



ISFAHAN IV. PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

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The name of Isfahan. In Middle Persian sources, Isfahan (Mid. Pers. Spahān) occurs clearly as the name of a province—in the inscriptions of Kerdir, “. . . Spahān and Ray . . .” in the list of provinces where fire foundations were endowed (Sar Mašhad 17, Naqš-e Rostam 35; Back, p. 421); in literature: “Spahān and Pārs and the adjoining districts” in the epic text *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* (1.3; Grenet, p. 52; for *kust[ag]* “district” as administrative term, see Gyselen, 1989, p. 42); Spahān as one of the regions allotted by the Kayanid Sām to his sons (*Bundahišn* 35.48; see also the chapters on rivers and mountains, 9.44, 11.8); and Spahān as an example of “fearful places” (*Pahlavi Vendidad* 2.23; the attribute may be a reference to the terrain and road conditions of Paraetacene [see below]). (A)spahan and Rey also figure as neighboring regions in the account of the struggle between Kōsrow II (r. 590-628) and Bahrām Čobin (see BAHRĀM vii), in the 7th-century Armenian history of Sebeos (Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 27; Sebeos, pp. 60, 63, 73).

The earliest Islamic sources likewise use the name “Isfahan” to refer to the region, and not unequivocally to the city of Gay [q.v.] (see further ISFAHAN vi, below). The latter usage has been dated from the 2nd/8th century onward,



based on numismatic and literary evidence (Janāb, p. 13), but the practice may be evidenced in the 1st/7th century (for a possible reading on an Arab-Sasanian coin, see Gyselen, 2000, p. 173). A close association of the name of the province with its primary city seems evident from the title of the Nestorian bishops of Ispahan (ʿsphn), who are attested in the 5th-6th centuries (Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 30) and who must have had their episcopal seat at Gay.

Application of a region name to the main fortress-town in it has other parallels (see examples, Eilers, 1988, p. 312), possibly including Ray (however, no earlier name of the city is known). The earliest references to Ray are to the region (*dahyu*, q.v.) in northeastern Media (Ragā: Darius I, Bisotun 2.71; in the Avesta: Y. 19.18, Vd. 1.16; *Book of Judith* 1.5, 1.15), but the city name also is old (Arrian, *Anabasis* 3.20.2; *Book of Tobit* 1.14 through 9.5, depending on MS: “Rhagae in/of Media” or simply “Rhaga”; cf. Rhaga in Strabo, 1.3.19, 11.9.1, 11.13.6, covering both). The name Rhagiane indicates a region in Ptolemy, *Geographia* 6.2.5, distinguished from the city, which is recorded under its Seleucid name Europus (for the Greek names of the city, see *RE* VI/1, col. 1310). Isidorus (sec. 7 and summary table entry) uses the distinct terms “Rhagiane Media” and (the city of) “Rhaga.” The Peutinger Table has two adjoining city entries, Europus and Nagae; if the latter is emended to +Ragae (as suggested by F. H. Weissbach, *RE* VI/1, col. 1310), this would be a case of synonymous names treated as separate places, somewhat analogous to that of Ptolemy’s Gabae and Aspadana (see below).

The underlying form of the name Spahān can be analyzed as: (1) **spādāna*—“connected with the army (*spāda*-)” with the adjectival suffix *-āna* (Spiegel, I, p. 100; Back, p. 257), but become a noun; compare “Hamadān” < OPers. *hamgmatāna*- (Gk. Ecbatana [q.v.]; see also IRAN vi, 1. Earliest Evidence); (2) Old Persian **spādānām* “of the armies,” genitive plural of *spāda*- (Hübschmann, 1895, p. 201; cf. *-ān* in *ērān-šahr*, q.v.). The meaning in either case agrees with Ḥamza Eṣfahāni, who stated in his *Ketāb Eṣfahān* (known only through quotations) what may have been a familiar (and correct) popular etymology: “Isfahan” means “the armies” (cited by Yāqut: see Schwartz, V, p. 587; cf. *Aṣfahān asfahān*, Māfarruḳi, p. 6; cf. also the city name variant *Sefahān* in the *Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] II, pp. 21.242, 126.909, and other forms in Schwartz, V, pp. 585-86). The age of this usage as a province name prior to Kerdir’s list is unknown, as is its source—whether an actual administrative term or a popular usage alluding to the function of the garrison city of Gabae/Gay.



