A Case of Religious Architecture in Elymais: The Tetrastyle Temple of Bard-e Neshandeh

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Abstract

This study provides a new approach and interpretation of a remote Elymaean tetrastyle temple found in the course of excavations conducted at the sacred terraces of Bard-e Neshandeh in the mid-19th century. Perched on the heights of the Zagros mountains in the current province of Khuzestan (SW Iran), the shrine on the lower terrace reflects an innovative synthesis of structural elements engaging both Mesopotamian and Iranian templates and it occupies a special place in the records of temple architecture of the Iranian world before the Sasanid conquest. According to this investigation, a re-evaluation of the tetrastyle temple is proposed in order that it will yield new insights and progress of understanding on the cultic monumental apparatus in Hellenistic and Parthian Elymais.¹

Keywords

Elymais – Khuzestan – temple architecture – Seleucid-Parthian Iran

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1 Introduction

General View
The reconstruction of history and religious traditions of ancient Iran is deeply dependent on philological and epigraphical studies, leaving behind many questions still to be resolved. One of the most problematic and less frequented research fields is centred on the study of kingdoms that developed in southwestern Iran along the Zagros mountain range, in the shadow of the Arsacid dynasty (ca. 2nd cent. BC–3rd cent. AD). Despite claims that ancient Iranians worshipped in open-air spaces, the Elamite inheritance handed down to the Elymaeans ensures that semi-closed structures of cultic significance have been discovered in some areas of modern-day Khuzestan.

The architectural evidence from the Bakhtiari mountain region between the modern provinces of eastern Khuzestan, Chaharmahal va Bakhtiari, and Kohgiluyeh va Buyer Ahmad suggests a complex picture of heterogeneous domestic religious practices. In this cultural context, the use in some cases of closed temples in conjunction with the most common cultic structure attested in ancient Elymais, namely open-air terraces, represents an architectural hallmark of the region. These so-called sanctuaires autochtones (Martinez-Sève 2014), centres of local religious and cult activities, were erected on the highest point of the sites on artificial elevated platforms. In this structural concept, temples do not appear to be isolated architectural units, but they are frequently incorporated within monumental shrines, delineated by dry-wall substructures with rectangular buttresses, in an environment particularly significant from an aesthetic point of view (Álvarez-Mon 2014). The Elymaeans drew from and selectively integrated a variety of cultural, structural and religious traditions to forge new architectural vocabularies and ritual expressions. The resulting constructive and sacred forms transcended all previous and contemporary traditions, be they Elamite, Babylonian, Achaemenid, Greek or Parthian.

Object of the Study
Perched on the heights of the Zagros mountains of Khuzestan, arranged on artificial terraces set up through substructure walls of irregular stone blocks, the sanctuary of Bard-e Neshandeh represents a most significant archetype of sacred architecture in what was known in the Classical sources as the Hellenistic and Parthian Elymais. In this remote area of southwestern Iran, marked by a complex geography of narrow gorges and incised valleys, rises the shrine of Bard-e Neshandeh, based on a typology defined by Ghirshman (1976) as terrasses sacrées, and exemplified by the other two monumental sanctuaries of Masjed-e Soleyman and Shami. They represent places of worship created on
elevated areas which were shaped and confined by walls—mostly made up of irregularly cut blocks of stone, arranged with care—to create a flat ground for the building of platforms, altars, bases for statues and indeed closed temples.

This study focuses on the analysis concerning the function of the tetrastyle temple built on the lower terrace of the sacred complex at Bard-e Neshandeh, with particular attention to the issues related to its interpretation. Through study and integration of photographic documentation, a re-evaluation of this building will be proposed in the anticipation of an even more precise assessment is made possible by new evidence coming from future excavations. Because of the absence of surveys subsequent to the Ghirshman’s mission (1964–1966), and the dramatic state of preservation to which the site is exposed, the information acquired is far from being exhaustive. However, on the basis of a careful observation of the planimetric and photographic documentation—and in opposition to the statements given by Ghirshman who interpreted the tetrastyle-style temple as a place of Zoroastrian worship—I will attempt to establish new structural affinities with Mesopotamian sacred architectures.

2 General Information and Past Studies of the Tetrastyle Temple

Main Sources for the Study of the Tetrastyle Temple
Ghirshman (1976: 5–55); for architectural comparisons see Downey (1988); for the analysis and dating of the ceramic finds see Haerinck (1983: 13–26); for numismatic evidence see Augé et al. (1979); for religious and cult considerations see Hansman (1985) and Martinez-Sève (2004, 2008, 2014).

Circumstantial Aspects
The agglomerate of Bard-e Neshandeh is on a 675 m high area overlooking the valley of Karun, one of the largest river basins in Iran. Around 10 km south-southwest from Bard-e Neshandeh is situated the modern city of Masjed-e Soleyman (ca. 90 km northeast of Ahwaz, the capital of Khuzestan) which includes the similar but more complex Elymaean shrine of Sar-Masjed. The third ‘terraced’ sanctuary known so far in Elymais (i.e. Shami) is instead located at 35 km east of Bard-e Neshandeh, in the proximity to Izeh-Malamir (ca. 30 km south-south-east), a flourishing valley centre of Elamite (Potts 1999: 253–56; Waters 2000: 82–85, 116; Álvarez-Mon 2010, 2013, 2015) and Elymaean culture which was inhabited as early as the Palaeolithic era (Wright 1979: 33–128).

Nowadays, Bard-e Neshandeh appears to visitors as being home to landscape that is hostile, arid and desolate, devoid of tall-growing vegetation and
suffering a virtual absence of water despite the presence of the Karun river just 9 km away. A particular aura of rare severity surrounding the entire area is fostered by the proximity of unique rock formations of the Bakhtiari mountains, characterized by parallel and straight strips of rocks which carve on the ground a sort of paths or natural low ‘walls’ that seem to envelop the religious complex in an ageless atmosphere (Fig. 1). The scenario is particularly impressive from an aesthetic point of view, and might have played an important role in the conception of the religious structure.2 Archaeological evidence shows that the serious lack of water would have been a constant in this area since the early settlements: the ruin of the fortified construction north-west of the terraces was flanked by three large cisterns (Ghirshman 1976: 7, Pl. VIII.2–3), and even the small village had required at least one (ibid.: Pl. VIII.5). A small pond, then, seems to have existed on the upper terrace (still in situ), between the north-west staircase and the podium (ibid.: Pl. XIV.4), while another pool of brackish water was used continuously until the second half of the last century by the

2 The importance of the aesthetic element of the natural environment in the creation of artistic-religious forms in Elam (and probably in Elymais) is thoroughly addressed in Álvarez-Mon (2014).
nomadic Bakhtiari tribe. Today, the area is far from settled zones and primarily restricted to use by shepherds and their flocks, and populated by packs of wild dogs.

**Previous Visits of the Site**

After the first and brief mention of the site by Unvala (1928: 86), who reported how only the column near the pond was identified by the local term of Botneshandah ("guiding idol") while the two terraces were simply named Qal'a ("castle") by the natives, there was a succession of scholars and travellers who visited the location of Bard-e Neshandeh. However, the first visitors were not aware of the existence of the tetrastyle temple on the lower terrace, since it was still covered by earth and debris and used as cultivated field by local inhabitants.

The first scholar to inspect and describe the archaeological scene, even if only incidentally, was Sir Aurel Stein, who was in southwestern Iran in the late 1930s. Being much more interested and attracted by Masjed-e Soleyman ruins, as were other scholars such as Siroux (1938:160) and Erdmann (1941: 225), he dwelled summarily on the site of Bard-e Neshandeh, giving a brief and non-exhaustive description of the religious complex (Stein 1940: 160–61), and still ignoring the existence of a temple beneath the surface of the lower platform. Even André Godard, who visited the location in 1947 (the same year as the first inspection of Roman Ghirshman), could not recognize the presence of a temple structure on the lower terrace that he briefly defines as "une sorte d’estrade ou ne subsiste aucun reste ou trace de construction" (Godard 1949: 159). This so-defined estrade—with no apparent signs of construction—was in reality the area where remains of the temple construction were concealed. Godard (ibidem) concluded that the bare site of Bard-e Neshandeh could not have any similarities with the ‘extremely wealthy’ Elymaean temple reported in the Classical sources as the one consecrated to Bel which Antiochus III tried to sack in 187 BC (Strabo, Geography XVI.1.18), or that shrine dedicated to Nanaia which Antiochus IV attempted to plunder two decades later.

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3 As described by Ghirshman (1976: 7), twice a year the nomads stopped here to draw water during their traditional transhumance through the region, and recently, before the use of modern cars, also the caravans that connected Susiana and the oasis of Esfahan stopped here for the same reason.

4 See also Diodorus Siculus, Historical Library XXVIII.13; XXIX.15; Justin, Epitome XXXI.2; Porphyrius, FGrH 11.260; Eusebius, Chronicle 253; St. Jerome, Commentary on Daniel XI.17–19.
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(II Maccabees 1.13–17),\(^5\) or even the famous temple of Azara (τὰ Ἀζάρα) recorded in Strabo, Geography XVI.1.18.

Not yet excavated at the time of Godard’s visit, the ruins of the tetrastyle temple were finally brought to light during the second excavation campaign led by Ghirshman (1965: 307–8).

