



SUSA V. THE SASANIAN PERIOD

SUSA

v. THE SASANIAN PERIOD

Literary sources. The data on literary sources regarding Susa (Šuš) in the Sasanian period have been compiled by Arthur Christensen (q.v.) in 1944 and augmented by the contributors to the *Cambridge History of Iran* (Vol.III). Roman Ghirshman (q.v.) based his account (Ghirshman, 1962) mainly on Christensen. Rémy Boucharlat (1985) contributed further research to work already begun by Robert J. Wenke (1976) who had investigated the interaction between trading centers and the peasantry in the region. The most important primary sources are the Acts of the Christian Martyrs (see [ACTS OF THE PERSIAN MARTYRS](#)) and the records of the Christian councils, as well as the Persian chronicle as handed down by Ṭabari.

The satrap of Susa had been loyal to the Parthian king Artabanus V, and the city was forcibly conquered by Ardašir (qq.v.) in 224 after his victory over King Šād-Šāpur of Isfahan; but it appears to have been rebuilt immediately. The great king made Susa, like other cities on the Persian Gulf, into an economic trading center with Mesopotamia, Mesene and Fārs, especially dealing with gold (Susa had a mint). The Shaur canal linked Susa and Ahvaz. Gondēšapur (q.v.) and Susa were at times residences of the Sasanian kings



besides Ctesiphon.

In the inscription of Šāpur I (241-272) on the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt, the first three provinces on the list of countries—Pārs, Parthia, Kuzestān (together with Assyria)—are named as Aryan lands “which our father, our grandparents and ancestors took possession of.” Thus Susa belonged to the heartland of the Sasanian Empire. Šāpur points out in the inscription that he founded Hormozd-Ardašir, today's Ahvāz (q.v.), clearly an old city, which at the time of its conquest in 224 had been destroyed like Susa and again rebuilt, and given a new name. In Gondēšāpur-Bēt Lapaṭ (q.v.; why-'ndwyk-Šhpwhry) the king had appointed the satrap Frik. In the early Islamic, and perhaps even in the Sasanian period, the three cities were administrative centers of three districts (*korrā*) bearing the same names, and the district of Susa was called Susianē in the Greek sources. In Kuzestān, which consisted of seven districts, Šāpur I settled Roman prisoners of war after his victory over Valerian in 260 C.E., among them many Christians along with Bishop Demetrius/Demetrianus of Antioch. They had their own settlements and a bishop in each of the three above-mentioned cities. Two bishops fighting against one another were ruling side by side when, shortly before 300 C.E., Pāpā bar Aggai became patriarch of the Christians in Seleucia-Ctesiphon in spite of the resistance of Milēs of Susa and his archdeacon Simon bar Sabbā'ē. Simon became Pāpā's successor. The Marcionite sect as well (Kardir distinguished between Naṣoraean and Christians) and Manichaeans also had their followers, for Mani addressed letters to the community of Susiana.

After Constantine had accepted Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire in 312, Christians began to be persecuted in the Persian Empire under Šāpur II (310-379) from 339 onwards. During a rebellion of Christians in Susa, the king used 300 elephants to destroy the city. It was probably after his victory over the Romans in Amida (q.v.) in 359 that he had the city rebuilt and had prisoners of war settled as weavers in Susa, producing silk brocades, according to an account in Mas'udi's *Morūj al-dahab* (Christensen, p. 127). A weaver named Possy had a workshop near the palace of Šāpur in Susa, and later, according to the Acts of the Martyrs, in Kerḳā də Lēdān (Shepherd, *Camb. Hist. Iran*, III, p. 1108). He produced brocades in silk and gold. Susa was renamed Ērān-Xwarre-Šābuhr (q.v.; nowadays Ayvān-e Karḳa). Under Yazdegerd I (399-420) the situation of the Christians improved, and the patriarch Ishaq was able to convene a synod in Ctesiphon in 410, mentioning the diocese of Susa. The synod of Ctesiphon set up the Eastern Church in 484



and chose Nestorianism to stress its independence from Rome as against Peroz I (457-484).

At the end of the Sasanian period, Kavād I (488-531) built the district of Eranasankard-Kāvād, which was often wrongly equated with Susa, but in the early Islamic period (and already in the list of Moses of Khorene) was part of Mesopotamia and was situated along the Diyala and Tigris. The Pahlavi text *Šahrestānihā-ī Ērān* also separates the cities (N° 42-47) ‘whrmzd-ltšyl’n/Ahvāz, Šwš/Susa, Šwstl/Šustar, wndywg Šhpwhl /Gondēšāpur and ‘yl’n-GD-krt Šhpwhl/(district?) Susa from (N° 53) ‘yl’n-s’n-krt-kw’t /Diyala-valley. The heresiarch Mazdak came from Susiana and at first regarded Kavād as a patron. The fierce arguments with the Mazdakites also had their effect on other minorities, so that the Jewish school in Susa was closed under Ohrmazd IV in 580. After the battle of Nehāvand in 642, the Arabs advanced, and the Persian generals fled via Fārs to Susa, where they surrendered to the Arab general Abu Musa and adopted Islam.

