Pigeon towers in central Iran

Meybod Pigeon Tower, Yazd Province
wikipedia.org

Varzaneh Pigeon Tower, Isfahan Province
wikimapia.org

Mardavij Pigeon Tower, Isfahan Province
hamgardi.com

When people see dovecote or pigeon tower, many of them think of a military fortification. But it is a structure intended to house pigeons or doves.
Dovecotes may be free-standing structures in a variety of shapes, or built into the end of a house or barn. They generally contain pigeonholes for the birds to nest, varzanehnight.ir wrote.

Why did people build them?

During the 16th and 17th centuries, particularly around the time of the Safavid Dynasty, Iranians built a large number of towers to house pigeons.
At its peak, the city of Isfahan had about 3,000 pigeon towers.
Pigeons were important for their eggs, flesh, and droppings. Most importantly, farmers used pigeon droppings to fertilize their fields. But now, every farmer uses chemical fertilizer. It is also said that some people used pigeon's eggs to make their babies start talking. For example, when a child was old enough to talk but still wasn't able to, the parents gave him or her pigeon's eggs to eat to help the process of talking.
Also, since many robbers were stealing crops, the pigeon tower was a safe place to store them.

What does it look like inside?

The typical pigeon tower is cylindrical, constructed of unfired mud brick, lime plaster and gypsum. The towers range from 10 to 22 meters in diameter and stand 18 or more meters high. Because many animals prey on pigeons, the towers were constructed as impenetrable fortresses that could shelter the pigeons from predators. The small size of the entrances prohibits large birds such as hawks, owls or crows from entering.
There are many nests inside the pigeon tower so the pigeon couples could live safely and protect their chicks. When the chicks get old enough they go to a new nest and no longer live with their parents. Varzaneh Pigeon Tower in Isfahan Province contains 8,000 nests, which means 16,000 pigeons could live there at the same time.
To avoid having a pigeon's dropping fall on the nest below, the tower was built with an incline so the droppings would fall directly to the bottom.

What is the white line around the tower?

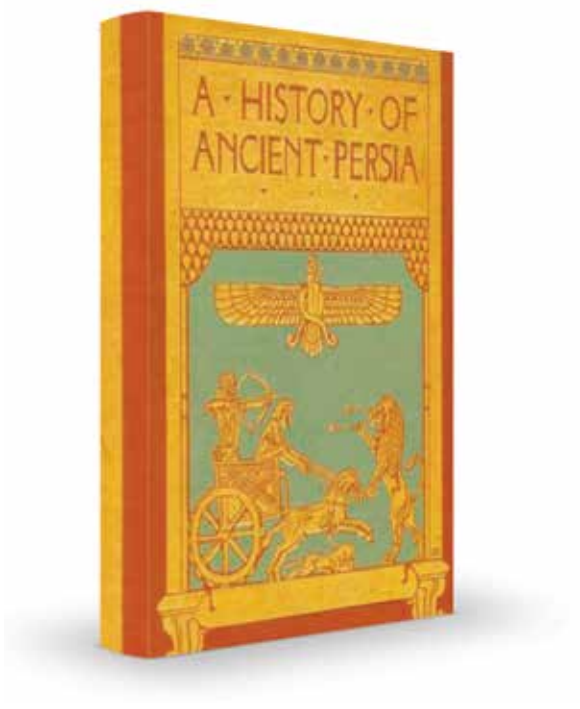
There were always some snakes around which could easily climb up the tower and get inside and eat pigeons. So, people learned they could paint a wide line around the tower so the snakes were no longer able to climb up.
To protect the pigeons from attacking birds, the entrance holes were built so small that only pigeons were able to go through them.
For further protection, wolves' or hyenas' heads were hung close to the tower so the attacking birds would be afraid to approach.

Where can we see them?

