



## SUSA III. THE ACHAEMENID PERIOD

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The date of 539 BCE, which is traditionally held to be the beginning of the Achaemenid period at Susa, refers to the capture of Babylon, as it is supposed that [Cyrus II](#) conquered Susa after he took Babylon (Herodotus, 1.190-91; Strabo, 15.3.2). The history of Persia before Cyrus (see [ACHAEMENID DYNASTY](#)) and at the beginning of his reign, and that of the relations of Persia with neighboring regions, indicate that Persian elements were present in the plain not far from Susa in the first decades of the 6th century (see above, viii). The administrative tablets from the Acropolis, written by a Susan authority, mention suppliers with Iranian names, as well as place names in eastern Khuzestan. Thus it is not certain that the control of Susa was achieved by an actual conquest.

There is no evidence of Cyrus or [Cambyses](#) having been active at Susa. Only [Darius](#), once his power was consolidated, chose Susa as one of his royal residences, soon after 520. In addition to Herodotus (3.140), some details in the royal inscriptions and in an Egyptian text point to such a date (Vallat, 1986, p. 281; Briant, 1993). Building was carried out there at the same time that he built Persepolis. Even so, until the advent of Alexander the Greeks knew only of



Susa, which they saw as the residence of the king of Persia and the capital of the empire from Cambyses to Artaxerxes II (Hdt., 3.30, 64; 4.83, 85; 5.49); for instance, it was at Susa that Darius learned of the defeat at Marathon (Aeschylus, *The Persians* 16) and to Susa that Xerxes sent information about the fall of Athens, then his own defeat (Hdt., 8.54 and 99). The choice of Darius was probably influenced by the geographical position of Susa, nearer than Fars to the rich Mesopotamian regions of the empire, but also by the glorious past of the city, which was the old capital of Elam and thus an important political component of the empire, where it was necessary to display royal power. He also established other residences outside Persia, at Babylon and Ecbatana.

*Written sources.* The descriptive history of Susa during the two centuries of the empire is poorly documented by the texts, which are few in number. The royal inscriptions are dated by the king who is the author; there exist more than thirty on stone tablets, round or square column bases, and mud bricks (for the corpus accumulated since the beginning of excavation, see Scheil, 1929, 1933; Kent, 1953; Steve, 1987; Lecoq, 1997). They deal with the construction of buildings, but none describes political events. They are often trilingual (Old Persian, Elamite, Akkadian), and some are represented by several examples. They deal with structures such as walls, “palace,” “*apadāna*” (only once), “buildings,” “house,” but several of these clearly correspond to the same building or to part of a complex identified by another inscription. None of them refers to a temple or sanctuary.

The clay tablets found at Susa are extraordinarily few in comparison to the discoveries at Persepolis. Even so, the existence of political and economic activity at Susa is undeniable. Besides the important building campaigns described by the inscriptions and reported in a few Greek sources, the sojourns of the king and his voyages to and from Susa are documented by the Greek sources. These apparently had no fixed rhythm; 3 months in spring are mentioned by Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 8.6.22), wintertime, by Athenaeus (513Fb), but there are many variants (Tuplin). Several tablets from Persepolis (end of the 6th–beginning of the 5th cents. BCE) mention satraps being received by the king (Hallock, 1969, PFT 679-80), caravan movements between Persepolis and Susa—sometimes coming from much farther away (ibid., PFT 1139, 1953, 2056), as well as couriers and workers coming from Asia Minor (ibid., PFT 1321 and 1404). Susa is one of the places where the kings kept a treasury; according to Strabo (15.3.2) each sovereign built one, and at the



surrender of the city Alexander found there 50,000 talents of silver (Quintus Curtius, 5.10). On the life of the people, written evidence is limited to very rare economic sources found at Susa in Akkadian (Paper; Joannès; including a contract: Rutten), or written in Susa and found elsewhere, such as some tablets from the Murasu archives in Nippur (Stolper, 1992). Most of them are dated from one of the Artaxerxes.

