

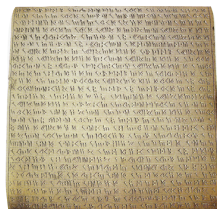
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The Function of Persepolis: Was Norooz celebrated at Persepolis during the Achaemenid period?

Persepolis, with its high dominating citadel platform crowned by a number of monumental buildings, richly decorated and inscribed, is very unusual in terms of architecture, planning and decoration. It has been deduced that the function of Persepolis has also been unusual. Accordingly over the course of many years the scholars of the ancient history of Iran have debated the questions of the purpose for which Persepolis was built and the function that its buildings served (Arthur Pope 1957: 123-130; idem 1967: 3011-3016; Carl Nylander 1974: 137, no. 2; Peter Calmeyer 1980: 55-63; M. C. Root 1985: 108, no. 25; Dandamaev and Lukonin 1989: 255; Edwin M. Yamauchi 1990: 339-42).

Many scholars supposed that Persepolis was not a centre of administration or capital of a world empire, but was rather a ritual city of the Achaemenid kings. By reasserting the theory of “the control of the natural world by the power of Heaven in ancient time”, Arthur Pope interpreted the features of Persepolis as fulfilling this theory. He interpreted, for instance, the crenellated walls as representing the mountains, the columns representing trees, the reliefs each proclaiming the sacred character of the entire structure; and “The Gate of the Nations” has been found to be giving access to this holy place (Arthur Pope 1957: 123-130; idem, 1967: 3011-3016; M. C. Root 1985: 108, no. 25). This theory did not find support among scholars of ancient history of Iran, but the identification of Persepolis as a ritual and ceremonial city has been widely discussed by several scholars (R. Ghirshman 1957: 65-78; idem 1965: 154; J. Balcer 1978: 128; M. C. Root 1979: 278; Schmidt 1985: 425).

The features of the Persepolis reliefs were interpreted as displaying the ritual of the New Year festival, celebrated at the time of the spring equinox. Most of the motifs of Persepolis sculptures have been connected with a Norooz festival: the lion and combats; the tribute or gift procession; the king fighting monsters; the people carrying food for banquets; the audience scenes; above all the throne scene in the Tripylon and the Hall of One Hundred Columns (R. Ghirshman 1957: 65-78; idem 1965: 154; J. Balcer 1978: 128; M. C. Root 1979: 278; Schmidt 1985: 425; James M. Fennelly 1980: 135-162.). The reliefs of the lion slaying the bull, for instance, have been interpreted as being of seasonal significance by Johan Hinnells (1985: 105), with the lion representing the heat and the bull the winter rains. He, nonetheless, does not ignore the theory that these reliefs may express the mighty power of the monarchy which devours all enemies (1985: 104). The gift-bearers have been interpreted as the procession of representatives of subject nations coming to Persepolis for the New Year at the time of Norooz (Ghirshman 1964: 154). In this regard Wolfgang Lentz and his colleagues, W. Schlosser and G. Gropp (1969: 957-983; 1971: 245-268; W. Lents-Merburg 1972: 289-290) also suggested that the Persepolis setting was oriented according to astrological/astronomical factors, not so much the spring equinox, as the summer solstice. To

provide details of such a New Year's rite at Persepolis, James Fennely (1980: 135-162) on the basis of the Babylonian texts describing a Babylonian New Year festival ritual drew a detailed account of twelve days' celebration in Persepolis. In this context he identified the Darius Tachara as the temple of Persepolis (1980: 135-162).

Recently conventional theory interpreting Persepolis as solely a ritual city, however, has been questioned by many scholars. For example, James Fennely's arguments, such as identifying the Tachara of Darius as a temple were criticised in the next issue of *The Biblical Archaeologist* by Levine and his colleagues (L. D. Levine, E. J. Keall, T. C. Young Jr. 1981: 72-73). Peter Calmeyer (1980: 55-63) also convincingly, gave a new interpretation about each of the reliefs, and rejected the suggestion that any of these might be related to the rite of Norooz. Similar arguments also were set out by a number of scholars who also cautiously rejected the traditional interpretation (Nylander 1974: 145-150; Ali Mousavi 1992: 204; Sh. Shahbazi 1978: 493).

It seems the original interpretation of the site as the setting for a New Year's rite came to Herzfeld as an inspiration when he was invited by the governor of Shiraz to celebrate the Norooz rite at Perspolis (Edwin Yamauchi 1990: 341). Though Herzfeld later suggested the celebration depicted on the reliefs were reflections of the Mithrakana fest instead of the New Year's rite (D. H. Bivar 1975: 97; Yamauchi 1990: 341, no. 24) his first interpretation, however, continued to be discussed by scholars and they tried to find more evidence to prove the theory. Since we have no contemporary Old Persian texts describing such rite (cf. Brosius 2000; Grayson 1996; idem 1975; Luckenbill 1973; Pritchard 1969; Kent 1953; Smith 1924), scholars have extrapolated backwards over a millennium, using data from Al-Bīrūnī in the passage where he describes the Norooz festival during the Sasanid period (Edwin Yamauchi 1990: 341; Al-Bīrūnī 1973: 285). A receipt of 1, 940 litres of wine found at the Persepolis fortification dating to the early spring was also interpreted as evidence to support the theory that the New Year was celebrated by the Queen's sister at Persepolis at the vernal equinox (Walter Hinz 1970: 423).

