



## KA'BA-YE ZARDOŠT

---

**KA'BA-YE ZARDOŠT** “Ka’ba of Zoroaster,” an ancient building at Naqš-e Rostam near Persepolis. It probably acquired its name in the 14th century, when sites of ruins all over Persia were associated with personalities from the Qur’ān or the *Šāh-nāma*. The name does not indicate that it was a shrine of the Zoroastrians, and there are no reports about pilgrimages to it. The Ka’ba was illustrated in the works of 17th-century Western travelers who visited Naqš-e Rostam, such as [J. Chardin](#), [C. De Bruin](#), and [E. Kaempfer](#); they entered its single room, which was easily accessible, since the structure lay half buried in rubble. The Ka’ba was systematically described in Erich F. Schmidt’s excavation report (*Persepolis III*, Chicago, 1970, pp. 17-49) with photos and architectural drawings, and it was studied again by David Stronach (*Pasargadae*, Oxford, 1978, pp. 117-37). The latter compared it with an almost identical (but less well preserved) structure in Pasargadae, the Zendān-e Solaymān (for illus. of which, see [INVESTITURE i](#)).

The Ka’ba is oriented toward the north, facing the rock face of the Ḥosayn Kuh. It is on the west side of the Naqš-e Rostam site, near the westernmost of the four Achaemenid royal tombs cut into the cliff (the one attributed to Darius II). It stands within a sacred precinct, surrounded by a Sasanian wall of possibly the 3rd century CE, which Herzfeld uncovered in 1933. Schmidt briefly worked on the excavation of the Ka’ba in June 1936 and uncovered its base. On the east wall he came upon the Middle Persian version of the inscription of Šāpur I (r. 241-72; hereafter ŠKZ). In June 1939, some weeks before the excavations came to an end due to the imminence of World War II, he resumed work at this site,



dug out the other sides of the tower, and found the Parthian (on the west wall) and Greek (on the south wall) versions of ŠKZ, as well as the Middle Persian inscription of ca. 285 of the high priest Karder (hereafter KKZ), which is below that of Šāpur I on the east wall (Huyse, pp. 6-7). Few ceramics or other artifacts came to light during the excavation (Schmidt, p. 38).

The Ka'ba is a square tower built of white limestone blocks, which are laid without mortar but are joined by iron cramps. It measures 7.25 m on a side, with a height of 12.50 meters. Taken together with the three-step plinth and the slightly pyramidal roof, the building has a total height of 14 meters. The full vertical length of each of the four corners of the tower is built out as a shallow salient. The roof cornice, decorated with dentils, projects slightly over the space between each pair of salients. The lower part of the building constitutes a massive foundation, over which, at a height of 6.35 m, there is a single chamber 3.70 m wide and 5.70 m high. The door is in the north wall and is 1.90 m high, 1.70 m wide. It was accessible by a flight of steps, the upper half of which, above the rubble, is destroyed; during the excavation, the lower part of the steps was found to be well preserved. From a height of 3 meters upward, the façades are decorated with 15 rows (16 on the north wall) of shallow and narrow rectangular recesses. Additionally, the south, east, and west walls each has, at the level of the chamber, three pairs of false window recesses; the north wall has two single recesses. Each "window" has an inner frame within the recess and an outer one flush with the wall; the whole window construction is made of dark limestone. The height of the paired false windows is graduated upwards; those in the lowest row are 1.60 m high, the next above (which are wider than the others) are 1.30 m, and the top ones 0.80 m. On the north side, the doorway has a decorated lintel, and the two small false windows are centered and vertically aligned above it. F. Krefter (on whom see also [HERZFELD iii](#)) investigated the door opening, which had insets for two door wings; he proved that these were designed for a solidly closed stone door like those in the Achaemenid rock tombs; once closed up, it would have had to be broken open for grave robbers to gain access. The actual stone door has disappeared.

At the Zendān-e Solaymān in Pasargadae, a fragment of a stone door, decorated with rosettes, was discovered (Stronach, fig. 64). C. Nylander was able to prove that the Zendān was older than the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt, because its stone blocks are not held by cramps. The Zendān was thus built at the same period as the palaces of Pasargadae, around 540 BCE, while the Ka'ba perhaps



dates from, or after, the decade before the building of Persepolis began ca. 520 BCE.

The Ka'ba has been variously interpreted as a fire temple, archive, or mausoleum. Schmidt (pp. 41-47) and Stronach (pp. 132-37) argued about the matter without reaching a decision. In 1983 H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg interpreted the two buildings as coronation towers erected by Darius I. In 1992 L. Trümpelmann (pp. 42-45) assumed that the Ka'ba had later been used as Šāpur I's tomb and that other Sasanians had been buried in the Achaemenid rock-cut tombs; hence the [SASANIAN ROCK RELIEFS](#) of Naqš-e Rostam were viewed as funerary reliefs of the early kings up to Hormizd II (r. 302-307). This thesis has not been supported by the excavation finds, and the ŠKZ inscription contains no indications of a burial.

The Ka'ba's use as a fire temple (as suggested by K. Erdmann, even before ŠKZ was published) is cast in doubt by the absence of a smoke outlet and by the door, which was originally firmly closed. The KKZ inscription mentions the establishment of five fire temples and speaks of the cults to be carried out there; it allows one to think that such an extensive temple complex was situated in the holy precinct inside the wall and that it included the Ka'ba, which was some centuries older. However, the excavations, within their very limited spatial range, have not led to discovery of the fire temple of Šāpur I.

