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Research Article

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The Fire Cult During the Achaemenid Period

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Abstract This study examines the sacredness of fire, temple structures, cult, and the relationship between fire temples and the cult of Anāhitā during the Achaemenid Kingdom period. While fire is considered sacred in Zoroastrianism, debates continue today about whether the Achaemenids were Zoroastrian, and it is argued that defining the concept of Achaemenid religion is difficult. This study, which does not ignore these debates, attempts to examine classical sources and modern research together while also taking into account royal inscriptions. In sources, it is noted that the Persians performed their rituals in the open-air areas and did not have temples, while the concept of sacred place emerging in Pasargadae and the controversial term "āyadanā" are noteworthy. In modern research, two different views emerge: one suggesting that the Persians did not have temples before the Achaemenid period and those who oppose this in light of the excavation findings. Structures uncovered both in the East and the West, such as Ka'ba-yı Zerdust, Naqsh-e Rustam, Tepe Nush-e Jan, and Dahan-e Ghulaman, have been included. The depiction of fire altars in Achaemenid seals and royal tombs has been examined. Additionally, the research addresses the impossibility of a singular cult and culture in the Iranian geography.

Keywords Achaemenids · Cult of Fire · Temples · Fire Temples · Cult of Anāhitā

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Introduction

The history of Iran, particularly pre-Islamic period, presents a complex and challenging field of study. Researchers face a range of difficulties. The terms "Iran" and "Persia" serve as prime examples of this issue. While "Iran" today refers to the modern Islamic Republic of Iran and its current borders, historically, it has carried different meanings, encompassing much broader geographical regions overe time. Similarly, the term "Persia", widely used in Western Europe, especially on the Continent, has been applied to denote the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanian Kingdoms in the Iranian plateau. However, this terminology introduces significant ambiguities and has contributed to a range of interpretative challenges in understanding the broader historical context.

The concept of "Iran" emerged during the Sassanian period in the 3rd century CE, encompoassing both religious and political meanings (Wiesehöfer, 2001: xi). However, in 1934, Reza Shah issued a decree to replace the term "Iran" with the French term "Pers", symbolizing a significant shift in the expression of modern Iranian identity. The term "Persia" not only referred geographically to the core region known as Parsa (Persis), but was also used to describe an ethnic group, such as "Parsa" first appeared in Assyrian and Babylonian tablets during the half of the 1st millennium BCE, with variants such as Parsua or Parsumash, and is encountered in Ancient Near Eastern texts in these forms.

The earliest use of the term "Parsa" in cuneiform typically referred to the mountainous regions of Iran, particularly various locations in the central Zagros and the peoples inhabiting these areas. However, from the late 7th century onward, the term began to be used to descrine the region of Fārs (Pārsa), and by the 6th century, it had become the heart of the Persian Achaemenid Kingdom (Daryaee & Rolllinger, 2021:7). Therefore, the term "Parsa" does not correspond to the modern concept of "Persia" as used today, but rather refers specifically to one of the core regions of the Achaemenid Kingdom.

The geographical name "Iran" (Eran) is derived from the term "Airyanəm Vaējah" found in the Avesta, meaning "the land of the Aryans" or "the vastness of the Aryan territories". This indicates that the Iranians themselves used this expression to define their homeland (Malandra, 1979: 7).

The term "Aryan" which is commonly used by scholars in Europe to refer to the Indo-Iranian language family, was coined by Professor Max Müller and carries its own set of challenges. It is suggested that the peoples categorized as Aryans – such as the Indians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Slavs, Celts and Germans – once lived in the same region and even under the same roof. The language they shared under this common roof is believed to be the ancestor of languages like Sanskrit, Akkadian, and Greek (Taylor, 1980: 2-4). Later, the Aryans divided into two groups: Indo-Europeans and Indo – Iranians. While the homeland of the Indo – Iranians are believed to have originated from the steppes of Central Asia, North of the Caspian and Aral Seas. According to this traditional view, during the third millennium BCE, this group into two subgroups: the Indo-Aryans and the Iranians. Subsequently, these two groups moved southward from the steppes around 1500 BCE (Malandra, 1979: 7).

Although the term "Iran" is often associated with kingdoms, it also carries significant ethnic and linguistic connotations. Specifically, it refers to the groups that spoke Indo-European languages, including the Iranian branch. However, non-Iranian languages were also part of Iranian history. Despite the kingdom being home to speakers of different languages, the Achaemenids used Elamite, Babylonian and Old Persian. Based on royal inscriptions, it is assumed that Old Persian thought to belong to the Achaemenid dynasty, was a high-status group who settled in Fārs at some point in an unclear period, with their language based on a southwestern Iranian dialect (Wiesehöfer, 2021: 8; Rossi, 2021: 53).

Even though there is no official definition for the state, the Great Kings considered their kingdom as the World itself. Beginning with the reign of Darius I, royal inscriptions offered a portrayal of the world through detailed lists of territories. (Daryaee & Rollinger, 2023: 3).

Moreover, both Darius and, later, Xerxes identified themselves in royal inscriptions as Achaemenid, Persian (Parsa), son of Persian, an Aryan (Ariya), and a member of the Aryan lineage (Ariyacica). The terms "Aryan" and "Aryan lineage" carry broader connotations. However, this does not necessarily imply that the Iranians shared a common migration history. The term "Persian" (Persis) refers to being a man from Parsa/Persis, meaning it is of a regional dimension (Malandra, 1979: 7).

Darius and Xerxes emphasized their Aryan origins, stating that Ahura Mazda was the god of the Aryans, and their ancient language was Aryan. The Achaemenids prioritized their Persian identity, rooted in their Aryan ancestry, over their broader identity as Aryans. Rather than identifying with other Iranian-speaking peoples, such as the Medes or Bactrians, they defined themselves as Persians. They emphasized their origin from the southwestern region of present-day Iran, known as Parsa or Persis. The Sasanians, on the other hand, developed an identity based around the concept of "Iran" (Wiesehöfer, 2021: xi).

