

# **A New Approach to Stone-reliefs of Persepolis**

Based on ritual, religious beliefs and the impact of the environment

Khoobchehr Keshavarzi

(2012)

## **Abstract:**

In the north eastern part of the Persian Gulf in Iran, there is a region called Fars today and Parse in the past. In this mountainous region there is a mountain previously called Mehr (love) and now called Rahmat (Mercy) with a 2500 years old ruined palace still dazzling on its skirts, remaining from the Achaemenid reign over Iran from c.550 to 330BC. Despite considerable research on the religion of this dynasty, Iranologists have not still conclusively reached a definite opinion on this matter and if they have, it is based on questionable evidences and interpretations. Based on remaining inscriptions and stone-carvings of this monument, the article is an attempt to show that the kings of this dynasty were definitely followers of Zoroaster, who founded the first official religion of the world 6 to 7 centuries AD, with all the symbols found in this unique palace having Iranian roots which so far have wrongly been attributed to the beliefs of other peoples and civilizations.

## **Key words:**

Persepolis, Achaemenids, Seven Amshaspands (archangels or benevolent entities), Religious Zoroastrian beliefs, Zoroaster (Zardosht), Lotus or the flower of marshes, Iris, Barsam, Eglantine.

## 1.Introduction

Iran covers a vast plateau in the Middle East of the Northern Hemisphere, extending from 20 to 40 degree north and 44 to 64 degrees east, surrounded by Turkmenistan, Caspian Sea, Armenia and Azerbaijan in the North, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in the East, Iraq and Turkey, in the West and Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman in the South.

The name Iran is the abbreviated form of Iranokhashatra, land of Aryans (airyana), who actually called their dwelling place Irioda'eenk-honam and after founding a state monarchy, they called it Irianokhashatra literally meaning Iranian Monarchy. The designation was later changed to E'aranshatra, Iranshar and finally abbreviated to Iran. In the south part of Iran there is a land called Pars by ancient Iranians and Pardis by the Greek, but it is called Fars today. It is a mountainous region in the north part of the Persian Gulf, encompassing highlands with Shiraz as its center.

In the land of Parse, there are monuments remaining from the Achaemenid era (c.550-330BC) known as Persepolis (Takhte Jamshid literally Jamshid's Throne) located at the heart of Fars Province, 1626m above the sea level, with the geographical coordinates Latitude: 29° 56' 9 N, Longitude: 52° 53' 23 E (see figure 1a & b). Persepolis was the capital city of the Achaemenid Persian Empire under Darius the Great beginning in c. 522 BCE, until its collapse at the hands of Alexander in c. 331 BCE. It was a center of royal power, a place of imperial ceremony, the locus of regional administration and according to late A. Da'dbeh, the first university of human spiritual development. Its current extant remains include, entrance staircase, the gateway of nations, Apadana Palace and yard, Darius' Palace (known as Tachar), Khashayar Shah's Palace (known as Hadish), the palace with three doors or the palace and the main hall, royal tombs, unfinished gateway and the treasury of inscriptions now called Persepolis Fortification Archive (PFA) (Image 2).



Image 1 – (a) Satellite picture of the Mountain of Mercy (Mountain of Love) and the location of Persepolis in relation to it. (b) Topographic map of the Mountain of Mercy and Persepolis Complex (A Collection of Traditional Iranian Architecture, Geographic Organization)

