Saryazd Castle reveals ingenuity of ancient Persian architecture

Iranica Desk

Rising from the heart of Iran's central desert, near the village of Saryazd in Mehriz, Yazd Province, Saryazd Castle is a 1,400-year-old mud-brick fortress that stands as a testament to the ingenuity of ancient Persian architecture. Dating back to the Sassanid era, the historic structure is widely described as one of the world's oldest known secure storage facilities, where people once safeguarded their most valuable possessions against invasion and looting.

Passing through the castle's entrance is like stepping back in time. Its towering mud-brick walls, defensive moats and labyrinthine corridors reveal a carefully designed system intended to protect both lives and property. Centuries ago, individual chambers served as private vaults where local residents stored their belongings during times of danger, according to IRNA.

At Saryazd Castle, security was built into the architecture itself. Narrow passageways, uneven staircases and interconnected rooms created a maze that would have been difficult for unfamiliar visitors to navigate. These features helped deter raiders and protect the valuables hidden within the fortress.

The castle's entrance once marked the boundary between the dangers of the outside world and the relative safety within its walls. Beyond it lay a network of chambers where families entrusted their possessions to a structure designed to withstand the uncertainties of the age.





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Each mud brick formed part of a centuries-old system of protection, reflecting the community's need for security in an unpredictable world. Inside, winding corridors and interconnected rooms formed the heart of the fortress. Around 1,400 years ago, these small spaces functioned much like individual safe-deposit boxes. Residents stored everything from essential grain supplies to gold and jewelry, protecting their belongings from raiders and the instability of the period.

The castle's multi-level layout reflects a sophisticated understanding of defensive design. Staircases leading to upper floors and secluded chambers made access more difficult, while the complex arrangement of passageways helped confuse intruders. Today, the quiet corridors offer a glimpse into the lives of people who relied on the fortress to protect the fruits of their labor and provide reassurance for the future.

Water was another essential element of the castle's self-sufficiency. A well in the central courtyard provided a vital source of water, enabling guards and those seeking refuge to endure prolonged periods of siege without relying on the outside world. The combination of storage chambers, defensive features and an internal water supply made Saryazd more than a fortress: it was a refuge designed to sustain life under difficult conditions. Food preservation was central to the castle's purpose. In an era marked by raids and insecurity, grain and other provisions could be as valuable as gold and silver. Residents stored their annual harvests, seeds and other essential supplies in sheltered chambers, protecting them against theft and the threat of famine.

Arched ceilings and ventilation openings helped create conditions suitable for storing provisions over extended periods. The design reflects a practical understanding of how to preserve food and maintain supplies in an arid environment, where survival often depended on careful planning and resource management.

Rows of small, orderly niches remain visible along the castle's walls. These recesses once held residents' possessions, including wheat, barley, jars of honey and oil, as well as other household necessities. Separate storage spaces helped keep each family's belongings apart, supporting an organized system of safekeeping and trust between residents and those responsible for the fortress.

The castle's vaulted mud-brick ceilings and overhead openings, originally designed to provide light and ventilation, further illustrate the thought that went into its storage areas. Although centuries of weathering and neglect have left many niches empty, they remain reminders of the goods and provisions once entrusted to these walls.

As the afternoon sun falls across the weathered structure, the full complexity of its architecture becomes apparent. Staircases wind through the building like interconnected veins, linking its different levels and leading deeper into the fortress. The arrangement was not merely aesthetic: its maze-like design was intended to make navigation difficult for outsiders and strengthen the castle's defenses.

Every narrow corridor and hidden turn contributed to a system in which familiarity with the layout offered a significant advantage. For those who knew the way, the passageways led to protected chambers; for potential intruders, they presented a confusing network of routes and obstacles.

Today, the Iranian tricolor flies above one of the castle's mud-brick towers, connecting the historic monument with the country's present. The crenellated parapets and geometric patterns on the tower walls reflect the craftsmanship of the people who built and maintained the fortress, while the flag serves as a symbol of continuity across generations.

Reading Room

New book explores untold stories of Takht-e Foulad

Iranica Desk

The book "Forty Unfinished Narratives of an Unfinished Place", compiled by Mostafa Heydari, offers a fresh perspective on Takht-e Foulad in Isfahan, exploring the historic site through human experience, art, architecture and spirituality. More than a historic cemetery, Takht-e Foulad preserves a significant part of Isfahan's cultural memory and urban identity.

