Encyclopædia Iranica

DERAFŠ
Article by **Alireza Shapur Shahbazi**

Published: December 15, 1994
Last Updated: November 7, 2013

DERAFŠ

DERAFŠ (“banner, standard, flag, emblem”; Av. *drafša-*, Mid. Pers. *drafš*, equivalent to OInd. *drapsá-*; see Horn, *Etymologie*, no. 553; *AirWb.*, col. 771) in ancient Iran. The use of the banner as a religious, royal, or military symbol was common among Indo-Iranians (Wikander, pp. 60-62, 96-97; Kramrisch; Kuiper) and Near Eastern peoples (Sarre, pp. 233-44; Nylander, pp. 22-23; for bronze “standards” with animal heads in western Iran, see Moorey). In the Avesta Bactria “with tall banners” (*ərəδβō.drafša-*; *Vd.* 1.7), a fluttering “bull banner” (*gaoš drafša-*; *Y.* 10.14), and banners of enemies of Iran (*Y.* 57.25; *Yt.* 1.11, 4.3, 8.56) are mentioned.

In the Achaemenid period each Persian army division had its own standard (Herodotus, 9.59), and “all officers had banners over their tents,” by which they were recognized in the camp (Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.5.13; cf. 6.3.4; for evidence of a similar tradition among the Parthians, see below). One such banner is held by a Persian warrior depicted on a Greek vase (the “Duris cup” in the Louvre; Pottier, p. 105 fig. 20). It is a square plaque in saltire, the upper and lower quarters painted black and the side ones white (Plate XXV.b). The origin of this form is Urartian, as is shown by a similar banner (Plate XXV.a) held by a worshiper facing a lion-mounted god on an Urartian bronze disk from Altıntepe (Taşyürek, p. 942 fig. 7; pl. CCXVIII/4-5). The standard of Cyrus iii the Great, “a golden eagle mounted upon a lofty shaft,” remained the royal banner of the Achaemenids (Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 7.1.4) and at Cunaxa marked the position of Artaxerxes II (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.10.12; cf. a similar eagle on the chariot of Darius III; Curtius Rufus, 3.3.16). At Persepolis six

"audience scenes" (in the Throne Hall and among the "Treasury reliefs"; Schmidt, p. 166, pls. 98, 99, 123; Tilia, pp. 175-208, figs. 3, 5, 7, 9, 18, 32) include depictions of Persian soldiers carrying square plaques on poles (Plate XXV.c), which Kurt Erdmann (pp. 62-63) first recognized as banners (the ensigns could have been added in color; Nylander, p. 26). The royal standard is also shown on the "Alexander mosaic" from Pompeii (a Roman copy of a Hellenistic painting of about 320 B.C.E.; Hölscher, pp. 122-69, 270-88), in which Alexander the Great is represented fighting Darius III at Issus (against the view of Rumpf, pp. 233-35, that it depicts a Macedonian attack signal, see Nylander, pp. 26-34). The banner, which is affixed atop a long lance, is a rectangular plaque of dark red (probably representing a purple original; Ackerman, p. 2767), separated by a clear red line from a border of dark red with yellow dots; there is a dark-red fringe along the lower edge. Within the field a golden bird, its head crowned with what appears to be a cockscomb, is partially preserved (Plate XXV.d). Some scholars have thus identified the bird as a cock, called the "Persian bird" by the Greeks and "the holy bird" in the Avesta (Sarre, p. 348; Nylander, p. 29 n. 44). Others (Ackerman, p. 2767 n. 4, with references) have considered it an eagle, the usual Achaemenid royal emblem. As the eagle or the related royal falcon (*varəγna*; Stricker; Shahbazi, 1984) symbolized *farr*, or God-given glory, and, as the eagle was associated with the Achaemenid family (Achaemenes was said to have been raised by an eagle; Aelian, *De Natura Animalium* 12.21; in Ezra 18:13 "Eagle of the East" refers to Cyrus; and in Aeschylus, *Persae* 205-10, the Persian king is personified by an eagle), an eagle or a foyal falcon seems more appropriate for the banner of Darius III. Indeed, a miniature banner in the form of a square tile (12.3 cm2) of Egyptian blue frit showing a falcon with outstretched wings and the sun-disk crown on its head, the whole framed by a border of triangles (Plate XXV.e), was discovered at Persepolis by ʿAlī Samī in 1327 Š./1948 (Īrān-Bāstān Museum, Tehran, no. 2436; Sāmī, fig. facing p. 100; Luschey). Although the origins of this motif can be traced to the Egyptian Horus falcon, its appearance at Persepolis is related to Iranian traditions concerning the "glory-bringing *varəγna* bird" of the Avesta (Luschey, p. 260 and n. 20). It also clearly recalls the royal Achaemenid emblem, "a golden eagle with outstreched wings," described by Xenophon (see above). Similar birds were embossed on two Achaemenid gold roundels from the "Oxus treasure" (Dalton, pp. 13-15, pls. XII/33, XXI/34). What appears to be a cockscomb on the banner in the Alexander mosaic is thus to be explained as the vestige of a misunderstood, or misrepresented, sun disk.