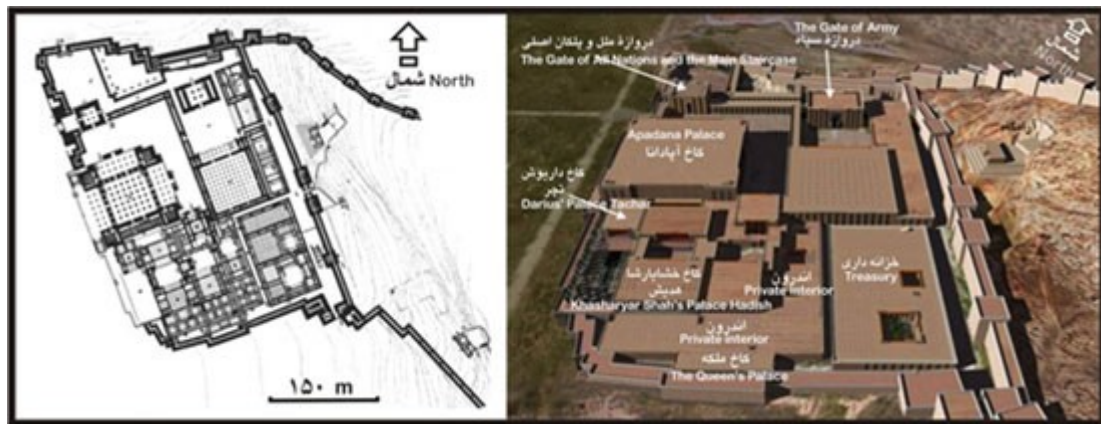


Image 2- Right, Southern view of a three dimensional reconstructed image of Persepolis and the location of its main buildings by Afhami and Gambke(Persepolis3D.com) with written permission (2003). Left, Persepolis plan and the position of its main buildings in relation to North (A Collection of Traditional Iranian Architecture, Geographic Organization)

The complex is situated on a rocky plane at the foot of a mountain now called Rahmat (Mercy), 57 km of north-east of the present Shiraz. The complex is situated on the west side of the mountains with royal tombs facing the 100 columns at the height of 40m (Image.2)

According to Lentz, Darius the Great chose the location of Persepolis according to astrological calculations with the direction of the solar axis at the dawn of certain days of the year coinciding with longitudinal and horizontal axes of the Palace. The same relationship is also found in buildings such as Azargoshtasb fire temple (in the city of Shiz in Azarbaijan). The comparison of satellite images clearly reveals the similarity of orientation of main axes of AzargoshasbFire Temple with Persepolis (Image.1, 3).



Image 3- Satellite Picture of Azargoshasb Fire Temple in Shiz, Azarbaijan.

The skirts of Kuh-e Rahmat (Mountain of Mercy) which Darius selected as the proper place for construction of Persepolis in 518BC, used to be famous as the Royal Mountain (Kuh-e Shahi) until 200 years ago, and apparently it was called Mehr (Mountain of Love) before.

The main parts of Persepolis were constructed under the reign of Darius the great and his son Khashayar. The oldest source mentioning the name Takhte Jamshid is Aja'yeb-ol-nameh (The epistle of wonders) written by Mohammad ibn Mahmoud Hamedani in 1194. Apparently, Josefa Barbaru was the first European from Venice who visited Persepolis in 1474. Among other Europeans, Sir Thomas Herbert, the English traveler and historian who visited Iran in 1627 was the first who heard this name from the natives and recorded it in his journals. Later other scholars including Arthur Upham Pope, Girschman, Hertzfeld and others also visited this site and in addition to presenting detailed description of all its components, they have also analyzed the inscriptions found there.

### **Evidences:**

Achaemenids were from a noble land-cultivating tribe of Pasargade. The far ancestor of Cyrus, Hakhamanesh, with a mythological personality (depicted as an eagle) is the founder of this dynasty. There are numerous evidences which show Achaemenids (particularly Darius the great and Khashayar Shah) were followers of Zoroastrian faith and Darius was an advocate of Zoroastrian reformation.

In Masterpieces of Persian Art, Pope writes: Achaemenid Empire, (the state of freemen), truly manifested this term; graciousness, truthfulness, discipline, purity of the heart, feeling of responsibility, kindness in social relations and faith in a noble religion were among the most remarkable qualities of Achaemenid dynasty manifested in the art of this era. The special features of this period together with its political power and religious passion are manifested in the architecture of the great city of Persepolis which is perhaps one of the most enchanting ruins of the world. The construction of this building began under the reign of Darius the great and it was still unfinished 150 years later. Persepolis was never the permanent place of residence of the kings. It was actually the spiritual and political center of the country where the great majestic feast of Norouz and Mehregan were held...It was under the reign of Cyrus and Darius, when Zoroastrian religion became the official religion of Iran and the first kingdom of the world was founded.”