Taking into account these two analyses, it seems none of them can lead us to this conclusion that either Norooz was celebrated at Persepolis or it was celebrated at the vernal equinox. First, the Persepolis receipt for 1, 940 litres of wine dated in early spring does not mean necessarily that the wine was used for the Norooz celebration or that the Queen's sister actually did celebrate Norooz. In contrast, there are reasons to assume that the lady did not drink all that by herself, but gave it away! (Peter Calmeyer 1980: 55). Secondly, the conspicuous absence of Persians themselves from delegations bearing gifts on the scene is not in agreement with the description of Al-Bīrūnī of the Norooz festival in the Sasanid period. Al-Bīrūnī, for instance, recounts that the King was enthroned in the first six days of Norooz to benefit his people, not vice versa. In the first day of Norooz he met the ordinary people, on the second day *Dahghanān* (farmers), on the third day the army and *Mobadān* (the clergymen) and then his family (Al-Bīrūnī 1973: 285; Nylander 1974: 147).

As far as the motifs of the Persepolis sculptures and the fortification texts are concerned, no connection can be drawn up between this evidence and either celebration of the Norooz festival at Persepolis or this festival being celebrated at the vernal equinox. Thirdly, the representation of tribute or gift-bringing people on the Apadana walls occurs in several palaces, not just on the Apadāna facade to suggest that they are related to Norooz. Comparing the 23 nations sculptured on the Apadāna facade (Schmidt 1953-1970; Ann Britt Tilia 1978; Michael Roaf 1983; John Curtis 1998), with those on the reliefs of Naqsh-e Rostam who are shown carrying the Darius throne we might argue rather for a tribute procession

of a traditional Near Eastern kind used as emblems of power, not a special ceremony (Nylander 1974: 145). This idea is corroborated by quite a few good parallels for such sculptures in the earlier art both on Assyrian sites, such as Khorsabad and Nimrud, and in the Iranian palace at Susa (Ann Frakas 1974, Fig. 38-40; Pierre Amiet 1972: 320ff). Fourthly, the other Persepolis reliefs, such as the king fighting a monster and the two animal combats, also have a background in ancient oriental art and most probably were derived from the Neo-Assyrian royal seal (Peter Calmeyer 1980: 59; Ann Farkas 1974, Fig. 36). Taking into account the above evidence, it seems the motive of the Persepolis reliefs most likely was intended to represent a certain abstract vision of empire and the imperial harmony rather than an illustration of an actual Norooz ceremony.

Furthermore, there is some evidence against the assumption that Norooz was an important part of the early Achaemenid year or that it was celebrated at the spring equinox. According to Herodotus (I 138,1) of all days in the year that Persians celebrated most was their birthday. The great royal banquet, a feast which takes place every year, is the celebration of the king's birthday. This the only day in all the year on which the king soaped his head and distributed gifts to the Persians (IX 110,2). The other great festival celebrated by the Persians during the year seems to have been on "Mithragan", when they sacrificed to Mithra (Mary Boyce 1983: 794-803). In contrast, no trace of Norooz can be found in the reports of those Greek authors who were relatively well-informed concerning matters relating to Persia. With one exception they did not even know about Persepolis itself. It seems Ctesias is the only author who mentioned the name of the city seven times calling it "Persai", he speaks of the practice of a king bringing the bodies of the deceased king and queen there for burial (Dandamaev and Lukonin 1989: 255; G. G. Cameron 1973: 56; R. N. Frye 1984: 125; C. Nylander 1974: 138, no. 4). Strabo (XV 3:7,8), Arrian (VI 29:1ff), Quintus Curtius (X 1:22) and other Greek historians who reported about the role and importance of Pasargada during the Persian rule have mentioned nothing about Norooz ceremony either in Pasargada or in Persepolis.

Several scholars, however, based on Strabo's report (XI 14,9) in which he mentioned that "The satrap of Armenia used to send to the Persian king twenty thousands foals every year at the time of the Mithragan preferred to connect Norooz with the autumnal equinox, which would make it coincide originally with the very prestigious old festival of Mithra, the Mithragan (S. H. Taqizadeh 1938: 13; Mehrdad Bahar 1973: 54, no. 1). Mehrdad Bahar (1973: 54, no. 1) also convincingly demonstrated that the Iranian calendar was started by the summer solstice rather than spring equinox.