Under the Seleucids and Parthians the local rulers of Persis claimed a royal

heritage and continued to use traditional Persian dynastic symbols (Shahbazi, 1977, p. 199; Wiesehöfer, pp. 103-08). Early Persid coins (3rd-2nd centuries B.C.E.) are adorned with a banner shaped as a square plaque in saltire, each quarter enclosing a roundel, with tassels along the lower edge (Hill, pp. clx-clxxii; Wiesehöfer, pp. 103-36, figs. 3-7; Plate XXV.f). Sometimes an eagle was added as a finial above the banner (Plate XXV.g), suggesting an even closer association with the Achaemenid royal banner. Ferdinand Justi (*Grundriss* II, pp. 486-87), followed by Friedrich Sarre (p. 350) and Oskar Mann, identified this banner with that on the "Alexander mosaic" and took both as representations of the Derafš-e Kāvīān. Eagle banners were also used by the Parthians and Armenians (F. C. Andreas apud Sarre, pp. 354-55). The Arsacids additionally used a flag adorned with the image of the sun (Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 16; cf. Ackerman, p. 2769 n. 3) and, as standards distinguishing units of 1,000 soldiers, silken banners bearing the image of a dragon (Lucian, *Hist. Conscr.* 20; cf. Christensen, tr., pp. 37-38; Ackerman, p. 2769 n. 1).

Four Sasanian banners are represented in sculptured scenes. One is an unfurled cloth flag (Plate XXVI.d) carried by a dignitary depicted on the rock relief at Bīšāpūr attributed to Šāpūr II (309-79; Sarre and Herzfeld, pp. 213-14, fig. 101; Ghirshman, figs. 225-26; Schmidt, III, p. 137). The remaining three are from Naqš-e Rostam in Fārs. On one, attributed to Bahrām II (274-93), a lance terminates in a ring with two lateral downcurving appendages; below is a crossbar with a large tassel dependent from each end (Plate XXVI.a; Sarre, pp. 357-58; Schmidt, III, p. 130). On the second (Plate XXVI.b), carried by a heavily armed attendant in the equestrian combat of Hormozd II (302-09; Sarre, pp. 256-57; Schmidt, III, p. 135, pls. 91, 93A), there is a crossbar with tassels at the ends and two (originally three) plain ribbons dependent from it. Finally (Plate XXVI.c), a mounted armed attendant in a relief attributed to Šāpūr II (Schmidt, III, pp. 136-37, pl. 95) carries a standard with a crossbar and end tassels, topped by three fluted globes similar to those surmounting Sasanian crowns.

As in feudal Europe, Sasanian magnates and nobles had their own coats of arms and banners (Faustus, 3.7; 4.2, 3, 20; 5.1, 43, tr. Garsoïan, pp. 73, 108, 150, 185, 226; *Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, II, pp. 212 ff., IV, pp. 41 ff., V, pp. 188-206). The *Šāh-nāma*, reflecting Parthian and Sasanian social practices, includes the following examples (note the consistency of forms in references to individual banners): Kāvūs, a golden sun crowned with a moon encased in purple (II, p. 212 l. 547); his son Farīborz, a sun banner (IV, pp. 26 l. 294, 41 l. 513); Tōs-e Nowḏa, an elephant banner (II, p. 213 l. 554; IV, pp. 33 l. 399, 41 l. 508); Gōdarz,

a golden lion banner (II, p. 213 ll. 556-57; IV, pp. 27 l. 300, 43 l. 527); Gēv, a black banner with a wolf as its emblem (II, p. 214 ll. 577-78; IV, pp. 27 l. 304, 43 l. 526); Gorāza, a wild-boar banner crowned with a golden moon (II, p. 215 l. 588; IV, pp. 29 l. 324, 42 l. 524); Rostam (and his son Frāmarz), a dragon banner atop a lance crowned with a golden lion (II, p. 214 l. 566; IV, pp. 29-30 ll. 345-46, 185 l. 1112, 189 l. 177); Gostahm, a moon banner (IV, pp. 28 l. 318, 42 l. 515); Aškaš, a leopard banner (IV, p. 28 l. 322); and Zanga-ye Šāvorān, a Homāy (the royal falcon) banner (IV, p. 29 l. 328). When Bahrām-e Čōbīn received the supreme command, Hormozd IV (579-90) gave him the dragon banner of Rostam, saying, “You are indeed a second Rostam” (VIII, p. 345 ll. 508-14). The true reason, however, was Bahrām’s Arsacid descent, through which he was heir to the traditional Arsacid dragon banner (Shahbazi, 1994, p. 159).