Some places cannot be understood solely through the age of their buildings, the number of prominent figures buried there or a catalogue of their historical monuments. Their identity is shaped by layers of life, memory, art, belief and human experience. Takht-e Foulad is one such place. Behind its appearance as a historic cemetery lies a rich world of personal stories, spiritual experiences, architectural beauty and collective memory — a world whose full potential remains largely unknown to younger generations, according to Mehr News Agency.

Among the many historical and research publications devoted to Takht-e Foulad, "Forty Unfinished Narratives of an Unfinished Place", compiled by Mostafa Heydari, takes a distinctive approach. Rather than repeating encyclopaedic information or simply introducing notable figures and monuments, the book invites readers to explore people's lived experiences of the site. Forty writers, researchers and Isfahan scholars have contributed to the collection, accompanied by 21 architectural sketches created by 21 artists, in an effort to rediscover the site's cultural and artistic dimensions.



Heydari acknowledges the important contribution of historical and encyclopaedic publications, including the four-volume Encyclopaedia of Isfahan, to understanding Takht-e Foulad. However, he believes that another approach is needed alongside conventional research: one that conveys how people experience the site's spaces, architecture and atmosphere. Personal narratives, he argues, can complement documented history and offer new ways for audiences to connect with cultural heritage. The book is therefore intended not to compete with academic research, but to provide an alternative perspective on this historic landmark.

The title emphasizes the unfinished nature of Takht-e Foulad's many stories. This does not imply incompleteness in the sense of deficiency, but rather the inexhaustible potential of the site's meanings and narratives. According to Heydari, everyone who has encountered the place and developed a personal connection with it may have a different story to tell. Its physical, historical, spiritual and human dimensions offer continual opportunities for discovery, making the book a starting point for further publications and explorations.

Takht-e Foulad contains around 50 Takyehs — distinctive Iranian religious and funerary complexes — some of which are particularly well known for their distinguished occupants, architectural features or historical significance. These include the Mir Fendereski, Seyyed al-Iraq, Madar Shahzadeh, Khansari and Khatounabadi complexes.

In selecting subjects for the book, the contributors also sought to explore less familiar locations. Even demolished sites, such as the Halabian Takyeh, are included in an effort to preserve the historical memory of places that no longer exist. The diversity of subjects and perspectives helps prevent repetition and reveals the many different dimensions of Takht-e Foulad.

One of the book's defining features is its combination of personal experience and literary storytelling with historical and scholarly information. The contributions approach the site from a variety of perspectives. One examines Takht-e Foulad through the lens of sociology and product design, while another, entitled The Passageway of Takht-e Foulad, explores visitors' experiences from the perspective of tourism. Other narratives focus on the site's artistic heritage, including architecture, calligraphy and stone carving. In this approach, research provides a foundation for storytelling, while narrative brings historical findings to readers in a different and more accessible form.

The book also seeks to challenge the conventional perception of Takht-e Foulad as a place associated exclusively with death and mourning. Beyond commemorating the dead, the historic complex serves as a place for solitude, prayer, contemplation, tranquillity and engagement with history and art. On Thursdays and Fridays in particular, visitors come to pray, reflect or find respite from the pressures of urban life, demonstrating the site's continuing connection with the everyday lives of Isfahan's residents.

The Isfahani scholar Jalaleddin Homai also highlighted the site's contrasting qualities, describing a place that can evoke sorrow while also offering enjoyment and recreation, alongside asceticism and worship. The combination of distinguished figures buried there, valuable architecture, artistic works and social beliefs creates an experience that extends beyond a conventional visit to a cemetery. For many visitors, Takht-e Foulad becomes a place of personal meaning and spiritual connection.

Despite these qualities, Takht-e Foulad has yet to receive the prominence it deserves in the presentation of Isfahan's tourist attractions, and it remains unfamiliar even to some local residents. In addition to its historic Takyehs, the complex contains Chelleh Khanes (traditional places of spiritual retreat), mosques, cisterns, inscriptions, gravestones, calligraphic works and religious traditions, each reflecting aspects of the city's social and cultural history.



Features dating from different historical periods, from the Ilkhanid and Safavid eras to the Qajar period and the contemporary age, make the site a valuable resource for understanding Isfahan's historical and cultural development.

Initiatives such as Takht-e Foulad tours, research programs and guided visits to its Takyehs have helped raise awareness of this heritage in recent years. Nevertheless, much of its cultural, artistic and tourism potential remains to be fully explored. Historic cemeteries can be understood as open-air museums of social history and anthropology, preserving evidence of a community's past, beliefs and ways of life while helping sustain its collective identity.