



Tos-i Nowzar Castle, an Unknown Fortress of the Ismail's in Kharazan Mountain of Tafresh County

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ABSTRACT

The central region of Tafresh is a mountainous area enclosed by high peaks. Situated along the north-south highway that runs along the edge of Iran's central desert, this area has held strategic importance throughout different historical periods. During the Sassanid period, Tafresh was part of the Jebal province, serving as a key transit point for roads connecting southern, southwestern, and western Iran to the northern and northeastern regions. Due to its rugged, mountainous terrain, the area was relatively secure, making it a suitable location for settlements and fortifications. To safeguard trade and travel routes, numerous forts were constructed during this time. Archaeological surveys in Tafresh have identified 35 settlements from the Sassanid period, primarily located along major routes and the banks of the Qara Chay River. The study of surface pottery and architectural remains from these sites suggests that Tafresh maintained cultural connections with regions in the south, southwest, north, northwest, and northeast. This article first examines the significance of archaeological surveys as an effective tool for reconstructing the historical background of Tafresh County. It then analyzes the identified sites, focusing on pottery finds and architectural evidence to shed light on the region's historical development.

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Introduction

Tafresh County is a small plain surrounded by high mountains on all sides, forming a natural fortress accessible only through the Khanak, Gypsy, and Silver paths. To the north, it is bordered by the Black Mountains of the Kaburan range; to the east, by the Stir and Sarkhan Mountains; to the south, by the Noqra Kamar and Kolaha ranges; and to the west, by the Rafsa, Do Bradaran, Amjak, and Gavan Mountains. No major rivers flow through this region except for the Qara Chay River, which serves as the primary source of the Qomrud.

Given Tafresh's strategic location near the main highways of the Iranian plateau and the necessity of safeguarding these routes, numerous castles were constructed in the area. Among them, one of the most significant is Tos-i Nowzar, which contains archaeological remains spanning from the Parthian period to the end of the Ismaili rule, up until the Mongol invasion (Fig. 1).

Methodology

During the survey of Tafresh County, more than 100 archaeological sites from various periods were identified. Among them, Tos-i Nowzar Castle was selected for detailed examination due to its strategic location, architectural features, and surface artifacts. In addition to the comprehensive sampling of all sections, a re-

examination was conducted within a one-kilometer radius. This study is based on a combination of fieldwork and library research.

Discussion

Tos-i Nowzar Castle

Tos-i Nowzar Castle is situated on a rocky outcrop in the middle of the Barf Chal Valley, north of Tafresh County. The valley runs in a north-south direction within the mountainous village of Kharazan-i Tafresh, along the Tafresh-Saveh road. The castle is located approximately 2 km southwest of Kharazan village and about 5.5 km northeast of Tafresh.

The castle is built upon a black volcanic rock formation. The valley in the center of Tos-i Nowzar Castle is known for its snowy conditions and is positioned to the right of the asphalt road that passes through Kharazan Mountain, which follows an ancient route. Access to the castle is possible via this road (Fig. 2).

Tos-i Nowzar Castle extends approximately 300 meters from east to west and 600 meters from north to south. The highest point of the castle rises about 80 meters above the valley floor. The volcanic cliff itself is 60 meters high, while the main constructed area, which contains various structures and installations, measures approximately 130 meters in length and 65 meters in width.