Beyond these terms, limited and scattered information about the history of Achaemenids is a common issue for many research topics. Therefore, apart from the existing knowledge of their religion and traditions, many details remain elusive. The religious beliefs of the Achaemenid rulers and their Persian subjects are also among the topics that have sparked considerable debate. Furthermore, information regarding the religious beliefs and practices of the Persians during the reigns of Cyrus and Cambyses is limited and contradictory. Not only is the early Achaemenid period poorly understood, but also the rituals, beliefs, and religions of the early Iranians, considered to precede them, are not well known. Additionally, one of the primary questions that arises – perhaps the first – is whether Achaemenids were Zoroastrians. However, the historical identity, origins, texts, and reforms of Zoroaster, as well as the regions where his reforms were implemented, remain subjects of ongoing debate.

Studies indicate that Zoroaster did not create a new religion; he transformed the ancient Iranian religion under the influence of Iranian paganism. One of the main supporting arguments fort his idea is that the foundation of Zoroastrianism includes worship practices related to the cults of fire and water, which are characteristic elements of Iranian paganism (Sarianidi, 1999: 308-9).

Fire, although often defined in modern times as a concept associated with Zoroastrinism, has historically been one of the most important cultic objects. Stories, myths, beliefs, and traditions related to fire can be found in many cultures. Since the Middle Stone Age, fire has been sanctified and included in rituals for the dead and sacrifices. Throughout prehistoric periods, it has shown more symbolic and divine qualities such as grave fire, home fire and cult fire (Maringer, 1974: 68 – 105). Just as in many other societies, among the Indo-Iranian speaking communities, fire was crucial for meeting basic needs like warmth, lighting, and cooking. In ancient times lightning a fire was not as easy as it is today. Fire, which was an important source for heat, light, and cooking, must have been one of the most primitive ways to protect against dangers such as predators and evil spirits.

The concept of fire temples in the Iranian geographical context presents a somewhat problematic and complex situation. Some researchers have attempted to link the origin of the fire cult back to the pre-Zoroastrian period. The reverence for fire, known as "Atar" (MP Adur-Atas, Pahlavi Ader) in the Avesta and as "Agni" in the Brahmanic traditions, is believed to have roots in Indo-Iranian and most likely, Indo-European origins. One of the reasons for this is the religious significance of fire, not only in Zoroastrinaism but also in Vedic tradition (De Jong, 1997: 343). Additionally, the respect for the hearth fire, which suggests the universality of the cult of fire or the idea that this cult originated from the hearth fire (Boyce, 1979: 4;

Shenkar, 2014: 90; Yamamoto, 1979: 30). Therefore, it is likely that the protection and transportation of fire were one of the oldest ritual activities (Cantera, 2019: 20).

As noted by Mary Boyce and Yamamoto, one the accepted hypotheses is that the people living in the Iranian geographical region, including the Zoroastrians, did not have temple structures, and the idea of acquiring such temples was only accepted from the later period of the Achaemenid era onward. The belief that no fire temples date back to the early periods has primarily directed researchers to Classical texts (De Jong, 1997: 345). However, the discovery of certain structures dating to the Achaemenid period and earlier has created a contradiction with Boyce and Yamamoto's views on temples (for further information, see Scerrato 1979; Stronach 1985; Genito, 1987; Gnoli, 1993, non-vidi).

The identification of fire altars or temples is one of the most prominent issues in research. In addition to the ancient and universal fire cult, tracking its development in Iran is quite challenging due to the difficulties encountered in the sources. Klaus Schippmann, Yumiko Yamamoto, and J. Houterkamp have gathered materials and archaeological findings related to fire altars and worship from the Achaemenid, Seleucid, Parthian, and even Sassanian periods (for further information, see Schippmann, 1971; Yamamoto, 1979; Houtkamp, 1991).

Some researchers argue that, except for a few locations in Central Asia, no fire temples or any other temples existed during the Achaemenid period. They attribute this to the lack of archaeological evidence and the uncertainty regarding the connection of these temples with Iranian cults or Zoroastrianism. Additionally, they suggest that temples began to appear only from the later periods of the Achaemenid period onwards (Boyce, 1975a; 1982; Yamamoto, 1979; Cantera, 2019: 20; De Jong, 1997: 343).

Due to the problem encountered in terms of sources, careful research is required to trace the cult of the fire temple and its development. The only written source apart from seals, royal tomb reliefs, and royal inscriptions related to the period is the Avesta. The debates surrounding the archaeological data of early – period fire temples have led researchers towards the works of classical writers. In addition to works from the period and classical writers' sources, modern sources and excavation findings should be carefully followed for the study of the cult of fire and its development.

In this study, all the terms and topics addressed are related to the Persians/Iranian people, who are considered to be associated with the Achaemenids, and the regions they both inhabited and ruled. The Achaemenid state, initially established by Cyrus II (around 559 – 529 BCE), reached its greatest extent, stretching from Thrace and northern Greece in the west to India in the east, from Egypt in the south to Afghanistan and Central Asia in the north (Tavernier, 2021: 39; Potts, 2021: 13) (fig. 1). The article addresses the importance of fire among the Persians, how fire temples emerged, and whether the Persians had a temple structure as mentioned in Classical sources. As previously stated, the focus of the study is the Achaemenid Kingdom, known as Persia or Parsa, which existed between 330 and 600 BCE.

The debate over whether the Iranians had temples in early periods also brings up the issue of how a structure should be defined as a fire temple. Additionally, there is another terminological issue: fire altars and fire bearers. Recent discussions on whether the Achaemenids were Zoroastrians or what the Achaemenid religion entailed have brought fire cults and temples back into focus. It also seeks to understand the relationship between the newly emerging Anāhitā cult treated separately from Zoroastrianism in this article. Finally, taking all this into account, the Achaemenids have been evaluated separately from the Zoroastrian religion.

Research Methodology

The main aim of this study is to systematically and critically analyze existing literature and texts, focusing on evaluating available sources from the perspective of ancient history rather than conducting new archaeological fieldwork. Archaeological data are primarily used to support the analysis, relying on previously published excavation reports and findings rather than direct field research. Existing archaeological evidence, ancient written records, and modern scholarly works have been carefully reviewed and compared to provide a comprehensive understanding. Thus, archaeological findings serve to complement and contextualize interpretations derived from literary sources and iconographic evidence.

