

Fire Temples In The Achaemenid Period **- Dr. Pallan Ichaporia**

There are two references to cultic structures in the Achaemenid royal inscriptions. In the Behistun inscription, Darius the Great proudly proclaims that he has rebuilt the āyadanā (“places of worship”) destroyed by a rebellious Gaumata (Boyce 1982: 88-89; Frye 1984: 173-174). In the Akkadian and Elamite versions of the inscription, this word is translated as “houses of gods”, a standard term for temples in these languages (this interpretation is accepted by most scholars; however, it could be that āyadanā might mean “rituals” rather than buildings).

In Old Persian, āyadanā could refer also to open air sanctuaries (Boyce 1982: 89). From the context of the inscription it is entirely unclear what kind of temple or sanctuary is meant. Were these Iranian sanctuaries or Babylonian/Elamite temples? The answer is not evident (for a brief discussion of some hypotheses, see Frye 1984: 174 n 7).

The second source is the “daiva inscription” of Xerxes (for a basic presentation, see Boyce 1982: 173-177). In this important inscription, many copies of which have been found, the King of Kings tells that among the countries of his empire there was one where previously demons (daiva) were worshiped. Xerxes destroyed that place (daivadanā) and purified it with “proper rituals”. However, as with āyadanā it is not known which country and what kind of structure Xerxes was referring to. The temple of Marduk in Babylon, Indo-Iranian temples in Eastern Iran or India, and even the Parthenon in Athens have been suggested. Among the more plausible possibilities is that the “daiva inscription might be evidence of the suppression of the Elamite cult (see Frye 1984: 174-175, fn. 8).

The Greek sources also remark that the Persians did not have temples (de Jong 1997: 345). Herodotus (I. 132) says: “I know that the Persians have these customs: it is not their custom to erect statues, temples and altars... But it is their custom to go up to the highest summits of the mountains and sacrifice to Zeus, calling the entire vault of the heaven Zeus” (for a commentary, see de Jong 1997: 76-121). Further information regarding the religious atmosphere of the Achaemenid Empire might be obtained from the “Persepolis foundation tablets” (see Aperghis 1998; Stausberg 2002: 183-186 with references to previous studies). Despite the fact that they are administrative and not religious documents, the Persepolis tablets mention the worship of the Elamite gods along with the Iranian ones, name various kinds of priests and rituals

In this context we must touch on the question of the religion of the Achaemenids. This issue has been the subject of exhaustive scholarly debates, which have failed to provide an answer to the question “were the Achaemenids Zoroastrians?” (to name the most important and recent studies: Herrenschmidt 1980; Frye 1984: 120-124; Boyce 1985; Schwartz 1985; Ahn 1992; Dandamaev/Lukonin 1994: 320-367; Wiesehöfer 1996: 94-101; Koch 2002; Kellens 2002; Stausberg 2002: 157-186; Razmjou, 2005; Jacobs, 2006). Opinions range from those who hold that “the Achaemenids were definitely not Zoroastrians” to scholars who believe that Zoroastrianism was the state religion of the Achaemenid Empire (for this last view, see recently Kreyenbroek 2006; for a brief review with references, see Stausberg 2002: 157).

Despite some recent attempts to show that there are parallels between the Avesta and the Achaemenid royal inscriptions (which would mean, that the Achaemenids knew the Avesta and, therefore, were followers of Zarathushtra, (see Skjærvø 2005), the question remains open. Inability to reach consensus has even caused some to regard this problem as “purely academic and misleading” (Kellens 1999: xiv). It is clear that, according to the royal inscriptions and other sources, the religion of the Achaemenid kings was an Iranian religion and as such, part of the same broad religious tradition as Zoroastrianism (Shaked 1994: 7, fn. 5; idem 2005: 184). Beginning with Darius I, Achaemenid kings recognized Ahuramazda as the supreme god, rejected the daiva and employed the Avestan terminology of arta and drauga. However, anything beyond these observations would be pure speculation.

Nevertheless, there are temples within the Iranian world dated to the Achaemenid period. One of the most important was uncovered in Dahān-i-Ghulāmān in Sistan by a team of Italian archaeologists (Scerrato 1966; for a recent presentation, see Boucharlat 2005: 268-269) (Fig. 8). The temple was built at the end of the 6th-beginning of the 5th century BCE together with the whole settlement, probably a provincial capital. It was abandoned after a period of 100-150 years (Gnoli 1993: 582-583; Stronach 1985: 610 proposes a date of the first half of the 5th century BCE). The temple was excavated in the eastern part of the settlement, close to the residential area. It was built of mud-bricks-a technique typical for the region (Stronach 1985: 608). The layout is almost square (54,30 x 53,20 m.) and consists of four corner rooms and a central courtyard with four porticoes facing inwards. While this layout seems to have parallels in the royal architecture of Persepolis it also demonstrates some influences of a local Eastern Iranian tradition (Stronach 1985: 608; Gnoli 1993: 584).

In the center of the courtyard, three monumental stepped altars were installed. The remains of ashes mixed with grease and burned bones were found scattered throughout the temple. Since burning sacrificial animals is absolutely unacceptable under the purity laws of contemporary Zoroastrianism, it has been suggested that the Dahān-i-Ghulāmān temple could be evidence of a pre-Iranian, autochthonous cult, and yet another indication of Achaemenid religious tolerance (Boyce 1982: 130).

At the same time, we can not be certain that all Iranians in this period knew and obeyed the purity laws, and it is not impossible that some variation of an Iranian or Indo-Iranian cult was actually practiced at Dahān-i-Ghulāmān. The presence of three altars might be an indication of the worship of a triad of gods (Gnoli 1993: 584), but this can not be firmly established.

The remains of another temple dated to the beginning of the 4th century BCE were excavated at Tash-K'irman-tepe in Chorasmia (Helmset al. 2002) (Figs. 9-10). The Karakalpak-Australian excavators claimed that what they found was "certainly a fire temple, which may date back to the early stages of Zoroastrian religion" (ibid: 6-7). The complex consists of a high podium, a small courtyard and a labyrinthine system of rooms and corridors. Some of them contained thick layers of ashes. Several altars were also found attached to the walls. No exact parallels to the layout of this building are known, but it is very likely that some kind of Iranian cult was practiced there in the Achaemenid period. Nevertheless, speculations about a "Zoroastrian fire temple" and its place in the history of the Zoroastrian faith are methodologically inappropriate and add little to the understanding of this site.

Another building in Chorasmia, which has been termed a temple was discovered in the citadel of Kalali-Gir 2 (Fig. 11). The excavators think that the entire site served as a ritual center for the region from the middle of the 4th century until the beginning of the 2nd century BCE (Vainberg 1994: 75). The round temple was erected on a podium 2 m. high and had a diameter of 24 m. It was surrounded by some 40 passages and chambers. Finds of special interest include a small female figurine.

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