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The Castle of Bihistan in Northwest Iran

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Abstract

Almost 12 kilometers to the east of *Mahneshan* city in *Zanjan* province, Northwest Iran, there is a collection of hoodoos with an average height of 250 meters nearby *Bihistan* village that can be seen from great distances. These hoodoos consist of some colossal columns which look like huge mushrooms nicknamed as "*Jinni's Chimney*". Several rock-cut spaces have been uniquely carved inside these sedimentary bedrocks on various levels and the whole site is known as the *Qala* (stronghold) among the locals. As a result of the occasional lack of documentation for certain phases of its construction and extension, different scholars of Iranian and Islamic architectural history have proposed different theories regarding its historic revolution, some of which seem contradictory. This study aims to determine more precisely the architectural development of this rock-cut site and to study its probable function besides suggesting a relative chronology for the architectural remains.

Keywords: Rock-Cut architecture, The Castle of Bihistan, Defensive Architecture.

Article Type: Research Article

Introduction

Bihistan lies about 98 kilometers West of *Sultaniyya* (the Mongol Capital), but this is mere "*map distances"* and traveling from *Sultaniyya* itself might take more than one day to get to the center of *Bihistan*. All roads or rather paths, not only are never straight but also consist of innumerable descents and ascents, the crossing of various ravines, and so forth. Although there are many mountainous paths by which *Bihistan* may be reached, the most convenient and easy route is via *Nik Pey*, which can be easily reached from Tehran-Tabriz Highway. Considering the fact that there is no remaining of historic bridge foundation to span the physical obstacle of *The Gizil Ozan River* in this region, the ancient path to the site must probably lie in the south after reaching "*Angoran"* and *"Qalajiq*". It is very difficult to have an idea of the figure of the population of surrounding villages in the past. What one can see now is that there are only a few villages with a population of a hundred families and over. The majority are hamlets with a few dozen families or less. Usually, in what may be called *"desert Iran*", as in Khorasan, villages are separated one from another by fairly long distances (Ghorbanzadeh and Niloufar 2019), and there is little of what can be called inter-village social life. However, in Bihistan, which is a comparatively small area, naturally isolated from neighboring localities by the high ranges, villages are far more in contact with each other.

There is no consensus as to the construction date of the *Qala* and no one has determined a specific date for its establishment. Earlier researchers have attributed it to the *Medes* (678-549 BCE) (Sobuti 1998: 46), dealing with the name of the nearby village *"Mad Abad*" while others have related it to the *Achaemenids* (550-329 BCE) (Ali 2004). Some experts on the other hand date it to the 11th century A.D when Muslims first arrived in Iran (Abdi Kiya 2013). These contradicting conclusions show how little certitude we have about the chronology of the *Qala* (Figure. 1). The suffix "*–istan"* in *Bihistan* is common in Iranian geographical names, but we have no clues to build any theories as to the meaning of the first part of the word *"Bih*" which may be derived from ancient autochthonous languages[1].

[1]Tabaristan" in Northern and "Sistan" in Southeast Iran are parallel forms.

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Figure. 1: *A view of the Qala from the northeast*

The *Qala* lies on the west bank of *The Gizil Ozan River* along a road that links the green valley of the river basin to *Tak Aqach* village, and the nearby stronghold *Qalajiq*. From the names given by *Mustufi in Nuzhat al-gulub* (written in 740/1340 CE), we know that *The Gizil Ozan River* was called by the Mongols *Hulan Mulan* (Mustufi 1983: 217). Another shorter river, called *Akiz,* which is dried up now, once flowed through hilly country to the northwest of the *Qala* and joined *The Gizil Ozan River.* The third seasonal stream rises in the east bypassing *Jannat Ulang* village along with a wide gorge and emerges into the fertile plains of Bihistan and descends *The Gizil Ozan River.* There are several other streams that flow to join this water-rich river and this explains the capacity why the builders of the site had an obvious interest to choose this location. We cannot say whether the name of this site goes back deep in time. However, considering the fact that under the *tuman* (administrative center) of *Maraghe*, *Mustufi* quoted a district *Bihistan* without any extra explanation (Mustufi 1983: 87)[1], it can be concluded that it preserved this name at least by the time of the Mongol conquest and rule of Iran (1219 – 1370 CE).

