

Takht-e-Jamshid -Persepolis

Takht-e-Jamshid (Persepolis) was founded in 512BC by Darius the Great, and added-to over the next 150 years until it was captured from Darius III and burned to the ground by Alexander in 331 BC. It was one of the wonders of the world. Persepolis is simply Greek for “Persian City”. It was started decades before the Parthenon (490BC), and all the workers were paid (no slave labor). Workers were employed from all over the empire to build it. It is today a UNESCO World heritage site.

Persepolis became a center for ceremonial and cultural festivities, a center for dignitaries and visitors to pay homage to the king, a private residence for the Persian kings, a place for satraps to bring gifts for the king in the Spring during the festival of Nowruz, as well as a place of governance and ordinance. Persepolis’s prestige and grand riches were well known in the ancient world, and it was best described by the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus as “the richest city under the sun.

After the death of Cyrus the Great, who fell in the battle at the age of 60, Darius I, who used to be the flag bearer of Cyrus’ son in Egypt, became the ruler of Iran. He lead his troops to Pasargadae, and built Persepolis – the Persian city. The city was built in VI-V century BC and became the new capital of ancient Iran – the great Achaemenid Empire with 28 provinces. Back then, territories of Egypt, Syria, parts of India and other lands belonged to Iran. During the rule of Darius, Apadana Palace, Council Hall, the main imperial Treasury and its surroundings were constructed.

Persepolis was the summer residence of Persian kings, their place for recreation and religious holidays. During the holiday of Nowruz, which lasted 13 days, the representatives of all the provinces came here with offerings for Darius. The son of Darius, Xerxes the Great waged his war against Greece from Petropolis and piled up the treasure in the vast store rooms. The palace of Xerxes was twice as large as the palace of Darius, consisting of two royal mansions.

In 330 BC Alexander the Great captured Persepolis and ordered to burn Xerxes’ palace to the ground. When the palace was excavated, three feet of ash covered its floors and many of the columns had marks from the two thousand year old flames. Historians are not entirely sure if Xerxes’ palace was burned by accident or as a deliberate act of revenge for Persian burning of the Acropolis of Athens.

When Alexander reached the tomb, he was horrified by the manner in which the tomb was treated, his attempt to undermine their influence and his show of power in his newly conquered empire, than a concern for Cyrus's tomb.

The tomb was originally ornamented with an inscription that, according to Strabo (and other ancient sources), stated:

O man! I am Cyrus the Great, who gave the Persians an empire and was the king of Asia. Grudge me not therefore this monument.

After the Arab invasion into Persia and collapse of the Sassanid Empire, Arab armies wanted to destroy this historical artifact, on the basis that it was not in congruence to their Islamic tenets, but quick thinking on the part of the local Persians prevented this disaster. The Persians renamed the tomb, and presented it to the invading army as the tomb of King Solomon's mother. It is likely that the inscription was lost at this time.

From 316BC onwards, the city gradually declined, but the ruins of the Achaemenid empire remained as a witness to its golden era. Nowadays you can see the ruins of the colossal buildings of the city, made out of dark marble, the Gate of All Nations with Lamassus – bulls with the heads of bearded men, Apadana palace built by Darius, the Throne Hall, many other palaces, storerooms, stables and quarters. The walls of the buildings retained beautiful bas-reliefs with figures of warriors, animals and battles of the time. The kings Darius I, Xerxes I, Artaxerxes I and Darius II are buried in the Tombs of Kings on the site.

Access to the platform is by a monumental double ramped ceremonial staircase, carved from massive blocks of stone (five steps are carved from a single block seven meters long), and shallow enough for the most important guests to be able to ride up on their horses. The stairs were closed at the top with gates whose hinges fitted into sockets in the floor, seen at the top of the left or northern flight. The staircase landing is L-shaped; a corner of the platform jutting into it, reducing its surface by one-fourth. This is functionally irrational, but serves a religious purpose, since it forms with the edge of the platform and the Gate of All Nations a ziggurat symbol in birds eye view for god to behold.

At the head of the staircase is the Gate of All Nations, built during the reign of Xerxes I. It impresses with its massiveness. Its Four Corners is oriented to the four cardinal directions; the entrance is through the western doorway. It is

guarded at east and west by vast bull-like colossi closely akin to the bull figures of Assyria

It is well worthwhile to spend all available time studying the eastern staircase of the Apadana. Better preserved, the reliefs are full of religious symbolism as well as being a record in stone of the New Years procession. The staircase is best divided into three portions, a central, a northern, and a southern panel. The northern panel shows the reception of the Persians and Medes, the more interesting southern panel the reception of the subject nations. Recent restoration of the palace showed that the original plan and layout was of much more primitive type, the monumental double staircase being added later. It is still undecided if the Apadana was not built over an older cyclopean platform of the type erected by the early Achaemenian kings in Masjid-e Suleiman

Kushyia (Ethiopians), with closely curled hair and Negroid features, carrying a vase and an elephant tusk and leading an okapi.

Putaya (Libyans), escorting a kudu with long curved horns, and horse-drawn chariot.

Zranka (Dranjianians), including a lancer with a shield and a long-horned bull (some believe these are Arachosians, mountain folk from Kerman region, and cattle breeders.)

Arabaya (Arabians), with textiles and a dromedary.

Skudra (Skudrians), lancers carrying shields, and a horse led by soldiers who wear classical type Thracian helmets.

The Asagarta (Sagartians), wearing tasseled caps (like those of the Capadoicians and Armenians), two of which are fastened under the chin like Balaclava helmets.

Sogda (Sogdians), or as some believe Chorasmians, holding a short sword, bracelets and axes and leading a horse.

