

The Achaemenids and Zoroastrian Fire Altars

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Ever since the reign of Darius his veracity or mendacity has been debated. In recent years a re-examination of the cuneiform sources, especially those from Babylonia, has shifted the balance in favor of the thesis that Darius murdered Bardiya, brother of Cambyses, and concocted the story of Gaumata the Median magus who impersonated Bardiya or Smerdis as the Greeks called him.¹ I have not the time here to discuss the contributions of Waters and Vogelsang, but wish to take the opportunity to present a logical flaw in the argumentation of Darius.

People accepted the story of Darius, and this is seen in the Laws of Plato, who certainly has no intention of supporting one version or another of facts concerning the rise of Darius, rather he reports the general account, with some moralizing, as follows:²

"After the death of Cyrus, his sons, in the fullness of luxury and license, took the kingdom, and first one slew the other because he could not endure a rival; and afterwards the slayer himself, mad with wine and brutality, lost his kingdom through the Medes and the Eunuch, as they called him, who despised the folly of Cambyses. So runs the tale... Tradition says the empire came back to the Persians through Darius and the seven chiefs."

First, it is clear that Plato is repeating stories that he heard, which illustrate his point on the spoiling of children. He is not concerned with the veracity of the stories, but the item which is of interest, not stressed in the Iranian writings, is that the Medes held power from the time that Cambyses "lost the kingdom" until Darius restored it for the Persians, Darius would not mention this since he was intent on uniting both Medes and Persians behind him.

Second, Plato's remark about the Medes was what common people believed, whether true or not. Someone called Bardiya ruled a short period after the death of Cambyses, as we learn from cuneiform tablets. Whoever it was did not proclaim the overthrow of Persian rule and the restoration of Median supremacy but ruled as Bardiya, son of Cambyses. Thus Plato was wrong in saying that Cambyses lost his kingdom to the Medes, even though a number of Median pretenders to rule revolted both against Bardiya and against Darius, as Vogelsang has proposed. If we follow the Behistun inscription, the question arises why did Gaumata pretend to be Bardiya, revolting against Cambyses, rather than enlisting the aid of disgruntled Median chiefs and proclaiming the restoration of Median rule? Instead he assumed an identity which hardly could last before he would be discovered. I suggest that Darius slipped here.

There is not time to elaborate on the religious implications of the early Achaemenids and the question of the destruction of the ayadana, but there are several scenarios which would fit the contention that Darius murdered Bardiya and made a change in religious policy. I wish to mention my second point, Zoroastrian fire altars.

Several *caveats* about archeological excavations in Iran and Central Asia may be raised. First, the uncovering of so-called fire alters in very ancient times have been proposed as proof of the

existence of Zoroastrianism or proto-Zoroastrianism in very early times. But Hinduism and other ancient religions employ fire in rituals and ceremonies, and second, we must not forget that it was difficult to start a fire in ancient times, where rock against rock, or later flint against steel, required both great patience and skill. One can imagine a "secular" fire always kept burning on a pedestal in a covered area, protected from wind and rain, and which provided a source for household fires for cooking and warmth. Dwellings around a central structure were common in the past.

The tendency to designate any large structure where ashes are found as a temple, and if no ashes are found then it was a palace, should be reviewed. One gains the impression that in antiquity people spent most of their time praying and in rituals and ceremonies. Hopefully new technologies will bring new insights into our knowledge of ancient Iran, and throw light on the countless "cult objects" uncovered in excavations.

¹ W. Vogelsang, "The Rise of Darius in a North-South Perspective," *Iranica Antiqua*, 37 (Gent, 1998), 195-224.

Matthew W. Waters, "Darius and the Achaemenid Line," *Ancient History Bulletin*, (Cambridge Ma., 1999), in publication.

² Laws III, 694. I quote from his *Works*, translated by B. Jowett (Oxford U. Press, 1952).