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ASTŌDĀN
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ASTŌDĀN, "bone-receptacle, ossuary" (Persian *sotōdān*), from *ast–* "oss, bone" and *–dāna* "container, receptacle." The term has an important place in the vocabulary of ancient Iranian funerary rites. The Old Iranian word *daxma* (from **dafma* from IE **dhmbh*) "bury" (K. Hoffman in *ZVS* [*KZ*] 79, 1965, p. 238) indicates that Iranians practiced inhumation (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 109). Later, exposure of the dead became widespread among Central Asians and East Iranians, and was enjoined by the Avesta. According to the *Vendidad* (*Vd.* 7.1-9, 25-27, 54-59), the corpse (*nasu*) is possessed by the death-demon (*druj-nasu*), and is thus capable of defiling the holy creations of fire, water, and earth. Consequently, it is anathema to cremate the dead (*Vd.* 1.17; 7.74), or to bury it (ibid., 1.13), or to cast it into the water (ibid., 7.25-27); instead, it must be carried to the highest places (i.e., the *daxma*s of later periods), where corpse-devouring birds may swiftly remove all that is corruptible, of the body, leaving only the cleaned bones (ibid.). These are to remain exposed to the sun and rain (ibid., 7.49-51). After one year they are considered clean and non-polluting (ibid., 8.33-34, 45-46). Then they may be taken to a receptacle (*uz.dāna*, rendered in Pahlavi as *uzdahist* and explained in the *Vendidad* (*Vd.* 5.6) as *astōdān* (see *AirWb*. col. 412) built of permanent materials, and set in a place inaccessible to dogs, wolves, foxes, and rain water (*Vd.* 6.49-50). When someone dies in a hut or tent (e.g., among the nomads or during expeditions), the relatives are to search for a *daxma* where the corpse can be exposed, but if such a place is far away and they find it easier to remove their hut or tent, they are to leave the body on the spot and abandon their dwelling (ibid., 8.1-3). Similarly, the construction of a receptacle is obligatory only for the wealthy;

those with little means are allowed to lay the bones on the ground, without couch or cushions, exposed to the light of the sun (ibid., 6.51).

The earliest attestation of the term *astōdān* is in the early fourth century B.C. Aramaic epitaph of Artima, son of Ǝrəzifiya (see Artyphius no. 4), a Persian official in Limyra (Lycia) and almost certainly a cousin of Cyrus the Younger (see Shahbazi, *Monuments*, pp. 111-24 with full references; see also A. D. H. Bivar, "A "Satrap" of Cyrus the Younger", *NC*, 1961, pp. 119ff.). The tomb is cut in the rock, and has a thick entablature 3.20 m long; it is provided with two small doors (95 by 70 cm) which lead into a pair of tiny square chambers (2.10 m on each side and 1.20 m in height) separated by a thick wall. Into the floor of the chamber to the left is cut a pit 80 cm deep, 130 cm long and 68 cm wide; a slightly wider pit is cut in the chamber B to the right. The Aramaic epitaph is carved in "Imperial Aramaic" in one line above the doorway of chamber A, while chamber B bears one line of Greek inscribed some sixty years later than the Aramaic epitaph. Both are partly damaged (Shahbazi, *Monuments*, pp. 111-14). The Aramaic text reads: *ʾstwdnh znhʾrtym brʾrzpy ʿbdʿḥr mn zym . . .* -(70cm) *–[zy]lh* "Artima, the son of ʾRZPY made this *astōdāna*; anyone who . . . (here came an imprecatory phrase) . . . (of) him" (see R. S. Hansen, "Aramaic Funerary and Boundary Inscriptions from Asia Minor," *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem* 192, Dec. 1968, pp. 6ff.; Shahbazi, op.cit., pp. 114-15). The late fourth-century B.C. Greek epitaph is translated as follows: "Artimas, the son of *Arziphius, of Limyra, and the great-grandfather of Artimas of Corydalla first constructed this tomb (*taphos*) for himself and his descendants" (Bivar apud Shahbazi, op. cit., p. 119). The pits inside the tomb-chambers are too small to accommodate full-grown bodies, and Artimas had in fact hewn this small tomb as a family sepulcher. The purely Iranian religious term *astōdāna* was retained in the Aramaic text because it denoted a particular type of funerary place for which a suitable equivalent could not be found.