The data sources for the research include ancient textual materials (such as Herodotus, Xenophon, and Diodorus Siculus) and their available translations, alongside archaeological reports, seal and coin iconographies, and Achaemenid period inscriptions. Furthermore, modern scholarly literature related to the topic has been reviewed to incorporate diverse viewpoints and interpretations.

The geographical scope of the study is limited to the Iranian Plateau and its surrounding regions within the boundaries of the Achaemenid Kingdom. The temporal scope covers the Achaemenid period from the 6th century BCE to the late 4th century BCE. These delimitations allow for a more coherent analysis of the available sources and archaeological data. The primary focus lies on religious structures, temples, and evidence of fire cults during this era.

Source criticism has been applied by analyzing the ancient authors' texts in their historical and cultural contexts. Potential biases, ideological influences, and narrative styles have been questioned, and consistencies or contradictions between different sources have been compared. Attention has also been paid to nuances and translation variations in the original languages of the texts.

Iconographic analysis has been carried out through detailed examination of religious symbols found in Achaemenid seals, coins, and reliefs. The cultural context in which these visual materials were produced, the deities or concepts they represent, the meanings of motifs, and their relationship to religious rituals have been studied. Iconographic evidence has been cross-referenced with archaeological findings and written sources to deepen the understanding of temple structures and fire cult practices.

This multidisciplinary approach has enabled a complementary evaluation of textual and visual evidence, fostering a more holistic and critical understanding of Achaemenid religious practices. However, the limitations of existing sources and the predominantly Greek perspective of ancient accounts require cautious interpretation of the findings.

Fire Among Persians

Fire, like in many societies, was significant for the Indo – Iranians to meet basic needs such as heating, illumination, and cooking. The respect for the fire referred to as “Atar” in the Avesta (MP Adur – Atas, Pahlavi Ader) and “Agni” in Brahmanic traditions, likely extends back to the Indo – European periods. The reverence for the hearth fire, considered universal in fire worship, or derived from it, is widely accepted (Tiele, 1932: 63, 65; Maringer 1974: 86; Boyce, 1979: 4; Yamamoto, 1979: 30; Shenkar, 2014: 90). In Iranian rituals, the fire, which is a central icon is important as the deity called Atar and is considered the son of Ahura Mazdā (De Jong, 1997: 100-1; Skjærvø 2011: 12).

Herodotus mentions that the Persians considered fire to be a deity (Hdt, 1.131, 3.16). Xenophon, while discussing offerings, refers to fire worship several times (Xenophon. Cyropaedia. 1.6.1; 7.5.57). In Strabo, we see that the Persians pray to fire first before offering sacrifices to whichever god they desire (Strabo. Geography. 15.3.16). Clement of Alexandria, who based his writings on Dino mentions that the Persians and

Medes worshipped Fire (Clement of Alexandria. Procepticus. 5.65.1). When the Curtius Rufus talks about the importance of fire among the Persians, on the other hand, Diogenes Laertius states that they believed the gods existed in fire, earth and water, and that fire was the primary symbol of the divine in this world and the central focus of ritual activities (Quintis Curtius Rufus. Historiae Alexandri Magni. 3.3.9; 4.13.12; 4.14.24; Diogenes Laertius. 1.6-9).

Another thing mentioned in the works of Classical writers that the Persians abstained from cremation rituals for the dead (Ctesias. Persika. §57). Herodotus indicates that the Persians did not cremate their dead but rather buried them without being mutilated by birds or dogs, and that in-ground burial was a commonly preferred burial method within the society (Hdt.1.140; 3.16.3). The view that corpses were torn apart by birds and dogs is corroborated by Plutarch (Plutarch. Artaxerxes. 18.5). The reason for their avoidance of cremation was likely due to their desire not to have the fire contaminated by the bodies of the deceased (Strabo. Geography. 15.3.14). Dioscorides also mentions that the Persians had a strong aversion to cremation their dead (Dioscorides. Anthologia Palatina. 7.162). The practice mentioned by Herodotus, where the body was first torn apart by animals and then buried, was actually carried out by the Magi. The Persians, on the other hand, would cover the body with wax before burying it in the ground. Both practices were contrary to the Zoroastrian tradition (Widengren, 1965: 133). During the Greek expedition, Herodotus recounts that Xerxes buried an Achaemenid named Artachaees who had died of illness and gave him a funeral and burial. However, he does not specify the burial type (Hdt.7.117).

However, after the Battle of Thermopylae, Herodotus reports that Xerxes buried the dead soldiers in trenches and covered the bodies with soil (Hdt.7.24). This practice is consistent with the directive mentioned by Xenophon, according to which the body of Great Cyrus should be buried after his death (Xenophon.Cyropaedia.8.7.25; also see Quintius Curtius Rufus. Historiae Alexandri Magni. 3.12. 13-14).

In Xenophon, Cyrus sacrificed first to Hestia, and then to Zeus, and the to any god suggested by the Magi. Xenophon's mention of Hestia likely stems from the similarity between the Persian hearth fire cult and the Greek Hestia, the goddess of the hearth (Xenophon. Cyropaedia. 7.57). In the late 4th century, funeral sacrifices were still being performed at Cyrus's tomb, while the royal coronation ceremony took place at a local temple (Plutarch. Artaxerxes. 3.2; cf. Sancisi –Weerdenburg, 1987; Briant, 2002: 523-4; 667; 998; Henkelman, 2012: 940).

Evidence regarding the existence of the dynasty fire, which was lit when kings ascended the throne and extinguished upon their death, is not sufficient. Most of the evidence for dynasty fires is based on accounts related to Alexander. Diodorus Siculus, Alexander, upon the death of his beloved friend Hephaistion, ordered the people of Asia, including the Persians, to extinguish what they called the sacred fire until the funeral was over (Diodorus Siculus. 17.114.4). Curtius Rufus when referring to the dynastic fire, states that the sacred and eternal fire plays an important role in processions dedicated to multiple gods (Quintis Curtius Rufus. Historiae Alexandri Magni. 3.3.9; 4.13.12; 4.14.24). Xenophon describes how after processions dedicated to various gods, the fire is carried on a large altar (Xenophon. Cyropaedia. 8.3.12).