**Archaeological Context**

The site covers an area of around 700 m long and 250 m wide and it is composed of three distinct parts at some distance from each other starting from the “raised stone” (or “erected stone”)\(^6\) that names the site. Bard-e Neshandeh owes, indeed, its origin to a column of the nearby temple, taken by caravanners in the distant past and driven into the ground to act as a reference marker at the shore of the body of water they used. Considering the column as a benchmark, a palatial structure (maybe a fortress) is situated 150 m to the west, isolated on a small terrace. Moving southwest of ca. 200 m from this last point, also accessible through a northbound roadway of ca. 150 m, two large terraces are revealed resting on a lower hill; while 100 m to the north of the fortress-like structure the ruins of a village, or ‘lower town’, including about one hundred houses and a large cistern for water storage, are reported by Ghirshman (1976: 9–10; Fig. 2). In any case, the French archaeologists were not affected by the village’s remains, and only marginally interested in the ‘palatial’ area, respect of which a plan only for the most recent phase (dated around the early Islamic period) was drawn without studying the older phases.\(^7\) The excavations

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\(^5\) Several ancient authors refer the tale of Antiochus IV’s expedition to the Elymaean temple respectively dedicated to Artemis (Polybius, Histories xxxi.9.1; Josephus, Jewish Antiquities xi.358–359), Venus (Appian, The Syrian Wars 11.66), Diana (Pliny, Natural History vi.31.135; Porphyrius, FrGrH 11.260, F 53 and 56; St. Jerome, Commentary on Daniel x1.36; Zonaras, Extracts of History iv.20), Nanaea-Nanaia (II. Maccabees 1.13–17), Anahita (Aelian, On the Nature of Animals xii.23).

\(^6\) Indeed, the term Bard-e Neshandeh in the Bakhtiari dialect means “fixed stone” or “signal stone” where the word bard is a synonym of the Persian sang (“stone”) and nešānde is the past participle of nešāndan (“to fix into the ground as a signal”, “to stick”) (Mario Casari, personal communication, April 7, 2008).

\(^7\) The ‘castle’ (or fortress) measures 29.80 m long and 18.60–19 m wide including a central courtyard or hall of 9.70×6.75 m, around which large chambers are symmetrically laid out. Ghirshman, who only devoted five days to excavation of the ‘palatial’ structure found evidence which suggested the subdivision in three phases of construction. In this evaluation, the first phase was contemporaneous with the beginning of the upper terrace’s construction, which Ghirshman tentatively placed in the pre-Achaemenid period, while the last phase extended into the early Islamic period. The dating of the this latter was made possible by...
Figure 2  General Situation (line-drawing map in Ghirshman 1976: fig. 2, modified by the author; photos by the author).

Figure 3  Site plan of the Sacred Terraces (Ghirshman 1976: plan 1, modified by the author).
were concentrated solely in the area that the French archaeologists thought it would be the most ‘archaeologically’ relevant: the sanctuary of the ‘sacred terraces’ (Fig. 3). Finding differences in the methods of construction, Ghirshman distinguished an ‘upper terrace’ and a ‘lower terrace’ for a total length of approximately 157.20 m delineated by a dry-wall substructure with rectangular buttresses. The upper terrace is the oldest structure in the complex for which the excavators distinguished two different constructional phases. In an initial stage (phase I), the terraces, rectangular in shape, measured 67.50 m long and 45.30 m wide on the southeast side (42.50 m on the northeast side), and was made accessible to the pilgrims through the presence of two modest staircases (Ghirshman 1976: plan 1). At the center of the terrace, there was a square podium with an exterior facing in stone blocks of reduced dimensions, which in this earliest phase measured 5×4.97 m, most likely used for ritual performances. The increased importance of the local rulers, or the growing fame of Bard-e Neshandeh as a place of worship, might have encouraged a substantial extension of the terrace during phase II, to reach a length of 106.50 m and a width ranging from 75.45 m in the southeast to 68.70 m in the northwest. Notably, the entire enlargement was completed with the use of hundreds of rough unprocessed stone blocks of the same type employed for the walls of the nearby fortress.8 The ceremonial criterion of approach to the terraces through two distinct access points was maintained with the construction of two new staircases, among which one of exceptional monumentality on the northwest, presumably assigned for receiving the worshippers on pilgrimage (ibid.: 19).

At the corner between the socle of the staircase and the eastern wall there is a small chapel, located to the left of the staircase at the same level of the socle, containing a niche (1.05×1.25 m) with the same thickness of the overhang, and that Ghirshman (ibid.: 21) interpreted as an atesh-gah.9 To the left

the discovery of some fragments of brown or grey glazed pottery, with decorations in black, from the 9th century AD. The construction of circular and semi-circular towers, instead, may be assumed as a terminus post quem for the Sasanid epoch, since these fortifications are not attested in the Arsacid period (Ghirshman 1976: 10–11). With regard to the village, a plan was published (ibid.: fig. 2), but not a report.

8 This factor led Ghirshman (1976: 10–11) to suppose that the most recent phase of such a fortress or palatial structure had been built since the abandonment of the sacred terrace, almost surely in the early centuries of Islam.

9 Atesh-gah means literally “place (gah) of fire (atesh)” (Huff 1975). It must be emphasized that the French excavations were made during the 1960s, when the assumption of Godard (1938) and Erdmann (1941), regarding Iranian religious architecture, was still
of the niche, a bas-relief depicting a libation scene, likely representing a local king, was found still in situ (Ghirshman 1964a: 307–8; 1964b: 187–88; 1976: 21–23, Pl. xii; Kawami 1987a: 182–83, cat. no. 21; Mathiesen 1992: 11, 151, cat. no. 25). In the course of this phase, even the previously destroyed podium was rebuilt, increasing its dimensions (6.90×6.82 m).

Finally, the entire structure was again enlarged (phase III), extending its length to 157.20 m, with the inclusion of a lower-level second terrace (74.15×56.50 m) which was conjunct to the older platform through an access staircase in line with the main one (NW) of the upper terrace. The most important building on this new terrace is undoubtedly a tetrastyle temple, which takes its conventional name from an almost square four-pillared area, surrounded by three elongated rooms with no direct communication between them and preceded by a portico with two rows of columns.

**Current Dating**

The tetrastyle temple was discovered only during the second excavation campaign led by Ghirshman in 1965, therefore, the first attempts at dating the site solely referred to the upper terrace with the podium. Sir Aurel Stein (1940: 161) placed the complex within the Parthian era, basing his suggestion on a sculpted limestone head with Hellenistic traits found in a nearby field. A proposal shared by Godard (1949). For the dating of the religious complex, Ghirshman (1976: 28)—in light of certain findings of small artefacts—decided to determine that the commencement of the podium on the upper
terrace in the 7th–6th century BC, despite another context where he considers a dating to the 8th–7th century BC (ibid.: 50). It remains questionable, however, whether these finds provide adequate evidence for such an early dating. The terrace of phase I was likely still in existence during the Hellenistic period (ibid.: 39), while upper terrace’s later enlargement (phase II) was supposed to have occurred during the reign of Kamnaskires I, king of Elymais in the mid-2nd century BC (ibid.: 36, 39). Dating the complex at the Seleuco-Parthian period was supported by Schippmann (1971: 256–59), who, on the other hand, rejected an Achaemenid chronology for the first phase of the complex. The analytical study of pottery found in the soil of the site between phase I and phase II, conducted by Haerinck (1983: 13), has permitted to place its dating from the end of the Achaemenid period to 150 BC. With regard to the tetrastyle temple on the lower terrace (phase III), unfortunately, it has not been possible to date the first phase of construction. However, as also suggested by Ghirshman (1976: 40), it may be deduced from a foundation deposit of 4735 coins (Augé et al. 1979), unearthed during the excavation in 1966 under the top step of the elongated room no. 1 that the final restoration of the structure plausibly occurred during the 2nd century AD. Regarding the activity of the religious shrine, in Ghirshman’s opinion (ibid.: 50), it was regularly effective until the end of the 1st century of Sasanid domination (ca. 4th century AD), as also substantiated by the finding at the nearby Masjed-e Soleyman of some coins from the time of Shapur II (309–379 AD).

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11 The foundation deposit contained 4,735 coins, mostly Elymaean in bronze presumably from Susa, but also included 165 Elymaean tetradrachms in silvered bronze, 4 obols and some Parthian coins which offered accurate means of data. In particular, it should be mentioned that there was a Kushan coin of Kanishka. Amid the Elymaean series of this deposit a very small number of coins was found, attributable to the last kings of Elymais, the so-called rois incertains. These nameless kings are commonly placed at the turn of the last quarter of the 2nd century and the early 3rd century (just behind the Sasanid conquest) without the certainty of a correct dating and succession (Augé et al. 1979: 38). The ‘rarity’ of these particular coins here is in stark contrast to the extraordinary abundance of previous issues. Accordingly, this suggests that the foundation deposit was made in a period, in which the first mintages of these rois incertains were not yet widely distributed—certainly before the end of the 2nd century AD—and where the coins of their predecessors still circulated abundantly (ibid.: 38–39).
3 Description of the Tetrastyle Temple

As previously mentioned, during phase III a second and lower terrace was added onto the religious complex of Bard-e Neshandeh. This new extension was built oriented north-west, following the general slope of the mountain. It is 74.15 m in width, and 50.70 m in length with its southern angle exceeding the western corner of the upper terrace of 21.15 m. The architectural style of its dry-wall substructure, characterized by buttresses and recesses, replicated the structure of the upper terrace. The access to the lower terrace from the valley was guaranteed by a new staircase (NW) in line with that of the main upper terrace. This small staircase, built because of the sloping terrain, was brought to light by Ghirshman (1976: 39) in an advanced state of destruction, probably caused by water erosion, so that the number of steps remains uncertain (Fig. 3).