In Mo-in Persian dictionary it is said about Zoroaster and his world view: “The Iranian prophet Zoroaster was from Sepenytamah family. Most Orientalists believe that he emerged 6 to 7 centuries before Christ. He lived at the same time of Goshtasb, Zoroaster’s contemporary ruling king who accepted his religion. Gathas are Zoroaster’s own words and the religion he founded is called Zoroastrianism. In this religion, Ahuramazda is the great God. The seven Amshaspands (archangels or benevolent entities) and a large group of gods and goddesses carry out his will. Ahriman, the evil psyche, Komarikan and an army of other devils are his companions. The three main principles of Zoroaster’s religion are: Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds. The belief in an afterworld, with a bridge separating the two worlds, final judgment and the existence of a paradise (heaven) and a hell are among prominent beliefs of this religion. Humans should help Ahuramazda in the battle between good and evil.”

Amshaspands as mentioned above carry out Ahuramazda’s will and in addition to manifesting Ahuramazdian benevolent qualities in this world, they are the guardians of precious elements of the existence. Their names and functions are:

**Ordibehesht (Ardibehesht)** represents Ahuramazda’s purity, truth and divine order and law. It is the guardian of fire in this world. The third day of each month and the second month of each year are designated after it. In Avesta it is called Ashvahashta meaning the best truth and lawful cosmic order. Its rival devil is called Indera (Indra).

**Bahman (Vahumanah)** represents Ahuramazda’s good manners and it is the guardian of cattle. The second and eleventh day of each month and the eleventh month of the year are called Bahman. Its rival devil is Bousha’sb.

**Shahrivar**, represents the chosen land or kingdom, and Ahuramazda’s heavenly land. In other words, Shahrivar is the representative of divine kingdom and power and is the guardian of metals in this world. The fourth day of each month and the sixth month of the year are called after it. Its rival devil is Seora’.

**Sepanda’rmaz (Esfand)** represents Ahuramazda’s patience and adaptability and is the guardian of the Earth. The fifth day of each month and the last month of the year is called the same. Its rival devil is Taromeyti.

**Khorda'd** represents Ahuramazda's perfection. It is the guardian of waters in this world. The sixth day of each month and the third month are called after this Amshaspand.

**Amorda'd (Morda'd)** represents immortality or Ahuramazda's imperishable essence. It guards plantations in this world. The seventh day of each month and the fifth month of the year called the same.

The seventh Amshaspand is Ahuramazda. Together they guarantee the presence of divinity in the spirit – fravahar- of righteous human beings.

Other Creations of Ahuramazda represented in Persepolis

**Farah Vashi** (in Avestan) or Fravahar (in Pahlavi) is the hidden force which together with everyone's psyche and religion (conscience) detaches the body after death and moves to the divine world. In Avesta, it is the force which Ahuramazda has sent to guard and maintain divine creations. Fravahar's return is to Ahuramazda, the center of the Eternal Light.

**Soroush** is the first creation of Ahuramazda who learnt Gathas by heart, offering its worship to Ahuramazda with a branch of Barsam. It is one of Bahaman's companions. Listening to Soroush is to hear and obey Ahuramazda's orders.

**Barsam** represents all trees, vegetations and plants. It is a bundle of small twigs of a tree, usually cut from Pomegranate tree or Myrtle by a special knife called Barsamchin while reciting some prayers during the procedure. The whole process is a ritual and after the barsams are cut and washed they are tied together with a strand of palm leaf.

In the Book of creation called Bon-dahesh, each Amshaspand is symbolized by a flower-plant: Below is the list of Amshaspands and the flower attributed to them:

Ahuramazda is represented by Myrtle, Bahman with white Jasmin, Ordibehesht with Marjoram, Sharivar with Basil, Sepandarmaz with Melissa, Khorda'd with Iris, Morda'd with Lily.

As we will see, flowers and plants seen in the stone-carvings of Persepolis are symbols of the above Amshaspands and other determining principles of Zoroaster's faith. This is a very important point overlooked by all Iranologists who identified them wrongly as enumerated below:

The Barsam held in the hand of the King Darius is identified as Lotus.

Flowers surrounding Frahvashi (Fravahar) are identified as palm tree.

The decorations around the neck of the cow as lotus bud calling it 12 petal flower.

Flowers held by the king and the crown prince are thought to be Egyptian due to the presence of a bud between two blossoms and the arrangement of the stem.

The axis of Zoroaster's teaching in Gathas is the faith in the divinity of Ahuramazda, and the twin opposing spirits Spenta Mainyu, the Bounteous Spirit and Angarah Mainyu, the Spirit of Destruction. Ahuramazda's seven Amshaspands are guiding lights to salvation and happiness in the same way as they assure Ahuramazda's presence (good spirit) in the soul of righteous people.