These points prove a case of the exposure of the dead and the placing of the disarticulated bones into *astōdān*s, in the same way as ordained by the *Vendidad* (ibid., pp. 129ff.). By analogy, many of the rock-cut tombs in Iran and Anatolia dating from the Achaemenid period (see H. v. Gall, "Zu den "medischen" Felsgräbern in Nordwestiran und Iraqi Kurdistan," *Archäologischer Anzeiger*, 1966, pp. 19-43), as well as similar ones from Hellenistic, Parthian, and Sasanian times, which are provided with funerary pits too small to receive articulated bodies, must have been *astōdān*s

"ossuaries." A good example of this type is the rock-cut tomb at Qyz Qapān in Iraqi Kurdistan (C. G. Edmonds, "A Tomb in Kurdistan," *Iraq* 1, 1934, pp. 183ff.) which dates from the fourth century B.C. (E. Porada, *The Art of Ancient Iran*, New York, 1965, pp. 138-39). This has three chambers, each with a pit, and its facade is ornamented by two magi flanking a fire altar in obvious immitation of the scene sculptured on the royal Achaemenid tombs (Shahbazi, *Monuments*, p. 133).

Some rock-cut tombs, especially those of the Achaemenid kings, have, however, stone sarcophagi which were clearly intended as burial cists. Indeed, Herodotus testifies to two methods of the disposal of the dead among the Persians: exposure and embalming. "It is said that the body of a male Persian is never buried until it is torn either by a dog or a bird of prey. That the magi have this custom is beyond a doubt, for they practice it openly. The dead bodies of those who do not follow this are covered with wax, and then buried in the ground" (Herodotus 1.140, confirmed by Strabo, *Geography* 15.3.20). The wealthy who did not practice exposure, avoided the pollution of the holy creations of fire, water and earth by the first embalming the corpse and placing it in a solid coffin, and only then entombing it, often in a stone (rock-cut) sepulcher. The royal Achaemenid tombs were thus prepared as a result of wishing to obey in a practical way the ordinance of the *Vendidad*. Hence, they must be classified as special *astōdān*s (Shahbazi, op. cit., pp. 130ff.), and in fact the Aramaic inscription carved on the tomb of Darius the Great seems to attest (1.10) the very term *[ʾ] stwd [nh]* (R. N. Frye, "The "Aramaic" Inscription on the Tomb of Darius," *Iranica Antiqua* 17, 1982, pl. III). They were called *astōdān*s even when their origins had become obscure (see *Moǰmal*, pp. 461ff.). Naturally, under exceptional circumstances, such as during the course of a campaign, the ordinary burial was practiced by the Persians (Herodotus 7.117; 8.24; 9.84; for instances of Persian burial see Shahbazi, op. cit., p. 127).

According to Justin (41.3.5), "the common method of disposing of the dead among the Parthians is to leave their bodies to be torn by birds and dogs; when the bones have been stripped of flesh they are buried." However, the Parthians practiced both the inhumation and exposure (J. M. Unvala, *Observation on the Religion of the Parthians*, Bombay, 1925, pp. 29ff.; R. Ghirshman, *Iran from the earliest times to the Islamic Conquest*, Harmondsworth, 1954, pp. 270f.; M. Colledge, *The Parthians*, 1967, p. 100; S. Kāmbaḵš-e Fard, "Les fouilles de Kangāvar, le temple d'Anāhitā," *Bāstān-šenāsī wa honar-e Īrān* 6, 1350 Š./1971, pp. 10ff. esp. 28f. (Persian), and 10-13

(French résumé). The Arsacid kings were entombed in the “Royal Tombs” first in Nysa (Ashkhabad/ʿEšqābād: Isodor of Charax, *Parthian Stations*, tr. W. H. Schoff, 1914, p. 9) and then at Arbela (Dio Cassius 79.1.2). Since their Achaemenid predecessors as well as their Sasanian successors used embalming, it is likely that they, too, used the method of preserving the body.