The temple measures 22.20 m in front and 20.60 m on the rear wall with each of the side walls 7.50 m long and it shows along the northeast façade a portico (no. 6 on Ghirshman’s plan) with its floor raised approximately 0.10 m to 0.15 m above the ground level of the external area. In the French photographic documentation (Ghirshman 1976: Pl. XX.1–5; Pl. XXI.2), this flooring appears to be made of beaten earth, at least with regard to the part in front of the four-columned hall (room no. 5) and the entire eastern corner, delimited on all sides by a row of stone slabs which were placed horizontally on the paved area in front of it12 (Fig. 4). Such a low step allowed the floor of the portico—under the cover of a roof supported by pillars—to remain dry when rain fell; therefore, since the facing area was paved, the portico with all probability did not need to be completely paved in stone. An analogous situation is found in several Buddhist monasteries in northwestern Pakistan, where the floors of the porticos, apparently similar to those in Elymaean temples, were not paved because they were protected by a roof and separated from the facing area by a low step elevated above the layer of the external space.13 The higher level of the edge of the porticos in the Pakistani monasteries may be explained by the fact that in those areas (Swat region) rainfall amounts estimated were higher than in Iran. It is also important to note that area no. 5 of the Elymaean temple is elevated by a few centimetres with respect to the pavement of the portico in a sort of

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12 This possibility diverges from the description of Ghirshman (1976: 41) who considers the floor paving in its entirety. After a personal inspection of the site in November 2015, I have to say that unfortunately the degradation of the site does not make it possible to provide more certainty in this regard.

13 For the monasteries in Pakistan (Swat) see Callieri (1989).
low step (Fig. 5). A superficial observation may have led Ghirshman to identify this difference in level as a presumed wall foundations, for which, however, there is no real structural evidence.

Examining the columns of the portico, some of them seem to rest on bases which were buried below the floor, such as foundations, up to the level of a moulded element like a torus which was instead above the ground (Fig. 4). This situation can lead to the formulation of two different hypotheses: the first consists of assuming the belief that there was an earlier plan of occupation, in relation to which the column bases were raised. However, this interpretation can be immediately refuted by the fact that the underground column bases are not all of the same typology and consequently were not buried through the same procedure. This circumstance tends to corroborate the second assumption, namely that the column bases, most likely of re-use, were utilised as foundation for the columns themselves, in order to make the structure of the portico more resistant, especially during the seismic tremors to which Iran has
been highly subjected. In a similar context, the presence of a Hellenistic-type base (the third from the east in the outer row) characterized by a plinth of square plan and a scotia between two tori (*ibid.*: Pl. XX.1–5) is understandable.14

According to Ghirshman (1976: 41), the portico was made of two rows of eight columns each, with those in the second row leaning against the wall of the façade. However, upon close analysis of the photographic documentation, it seems that the columns (or the remains of them) number only fourteen and not sixteen. Two columns of the second row (the third and fourth starting from the east) were in effect not present in front of room no. 5, although at that point a wall against which the columns would have rested was elevated in plan (*ibid.*: Pl XXIII). In reality, observing the structural proportions of the temple and the distances between the columns and the wall, the existence of the proposed wall elevation seems extremely questionable (see map in Figs. 4, 9). Moving into the temple, it can be noted that along the south, east and west sides of room no. 5 were placed long stone blocks that Ghirshman (*ibid.*: 40) defined as "paved benches". These stone elements were arranged as a sort of double step running along the wall in order to provide benches for the worshippers and officiants of the religious rite (Fig. 5). The sizes of the stone blocks are completely arbitrary

14 Various other arrangements were employed against the seismic forces, one of them, as can be seen from the first two columns against the wall in the east side of the portico, was the use of blocks of stone set against the pillars, preventing them from collapsing in case of earthquake (Ghirshman 1976: Pl. XX1.2).
in the map provided by Ghirshman and do not correspond to what is seen in the photographs (ibid.: Pls. XXI.1, XXIII). Through the portico is access to the area no. 5 with its almost square plan (9.20×7.25 m), including four columns symmetrically arranged at the centre. This central hall is surrounded by three rooms of elongated plan, independent of each other and elevated in comparison to it. They communicate with the central chamber through doorways, one per room. It is evident that the areas no. 1 (9×3.30 m) and no. 3 (10.70×3.10 m) were reached through three steps, while the inaccurate visual documentation does not allow verification of the number of steps for room no. 2 (10.60×2 m). Noteworthy, room no. 3 has a stone socle leaning against its southeastern wall. A fifth room (no. 4), much smaller than the others (2.40×3.30 m) and depicted by Ghirshman (ibid.: 40) as a sacristy, is located on the north side of the temple and it is accessible only from the outside (NW).15

In line with this fifth room, there is another space a few metres to the northwest with a squared plan (no. 8), and to the north of this one, just a few metres further, a room with a probable rectangular plan (no. 7) has also been reported. These isolated structures, with paved thresholds and consisting of just one internal space each, are explained by Ghirshman (ibid.: 39) as possible quarters for temple guards (see map in Fig. 4).

4 The Tetrastyle Temple of Bard-e Neshandeh in Historical Context

Research and analysis of Elymaean discoveries over the last centuries have indicated that the architectural and artistic traditions in Elymais were culturally unique on the ancient Near Eastern landscape during the Seleuco-Parthian period. Its people did not limit themselves to passively following the guidelines of more extended and established traditions in the region, but gave new life to an independent and thriving style which was subject to developments and changes, being able to satisfy local needs. The corpus is quite surprising as it used elements from geographically distinct areas, such as the Syro-Mesopotamian, Iranian or Elamite regions, combined together in a new innovative approach.

In this regard, a panoramic vision of the complex exchange system mechanisms in Iran would be extremely important. This relied, above all, on the alternating orientation of Susiana, which due to its geographical position at the

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15 Note that the measurements of these rooms are approximate because Ghirshman in pri-mis does not provide them, and those reported in this article have been acquired from the plan that he published.
junction of the antithetic worlds of the Iranian highland and Mesopotamian plain, for most of its history represented a theatre of conflicts, not just between rival states of Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau (e.g. Elam), but also between the central authorities (Achaemenid, Seleucid and Parthian) and the (semi-)nomadic tribes of the Zagros, playing paradoxically a decisive role as a centre of interaction and meeting point for all these various cultures and populations (cf. Miroschedji 2003). As a result, the situation created the cultural uniqueness of Elymais—which in alternating phases had Susiana under its dominion—of being capable of moving freely from Mesopotamian temple planimetric layouts to Elamite and Iranian cultic structures, seemingly through the use of Urartian construction methods (Ghirshman 1950: 215; Stronach 1974: 246.).

Sanctuaries in Susiana and Elymais

Four sanctuaries are currently known in Susiana and Elymais, but many uncertainties regarding either the date of the buildings or the nature of the cults,

16 There was an important and productive combination at the end of the 7th century BC between the Elamite and Assyrian traditions which led to a ‘revitalisation’ of the Elamite traditions themselves (Álvarez-Mon 2012: 756), contradicting the vision of those who saw these in dramatic decline. Furthermore, during the Achaemenid reign, elements of Greek and Iranian art were mixed together to create a complex blend which characterised the artistic tradition of Iran at the time of the rise to power of the Arsacids. The conquest by Alexander the Great then brought “a fresh wave of Greek art and […] Hellenistic style” (Kawami 1987a: 31). Both these traditions—Elamite-Assyrian and Achaemenid—can be noted at times in Elymaean artistic background.

17 As a personal reflection, I want to emphasize that in most cases presumed cultural influences or associations are created more by the history of study than by real historical phenomena. So then, instead of an ‘Urartian tradition’ would be more appropriate to speak of ‘construction techniques documented in Urartu’ where stone, as in Elymais, was a readily obtainable building material—contrary to what occurred, for instance, in Mesopotamia—favouring construction techniques which have been revealed as quite similar.

18 Several places of worship are documented in Elymais, both by written sources and archaeological evidence, but the information is not always firmly assured (Messina 2015a). Three sanctuaries have been clearly identified so far as Elymaean through field studies, while for the temple of Nanaia at Susa an Elymaean origin cannot be corroborated (Martinez-Sève 2014: 253–56). Two of them have been explored by Ghirshman between 1964 and 1972 in Masjed-e Soleyman and Bard-e Neshandeh (Ghirshman 1976). Unfortunately, the study of Ghirshman has been the only work in the field carried out so far. The last sanctuary known in Elymais is the shrine of Shami, located at around 30 km north-north-west of Izeh-Malamir, in a region that was one of main political and cultural centre for the Elymaean kingdom. The first archaeological data goes back to Sir A. Stein who led some surveys in 1936. It was the only partial study provided in the valley until theIranian-Italian
which were celebrated in there, still need to be properly addressed. Although both regions had their own peculiarities, at different times in history they constituted the same political, and eventually cultural, ensemble which was designated in the Babylonian documentation by the name of Elam (Hunger, Sachs 1996; see also Potts 2016: 371–74, table 10.2). The Elymaeans had a reputation of being unruly and hostile mountaineers living between the incised valley and isolated gorges of the Zagros mountains who were attested in the late Achaemenid period as able to exact tribute from the Persian kings when the royal court moved from Ecbatana to Babylonia (Strabo, *Geography*, XI.13.6), and to constantly threat the people of the plains (i.e. Susians). This picture, however, which was mainly the product of an inaccurate Greco-Roman perception, appears to be too schematic. At least in a later period, the Elymaeans also occupied the plains adjacent to the Zagros mountains where their main cities, including the capital Seleucia-on-the-Hedyphon (modern Ja Nishin; see Hansman 1978), were established. The people of Elymais may confidently be considered as the heirs of Elamites, and it is indeed with this denomination that they are reported in the Mesopotamian texts. The same term was also applied to the neighbouring Susians, who therefore were not distinguished from the Elymaeans in the Babylonian diaries (Hunger, Sachs 1996).

