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Symbols of political authority? Early Sasanian cityscapes in southwestern Iran
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English Summary

This study deals with the question of how political authority was created and reproduced by the early Sasanian rulers (224–338 CE) in cities and their hinterlands in southwestern Iran. The cities Gūr, Bīšāpūr and Dārābgerd serve as case studies for early Sasanian urban development in southwest Iran. Within the framework of the study, they were systematically compared with each other and examined for common structures.

The formation of the Sasanian Empire and the successes of the founder of the empire, Ardašīr Bābakān, are among the most popular topics in the historical-legendary historiography of late antiquity and medieval Iran. Among the deeds of the kings, the Arab-Persian geographers praised their city foundations in particular and, when describing them, made sure that the respective founder was named. Thus Ardašīr I. (224–239/40) is said to have founded eight cities, including Ardašīr-xwarrah (Gūr), respectively, »the glory of Ardašīr«, while his son Šāpūr (239/40–270/2) is said to be the founder of twelve cities, including Bīšāpūr, the »beautiful city of Šāpūr«.

The royal city foundations and the respective surrounding areas were actively shaped in the sense of the new ruling dynasty and, especially in the initial phase, decisively influenced the development of the spatial, structural and pictorial formal language of the new empire to be created. The often round or orthogonal city plans of many Sasanian cities in Mesopotamia and Pārs imply a certain degree of central planning – or at least an established model for the construction of cities. And yet the instruments through which the early Sasanians operated politically in space (both materially and symbolically) are hardly comprehensible from today's perspective, and the role these cities played in the formation of the early Sasanian state has remained unexplored.

The present work combines a previously neglected question and various research methods in order to attempt a contextual analysis of the cities and their environs that has not yet been undertaken. The aim of this study is not only to contribute to the understanding of early Sasanian cities, but also to serve as a basis for future studies in order to further pursue and develop the approach chosen here.

The analysis of the cities is based on data obtained from the traditional quantitative means of archaeological field research, primarily in the form of published excavations from the 1930s to the 1970s as well as recent city surveys. These are supplemented by new and previously unpublished excavation results which were documented during a one-month research stay by the author in Iran. The analysis of

the data material led to a number of results that contribute to a fundamental reinterpretation of early Sasanian urban planning on several levels. These include the revised dating of individual building structures, such as the city wall in Dārābgerd, as well as the functional reinterpretation of buildings that played a central role in the cityscape in question and that can be considered places of a possible emperor cult. These include, among others, the so-called temple of Anāhīd or the Šāpūr cave in Bīšāpūr. Furthermore, the study indicates that the fire temples in Gūr and Bīšāpūr may be interpreted as places of royal – not as previously assumed religious – fires.

On a macroscopic level, the systematic comparison of cities allowed conclusions to be drawn regarding Sasanian urban planning. For example, despite profound differences in external design, an architectural representative of the frequently physically absent king can be found in the geographic centers of all three early Sasanian cities studied. With regard to the question of the extent to which these cities served as symbols of political identity, it was found that both the environs and the architecture of individual buildings within the cities were used systematically for the divine legitimation of the new dynasty and thus as an early manifestation of a territorial claim to power.