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ACHAEMENID DYNASTY III.
CULTURE
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iii. Culture

Religion. The religion founded by Zarathushtra/Zoroaster had its root in the old Indo-Iranian (Aryan) religion; in this system the divine and the human spheres were placed under a higher order called *ṛtám* (Av. *aša*, OPers. **ṛta*), which was realized as right and truth. The supreme god in Zoroaster's system was Ahura Mazdā (OPers. *Auramazdā*), the "Wise Lord" or "Lord Wisdom," who had created the world and disposed it. Fundamental was the antithesis of truth (proclaimed by Zoroaster) and falsehood (attacked by him), from which were developed, according to Zoroaster's cosmological speculation, the dualism between light and darkness, god and demon (i.e., Ahura Mazdā and Angra Mainyu), good and evil, etc.

No doubt Darius was an ardent and devout worshipper of Ahura Mazdā. The "great god" (*baga vazṛka*) Ahura Mazdā is the only one Darius calls by name, although he invokes the "other gods, who are" (*aniyāha bagāha tayaiy hantiy*, DB IV.6l, 62ff.). His successors, by contrast, name other deities as well. Ahura Mazdā created heaven and earth, made the Achaemenids kings, and bestowed on them their kingdom (see above). It is "by the favor of Ahura Mazdā" (*vašnā Auramazdāha*) that the kings were kings and that they did what they did, as they themselves declare. The kings begged Ahura Mazdā's support and protection for themselves, for their clan, their empire, their deeds. Darius

particularizes this in DPd 15-18: “May Ahura Mazdā protect this country from a (hostile) army, from bad harvest, from falsehood (i.e., riot and rebellion).” He speaks in intimate terms: “Unto me Ahura Mazdā was a friend” (DSj 4); “mine (is) Ahura Mazdā, Ahura Mazdā’s (am) I” (DSk 4), so that we may speak of a rather personal relation between this king and his supreme god. The moralistic tone in some Darius inscriptions, particularly when he urges the doing of right and truth (cf. Herodotus 1.136.2 about education in veracity and 1.138.1 about the ignominy of lying), often recalls Zoroaster’s own ethical teachings in the *Gāthās*. The Achaemenids might thus be understood as real Zoroastrians, although those elements of their religion which seem to be Zoroastrian may also be construed as reflections of the pre-Zoroastrian stage of Iranian religion. Moreover, it is certain that Darius was no missionary for Zoroastrianism. Like Cyrus, who restored the former position of the Babylonian Marduk cult, Darius excelled in tolerance of the cultural-religious heterogeneity of the peoples of the empire; this benefited the Egyptians, Greeks (cf. the Gadatas letter), Babylonians, and Jews, to whom the return to Jerusalem and the reconstruction of the Temple, granted by Cyrus in 538 B.C., was confirmed by Darius. The basis of this tolerance, however, is not apparent. (See, most recently, J. Duchesne-Guillemin, “La religion des Achéménides” in Walser 1972, pp. 59-82; idem, “Le dieu de Cyrus,” *Acta Iranica* 3, 1974, pp. 11-21; M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, HO I.8.1.2, vol. II, *Under the Achaemenians*, Leiden, 1982). See Achaemenid Religion for a detailed discussion of the subject.

Art (see also Art, Achaemenid). Achaemenid art is a solemn and dignified imperial art; on a hitherto unknown world-wide scale, serving as a glorification of the dynasty. It referred entirely to kingship, especially since Old Iranian religion, at least Zoroastrian religion, did not know temples. The enormous extension of the Achaemenid empire brought about an equally enormous development of splendor, particularly in architecture. The climax of Achaemenid art came when Persian power was at its height, when abundant gold and silver flowed into the royal treasury from the whole empire and the greatest kings of this dynasty endeavored to have palaces and capital cities larger and finer than those of their Babylonian and Assyrian forerunners. Very extensive building activity is to be observed in Susa, Pasargadae, and especially Persepolis.