In central Iran, you can see a lot of them near the farms. The great French traveler, Jean Chardin, has mentioned in his book that there were over 3,000 pigeon towers around Isfahan.
The environs of Isfahan are dotted with bizarre but very picturesque pigeon towers. In contrast to a European dovecote, which often housed pigeons to be used as meat, in Iran the pigeons were never eaten. Here, pigeon towers were used as guano factories to produce fertilizer for the melons that have always been the pride of the region. The guano was also used in the manufacture of gunpowder.

Iran, a prehistoric land

The whole Near East, its plains and mountains, has been inhabited by man since the Stone Age, and compared with European sites of the same age the oriental sites show a high degree of culture.
With the Aeneolithic Age, the introduction of copper, a separation begins. The mountain lands, occupied since the Palaeolithic Period, and hence more advanced, remain behind. The alluvial lands like Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria afforded easier conditions for settling in villages and towns.
Iran, from this period, was to Babylonia as northern Europe was to the Mediterranean countries in the second and the early first millennia BCE. After 3,000 BCE Babylonia enters into the light of history, producing writing that we can read, whereas Iran does not seem to have taken part in the intellectual developments that led to writing.
That does not mean that there had been no intercourse, no cultural contact; on the contrary, connexions must have been common, for the mountains owned the metal that distinguishes the period. And just as in later historical times, amicable relations must always have alternated with hostile ones, with the tendency of extending political influence in either direction.
In Iran, too, documents may be found, and a few of them have been found, that will spread the light of history on those lands. But, at present, during the third and second millennia Iran is for us a prehistoric land.
Western Iran, in this old application of the name, includes Armenia, which, with its prodigal wealth of metals and its central position between the lands of old oriental history and Asia Minor, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and South Russia, must be regarded as the true home of aeneolithic metallurgy. The farther back in history, the greater becomes the importance of this almost unexplored country.
We know little about the race and language of the population during this remote period. Relatively best known is Elam, a part of the alluvial plains projecting into the mountains which has always been the object of contention between the mountaineers and the plainsmen, and developed, at least as early as old Sumer, a civilization of its own with a peculiar script, called proto-Elamite.
It is unknown how far this script may have been used in the interior of the country. Although it is not generally admitted, its is believed that the Elamites, their northern neighbours the Kossaeans, farther in the east the Ellipi, to the north the Lullubi and Guti, and adjoining them the Urartu, which means all the peoples of the western border of the highland, and, from archaeological reasons, at least a great part of the inhabitants of that highland itself, belonged to one and the same ethnic and linguistic group. This group — again an opinion not yet strictly provable and not generally accepted — was related to the aboriginal inhabitants of Mesopotamia (a term excluding Iraq) and parts of Asia Minor, whether they are to be called Mitanni, Hurri, or Hittites.
If a name is wanted for the pre-Iranian population of Iran, it is advisable to speak of Caspians. This name we can trace in ancient times over many parts of the plateau, and it is still living in the name of the Caspian Sea.
Only a few monuments show us how these Caspians appeared. One of the three rock-sculptures at Sarpul, on the Baghdad-Hamedan road, shows a king of the Lullu, called Annubanini, before a goddess with the Akkadian name Inninna. The king puts his foot on a conquered enemy, while the goddess leads two more, and in a lower register, of smaller scale, there are six more captives. The inscription, in Akkadian, has been deciphered, and fixes, in harmony with the style of the sculpture, the time of the monument as that of Naram-Sin of Akkad. On his famous stele in the Louvre, the masterpiece of all Sumerian art, that king is himself represented as conqueror of the same Lullu. If that conquest had been a lasting one, the rock-sculptures ought to be somewhat older; allowing for the oscillation of 120 years in all the dates of the first half of the third millennium, that would mean about 2670 or 2550 BCE.



The above is a lightly edited version of part a chapter entitled, 'The pre- Achaemenid and the Achaemenid epochs', from a book entitled, ' A History of Ancient Persia', published by Oxford University Press.