**Before Alexander’s Conquest**

Religious cults within the mountainous region of the Bakhtiari in eastern Khuzestan were often celebrated in open-air sanctuaries since at least the (neo-)Elamite period (ca. 1100–539 BC), as demonstrated by the presence of a number of Elam’s open-air cult places located in the valley of Izeh-Malamir (ancient Ayapir), e.g. Kurangun, Kul-e Farah and Shekaft-e Salman (Vanden Berghe 1983: 27, 111–12). Apparently, according to Herodotus, worships at places with a natural numinous quality were also popular in ancient Iranian cultures, but revealed a much older history in southwestern Iran.19 Although it would

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seem therefore evident that the development of religious closed structures (i.e. temples) was not necessary, the real situation appears undoubtedly much more complicated. The sharply-marked structural dichotomy between established temples and open-air shrines in Iran was indeed amply exceeded in the artistic and cultural eclecticism of Elymais. In this regard, the pursuit of open-air spaces during the Achaemenid period was accomplished by the construction of monumental sacred terraces, also typical in central Asia. In Uzbekistan have been discovered along the valley of Surkhan-darya the site of Pachmak-tepe (nearby Djanavlat-tepe at ca. 8 km south-east of Sherabad-darya; Pidaev 1973, 1974; Bernard 1976: 271; Sagdullaev, Khakimov 1976; Abdullaev 1994; Boyce, Grenet 1991: 182–83), the platform of Pshak-tepe (near the confluence of the Surkhan-darya with the Amu-darya; see Duke 1974, Askarov 1982), and the religious structure of Kindyk-tepe (in the Bandikhan region; see Boroffka 2009: 138–40). In Tajikistan, instead, is situated the sacred terrace of Kok-tepe (in the middle of Zeravshan valley, ca. 30 km south-eastern of Samarkand; Rapin et al. 2001, 2010; Rapin 2007). Considering the fact that monumental terraces or precincts were present in eastern Iran from the 2nd millennium BC (e.g. Nad-i Ali in Afghan Sistan; see Francfort 2005: 334), the dating of these religious structures is still questionable. It would be considered reasonable an establishment at the end of the Achaemenid period which continued to survive during the Hellenistic and Parthian periods with the similar platforms of Hung-e Azhdar, Shami, Qal'e-ye Bardi, Masjed-e Soleyman and Bard-e Neshandeh. According to Shenkar (2007: 177), these terraces may indicate nomadic Iranian traditions of cult officiated in open-air precincts suggesting that the first Achaemenids, unlike the Medes, did not perform their cults in closed temples (also Stronach 1985: 622). The Persians likely preferred to worship under the open sky, while if enclosed religious structures existed, they presumably represented an exception (Grantovskij 1998: 115). Indeed, no single architectural temple criterion seems to exist during the Achaemenid period, and the religious structures assumably revealed a range of assorted local cults.

The Impact of the Seleucid Architecture
Before the Macedonian conquest, archaeological excavations have therefore disclosed that, besides the open-air terraces, a second kind of religious

in honour of Humban (region of Fahliyan), an originally Elamite god, at the Betir river, providing an indication of cult continuity.

20 On terraces in Iranian architecture, see Kleiss (1998).

21 The platform of Kok-tepe seems to be after a more ancient religious structure.
structure, namely ‘closed temples’, were developed in the Iranian world (Shenkar 2007). At the beginning of Seleucid period, diverse impressive temples, characterized by a number of shared structural elements, emerged at approximately the same time in Mesopotamia, Syria, and in Bactria along the main river valleys (e.g. Oxus). The origin of these sacred structures marked by common characteristics, and the interactions between them are still largely debated. Among the sites, the presence in ancient Elymais of religious architectures, which resembled the basic ground plans of Hellenistic-period temples from Mesopotamian and Syria, may represent an important connection point between excavated sites across western and central Asia under the Seleucids. The Greek conquest of Iran, in point of fact, had a significant and controversial impact on temple structures. The influence of Hellenistic architectural tradition on Iranian sanctuaries, however, was apparently limited to a number of decorative elements, while the planimetrics were entirely based on Mesopotamian and Iranian structural elements. In this regard, according to Shenkar (2011: 130–31), the religious architectures in Iran may more precisely be grouped into two distinct typologies. The ‘Mesopotamian type’ (Fig. 6), constituted by the two temples of Ai Khanoum (Temple with Niches and Extramural Temple) and conceivably the first phase of the two temples

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22 The denomination of ‘Iranian world’ as used in this paper extends beyond the borders of the modern Islamic Republic of Iran. It refers to the region from the Zagros ridge in the West to the Hindu-Kush mountains in the East, from the Persian Gulf in the South to the Transoxiana in the North, which between the 1st millennium BC and the 1st millennium AD was mostly, but not entirely, inhabited by Iranian-speaking tribes and possessed common cultural elements and religious traditions.

23 For the chronological discussion, see Downey (1988: 131); Hannestad, Potts (1990: 115); Bernard (1990: 52, no. 7); Boyce, Grenet (1991: 44); Boucharlat (2005: 238). Although the temples whose remains were excavated on the sacred terraces at Masjed-e Soleyman are generally dated to the Parthian period (Boucharlat 1999: 34), evidence which can exhaustively refuse an older dating, at least at the Hellenistic era, has not yet been provided. In addition, the existence of an earlier structural phase attributed by Ghirshman to Athena Hippia below the ground level of the ‘Grand Temple’ at Masjed-e Soleyman may indeed suggest a Seleucid origin for the temple (Ghirshman 1976: 77–80), as also partly corroborated by the analytic study of Haerinck regarding the ceramic from the site (Haerinck 1983: 13–14; see also Schippmann 1971: 248, 257). On the other hand, the dating to the Seleucid period for the first foundation of the two temples at Masjed-e Soleyman is largely based on small finds that came to light during the French excavations led by Ghirshman, mainly constituted by votive offerings such as terracotta objects, bronze figurines, jewellery and pottery. Since this material is not considerable, the hypothesis of dating them to the Hellenistic period would need indeed to be approached with caution (see also personal comment of David Stronach reported in Downey 1988: 131).
at Masjed-e Soleyman (Temple of Athena Hippia and Temple of Heracles), is characterized by thick mud-brick or stone walls frequently decorated with niches, a roofed or open antecella (pronaos) and a cult cella (naos) often divided into three chambers.

24 Although the early structural phase of the ‘Grand Temple’ at Masjed-e Soleyman (temple of Athena Hippia) could not be determined, Ghirshman proposed that its planimetry was very similar to that of Parthian period, which is evidently Mesopotamian-influenced (Downey 1988: 132–33).
The origin of this type is most probably in Mesopotamia (Fig. 6a–b) where, the Babylonian temples were commonly contained within larger religious complexes (e.g. Bit Resh at Uruk) rather than being represented as central-ized free-standing structures. The same Mesopotamian-influenced model also reveals close parallel with sacred architectures in the later Parthian period (Fig. 6g–h), and it is reflected in plans of some Nabatean temples (Fig. 6i–k). The ‘Iranian type’, instead, to which the temples of Persepolis (Fratarakas), Takht-i Sangin (Fig. 7e, n) and Dilberjin (Fig. 11) could be attributed, probably developed in western Iran and originated in Achaemenid royal architecture. This typology is identified by a roughly square tetrastyle cella surrounded by corridors and flanked by wings (perhaps sacristies) with exterior entrances. However, not all these structural elements are always present in the Iranian-kind temple, and the planimetry produced over the centuries some variants, which became widespread in the Iranian world and beyond reaching, for instance, Syria and Gandhara during the Parthian, Kushan and even in later periods.

Seleucid architectural traditions clearly provided a challenging departure point for early Parthian official structures (Invernizzi 1994: 191, 203; 2001: 133–57; 2005: 71–79), as demonstrated by the ruins of Old Nisa (in present-day Turkmenistan), the first imperial capital of the Arsacid kingdom (ca. 250 BC–ca. 226 AD), which hosted several monumental constructions developed in a succession of distinct structural phases (Invernizzi, Lippolis 2008). The site presents different buildings, which were evidently influenced by Hellenistic palatial and religious architecture, as an earlier stage of the ‘Red Building’ (Fig. 7a). This structure incorporates an almost square tetrastyle portico and a ground-plan which is reminiscent of the temple of Takht-e Sangin in ancient Bactria. Similarly, several provincial cult architectures, distinguishable by a four-columned room surrounded by sacristies or ambulatories with a central entrance from the portico, emerged during the Arsacid period at Susa (ayadana) and Persepolis (Fratarakas Temple) among other structures (Shenkar 2011: 132, fig. 14).

