



## DAHAN-E ĠOLĀMĀN

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**DAHAN-E ĠOLĀMĀN** or, according to Walther Hinz (p. 374 n. 1), Dahana-ye Ġolāmān “Gateway of the slaves,” site located 2 km straight south of the village of Qaḷ’a-ye Now (New fortress, QN) ca. 30 km southeast of Zābol in Sīstān, in the Persian part of the endorrheic basin originally formed by the waters of the Helmand river, very close to the Afghan frontier. The archeological site, which was discovered in 1960 by Umberto Scerrato of the Italian archeological mission, is located on a terrace at the foot of the desert plateau that surrounds the Hāmūn-e Helmand basin, near an artificial corridor that serves as the entrance into the basin and for which the site is named. That this vast depression (Tate, pp. 142ff.), though scoured by wind and choked with sand, was formerly fertile and inhabited is clear from traces of villages and agricultural works discovered in 1964.

The excavations, directed by Scerrato, were begun in 1962 and continued to the end of 1966 under the sponsorship of the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO). They revealed an urban settlement of considerable proportions, certainly far more extensive than the architectural remains that have been uncovered. It is a unique survival from the Achaemenid period and is notable not only for its size but also for its internal differentiation by function, reflected in the presence of large public buildings and an extensive residential area. It is thus by far the most significant example of a provincial capital located at a distance from the imperial center. The other Achaemenid settlement of the region, which is located in the eastern, Afghan part of the province and was excavated by Roman Ghirshman (1939, pp. 10-22), did not



share the same characteristics, though the comparative study of the ceramics from the two sites does reveal some obvious similarities. Together with other elements, especially seals, arrowheads, building plans, and ceramics from other sites in Afghan Sīstān (cf. Fairservis), they make it possible to pinpoint the foundation of Dahan-e Ġolāmān to the 6th or the beginning of the 5th century B.C.E. (Scerrato, 1966b).

The dimensions of the inhabited area that have been uncovered are noteworthy: a length of 1.5 km from east to west and a width of 300-800 m. Archeological investigations have revealed that the city was established according to a generally unified plan and also have made it possible to identify at least two principal phases of construction. The excavated buildings, constructed of mud brick and pisé on a flat terrace below the desert floor, are distinguished by an absence of stratigraphy. The entire complex suggests an urban foundation laid out according to a well-defined plan and literally built in the wilderness, inhabited for a brief period (a century or a century and a half), and then abandoned as a result of the natural forces that have always determined the survival and migration of urban settlements in the arid regions of Sīstān: the instability of the delta and the inevitable resulting shifts in the system of irrigation channels, the sometimes disastrous flooding of the Helmand, and the salinization of the soil. In particular, some minor fluctuations of the deltaic system are attested from the beginning of the sub-Atlantic phase (ca. 500 b.c.e.): “[T]he water input must have been reduced and channelled through the actual delta, possibly one of the reasons why the Achaemenian settlement of Dahan-e Ghulaman was abandoned” (Meder, p. 64).

The residential quarter, which seems to have extended over about 100 ha, is divided into two parts by a spur of the terrace. On the western side the buildings are aligned along an ancient canal, the course of which can still be traced; it must have intersected another canal running north-south, dividing the eastern part of the town. On the south at the eastern end of the excavated area, not far from the artificial corridor for which the site is named, stands a sort of massive natural tower called Qabr-e Zardošt “Tomb of Zoroaster,” with a rectangular room hollowed out of its interior, now lacking its southern side.

The many buildings of which it has been possible to recover the plans, owing



in some instances to the excavations and in others to small outcroppings of saltpeter at points corresponding to the buried structures, have entrances on the south, with the exception of building QN 2, which has on its east side a bent entrance turning south. The orientation of the entrances toward the south was certainly determined by the violence with which the wind blows; the region is famous for its “120-day wind” from the northwest and for its “moving sands” (Le Strange, *Lands*, p. 337; see [climate](#)).

Thanks to the shifting of the dunes, which each year uncovered the foundations of new buildings, a combination of excavation and surface survey permitted recovery of the plans of seven large structures (QN 1, 2, 3, 15, 16, 17, 21-22), each with a large central courtyard, sometimes with porticoes, as well as several residential quarters in which the standard plan was that of a closed quadrangle without courtyard but with a corridor around a central square or circular structure in which there were several additional small rooms.

Taken together the buildings are evidence that Dahan-e Ġolāmān was a city of sharply differentiated functional spaces; an area for religious ceremonial (QN 3), an area for civil ceremonial (QN 1), an administrative area (e.g., QN 2), an area at the eastern end of the site perhaps devoted to economic activities, and private houses (e.g., QN 4, 5, 6, 7).

