



## MASJED-E SANGI

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**MASJED-E SANGI**, a rock-cut mosque near the ancient site of Dārābgerd. The site, also known as the Qaṣr-e Doḡtar or Caravanserai, is a rock-cut mosque, carved into the cliff that raises the geological terrace of the present town of **Dārāb** (ca. 6 km northwest) above the northeastern rim of the plain in which the ancient site of Dārābgerd is situated (ca. 10 km west).

The Sasanian rock relief of Shapur I is carved in the same cliff above a spring-lake (ca. 6 km west of the mosque). Beginning in the 19th century, Masjed-e Sangi was frequently reported, e.g., by William Ouseley (1821, pp. 137 ff.), A. Dupré (1896, pp. 345 ff.), K. Abbott (1857, p. 161), J. Preece (1886, pp. 411 ff.), Forṣat Širāzi (1896, pp. 97 ff.), and Ḥasan Fasā'i (1895-96, pp. 199 ff.), and it was more comprehensively described by Aurel Stein (1936, pp. 196 ff.). A detailed documentation with convincing interpretation was given by L. Bier (1986, pp. 117 ff.). The rock-cut façade of the mosque shows a slightly pointed, high and wide entrance arch between two pilasters, which seem to have separated the two identical side-rooms on either side of the entrance area. The floors of these two rooms are cut into the rock; whether the upper parts were constructed as roofed halls, and whether the entrance area between, in front of the arch, was covered in some way as an entrance (*eyvān*), is unclear. A third chamber is driven into the rock on the right side beside the façade. The entrance arch, which is now walled up by mud bricks with a small door only, may have had large door wings, which have left traces in the ground. It leads into a transverse, tripartite narthex, consisting of a central part with cross vault and two lateral parts with tunnel vaults.



The tympanum above the horizontal lintel of the door from the central narthex to the inner mosque has a long inscription; further inscriptions are, next to this one, in the left part of the narthex and at the *mehrāb* (prayer niche) inside the mosque. They give 652 H (1254 CE) as the date of construction and, according to more recent readings, the name of the Šabānkāra ruler Moḥammad b. al-Mobārez b. al-Ḥasan as the founder (Bier and Blair in Bier, 1986, pp. 117, 129, note 14). The plan of the interior mosque is a Greek cross, with 4 tunnel-vaulted halls around a central square, which is nearly fully open to the sky through a vertical shaft. The axis of access is perpendicular to the *qebła* direction. Narrow, low corridors with flat ceiling, accessible from the lateral parts of the narthex, run behind the 4 halls all around the mosque, stopping short only at either side of the *mehrāb* wall of the southwest hall. The halls are connected with the corridors by wide openings, which appear more monumental due to the semi-globular tympana above the lintels of the low corridors. Apart from the decoration of the *mehrāb* with its *moqarnas* vault, corner-colonettes, floral arabesques, and inscriptions, there is only a fragmentary pearl- and prisma ornament high up in the northwest corner of the central square, fillets under the crowns of the vaults and rectangular framings as architectural decoration.

In spite of the evidently original *mehrāb*, a non-Islamic, Zoroastrian, Christian, or even Buddhist origin of the unusual monument has frequently been discussed, partly because of its seemingly pre-Islamic, rounded, not clearly pointed vaults and arches (e.g., Monneret de Villard, 1936, p. 183; Wilber, 1953, p. 107 and 1965, p. 135; Gropp, 1970, p. 195; Matheson, 1976, p. 261; Ball, 1986, pp. 103 ff.). However, the lack of a secluded place for a sacred fire excludes the interpretation as a Zoroastrian fire temple, and neither can the *mehrāb* with its *qebła*-direction be taken as a re-worked altar apse of a church, nor is the cross shape of the layout evidence for a Christian building. Instead, the layout has to be seen in line with the typical Iranian four-*eyvān*-pattern around a central court; the court function of the central square here is clearly demonstrated by the slightly sunken level of its floor. The tympanum inscription seems to call the monument a “masjid and ribāt” (Bier and Blair in Bier, 1986, p. 128, note 14), thus obviously extending the function of the mosque to a place of congregation of special religious groups. This attribution may explain the corridors, unusual for a normal mosque; they provide access to every place in the building without crossing any of the *eyvāns* and disturbing ongoing activities there.

The construction of Masjed-e Sangi was not an isolated project. It was accompanied by a water tunnel, driven into the cliff northeast of the mosque, beyond a wide gully coming down from the Dārāb plateau. From the tunnel mouth a canal passes by the front of the mosque and runs southeast towards the ruined site of Jannatšahr. On the left side at the exit of the tunnel is a fragmentary inscription tablet with the same kind of raised letters as in the mosque, among which the same date as that in the mosque is preserved (Huff, 1995, pp. 419 f.; idem, 1996, p. 6; reading by H.-P. Haase, Berlin, 2005 [personal communication]). Masjed-e Sangi was clearly part of a pious and economic foundation, including an irrigation project, financed by one and the same donor. A more recent inscription above the tunnel, containing verses in cartouches (Gropp, 1970, p. 195), may indicate reactivation of the medieval project in later, perhaps Qajar, time. Another easily visible water canal with a water-mill, running diagonally down across the cliff, obviously carrying surface water from the direction of Dārāb, was noticed by Stein (p. 199). It also demonstrates the importance of irrigation projects in this part of the plain.

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