



INDIA III. POLITICAL AND CULTURAL RELATIONS: ACHAEMENID PERIOD

Much of what has been written on the history of the cultural and political relations between ancient Iran and India concentrates on the Achaemenid period (cf. Weber and Wiesehöfer, 1996, pp. 614-16). While the complex question of Indo-Iranian origins is not discussed here, it is important to remember the close connections between Iran and India in the area of religion and mythology (see [INDO-IRANIAN RELIGION](#), [IRAN vi. IRANIAN LANGUAGES](#)).

Iron Age cultures in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), represented in the Swat valley and also discovered at Akra near Bannu (Assemblage 2; Khan et al., 2000, pp. 107-8, 113), show strong links to Iran and Central Asia; but it was the conquest by Darius I of the territories of the Indian subcontinent west of the Indus that for the first time created a clear relationship between India and Iran. On the basis of the dating of the Bisotun (q.v.) inscription, such conquests can be dated to around 518 B.C.E. (Vogelsang, 1987, pp. 187-88; Briant, 1996, p. 153). It also has been suggested that the Persian penetration into the Indus region occurred in stages, starting from the north and moving southward (Fussman, 1993, p. 84). This is inferred from the fact that Gandhara (OPers. *Gandāra*) is already mentioned at Bisotun, while the toponym Hinduš (Sind) is added only in later inscriptions. As to how long



Achaemenid rule lasted, opinions vary—at least in regard to the northwest of the Indian subcontinent. The hypothesis that the region had already become independent by the end of the reign of Darius I (486 B.C.E.) or during the reign of Artaxerxes II (405/4–359/58; Chattopadhyaya, 1974, pp. 25-26) appears to be contradicted by Ctesias's reference to gifts received from the kings of India and by the fact that even Darius III still had some Indian units in his army (Briant, 1996, pp. 699, 774). At the time of the arrival of the Macedonian army in India (327-326 B.C.E.), there is no mention of officers of the Great King; but this does not mean (as has been recently suggested by Dittmann, 1984, p. 185) that the Achaemenids had no power there. Other data indicate that they still exercised control over the area, although in ways that differed from those of Darius I's time (Briant, 1996, pp. 776-78).

The Achaemenids listed their subject nations (*dahyu*), including the eastern ones, in several inscriptions (see, above, section ii.) and depicted their representatives in sculpture, either as “gift-bearing delegations” (e.g., on the Apadāna stairways) or as “throne-bearers” (e.g., on the royal tombs, two of which identify the figures by trilingual inscriptions, and on Persepolitan doorways; see [PERSEPOLIS](#) and NAQŠ-E ROSTAM). The sculptures express strongly the ideology of an empire that is encircled by a ring of peripheral peoples (Calmeyer, 1982; 1983). Among the representatives on the tombs are Gandharans, Sattagydians, and Indians, all wearing similar costumes (see [PERSEPOLIS](#) with references). These have also been identified among the twenty-three gift-bearing delegations on the Apadāna stairways, as well as on the partially reconstructed stairway of Artaxerxes I (Tilia, 1972, pp. 293-308). Arachosia, Sattagydia, and India are represented and named among the subject nations sculptured on the base of the Egyptian statue of Darius I from Susa (Roaf, 1974).

The frequency with which the inscription lists and the depictions disagree in number and order allows us to understand that such documentation served only to underline the ideology of the supranational empire and could not have been intended as an administrative text (Briant, 1996, p. 189). As a result, there are different interpretations as to the identification of the various populations (see Tourovets, 2001, bibliog.). Similarly, the theory that the gifts carried by the delegates are products typical of the respective regions and therefore are valid indicators for identification of these regions (Jamzadeh, 1993) has been cast in doubt. Since delegates from different regions often carry similar objects, these objects can be interpreted as conventional motifs of Achaemenid “court” art



(Tourovets, 2001, p. 224).