According to the Diodorus, this sacred fire which was requested from all the peoples of Asia, is likely the fire they kept in their homes. After the head of the family died, the hearth fire was extinguished. Just as it is here, after the king died, the dynastic fire was extinguished and then rekindled after the next king ascended the throne. The dynastic fire, on the other hand, was a symbol of the Achaemenid dynasty The dynastic fire is considered a symbol of the Achaemenid dynasty and kingdom. Additionally, it is accepted that the tradition of the dynastic fire emerged from the hearth fire. Information about how it continued during the Parthian and Sasanian periods and their rituals can be found in sources. (Yamamoto, 1979: 32-3; De Jong, 2010: 551).

Frazer divided the stages of human mastery of fire into three phases: the first period when fire was unknown, the second period when fire was discovered and used for warmth and cooking, and the third

period when fire was regularly utilized (Frazer, 1930: 201). From the perspective of the Persians, it is likely that fire transformed into hearth fire during the transition from nomadic periods to settled life or during the process of transition. Later on, it can be divided into periods such as evolution into sacred fire and dynastic fires.

Sacred Places

It is generally accepted that the Persians (and the Medes) may have inherited the tradition of worshiping at open-air or hearth fires from the Indo – Iranian tradition. (Boyce, 1975a, 1985, Yamamoto, 1979: 26).

Herodotus stated that the Persians did not have the habit of making statues, temples or altars (Hdt. 1.131). It was reported by Strabo five centuries later that the Persians did not have statues or altars because they regarded the sky as Zeus and performed sacrifice rituals on a high place (Strabo. Geography. 15.2.13). Xenophon who expresses a similar view, is unaware of the existence of Persian temples and mentions that they performed sacrifice rituals outdoors on a hill (Xenophon. Cyropaedia. 8.7.3). Clement of Alexandria, referring to Dino of Colophon, also describes Persians sacrificing outdoors (Clement of Alexandria. Procepticus. 5.65.1). As a result, ancient Iranian worship ceremonies were conducted in any clean and open area. However, in later periods, seasonal celebrations where people gathered took place in high places and near water springs (Boyce, 1982: 22).

Although the existence of a few established sacred areas is known from what Strabo reported, two points regarding religious structures stand out in the Achaemenid royal inscriptions (Strabo. Geography. 11.8.4). One of them is the mention in Darius's Behistun inscription of rebuilding the destroyed place of worship, āyadanā, during the rebellion of Gaumata (DB 1.14; DB 63-4; Wikander, 1946: 58; Schmitt, 1991: 53) (fig. 2). The word "āyadanā" is translated as "temple" in the Akkadian and Elamite versions of the inscription. This is because āyadanā is a standard term used for termples in these languages (Widengren, 1965: 131; De Jong, 1997: 345). Upon detailed examination of the inscription, it is uncertainty what type of structure this temple or sacred place referred to as āyadanā was. In addition to this uncertainity, it is also unclear whether āyadanā was an Iranian sacred site or a temple in Babylon or Elam (Shenkar, 2007: 173). Some researchers have suggested that āyadanā refers to places of venetration, temples or open-air sanctuaries. According to Boyce, in Old Persian, āyadanā also refers to sacred areas, while Lecoq has suggested that they could refer to buildings. (Boyce, 1982: 89; cf. Lecoq, 1997).

The second point is the Daiva Inscription, which is thought to have been written during the reign of Xerxes I. This inscription describes how the Great King destroyed the daivadand in a territory of the kingdom where worship of the daivas took place, purifying the region with appropriate rituals dedicated to Ahura Mazda (XPh §3) (fig. 3).

As in the example of āyadanā, the specific structure or country referred to by the term daivadand remains unclear. For this reason, the Daiva Inscription is one of the most debated inscriptions of the Achaemenids. It has been suggested that the term Daiva refers to the Marduk Temple in Babylon and the Babylonian gods named Daiva (Widengren, 1946: 138). Alternatively, other interpretations consider options such as the destruction of Indo-Iranian temples in Eastern Iran and India, or the eradication of Greek religious practices, as relevant to the term daivadand (Gnoli, 2011).

In the content of the inscription, two different perspectives emerge regarding Xerxes' destruction of the daivas. The most common view is that it represents an act of disrespect towards Babylonian and Greek temples or the suppression of Elamite culture (Shenkar, 2007: 174; Brosius, 2006: 90). In this sense, Xerxes' actions are ideologically legitimized as acts of religious propaganda aimed at disrespecting these temples (Degen, 2024: 45). Alternatively, some interpretations suggest that Xerxes' behavior is related to the notion of

religious tolerance within the Achaemenid Kingdom. This tolerance is linked to the Persepolis Fortification Archieve, which demonstrate that worship of Iranian, Elamite, and Assyrian deities took place in Persis. According to these documents, there was a diversity of gods, beliefs, and cultures during the Achaemenid period (Brosius, 2006: 90).

A more comprehensive interpretation comes from Degen: Xerxes, breaking away from his father Darius I's policy of tolerance, implemented harsh measures against all religions other than his own. He distanced himself from the Achaemenid religious policy, which is often regarded or interpreted as a form of tolerance (Degen, 2024: 41).

In conclusion, the different groups described in this inscription are viewed as a sectarian conflict, hostility towards those outside the Iranian faith, or a departure from the Achaemenid policy of tolerance. Even though the exact nature or location of the Daiva remains a topic of debate, it is inferred to refer to "other gods, demons, or temples." This is because the destruction of the āyadana, or temples, mentioned in the Behistun Inscription is considered an act of disrespect and is associated with Darius's enemies. Therefore, it is clear that the āyadana in Behistun and the daivadāna in the Daiva Inscription are different.

One of the oldest religious sites dating back to the Achaemenid period is the open-air fire altar located in Pasargadae, which was built as the royal capital by Cyrus II (Canepa, 2018: 27). Pasargadae maintained its significance as an administrative and economic center throughout the kingdom, primarily due to the presence of Cyrus the Great's monumental tomb, the founder of the kingdom. The palace served as a crucial venue for royal ceremonies and coronation rituals, while the open-air sanctuary regularly hosted large-scale sacrificial rites (ibid.: 29). In this area, two stone pedestals, isolated from other buildings and placed in an open space with stairs in one of them, have been found. Stronach, who conducted the excavations here, believed that these stone pedestals were fire altars (Stronach, 1978: 141-142, figure 72 and table 108) (fig. 4).

