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This Hurrian clay figurine, ca. 2300 B.C., was discovered at the Syrian site of Urkesh.

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THE FACT THAT VEGETATION sprouts from the 60-foot-tall walls of Narin Kala does nothing to diminish the impression that the massive sixth-century A.D. fortress is impregnable. As we stride up the hill toward the citadel, archaeologist Murtazali Gadjiev calls my attention to sections that have been rebuilt, but he doesn't bother to conceal his pride that the monument has weathered 1,500 often tumultuous years more or less intact. Built by the *shahanshahs* ("kings of kings") of Iran's Sasanian Empire, the eight-acre castle once anchored an elaborate array of fortifications. Limestone walls more than 20 feet tall linked dozens of small fortresses and wound more than 30 miles from the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains to this citadel overlooking the Caspian Sea. Sometimes called the Great Wall of the Caucasus, it was built to keep the Sasanians safe from invasion by nomadic peoples to the north. It sealed off one of history's most strategic passes, a narrow strip of land in the modern-day Russian republic of Dagestan, and was so well constructed that it was used into the 19th century.

Gadjiev is on intimate terms with the fortifications; he dug at the citadel during his first field school in 1974. Now as a senior archaeologist at the Dagestan Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences, he is in charge of excavations at the fortress. Gadjiev has also recently completed an intensive survey of the ruins of the inland fortifications, known locally as Dag Bahri, "the mountain wall." His love of military history


has family roots: an uncle, Magomed Gadjiev, was a legendary submarine commander who was named a Hero of the Soviet Union after he was killed in World War II. (Stamps have been issued in his honor and a city in Arctic Russia was renamed for him.)

As we near Narin Kala, I can see that several different wedding parties are jostling one another as they try to get through the citadel's narrow gates. The Caspian Sea and the small city of Derbent below the fortress make for the most picturesque vista for hundreds of miles around, so a wedding in southern Dagestan just isn't complete without a visit to the citadel. But the traffic-flow issue is complicated by an age-old Dagestani tradition of barring passage to newlyweds until the groom pays a fee for the bride. At Narin Kala the wedding parties are backing up and grooms are paying through the nose.

Eventually we make our way through the thicket of brides, grooms, and wisecracking relatives demanding rubles, and enter the fortress. Gadjiev and I climb a set of steep stairs to the battlements. From here, it's clear that the town of Derbent was also part of the Sasanian defensive scheme. Two walls run from Narin Kala to the sea. Old Derbent, which has an eighth-century mosque and a number of other buildings that have survived for more than 1,000 years, lies between these two sturdy walls, both about 20 feet tall. The city gets its name from the Persian *Dar Band*, which means "barred gate."

"The Caspian plain narrows here dramatically," says

The Shah's



Constructed in the sixth century A.D. on the orders of the Sasanian ruler Khosrow I, the citadel of Narin Kala overlooks the Caspian Sea and Derbent, the oldest continuously occupied city in the Russian Federation.

Gadjiev, his long arm describing an arc from north to south. "That has made this a strategic point for millennia." The fifth-century B.C. Greek historian Herodotus was the first to put his finger on this geographic feature when he wrote about the Scythian invasions of the Near East. He noted that the nomads pushed their way into civilization's heartland through a Caspian corridor, riding their horses across the plain that lies between the sea and the Caucasus to the west. At Derbent, the mountains jut out toward the Caspian plain, coming within less than a mile of the sea, meaning the city sits atop a strategic chokepoint.

Excavations in the citadel during the 1970s showed that the Sasanians were not the first to appreciate the significance of the Derbent pass. Finds demonstrate that the hilltop was settled as early as the Bronze Age, and by the eighth century B.C. there were fortifications where the citadel now stands, perhaps a response by the local population to Scythian incursions. By the fourth century B.C., a town had grown up around the citadel.

Both the fortress and the Derbent pass are mentioned in accounts of the Roman general Pompey's 65 B.C. campaign in the Caucasus. At that point the fortress was probably on the northern border of the small kingdom of Albania, which was eventually absorbed into the Sasanian Empire. As attacks on states to the south by nomadic peoples such as the Huns became more and more frequent, Derbent began to acquire symbolic signifi-

cance. "This was the border between the agricultural world and the nomadic world," says Gadjiev.