Devils and their rivals symbolize Ahriman's (evil spirit) in people and the task of the righteous people is to subdue and restrain them. The stone-carvings illustrating wrestling of the kings and heroes in fact symbolize this act of subjugation of the evil spirit and its devils and not what researchers and Iranologists have so far interpreted.

The pendentives of the main hall leading to the rooms are thought to be a royal hero fighting with a lion, cow or the mythological shirda'l (winged monster).

For example, according to Warner the images showing a royal hero defeating a monster or a dangerous animal, Assyrian in origin. "Assyrian King only wrestled with lions which stood on two feet like humans, while Iranian royal hero wrestles with supernatural monsters."

Now as mentioned above Zoroastrian worldview is based on the opposition of the twin spirits, the struggle of the seven Amshaspands with their rivals and the cooperative role of all righteous creatures in this battle. In addition, Asha (meaning justice and righteousness) plays a vital prominent role in this struggle and asha vana'n (Asha's followers) are in constant struggle and opposition with dorvenda'n (followers of dorouj, Lie [druj]). The name of Asha is mentioned in almost every page of Gathas.

In Yasna, chapter 29, paragraph 2 it is said:

“The Creator of the universe then asked Asah, who would you like to rule the world who would defeat and restrain the followers of lies and anger?”

In reply (3rd paragraph) Asha said, such a ruler will not do injustice to the world and people. He is kind and harmless. He should be stronger than all the people so that whenever he calls me, I would rush to help him.”

In Yasna (chapter 31, paragraph 18) it is said:

“Therefore, you should not listen to the words and teaching of Dorvands (followers of Lies or devils) who bring about destruction and ruin and you should resist them with arms.”

Now based on what is said above we will analyze the four main stone-reliefs of the main hall. As it can be seen in image number 4, two servants are accompanying a member of the royal family. What is noticeable in this image is the tallness of the high royal figure and the different cut of his beard seen in other stone-carvings too (image number 5). Images 6 -9 show four images of the main hall in which the inner spiritual struggle of the king as a follower of Zoroaster’s teaching is represented in his combat with four rival opposing devils of four of Amshaspands (the human face in all the four images is the same with the same royal beard while the faces of devils change) manifesting the spiritual presence of Amshaspand in the image of the king and the slaughter of the devil in the image of some animal (Yasna, chapter 31, paragraph 18).

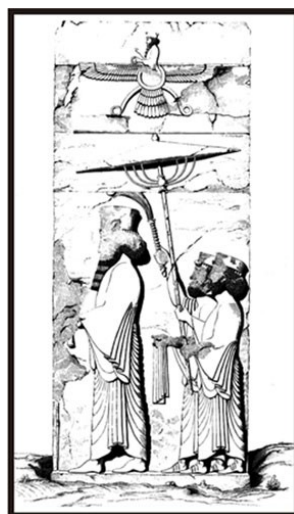


Image 4- The Hall of Council (Three Gated Palace) – The king and two royal servants (A Collection of Traditional Iranian Architecture, Geographic Organization)





Image 5- The King and the Crown Prince in one of religious ceremonies. As it can be seen the king's beard is different from his entourage.

The same difference can be seen in Image 4 too. (A Collection of Traditional Iranian Architecture, Geographic Organization)