Bihistan benefited from its unique position: in a mountainous environment near *The Gizil Ozan River* which is flowing northwestern and northern Iran and discharges into the southwestern corner of The Caspian Sea after about 500 kilometers (Figure. 2). The bed of this river is sufficiently wide to permit the cultivation of rice in several hectares of excellent pastures, however, the sudden rise of the river after heavy rains may wash down the crops.

A number of very interesting names are noticeable in local toponymy. The names that had been given to the physical world by its original inhabitants are generally lost under the web of appellations reflecting the histories, religious beliefs, and values of settlers and immigrants rather than of the region itself (Tepfer and Meacham 2012). The majority of villages in The Gizil Ozan River basin bear Mongol names and seem to reflect the period of Mongol domination of a huge area encompassing Northwest Iran (Figure.3).Regarding *Jannat Ulang*, which is a village situated 10 km to the east, the toponymy bears witness to definite Mongol infiltrations. It is also one of the very numerous Mongol names formed with the suffix *Ulang*. From historic resources, we know that a similar name of *Qunqūr Ulang* was used for imperial camping in the southeast of *Sultaniyya* (Mustaufī 1983: 55)[2] which was ordered by *Arghūn Khan* (1258-1291 CE). One of the villages almost 25 km to the east of *Bihistan, Yamchi*, has preserved the original Mongol name as well. This name is referred to the Mongol postal

[1]In *Nuzhat al-Qulub* the districts of Maraghe are given as *Sarcham, Niyajun, Dizak-Rud, Gavdul*

[2]*Hamdallah Mustaufi* mentioned that this place was in use as a hunting place for falcons (Mustaufī 1983: 55). Also *Rashīd al-Dīn* mentioned that falconry was the main entertainment of the Mongol rulers in Iran (Rashīd al-Dīn 1997:657).



Figure. 2: *The location of The Gizil Ozan River in relation to the Qala*



Figure. 3: *Locations of surrounding villages around Bihistan*

system, *Yam,* which had been extensively used and expanded by the Mongols (Silverstein 2007:141) where highly-trained people, who are as we say *postillions*, were in charge of horses (Silverstein 2007:141).Similarly,the village of *Almaliq*, some 16 km to the northeast, and *Yurd* stand as reminders of the original Mongol names. *Almaliq* is a historical city located somewhat northwest of today's *Kulja* in Turkistan (Guedy2013:259). This city became the headquarters of the Chagatai Khanate (1226-1347CE)which was the 13th-century Mongol subordinate. Moreover, it is likely that *Yurd* is the transliterated form of the Mongolian Word Yurt in which the consonant "t" is rendered simply as "d" and means a circular trellis walled framed tent (Faegre 1979: 88)[1].

Southeast of *Bihistan,* one finds the name *"Qutluq"* whose doublet is found with the name of the village in the south of the *"Shahi Island"*

[1]Turko-Mongol Imperial rulers did not live inside cities, but at the *ordo*, which was a collection of *Yurts*, set up outside the city walls (Guedy 2013:88).

in the *Lake Urmia Basin*. The name of this island has appeared in the historic literature after the mysterious inhumation of *Hulagu* (r. 1255-1265 C.E), the founder of the Ilkhans, the eastern sector of the Mongol Empire. According to Minorsky (1957), the word *"Qutlu*" suggests a Mongol name that means "*blessed*". The other name for a village that can interest us is "*Qutluq Khatun'* who was *Arghun Khan's* (r. 1284-1291 C.E) wife. Then it is reasonable to conclude that it might have arrived during the Mongol dominion. "Khatun Kandi" is located only 4 km to the east of "Qutluq Khatun" whose name should typically represent a Central Asian Turkish name. *Peter Benjamin Golden* quotes that the title *"Khatun*" appeared among the Mongol rulers as the title for the *Khagan's* (a title of imperial rank) wife which was borrowed from Sogdian word *"Xwaten"* (wife of the ruler) (Golden 1998: 5). Another curious name is *"Baktash*", situated some 15 km to the south on the road from *"Qara Batlaq"* to *"Qalajiq"* which reminds the name *"Hājī Baktāsh* Walī" who was a 13th-century *Sayyid* (saint) and philosopher from Northeast Iran (Khorasan) (Olsen 2007: 143). According to written sources he had an important influence on the Turkish nomads of Asia Minor (Savvidēs 1981: 116). Locals believe that *Bektashi Muslims* who believed that the path of "*Hājī Baktāsh*" is the path of *"Ali ibn Abu Talib*", (Olsen 2007: 143) once were settled in this village.