Ptolemy's name *Aspadana* (see below), if going back to Alexander or the Seleucids, would indicate the name's currency in the Achaemenid period.

Associated names. For the Middle Persian city-name *Gay* (in Šāpur I's inscription ŠKZ: Mid. Pers. *gdy*, Parth. *g'b*, Gk. *Gē*), the older form is represented in Gk. *Gabae*. The underlying Old Iranian toponym would be **Gaba* (> Mid. Pers. *Gay*, as OPers. *Ragā* > *Ray*), for which a meaning of "lowland" (and hence, winter pasture) has been suggested (Ehlers, 1988, p. 368; Huyse, II, p. 164 with references). This would be in keeping with the site of the city and its abundance in crops and flocks (e.g., Ebn Hawqal, p. 362; tr., II, p. 354; Schwartz, V, p. 595; see also ref. below to Eumenes). Ptolemy locates three place names with initial *Gab-* in Media (*Geog.* 6.2; there are also *Gau-* names; these may represent **Gāu-*: cf. Av. *Gāum* "Sogdiana" in *Vd.* 1.4 [see [GABAE](#)]). But he, or his source, places *Gabae* (*Geog.* 6.4.7) in the far southeast of Persia, as he does *Pasargada*. The *Gabaei* people likewise are found in a southerly direction (6.4.3), near the *Suzaei*. If the latter (their name perhaps confused with the *Susaei* of *Susiana*) are to be understood as +*Uzaei* for *xuz-*, the people of *Khuzestan* [see [GABAE](#)], then Ptolemy's source for this data shows consistency, since *Susa* and *Elymais* (q.v.; i.e., *Khuzestan*) are southwestern neighbors of *Isfahan* (cf. Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 29, n. 3).

Strabo (15.3.3) more accurately locates *Gabae* "somewhere in the upper [i.e., northerly] parts of Persia—"a general location in keeping with Ptolemy's city of *Aspadana* (*Geog.* 6.4.4), which is placed in western and northern Persia. The name *Aspadana* for **Spādāna(m)* suggests a non-southwestern (i.e., non-Old Persian) Iranian transmission of the name with prothetic vowel, such as occurs in Parthian (see 'sp- examples in Henning, *Mir. Man.* III, pp. 895-96), for example, in Paikuli inscription 14 'sp'dp[ty] for Mid. Pers. sp'hpt "army commander" (Skjærvø, p. 42; cf. Arm. (*a*)*sparapet* [see [ARMENIA AND IRAN ii](#), pt. 6.d]) and the city name of *Isfahan* in Armenian and Syriac, above; Manichean 'sp'δ (cf. Sogdian 'sp'δ, 'sp'δ, sp'δ /əspād/ "army," Gharib, p. 63). The Greek name appears again, as *Aspada* in "Elamitis," in the work of the Geographus Ravennas (Schnetz, p. 24, 2.2.2). Ptolemy and his sources are deemed in error in distinguishing *Aspadana* from *Gabae* (Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 29); more precisely, they did not recognize the regional scope of *Aspadana*, recording it as another city. (For a differing view, see above, i.)

Ptolemy's *Aspadana* is placed in the direction of *Isfahan*. It is perhaps far enough north to be assigned (with W. Tomaschek, *RE* II/2, col. 1709) to *Paraetacene*, the border region of Persia adjoining *Media* (Ptolemy, *Geog.* 6.4.3)



and leading eastward to Gabae/Isfahan. The name Paraetacene—and presumably at least part of the area—is identified with modern Faridan (q.v.), the uplands west of the Isfahan plain (see additional references in *RE*, Supp. X, cols. 478-82). Although the Paraetaceni people are termed a Median tribe by Herodotus (1.101), the land is later attributed to Persia and to Elymais (Diodorus Siculus, 19.34.7; Strabo, 16.1.17-18). Alexander had assigned it to the governor of Susa (Arrian, *An.* 3.19.2)—a practical choice for protection of his communications but perhaps also following current Achaemenid custom. The administration of Paraetacene and the fortified city of Gabae from the power centers of the provinces to the south may point to the city's importance for the defense of Persia (Pārs) and Susiana against forays from the north. For example, in Ṭabari's account (II, p. 709.16 f.) Isfahan is the starting point for the conquest of Persia by the Arsacid Artabanus [IV?; q.v.]; Kōsrow II, in stationing Armenian troops in Isfahan, must have hoped to prevent the rebels from raiding to the south (Sebeos, pp. 59-61); and Ebn Ḥawqal says it was the line of defense against Turks and Deylamites (p. 363; tr., II, p. 355).