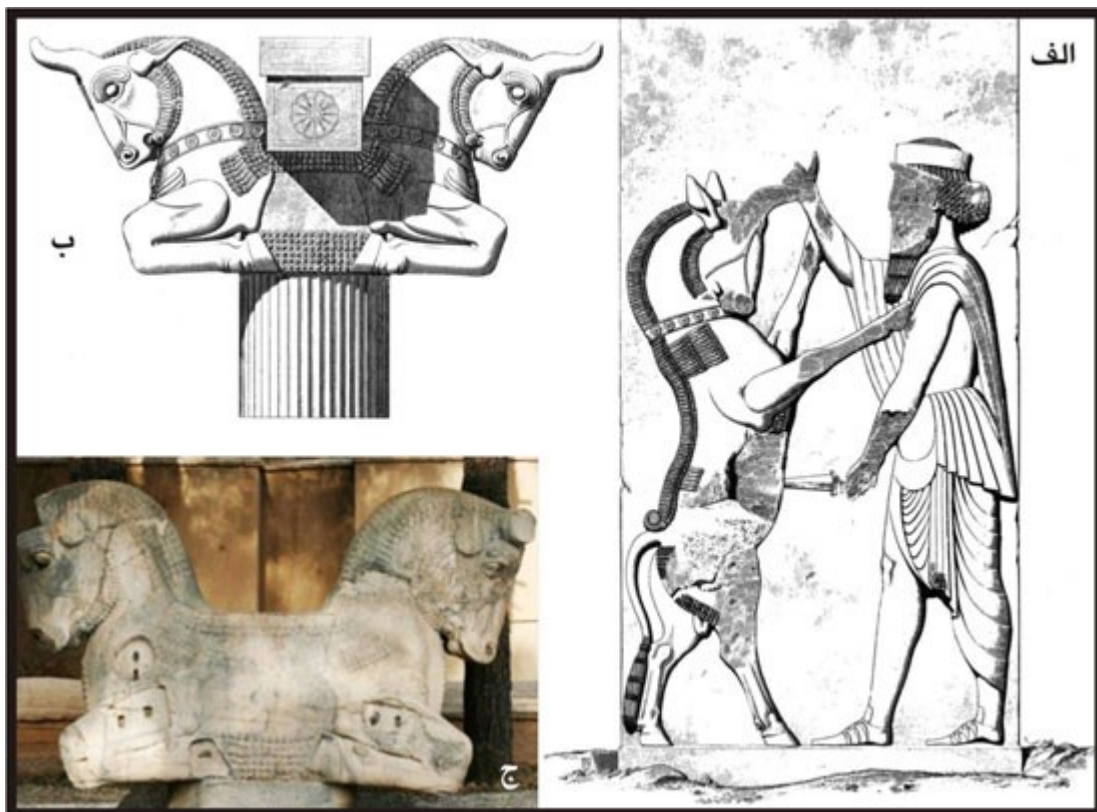


Image 6- Persepolis, Main Hall (a) The battle of the king with a devil with the head of a cow and his victory (b) The devil entrapped in the form of column capital.

(A Collection of Traditional Iranian Architecture, Geographic Organization)



Image 7- Persepolis Main Hall (a) The battle of the king with a devil with the head of a horned lion and his victory (b) The devil entrapped in the form of column capital. (A Collection of Traditional Iranian Architecture, Geographic Organization) (c) The column head in the shape of a lion



Image 8- Persepolis Main Hall (a) The battle of the king with a devil in the form of a bird (b and c) The entrapped devils in the form of column capital. (A Collection of Traditional Iranian Architecture, Geographic Organization)