The names of the other villages of the surrounding area, *"Qara Darre*", *"Qara Bulaq"*, *"Qara Bute*", *"Qara Dash"*, *"Qara Aghaj*", *"Agh Kand", "Aq Bulaq", and "Sari Kand"* also look Mongolic. In Mongolian literature, the five most important color names define the four cardinal directions and the central point (Khabtagaeva 2001). In this way, black (Qara) is the color of North, South (Quney) is red, East (Qoy) is blue, West (Aq) is White, and the center is Yellow (Sari) (Minorsky 1975)[1]. In addition to the examples given above, *Bihistan* is flanked by two villages on either the west and east called *"Qara Gol"*, with the second part *"Gol"* applied to the countless rivers in the highlands of Mongolia (Tepfer and Meacham 2012). Whether more vestiges of the Mongol names like *"Sa'in*" (good) (Minorsky1975), "*Quney*" and "*Iqli Bulaq"* (Dashzeveg *et al*. 1995) can be traced around *Bihistan* may become clear when we have a full list of geographical features in this area.

[1]As Minorsky mentioned (1957), it is interesting to chase a pretty clear link between these names and the Turkish component "-*Kand*".

Description

The geological outlook of the scenery of Bihistan presents many interesting features. The *"Qala"* itself is an immense piece of a sedimentary bed, lifted up into an almost perpendicular position, with an outer perimeter of about 497 meters. Its existence is due to the conglomerate of which it consists is harder than in various other neighboring beds. Its material, however, is far from being uniform, and ranging from almost real fine-grained sandstone to occasional patches of soft rock, liable to rapid erosion. There is another similar natural appearance to the south which does not seem to have been used for any building or living accommodation. Approaching the complex from the east, one first sees three sets of spiral stepped tunnels, cut into the bedrock and leading to the uppermost level. These units are badly affected by erosion and are quite impassable without elaborate mountaineering equipment.

If geological conditions are taken into account, it is obvious that *The Gizil Ozan River* was passing much higher than now, and came much nearer to the eastern foot of the site. I was told that it was almost impossible to cross the river to the opposite bank thirty years ago. In fact, the site probably did not need special fortifications in this part, being well-covered by the river. Unlike the entirely inaccessible eastern side that presents a perpendicularly rising wall of hard rock, the slope of the northwestern face is much more gradual and probably does not exceed some 40 degrees. Climbing up over the path of soft earth, one arrives in the point marked on the plan with "A". Here, almost for certain was act as an entrance. The evidence of a set of rock-cut cells on the opposite side as well as a mud-brick structure on the stone bed, looking something like support to this entrance, indicates the vulnerability of this side in front of foreign visitors. They were surely demolished and washed down by rain. From there a narrow path is leading to several rock-cut rooms with an almost uniform height of about 2.00 m, and of varying depth, mostly about 3 to 4 meters. Thirteen stone benches measuring some 0.7m × 0.4 m have been cut on either side of a deeper (1.8 m × 1.15m) central niche. At the end of this path there is a rectangular room covered with triangular niches on all sides, probably to hold oil lamps (Figure. 4). A pointed arch and a set of stairs running down in the middle of a hyperbolic niche descend into *The Gizil*

