By the early 5th century Hadrian’s Wall in northern England was being rendered obsolete due to Rome’s diminishing power and military capability to prevent the Wall being overrun by Caledonian tribes from the north. But at about the same time period another long wall was being erected allegedly for defensive purposes by the Sassanids at the helm of the contending Persian Empire in the east. This was the Great Wall of Gorgan located in northeastern Persian (Iranian) territories south of the border with present time Turkmenistan. In an introduction to a report on a joint Iranian-British project to excavate and survey portions of the Gorgan Wall Omrani Rekavandi et al. (2008: 13) boast of its scale and historical significance, and at the same time are puzzled by its relative obscurity compared to other ancient barriers:

It is longer than Hadrian’s Wall and Antonine Wall taken together. It is over a thousand years older than the Great Wall of China as we know it today. It is of more solid construction than its ancient Chinese counterparts. It is the greatest monument of its kind between central Europe and China and it may be the longest brick, or stone, wall ever built in the ancient world – and yet few have ever heard of it.

The 195 kilometer-long wall runs east-west from Pishkamar Mountains at the junction of the Alburz and Kopet Dag mountains all the way to the south-eastern corner of Caspian Sea coast north of the town of Gumishan in Iran’s Golestan Province, where according to Howard-Johnston (2006: 192) “its western extremity was probably destroyed when it was submerged under the Caspian, during the last high-water phase in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries.” (see Figure 3.1). This lesser-known and studied ancient wall has many names: the ‘Red Snake’ (‘Qizil Alan’ in Turkmen language) because of the red-colored brick used for its construction1;

---

1 Cf. Arne (1945: 7).
Figure 3.1 Sketch map of the Gorgan Wall, starting in Pishkamar mountains on the east and ending on the Caspian Sea coast on the West. The Wall runs almost parallel to Gorgan River with similar origination and destination points (numbers refer to fort locations).