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BURIAL II. REMNANTS OF BURIAL PRACTICES IN ANCIENT IRAN

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ii. Remnants of Burial Practices in Ancient Iran

The burial practices of pre-Islamic Iran are known partly from archeological evidence, partly from the Zoroastrian scriptures, namely the Avesta and the later Pahlavi and Persian literature. Both should be viewed in light of the other.

The original meaning of the Old Iranian (Avestan) word *daxma* was most probably “grave” (Hoffmann), which indicates that the ancient Iranians practiced interment (cf. Cinquabre; Fukai and Matsutani, 1982). With the advent of the Zoroastrian religion, however, burial was explicitly prohibited, and exposure to flesh-eating animals was prescribed in the *Vīdēvdād* as the only acceptable way to dispose of a body (see iii, below). Nevertheless, there are a number of indications, even in the Zoroastrian texts, that significant portions of the population resisted the change in funerary practice (see below). For example, unlike the sin of cremation, which meant desecration of the fire, the sin of burial was not punishable by death: In *Vd.* 3.36-42 only corporal punishments were prescribed, depending on the elapsed time

between interment and exhumation; in practice, these punishments were convertible into fines. Although the sin was theoretically irremissible after two years, it could still be cleared if committed on bad advice and repented. The land on which a grave had been dug became pure again after fifty years (*Vd.* 5.14). Some Sasanian commentators favored still lighter penalties (Pahlavi *Vd.* 3.37-40, 5.14), obviously in an effort to come to terms with persistent ancient practices. On the other hand, there is evidence that as late as the Sasanian period an accusation of burying relatives was the occasion for execution of a political enemy (Procopius, 1.11.37), and mass exhumations were committed in Christian cemeteries during a period of persecution (see the passion of Pērōz of Bēt Lāpaṭ, in Hoffmann, p. 39).

In any attempt to reconstruct actual burial practices from the Achaemenid period onward, archeological evidence must be used with caution. The first difficulty is that there is very little evidence from western Iran, compared to the wealth of information from eastern Iran provided by Soviet excavations in Central Asia (for a survey of the latter, see Grenet, 1984a). Another problem is how to evaluate the surviving evidence, which may distort the relative importance of burial and exposure. Exposure is well documented for eastern Iran, where bones were preserved in ossuaries (datable as early as the 5th-4th centuries B.C. in Choresmia; see astōdān). In western Iran, however, it seems to have been less common to gather bones, and there is no tangible trace of the typical Zoroastrian practice before the Sasanian period, though it is mentioned in Greek sources as early as the Achaemenids.

Nevertheless, even after the spread of Zoroastrianism it appears that inhumation continued among nomads or former nomads in Bactria and Sogdia (Staviskij, pp. 120-26; Mandel'shtam, 1966, 1975; Litvinskiĭ and Sedov, 1983, 1984; Grenet, 1984b, 1985) and among the population of Deylam and Gīlān, as late as the Seleucid and Parthian periods (Litvinskiĭ, pp. 98-100; Fukai and Matsutani, 1980). The graves, either simple or lined with stones, were sometimes arranged in short catacombs, as in Deylam and Gīlān, or marked by cairns or mounded earth (kurgans), as in Bactria and Sogdia. Burial goods included pots for offerings, small personal ornaments, and weapons.

On the Iranian plateau in Achaemenid times burial is scantily documented by archaeology (Naumann, pp. 30-34). The bodies of kings were laid in freestanding or rock-cut tombs (see Boyce, II, pp. 24-26, 54-55, 59, 182; iii, below). Herodotus, writing in the 5th century B.C., mentioned that corpses were coated with wax before burial (1.104); this custom has been interpreted

either as a means of preserving the earth from pollution (Kammenhuber, p. 306) or as a primitive form of embalming—a practice thoroughly alien to the spirit of Zoroastrian regulations (Boyce, II, p. 182).

The burial of entire corpses in ceramic containers spread from Mesopotamia to western Iran soon after the Greek conquest (perhaps even before; see Schmidt, pp. 117-23, pls. 85-89, on the "cemetery of the Persepolis spring"), but it is impossible to decide whether or not the adoption of this fashion had religious significance. Furthermore, the extent to which specimens of such containers discovered in Kushan Bactria betray influence from the Parthian empire is difficult to assess (for a substantial critical survey, see Litvinskiĭ, pp. 115-20; cf. Litvinskiĭ and Sedov, 1984, pp. 135-50).

At approximately the same time a type of freestanding mausoleum was developed in Bactria and Margiana. It has been tentatively interpreted as a compromise between practicing burial and meeting Zoroastrian requirements forbidding it; corpses were left to decompose naturally on benches inside the vaults in order to avoid polluting the earth, and the mausolea themselves were raised on platforms (Grenet, 1984a, pp. 94-101, 230, 323-24; but other writers consider such mausoleums to have received bones gathered after exposure in regular Zoroastrian fashion, see Litvinskiĭ and Sedov, 1983, pp. 107-16, and Rtveladze, 1987).

Direct burial in the earth was still sporadically practiced in Sasanian Iran (see especially Balcer; for Hephthalite burials, see McNicoll, p. 49; the "Kushano-Sasanian" burials published by Shaffer and Hoffman may also be Hephthalite).

The placing of a coin in the mouth or hand of the deceased, attested at many sites in both western and eastern Iran, was probably a continuation of the Greek custom of supplying the deceased with "Charon's obol," a coin given the dead man to pay his passage across the river Styx in Hades (Hansman and Stronach; Balcer; MacDowall; Grenet, p. 219).

See also ASTŌDĀN.

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