Derbent MARKED THE NORTHERN frontier of the Sasanian state for more than 300 years. Though often overlooked in Western accounts of world history, the Sasanian Empire was a real superpower, with important connections both to the Byzantine Empire and China. "The Sasanians aren't well known in America," says Touraj Daryaee, a historian of the University of California at Irvine, and the founder of the Sasanika Project (www.sasanika.com), an effort to increase awareness of the Sasanian world. "People are interested in the Achaemenid Persian Empire [559–330 B.C.] and they are interested in the Islamic period, but they forget there are the Sasanians in between."

The Persian-speaking Sasanian dynasty got its start in A.D. 224, when the first shahanshah Ardashir I united Iran under his rule. The empire's boundaries fluctuated, reaching as far as the Mediterranean to the west and what is now Pakistan to the east. (For a time, even Egypt was controlled by the shahanshahs.) Like the Roman Empire, the Sasanian Empire incorporated hundreds of different peoples, and united them under a single administrative system that employed Persian as its lingua franca.

In the early days of their rule, the shahanshahs established Zoroastrianism as the state religion. Codified by the prophet Zoroaster, who

by ERIC A. POWELL

Great Wall

Massive fortifications on the Caspian Sea
once kept nomadic warriors at bay



was said to have lived sometime before Alexander the Great, the monotheistic religion celebrates a deity named Mazda. "To the extent they are remembered today, they are thought of as Zoroastrians," says Daryaee (though Christianity and Judaism were also tolerated in the empire). "The remains of Zoroastrian fire temples in Iran are the most visible physical legacy of the Sasanians," says Daryaee. "But their culture really did have a dramatic impact on the artistic and intellectual life of later Islamic peoples. Sasanian artistic and religious motifs were picked up in a major way by Islam."

The Koran may even mention the fortifications at Derbent. In a section that describes the exploits of Alexander the Great, the pass at Derbent seems to be described as the place where Alexander built a great iron gate to keep out the people of the north. In the Middle Ages, Narin Kala was sometimes referred to as "Alexander's Gate." In fact, construction of the citadel and wall began around A.D. 570, during the reign of the shahanshah Khosrow I.

"These fortifications were built during a time of resurgence for the Sasanians," says Daryaee. "The fourth century was a bad period for the empire. The economy collapsed and it really was a dark age for the Sasanians." The empire grew so weak that at one point the shahanshahs were forced to pay tribute to the Hephthalites, a nomadic people to the east known as the White Huns. "But Khosrow I revitalizes the empire," says Daryaee. "He reforms the administration, centralizing it, and begins a program of monumental building."



The Sasanian Empire at its greatest extent

The most visible legacy of Khosrow I's efforts are the ruins of the royal palace at Ctesiphon, the Sasanian capital in what is now Iraq. The citadel at Derbent, though it has been heavily modified in the 1,500 years since its construction, is the other great monument to this moment of Sasanian revitalization.

David Stronach, an archaeologist at the University of California at Berkeley, has a long history of excavating in Iran, and conducted fieldwork in Daghestan in the mid-

1990s. He worked with a team of Daghestani archaeologists and Wellesley College researcher Philip Kohl at the Bronze Age site of Velikhent, a few miles north of Derbent. Stronach has a vivid memory of first seeing the Sasanian fortifications. "Derbent was where we went to go to market, and the first time we traveled there I was astonished to see the walls of the city," says Stronach. "Needless to say, I didn't spend much time at the market that day."

So interested in the fortifications was Stronach that he joined forces with Gadjeiev to conduct a GPS survey of the mountain walls. The war in neighboring Chechnya meant that Stronach was unable to return to Daghestan in the late 1990s, spelling an end to his involvement in the project. But the walls and Gadjeiev's work there still intrigue him. "Remarkably enough, the tall walls of the main citadel at Derbent, the walls of the lower city, and the hilltop defensive walls are all constructed with masonry techniques that you see in Iran," says Stronach. The walls were made of a core of rough stone blocks faced with limestone slabs. Stronach notes that they

bear a striking resemblance to the main gateways at the celebrated site of Takht-i Sulaiman in northwestern Iran, known as the Sasanian "Hagia Sophia" because of its famous Zoroastrian fire temple.

Derbent and the mountain wall are certainly the most visible remains of the Sasanian efforts to safeguard their empire against attack, but they are only the northernmost outpost in a network of Sasanian fortifications.