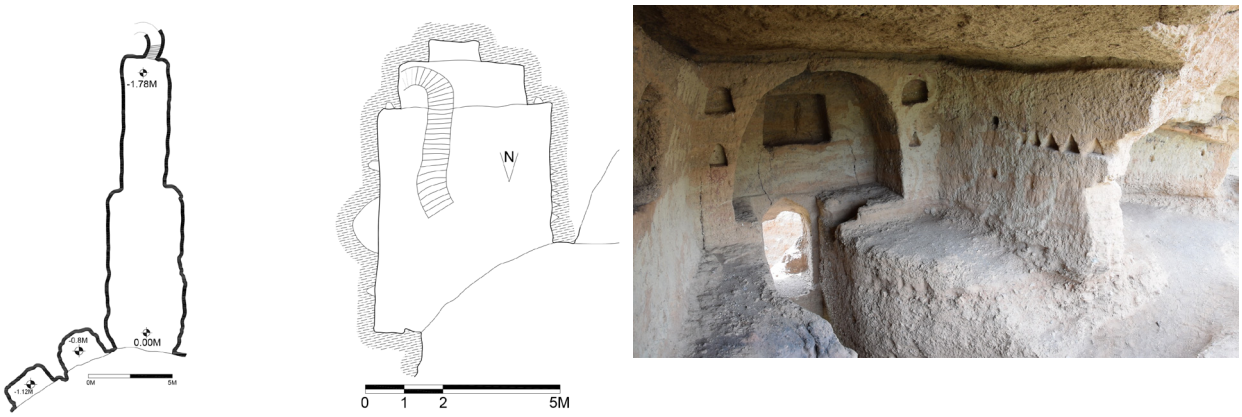


Figure. 4: *Left: Ground plan of the northern tunnel; Middle and right: The entrance to the northern stair canal*

Ozan River on the eastern side. More interesting is the evidence of a groove in the ceiling that could have been used to hold a curtain rod to hide this marvelous path. Some 35 meters beneath this room an impressive long tunnel (measured 22 × 1.8m) opens up through the rock in the northern face of the *Qala*. It would have been possible to access the stairs from this level as well (Figure. 4-left).

Remains of a ruined village in connection with rock-cut cells to the west are more accessible and probably intended as stables and residential quarters (Figure. 5). Even in the absence of archaeological excavation, the structure of its individual units, their relationship, and the basic functions are easier to determine. Mud-brick structures could have belonged to a later addition, however, similar constructions may have housed part of the inhabitants in the past. It is obvious that the interior surfaces of the rock-cut spaces in the village have been covered with a thin layer of plaster (gach) on a relatively thick layer of clay. The application of the same method in almost all of the cells in the *Qala* and the nearby village propose no delay or postponement of the construction on the site. Local inhabitants whose memory is notoriously unreliable, say that these rooms were tenanted for some time by their grandfathers. In the center of the village, there is a ruined stone-made structure which refers to a bathhouse. Here, many potsherds founding and it was here that a piece of an aqueduct pipe is visible. As the height of *The Gizil Ozan River* is slightly higher than the bath, hydrodynamically there would be no problem at all to bring the water to this structure. On the uppermost level, there are five interconnected rooms from which a wide view opens upon the whole expanse of the village in the west. The open side of these spaces that may be called the "nerve center" of the *Qala* once was