The conclusion that these stones are fire altars was reached based on reliefs carved on the rock tombs of the seven successive Achaemenid kings, including Darius, found at Naqsh-e Rustam and Persepolis (Chosky, 2015; 394). However, Potts suggests that this conclusion is speculative, while according to Yamamoto, the term "fire altar" is misleading. Yamamoto points out that reliefs in the rock tombs at Naqsh-e Rustam and Persepolis indicate that one of these pedestals carried fire at a certain ceremonial time, but it is not clear which one carried the fire (Potts, 2013: 453; Yamamoto, 1979: 30).

One or both of these pedestals may have carried the fire. However, the mention that there is no clear consensus on whether they are altars or pedestals brings about a debate between a fire altar versus a fire-holder. The term "fire altar" is used by modern researchers to denote the platform where the sacred fire was placed. Some researchers such as Boyce, argue that this term is misleading because these structures were used solely to hold the fire in a metal or clay vessel for worship purposes. Therefore, although Boyce proposed the term "fire-holder" instead of "fire altar", it has not gained much popularity (Boyce, 1982: 51-2). Boucharlat, who shares a similar approach, suggests that the term meaning "fire altar" is polysemic and instead proposes that it would be more appropriate to refer to it as "fire stand" or "fire-holder" (Boucharlat, 2014: 11). Those seen at Naqsh-e Rustam are fire-holders and could be related with the cult of fire (Stronach, 1978: 138 – 45; Yamamoto, 1979: 28-9).

Another view supporting Boyce's fire-holder is that Achaemenid Persians built altars instead of temples for their gods, and these altars were fire vase bases used solely to carry fire, with no other purpose (Brosius, 2006: 90; De Jong, 1997: 111). The fire altars found on seals of the period are among the evidence supporting this view. Additionally, what a Herodotus report states is that the Persians did not conceive of their gods in human form, yet on seals or coins, Ahura Mazdā is depicted in human form (Jacobs, 2006: 216). On the other hand, the sacred fire was also preserved in portable altars. In Xenophon, a portable altar of this kind

is depicted, and only certain people would carry the fire in a large vessel (Xenophon. Cyropaedia. 8.3.12). Curtius Rufus wrote that the fire was carried on silver altars (*argenteis altaribus praeferebatur*, Quintus Curtius Rufus. Historia Alexandri Magni. 3.3.9; 4.14.24 *qui praefertur altaribus*).

Depiction of Fire Altar in Achaemenid Art: Royal Tombs and Persepolis Archieves

Great Cyrus II is buried in a rectangular tomb chamber in Pasargadae, but the kings who came after Cambyses II (530-522 BC) made their tombs in the form of monumental rock-cut tombs. Today, at the site known as Naqsh-e Rustam, the rock-cut tombs of Darius I (522-486 BC) (fig.5), Xerxes I (486-465 BC) (fig.6), Artaxerxes I (465-424 BC) (fig.7), and Darius II (423-404 BC) (fig.8) can be found (vanden Berghe, 1983: 35). After Darius I chose this area, which has been considered a sacred site since the 2nd millennium BCE, for his monumental tomb, other kings similarly commissioned their own monumental tombs (Garrison, 2009: 17). The tombs of the other three kings, Artaxerxes II (404-359 BC) (fig.9), Artaxerxes III (ruled 359-338/7 BC) (fig.10), and Darius III (380-330 BC, unfinished tomb), are also located in Persepolis (vanden Berghe, 1983: 35). The reliefs found in Darius's tombs are similarly interpreted: the king is worshiping fire on a stone altar (Yamamoto, 1979: 21, 108; Brosius, 2006: 90).

The front facades of all the tombs are divided in a cross shape, with a Egyptian-style gate in the middle section. The upper parts are adorned with sculptures. The king is depicted standing in front of a fire altar, sacrificing to holy fire and praying to the Ahura Mazdā. At the top of these scenes, there is a winged sun disk, a crowned bust, and a lunar symbol, which are symbols of the Achaemenid dynasty. Guard units are located at the sides of the tombs (vanden Berghe, 1983: 36). The depiction of the king in front of a fire altar may imply the existence of such a ritual. However, two inscriptions called DNa-b on the relief, do not mention the religious significance of the sculpture (Root, 1979: 163) (fig.11, 12). The fire on the stepped altar depicted on the relief is accepted as visual evidence for some of the information provided by Herodotus (Garrison, 2009: 50). Also, the sun shining in the scene on this relief is interpreted as an indication that the ritual took place in an open area and that there were no temples (Huart, 2008: 81).

Another issue here is that only the tomb of Darius I has a trilingual inscription in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian. This inscription helps determine the ownership and date of Darius I's tomb. However, since the other tombs lack inscriptions, a precise dating cannot be established. Assignments have been made based on historical data and typological research (vanden Berghe, 1983: 36). Nevertheless, what catches our attention here is that the other tombs share similarities with Darius I's tomb, including the reliefs and the depiction of the fire altar.

In coins, seals and bullae from the Achaemenid Persian period, we see the depictions of worship, rituals and religious elements. While descriptions of worship, rituals and religious elements on these materials may be limited, they are still significant. During the Achaemenid period, the significant role of fire altars in official rituals is evident in the depictions found on seals. The male figure facing the fire altar to the left is found on most seals. In these representations, at the top step of a stepped basin tapering towards the base, there is a fire altar. The flames on the altar are usually depicted in inverted cone or semi-circle shapes (Canepa, 2018: 158). In this article, we only focus on examples from the period that include fire altars. Because, generally, the materials included in this group contain details such as Ahura Mazdā, rituals such as praying or sacrificing, priests (magi) along with accompanying details like wigned disks, floral elements, and court robes etc.

The Persepolis Fortification Archive seals contain detailed depictions of ritual scenes. Thanks to the work of Mark Garrison, these seals are better understood (Canepa, 2018: 156).