A joint team of British and Iranian archaeologists have surveyed and excavated at the so-called Wall of Gorgon near the Iranian border with Turkmenistan. Extending more than 120 miles from the Caspian Sea eastward, the mud-brick



Current excavations at Narin Kala have focused on the citadel's use in late medieval times, though previous digs show the site was occupied as early as the Bronze Age.

Two years ago archaeologists discovered the skeletons of Russian soldiers killed in 1831 by Chechen guerillas. The remains of six troops were found, one of whom was buried with a copper Russian Orthodox cross.

wall was erected earlier than the stone fortifications at Derbent, perhaps to secure the empire against the threat posed by the Hephthalites.

Gadjiev and his colleagues have also excavated and surveyed a series of other walls on the western side of the Caspian. Just 15 miles south of Derbent, a massive mud-brick fortress called Torpakh-Kala sits in a restricted military zone near the border with Azerbaijan. Gadjiev was given permission to do limited fieldwork there, and found a Hunnish arrowhead embedded in the fortress walls, along with evidence that the site was constructed in the late fifth century A.D.

Across the border in northern Azerbaijan, excavations show that a 60-mile-long mud-brick fortification called Ghilghilchay ("wall of clay" in Azeri) was built there sometime between A.D. 508 and 522. Perhaps the first Sasanian effort to seal off the Caspian corridor, Ghilghilchay was probably the prototype for the stone defensive wall erected 50 years later at Derbent by Khosrow I to defend against the Turkic Khazars, the last nomadic people to threaten the Sasanians from the north.

GADJIEV'S CURRENT EXCAVATIONS, in the southern corner of Narin Kala, are still in their early stages. The fortress was used for 15 centuries, so in addition to the Sasanian remains, the citadel holds evidence for



the long series of occupiers who followed them. The Arab caliphate held sway here until the 10th century, followed by the Mongols, Turks, and Persians who all maintained garrisons in the citadel. Finally the Russians came in the 18th century.

Gadjiev walks me over to the wide area he and his students have exposed and we examine it from high atop the battlements. His group has yet to excavate to the Sasanian levels, but have already made an interesting discovery, the burials of six Russian soldiers.

Russians were usually interred in a graveyard not far from the citadel, so the presence of the soldiers' remains inside the fortress was unexpected. When Gadjiev researched the Russian military archives in Moscow, he found that in 1831 Chechen fighters laid siege to Derbent and trapped the Russian garrison in the citadel. The commanding officer reported that six Russian soldiers had been killed in the engagement. With Chechen fighters between them and the graveyard, the Russians seem to have decided to bury their compatriots in the corner of the citadel.

"We now consider the archaeology of these later periods more important," says Gadjiev. In times past, archaeologists would have been eager to get to deeper levels, but Gadjiev's team is moving methodically through the deposits, mindful that Narin Kala played an important role in the years after the Sasanian empire dissolved.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, this part of Daghestan has become the new "southern gate" of Russia, and Derbent is once again strategically significant. In 2005, Russia's own shahanshah, Vladimir Putin, visited Narin Kala after inspecting a military base on the border with Azerbaijan.

Daghestani archaeologist Murtazali Gadjiev examines a section of the 30-mile wall that once ran from Derbent into the Caucasus Mountains.