In general, Achaemenid art is a blend of many elements of various origin (e.g., the column of Mediterranean provenance or palace ground plans in

Babylonian style). This is not strange, since materials and artisans were brought from all provinces (see the Susa building inscription DSf, cited below). Achaemenid art followed various old and firm traditions, to a considerable extent those of older Near Eastern art, and was eclectic in taking over foreign features. Yet it combined single borrowed elements into a new whole and possessed "an undeniable unity and individuality" (Nylander 1970, p. 12). The participation of Greek masters favored the overcoming of Mesopotamian formal and figurative traditions, but individual names unfortunately are unknown to us. As long as the effect and the newly created whole was Persian in character, the Achaemenids were tolerant in artistic matters, too.

The history of Achaemenid art is bipartite; it falls into an "archaic" period represented chiefly by the monuments of Pasargadae, which Cyrus the Great had erected, and a "classic" period especially manifest in the monuments of Persepolis and the royal tombs at Naqš-e Rostam (both initiated by Darius) and remaining practically unchanged for two centuries. There are great differences between these two periods in form, style, and many other respects. Pasargadae is, in a sense, "the birth-place of Achaemenian art" (Nylander 1970, p. 21, and passim). It became the new residence of the king of a people that entered suddenly into the light of history. In the very heart of Fārs, Cyrus fostered bold experiment, which created in Pasargadae unusually wide-spread, unfortified grounds with simple buildings. (The strong Ionic influence on these has been worked out systematically by Nylander 1970). Pasargadae with Cyrus' tomb, a monumental gate house, an audience hall and a residential palace with large column halls (see D. Stronach, *Pasargadae*, Oxford, 1978) was a holy place of the Achaemenids, where later kings were crowned (see Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 3.1-6 on the coronation ceremonies of Artaxerxes II).

With regard to the development of Achaemenid architecture, Pasargadae paved the way for Persepolis, now Taḵt-e Jamšīd "Throne of Jamshid," the city Darius founded ("formerly no fortress was built here," DPf 9ff., Elamite only); Xerxes I and Artaxerxes I finished it according to his ideas. On a great terrace at the foot of Kūh-e Raḥmat ("Mountain of Mercy"), it formed a ritual and representative center on a hitherto unknown scale, a palatial city appropriate to this powerful world-ruling empire (see E. F. Schmidt, *Persepolis* I-III, Chicago, 1953-1970). The splendid buildings of Persepolis, in whose construction artisans from all satrapies were engaged (as we see from the wages assigned to them in the Elamite tablets from the Persepolis treasuries),

are the culmination of this art and to a certain degree the distinctive mark of the empire. The ground plan of the Persepolis terrace (approx. 450 by 300 m), a homogeneous whole, is characterized by grandiose and representational construction, sense of space, and appropriateness; with its magnificent architecture and decorative elements it is no doubt one of the greatest artistic productions of ancient times. The typically Achaemenid monumental palaces such as the Hall of a Hundred Columns (70 by 70 m, the largest of all Achaemenid palaces) or the Audience Hall (OPers. *apadāna*) are still impressive, even in their ruined state. Notable are the tall (nearly 20m), slender columns with their animal protome capitals; the rich ornamental reliefs, partly based on Mesopotamian or Elamite patterns in their representations of the king (particularly in the so-called Audience Relief); and the monotonous but impressive parade of innumerable soldiers of the imperial army and tribute-bearing delegations of the nations, which decorate staircases and monolithic door-frames and symbolize the power of the multinational empire. Persepolis was of special significance for the Persian kings, who celebrated here their highest feast, the New Year's (Nowrūz) festival at the vernal equinox, and received at this occasion the gifts of the delegates from all the provinces.

One hour northwest of Persepolis, at Naqš-e Rostam ("Rostam's Picture"), there are four tombs of Achaemenid kings carved into the precipitous rock of the Ḥosayn Kūh. They are all of the same type, the later ones (presumably by Xerxes I, Artaxerxes I, and Darius II) exactly copying the oldest one cut by Darius I (identified by its inscriptions, DNa-d). The huge tomb was destined for the king and eight relatives; its front, in the form of a recessed Greek cross, depicts in its central part the sculptured facade of a palace (22.5 m high, in front of the tomb proper) with tall columns (recalling Median and Urartian traditions). On top of this the king stands before a fire altar on a platform supported by the representatives of the thirty nations belonging to the empire. Similar tombs are to be found above the Persepolis terrace on the slopes of Kūh-e Raḥmat (attributed to Artaxerxes II and III) and southwest of the terrace in an angle of the rock (unfinished [that of Darius III?]). Near Naqš-e Raǰab (4 km north of Persepolis), remains of the unfinished tomb of (presumably) Cambyses II have been found; thus we can state that all Achaemenid kings were interred in their mother country Fārs, the corpse of a king deceased abroad being transported there in state (cf. Ctesias 15, sec. 44J.).