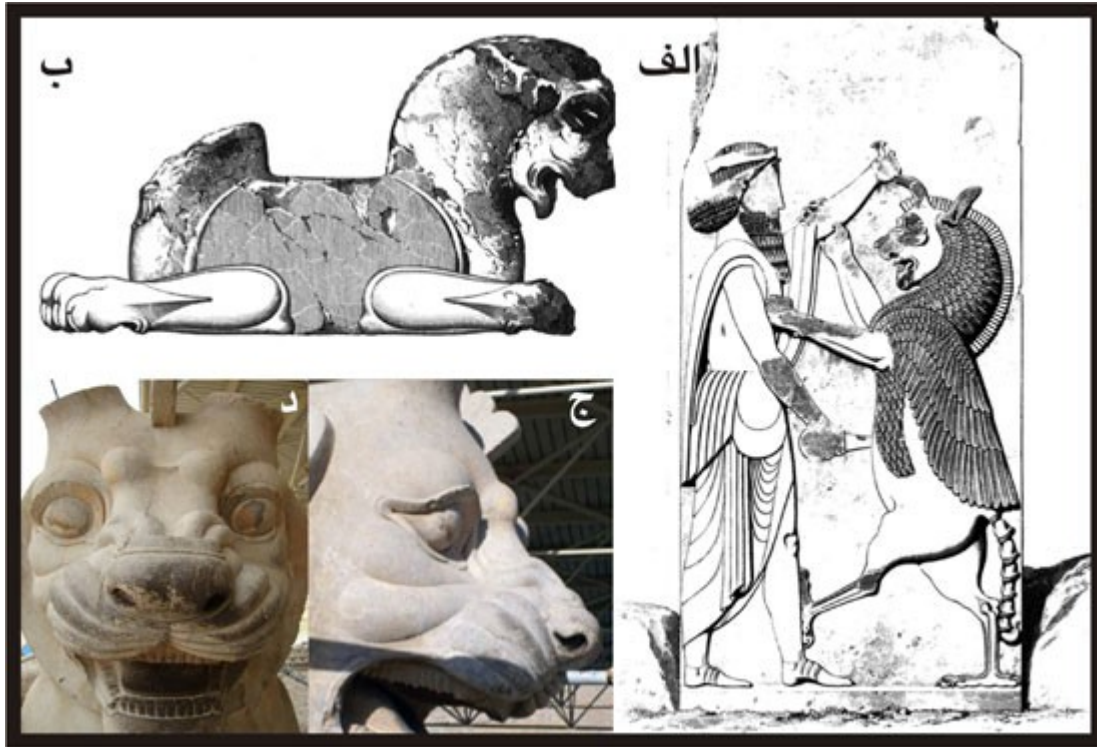


Image 9- Persepolis Main Hall (a) The battle of the king with a devil in the form of a horned lion (shirda'l) (b) The entrapped devil in the form of column capital. (A Collection of Traditional Iranian Architecture, Geographic Organization) (c and d) The column capitals.

The use of arm (a spear seen in all the four images) suggested in the above-mentioned text of Yasna and the similarity of the sculptures of the head of the devils found under the ceilings with those seen in the main hall actually emphasizes the victory of good Achaemenid kings over the devil (images 6-9). Putting it in words, it is like the four devils depicted on the pendentives of the walls of the main hall represent their defeat and subjugation by goodness. That's why the head of the defeated devils are used as column capital under the ceilings, like an allusion to their entrapment and restraining (Images 6-9) as 'salvation arrives when the devils are subdued.'

On the other hand, careful examination of the texts of inscriptions and their comparison with stone-carvings shows that the images are an exact copy of the texts and vice versa. This exact obsessive representation in written and pictorial languages can also be seen in the expression and outer appearance of nations mentioned in inscriptions. For example, necklaces represent Persians, bracelets Medians golden vases, large bowels Assyrian, and so on with all these objects having been unearthed and now preserved in various museums of the world.

According to Zoroaster's teaching, human salvation is only possible with the knowledge of Ordibehesht, compassion of Bahman, devotion of Shahrivar and patience of Sepanda'rmaz (Esfand), Perfection of Khorda'd and Eternal life of Morda'd. We can see a pictorial representation of the first four passages in the pendentives of the main hall of Persepolis in the form of slaughter of the devils and their use in its column capitals.

Unification with Ahuramazda requires the blending of human knowledge with love and passion of life developed in the service of humanity. It is only in this way that one then can achieve the solid faith of Sepanda'rmaz, perfection of Khorda'd and eternity of Amorda'd. The process of the passage through the six Amshaspands who are closest to Ahuramazda, represent the path of redemption which Darius and Khashayar Shah seem to see themselves worthy of its attainment.

That is why we find in the inscriptions remaining from these kings the phrases such as "We built everything on the approval of Ahuramazda," "May Ahuramazda protect me," "May Ahuramazda protect my country and whatever I did and all that my father did," "Protect these people, for if they propagate, Ahuramazda will bless this dynasty with eternal life."

For the fifth and sixth part of the above passage, that is the attainment of perfection of Khorda'd and eternal life of Morda'd, completing the circle of perfection with Ahuramazda as its center, in their aspirations the two kings Darius and Khashayar Shah evoke their presence, as recorded in their inscriptions.

The name of these two Amshaspands are generally mentioned together both in Avesta and Gathas (see for example, yasna, chapter 44, paragraphs 18 & 19, chapter 45, paragraph 5, chapter 47, paragraph 1, chapter 51, paragraph 7).

In the images of Persepolis, while the first four passages are pictorially represented by the victory of goodness (in the image of the king or a royal hero) over devils, the last two passages through Khorda'd (perfection) and Morda'd (eternal life) representing the highest aspirations, spring of life and creativity, fertility, growth and final unification with Ahuramazda are illustrated masterfully and in a poetical way, in the form of their symbol, the flower Iris (notice the joined stems of images 10 & 11), particularly in those images conveying the concept of holiness.