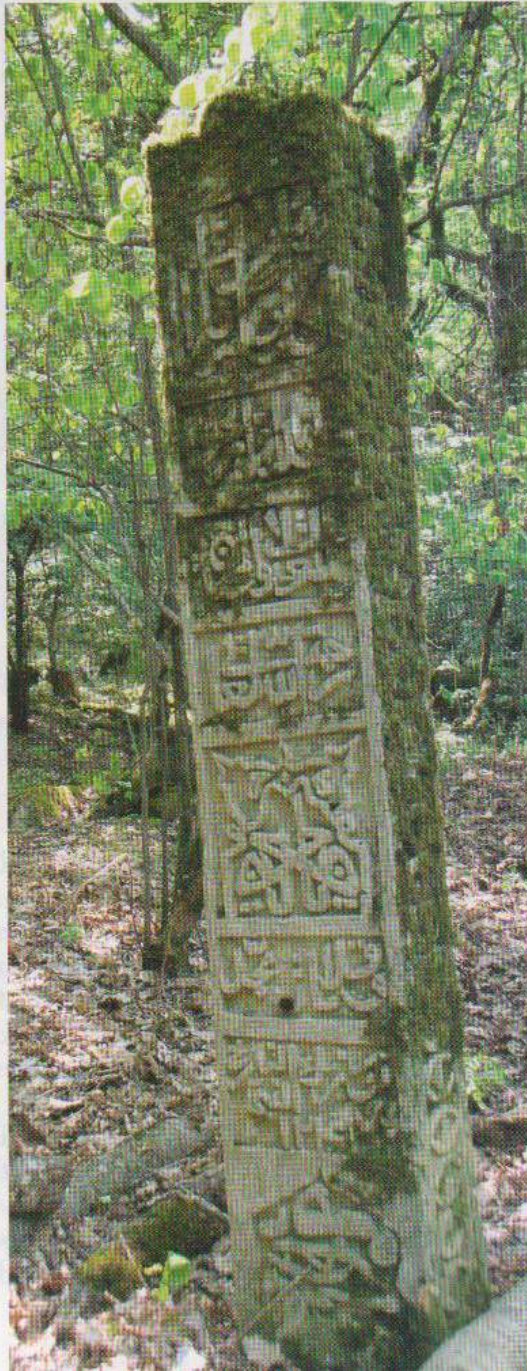


uncovering ceramics and other artifacts not just from the Sasanian period, but from the Arab, Mongol, and Turkic eras as well. He's also discovered previously unknown Sasanian masons' marks left on the wall. Carved in Persian, these signatures record the names of individual masons, such as Moshig or Darius. In one particularly long inscription, the builders even included the date of construction.

These masons' marks also cover the walls at Derbent, and Gadjiev has made the study of these symbols a focus of his work (Gadjiev moonlights as a corporate logo designer—he helped create the official seal of Daghestan). At Fort 24, a large structure near the end of the wall, Gadjiev is eager to show me a particularly good example of a mason's mark. But he's disappointed. "Oh, the bastards," he mutters, running his hand over a hole in a well-preserved section of the fort. Since his last visit to this remote section of the Dag Bahri, someone has ripped the stone out of the wall. "Every year we lose more and more," he says.

The walls began to fall apart in the 19th century when they lost military significance. Locals took stones from them for their own buildings, leaving the occasional single, haunting tower alone on some of the hilltops. Segments farther from habitation are in better shape than those next to settlements, but villages grew up next to most of the large forts hundreds of years ago, meaning some of the most important sites are the most damaged. Gadjiev worked hard to get Derbent and the mountain wall added to UNESCO's World Heritage list in 2003, and is trying to partner with local officials to preserve it, but the effort is an uphill struggle.

Gadjiev drives me to the end of the wall, remarking that some sections seem like overkill, elaborate fortifications built in inaccessible areas that make little strategic sense. He wonders if the builders were making work for themselves. Gadjiev also feels that the wall was never actually completed, reasoning that the Sasanians probably



Sasanian marks on the walls of Derbent include a Persian inscription, far left, recording the name of the mason Darius. A cross and a circular Zoroastrian symbol hint at the religious diversity of the ancient city. Medieval Islamic headstones, below, are also a rich source of inscriptions.

intended for it to reach even further into the foothills of the Caucasus.

But after seeing the vandalized section of wall, Gadjiev's seemingly endless trove of observations seems to dry up. After three days of hiking Dag Bahri, examining dozens of forts and towers, as well as the remains of medieval Islamic cemeteries, it's time to get back to the citadel. Gadjiev has been neglecting his excavations to show me the wall, and needs to check up on his students.

When we get back to Derbent, we find a group of young boys have barricaded the road to the citadel with stones left over from the construction of a nearby café meant to resemble the citadel. The children are stopping dozens of honking cars belonging to large wedding parties and extracting money from the grooms.

After taking dollars and rubles from a party, the boys create a hole in the wall just big enough for the cars to squeeze through and then close it up again. "Well done," says Gadjiev as he appraises the pile of surplus limestone blocks. The children accept the compliment and allow our car to slip through an opening in the wall. We speed up the hill toward the citadel, leaving the Caspian plain far below. ■

Eric A. Powell is a senior editor at *ARCHAEOLOGY*. Go to www.archaeology.org for more images of the Great Wall of the Caucasus.