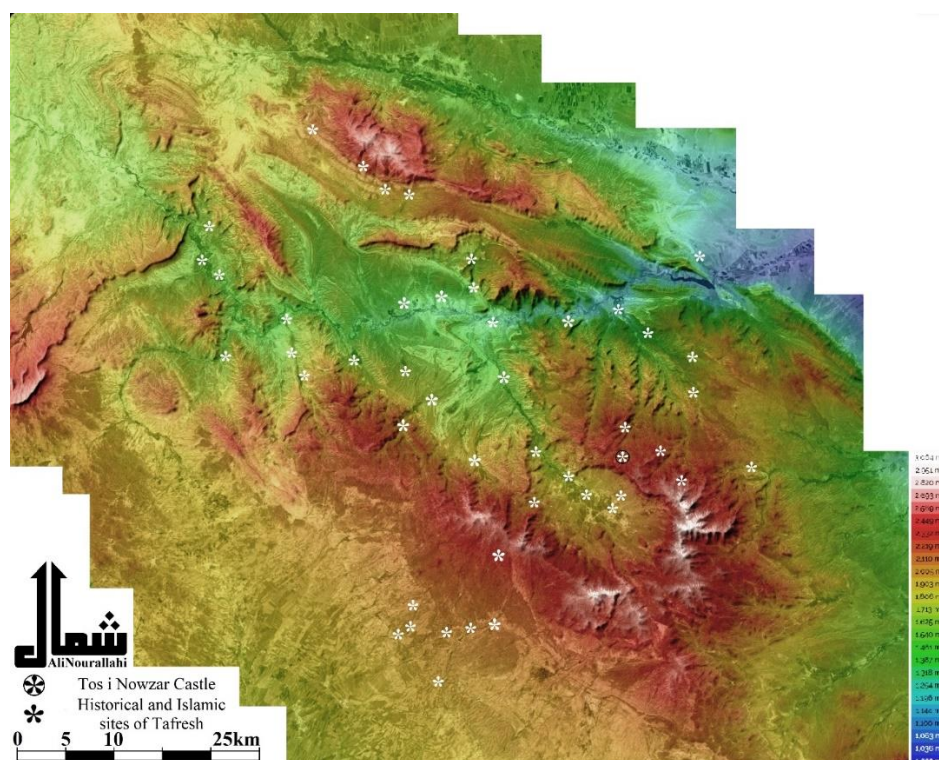


Figure 1: Tafresh County and Tos-i Nowzar fortress and Historical sites (Author, 2022).



Figure 2: Full view of the Tos-i Nowzar Castle and surroundings (Author, 2022).



Figure 3: Northern view of Tepe Dinar (Authors, 2022).

The castle consists of two main sections: the citadel, which is situated on the upper part of the rocky outcrop and is difficult to access. This section, where the main citadel is built, comprises numerous rooms constructed using rubble, plaster, and bricks. Due to the limited available surface area, the architecture is compact, requiring builders to first level the sloped rock before constructing the desired spaces.

In the southern section, several rectangular water reservoirs have been carved into the rocky bed in a north-south direction. The inner walls of these reservoirs are coated with a layer of *Saraj* (a traditional waterproofing material) for insulation, and their upper edges are reinforced with *Saraj* and stone rubble. Based on archaeological evidence, some of these reservoirs are believed to date back to the early construction phase of the castle, specifically the Parthian and Sasanian periods (Kiani, 1982; Keall & Keall, 1981). While there is no definitive evidence regarding the roofing of these reservoirs, it is speculated that they were covered with brick arches, and residential spaces were built above them. These areas were accessible via staircases leading down to the reservoirs, and it is possible that a network of pipes once distributed water from these tanks to other sections of the castle, including the bathhouse.

As for the water supply system, ceramic pipes (*Tanbushah*) found in the lower sections indicate that water was sourced from springs located at a higher elevation than the fortress (Fig. 3). It is believed that water was transported to the castle using camels.

In the northern section, or the "nose" of the citadel, remnants of small and compact rooms have been found. These structures, made from crushed stone and plaster, were built directly onto the rock and are referred to by locals as the prison. The citadel also contained spaces that served a ceremonial or noble function, as evidenced by decorative elements such as cruciform, octagonal, square, and star-patterned *luster tiles* (Mason, 1977; Watson, 1977, 1994). These spaces likely included halls, rooms, and bathhouses, though no significant remains of them exist today.