*Archeological data.* The excavations carried out at Susa over several decades have rarely given priority to the Achaemenid period. In spite of 70 excavation campaigns, the general image of Achaemenid Susa remains incomplete (Perrot; Boucharlat, 1990b and 1997; Steve, Vallat, and Gasche, 2002, pp. 485-500 and 553-57). The work of M. Dieulafoy in 1884-86, R. de Mecquenem in 1912-35, and above all that of J. Perrot in 1969-78 revealed the boundaries of the city, the palace of Darius partially reconstructed by Artaxerxes II, and a small palace (the “Shahur palace”) outside the walls on the west near the Shahur (Shaur, etc.) river. Another building, the so-called Donjon, at the far southern extremity of the city, is of uncertain date. Work resumed in 1995 on the Apadāna mound, directed by M. Kaboli, under the auspices of the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization (Sāzmān-e mirās-e farhangi, šanāye-e dasti va gardešgari). Within the city itself, our information is thus limited to the royal buildings. Outside the city, chance discoveries of stone architectural elements in 1977 (Boucharlat, Shahidi), and others since the beginning of this century, indicate either buildings for the elite or reuse of Achaemenid rooms during or after that period.

The topography and the plan of Susa before Darius are unknown, but more than three millennia of occupation had shaped the three principal mounds, of which only one part was occupied in the Neo-Elamite III period (see above, viii). To the east of these mounds, R. Ghirshman (1954) brought to light a group of houses, the “Achaemenid Persian village” which he attributed to Persian occupants, although the earliest material is clearly Neo-Elamite of the beginning of the 6th century (Miroschedji).

The royal constructions at Susa are known through inscriptions, and attempts have been made to match these with constructions seen in the excavations. These inscriptions are labeled with the initial of the king, that of the site, and an alphabetical classification (e.g., DSz “Darius Susa No. z”). The best-known buildings are the palace of Darius on the mound of the Apadāna, consisting of a residential palace and an audience hall, as well as the monumental gate which gives access to it, and facing these, on the Royal City mound, a covered



passage (called “Propylaeum” by the archeologists). His son Xerxes finished his work. A century later Artaxerxes II restored the palace of Darius, which had burned 50 years earlier under Artaxerxes I, his grandfather. Only certain kings are known to have built (or, perhaps, completed building projects) after Xerxes: possibly Artaxerxes I, Darius II (according to two inscriptions), and Artaxerxes II, according to several inscriptions, one of which corresponds to the archeological remains outside the walls, on the west bank of the Shahur and facing the palace of Darius. The monument called the [Āyadana](#), located 4 km north of Susa and long considered to be the prototype for Achaemenid fire temples based on the interpretation of the remains by the excavator (Dieulafoy), should not be listed among the Achaemenid constructions. It is now known to be a construction of the Seleucid or Parthian period (the columns are reused; Ghirshman 1996, p. 200), probably a rich residence (Schippmann, pp. 266-74) with a plan common from Mesopotamia to Afghanistan in that period (Francfort).

Darius surrounded the 100-hectare area of the three principal mounds in a lozenge-shaped enclosure. He prided himself on having rebuilt ruined fortifications, but with modifications (DSe). The excavations show that he greatly changed the topography. After having leveled the top of the Apadāna and Royal City mounds to an even height of 15 m above the plain, he fixed the boundary of the royal city by a retaining wall which was impressive to the visitor, but without fortification (“without a rampart” according to Strabo, 15.3.2); the old reconstruction (Dieulafoy) of a very sophisticated fortification is pure fantasy. This glacis has been identified on the southern, eastern, and northeastern sides of the city; measuring up to 25 m wide at the base, it is a construction made of mud bricks, drained within by a deep gravel lining. We know at least one of the accesses into the city on the east through a monumental gate of 36 x 18 m. Within this area, the king organized the royal city with a citadel in the west (Ctesias after Diodorus, 2.22.3) on the mound of the Acropolis, which dominated even his palace; the foundation of the enclosure wall is more than 10 m higher than the floors of his palace. This wall was 5 to 11 m thick, and apparently without towers (de Morgan, 1900, p. 89 and fig. 8).

