



HERAT II. HISTORY, PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

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The present town of Herat in western Afghanistan dates back to ancient times, but its exact age remains unknown. In Achaemenid times (ca. 550-330 B.C.E.), the surrounding district was known as *Haraiva* (in Old Persian), and in classical sources the region was correspondingly known as Areia. In the Zoroastrian Avesta (*Yašt* 10.14; *Vidēvdāt* 1.9), the district is mentioned as *Harōiva*. The name of the district and its main town is derived from that of the chief river of the region, the Hari Rud (Old Iranian **Harayu* “with velocity”; compare Sanskrit *Sarāyu* [Mayrhofer, *Dictionary* III, p. 443]), which traverses the district and passes just south (5 km) of modern Herat. The naming of a region and its principal town after the main river is a common feature in this part of the world. (Compare the adjoining districts/rivers/towns of Arachosia and Bactria.)

The site of Herat dominates the productive part of ancient Areia, which was, and basically still is, a rather narrow stretch of land that extends for some 150 km along both banks of the Hari Rud, from near Obek in the east to near Kuhsān in the west. At no point along its route is the valley more than 25 km wide. The city and district of Areia/Herat occupy an important strategic place



along the age-old caravan routes across the Iranian Plateau.

The Persian Achaemenid district of Areia is mentioned in the provincial lists that are included in various royal inscriptions, for instance, in the Bisotun inscription (q.v., DB 1.16) of Darius I (ca. 520 B.C.E.) in Fārs province. In the texts the name of Areia is grouped with Zranka (or Dranka), modern Sistān to the south; Parthava (Parthia) to the northwest, and Bāxtriš (Bactria) to the northeast. Representatives from the district are depicted in reliefs, e.g., at the royal Achaemenid tombs of Naqš-e Rostam and Persepolis. They are wearing Scythian-style dress (with a tunic and trousers tucked into high boots) and a twisted turban around the head. This costume is also worn by the representatives from nearby Sistān (to the south) and Arachosia (to the southeast) and is reminiscent of the dress worn by the representatives from almost all of the northern lands of the Achaemenid Empire, which were strongly influenced by the Scythic cultures from the Eurasian steppes. On the so-called Darius Statue that was discovered at Susa (Kervran, 1972), the representative from Areia is also shown wearing a long coat worn around the shoulders with empty sleeves. This type of coat is known from classical sources (Gk. *kandys*) and was sometimes also worn by the Persians and the Medes. The origin of this coat should be sought among the nomadic Scythians of Central Asia. (See further in Gervers-Molnár, 1973.)

Very little is known about Areia during the Achaemenid period. Herodotus (7.61 ff.) tells that Areians were included in Xerxes' army against Greece, around 480 B.C.E. In Herodotus's taxation list of the Achaemenid Empire (3.89 ff.), the Areians are listed together with the Parthians, Choresmians (from south of the Aral Sea), and Sogdians (from the valley of the Zarafshan River, around Bukhara and Samarkand). According to Herodotus, the Areians in Xerxes' army were dressed in the Bactrian fashion, which means that they were wearing a Scythian-type outfit.

At the time of Alexander the Great, Areia was obviously an important district. It was administered by a satrap, called Satibarzanes, who was one of the three main Persian officials in the East of the Empire, together with the satrap Bessus [see BESSOS] of Bactria and Barsaentes of Arachosia. This would mean that the capital of Satibarzanes, which may have been Herat, was one of the three main Achaemenid centers in this part of the world, together with ancient Bactra (modern Balkh, the capital of ancient Bactria), and Old Kandahār, the capital of ancient Arachosia. In late 330 B.C. Alexander the Great, according to his biographers, captured the Areian capital that was called Artacoana



(Arrian, *Anab. Alex.* 3.25.2-6; Curtius 6. 6.33 [Artacana]; Diodorus 17.78.1 [Chortacana]; Pliny, *Nat. hist.* 6.61.93; Strabo 11.10.1 [Artacaena]). The etymology of this name remains unknown, and whether this place should be identified with the modern city of Herat is also uncertain, although the strategic position of modern Herat would suggest its great antiquity; and thus the possibility remains that they are one and the same place. In the early nineteenth century a Persian Achaemenid cuneiform cylinder seal was found in or near Herat (Torrens, 1842).

After Alexander the Great, classical biographers refer to a city called Alexandria in Areia, but again its identification remains unknown. Soon after the death of Alexander, Areia was briefly attacked by Scythic nomads from the far north (Pliny, *Nat. hist.* 6.47). In the following years, Areia became a frontier area between the empire of the Parthians to the west and that of the Greco-Bactrians to the east. In the late second century B.C.E. the Greco-Bactrians were defeated by northern tribes, and Scythians (or Sakas) traversed the district of Areia; perhaps under pressure from the Parthians, they finally settled in nearby Sistān (Mid. Pers. *skstn* “Sakastān”), farther to the south. In the *Parthian Stations* (14-16) by Isidore of Charax, an itinerary composed in the Augustan era, the district of Areia is placed between Margiana (in the vicinity of modern Marv to the north), and Anauon (around modern Farāh) to the south. At that time the district was clearly regarded as forming part of the Parthian realm.

In the Sasanian period (226-652 C.E.), “Harēv” (*hryw*) is listed in Šāpūr I’s Ka’ba-ye Zardošt inscription; and “*Hariy*” (*hr’y*) is mentioned in the Pahlavi catalogue of the provincial capitals of the empire (Markwart, *Provincial Capitals*, pp. 11, 46). Ca. 430 C.E., the town is also listed as having a Christian community. Sasanian seals and engraved gemstones were reported to have been found in or around Herat (Torrens, 1842). The city served as a Sasanian mint, its name being recorded as *hr*, *hry*, and *hrydw*. Additionally, gold and copper coins have been found that are clearly Sasanian in inspiration, although the Sasanians in Iran generally did not strike gold coins but preferred silver issues. The gold coins from the Herat area show a fire altar on the reverse and the portrait of the ruler on the obverse. The name of the ruler is often identical to one of those listed on the so-called Kushano-Sasanian coins from Bactria, and this would indicate that the Sasanian governor in the northeast of the Sasanian Empire at times also controlled the Herat district. (For the coin evidence, see Dani and Litvinsky, 1996.)



In the last two centuries of Sasanian rule, the area and town of Areia/Herat had great strategic importance in the endless wars between the Sasanian Iranians and the Chionites and Hephthalites (qq.v.), of Hunnish origin, who had been settled in modern northern Afghanistan since the late fourth century; but exact information is scarce. The city of Herat, however, became well known with the advent of the Arabs in the middle of the seventh century.

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