Archeological finds. The gigantic metropolis of the Ancient Elamite Empire (4000-600 B.C.E.) extended over 1 square kilometer and had been completely redesigned under the Achaemenids into a residential city with palaces and a surrounding wall. Its four hills towered up to about 20 meters and were named Acropolis, Apadāna (q.v.), Ville Royale, and Ville des Artisans by the French archeologists. During the Selucid and Parthian period, the entire area was twice rebuilt, and once more during the Sasanian period, after which it remained without further interference up to the early Islamic period. Since the aim of the archeologists in their 70 excavation campaigns from 1850 to 1978 was to expose the Elamite buildings, the later layers had to be cleared away and were often treated without due care.

The Acropolis was excavated by Jacques de Morgan (q.v.) in his 4th to 15th seasons of excavation, 1897–1910. He removed the entire surface area, without paying attention to the tile-work. Only small finds were collected and taken to the Louvre. In the excavation report of 1905, G. Jéquier merely mentions (p. 41) a hoard consisting of 700 coins of Khosrow II. Later on, some of the pieces from these excavations were published by Dorothy Shepherd and Prudence Harper (Shepherd, *Camb. Hist. Iran III*, ceramics with green lead glaze pl. 109a, p. 1107, glass vessels manufactured in Susa, pl. 108b, pp. 1104-5, a small bowl in gold and rock crystal, with its hollows incrustated, and a jade bowl p. 1098 [also in Ghirshman, 1962, p. 222, fig. 264]; Harper, *Camb. Hist. Iran III*, two silver bowls, one in the shape of a boat pl. 115a-b, p. 1114). A stucco relief was



taken to Berlin. These finds lead one to assume that during the Sasanian period there were villas of rich merchants above the ruins of the Elamite temples.

On the Apadana, William Kennet Loftus worked on the Darius palace in the first and second excavations (1850-54), and found the ostrakon mentioned below, which is now in the British Museum. Parts of the Darius palace were covered over with Sassanid buildings, which were investigated by Jean Perrot in his archeological excavations 60-70, 1968-78. At the Xerxes gate, ruins of residential buildings were found, and in one of them was a jug with 1171 Sassanid coins of King Khosrow I (1 piece), Hormizd IV (2 pieces) and Khosrow II (1168 pieces). The jug and some of the coins bore Pahlavi inscriptions in ink.

In the Ville Royale, excavations of a large surface were made. In the excavations 16-38, 1911-1939, R. de Mecquenem excavated the southern top of the hill, the donjon, and reported (de Mecquenem, 1943, p. 70) on a “palais sasanide.” The plan in fig. 60 is rather unclear but shows that it was a villa, like the one in the ancient ruins of Kish in Iraq. The surface excavation “chantier A” of Ghirshman’s excavation 39-59, 1946-67 uncovered 15 levels of settlements, of which the lowest was erected around 1800 B.C.E. on grown ground. Among the uppermost levels (I-II of the early Middle Ages) were levels III and IV of the Sasanian period. About these excavations, I have only short preliminary reports, nor could I find plans of the excavated buildings. Level IV had been built in the early Sasanian period, shortly after the burning down of the Parthian city (level V) by Ardašir I. The excavated area was densely built with houses on both sides of several streets, and in the center was a large building of clay bricks with a square hall measuring 14 m a side, surrounded by 3 corridors. Two rows of 3 columns each on Achaemenian bases (spoils from the Darius palace) divided the room into 3 aisles, to which there led 3 doors on the façade, the central one being broader. The floor of the hall was paved in brick. The fallen walls of the columned hall bore remains of frescoes: one of them with a red ground featured the moon, stars, and clouds in a Chinese style, another with a blue ground showed a hunt with riders in twice their natural size. The rider in front wore a long bright-red garment with lozenge-shaped patterns, and on his belt his sword pommel was visible, while he bent his arm for archery. In front of the second one, of which only the head and forelegs of the chestnut horse were preserved, thronged the group of tracked animals, gazelles, two boars, a buffalo, above a fallen animal and below several killed ones. Some flowers and a circle with rays for the sun



suggested the landscape. The pictures were painted on a roughcast of straw and clay and were so badly broken that they could not be preserved, so that only one copy remained (Ghirshman, 1962, fig. 224, p. 183). The building stood near a large forecourt with a brick pavement and had in front of its façade a peristyle with Achaemenid column bases. Ghirshman considered the building as a mithraeum and compared the fresco with the hunting Mithras in Dura Europos, but the absence of a bull killing representation (tauroboly) makes his theory uncertain.

The houses contained a lot of ceramics, unglazed or with blue glaze, as well as objects in bronze and iron, coins and a buried battle horse with bridle, snaffle, weapons and lances. The traces of destruction, the broken-in walls and the many graves of killed people including children in the houses, courtyards and streets, buried in jugs with signs of crosses, are interpreted by Ghirshman as the result of the city's destruction at the time of the persecution of Christians by Šāpur II, who had used 300 elephants. The coins found in the layer ended with Šāpur II and confirmed this.