Access to the upper citadel was facilitated by two pathways, where castle builders constructed staircases of rubble and bricks bonded with half-

cracked plaster mortar. These staircases, located in the eastern and southwestern sections of the rock, are believed to have originally been covered with curved arches. Additionally, a secret corridor on the western slope of the rock suggests that these pathways were once enclosed for added security.

To further fortify the citadel, an outer defensive wall—measuring 1.5 to 2 meters thick—was constructed along the rock's perimeter, overlooking the surrounding landscape. Guard towers were strategically placed at certain points. Additionally, other vulnerable sections of the rock were reinforced with crushed stone and plaster mortar, rendering them impenetrable. Today, only the rocky foundation of the citadel remains, though evidence suggests that it once had multiple floors connected by staircases and corridors.

Architecturally, Tos-i Nowzar Castle exhibits key engineering and construction features characteristic of Ismaili fortresses. It bears notable similarities to Gardkuh Castle in Damghan, Nowzer Shah Castle in Qazvin, and Qiz Qala (or Dokhtar Castle), which was constructed atop a high rock at the southern edge of the Saveh Plain, where significant ruins still stand today.

Tos-i Nowzar Castle was historically connected to Qiz Qala via a route passing through Khanak village and Jalayr Qala, linking it to Saveh, Ave, Qom, Ray, and other surrounding cities.

The second section of the castle includes the lower slopes and the outer rocky inclines. Most of the architectural remains in this area are concentrated on the southern, southeastern, and western slopes of the rock. These structures primarily housed ordinary residents, guards, and craftsmen who lived and worked within the castle.

The buildings in this section were constructed using dry-stone masonry, possibly with mud mortar, and were covered with brick roofs. In the southwestern part of this area, a corridor with stone walls and a curved brick arch has been discovered. This passage is believed to have served as a secret route used by high-ranking residents of the citadel (Figs. 4, 5). Additionally, a well carved into the rock was used for water storage.



Figure 3: Water Source in citadel of Tos-i Nowzar Castle (Author, 2022).

All these spaces were protected by a stone wall and rampart reinforced with mud mortar. However, due to natural erosion and the passage of time, much of the area has been covered by soil, making it difficult to determine the exact locations of entrances and pathways.

This section also contained industrial workshops, including blacksmithing, metal

foundries, and pottery production. Kilns and brick-making facilities were identified outside the walls of the lower part of the valley, specifically to the south and southeast of Tos-i Nowzar Castle (Trinkaus, 1981, 1986; Bahrami, 1988; Ricciardi, 1970; Lecomte, 1987; Priestman, 2013; Kennt, 2004; Wilson, 1963; Wilkinson, 1973; Whitcomb, 1985) (Fig. 6).



Figure 4: Secret corridor entrance on the western slopes of Tos-i Nowzar (Author, 2022).



Figure 5: Secret corridor in the western slope of Tos-i Nowzar Castle (Author, 2022).



Figure 6: Islamic pottery of Tos-i Nowzar castle (Author, 2022).

Conclusion

Archaeological evidence suggests that Tos-i Nowzar Castle was originally founded during the Parthian period and remained in use throughout the Sassanid era. In the central region of Tafresh County, numerous sites and villages containing characteristic pottery from these periods have been identified and studied. Following the collapse of the Sassanid Dynasty, the region continued to thrive. Due to its rugged natural landscape, Tafresh became a strategic refuge for dissidents and opposition groups, including the Ismailis, who established multiple castles in and around the area.

One notable example is Dokhtar Saveh Castle. Additionally, Tos-i Nowzar Castle appears to have functioned as a key link between Ismaili fortresses in Isfahan and the Arjan region, connecting them to Saveh, Qazvin, and other Ismaili strongholds in Qomes, Qahestan, and the Alborz Mountains. With the Mongol invasion, the region suffered extensive destruction. Tos-i Nowzar Castle, believed to have served as an Ismaili stronghold during this period, was ultimately destroyed. Historical records indicate that, following the Mongol attack, only 13 settlements in Tafresh remained intact.

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