Despite the presence of many architectural fragments, including a bell-shaped column base bearing the name of Xerxes, there is no evidence of royal buildings on the Acropolis. It may have been used as Treasury; in the southern part, two important objects have been found together, an Achaemenid bronze



lion-weight of 121 kilos (Lampre; Curtis and Tallis, no. 301) and a large bronze weight in the form of a knucklebone, weighting 93.7 kilos, bearing a Greek inscription of the 6th century BCE (Haussoulier; Aruz et al., no. 154). The latter was probably taken from the temple of Apollon at Didymes, after the repression of the Ionian revolt in 494 (SEG, no. 9). This event is probably related to the deportation of Milesians (Herodotus, 6.19-20) to Susa, then to the Erythraean Sea (the Persian Gulf).

The royal quarter occupied the northern mound of Susa, called the Apadāna. The palace (the Apadāna and the Residence) occupied 5 hectares on a 12-hectare artificial platform (Perrot). Access to it was from the Royal City on a pavement of bricks, which passed through a monumental, covered square passage measuring 24 m on each side, which had two halls and two porticoes with two columns (Perrot, Ladiray, and Vallat). Begun by Darius, it was finished by Xerxes (XSa). Turning at a right angle, the road crossed a brick causeway and ended at the Gate of Darius, another square construction with a hypostyle central hall, which was begun by Darius and finished by Xerxes (XSd; Vallat, 1974b); it is reminiscent of the Gate of All the Nations at Persepolis (Perrot and Ladiray). Although this may not have been the only entrance to the palace (Kaboli), it was the official entrance. The passage through this gate toward the palace was flanked by a statue of Darius (there were probably two), much larger than life-size (originally almost 3 m, on a base 0.50 m high), one of the very rare examples of Achaemenid sculpture in the round (exhibited in the Muza-ye melli [National Museum], Tehran). The upper part is missing. The king is dressed in the Persian robe (see [CLOTHING ii.](#)), but the posture—one foot advanced, the arm folded against the breast—is Egyptian (Stronach, 1974). The folds of the dress carry an inscription in the three cuneiform languages of the empire and in hieroglyphics: “Here is the stone statue which Darius ordered to be made in Egypt, so that he who sees it in the future will know that the Persian holds Egypt” (DSab: Vallat, 1974a; Yoyotte). The Egyptian provenance is confirmed by the type of stone, a metamorphic sandstone from Wadi Hammamat near the Red Sea. Intended for the temple of Heliopolis, it was brought to Susa by Xerxes. The base of the statue carries on the front and back the Egyptian symbol of the union of upper and lower Egypt, and on the sides the representation of the “countries” (see [DAHYU](#)) of the empire; each is identified by an important figure and his costume, as well as by his name inscribed in a cartouche (Roaf, 1974).

The residential palace occupies 3.8 hectares to the south, across a vast



esplanade (Perrot, 1981). It is organized around three courtyards; the eastern courtyard carried on its northern face a lion frieze in enameled brick (now in the Louvre Museum; Dieulafoy, pl. V; Muscarella). The royal apartments were made difficult to access through doors and zigzag passages toward the west courtyard. On either side of the entrance to the king's apartment the foundation tablets were buried, square stone plaques (found intact) measuring 33.6 x 8.7 cm on each side and carrying the inscription DSz (Elamite) and DSaa (Akkadian). The two versions, which are quite different from each other, are official texts (fragments of copies on stone and brick have been found elsewhere on the site) declaring that the construction materials of the palace came from all the countries of the empire and that all the peoples of the empire contributed to its construction. Behind the king's apartment, a series of apartments for the family follow a similar plan; it is rather unlikely that they included an access stairway to the first floor (Amiet, 1994).

On the north, projecting forward, the Apadāna is also the work of Darius, but was rebuilt by Artaxerxes II (A<sup>2</sup>Sa, engraved on four column bases, the first inscription which identified this columned building by such a name; Loftus, pp. 370-73). This square construction is slightly elevated above the open space that surrounds it on three sides. Measuring 109 m on each side, it is very similar to that of Persepolis in plan and dimensions, having a central hall of 58 m per side with 6 x 6 columns, and a portico on each of the three open sides with two rows of 6 columns and square halls in the angles, which probably contained stairways. The plan of the south side is unclear, but definitely had no portico, making the general plan very similar to that of the Apadana at Persepolis. Column bases, shafts, and capitals are in stone on imposing stone foundations. Walls and columns have foundations in a deep trench or a well filled with gravel (10 m deep). The walls in brick and the stone uprights of the passages are very poorly preserved. Originally 20 m high, erected on a high terrace and open on three sides, the Apadana would have been impressive, visible from far off like Persepolis. The palace of Darius, unlike Persepolis, was not burned by Alexander; still in use when Alexander returned from the east in 325, it lost its function after his death in 323 but remained standing at least for some decades, as did the statue of Darius for several centuries (Boucharlat, 1990a).