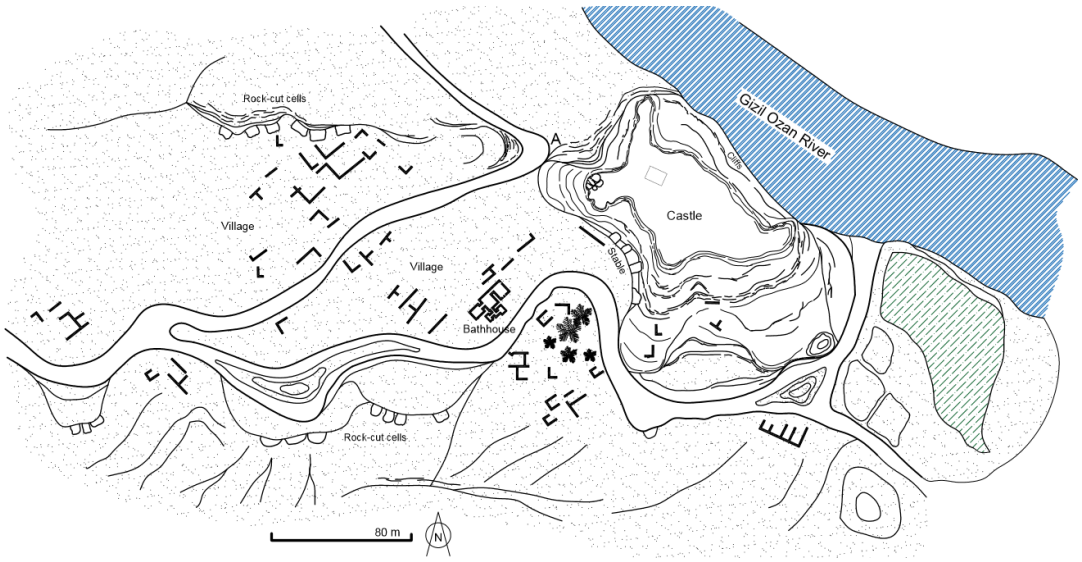


Figure 5. *General plan of the remains at the site*

covered by a fairly modern wall made of sun-dried bricks on a stone foundation. Staircases are the only possible way to access these rooms. Obviously, the entrance of the stepped rock-cut tunnels were hidden due to the height of the water when life was going on in the *Qala.* These stairs provide rapid means of access to the river, however, they were not as minimal as seen and once were covered with white plaster. On the topmost surface, there is a rectangular space (measuring 8 × 10 m) that can be attributed to a rock-cut water tank which covered with soil and overgrown with grass today. The soil is most probably washed from the sides. This storing pond would present an excellent catchment area for rainwater. As rains are usually heavy in this era, and occasionally torrential, the amount of water that the tank could catch could be several thousands of cubic meters after each heavy rain. The plan in Figure 5 gives an indication of the position of the various parts of the site.

Discussion

The earliest, and quite misleading, paper known about the Qala was that by Giovanni Curatola. It was published in Vol. 2, 1979 of the *Quaderni del Seminario di Iranistica, Uralo-Altaistica e Caucasologia dell' Universitat' Degli Studi di Venezia,* under the title *"Le Grotte di Behestan Nella Khamse: Descrizione del Sito"* [the caves of *Behestan*, site description]. In his paper, Curatola notes that the ultimate idea communicated by the Qala is a monastic settlement. Apparently, the rock-cut appearance of the *Qala h*ad encouraged him to come to this conclusion without any discussion. Similar misunderstandings have also been attributed to other similar sites, emphasizing that rock-cut architecture merely represents a religious function in Islamic Iran[1].

As mentioned above, this building is known as a fortification among locals and there can be little doubt that this is a correct conclusion. In other words, although the *Qala* may seem to has little to do with the stone-and-mortar fortress, it is convincing that the remains can be linked to defensive architecture. In this way, the limited access to the upper levels, dimension of the stair canals, and the idea of saving water which is a common feature of mountainous defensive castles cannot actually be considered for practical purposes in a monastery close by the river. The latter characteristic is highly important, because the redirection of rivers during siege actions, proved extremely damaging to the survival of the castle by cutting off inhabitants' access to water sources. As a result, this mechanism has always been paramount in the architecture of castles. As there are few ruck-cut rooms inside the cliff, the more likely surmise is that most of the inhabitants would have stayed in the village, apart from times of direct sieges. The stair canals could have been used as a hidden passage leading to the river where wooden boats were waiting to transport the inhabitants along *The Gizil Ozan River*. Stair canals descending the river remind the 13th-century castle of *Yam* in *Kaleibar* province, Northwest Iran, except that it is a spiral barrel vault made of masonry techniques. Due to the steep slope of the stairs and their one-man-pass characteristics, it is not easy to think that water was brought to the top by hand labor using Mashks (water skins). Even if it was possible, it would have taken much time and climbing, as a torture. Anyway, in the time of sieges, in the dry hot days of summer, it could have been used as the only way to save the *Qala*. I have already to an extent touched on the problem of the greatest importance in the history of the site, namely its water supply for the upper levels, and come to the conclusion that it could be made available only from the rock-cut water storage at the top. In this way, it makes the inhabitant independent from the water during months-long sieges. What seems probable to me is that water could be conveyed from this pond to the spiral stair canals to repel the enemies trying to climb up. Almost all of the cells are coated with a thick layer of soot, reminders that besiegers had set fire to the *Qala* after capturing it.