The interpretation of the Ka'ba as an archive building for the Avesta Codex is based on the word *bwny BYT'* (*bunxānag*) in the KKZ inscription. The word only appears in this single royal inscription, although it may now be compared with Bactrian *bonokadgo* "family estate" (Sims-Williams, 2000, pp. 187, 197). Cf. the proposed rendering of *bunxānag* as "principal property, capital" (M. Shafi, s.v. [DEŽ Ī NEBEŠT](#), in *EIr.* VII/4, 1995, pp. 348-50). The Middle Persian term was translated earlier as "library" or "archive" (Henning, 1957) and taken as referring to the Ka'ba. H. Humbach (1974) and M. Back (pp. 16, 203, 391, 508) questioned W. B. Henning's interpretation of the word and disproved his theory.

Most scholars consider the tower as an Achaemenid royal tomb, which, according to Fr. Bissing, is modeled on a three-storied tower block with windows. Kleiss has pointed out the similarity of the ground plan to Urartian temples; Urartian models indeed lie at the base of this style of building with two colors of stones, which we also observe in the palaces of Pasargadae. F. Weissbach and A. Demandt observed that the two towers, Ka'ba and Zendān,



more closely correspond to the description of Cyrus's tomb by Arrian (6.29) and Strabo (15.3.7) than does the monument in Pasargadae that is commonly attributed to this king. The high, massive foundation would make sense for the mausoleum of a Zoroastrian ruler, since it would prevent the seeping of cadaveric poison into the soil. Similarly high pedestals have been observed in the early medieval mausoleums of Lajim, Resget, and Gonbad-e Qābus in Māzandarān, with inscriptions which point to Zoroastrian tradition (Godard, 1936 and 1938).

At a distance of about 500 m from the Ka'ba, A. B. Tilia discovered an early Achaemenid palace pavilion, which may have been erected under Cambyses II. Thus both towers must have been situated in the vicinity of palaces. Bissing already ascribed the Ka'ba, as a mausoleum, to Cambyses II. It has also been suggested as a tomb of members of Darius I's family (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, p. 117). In any case, the authors of the two Sasanian inscriptions did not know the name of the person for whom the Ka'ba was intended, or they would have mentioned it; the burial chamber had been plundered long before and its doors left standing open.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

F. Stolze, F. C. Andreas, and Th. Nöldeke, *Persepolis*, 2 vols., Berlin, 1882.

M. Back, *Die sassanidischen Staatsinschriften* (Acta Iranica 18), Leiden, 1978.

Fr. W. Frh. von Bissing, "Der persische Palast und die Turmbasilika," in *Josef Strzygowski-Festschrift*, Klagenfurt, 1932, pp. 40-57.

Alexander Demandt, "Das Kyrosgrab in Pasargadae," *Archäologische Anzeiger*, 1968, pp. 520-40.

Kurt Stören Erdmann, *Das iranische Feuerheiligtum*, Sendschriften der DOG 11, Leipzig, 1941.

Géza de Francovich, "Problems of Achaemenid Architecture," *East and West*



16, 1966, pp. 201-60.

André Godard, “Les tours de Ladjim et de Regnet,” *Athār-é Irān* 1, 1936, pp. 109-24.

Idem, “Le Gunbad-e Kabus,” in *Survey of Persian Art* I, pp. 967-74.

Gerd Gropp, “Urartäische Miszellen,” *AMI* 22, 1989, pp. 103-24.

W. B. Henning, *The Inscription of Naqš-e Rostam*, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum* 3, 2, 2, London, 1957.

Philip Huyse, *Die dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. An der Ka'ba-i Žardušt (ŠKZ)*, *Corp. Inscr. Iran.* III, Vol. I, Text I, 2 vols., London, 1999.

Helmut Humbach, “Bun-xānag et Ka'ba-ye Zardušt,” *Acta Iranica* 3, 1974, pp. 203-8 (= *Commémoration Cyrus: Actes Du Congres De Shiraz 1971 . . .*), Tehran and Liège, 1974, pp. 203-8.

Wolfram Kleiss, “Zur Rekonstruktion des urartäischen Tempels,” *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 13-14, 1963-64, pp. 3-14; 39, 1989, pp. 265-70.

Carl Nylander, “The Toothed Chisel in Pasargadae,” in *Achaemenian Problems* III (*AJA* 70), 1966, pp. 372-76.

H. W. A. M. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, “The Zendan and the Ka'bah,” in Heidemarie Koch and D. N. MacKenzie, eds., *Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte der Achämenidenzeit und ihr Fortleben*, *Akten des Achämeniden-Symposiums Göttingen*, 1981 (*AMI Ergänzungsband* 10), 1983, pp. 145-52.

Nicholas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan I: Legal and Economic Documents*, *Corp. Inscr. Iran.* II, Vol. VI, *Studies in the Khalili Collection* III, Oxford, 2000.

Ann Britt Tilia, “Discovery of an Achaemenid palace near Taxt-e Rostam to the north of the terrace of Persepolis,” *Iran* 12, 1974, pp. 200 ff. Leo Trümpelmann, *Zwischen Persepolis und Firuzabad*, Mainz, 1992.

Franz Heinrich Weißbach, “Das Grab des Kyros und die Inschriften von Murgab,” *ZDMG* 48, 1894, p. 653.