Some information about the economic relations between the center of the empire and the Indo-Iranian border can be derived from the Achaemenid inscriptions and Greek sources. According to Herodotus “the Sattagydiāns, Gandarans, Dadicae, and Aparytae” were all included in “satrapy” VII and paid 170 talents to the king annually (3.91); “the Indians, who are more numerous than any other nations known to us” (3.94) formed the “satrapy” XX and paid more tribute than any other subject nation, namely 360 talents of gold dust. Herodotus (3.95) calculates this as equivalent to 4,680 silver talents (Euboean standard) in his day, i.e., 32 percent of his figure for the total revenue from the “satrapies.” This confirms that Hinduš was the largest Achaemenid domain in India (Bernard, 1987; but see Cook, 1985, p. 250, on the possibility that the data are exaggerated). Darius’s “Foundation Charter” of the Apadāna of Susa (DSf 34-35, 44), informs us that the *yakā* wood (*dalbergia sissoo roxb.*) used in construction of the palace came from Gandāra and the ivory from Hinduš. According to Ctesias (q.v.), the kings of India sent to the Persian Great King precious oils (Henry, 1947, p. 84), animals, and costly fabrics (in Aelian, *De Nat. Anim.* 4.21, 26). Elamite tablets record the names of Gandharans, Indians, and Arachosians at Persepolis and of officers of the king sent to the east, to whom were allotted food provisions (Vogelsang, 1990, p. 101; Seibert, 2002, p. 22).

In Iran itself what constitutes “Achaemenid” material culture is only vaguely defined; and, especially when it comes to pottery, during the Iron Age regional traditions are found to be stronger than uniform characteristics. Hence it is not easy to determine the Achaemenid presence in the Indo-Iranian frontier by archeological means. In the Achaemenid period it was primarily this frontier character of the region, rather than inclusion in the empire, that resulted in artisanal affinities between the productions of the Iranian plateau and those of Central Asia. Sir John Marshall’s excavations at the Bhir Mound in Taxila (Punjab Province), the most important center of the northwest region east of the Indus valley, produced no palatial structures or architectural features of Achaemenid character; and the ascription of the irregular plan of the settlement to the “slipshod method of Persian builders” (Marshall, 1951, I, p. 12) is arbitrary. Also yet to be verified is the alleged Persian origin of the funerary customs of the Dardic people, whose tradition of exposing corpses is described in classical references to Taxila (Marshall, 1951, I, p. 16). In the material culture from Period IV (of Achaemenid date) and the succeeding phases, some stamp seals and necklace beads in the shape of scarabs seem to



be the only elements possibly with Achaemenid inspiration (Marshall, 1951, II, pp. 103, 674-75). Moreover, the more recent excavations at Bhīr Mound (Bahadar Khan et al., 2002) have not produced reliable evidence of an Achaemenid presence there.

Even west of the Indus at the principal Gandharan sites, the search for archeological evidence of Achaemenid rule has not produced results (see Ali, 2003, p. 173). Sir Mortimer Wheeler excavated at Charsadda (town and district northwest of Peshawar, NWFP), which is the ancient Puṣkalāvātī (Gk. Peukelaotis), seat of the ruler of Gandhara who fought against Alexander. Wheeler (1962) revealed an important chronological sequence of pottery that long has been used as a standard for the whole region, although its absolute chronology has been somewhat revised (Taj Ali et al., 1997-98, pp. 14-15). He associated the presence of iron with the arrival of the Achaemenids, placing the beginning of its pottery sequence exactly within the sixth century B.C.E. (Wheeler, 1962, p. 34). A new chronology of the earliest phases up to the end of the second millennium B.C.E. was based upon a comparison to materials from the Swat valley to the north (Stacul, 1990, p. 606). This made possible, after a poor methodological approach (Dittmann, 1984), the clarification of those phases which correspond to Achaemenid rule. Yet the only artifacts in these phases which can be considered similar to Persian models are the “tulip bowls” and the “carinated bowls.” The “tulip bowls” are found in strata that Wheeler dates as post-Achaemenid (3rd-2nd centuries B.C.E.). The “carinated bowls” (see below), according to Wheeler (1962, p. 40), should be attributed to a period from the beginning of the sequence until stratum 27; however, the examples he illustrates belong to the 4th-3rd centuries B.C.E. (cf. Vogelsang, 1988, p. 106). At Bhīr Mound such forms appear in Period II, which dates to the third century B.C.E. (Sharif, 1969, p. 73). However, in Balambāt (Lower Dir District, NWFP) along the valley of the Dir north of Gandāra, the carinated bowls are attested, not so much among the materials from Period IV—defined as an ‘Achaemenian Period’ (Dani, 1967, figs. 57-60, “Achaemenian pottery”)—but from those of the earlier Period III; this too, strangely, is considered an “Achaemenian Period” (ibid., p. 264). The Achaemenid characterization of the period is mostly based on one of the two types of ovens or fireplaces found at Balambāt (ibid., p. 245). These were interpreted as fire altars on the basis of a comparison to those from Dahan-e Gōlāmān (q.v.) in Sistān. However, they differ typologically and have a practical function (cf. Tucci, 1977, pp. 12 ff.). Also, ongoing Italian archeological investigations in the Swat valley have not settled the question of an Achaemenid period there (cf.