Image 10- Stems of Iris: (a) Right Persepolis Stone-carvings. (b) Left, Iris Aphylla



Image 11-(a) The underground rhizomes of iris and their connection with each other (b) Iris growing in a line (c) The stone-carvings with underground rhizomes, (d) A general view of Persepolis stone-carving, notice the similarities b/w the real flower of Iris and the stone carvings in (a) and (b).

It is not in vain that the presence of frahvashi (fravahar), symbolizing the whole path of this spiritual journey (passages through the 6 Amshaspands) and attainment of holiness and eternal life (reaching the light of lights (khavarafkhashia) which is the most important part of the Zoroastrian transcendental philosophy is depicted next to Iris (see image 12).



Image 12- Presence of frahvashi (fravahar) as the symbol of spiritual evolution (passage through six Amshaspand) and attainment of holiness and eternal life next to Iris.

On the other hand, the flower symbolizing one of the assistants of Amshaspand Morda'd, the divinity Rashn is Eglantine; a flower with a pleasant calming scent seen repeated in the frames of the stone-relieves between cypresses like a scaffold, protecting the line of guests like a canopy (Image number 13). The continued presence of Eglantine as a symbol of protection and preservation of life (both humans and gardens) can be found in “Ershad-ol-zera’-eh”.

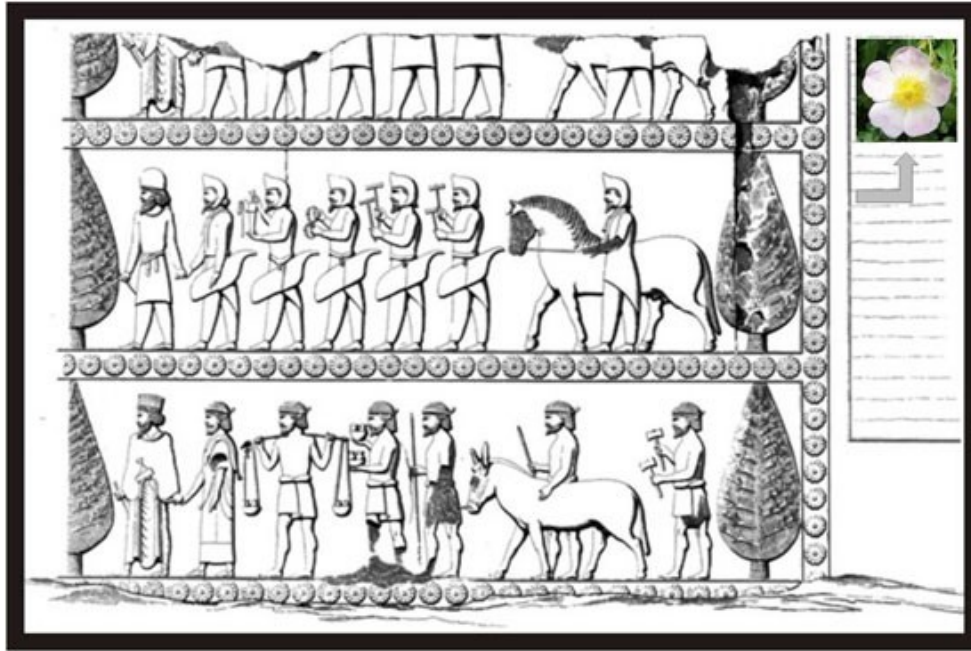


Image 13 – Repetition of flowers in the frames of Cyrus Hall like scaffolds of eglantine sheltering the guests as an allusion to the divinity Rashn – (Images of stone-relievs of Iran, British Museum, 1932).

Now comes the question of lotus and its connection with barsam. As it was mentioned before, a number of researchers have wrongly identified barsam (the symbol of all trees and vegetations) in Darius' hand as Lotus, and speculated it to be the same flower seen around the neck of animals, overlooking the fact that this flower can hardly grow in dry climatic weather of Pars (Fars). In addition to requiring special conditions for its growth, lotus is very sensitive to light and humidity. It is a flower growing in marshes closing its petals when the light fades. Lotus with the sharp end of its blossoms and the inner curving of its petals as well as its sensitivity and impermanence could not be the flower used during long rituals (from the beginning of preparation of barsam to the end of ceremonies) which instead required a longer lasting flower (Image number 14).