The Common Denominator of the Tetrastyle Space
Delineating the evolution of the central, roughly square four-columned space is of great relevance in order to better understand the ground-plan of the tetrastyle temple at Bard-e Neshandeh and it is crucial for its correct interpretation. A number of religious and secular edifices, which incorporated a hall whose ceiling was sustained by four pillars, have been excavated from Hauran to central Asia, though a geographical gap between Syria and Iran is quite evident. Schippmann (1971: 480–99) asserted that this was a well-defined planimetry
Figure 7  Iranian palatial and religious architectures including the main four-columned hall element.

originated in Iran and served a variety of different religions and cults. The common feature is a slightly rectangular or square environment with four columns symmetrically placed in the centre whose function was to support the roof.

An open-air altar surrounded by four columns was part of the edifice of Jarkutan in northern Bactria (modern Tajikistan) between 1400–1000 BC (Askarov, Shirinov 1994: 16–23; Görsdorf, Huff 2001). The same environment also appeared between 1000–800 BC at Hasanlu-tepe in western Iran (Azerbaijan). Four-pillared rooms are also recurrent in the Achaemenid architecture, in particular at the royal centres of Persepolis and Susa.25 In the last decade, moreover, two Achaemenid sanctuaries which integrated as part of their planimetric design the four-columned halls were uncovered at Sangyr-tepe in the northwestern area of the Shahr-e Sabz oasis (Rapin et al. 2010: 21–22) and Kindyk-tepe within the Bandikhan region (Boroffka 2009) in eastern Iran (modern Uzbekistan).

It is noteworthy that tetrastyle rooms represented the structural core for a number of sacred and secular edifices in the Iranian world (Fig. 7) mainly attributable to the Arsacid period, such as the Parthian constructions at Old Nisa (Pilipko 1996; Invernizzi, Lippolis 2008), Mansur-depe (Koshelenko et al. 1989, 2000), Nippur and Assur, and the so-called ayadana at Susa.26 A four-pillared nucleus also identifies the Hauran temples of Si‘a, Sur and Sahr in Syria (1st century BC–1st century AD; Netzer 2003: 103–9),27 the shrine on the mount of Kuh-e Khwaja in Sistan,28 the religious complex of Dedoplis Mindori in Georgia (2nd–1st centuries BC; Gagoshidze 1983, 1992), the Kushan royal temple at Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan (2nd century AD; Schlumberger 1961, 1975; Fussman 1983; Schlumberger, Le Berre, Fussman 1983), the Chorasmian

25 Hopkins (1942: 16–17) considered the tetrastyle room as an Achaemenid development. Colledge (1986: 10) indeed presumed that this “type of ‘centralized square’ hall was perhaps contributed by Achaemenid Iran”. For the most recent discussion of the origin and significance of the columned halls, see Gopnik (2010).

26 This structure was excavated during the 19th century, and for a long time was interpreted as an Achaemenid fire-temple (Schippmann 1971: 266–74; Litvinskiy, Pichikyan 2000: 209–16). However, after being compared with the dwellings at Ai Khanoum, it should probably be reconsidered as a residential complex dating to the later Seleuco-Parthian period and its religious interpretation seems very precarious (Boucharat 1997: 62–63; 2005: 242).

27 More specifically on Nabatean temples see Tholbecq (1997).

28 Regarding its earliest phase, the temple of Kuh-i Khwaja was dated to the Achaemenid period (Gullini 1964: 253–73; Litvinskiy, Pichikyan 2000: 219–26). However, a dating to the late Parthian (Schippmann 1971: 57–70; Boyce, Grenet 1991: 150; Mousavi 1999: 81–85; Ghanimati 2000: 146) or Sasanian periods (Kawami 1987b: 24) seems more plausible. Bivar (2003: 2–3) instead prefers a Hellenistic dating.
sanctuary (‘The Hall of the Dancing Masks’) incorporating within the high
dale at Topraq Qala in Uzbekistan (2nd–6th centuries AD; Grenet 1986;
Rapoport 1994) and the Sogdian temples of Penjikent in Tajikistan (5th–8th
centuries AD; Shkoda 2009).

The square *tetrastyle* space seems therefore to be a structural element
with a long well-established tradition in the Iranian world, especially during
the Parthian époque, appearing not only in the temple architecture, as some-
times asserted in the past (e.g. Sarianidi 1996: 321), but also in secular and
palatial constructions (Pugachenkova 1973). The central significance of the four-
pillared halls within the planimetric context of the Iranian architecture is evi-
dent; however, its exact use and the nature of the rituals officiated in there are
still barely understood. It featured different sorts of religious complexes, and
may have served either as a principal environment (e.g. a *cella*, or a structure
housing the sacred fire in the Iranian temple) or as a secondary one. In palatial
structures, instead, the four-columned spaces may have provided different utili-
izations, such as meeting halls, gates, and possibly even depots of various kinds.

5 An Architectonical Misconception: Past Interpretation and
Outdated Significance

As the first excavator of the site, the three-campaign report (1964–1966) pro-
vided by Roman Ghirshman is the most important and comprehensive source
of information for anyone who decides to take an interest in the Elymaean
religious complex at Bard-e Neshandeh (Ghirshman 1976), even if in many
instances the information may be imprecise or inexact. He interpreted the
higher terrace as a place destined for the worship of Mazdean divinities, in
particular for the cult of Ahuramazda whose sacred fire, displayed during the
rites at an altar on the podium, would have been originally kept in a niche
within the chapel at the bottom of the northwest stairway (phase I and II),
and afterwards in the sacristy attached to the podium (phase III). As regards
the tetrastyle structure on the lower terrace, Ghirshman (*ibid.*: 50) infers that
it represented a temple dedicated to the divinities Anahita and Mithra who
along with Ahuramazda form the central Divine Triad of the Mazdean reli-
gion. This hypothesis was based on the interpretation (*ibid.*: 45–46) of the two
figures carved on the historiated capital found near the portico as the two
Mazdean deities (*i.e.* the goddess Anahita and the god Mithra). The sanctu-
ary of Bard-e Neshandeh seems thus to be identified as one of those places
“hauts et purs” (Godard 1949: 155) described by Herodotus (*Histories* 1.131),
where the ancient Persians performed the ritual practices to their gods in the
form of natural elements (sun, moon, fire, earth, wind, water, etc.). Ghirshman, indeed, suggested that the ceremony took place in two distinct and consecutive stages: at first, the worshippers arrived on the lower terrace moving towards the temple of Anahita and Mithra. After leaving offerings for the two deities, they probably followed the paved path that connects the portico of the temple with the northwest stairway walking up to the higher terrace. Once at this point, the worshippers finally reached the podium through another small stairway placed on axis with the previous one, and here the rites in honour of the principal god of the Mazdean Triad, i.e. Ahuramazda, could be performed (Ghirshman 1976: 50). It is, in any case, appropriate to state that many of the Ghirshman’s interpretations are not adequately supported by archaeological data. Schippmann (1971: 498) who convincingly affirmed that no structural remains or any recovered findings had revealed evidence of Zoroastrian worship at Bard-e Neshandeh soon refused the scenario suggested by Ghirshman. The German scholar also considered the religious complex served as an Elymaean cult place unrelated with Zoroastrianism. On this point, it is important to emphasize that despite assiduous academic efforts, pre-Sasanid information on the Zoroastrian religion is still barely known and the term ‘Zoroastrianism’ itself should be used with caution29 as well as the denomination of ‘fire-temple’ attributed to the Iranian places of worship. Indeed, the fact that the Avesta (the primary collection of Iranian religious texts) and the royal inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings (e.g. Bisotun) do not even allude to such a term is meaningful. According to Shenkar (2011: 118), it thus seems more appropriate, and methodologically more correct, to use the general term of ‘Iranian temples’ in order to indicate the temples discovered within the Iranian tradition during the periods preceding the political ascent of the Sasanid rulers.

For some scholars (Ghirshman 1976; Downey 1988: 134–36), therefore, the tetrastyle temple of Bard-e Neshandeh reflects a plan seemingly developed in Iran (Schippmann 1971: 480–99) and, consequently, typical of the Iranian temple architecture which shows no influence from Mesopotamian schemes (Downey 1988: 135–36). This conclusion derived from the conventional interpretation of room no. 5 on Ghirshman’s published plan of the temple (Ghirshman 1976: plan 11; see also Figs. 4, 8) as the main cella with a square scheme, having its roof supported by four columns placed in the centre, and flanked by three elongated rooms (nos. 1, 2, 3) considered to be of secondary

importance. According to Schippmann (1971: 480–99), Downey (1988: 135–36) considered this type of four-columned environment to be very common in Iran and central Asia to the region of Hauran (southwestern Syria), and compared the ground-plan of Bard-e Neshandeh temple with a series of other religious complexes: from the so-called ayadana in Susa30 to the temple at Sahr and Baalshamin at Si‘a (Hauran), taking into account central Asian temples such as Bactrian examples at Surkh Kotal (north Afghanistan) and at Takht-e Sangin (Tajikistan), a Buddhist shrine at Mohra Maliaran (Pakistan), the Parthian temple at Mansur-Depe and the ‘Square Room’ at Old Nisa (Turkmenistan), and further, the Iranian temples at Penjikent in Sogdiana (Tajikistan) and Kuh-e Khwaja in Sistan. Another parallel was with the so-called temple of Fratarakas at Persepolis, excavated by E. Herzfeld in the 1930s,31 even though it may appear somewhat architecturally strained32 (for all these parallels, see Fig. 7).

