

Article

The Khandaq Shapur: Defense, Irrigation, Boundary, Frontier

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Abstract: Khandaq Shapur has been named one of the great barriers of the ancient world, but very little is known about the monumental-scale linear feature. This interdisciplinary paper brings together archaeologists and historians to present (1) an updated history of the Khandaq Shapur drawing upon a wider range of sources, including Arabic scholarly sources, and (2) a modern map of the Khandaq Shapur produced from a ground truthed remote sensing using historic Corona satellite imagery from the 1960s and imagery available in Google Earth. This new map of the Khandaq Shapur's ground truthed location is compared to the known locations of Sasanian sites from previous archaeological surveys to contextualise the Khandaq Shapur within the wider archaeological landscape. Together, the landscape archaeology and historical evidence provide a comprehensive picture of this unique feature: shedding light not only on its precise location, but also its nature (what was it?) and how it was used over time.

Keywords: Khandaq Shapur; Nahr al-Alqami; *Pallukat*; *Pallacottas*; Sasanian; Shapur II; Khosrow I; remote sensing; Mesopotamia; landscape archaeology



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1. Introduction

The Khandaq Shapur is considered one of the great barriers of the ancient world [1,2]. Also known as the Kari Sad'eh (كري سعدة) and better known locally as the Nahr al-Alqami (نهر العلقمي), the feature plays a central role in the foundation of Shiite Islam [3]. Despite its significance, little is known about the full history. It is primarily known from three points in time: (1) its foundation under Shapur II in A.D. 324, (2) its re-use under Khosrow I/Chosroes Anushravan (A.D. 531–579) during the mid-6th century A.D., and (3) as the location of the Battle of Karbala in A.D. 680 [4–7]. In Iraq, however, it is common knowledge that the Khandaq Shapur was first excavated by Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 604–562 BC) and that the feature was only reused by Shapur II (309–379 A.D.) [8].

Historians that attribute the foundation of the Khandaq Shapur to the reign of the Sasanian ruler Shapur II (309–379 A.D.) base their attribution on historical sources that describe the excavation of the feature in A.D. 324 [7,9], [10] (p. 485), [11] (p. 138), [12]. Shapur II was enthroned as an infant and the excavation of the Khandaq Shapur was one of the first tasks he undertook at the age of 15 when he first took practical, administrative control of the empire [9] (p. 73). It is possible he also constructed forts or a rampart along the Khandaq Shapur [11] (p. 183), [13]. The general purpose of the Khandaq Shapur was to protect the irrigated alluvial plain controlled by the Sasanians from Bedouin or Arab tribes—some allied to the Romans—in the desert to the west and keep them out following expulsion and a program of resettlement [9,10], [11] (p. 139), [12] (pp. 8–10), [14,15].