In the southern half of the royal city, signs of royalty are scarce or absent. At the southern extremity, at the Donjon, among the elements reused in several successive, post-Achaemenid constructions, certain Achaemenid fragments



indicate the presence of an Achaemenid-period construction, unless they were brought from other sectors of Susa. Among these fragments is a column base, with an inscription of Artaxerxes II (A<sup>2</sup>Sb), which was reused in a Parthian-period construction, also several stone orthostats with bas-reliefs of figures climbing a stairway, elements which are very rare at Susa, unlike Persepolis. Column base fragments, dozens of glazed bricks and even a fragment of the “Charter of Darius” (DSf) on a stone plaque were also found here, as in many sectors of the site of Susa (Loftus, pp. 402-10; de Mecquenem, 1934, pp. 222-26, 1943, pp. 70-76; 1947, pp. 82-5; Curtis, pp. 10-13). All these elements could have been taken, after Alexander, from the palace of Darius or the Shahur palace (see below) or some unknown constructions, since much activity occurred in this sector during the Seleucid period; most of the Greek inscriptions come from here, as well as many coins of Alexander type. The Donjon could have been the administrative center of the Seleucid city; it is opposite the ancient royal quarter, on land that had not been occupied in the Achaemenid period (Boucharlat, 1990b, pp. 150-51; 2000, pp. 145-47). However, the hypothesis of an Achaemenid construction in this location is the explanation most often accepted (Amiet, 1972, p. 167); attribution is made to Artaxerxes I and Darius II (Ghirshman, 1963, pp. 142-44, 268; Steve, Vallat, and Gasche, pp. 493-94) or judged uncertain (Stronach, 1985, p. 74; 1990, pp. 150-51). If Achaemenid, the building may have served to replace the palace of Darius after the latter was burned; in that case, Artaxerxes I must have built it.

The Shahur palace outside the walls is the work of Artaxerxes II, according to the trilingual inscription (A<sup>2</sup>Sd, found on several fragments, Vallat, 1979) on the column bases, although they were not found *in situ* (Labrousse and Boucharlat, 1974; Boucharlat and Labrousse, 1979). As in the palace of Darius, the much smaller hypostyle hall here (37.5 x 34.60 m) is projected forward, eastward in this case. There are 8 rows of 8 columns, with stone bases; the shafts and the capitals were in wood. This hall produced the first evidence of figurative wall paintings, with three almost life-size human heads framed by geometric motifs; the colors used are red, carmine (made of cinnabar), blue, and white, confirmed by the painters’ palettes, pottery shards full of pigments. These are also the colors in evidence at Pasargadae and at Persepolis.

The plan of the complex (3.5 hectares) is quite different from that of the palace of Darius. In a rectangle 220 x 150 m, the poorly preserved constructions are organized around an empty space, very likely a garden. One of the buildings was erected on a terrace 2 m high and its reconstructed plan is an example of



classic Achaemenid architecture: a central hall with four columns preceded by a wider portico opening onto the garden, surrounded by halls on the other three sides. In this palace several fragmentary orthostats and hundreds of pieces of glazed bricks of different types were found, but never *in situ*. They must have been taken from other constructions. Like the hypothetical palace of the Donjon, the Shahur palace might have replaced the palace of Darius while it was under restoration, but according to its location in the plain and its plan, it could also have been a place of pleasurable activity. One of the inscription fragments carries a word previously translated as “paradise” (Kent, p. 155), but this translation was later judged to be uncertain (Vallat, 1979, p. 148), then modified to “outside the walls” (Steve, 1987, p. 98), which has also been thrown into doubt (Lecoq, 1997, pp. 116 and 274). In any case, the Shahur palace represents a type which is original in Achaemenid architecture.