Buildings QN 1, 2, and 3 are located on the eastern part of the site. QN 15, 16, 17, and 21-22 are on the western part, north of the canal; only QN 23 lies south of the canal. Buildings QN 14, 20, 23, and 24 are of medium size and probably were private houses; in addition, immediately to the west of QN 3 there was a residential quarter (QN 4-13). Other constructions (QN 17-20) were located on the west side between QN 16 and QN 21-22 and on the east side to the southeast of QN 3 at the eastern end of the inhabited center.

Of the large public structures with rectangular or square plans (QN 1, 2, and 3; [Figure 35](#)) QN 1 is particularly impressive (ca. 70 x 53 m), with a porticoed central courtyard, which was probably intended for civil ceremonial. QN 2 (51 x 41 m), with a central courtyard and a double portico on the north side, was probably a treasury, as can be concluded from a certain number of clay vessels with seals of neo-Babylonian type, a stone seal and a cylinder of glass paste, and a large number of tin ingots each weighing ca 4 Persian minas. QN



3, with an almost square plan (53.20 x 54.30 m), four corner rooms, and a central courtyard porticoed on all four sides, was certainly intended for a religious function, which has been documented archeologically for both the identifiable phases of its existence (Figure 35). Aligned on an east-west axis in the center of the courtyard are three large altars, which were installed at a later time. It is significant that the layout of the buildings suggests natural comparisons with the architecture of Achaemenid Fārs, in particular Persepolis (the plans of the palace or *apadāna* type and the plans of the porticoed areas of the so-called “treasury”), whereas various parallels to other elements, like the stepped altars and the ceramics (for the latter, see Genito, 1990), indicate that they may have been survivals in the culture of this Sīstān site and that of other sites in Bactria and eastern Persia.

Scientific debate has been focused particularly on QN 3, the sacred building, which reflects a typology of a very special kind that seems to exclude a Zoroastrian interpretation (originally supported by the author; Gnoli, 1966, pp. 471-76), because of the remains of ashes mixed with grease and bones of animals, inadmissible by the rules of Zoroastrian purity. The ritual use of fire and animal sacrifice are documented from both of the two phases that characterize the history of the building. A tripartite scheme, reflected in the three central altars and the furnishing of three of the porticoes (excluding the entrance portico on the south) with special structures may represent a cult devoted to the three Achaemenid gods, *Ahura Mazdā*, *Anāhitā* (see *anāhīd*), and *Mithra*, and it is not improbable that QN 3 was an example of the kind of *āyadana*– “cult place” to which *Darius I* (522-486 b.c.e.) referred in the Bīsotūn inscription (Kent, *Old Persian*, DB I, ll. 63ff., p. 118). In fact, the building does seem to have been a cult place, rather than a true temple in the Babylonian or Greek style (Gnoli, 1967, pp. 107 ff.; Widengren, p. 155). It thus probably attests to local religious forms, most likely of Indo-Aryan origin (Tucci, 1977, pp. 13-14; Scerrato, 1979, pp. 731 ff.; Gnoli, 1980, pp. 71ff. and n. 80) or perhaps the survival of a still older religious sensibility, still respected by the Achaemenid administration (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, p. 130). In any event, the religious life of Dahan-e Ġolāmān seems to have been characterized by a combination of heterogeneous elements: from the sacred building QN 3 to a small “fire holder” in the farming village that grew up subsequently in the large building QN 16.

Dahan-e Ġolāmān, was in all probability the capital founded by the Persians



when they first settled in the region of Hāmūn-e Helmand: the Zarin (< Zranka) of the earliest Achaemenid period. Ctesias (*Persiká* 55), Isidore of Charax (*Stathmoi Parthikoí* 17), and the compiler of the Peutinger Tables (Tomaschek, 1883, p. 207) referred to different places by similar names in different periods. In fact, owing to the environment, Zarin must have been subject to successive shifts in location. The toponym (Zrang) is also attested in Pahlavi literature (Markwart, *Provincial Capitals* I, par. 38).

As for the importance of Dahan-e Gōlāmān for the history of Achaemenid Persia, it can be said that it is the sole large provincial capital surviving from the empire and that excavations there have brought to light a combination of “imperial” elements, identified in the public buildings, and local elements, noticeable especially in the valuable documentation of domestic architecture. Together these elements, both unique and distinctive, ensure the fundamental importance of the site for understanding the origins and evolution of urban settlement on the Persian plateau in the Achaemenid period.

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Figure 35. Isometric plan of building QN 3, Dahan-e Ġolāmān.