The tetrastyle temple is therefore shown through these comparisons as a sacred structure marked by a planimetry which strongly reflects the typical Iranian ground-level (Fig. 7) based on the centralization of a slightly rectangular or square four-columned hall within the ritual context of religious

30 Here Downey (1988: 135–36) revives an assumption of Ghirshman (1976: 197–200), noting that while the four-columned environment of the ayadana at Susa was surrounded by a single corridor which permitted circumambulation, this situation did not occur at Bard-e Neshandeh where the three elongated rooms were completely independent one of another and have only a direct communication with the central tetrastyle hall. The ayadana is characterized by many structural elements similar to the architectures of Ai Khanoum and Bactria, incorporating Iranian temple features as open forecourts, portico entrance, four-column central hall, and flanking elongated rooms. Although most of its elements are detectable in religious architectures, ayadana’s planimetry matches Bactrian domestic edifices more closely.

31 The temple takes its name from a local dynasty, known as the Fratadaras (“Keepers of the Fire”, a reading that changed to Fratarakas, “Rulers”). The ruins interpreted by Herzfeld as one complex dedicated to syncretistic Iranian-Hellenistic cults of the local dynasty, are in reality two distinct complexes separated by a road. Of these, only the one on the NW, taken as a point of comparison by Downey, can be interpreted as a place of worship (Callieri 2003: 155).

32 If it is indeed true that also incorporated in the Fratarakas’ temple there is a central square room with four column bases flanked on three sides by narrow elongated spaces not linked to each other, the structure at Persepolis differs from the Elymaean temple by having a podium which could have supported a statue. Despite this, the planimetry at Persepolis is different, as noted also by Downey (1988: 136), above all because, unlike the tetrastyle temple at Bard-e Neshandeh, between the portico and the square room there opens one of the three elongated spaces, and it could have functioned as an antecella.
practices in the Iranian temple architecture. However, a simple change of the site's planimetry due to an inaccurate structural observation of the first excavator (i.e. Ghirshman) could radically alter the perception of the temple providing the necessary basis for a more appropriate interpretation of the cult structure.

6 A New Perception under Mesopotamian Inspiration

Although it was noted as some scholars (Ghirshman 1976; Downey 1988; and indirectly also Schippmann 1971) discussed the tetrastyle temple of Bard-e Neshandeh interpreting its layouts as an evident case of Iranian architectural tradition, all these interesting attempts which have been made in order to draw parallels with Syrian and central Asian religious structures seem in reality built on a groundless architectural and functional interpretation of the four-columned hall (room no. 5) at Bard-e Neshandeh. This environment, in fact, came to be considered as the *cella* for an Iranian temple commonly surrounded by elongated spaces of minor importance often used as sacristies, storage or simply for circumambulation. After a thorough analysis of photographic and planimetric documentation, in addition to the author’s personal visit of the site in November 2015, room no. 5 would not appear to be a cult chamber of an Iranian temple, but rather a vestibule opening to the portico of a temple closely related to Mesopotamian prototypes. This assumption is strongly supported by assuming that the northeastern (NE) wall of the tetrastyle chamber—reconstructed and reported in his plan by Ghirshman—in all probability did not exist in the first place, leaving thus the way open for a new architectural and religious interpretation of the whole edifice.

*Architectural Re-considerations (Figs. 8, 9)*

From a more direct observation of the documentation published by Ghirshman in 1976, a series of inconsistencies becomes immediately evident (Fig. 9). Firstly from the reported plan (Ghirshman 1976: plan 11), it can be noted how the intercolumniations, and the distance between the pillars and the side walls are approximately the same on the northwestern (NW), southwestern (SW) and southeastern (SE) sides, while on the NE flank such proportionality

33 Nonetheless I have been personally on the site of Bard-e Neshandeh, the dramatic condition of neglect and degradation in which the religious complex finds itself, between pile of rubble and illegal excavation, forces continual reliance on the photographic documentation provided by Ghirshman.
is clearly missing because of the closeness of the columns and the debatable reconstruction of the wall elevation, provided by the Ukrainian-born French archaeologist but not confirmed by the architectural data (Fig. 8). Such a wall is indeed absent in the elevation—as can be seen in the photographic material (ibid.: pl. XXIII)—with the exception of a line of flat stones (likely a low step which separated the two areas of the portico and room no. 5) that Ghirshman inaccurately interpreted to be foundation stones34 (Fig. 5).

34 This inexact structural consideration led Ghirshman to assume that the NE wall existed in an original phase and it was deliberately knocked down at the time of the abandonment of the temple when its hypothetical deconsecration was undertaken during the Sasanid époque to transform it into an iwan. In support of his conjecture, Ghirshman (1976: 40) tendered the examples of Sogdian temples in Penjikent which had suffered the same fate.

**Figure 8** Architectural reconsiderations (line-drawing map in Ghirshman 1976: Plan II; photos by Dr. G.P. Basello 2014, courtesy of the DARIOSH Project).
Another particular, which promptly stands out from a careful evaluation of the photographic material (ibid.: pls. XXII.1, XXIII), shows that the lines of stone blocks placed against the walls on the NW and SE sides of the four-columned room extended until the flagstoned threshold of the portico, which is structurally improbable if the existence of the NE wall elevation is assumed (Figs. 8, 9). Interestingly, these two-step stone blocks which run along three flanks of the tetrastyle hall, and likely were used as benches for ‘spectators’, are also present within the temple structures at Masjed-e Soleyman and Dilberjin (northern Afghanistan), but either in the ‘Great Temple’ and the ‘Temple of Heracles’ or in the ‘Temple of Dioscuri’, they did not represent an identifying feature for the cult chamber (Figs. 6f, 10, 11). They may be interpreted, instead, as a structural element which distinguished waiting spaces like courts (‘Great Temple’, ‘Temple of Dioscuri’) and antecellae (‘Temple of Heracles’, ‘Temple of Dioscuri’). In addition, the row of columns against the NE wall of the tetrastyle hall does not appear to be made up of eight elements as supposed by Ghirshman, but rather of only six, as the two columns which would have stood against the hypothetical NE wall of room no. 5 are clearly absent in plan (ibid.: plan II.) and in photographs (ibid.: Pl. XX.1–2).

Finally, examining the three rectangular rooms (nos. 1, 2 and 3) which flank the four-pillared room on the east, south and west sides, it is significant to
take into consideration that until now they have been surprisingly indicated only as places of subsidiary use (e.g. storage rooms, sacristies, corridors), although there are certain factors which would be able to prove the contrary. For instance, the elevation of their respective floors more than half a metre above the ground-level of the tetrastyle room does not encourage an interpretation as storage rooms (Figs. 5–8), while the fact to have their own independent entrance reachable by a few steps only from the central hall and the absence of communication with one another certainly prevent the impression of recognizing corridor-like structures. An identification as sacristies instead could be credible, but the presence of a socle against the rear wall of room no. 3, presumably supporting a cult statue or altar, in addition to the finding of a foundation deposit consisting of almost 5,000 coins under the threshold of room no. 1, seem to suggest a more relevant function for these environments within the ritual context of the temple.

Reconsidered in this way, what was originally interpreted as the four-columned cult chamber of an Iranian temple would seem to be now a vestibule opening to a portico that has the contemporaneous functions of court and antecella, while the three elongated rooms around it could not reflect the scheme of service rooms but rather of rectangular cellae, for which the architectural reference is distinctly related to cult chambers of Mesopotamian standards (Fig. 6).
An ‘unusual’ Mesopotamian Example in Elymais (Fig. 10)

Encased in the foothills of the Bakhtiari mountains, at only 7.5 km southwestern of Bard-e Neshandeh, the shrine situated at Masjed-e Soleyman (Mosque of Solomon) represents the most evident example of Mesopotamian-influenced temple in Iran known so far. In the northeastern part of the valley, the temple of Sar-Masjed, situated within the large bend described to the south by the Karun river, is still in a dominant position from the rest of the modern city. It is constituted by a monumental structure based on artificial terraces built against a hill (30–40 m), providing a high spot that seems to have become a priority in the conception of mountainous religious architecture in Elymais. The complex of Masjed-e Soleyman unfolds across an extended trapezoidal surface (ca. 134×120 m) sustained by stone artificial substructures, in a way much more elaborate than Bard-e Neshandeh. In fact, here the sanctuary is composed of six platforms, different in dimensions and functions, of which the main area is based on two broadly extended terraces (I and V on Ghirshman 1976: plan III), neatly divided by a low wall. Ghirshman (ibid.: 55–77) suggested that after the Macedonian conquest, the Greeks enlarged the previous terrace and erected their own temples on it. Two temple structures stood indeed on this expanded platform. The ‘Great Temple’ consisted of a central square hall leading to the antecella and cella. Corridors surrounded the central complex with the main entrance being on the east side, which at one point was refurbished with a portico of 21 columns. The ‘Great Temple’ has a plan quite unusual, which does appear related to the Mesopotamian religious architectures. In particular, the central scheme based on a rectangular antecella-cella unit of the same width behind court (often roughly square) is visible in the temples of Anu-Antum, within the vast complex of Bit Resh, and Irigal at Uruk during the Seleucid period, and evidently related to a more ancient Babylonian tradition (Fig. 6a–b). However, while within the Mesopotamian sanctuaries there was only one doorway opening from the court into the antecella and then the cella, at the ‘Great Temple’ there were two. Furthermore, no niches typical of the Babylonian temples were found in the cella at Masjed-e Soleyman, but two altars were instead placed against the back wall of the cult room and aligned