Nothing is known of the non-royal urban constructions and domestic architecture at Susa. Paradoxically, all the sectors excavated outside the palaces appear to be empty of constructions (Boucharlat, 1990b, pp. 153-54). The known elements in the southern part of the Royal City are limited to a few walls (Miroschedji et al., 1987, pp. 14-15, fig. 2). This almost total lack suggests the hypothesis of a city in which only the enclosure and the royal buildings were built in solid materials, while the army and the civil servants lived in light constructions when the court was in the city. This idea is not easily acceptable in regard to the permanent administrative personnel of the province and for the local population, if there was one (Boucharlat, 1990b). It is noteworthy that, for the following period (3rd cent. BCE), the traces of occupation in the Early Seleucid city also are few, with no satisfactory explanation (cf. SUSA x). The idea of a “vast encampment” has also been put forward for Pasargadae; the question has not even been posed for Persepolis, where only the royal quarter on the terrace is known, but almost nothing of the town which must have supported it (see, e.g., Roaf, 2004, pp. 395-96).

In this context of an empty enclosure, the princely tomb found on the Acropolis mound remains enigmatic. Under a vault of mud bricks (an Elamite feature), a bronze sarcophagus contained a skeleton, identified without proof as that of a woman, alabaster flasks, silver and bronze vessels, jewelry of gold and semi-precious stones (de Morgan, 1905; Tallon), and coins now dated to the end of the 5th century (Elayi and Elayi, 1992). This unique tomb does not indicate the presence of a cemetery, nor does it prove that inhumation was commonly practiced. The funerary rites of the population of Susa in the



Achaemenid period remain unknown, and those of the elite do not seem to be particularly Zoroastrian, according to this princely tomb.

There are no archeological traces of Mazdeism in the local population; it is probable that the previous Elamite beliefs remained very much alive, while the Babylonian and Jewish groups that are attested (e.g., in the *Book of Esther*; Perrot, 1989) followed their own beliefs. For the kings, we note the references to [Ahura Mazdā](#), whom Darius recognized and to whom he sacrificed (DSk) without making him the only god, but “the greatest of the gods” (DSf 9), without naming the other gods (DSe 50-51). Mithra is mentioned on two occasions under Artaxerxes II (A<sup>2</sup>Sa 4-5; A<sup>2</sup>Sd 3-4), but not Anāhitā (see [ANĀHĪD](#); Steve, Vallat, and Gasche, pp. 553-57).

Personal objects of the Achaemenid period found at Susa were scattered over the different mounds and constitute only a very modest corpus. Luxury goods probably were pillaged, beginning with the conquest of Alexander. There remain fewer than twenty stamps, cylinder seals, and bullae (Amiet, 1972a, pp. 284-87, pls. 189-90) to be compared with the thousands of documents at Pasargadae, fragmentary stone vessels (Amiet, 1990), a few ostraca in Aramaic (referred to by Amiet, 1972, p. 167), some Egyptian amulets in the shape of the Eye of Horus (*udjat*), and a fragmentary stone stele (Abdi). A collection of small decorated ivory plaques was found in a post-Achaemenid well at the Donjon (Amiet, 1972a); the style and the iconography indicate various provenances (Persian, Phoenician, Greek, Egyptian), but we do not know whether they belonged to a rich person, or whether they were a cache of objects in a royal palace. A few Greek painted potsherds were found at various points at Susa, especially on the Acropolis; these have no indication of the owners, whether king, nobles, rich Susans, or foreigners from the Greek world, such as a Nikokles from Sinope known from his epitaph in Greek from the early 4th century (SEG, no. 27). The terracotta figurines are surprisingly rare, compared to those of previous or later periods (Martinez-Sève, pp. 74-79). There are no traces of metal tools. The corpus of pottery is now better known (Boucharlat et al., 1987, pp. 192-94 and especially Miroschedji et al., pp. 14-35). It provides evidence for the presence of ordinary inhabitants inside the city walls of Susa and also serves as a reference point for identification of the occupation of ancient Susiana in the Achaemenid period.



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