Even though history is silent as to who actually planned and supervised the construction of this site, cutting these spaces was not certainly beyond the engineering skills of the region. Some scholars believe that it was Alamut which was the parent

[1]for example Dash Kasan in Varay and the underground rock-cut architecture in Maraghe, are by no means to be seen as temples. See: Varjavand, P. 1976. Mithraeum or Imamzade Masum-e-Varjuy. Journal of Archaeological Survey 42: 89-100. Shekari Niri, J. 2006. Imamzade Masume Varjovi: An Iranina mithraeum and its similarities to the European mithraeums. Motaleat-e-Irani 10: 109-126. Shojadel, N. 2000. The history of Mithraism and Mehr temple of Maraghe. Tarikh Pajhouhi 24: 44-68. However, as I discussed elsewhere, their spatial arrangement suggest that their function differ from a temple construction even at its most basic levels.

side to which this castle belonged (Sobuti 1998: 46)[1]. The main line of the fortress did not change during the 160 years or so of the Ismaili state. From *Alamut* this line stretches eastward to *Firuzkuh* and then along the road to *Mashhad*, past the great complex of the stronghold in *Qumes* between *Semnan* and *Damghan*. In Khorasan, the line runs Southward to *Qohistan* and the border with Sistan, and Westward to *Tus* (Ivanow 1931; 1960). On the other hand, from archaeological records, we know that the backbone of the Ismaili defense system was provided by the chain of formidable castles that defend the borders of their state and without which the state would probably have crumbled (Willey 2005: 105). In other words, the ability of an efficient system of communication in the event of an attack is the main principle that governed the construction of their castles (Ivanow, 1931). Furthermore, the *Qala* is considerably smaller compared to the *Ismailis'* castles. In his *Tārīch-i Jahānguschāy*, *Juwayni* mentions that the circumference of *Maymundez* in the *Alamut* valley was one *farsakh* (about 6km). (Juwayni 1975 Vol 2. 639).

Although the location of *The Gizil Ozan River* in the east would provide an insuperable obstacle to the attackers approaching the *Qala*, however, it is highly pregnable from the west side where there is no perimeter defensive wall surrounding inhabitant's quarters (Figure. 6).

Shards, both glazed and plain, are visible on the surface (Figure. 7). All of the glazed shards are lightly and delicately thrown, though only broken fragments are found. Amongst the plain shards are those of large vessels (*Khumra*) used for water or for keeping grain. Shards of different shades of green are mostly fragments of smaller bowls and plates. The fabric of the shards is usually of a fairly fine-textured green and blue body, mostly light in color and well oxidases in the firing, apparently not for local make. Among the shards, some are covered with a green glazes that have been cut through with a *sgraffiato*[2] design that is visible in the excavation of the nearby Ilkhanid site of Ojan (Velayati *et al*. 2017). Archaeological evidence from various sites in Iran supports the view that *Sgraffiato* wares in North and Northwest Iran belong to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Fehervari 1973: 66). More importantly, Aq-Kand, which was an important kiln site for producing luster potteries in the 12th and 13th centuries (Fehervari 1973: 66), is located some 56 km to the west. The prominent pottery types and glazed fragments show that there are, at least, some artistic links between the *Qala* and *Aq-Kand.* The most frequent colors in *Aq-Kand* pottery are brown, yellow, and green with occasional splashes of colored glaze in the yellow spectrum (Hoseini *et al.* 2015). Hence, it is highly expected that similar spectrums of glaze in the *Qala* would have been affected by this region. Although *Fehervari* (1973: 66) believed that Sgraffiato in Northwest Iran was not made before the twelfth century, surface findings of shards in the *Qala* are not an ideal material to date archaeological sites since they could have been transferred to the site at any time.

Regarding the function of the site one possibility is that it would serve as a power base for bandits and outlaws to cut off the paths, terrorizing the travelers and loot passing caravans on the main Tabriz-Sultaniyya road. Although the Mongol territories had always been known as a unified safe entity, in the 14th century, *Hamdallah Mustufi* attests the existence of road-cutters in the western territories of the Ilkhanates (Mustufi 1915:107). Nearly half a century earlier, Zakariya *al-Qazvini* in his Athar al-Bilad va Akhbar al-Ebad mentions some Kurd tribes in western Iran who due to geographical factors were able to carry out banditry (Qazwiny 1998: 398). Also, Iz al-Din ibn Shaddad (1217-1285 CE) refers to a protection tax that was collected by local bandits in the Ilkhanates in the 13th century (Al-Halabi 1953: 102). This evidence show that this idea is quite possible since from Sultaniyya, the only caravan road to Azerbaijan was only reachable through the major pass that was located on the periphery of the *Qala*. This path crossed the Ala-Daq mountain ranges in Miyaneh in which two important Ilkhanid caravanserais of *Nik Pey* and Sarcham are located.

