra, the outer two were rectangular, the central one square, though roofed with a dome and without wall niches (Finster and Schmidt, p. 41 fig. 13). Fragments of late Sasanian pottery were associated with the building.

The basilicas with three chapels at all these sites can be associated with the Nestorian church, the dominant Christian sect in Sasanian territories (for a 19th-century Nestorian church with three chapels see Kleiss, pp. 117 fig. 128, 118). There is also evidence of Monophysite Christians in the Sasanian empire in the basilica at Qaṣr Serīj (‘Ēn Qenāyē or ‘Ēn Qenā; Nau, pp. 11, 27-30), 60 km northwest of Mosul, the church of St. Sergius in Bēt ‘Arbāyē (Oates, pp. 97-117



[cf. arbāyistān]). It is unique among surviving Christian monuments in Iraq, in that its plan, enclosed by a portico on the north, south, and west sides, echoes that of many well-preserved examples in Syria (Oates, pp. 107, 112). The interior consists of a central nave flanked by narrower aisles and terminating in a single semicircular apse; on either side of the apse a small room projects beyond the external walls of the church, one serving as sacristy, the other as a martyrion for whatever relics the community possessed (Oates, pp. 108 fig. 13, 110 fig. 14). The church was surrounded by monastic buildings of mortared rubble, a construction material more traditional for the region than the carefully dressed limestone blocks of the church itself. The church probably dates to a few years after 559, when Ahudemeh, founder of the monastery at Qaṣr Serīj and newly consecrated Monophysite bishop of Bēt ‘Arbāyē, was granted permission by Kōsrow I (531-79) to build churches (Oates, p. 115; Nau, pp. 27, 29-30). The only other material evidence for Christians in the Sasanian period is found on engraved stone seals. Some bear names like Jacob and Abraham, which may be Christian or Jewish, and are engraved with typically Sasanian motifs, such as a winged lion protome (Mordtmann, pl. IV/34; Shaked, p. 23). But a number of them, characteristically Sasanian in form and style, prominently display a cross or include one or two crosses as subsidiary motifs, as do some conical seals as well. The crosses are either variants of the Latin cross, with elongated lower arm, or of the Greek cross, with arms of equal length (Lerner, pp. 3-8 and pl. I). Some of the former can be related to Early Byzantine coins and metalwork (4th-7th centuries), whereas others resemble the crosses found in the Nestorian church at Hira and at various sites in southern India associated with local Persian Nestorian communities (Gropp, p. 270 fig. 2; Anklesaria, p. 64). Other seal devices include Christian iconographic motifs (angels and orants) and scenes from the New Testament: the visitation, the adoration, and the entry into Jerusalem. Old Testament subjects also occur, as they held particular meaning for early Christians: the sacrifice of Isaac and Daniel in the lions’ den, often with crosses above his upraised hands (Lerner, pp. 18-26 pls. IV-VI).

Some seals are inscribed in Syriac or Pahlavi; a few in Arabic Kufic Script [cf. calligraphy] are post-Sasanian in date, though their style and motifs show continuity with examples from the Sasanian period. The names of the seal owners, when given, are Persian, which is not surprising, in view of the strong national character of the church in Persia.



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