Region and province. The province of Isfahan has a varied landscape of plains and hills, and in the west and southwest it is bordered by the high ranges of the Zagros mountains. E. Herzfeld (1968, p. 189) suggested that the Isfahan region is to be equated with the ancient Elamite province of Siamshki, a district attested from the late 3rd millennium B.C.E. During the 2nd millennium it was administered, together with the district of Elam, by a viceroy accountable to the Elamite king, who resided at Susa in Khuzestan.

Strabo (15.3.3) states that the Achaemenid kings had one of their palaces at Gabae—in Persia—showing the area's close political bond to the Achaemenid homeland. The grecized name of the city's district, Gabiene, may indicate that it formed an eparchy or sub-district of a Seleucid satrapy and distinct from Paraetacene (according to W. W. Tarn, on names in *-ene*: pp. 2-4), as it probably had been in an Achaemenid satrapy (Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 29). In 317 B.C.E., during the wars of the successors of Alexander the Great, Eumenes, who supported the legitimate heirs, moved his army from highland Paraetacene to winter in Gabiene, where provisions and fodder were abundant; and there some of his officers betrayed him to the contender Antiochus, who became Antiochus I (Diodorus, 9.19.34-43). In 165 B.C.E., another Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, advanced from Susa and attempted to plunder a sanctuary of Artemis in Elymais. He was unsuccessful, having been thwarted by the local tribes. Antiochus retreated to Gabae (emended from



Tabae) “in Persia” and died there in the winter of 164 B.C.E. (Polybius, 31.9; cf. Appian, *Syriaca* 66).

Spahān must have become part of the Arsacid (q.v.) kingdom under Mithradates I (r. ca. 171-138 B.C.E.) or Mithradates II (r. ca. 123-88 B.C.E.). The former is said to have subjugated Media (Justin, 41.6.7), presumably after the death of the rebel Seleucid satrap of Media, Timarchus, ca. 162-160 (see Debevoise, p. 21; *RE* VIA1, cols. 1237-38; compare Ṭabari’s Aršak “Arsaces,” who defeated the Seleucids and gained control “from Mosul to Ray and Isfahan” [I, p. 704.14-15]). The latter likewise defeated the Seleucids, consolidated Arsacid control of Iran, and stabilized the frontiers of the kingdom. Down to the time of the rise of the Sasanids in the 220s C.E., the city and region may have held considerable autonomy. According to Ṭabari (I, p. 818.7-8), the local king, Šād-sābūr, was killed when the city (i.e., Gay) was captured by the the Sasanid Ardašīr I (q.v.) as the latter proceeded to extend his power beyond Fars but before his confrontation with Artabanus V, the last of the Iranian Arsacid dynasts. Ṭabari does not mention any appointment of a governor, but, during the reign of Ardašīr’s son Šāpūr I (r. ca. 239-70), a governor (*šahrab*) of Gay is named in the list of current royal officials in the king’s victory inscription at Naqš-e Rostam (ŠKZ, Mid. Pers. 33, Parth. 27, Gk. 63.; Huyse, 1999, I, pp. 59-60). Under the Sasanids the province of Spahān extended from Hamadan eastward to the borders of Kermān and from Ray and Qomes southward to the borders of Fārs and Khuzestan.