35 The presence of an antecella and cella of the same width is a hallmark of Mesopotamian architecture plainly distinguishable, for instance, from Assyrian temple type (e.g. the Sin-Shamash temple of Assurnirari I and the Anu-Hadad temple at Assur; see respectively Haller, Andrae 1956, Andrae 1909) where a wide antecella preceded a deep narrow cella behind it.
with the doorways. Between the nucleus of the Elymaean sanctuary and the external wall there was then a corridor which isolated the central zone from the outside.\(^{36}\) This element of separation is also seen in the temple structures of Anu-Antum and Irigal, but while at Sar-Masjed temple the corridor run around all sides of the central block without interruption, the Mesopotamian temples of Uruk had a corridor on only two flanks of the central sanctuary area, with courts on the other two sides. The temple of Masjed-e Soleyman was considerably more basic than the Anu-Antum and Irigal structures where the cult spaces were only limited parts within elaborated religious complexes (e.g. Bit Resh) composed of more subsidiary rooms and courts (Fig. 12). Differently from Anu-Antum shrine, at Sar-Masjed temple the main access was perpendicular to the entrances of \textit{antecella} and \textit{cella} in a planimetric scheme which certainly reflected the perpendicular \textit{bent-axis} type of Mesopotamian temples from the 4th–3rd millennium BC.\(^{37}\) The ‘L-shaped’ \textit{bent-axis} of the ‘Great Temple’ of Masjed-e Soleyman is also recognizable in the \textit{Epatutila}, the temple of Ninurta at Babylonia built by Nabopolassar (ca. 658–605 BC), and in the Antum sacred area within the Anu-Antum temple, where similarly the main entrance of the court was perpendicular to the accesses of the \textit{cella} (Figs. 10, 13, 14). Thus, the divine statues were not visible from outside the temple, and the worshipper or pilgrim had to turn right or left on entry of the court to see them. In both Bit Resh (considering the Anu sacred section) and Irigal, the entrance of the chief court was laid on the same axis of the \textit{antecella-cella} unit.

Moving towards the northwestern flank of the upper terrace at Masjed-e Soleyman, the modest sanctuary of Heracles (Fig. 6f) can be seen as a simplified version of the ‘Great Temple’. The \textit{antecella-cella} block is indeed quite similar, having a typically Mesopotamian elongated rectangular shape, even if in this case the court is absent and the access comes through the \textit{antecella}.

\(^{36}\) According to Ghirshman (1976: 189–90), this corridor could have been used for circumambulation differing from the isolating elongated spaced present in the Mesopotamian temples.

\(^{37}\) As a temple structure, the \textit{bent-axis} planimetric scheme first appears in the mid-4th millennium BC at Tell Sheikh Hassan on the middle Euphrates (modern Syria; see Boese 1995), and, excluding an early 3rd-millennium BC example in the Inanna temple at Nippur, it seems to be unknown in Babylonia. Having a long history at Mari and in the Diyala region (eastern Iraq), \textit{bent-axis} temple schemes are also visible in the Shrine of Ishtar at Nuzi, originally constructed as a single sanctuary in the late 3rd millennium BC and extended to include a second similar shrine (ca. 2000 BC). It would seem that, apart from the early example at Nippur, this planimetry and the associated ritual were typical of central and northern Mesopotamia.
with two doorways, one of which in axis with the entrance of the cella. In both the temples of Masjed-e Soleyman, therefore, some structural elements typical of the Mesopotamian sacred architecture were omitted (e.g. the decoration of the exterior walls with projections and recesses, the cult niches), while other characteristics which did not occur in the Babylonian Seleucid temples were added (e.g. circumambulatory corridor).

It is particularly significant that the temples at Masjed-e Soleyman do not slavishly replicate the ground-plan of the Mesopotamian sanctuaries, but transform and reorganize it. For instance, the presence of two doorways into the antecella and cella block with two altars against the back wall of the cella is an innovative feature absent in the arrangements from the Babylonian temples, and it is likely due to local needs of cult. Further, the corridor which uninterruptedly run around the central cult unit (court-antecella-cella) of the ‘Great Temple’ at Masjed-e Soleyman, isolating it from the external environment, has not similar examples in the Mesopotamian religious architectures. On the contrary, this type of corridor-like unit seems to originate in eastern Iran (e.g. Bactria) where the subsidiary rooms typical of the Babylonian temple structures have been converted to continuous ambulatory corridors, a hallmark of later Iranian architecture, surrounding the naos which housed a cult statue/s. Analogous corridors are also seen in the houses of Ai Khanoum.

FIGURE 12  Bit Resh sanctuary at Uruk (Downey 1988).
Figure 10
Great Temple (Masjed-e Soleyman) (Downey 1988).

Figure 13
Bit Resh sanctuary at Uruk (Downey 1988).

Figure 14
Epatutila (Babylon) (Downey 1988).
and other central Asia sites with the function of isolating the internal environments (cf. Francfort 1977: 267–80), and possibly anticipated constructions such as the ‘Square Temple’ of Hatra and the Sasanian fire temples (Ghirshman 1976: 187–91; cf. Stronach 1985: 610–12, 617–19, 624–27). Finally, the presence of a portico in front of the main entrance reveals Greek influence which was instead absent in the Mesopotamian religious structures of Seleucid Uruk.

The temples of Masjed-e Soleyman are a clear example of how Babylonian and Iranian planimetric elements were originally combined in Elymais together with Greek architectural ornament imprinting a brand-new development in the local sacred architecture. The ground-plans and structural elements of the Elymaean temples do not reproduce any heritage of architecture devotedly, but rather convincingly amalgamate Mesopotamian, Iranian and Western architectural aspects. If Ghirshman’s assumption is confirmed, the Parthian rebuilding (‘Great Temple’) of the temple of Athena Hippia at Masjed-e Soleyman by the use of the same layout may reflect the persistence of a design in the Elymaean region which reveals in the tetrastyle temple of Bard-e Neshandeh an even more innovative architectonic scheme.

**An Innovative Concept of Mountainous Sanctuary**

Engaging both Mesopotamian and Iranian templates, the tetrastyle temple present on the lower terrace of Bard-e Neshandeh creatively re-imagined and manipulated important structural elements, updating them and making them its own. The Elymaean temple indeed on its interior design reflects a planimetry that skilfully combined the centralized four-columned hall typical of Iranian architectures, generally from Parthian time and onwards, and the elongated cult chambers of evident Babylonian origin. Yet, the temple of Bard-e Neshandeh markedly diverges from Mesopotamian and Iranian sacred architectures in several key features including its axial and symmetrical design, its number and arrangement of cult chambers, not to mention the predominance of Greek architectural ornament (*i.e.* portico) on its exterior façade. For instance, the distinctive rectangular plan of three independent juxtaposed *cellae* reachable through three separated small staircases, and entered via an open vestibule with the contemporaneous function of court and *pronaos*, appears in the Seleucid period at Ai Khanoum (Extramural Temple). The very similar planimetry, present not only in other sacred structures in Bactria (*e.g.* Temple with Niches), but especially in later Parthian times at Dura-Europos (especially the Temple of Artemis and the Temple of Zeus Megistos; Bernard 1990: 51–52; on the temples of Dura-Europos, see Downey 1988: 76–131), indicates a continuity of this architectural type in Mesopotamia (Fig. 6) which may have its
planimetric prototype in the *Epatutila* (Temple of Ninurta) of Babylon (on the *Epatutila’s plan*, see Downey 1988: 41–42; Fig. 14).

Plausibly under Parthian influence, an analogous plan also appears in three late Nabatean temples (Fig. 6i–k; Netzer 2003: 68–72, 99–102). At Bard-e Neshandeh, the scheme of three independent cult chambers, entered from an open vestibule via three separated small staircase within a typical Mesopotamian-type rectangular ground-plan, was creatively reproduced with the symmetrical disposition of these three elongated *cellae* around a central four-pillared environment, contemporaneously used as court and antecella, in a planimetric design which, on the other hand, seems to reproduce the expected architecture belonging to the Iranian tradition of worship composed by a centralized tetrastyle halls surrounded with subsidiary rooms (*e.g.* Figs. 7, 11).  

Furthermore, the presence of a two-row columned portico, rectangular in shape, with mixed Persian and Greek bases completely absent in Mesopotamian-model temples of Seleucid period, also attests the use of a Greek architectural element, as often occurred in other Iranian-type structures (*e.g.* Fig. 7e, n). The Elymaeans selectively combined Mesopotamian, Iranian and Greek architectural traditions and developed an eclectic, yet coherent, repertoire that constituted the basis for their religious architecture. The construction on top of artificial platforms, which in the case of Bard-e Neshandeh consisted of an artificial terraced mountain ridgeline with a multilevel stairway leading up the mountain’s southeastern side, may be associated with similar structures discovered in Iran and Bactria, and connected with open-air places of worship as described by Classical authors (Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.131; Strabo, *Geography*, xv.3.13–14).

