



ĀTAŠDĀN

ĀTAŠDĀN (Zoroastrian Pahlavi) “place of fire, fire-holder,” designates the altar-like repository for a sacred wood-fire in a Zoroastrian place of worship. *Ādurgāh*, *ātašgāh*, and *ādišt* (today *ādošt*) are synonyms of *ātašdān*; *ādišt* (literally “fire-place”) is also attested in the Zoroastrian Pahlavi books for a domestic hearth. Nowadays the Zoroastrians of Yazd commonly use the term *kalak*, which is a dialect word for a brazier or container of fire, and those of Kermān employ *maḡreb*, a word whose origin has still to be satisfactorily explained. The other Zoroastrian terms all appear to be factual ones, without the specifically religious connotations attached to the standard Western rendering of “fire-altar.” No Avestan term is known, but the temple cult of fire was evidently a relatively late introduction in Zoroastrianism (see under *ātaš*).

An object which looks as if it might be a prototype of one of the standard forms of *ātašdān* has been excavated in a Median building attributed to the eighth century B.C. at Nūš-e Jān Tepe, Hamadān. This altar is made of mud-brick, and coated with fine white plaster, which gives it the appearance of stone. The square shaft is surmounted at about waist-height by a broad stepped top, each of the four steps projecting outward above the one below. In the top is a shallow bowl, with traces of charring round the rim. Its cavity is too small to have held an ever-burning wood-fire, which needs a deep bed of hot ashes to sustain it; what rites this Median altar served remain unknown. Fragments of two, or possibly three, *ātašdāns* which somewhat resemble it in profile have been discovered as surface finds at the Achaemenid site of Pasargadae. These, as reconstructed, consisted of a three-stepped top and a



three-stepped base, joined by a slender rectangular shaft. The distinctive feature which shows them to have been Zoroastrian fire-holders, and not altars, is that the top was hollow, i.e., designed evidently to hold a quantity of ash. These fire-holders were finely wrought in white stone, and have been assigned on technical grounds to the time of Cyrus the Great (sixth century B.C.). The impressive pair of plinths which still stand on the Pasargadae plain are attributed to the same period, but are evidently not *ātašdāns*, for not only do they lack a deep fire-bowl, but excavation has established that they have always stood unsheltered in the open, and so could not have served the cult of ever-burning fire.

Fire-holders with exactly the same profile as the Pasargadae ones appear on the funerary monuments of Darius the Great and his successors. There the king is shown standing before an *ātašdān* which bears a pyramid of leaping flames. The *ātašdān* has again a three-stepped top and base, and the shaft is now decorated with threefold recessed vertical panels. A humbler mud-brick fire-holder of the later Achaemenid period has been found in a house in a farming village near Dahān-e Gōlāmān in Sīstān. This has a big broad top with six steps, set on a slender round shaft which rises from a small, plain base. In the top is “a central hemispherical receptacle for the fire” (Scerrato, p. 727). In another house in this village there was found a low, square “stepped pyramid” (ibid.), with the third, and topmost, step being hollow. This too the excavators have identified as a fire-holder. If this is so, it is of an otherwise unattested type.

Representations of fire-holders appearing on seals of the Achaemenid period show two types. One is similar to that of the royal monuments. The other consists of a broad rectangular column, usually with a crenellated top, whose merlons have presumably the function of containing the embers. In some representations a thin column of flame appears between them; and sometimes a person or persons appear beside the column, reverencing the fire. These fire-holders are without known antecedent.

Another fire-holder was recovered from the ruins of the fire temple on the [Kūh-e Kāvāja](#) Sīstān. This may have been coeval with the Sasanian building, or have survived from the older Parthian structure there. It again was of the Pasargadae type, with three-stepped top and base; but it seems subsequently to have disappeared, and no measurements are recorded for the depth of its bowl. Otherwise fire-holders of the Parthian period are known only from representations. A carving at Bisotūn (Behistun) shows a worshipper in



Parthian dress beside a small Pasargadae-type one; and another fire-holder of this type is shown on a seal with a Parthian inscription from Seleucia-on-the-Tigris (*Survey of Persian Art* I, p. 473 fig. 126, t). An engraved gem from Nisa shows a worshipper venerating fire rising from a holder with slim shaft, plain top and two-stepped base, above which two projections spring out like upward-pointing branches on either side. A variety of fire-holders of different shapes and sizes are shown on the *Frātadāra coins of Pārs during the Parthian period. The first series portrays so-called “tower altars,” solid rectangular blocks rising above the heads of the worshippers who stand beside them. These “altars” are set on two steps, and are decorated with recessed vertical panels. The earliest have flat tops which, perplexingly, are crowned in several instances by three miniature “altars” of exactly the same type as themselves, but bearing what look like twin horns—presumably either merlons or stylized flames. Other fire-holders have crenellated tops, like those on Achaemenid seals. In the last coin-series are shown fire-holders like those on the Achaemenid tombs, with threefold recessed panels on their shafts. Other coins of this series present a worshipper standing before what looks like a slender metal fire-holder, with flame rising from it.

The Arsacid Valaxš I was the first Iranian king to set a fire-holder on the reverse of bronze coin issues (G. F. Hill, *Catalogue of Greek Coins* 28, London, 1922, pl. 29.11-12); this became the standard practice of the Sasanians. Their *ātašdān* bore, as the coin-legends show, the personal fires of the kings; and they are shown as very big, like the “tower altars” of the early *Frātadāra coins, rising well above the heads of the figures beside them. The basic type has a two-stepped base and two- or three-stepped top, but other details vary. Thus the shaft is sometimes thick, sometimes slender; and when it is slender there are occasionally elaborate little side-columns, curiously wrought, to support the outer step of the top. Usually flames are shown leaping up, and often there is a diadem tied round the shaft, presumably to declare the fire a royal one.