Abū No‘aym (I, p. 14) gives this account of the Sasanid province of Isfahan: It comprised three administrative regions (*ostān*), seven cities or towns (Persian *šahr*, Ar. *madīna*), 30 lesser towns (*rostāq*), 120 rural subdivisions (*tassuj*), and 5,000 villages (Persian *deh*, Arabic *qarya*). The seven cities of the province were known as Kaḥṭa, Jār, Jayy (that is, Gay), Qeh (or Qeh-Jāvarsān), Mehrbon, Darrām, and Sāruya. Four of the cities that lay in northern and northeastern sections of the province were already ruined in late Sasanid times. The three remaining cities, namely Jayy, Qeh, and Sāruya were divided into two major townships (*kūra*), 27 lesser towns, and 3,013 villages before the Arab conquest. On the eve of the wars of conquest, Jayy constituted the principal city and Qeh-Jāvarsān the second major city of the province of Isfahan. By the completion of the Muslim conquest of Isfahan, the towns of Qeh and Sāruya were wiped out, and Jayy stood as the sole surviving city of the province.

Some Sasanid and Arab-Sasanian drachm coins show a mint signature GD, which is read as “Gay” (Mochiri, 1972, pp. 27-31; see also [ARAB-SASANIAN](#)



COINAGE and SASANIAN COINAGE at *iranica.com*, Table 2). This mark is attested for most Sasanid kings from Pērōz (457-84) to Ardašīr III (628-29) and under the early Arab governors, while “Isfahan” seems not to have been used as a mint name until some time later in the Islamic period. The Middle Persian name “Spahān” does occur on the seal of an administrative official, called the *framādār* [q.v.] “of the seven princely families” (*wāspuhragān*; see Chaumont, 1998; Gyselen, 1989, pp. 65-66, 73-74; cf. the title “accountant [*amārgār*] of the seven princely families,” in Sebeos: Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 29; Sebeos, pp. 46-48). The high status of Spahān which this title seems to imply is echoed in the account of Abū No‘aym, who states that, before Islam, the province of Isfahan was the seat of the seven noble families (Arab. *ahl al-boyutāt*; on the social classes, see Huyse, II, pp. 119-20; Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 29; SOCIAL CLASS iii; ASĀWERA). “Spahān” also occurs on the seal of an “accountant of Ray and Spahān” (Gyselen, 2002, pp. 42, 169 f.); his jurisdiction apparently covered the two provinces, of which the two main cities were key links along the highway to the north and east.

Descriptions of the city. The Arab geographers (e.g., Ebn Hawqal, p. 362; tr., II, p. 354) report that the Sasanid city of Isfahan comprised two adjoining towns: Jāy, the fortified town and province center (hence the alternate name Šahrestāna) on the site later occupied by central Isfahan, and, two miles (*mil*) away, Yahudiya, a Jewish settlement. Ebn al-Faḡīh (p. 261) states that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar first brought Jews to Isfahan from Jerusalem; and *Šahristānihā ī Ērān* 53 (Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 21) attributes the founding of the Jewish community there to Yazdegerd I (r. 399-421), who did so at the request of his Jewish wife Sōšanduxt. (On the deportation of Jews from the western Sasanid frontier, see Neusner, III, pp. 339 ff.; IV, p. 16.) The fifth-century Armenian historian Moses of Khoren (3.35) records a transfer of Jews from Armenia to Aspahan already under Šāpur II in the 360s, while Faustus (q.v.) mentions only the settlement of the Armenian captives in Asuristān and Xuzistān (pp. 192-95). In any case, the formal founding of the town of Yahudiya is dated to the early ‘Abbasid period and is attributed to Ayyub b. Ziyād al-Kendī (Abu No‘aym, I, pp. 16-17). What may have been, in the Sasanid period, a relatively small Jewish settlement (Pers. *ku-johudān*, glossed as Ar. *sekkat al-yahud*, Abu No‘aym, I, p. 16) was later known to the Arab writers as the larger of the two towns. (See also Honarfar, pp. 25-29; Le Strange, pp. 202-6.)