The sacred intent of open-air spaces during the Achaemenid period was indeed accomplished by the construction of monumental sacred terraces, also typical in central Asia (*e.g.* southern Uzbekistan; Martinez-Sève 2014: 241–42), built of undressed stones where the cult practices were performed with the use of a podium reached by multitudes of worshippers who ascended and descended from platforms through different staircases. As illustrated by the Elamite rock-cut reliefs’ tradition which identified with certainty the sacred sites in the Zagros highland region, emphasis should be given to the allegorical movement of ascent and descent from the natural summit (hill?) to the

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38 As previously mentioned, the fact that the three elongated rooms opened only to the central area and did not communicate with one another, the use of three independent small three-stepped staircases as only access to them, the presence of a socle in support of a statue or altar on the short SW side of room no. 3, leave small ambiguity on their interpretation as Mesopotamian-influenced *cellae* intended for local cult practices in Elymais.
bottom (river basin?), abode of gods, symbolically represented in Elymais by
the construction of artificial terraces proposing a cultual upward and down-
ward movement of worshippers in the communal act of achieving the divine.
As is true for the Elamite sacred open-air sites (e.g. Kurangun; see Potts 2004;
Álvarez-Mon 2014), the relevance of the landscape’s aesthetic value in the con-
text of Elymaean sanctuaries has long been ignored. Álvarez-Mon pointed out
how the aesthetic experience of the natural environment guides to a mysti-
cal religious experience that breaks the bonds of time and space. It may be
suggested that a distinctive component of Elymaean highland cult practices,
as well as for the previous Elamite’s, included ritual processions and accom-
plishment of traditional ceremonies on artificial open-air sanctuaries, subse-
quently enriched of Mesopotamian-type temples during the Seleuco-Parthian
period. In particular, Bard-e Neshandeh, like the other sanctuaries in Elymais
(e.g. Masjed-e Soleyman, Shami, Qal’e-ye Bardi), seems to have been built in
order to be intimately assimilated within an environmental framework where
the retaining walls of the terraces have been adapted to the natural rocky
structure on which they were erected, as if the artificial platforms were the
optimal extension of the mountainous environment. Thus, one can even be
encouraged to assume a conceptual bond (cf. Messina 2015b: 202) between the
terraces and the mountains on which they arise with the latter that may have
played a crucial role in the cult practices of the people located in Elymais and
previously in ancient Elam.39 This could justify de facto a belief system where
the perception and experience of the metaphysical establishes a connection
with landscapes of extraordinary natural properties. The most striking exam-
ple in this regard is represented by the Elymaean sanctuary of Tang-e Sarvak in
the modern Iranian provinces of Kohgiluyeh va Boyer Ahamad (Henkelman,
Khaksar 2014). All the sacred sites in Elymais would indeed be devoid of mean-
ing if decontextualized from their mountain environment within which they
are not only a simple integral part, but a more conceptually functional exten-
sion. Besides, the natural surroundings certainly contributed to create such a
sense of spiritual remoteness, which enshrouded the abode of the Elamite/
Elymaean deities in a veil of ethereal atmosphere.

Unlike several Elamite and Achaemenid natural open-air sanctuaries, which
cease their activities at the end of the Achaemenid era, the presence in Elymais
of artificial sacred terraces—located in traditional places of significant reli-
gious relevance—that were cultually ‘modernized’ with the introduction of
covered architectonical structures (i.e. temples) throughout the Seleucid and

39 Significantly, at least eleven ononyms are recorded on the Persepolis Fortification tablets
published so far together with the offers received (Henkelman 2008: 536–37).
Parthian eras, fostered the evolution of new places of worship. Whatever the nature of cults taking place here was, ancient sources and modern knowledge suggested the important role played in the socio-political history of Elymais by these new sanctuaries, as demonstrated in the attitude that the Seleucid and Parthian kings had in their regard. Being caskets of thousand-year traditions, they were large-scale gathering places where the clerical class had an eminent social position, probably belonging to an elite rank. The religious authority in Elymais was indeed able to administrate considerable wealth and its influence was such that they were capable of swiftly mobilising the masses against potential foreign threat, as recorded by the Classical sources. The Greco-Roman authors give special mention at least to three temples in Elymais but unfortunately, no archaeological evidence at Bard-e Neshandeh has been discovered to corroborate the textual documentation, although it is significant that sources mention the presence of temples in the Elymaean region only from the Seleucid and early Arsacid eras. Moreover, no data associated with this sacred structure that provides a clue as to the nature of the deity or deities worshipped in the temple and therefore a more precise connection with one of the Elymaean temples reported by the Classical texts has yet brought to light. Roman Ghirshman considered the shrines of Bard-e Neshandeh as a Zoroastrian place of cult and the tetrastyle temple as a sacred place dedicated to Mithra and Anahita, although examples of monumental Zoroastrian fire-temples only appear manifestly and in abundance during the Sasanid period. The ranks of pre-Sasanid fire-temples have thinned significantly, as ancient sites have been subject to new dating technologies and more critical analyses.40 Besides, although the identity of the deities honoured in the Elymaean cult places is still poorly understood due to the lack of documentation, the Elymaean pantheon seems to be of Semitic origin (Hansman 1985). Bel (Zeus/Jupiter), Nanaia (Artemis/Ishtar), a syncretic version of Heracles, and a goddess represented with features analogous to Athena personify the main deities in Elymais, as indicated by the Classical sources and the local rock reliefs including inscriptions. A native version of the Semitic Bel, explicitly mentioned in texts (e.g. Tang-e Sarvak, Tang-e Botan) was likely the most important god in the Elymaean pantheon (Kawami 1987a: 97–102), and indeed a syncretism between Zeus and Bel (under the name of Zeus-Belos) was a well-known phenomenon even in Mesopotamia and Syria (Downey 2004).

40 For instance, C14 dating has demonstrated that the sacred shrine at Kuh-e Khwaja (Iranian Province of Sistan) dates to the late Parthian or early Sasanid period. The architectural and sculptural characteristics more strongly relate to Sasanid art (Ghanimati 2000).
After these considerations, the tetrastyle temple of Bard-e Neshandeh—definitively removed from the list of places of Zoroastrian worship (Schippmann 1971: 498)—may be confidently interpreted as a cult place based on a proficient integration between Mesopotamian and Iranian architectural models and dedicated to local deities (Fig. 15). In particular, the existence of a divine autochthonous triad in Elymais may indeed be fostered by the topographical plan of the Bard-e Neshandeh tetrastyle temple where three elongated cellae may be plausibly associated with the cult of three different deities, as well as be strengthened by the rock relief ANa of the monument A at Tang-e Sarvak (Hansman 1985; for the reliefs of Tang-e Sarvak, see Henning 1952; Vanden Berghe, Schippmann 1985; Mathiesen 1992; Von Gall 2000; Haerinck 2003).

7 Conclusion

One can only guess what caused the Elymaean rulers to erect temples whose plans were entirely based on Mesopotamian and Iranian models. They were probably acquainted with Greek temple architecture, since the local religious iconography in Elymais was mostly influenced by Hellenistic figurative language, but for some reason they preferred ‘eastern’ prototypes. One possible explanation is that a school of native architects who planned these temples versed in the Mesopotamian architectural tradition during the Seleucid and Parthian periods, and incorporated some elements of Iranian building heritage. The city of Susa and its surrounding flat area, often considered an appendix of Mesopotamia, may have represented a channel of cultural transmission between the Iranian plateau and the Mesopotamian plain, not to mention the strong presence of Greeks in Susiana. This situation would have created the peculiarity of the local culture of Elymais—reflected in the religious architecture—of being capable of moving freely from a Mesopotamian orbit to Elamite and Iranian traditions, passing through a Greek artistic language. However, although it is still unclear why Mesopotamian influence seems to pass over Iran and reappear only in Bactria, the reinterpretation of the Elymaean temples, in particular at Bard-e Neshandeh, may provide an intermediate point between Babylonia and Ai Khanoum during the Seleuco-Parthian period (Bernard 1976: 266–70). The tetrastyle temple of Bard-e Neshandeh perfectly reflects a balanced combination between a distinctive Iranian element.

41 It is worth mentioning that further to the East, the Jandial temple near Taxila (modern Pakistan) did include several elements borrowed from Greek sacred architecture (Rapin 1995: 287–91).
identifiable with a four-columned roughly square hall, which flourished during the Parthian period, and some planimetric features (e.g. rectangular ground-plan, pronaos, elongated shape for the cult chambers, tripartite naos) which instead evoke Babylonian architectural models, revitalised and promoted by the Seleucid kings. From a purely planimetric point of view, the Bard-e Neshandeh temple can be positively placed when the Seleucid architectural models still offered a stimulating starting point for the still embryonic Parthian official architecture. A period datable between the 3rd century BC to the 1st century AD, which bears recognizable traces of a direct persistence concerning the Hellenistic heritage combined with local traditions, particularly with regard to the religious sphere (Callieri 2015), might be proposed for the establishment of the tetrastyle temple of Bard-e Neshandeh in line with the Ghirshman’s assumption of the 2nd century AD as a terminus ante quem for its first phase of construction (Ghirshman 1976: 40).

Several attempts have been provided in order to ‘read’ these monuments as primary sources of information on the Elymaean culture and religion, but
in the almost total absence of documentary evidence, this has proven to be very challenging (Hansman 1985; Haerinck 2003; Martinez-Sève 2008, 2014; Henkelman, Khaksar 2014). A wider archaeological and cultural perspective could contribute to a better understanding of the ancient Elymaean highland sanctuaries. Querying and evaluating, for instance, the degree by which the natural environment has played a participatory role in the emergence of the sacred architectures, it can be assumed that the shrines exhibit an exclusive expression of art and religious ideology in Elymais. Besides, it cannot be accidental that the Elymaean sanctuaries have not yet been found on the crowded plains, but rather in the isolated highlands, and indeed it may indicate that this latter area was secure enough to house their most importance places of worship. Yet, as occurred with the older open-air sanctuaries, our perception of this complicated situation may hardly be exhaustive. The area of Bard-e Neshandeh, which has been unsurveyed in the last 50 years, would need to be more thoroughly investigated by intensive and extensive systematic surveys in order to propose a better understanding of the framework within which an Elymaean sacred place was conceived and developed.

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