Level III, which lay above it, was poorly built of pressed clay, and only few clay bricks were used for the houses. The non-decorated ceramic and poor barbotine ware also showed a lack of wealth. In one house, there was a clay bulla with 5 seal imprints. A life-size lion's head in stucco was apparently guarding a door. In an intermediate layer there were several 4th – 6th century clay brick houses, in which blue-glazed jugs and a small "archive" with a dozen clay bullae belonged to a higher-class population. In the upper rubble of the houses which had not been destroyed by the Arab conquest, there were some early Islamic ceramics.

On the Ville des Artisans, there was a great necropolis during the Parthian period, which was abandoned in the Sasanian period, perhaps for religious reasons, since Christians and Zoroastrians sought new cemeteries. The Islamic level with its great mosque represented a new beginning.

Inscriptions. In Susa no major Sasanian inscriptions were found. Brief Pahlavi writings in ink were inscribed on the coins of a treasure trove. The above-mentioned ostrakon from Susa (O.191 Brit. Mus.) has been described in CII by Jean de Menasce, *Ostraca and Papyri*, 1957 pl. IX and: Dieter Weber, text volume 1992, p. 1, 197, as "hardly legible." Further brief Pahlavi inscriptions are to be found on clay bulls and seals from Susa. The bull found by Ghirshman in level III has the imprint of a written seal, which only in its



central field bears the abbreviation for the district 'yl'n without the more detailed line on the margin. Other imprints of seals (Göbl, *Tacht-e Suleiman*) have the marginal line 'yl'n-'s'nkl-kw'ty (thus Ghirshman and Göbl), but the abbreviation can also be completed as Ērān-Xwarreh-Šabuhr. Herzfeld has published a seal of Farrok-Šabur, Mobad of Ērān-Ḳwarreh-Šapur (Christensen 1944, p. 118.) The abbreviation appears to be the short form for the mint of Susa.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Rémy Boucharlat, "Suse, marché agricole ou relais du grand commerce, Suse et la Susiane à l'époque des grands empires," *Paléorient* II, 1985, pp. 71-81.

Idem, "Suse à l'époque sasanide: une capitale prestigieuse devenue ville de province," *Mesopotamia* 22, 1987.

Arthur Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 2nd. ed., Copenhagen, 1944.

Roman Ghirshman, *Iran, Parther und Sasaniden*, Munich, 1962.

Idem, "Cinq campagnes de fouilles à Suse (1946-1951)," *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie orientale* 46, 1952, pp. 1-18.

Idem, "Fouilles à Suse, campagnes 1948-1951," *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* 1949, pp. 196-99; 1950, pp. 233-38; 1951, pp. 297-98, Idem, "Suse," in *La civilisation Iranienne*, Paris, 1952, pp. 55-58.

Idem, "Suse I-III," *Journal du Ministère de l'Education Nationale de l'Iran*, 1949-1951.

Idem, "The Town which Three Hundred Elephants raised to the Ground, the newly excavated fourth level of Suse and the Partho-Seleucid Necropolis," *ILN* October 7, 1950, pp. 571-73.



Idem, "Fouilles de Suse (1946-51)," *Revue des Arts* 3, 1951.

Philippe Gignoux, "Les inscriptions en surcharge sur les monnaies du trésor sasanide de Suse," *CDAFI* 8, 1978, pp. 137-53.

Robert Göbl, "Die Tonbullen vom Tacht-e Suleiman, Ein Beitrag zur spätsasanidischen Sphragistik," in *Tacht-e Suleiman, Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen* Bd. I, Berlin, 1976.

Rika Gyselen, "Trésor de monnaies sasanides trouvé à Suse," *CDAFI* 7, 1977, pp. 61-74.

R. Gyselen and Hermann Gasche, "Suse et Ivān-e Kerkha, capitale provinciale d'Ērān-Xwarrah-Šāpūr: Note de géographie historique sassanide," *Stud. Ir.* 23, 1944, pp. 19-35.

G. Jéquier et al., "Recherches archéologiques II," *MMAI* 7, 1905.

Prudence Harper, "Sasanian Silver," in *Camb. Hist. Iran*, III, pp. 1113-29.

R. de Mecquenem, et al., "Archéologie Susienne 1933-39," *MMAI* 29, 1943.

P. Jean-Pierre de Menasce, "Ostraca and Papyri in Pahlavi," *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum* III, IV – V, I, London, 1957.

Myriam Rosen-Ayalon, "Ville Royale de Suse 4: La poterie islamique," *MMAI* 50, 1974.

Dorothy Shepherd, "Sasanian Art," in *Camb. Hist. Iran*, III, pp. 1055-112.

Jamshedji Maneckji Unvala, "Empreintes de cachets sassanides" in *Hezāra-ye Ferdowsi* (The Millennium of Ferdowsi), Tehran, 1944, pp. 90-95.

Dieter Weber, "Ostraca, Papyri und Pergamente, Textband," *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum* III, IV-V, London, 1992.

Robert J. Wenke, "Imperial Investments and Agricultural Developments in Parthian and Sasanian Khuzestan 150 BC to AD 640," *Mesopotamia* 10-11, 1976, pp. 31-121.