Based on earlier sources, Ḥosayn b. Moḥammad Āvi (14th cent.), in the Persian



translation of the Arabic local history of Isfahan, describes Gay/Isfahan as it appeared during the Sasanid period (Āvi, pp. 417-18). One of the gates of Gay, situated opposite the market square, was named the Gate of Jūr (or Gūr); a second, the Gate of the Moon (or perhaps of Māh “Media”), also called the Gate of Esfiš; a third, the Gate of Tīr (the Arrow, or Mercury); and a fourth, the Gate of Juš, commonly called the Jews’ Gate. Near this last entrance the Sasanid king Pērōz is said to have built a village called Āḍar-šāpurān, and here he constructed a new palace and garden, also a fire temple to which he bequeathed the revenues of the village. One of the curious features of Gay at this period (Āvi, p. 418) was that “when the sun reached the first degree of Capricorn, it shone, as it rose, directly through the Gate of Jur and, as it set, through the Jews’ Gate; while on entering the first degree of Cancer it shone, as it rose, through the Gate of Māh or Esfiš and, as it set, through the Gate of Tīr. The width of the foundations and walls was 60 large bricks, and over one of the gates was an inscription stating that the sum expended on feeding the artisans and laborers engaged in the construction of the wall amounted, ere it was completed, to 600,000 derhams” (see also Abu No‘aym, I, p. 15). Close to the Gate of Jur was a market called Bāzār-e Jurin. There, at the season of the New Year (that is, the vernal equinox), the people of the Isfahan district, “rich and poor, high and low, men, women, and children used to repair, remaining encamped there for two or three months for the great fair and general festivities which were held at Nowruz” (Āvi, p. 418).

The city in traditional history. The Middle Persian geography *Šahristānihā ī Ērān* [q.v. at iranica.com] (sec. 53: Markwart, 1931, p. 21) records that the provincial capital of Gay was built by Alexander the Great; and this opinion is repeated by the early Islamic writers Ṭabarī (I, p. 702) and Ebn al-Faḡīh (p. 262). According to the local history, the city was founded before the period of the legendary Iranian hero Jamšīd; it suffered much destruction from Afrāsiāb the Turk, was restored by Queen Kōmānī (Homāy, q.v.), the daughter of Bahman, son of Esfandiār, and was left unharmed by Alexander (Āvi, p. 417). Another fragment of legendary history is given by the Isfahan native, Ebn Rosta (q.v., pp. 151 ff.), according to whom an ancient building in Jayy called Sāroq was built by Kay Kāus and later rebuilt by Bahman, son of Esfandiār. (See also survey in Schwartz, V, pp. 587-89.)

The local history (Āvi, p. 417) associates with Gay/Jayy a version of Zoroastrian tradition regarding the history of its sacred books (see [EṢṬAKR](#) and [AVESTA](#)): because of the clean air and dry soil, the ancient books of the Persians are said



to have been preserved there during the Sasanid period. They were written on birchbark, because this material was less subject to decay than others. The climate of Gay also attracted several of the Sasanid kings, according to local lore. Ḥamza, in his *Ketāb Eṣfahān* (quoted by Āvi, p. 419), relates that Pērōz, the son of Yazdegerd II (439-57), consulted a Greek physician from Rūm (i.e., Anatolia) as to which of the cities of Persia was best suited for a palace. The physician chose Isfahan, because the climate would give “life to the Messiah, duration to life, and eternity to duration.” Pērōz instructed Šāpūrān, a son of Āḍarnāmān, governor of Isfahan, to repair the walls of Gay in preparation for the king taking up local residence. But Pērōz was killed shortly after. His son Kawād (488-531) directed a similar inquiry regarding a propitious place of residence to a Greek physician, and again Gay was suggested.

The local history (Āvi, p. 694) also relates that the Sasanid kings preferred Isfahanis as retainers to all other peoples. It states that, of 373 attendants of Ḳosrow II (590-628), 230 were Isfahanis. To these alone did the king entrust the guardianship of the Derafš-e Kāviān (q.v.). This royal standard was said to be the leather apron of the blacksmith Kāva (an Isfahani), who, according to legend, had rid Iran of the evil tyrant Zohak. On one occasion when Ḳosrow did attempt to have the care of the standard transferred to the Āzarbāyjānis, a fight ensued between the two sides; and in this the Iṣfahanis prevailed. Ḳosrow II (591-628) wished the custody of the standard to remain especially with the Isfahani family of Gudarz. Ardašir I (224-40) is said to have held that no ruler could achieve a permanent victory over another until he had secured the support of the Isfahanis; and Ḳosrow I also credited his success to them. Ḳosrow II also is alleged to have preferred Isfahanis, particularly men from the Faridan area, to all other troops (Āvi, p. 695).

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