An unfinished palace of Artaxerxes III lies across the courtyard to the south, and to the east of the Tachara, on the highest part of the platform and, like all the palaces, standing on its own terrace, is the main hall of the Hadish (literally, a Dwelling Palace), Xerxes private palace which can be reached by a staircase from the courtyard.

The central hall of the Hadish with its 36 columns, approached by the northern porch with 12 columns, is surrounded by small chambers on the east and west, and has five doorways whose portals depict Xerxes entering or leaving the palace, accompanied by attendants.

North of the Hadish is Tripylon, the small Central Palace with its three entrances. The bas-reliefs on the main double staircase on the north depict Persian and Median guards with, on the inner surfaces, still other attractive reliefs of Median courtiers and nobles on their way to a banquet. There was another staircase on the south side of the Hadish, now moved to the National Museum of Iran. On the portal of the eastern doorway Darius is shown on his throne, supported by representatives of 28 countries, and Xerxes the crown prince stands behind. The Tripylon was certainly not a palace; it was either the main hall giving access to other palaces, or a kind of military headquarters.

To the east of Tripylon and the Apadana and immediately to the north of the Treasury, is the largest edifice on the platform the Hall of One Hundred Columns, measuring 70 x 70 meters in area, covered with some three meters of soil and cedar ash when it was first partly excavated by Motamed od-Dowleh Farhad Mirza, governor-general of Fars, in 1878. It was used for the reception of the delegations of the subject peoples and collection of their tribute. It is the most functional building in the complex; it shows the psychology of Persian statecraft at its highest. The king entered the palace through the side door, positioned himself on the throne in the center of the hall, and surrounded by the nobles and the staff of the treasury.

Museum is reached through the southern gate of the 100 Column Palace. It contains not only objects found in Persepolis but, in the right-hand galleries, prehistoric pottery and artifacts from nearby mounds including Tall-e Bakun, and on the left early Islamic exhibits from Istakhr. On leaving the Museum turn sharp right and follow the outer wall of the Museum until you come to a small covered recess with several office doors. In the wall of this recess are two panels of Achaemenian tile, which, though faded, show the vivid colors used. The entire palace was similarly covered in colored tiles or painted.

East of the Museum, at the foot of the mountain face, is a self-contained complex of halls covering over 10,000 Square meters, including two large halls whose roofs were supported respectively by 100 and 99 wooden columns, and which is believed to have been the Treasury begun by Darius. Stone and clay tablets in Akkadian and Elamite found here gave details of exact wages in cash

and in kind, paid to the men who built Persepolis, proving that this gigantic undertaking was constructed by free, paid labor, in contrast to contemporary monumental buildings in other countries where slave labor was the rule.

This is an artistic representation of the ancient zodiac at the time of the Spring Equinox, which is also Persian New Year. The Persian emperors celebrated New Year by feasting and receiving tribute at Persepolis, the Spring Palace. To this day Persians celebrate New Year (Nowruz) at the Spring Equinox.

The lion-bull combat/contest scene also appears on the west stairway of the central panel of the apadana. Further figures of the lion-bull combat/contest appear on the corner angles of the southern facade of the Palace of Darius at Persepolis. In all examples the lion is depicted attacking the bull from behind. The actual meaning of the lion/bull composites will likely always remain a guess. At this date the depiction is seen as a symbol of kingship and power. The depiction is variously described as a "lion devouring a bull," a "lion fighting a bull," or "the rear attack." Both figures are shown standing and both are in a rearing posture.

The figures are Persian Immortals – elite soldiers. At either side and in the center are inscriptions, the left in Babylonian, the center in Old Persian, and the right in Elamite. This palace was begun by Darius and finished by his son, Xerxes.

Homas are a chimera of an eagle and a lion, and are another ancient icon of Mesopotamian culture. Sometimes called Huma, Bulah, Kumay or Umay, these creatures feature in Iranian, Turkish, Indian and Arabic traditions. They are sometimes confused with the mythical Simorgh bird of the Shahnameh and Iranian folklore.

Everyone who entered Persepolis came through this gate. It had 2 exits, one that led towards the Apadana audience hall, and the other to "Army Street" and probably barracks. Delegations waited here before being allowed to continue to the Apadana audience hall. The creatures depicted are karibus, winged chimeras of man and bull. They are supernatural guardians, the cherubim of the Bible.

These are recurring elements throughout Persepolis. The lions and bulls representing the ancient zodiac, together they represent the spring equinox which is Persian New Year (Nowruz.)

All over Persepolis there are clear gestures of friendship. The Persians could not control their huge empire by might alone. They used satrapies – provinces – governed in many cases by local kings. This is why Darius referred to himself as “King of Kings.”

Known in Farsi as “mikhi” (nails) as it resembles the impression of woodworking nails in clay.

One of the oldest scripts, it originated some 4,000 years BC and was normally written using a trimmed reed making impressions in clay tablets.

Tomb of Artaxerxes III (Ardashir) carved into the Mountain of Mercy above Persepolis

The reliefs of the foreign delegations bringing gifts to the King are constructed around the idea that the King commands the respect and praise from people travelling from all over the world. It is primarily an illustration of his far reaching power but it is executed in a manner as to suggest that it is his far reaching benevolence that inspired so many people to bring so many gifts to him. The held hands and smiling faces are a testament to the ideal of happy and willing subjects demonstrating their love for the regime. However the foundation inscription of Darius (DPe) clearly states that the nations which bring him tribute did so because they felt fear of him. But since the only version of the inscription which mentions fear is in Old Persian it is unlikely that this was intended to mock the tribute bringers. In any case with this inscription in mind we can see the wider context and reality behind the tribute procession even though the imagery very much affects the ideal of peaceful and willing cooperation.