Seals and rock-carvings of the Sasanian period show other *ātašdāns* of this basic type, but smaller than the royal ones, usually about waist-high. Small knee-high *ātašdāns* are also shown, which were presumably used for ritual purposes, being probably ancient specimens of what the Zoroastrians now call *āfrīnagān*, i.e., portable holders of fire for religious observances. A number of remains of Sasanian fire-holders are known, notably from the ruins of the temple *Ādur Gušnasp*. Here the square three-stepped pedestal of the *ātašdān*



of the great fire itself has been found, with the stone base of a round shaft rising from it; and other smaller *ātašdāns* and little stone *āfrīnagāns* have been dug out of the temple ruins. Big open-air “altars” also survive in Fārs, the best known specimens being a pair at Naqš-e Rostam. These could only have been used for especial occasions and relatively brief observances, when fire set on them would have been constantly tended, and not exposed to harsh weather.

Most fire temples were eventually destroyed after the coming of Islam, or incorporated into mosques; but in the dark, lowly places of worship which were all that were ultimately left to the Zoroastrians, the *ātašdān* was still an essential feature. The relatively old specimens which still survive in Yazd, Kermān and their villages are big solid pillar-type ones, waist-high or a little taller, and round, hexagonal or octagonal in shape. Nearly all are made of mud-brick coated with a fine hard plaster, which gives a finish like stone; but at Šarīfābād-e Ardakān there is a little stone one, brought from the now-destroyed fire temple at Aḥmadābād nearby (see Boyce, *Stronghold*, pp. 8 n. 19, 76-77), which consists of a slender solid shaft with a deep cavity in the top. Around the rim of this cavity there are hollows to hold oil for lamps, and smaller ones to receive candles. When the Parsi agent, Manekji Limji Hataria, helped the Zoroastrians of Yazd to rebuild their Ātaš Bahrām in 1855, he set in it an old *ātašdān* (excavated near the city’s *daḳmas*) made for it out of a solid block of stone, fashioned to form a deep round bowl (see Boyce, “The Fire-temples,” p. 57). In India, however, the Parsis themselves had already by then broken with the old tradition of a stone *ātašdān* or its equivalent, and had taken to placing their sacred fires in big metal vases, made of brass or German silver. These were placed on a low square stone, to which the old name of *ādošt* was still applied (ibid., pp. 57-58). This development probably took place in the late fifteenth century, when for more than a decade the Parsis had to carry their one sacred fire, an Ātaš Bahrām, from place to place for safety during Muslim campaigns of conquest. When eventually it was brought to a more permanent abiding place at Navsari, a new *ātašdān* was probably made for it on the model of the portable *āfrīnagān* in which it had been kept for so long; since this was then the only sacred fire which the Parsis possessed (see further under *ātaš*), a pattern was thus set which was followed later for all sacred fires in their community. From the latter part of the nineteenth century Parsi influence has been strong on their Iranian co-religionists, and gradually the old traditional *ātašdān* of the Iranian fire temples have been replaced by handsome metal vases imported from India, which are now to be seen in the main fire temples of Yazd, Kermān and Tehran, as well as in a number of



villages. The traditional type of *ātašdān* is now found in less prominent sanctuaries and in disused fire temples. In village sanctuaries there is regularly an *ātašdān* of this old type in the outer hall, in which fire is kindled at festivals and for special observances. In areas around Yazd where Zoroastrianism long survived, even bigger fire-holders (*kalaks*) are to be seen here and there in village squares, in which fires are lit by Muslims on festive occasions, in a manner which seems to carry on an ancient Zoroastrian tradition.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

D. Stronach, *Iran* 7, 1969, pp. 1-20, and with M. Roaf, *ibid.*, 11, 1973, pp. 129-39, fig. 6, for the Nūš-e Jān Tepe altar.

D. Stronach, *JNES* 26, 1967, p. 287, and *Pasargadae*, Oxford, 1978, p. 141 with pl. 107, for the Pasargadae fire-holders.

U. Scerrato, *South Asian Archaeology 1977*, ed. M. Taddei, Naples, 1979, II, pp. 727-29, for the Dahān-e Ġolāmān fire-holders.

E. Schmidt, *Persepolis II*, Chicago, 1957, for Achaemenid seals. *Idem*, *Persepolis III*, Chicago, 1971, for plates of the Achaemenid funerary sculptures.

Survey of Persian Art, IV, plates, for seals, coins, and monumental representations of fire-holders.

K. Schippmann, *Die iranischen Feuerheiligtümer*, Berlin and New York, 1971, pp. 194-96 (with further references), for the *Frātadāra “tower altars.”

D. Stronach, “The Kuh-i Shahrak fire altar,” *JNES* 25, 1966, pp. 217-27, for open-air fire-holders. R. Naumann, “Die sasanidischen Feueraltäre,” *Iranica Antiqua* 7, 1967, pp. 72-76.

M. Boyce, “The fire-temples of Kerman,” *Acta Orientalia* 30, 1966, pp. 56-58.

W. Eilers, “Herd and Feuerstätte in Iran,” *Innsbrucker Beiträge zur*



Sprachwissenschaft 12, 1974, pp. 307-38.

Y. Yamamoto, "The Zoroastrian temple cult of fire in archaeology and literature," pt. 1, *Orient* 15, 1979, pp. 19-53; pt. 2, *ibid.*, 17, 1981, pp. 67-104.