See also ʿALAM VA ʿALĀMAT; BANNERS.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(For cited works not found in this bibliography and abbreviations found here, see “Short References.”) P. Ackerman, “Standards, Banners, and Badges,” *Survey of Persian Art* VI, pp. 2766-82.

A. Christensen, *Smeden Kāväh og det gamle persiske rigsbanner*, Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, Historisk-Filologiske Meddelelser 2/7, 1919; tr. J. M. Unvala as “The Smith Kāveh and the Ancient Persian Imperial Banner,” *Journal of the Cama Oriental Institute* 5, 1925, pp. 22-39.

O. M. Dalton, *The Treasure of the Oxus*, 3rd ed., London, 1964.

K. Erdmann, review of E. F. Schmidt, *Persepolis* I, *Bibliotheca Orientalia* 13, 1956, pp. 62-63.

R. Ghirshman, *Persian Art. 249 B.C.-A.D. 651. The Parthian and Sassanian Dynasties*, New York, 1962.

G. F. Hill, *British Museum Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Arabia, Mesopotamia and Persia . . .*, London, 1922.

T. Hölscher, *Griechische Historienbilder des 5. und 4. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.*, Würzburg, 1973.

S. Kramrisch, “The Banner of Indra,” in K. B. Iyar, ed., *Art and Thought. Issued in Honour of Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy . . .*, London, 1947, pp. 197-201.

F. B. J. Kuiper, review of J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *Symbols and Values in Zoroastrianism*, *IIJ* 11, 1958-59, pp. 125-33.

H. Luschey, “Ein königliches Emblem,” *AMI* 5, 1972, pp. 257-60.

O. Mann, “Kāveh o derafš-e kāvīānī,” *Kāveh* 1, 24 January 1916, pp. 3-5.

P. R. S. Moorey, “A Note on Pre-Achaemenid Bronze Standard Tops from Western Iran,” *Iran* 15, 1977, pp. 141-46.

C. Nylander, “The Standard of the Great King—A Problem in the Alexander Mosaic,” *Opuscula Romana* 14/2, 1983, pp. 19-37.

E. Pottier, *Douris*, London, 1909.

A. Rumpf, “Zum Alexander-Mosaik,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Athenische Abteilung* 77, 1962, pp. 229-41.

ʿA. Sāmī, *Persepolis*, tr. R. Sharp, Shiraz, 1970.

F. Sarre, “Die altorientalischen Feldzeichen, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung eines unver-öffentlichten Stücks,” *Klio* 3, 1903, pp. 331-71.

Idem and E. Herzfeld, *Iranische Felsreliefs*, Berlin, 1920.

E. F. Schmidt, *Persepolis* I, III, Chicago, 1953, 1970.

A. S. Shahbazi, “From *Pārsa* to *Taxt-e Jamšīd*,” *AMI* 10, 1977, pp. 197-207.

Idem, “On Vāreγna, the Royal Falcon,” *ZDMG* 134/2, 1984, pp. 314-17.

Idem, “The Parthian Origins of the House of Rustam,” in C. A. Bromberg, ed., *Iranian Studies in Honor of A. D. H. Bivar,* Bulletin of the Asia Institute, n.s. no. 7, Bloomfield Hills, Mich., 1994, pp. 155-65.

B. H. Stricker, “Varəγna, the Falcon,” *IIJ* 7, 1963-64, pp. 310-17.

O. A. Taşyürek, “Darstellungen des urartischen Gottes Haldi,” in S. Şahin, E. Schwertheim, and J. Wagner, eds., *Studien zur Religion und Kultur Kleinasiens. Festschrift für Friedrich Karl Dörner . . .* II, Leiden, 1978, pp. 940-55.

A. B. Tilia, *Studies and Restorations at Persepolis and Other Sites of Fārs* II, Rome, 1978.

J. Wiesehöfer, *Die “dunklen Jahrhunderte” der Persis*, Munich, 1994.

S. Wikander, *Der arische Männerbund*, Lund, 1938.