The Persepolis Fortification Archive (PF) and Persepolis Treasury Archive (PT) were discovered in 1933/4 at the heartland of Achaemenids in southwestern Iran, Persepolis, by Ernst Herzfeld and Erich Schmidt. (Cameron, 1948: 18-9; Root, 1988: 1-2; Razmjou, 2005: 84). The archive, a small portion of which is preserved, consists of approximately 30.000 tablets (Herzfeld, 1941: 226) and dates back to the the period between 508 and 493 BCE, spanning from the reign of Darius I to Artaxerxes I. It is among the most important sources for Achaemenid culture (Hallock, 1969: 1; Garrison, 2017: 27-8). The seals found in the archive are crucial for Achaemenid iconography. The archives, which are not limited to local food production, also encompass various social and economic issues. By focusing on different segments of society, they provide important insights into the overall structure of the kingdom (Hallock, 1973: 320). They provide information on various subjects such as religious practices, administrative mechanisms of the kingdom, trade routes, languages, society and so on (Garrison, 2017: 27-8).

Fire altars attributed to the Achaemenid period generally appear in these visual sources in two main forms. The first one features a stepped structure, supported by a column or conical-shaped base. The other one is a rectangular structure with its upper part shaped as a tower or adorned with triangular masses (Garrison, 2017: 1). Yamamoto described them in three groups: tower structure, stepped structure and slender shaft (Yamamoto, 1979: 31). The evidence obtained from Persepolis provides information about two different types of altars. The seal PFS 11 (fig.13) represents the tower altar, while the seal PFS 75 (fig.14) serves as an example of the stepped altar (Garrison, 2009: 51). Overall, there are depictions described as stepped, tower, or stepped tower in the archive.

The stepped structures depicted on the seals are portrayed with one or two attendants in some cases, and in others, they are represented with sacrificial rituals (Garrison, 2017: 123-7; 128-131; 132-7; 138-145). When examining examples of stepped structures, although some differences may emerge, the most prominent and defining feature shared by all is the blazing of the fire and the three-stepped podium. Each step of the podium becomes wider moving from the bottom step to the top step. However, in some cases, two-stepped or even single-stepped structures are observed. These stepped podiums with varying bases have been examined in four different types: conical support (PFS 578s, PFUTS 110s, PFUTS 156, PFUTS 147, PFUTS 149) (fig.15), tripod support (PFUTS 66, PFUTS 91, PFS 2360, PFUTS 615, PFUTS 614) (fig.16), broad rectangular support (PFUTS 154, PFUTS 610, PFUTS 618) (fig.17) and columnar support(s) with or without a base PFUTS 111, PFUTS 148, PFUTS 94, PFUTS 285, PTS 20, PT5 791) (fig.18) (ibid: 248-250) (ibid: 248-50).

The tower structures mentioned in the fire altars are divided into two main groups: crenelled top and V-shaped top. Tower structures are generally the largest elements in the scenes they depict, apart from their distinctive characteristics. Scientists have not reached a clear consensus on tower structures. However, there is no indication of fire present in the depictions of tower structures. (ibid, 2017: 272; 297). Due to the lack of consensus on the use of towers, the article focuses on depictions of fire altars or fire holders found in this archive.

Not included in the Persepolis archives but one seal from Gordion, Anatolia stands out significantly within the context of fire altars. Gordion SS 100 (Cat. No. 33 2342 SS 100) (fig.19) worship scene consist of a fire altar, two bearded crowned figures in court robes, pedestal sphinxes, a wigned disk, a half figure, floral elements of lotus, phialai and an Aramaic inscription (Dusinberre, 2005: 51-2.).

Temples

The common belief found in classical sources is that the Persians did not have statues, temples, or places of worship as highlighted before. For instance, Herodotus mentioned that Persians performed their sacrifices and rituals in open air sacred places because they did not have temples (Hdt. I.131). When Xenophon talks

to us about fire, he does not provide information about temples (Xenophon. Cyropaedia. 8.7.3). While Dino does not acknowledge the existence of temples belonging to the Persians, Clement of Alexandria reports the open air places. (Clement of Alexandria. Procepticus. 5.65.1). According to Cicero the Achaemenid king Xerxes (486 – 465 BCE) ordered the destruction of the temples in Athens because he considered it wrong to confine gods within walls. It is also noted that the Persians had a tradition of viewing sacred statues in human form as undesirable (Cicero. Da Republica. 3.9.14).

The lack of information about fire in the Gathas and the absence of a clear reference to the existence of temples in later sections of the Avesta support the statements of classical writers. However, the absence of a specific term for fire temple in the Avestan language and the mention of the cult of fire temples in the Vendidad section (Vd. VIII. 81. ff). This section, believed to have been created during the Parthian period, has been cited as supporting evidence against the idea that there were fire temples or any kind of temple during the early Achaemenid period (Yamamoto, 1979: 79; Boyce, 1982: 222). Nevertheless, several structures of religious significance dating back to 1400-1000 BCE have been discovered in Central Asia (Askarov/Shirinov, 1994 16-23; Sarianidi, 1998; 1999; cf. Sarianidi, 2002: 162 – 214). Although excavators in the region have referred to these places as fire temples, their connection to Iranians and Indo-Iranians is not certain. This is because they may belong to the indigenous people who inhabited the region before the arrival of the Indo-Iranians in the second millennium BCE (Shenkar, 2007: 171).

While temples dating back to the Achaemenid period have been found, Schippmann has described five out of six structures identified as fire temples from this period as doubtful and questionable. Also, Boyce used Schippmann's research in her arguments. The Ka'ba-i Zardhust at Naqsh-i Rustam and Zendan-i Suleyman in Pasargadae are considered to be temples or fire temples. Their purposes and significance are not fully understood, and a similar Achaemenid tower structure was discovered in Samadlo, Georgia. (Shenkar, 2007: 178) (fig.20, 21). Boyce states that Ka'ba-i Zardhust and Zendan-i Suleyman date back to the pre-Darius and even Cyrus period. The idea that these tower structures served as tombs is supported by their resemblance to the tomb of Cyrus (Boyce, 2001: 458). Another structure is Building 3 (QN3), discovered by Italian archaeologists in Dahan-e Ghulaman in Seistan, described as sacred (Scerrato, 1966; Boucharlat, 2003: 268-9) (fig.22). Probably built near the settlement in the late 6th to early 5th century BCE, whis building bears similarities to the royal architecture of Persepolis while also reflecting the local traditions of Eastern Iran (Stronach 1985: 608). Boyce suggested that this temple could be evidence of a pre-Iranian cult and might represent a tolerance or acceptance of the Seistan people, known to worship Elamite gods until the 5th century (Boyce, 1975b: 458; 1982:128-31).