In Susa, the empire's political capital and old Elamite residence, the official

cosmopolitan art of the Achaemenids is equally evident. Here Darius constructed a strong citadel in the old acropolis and a monumental palace on a large terrace; within that was a majestic audience hall (burnt down under Artaxerxes I). Government buildings were presumably in the so-called “Royal City” (southeast of the palace), which has not been excavated. The cooperation of the diverse nations in the construction of these buildings is attested in the building inscription DSf, an important text for the history of Achaemenid civilization: “The digging of the foundations, filling up the mud-ground with rubble [for the palace with immense stone columns intended by Darius, after the model of Cyrus’ buildings in Pasargadae, at a place where formerly there were only buildings of clay bricks] and molding of the bricks has been done by Babylonians; cedar timber [used for the framework of the roof] was brought by Assyrians from Lebanon to Babylon and from there to Susa by Carians and Ionians; sissoo timber was brought from Gandhara and Carmania; the gold wrought here was brought from Lydia and Bactria; lapis lazuli and carnelian wrought here were brought from Sogdiana; the turquoise wrought here was brought from Chorasmia; silver and ebony were brought from Egypt; the colors for the wall-reliefs were brought from Ionia; the ivory wrought here was brought from Nubia, India, and Arachosia; the stone columns wrought here were brought from Elam. The stonemasons were Ionians and Lydians; the goldsmiths were Medes and Egyptians; the woodcarvers were Lydians and Egyptians; the brick layers [of the colored, glazed brick reliefs decorating the walls only in Susa, this continuing a Babylonian tradition] were Babylonians; the wall-painters were Medes and Egyptians” (DSf 28-55). Thus the appearance of many foreign elements in technique and realization is not surprising, but they are applied by Persians autonomously and with a new conception for their own designs, so that the final product was Persian.

The representation of the omnipotent king and kingship is at its highest in the rock relief of Bīsotūn (with its important trilingual inscription) at a place holy from time immemorial (as its name reveals: Iranian *Bagastāna “Place of the gods,” attested only in Greek, *Bagístanon óros* [Ctesias 1, see 13.1.2J. = Diodorus 2.13.1-2]) near the so-called “Gate of Asia.” This monumental relief, some 66m above the road, was sculptured by Darius’ order in 52l-519 B.C. It represents the king standing on the left (with two attendants behind him, his bow-bearer and his spear-bearer), his foot on the body of the defeated Gaumāta, and facing a line of nine captive rebels. Their hands are tied behind their backs and a rope around their necks links them together; above the whole is the symbol of Ahura Mazdā.

The Darius statue newly found at Susa gives a little insight into Achaemenid round sculpture, of which little is known beyond the report of Plutarch, *Alexander* 37.5, that a great statue of Xerxes in Persepolis (?) was overthrown by Alexander's soldiers. Greek statuary was much prized by the Achaemenids and was abundantly removed from Greece by Xerxes to his residences (cf. Arrian 7.19.2); the torso of a beautiful Greek statue has even been found in Persepolis (Schmidt, *Persepolis* II, p. 66). A great number of beautiful small Achaemenid objects are known: metalwork, above all tableware in gold and silver (*rhyta*, vessels, plates, cult utensils, etc.), jewelry (earrings, bracelets, etc.), weapons (daggers), seals and gems cut in the old Mesopotamian manner but with Iranian figures (e.g., with the king on a chariot fighting a lion or before a fire altar and with the symbol of Ahura Mazdā). All this is characterized by an animal style, as is typical for the Scythians; but, besides ancient Near Eastern animals such as the lion, bull, griffin, ibex, etc., there are typically Iranian ones such as horse or camel. The world's oldest preserved carpets, found in a kurgan of the Scythian necropolis at Pazyryk in the Altai region, belong, according to their motifs, to Achaemenid times (about 500 B.C.).

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