Image No. 14- Lotus and its natural bio-ecological environment (aquatic).

Image number 15 shows the similarity of the flower in Darius' hand, with pomegranate flower. From the bio-ecological point of view, apart from its sacredness and beauty, pomegranate flower is more in harmony with the climatic conditions of the region and physiologically it is more resistant than aquatic flowers, therefore it is a more appropriate flower to be used in long ceremonies.



Image No.15 –Similarity of barsam in Darius' hand (right) with pomegranate flower (left).

In Avesta we read: “It is said, the divinity Soroush spreads barsam, three times, five times, seven times and nine times and offers the worship to Ahuramazda.” In Yasna (chapter 43, paragraph 12) it is said: “When you ordered me ‘Appeal to asha and know her’ you told me unheard words: Try to let Soroush penetrate you to recognize divine graciousness granting reward and punishment to both groups.”

Soroush is one of the divinities playing an important role in the struggle against devils. It is said in Bondaresh: “Soroush received the task of guardianship from Ahuramazda. In the same way that Ahuramazda is the Lord of the heaven and the universe, Soroush is the Lord of the world and it is said, Ahuramazda is a spirit protecting the soul, while Soroush is a spirit protecting the world. For Soroush has not slept well since the creation of living beings in order to guard them. According to Abu Reyhan, Soroush is a divinity guarding the night and some say he is Gabriel. The soul of the dead reaches the Chinvad Bridge protected by Soroush. I praise, the brave pious dutiful Soroush. He is brave because when he turns his club toward Khorasan (East), fear is subsided until he points it to the west. He is dutiful because he obeys the God. And he is astonishing because devils are dispersed by his stroke. He is



divine because he rules arzeh (the country of the East) and saveh (the country of the West) (zand akasieh 220, Rahim Afifi, Iranian Mythology and Culture in Pahlavi texts). That is why holding barsam – whether it is the king or an ordinary Zoroastrian - represents continuous remembrance of the presence of Soroush (Gabriel).

### **Conclusion:**

From all that is said above, Zoroastrian religious and ritual beliefs were so blended with everyday life of ancient Iranians that one can trace them in all aspects of life including their architecture. Illustration of the opposition of good and evil, the spiritual presence of Amshaspands in the figure of the king in stone-reliefs and entrapment of devils by using their sculptures as column capital all point to the above integration. Considering that Persepolis was the place where Achaemenids held their religious rites, ceremonies and mysteries, surely the images found there should be an allusion to the ruling ideas and ideals of their era manifested in the form of mythological symbols of their divinities. The subtle intelligent practice of Achaemenids in illustrating their basic religious beliefs for various peoples with different religious faiths living in the vast Persian Empire attending various ceremonies in the Palace is an example of the respect the kings of this dynasty had for the freedom in faith and ethics of their subjects. In all the stone-carvings with an allusion to spiritual beliefs, the Amshaspands Khorda'd and Morda'd have a prominent presence in the figure of Iris flower. Attribution of a flower to each Amshaspand represents the close relationship of Achaemenid religious beliefs with their natural environment and regional climatic conditions in which lotus can not have a logical reasonable place.

The above analysis is an effort made to show the Iranian origin of what is seen in stone-reliefs of Persepolis, their relation with religious beliefs of that era and refutation of non-Iranian root of the images found there. This is a new approach demanding extensive studies for further decoding of the remaining reliefs. On the whole archaeologists agree that Persepolis is the manifestation of Achaemenid religious faith. Thus with a new approach to its stone-reliefs we can see their adherence to Zoroaster's teaching in a pictorial way which can serve to decode their details. Emphasizing once more on the above images, the similarities of devils in stone-carvings and the reliefs showing the battle of the king with devils and the use of sculptures of their heads as column capitals is a pictorial representation of the inner human spiritual journey for the attainment of salvation.

## **Refetrence**

*Alireza Shapuri Shahbazi, "Persepolis, Documented Guide", Parseh Research Foundation, Pasargade, Tehran, 2010).*

*A complete Geographical Atlas, p.10*

*Rex Warner, Encyclopedia of World Mythology, translated by A. Esmailpour, 2009.*

*Cambridge World History, Vol.2, The History of Iran, Achaemenid, 2008.*