The oldest known altar in Iran is a well-preserved tower-like structure found at Tepe Nus-e Jan, northwest of Hamadan. This remarkable structure, dating back to around the mid-8th to mid-6th centuries BCE (approximately 700 BCE), is devoid of windows. It is built at the highest point of a prominent rock and contains fire basins (Stronach & Roaf, 2007: 212; Stronach, 1973: 133) (Fig.23). Traces of burning are visible in the shallow fire basin in the center of its square upper surface. Stronach notes the difficulty of maintaining a permanent fire in this shallow basin and suggests that this altar is evidence that the early fires of Media were not permanent and were rekindled at each ceremony. Furthermore, Stronach acknowledges this as a Zoroastrian temple because it was thought Zoroaster lived around 650 BCE during that period (Yamamoto, 1979: 34). According to Yamamoto, the reason this place is called a fire altar is the presence of a wall around it and the knowledge that the fire of Media was used in some temples but did not burn continuously. Additionally, during the Achaemenid period, there were many Elamites and Babylonians who adhered to their own beliefs and were not subject to Zoroastrianism, indicating that the fire cult existed not only among Zoroastrians but also in other religions and cultures (ibid: 34-5).

Another sacred structure dated to the Achaemenid period was found near Erivan in Arinberd (ancient Erebuni). The former Urartian palace was revised for a Persian satrap's residence and later transformed into a fire temple. The structure of this temple resembles that of the temple in Susa (Boyce, 1982: 226). While the structure called āyadanā in Susa is considered an early Iranian temple example, Shenkar has stated that this structure should be dated to the Hellenistic – Parthian period (Shenkar, 2014: 177, cf. Stronach, 1985: 621; Boucharlat, 2005: 242). Dating back to the early 4th century BCE, Tas-K'irman-tepe in Khwarezm and Kuchuk-tepe in the 6th century BCE Bactria are other religiously significant remnants. However, again, no clear relationship has been established. (Shenkar, 2014: 176.)

Along with all these, one commonly accepted belief is that fire rituals conducted in open-air sacred places at high altitudes during the Achaemenid period evolved into enclosed sites with open surroundings in later periods. The institutionalization of fire temples began in the 4th century BCE and continued into the Sasanian period, when it may have responded to the growing prominence of the Anāhitā cult (Boyce, 1982: 222-224). So, according to this interpretation, the cult of fire worship likely emerged during the reign of Artaxerxes II with the establishment of an image cult associated with Anāhitā (Wikander, 1946: 60; Yamamoto, 1979: 108).

Strabo mentions Persian temples in Anatolia and the ever-burning fire (Strabo. Geography. 15.3.15). A similar custom is observed in Pausanias; they constantly feed the fire around an altar in a sacred room and read a text from a book in an incomprehensible language (De Jong, 1997: 347). Fire temples are referred to as **ātarš-kata* (**ātarš-gāθu*) in Old Persian and Avestan, *ātaxšgāh* in Middle Persian, and *ātaşgāh*, *ātaşkade*, or simply "fire place" or "fire house" in Modern Persian (Chosky, 2015: 394).

In Achaemenid inscriptions, the name of the goddess Anāhitā, which first appeared during the reign of Artaxerxes II (r.c. 404 to 358 BCE), is mentioned as "areeduui sura anahita" in the Avesta and as "Anahid" in Middle Persian (Jocobs, 2001: 88; Shenkar, 2014: 66). Unlike his predecessors, Artaxerxes II's inscriptions mention not only Anāhitā but also Miθra (Mithra) alongside Ahura Mazdā (Huart, 1998: 81; Briant, 2002: 251; 253). On the other hand, Anāhitā is dedicated a section in Avesta's Yašt (Yašt V). The conclusion drawn from later inscriptions from the time of Artaxerxes II, especially in specific locations at Hamedan (A^2Ha) and Susa (A^2Sa), is that Miθra (Mithra) and Anāhitā were worshipped alongside Mazda (Saadi-Nejad, 2001: 121) (fig. 24, 25).

The Babylonian priest Berossus recounts that King Artaxerxes Mnemon ordered the erection of statues of Anāhitā in the kingdom's most important cities, such as Babylon, Susa, Ecbatana, Persepolis, Bactria, Damascus, and Sardis (Clement of Alexandria. Procepticus. 5.65.2-5; see more Berossus. III. 65, non-vidi; Wikander, 1946: 69 Briant, 2002: 253.) Also, Berossus claims that Persians had no images of gods until Artaxerxes II erected them. Traces of the erected statues and temples have not been found (Wikander, 1946: 62; Jacobs, 2001: 90). On the other hand, the first mention of the goddess Anāhitā in royal inscriptions is believed to support Berossus's account (Shenkar, 2014: 16).

Although clear evidence regarding this innovation concerning Anāhitā could be obtained, a small temple located not far from the Achaemenid palace in Susa is noteworthy (Schippmann, 1971: 266-9). While the basic traces of the temple have been lost and some parts have been unearthed, the excavator M. Dieulafoy dates it to the reign of Artaxercxes II (Wikander, 1946: 70; Schippmann, 1971: 272-3). The reason for this is the similarity between the column bases found in the small temple and a bell-shaped column base with a short inscription found in Susa. Some researchers describe this place as one of the Anāhitā temples that began to be established during the reign of Artaxerxes II, while others have called it a fire temple. (Boyce, 1975: 459). However, Schippmann expresses that there is possible but insufficient evidence to claim that the Susa complex was dedicated to Anāhitā (Schippmann, 1971: 272). It should also be noted that the columns

might have been reused here during the Parthian period. Regardless of the exact date, Boyce states that it is uncertain what type of cult object was present in the sacred area of the temple (Boyce, 1982: 225-6).