As for the Sasanian period, exposure of the dead as ordained by the *Vendidad* appears to have been the usual practice (Procopius, *Persian Wars* 2.11.34; Agathias 2.22f.; see in detail Inostrantcev, “Burial Customs,” pp. 9ff.), and there are many rock-cut *astōdān*s in various parts of Iran, especially in the Persepolis region, which confirm the information of the literary sources. These *astōdān*s vary in size, from a little hole of 30 by 45 cm and a depth of 50 cm (a good example is cut near the investiture relief of Ardašīr I at Naqš-e Rostam) to small chambers (e.g., one at Āḵor-e Rostam near Persepolis) to large labyrinthine tombs of Tādvān in Fārs (M. T. Moṣṭafawī, *Eqlīm-e Pārs*, Tehran, 1954, pp. 86-87). The cave at Bīšāpūr is plausibly identified as the resting place of Šāpūr I (R. Ghirshman, *Persian Art: The Parthian and Sasanian Dynasties*, New York, 1962, p. 166). Freestanding *astōdān*s also were prepared, mostly in clay (see C. Trever, *Terracottas from Afrasiāb*, Moscow and Leningrad, 1934, for a good survey), and were ornamented with the figures of the dead or of divine beings. Stone *astōdān*s are known; one from Bīšāpūr (now in Tehran Archeological Museum) is a square block approximately 50 by 50 cm, with a pit some 22 cm deep, and bears on its outer sides the sculptured figures of four deities, in whom Ghirshman saw Mithra, Zurvān, Ātar and Anāhitā (Ghirshman, loc. cit., with pl. 210, and in *Artibus Asiae* 22, 1948, pp. 292ff. with figs. 1-7). Another fine example from Turkistan comes from Bianayman and is now in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad; its façades are decorated with figures of divine beings standing in arcades bordered by rosette bands (ibid., with figs, 8-10).

The exposure of the dead was so widespread under the Sasanians that its adoption by aliens was a sign of conversion to Zoroastrianism (Procopius 1.12.3-4). However, the nobility and members of the royal family disposed of their kin by having the corpse embalmed with musk, camphor and ambergris; and having placed it in a coffin, they deposited it in a chamber tomb with the person’s precious belongings; this tomb they called either *daḵma* or *astōdān*. This method avoided the pollution of the earth which arose from simple inhumation. It was therefore considered entirely different from burial in a grave (*gūr*), practiced by the Christians, which brought the lifeless body into

contact with the earth (see Shahbazi, *Monuments*, pp. 128-29, 154-57). Even after the fall of the Sasanians, this custom continued among the Buyid kings and nobility, and gave rise to the construction of large and magnificent Shiʿite mausoleums.

The Islamic conquest (mid-seventh century A.D.) brought about a drastic change in the practice of exposure. Muslim interference, often resulting in persecution of Zoroastrians, made the preparation and maintenance of *astōdān*s more and more difficult. This situation led to the construction of what may be termed "communal *astōdān*s," i.e., walled spaces erected outside settlements in which disarticulated bones could be preserved; thus the medieval *daḵma*s ("tower of silence"), which combined the exposure places and ossuaries of the earlier times, emerged as the single characteristic funerary building of later Zoroastrians. Even these gradually fell out of use with the progressive decrease in Zoroastrian population, and in this century, under alien communal influence; today, only the Parsis of India still retain these *daḵma*s (see further Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, London, 1979, pp. 175f.; Modi, *Ceremonies*; R. M. Unvala, *Rivāyāt-i Dārāb Hormazdyār*, Bombay, 1922, pp. 240-43). The Islamic authors use the term *astōdān* indiscriminately, as synonymous with words meaning "grave, chamber ossuary, mausoleum, or rock-cut tomb." In the famous semi-distich by Rūdakī, "The dead will not come back alive, the dead went into *astōdān*," the term means grave. In Neẓām-al-molk's *Sīar-al-molūk* (ed. H. Darke, Tehran, 1347 Š./1968, p. 226) the *astōdān* which a wealthy Zoroastrian of Ray built (tenth century) on a lofty hilltop with much trouble and expense and which the Muslims soon seized, was almost certainly a true ossuary provided with a monumental covering. The same applies to the *Setōdān* which Gayūmarṯ is said to have prepared on the mountain near Balḵ for his son Sīāmak (Baḷʿamī, *Tārīḵ*, p. 125f.). And when the author of *Moǰmal-al-tawārīḵ* (pp. 461ff.) attributes the rock-cut tombs of the Achaemenid kings at Naqš-e Rostam to some Avestan kings, he terms them *sotōdān*s. In the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsī many instances of the term *sotōdān* signify family or private mausoleums; sometimes the word is used synonymously with *daḵma* in the same context (Shahbazi, *Monuments*, pp. 154ff.).

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