Tusa, 1979). The proposed links connecting the pottery of Period VI of the Proto-historic sequence of Swat, the material culture from Ḥasanlu (q.v.) IIIA, Iron Age III (Stacul, 1970), in western Iran, and that of Yaz Depe II and III (Silvi Antonini, 1969) in Turkmenistan, ancient Margiana, must be reviewed in the light of new chronological frameworks for comparable materials and, above all, with allowance for the shared Indo-Iranian background.

The Achaemenid presence in the two “satrapies” of Sattagydia and Arachosia is considered to be possible by some authors. In Bannu District, NWFP, which is identifiable with Sattagydia, the ceramics brought to light by the Anglo-Pakistani excavations at Akra and labelled as Assemblage I, dating to between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C.E., include “bowls with offset vertical rims, S-carinated rim bowls and tulip bowls”; clear similarities can be found between them and materials coming from diverse regions of Achaemenid Iran, ranging from the southeast (Tepe Yaḥyā) westward to regions such as Fārs (Khan et al., 2000, pp. 104-6). The British excavations at Kandahār, the main center of Arachosia, have shown that an initial Iron Age phase of the settlement with a mud-brick fortification was followed by buildings, in different areas of the principal settlement, that vary in dimension and quality but usually have a fixed orientation. This suggests the presence of a main complex that dominated the settlement. Traces of such a structure were found in the “casemated massive wall” dating back to Period II (Wightman and Ball, 1996), which corresponds to the Achaemenid period. In the ceramic material, traits in common with those of Achaemenid Persia, such as the carinated bowls, have been recognized (Fleming, 1996). Even though the existence of typological affinities in the pottery cannot be denied, we think it is more accurate to consider these as partial affinities of the material culture of different regions all within the same political entity; affinities within this shared milieu need not have been the direct result of the exercise of political power.

Clearer evidence of an Achaemenid presence in the frontier region is found in three aspects of the material culture which are directly associated with the exercise of political power:

(1) At Taxila is seen the diffusion of a coinage which is similar in technique and weight to the silver bent-bar punchmarked coinage of the Afghan region in the late Achaemenid period (D.W. MacDowall and M. Taddei, p. 203), even though it is slightly different in shape. If this silver bent-bar punchmarked coinage seems to have been in use at Bhir Mound from Period IV, the earliest



phase (Marshall, 1951, I, p. 103), that means it actually developed only in the late Achaemenid period (Allchin, 1995, p. 131). The influence of this coinage on the form and technique of the local punch-marked coinage of Indian weight standard has been underlined by several scholars (cf. Cribb, 1983). The Achaemenid influence continued after the fall of the empire, and some of the coins from Taxila dated to the end of the third century B.C.E. still show on the reverse the image of a personage in the guise of an Achaemenid satrap (Bernard, 1987, pp. 188-89).

(2) At Taxila, Kandahār, and Hadda is seen the spread of the Aramaic language. This resulted in the birth of a syllabic writing system (Kharoṣṭhī), which is, without doubt, derived from the Aramaic script (Greenfield, 1985, p. 705), although examples of the Aramaic language in northwest India all date to the post-Achaemenid period. The concept of writing, for the Kharoṣṭhī script as well as Brāhmī, can be derived from cultural contact with Persia. The direction of influence is indicated by the Iranian origin of the term *lipi*, with which the Indian grammarian Pāṇini defines the writing (Fussman, 1988-89, p. 513).

(3) Also clearly due to the Achaemenid presence in northwest India are the “Greco-Persian” seals, which are a typical imperial Achaemenid production. The appearance of symbols such as the swastika or a taurine animal, which are sometimes paired together with characteristic Indian iconographies such as the zebu (large-humped cattle), suggests that these seals were produced locally (Callieri, 1996).

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(additional to section ii):

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