[1]This movement was founded by Hassan Sabah in 483 AH with the conquest of Alamut Castle and their rule lasted until 654 AH. The headquarters of the Ismailis was in Alamut, and most of their activities were fighting the caliphs of Bani Abbas and the Mongol tribes. See: Daftary, F. 2005. Ismaillis in Medieval Muslim societies. London: Tauris Publishers.

[2]This design was made by carving away the layer of slip, thus revealing the dark colour of the body. Afterwards, the objects were covered with a greenish lead-glaze. When the latter glaze was used some splashes of green, brown, or yellow were often added (Fehervari 1973: 66).



Figure. 6: *A view of the Qala form the west*

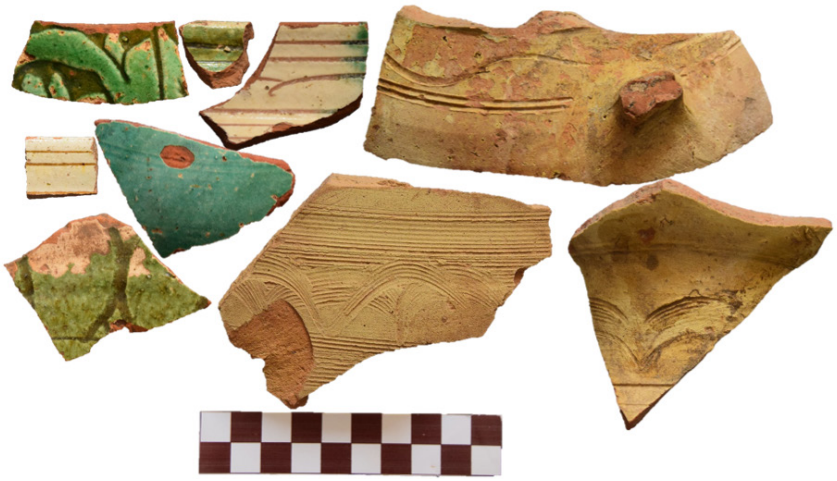


Figure. 7: *Selection of shards from the Qala*

Conclusion

Locals have various stories to tell about the Qala, but this construction was apparently intended to control the surrounding area by providing a base from which raids could be launched on the passing rich caravans along the Silk Road. Since the construction of the *Qala* does not reflect a costly imperial fortification of the neighboring sites like Sultaniyya, it is quite possible that it was in the hands of local powers rather than being a resident of a monarch or noble. Unlike the other castles of the region, it is not frozen in the typical style of masonry constructions and offers a fairly different style of defensive structure by cutting the rock. However, it does not deserve to be called a completely fortified castle since unlike the eastern face which is quite impossible to be scaled, the west face is easily pregnable and more open to attack. Unlike the previous studies, there is no reason to attribute the *Qala* to the Medians because "*Mad Abad,*"with the suffix *–abad,* is a Persianized word. Additionally, there is no prominent Median site around the *Qala* to attribute it to this time span. It cannot also belong to the 11th century Ismaili crises due to the marginalization of *Mahneshan* on the political chessboard during the Ismaili government of Alamut. Considering the toponymy of the region, we can surmise a link between the *Qala* and Ilkhanid Iran which is the only recognizable settlement on the site. Even though it is probable that the *Qala* was created before the Ilkhanids, unfortunately, we have no genuine pre-Mongolian sources to check this possibility, which appears undoubtedly too rabid to be entirely true. Hence, until now, there is no positive evidence that the *Qala* was occupied before the 13th century. The abandonment of the site is hard to date, however, it can be destroyed after a while by the central authority during a bloody Mongol capture whose policy was “zero tolerance”.

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