In the early part of the Achaemenid era, the Persian kings used a calendar based most probably on the Babylonian. Their months run strictly or almost parallel with the Babylonian months: the year began in the Elamite month *Hadukannaš/Zikli* and Babylonian month *Nisannu* (Leo Depuydt 1995: 193; S. H. Taqizadeh 1938: 13; A. Poebel 1938: 142-165; idem 1939: 121-145; G. G. Cameron 1948: 34; R. T. Hallock 1969: 74). We also know that the month of *Nisannu* was always situated more or less closely to the vernal equinox. Nonetheless, climatic and other differences in the natural and cultural year persisted between lowland Mesopotamia where the new year was celebrated at the vernal equinox and the Iranian plateau, the Persian new year beginning either in summer solstice or the autumnal equinox despite using the same calendar (C. Nylander 1974: 143; S. H. Taqizadeh 1938: 13; Leo Depuydt 1995: 193-202; François de Blois 1996: 39-53). This suggestion is corroborated by Al-Bīrūnī (1973: 285), who from the point of view of observational astronomy clearly mentions that the Persian year began at the summer solstice instead of the vernal equinox.

Citing from Al-Bīrūnī, Mehrdad Bahar (1973: 54) noted that the Sogdian and Khwarezmian calendar also commenced by beginning of summer solstice. He also mentions that the name of Persian months in ancient Persian calendar indicated the New Year must to begin by summer solstice. The second suggestion also is collaborated by Athen's report (XII 4K) where he explicitly testifies that the Achaemenid king spent autumn in Persepolis, not the early spring (Sh. Shahbazi 1978: 478). On the other hand, there is other evidence, not least as given by Al-Bīrūnī, tending to show that Norooz in Iran has undergone very many changes and has been understood very differently at different times (Mary Boyce 1983: 808-809). In other word, as it has been stressed by some scholars on calendrical problems, there is no compelling reason to assume that the Persian year originally began at the vernal equinox (S. H. Taqizadeh 1938: 6f; E. J. Bickerman 1967: 198; M. Boyce 1970: 513-539; M. Boyce 1983: 808-809; Bahar 1973: 54).

Taking into account the above evidence, it seems there is no precise evidence indicating that, first, Persepolis was erected just as a ritual place, celebrating the Norooz (M. Boyce 1982: 108; B. Goldman 1974: 41), secondly, there is not enough evidence to demonstrate that Norooz was celebrated at the vernal equinox, as it was in Babylonia or in the medieval history of Iran. It is possible that Norooz along with other ceremony may have been celebrated during Achaemenid period at Persepolis, but not precisely at the vernal equinox time, but as has been reported by Al-Bīrūnī probably at summer solstice or perhaps at autumnal equinox. In other words, if we endeavour to find an annual celebration at Persepolis, which probably took place, it could be either at summer solstice or at autumnal equinox when the Mithragan (Mehrgan) was celebrated (P. Calmeyer 1980: 56; A. D. H. Bivar 1975: 197).

To bring the above information all together it seems, unlike the traditional theory, the facade sculpture of the Apadāna, the tribute or gift procession; the king fighting monsters; the people carrying food for banquets; the audience scene and fire honoured can not be related to the Norooz festival. In other word, the concept of Persepolis as primarily setting of the New Year festival is too narrow, or at least the reliefs of Persepolis do not reflect such an assumption. All the reliefs are mostly easily explained as an expression of royalty. In the interpretation of the text they are neither confined to Persepolis nor to a certain time of year, but they are for every day of kingship (P. Calmeyer 1980: 61; B. Goldman 1974: 41). Persepolis and each of its buildings, the sculptures, reliefs and inscriptions are reflected the dignity, immortality, glory and splendour of empire, and it gave the richest and most eloquent expression of Achaemenid power, in a political, dynastic context and elaborate statement of kingship (T. C. Young 1988: 109; C. Nylander 1979: 348). It seems Josef Wiesehöfer (1996, p: 25) is right where he writes:

In the Persepolis reliefs the themes and motifs of the images complement one another to form a new blueprint for a specific concept of Persian kingship and empire. Whether we are dealing with gift-bearing delegations or throne-carrying subjects lined up according to their ethnic origins, with the royal hero fighting against composite creatures or portrayed in an attitude of adoration and prayer, as on the burial facades, for the early Persians all this was the expression of a timeless idea of universal and cosmic order upheld by divine assistance and mutual loyalty between king and subjects. This same idea is reflected in trilingual inscriptions, whether through their emphasising the qualities of the king or the importance of the subjects' loyalty to the stability of the empire, or through their references to divine support for the king or to the vast expansion of the empire.

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ABBREVIATION AND SYMBOLS

ActIr	<i>Acta Iranica</i> (Leiden).
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i> (Princeton).
AJSL	<i>American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature</i> (Chicago).
BSOAS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i> (London).
CAH	<i>The Cambridge Ancient History</i> (Cambridge).
CHI	<i>The Cambridge History of Iran</i> (Canbridge).
EncIr	<i>Encyclopædia Iranica</i> , Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), California (London).
EW	<i>East and West</i> (Rome).
IrAnt	<i>Iranica Antiqua</i> (Leiden).
JAOS	<i>Journal of American Oriental Society</i> (Boston).
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i> (Chicago).
OIP	<i>Oriental Institute Publication</i> (Chicago).

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