The oldest Iranian temple in Anatolia, dating back to the sixth century BCE and located in Zela in Cappadocia, was devoted to Anāhitā and a deity referred to as "Omanos"(Saadi-Nejad, 2001: 120). Ancient Greek writers associated Anāhitā with ancient Greek goddesses such as Aphrodite (Urania), Athena, and Artemis (ibid: 120). The oldest written evidence of Anāhitā is found in Herodotus. According to Herodotus, the cult of Anāhitā was present in the Iranian pantheon but was introduced later (Hdt 1.131). Although Herodotus mistakenly referred to the god Miθra (Mithra) as a celestial goddess, research has revealed that he was actually referring to Anāhitā (Wikander, 1946: 56; De Jong, 1997: 104; 107-9; 269). Additionally, later Greek writers referred to this goddess as "Aphrodite-Anaïtis" (Saadi-Nejad, 2001: 120).

Plutarch states that Artaxerxes II was crowned in the temple of a war goddess, presumably Athena (Plutarch. Artaxerxes. 3.1-2). Additionally, he mentions another temple devoted to Artemis, who is likely, another form of Anāhitā and known as Anaïtis, in Ecbatana (Plutarch. Artaxerxes. 27.3.) According to Strabo, the Armenians, Persians, and Medes, who shared the same religious beliefs, held great reverence for Anaïtis (Anāhitā) (Strabo. Geography. 11.14.16). Especially from the 1st century AD onwards, there was a huge statue dedicated to Anaïtis in a temple of Anāhitā in the city of Eriza in Acilisene. This statue was worshipped, and it was plundered by the Roman Empire in 34/36 BC (Pliny the Elder. The Natural History. 33.24; 5.20).

Xenophon describes a magnificent royal ceremony with three chariots that was performed every year during the reign of Cyrus the Great. Following the sacrifice, a chariot with a white horse, representing that of Ahura Mazdā (Zeus), chariots representing those of the sun (Miθra - Helios), and presumably a fire altar adorned with purple trappings for Anāhitā (Hestia), passed before the king and the aristocrats of his court (Xenophon, Cyropaedia. 8.3.12).

The erection of temple statues appears to be a significant innovation in Iranian religious practices, and it is believed that this innovation was the personal initiative of Artaxerxes II (Jacobs, 2001: 88). This is accepted as an innovation because the Persians were known for not creating physical representations of their gods (Sarianidi, 1999: 302). Also, it looks like this image cult emerged after the periods observed by Herodotus (De Jong, 1997: 93). The construction of Anāhitā statues, which began during the reign of Artaxerxes II, is generally attributed to influences from foreign cultures. Some scholars, like Meyer, Cumont, and Boyce, believe this temple image has Sumerian origins, while others, like Windischmann and Wikander, attribute it to the Greeks (Wikander, 1946: 62; Saadi-Nejad, 2001: 121).

Recent excavations at Oluz Höyük in Amasya, dated to the mid-5th century BCE, have raised the possibility of the presence of a fire temple associated with the Achaemenid period (Saba, 2021: 151-174). This is due to several factors: the Persians are known to have conducted their worship in open and elevated areas, and the institutional development of temple cults in Iran is believed to have begun primarily during the Achaemenid period. Furthermore, most Anāhitā sanctuaries in Anatolia were constructed on natural high grounds (Klingenberg, 2020: 110) These considerations make it difficult to definitively categorize the Oluz Höyük structure as a fire temple. Therefore, while the site may represent an early example of Achaemenid religious architecture in Anatolia, current archaeological evidence remains inconclusive and open to interpretation. Furthermore, it should be noted that research on Oluz Höyük remains limited to investigations conducted by the excavation team, and independent or supplementary studies are currently lacking.

However, the Bünyan Altar found in Kayseri and the Arebsun Inscription from Nevşehir can be indirectly associated with the fire cult, although not in a direct manner (Dusinberre, 2005: 235; Boyce, 1982: 274-275). While the Arebsun Inscription does not explicitly reference a fire altar or fire cult, the mention of deities such

as Ahura Mazda and Bel suggests a religious content and indicates that the text likely pertains to a place of worship. These divine names also reflect the inscription's Persian and Mesopotamian religious influences.

On the other hand, the depictions of Persian priests (magi) on the Bünyan Altar are particularly noteworthy. These figures bear strong iconographic similarities to reliefs found at sites such as Daskyleion, Persepolis, and Naqsh-e Rustam (Karagöz, 1997: 137). The priests on the altar are portrayed holding a phiale (libation bowl) instead of the traditional barsom (sacred bundle), an iconographically distinctive element that nevertheless signifies the representation of a ritualistic religious ceremony. Furthermore, the priests (magi) are depicted wearing the typical Persian headgear and kandys robes, clearly grounding these representations within Persian religious traditions (Karagöz, 1997: 145). Given that priest (magi) traditionally played roles closely linked to fire in Zoroastrian rituals, this altar may be indirectly connected to the fire cult.

Nonetheless, neither example provides direct or unequivocal evidence of a fire altar or fire cult practices. Therefore, the Arebsun Inscription and Bünyan Altar should be considered as examples that can be associated with the fire cult primarily through indirect religious indicators and secondary iconographic elements.

Conclusions

While there is no debate about the sacredness and significance of fire based on information obtained from classical and modern sources, the issue of temples is controversial. Additionally, fire, being vital, has existed in the cults of most societies and is considered a universal cult. Fire also holds an important place in Iranian cults. Herodotus mentioned the Persians' reverence for fire but did not emphasize it as a distinctive feature of their religion (Hdt. 3.16). Therefore, despite the existence of a sacred fire, the lack of institutional temple structures from that period remains a gap in terms of sources and data. Contrary to classical sources, Avesta, and royal inscriptions, archaeological evidence reveals the presence of temples among the Iranians in the territories under the kingdom's dominion. However, reaching a definitive conclusion about the detailed or specific purpose of these sacred temples or structures and their worship rituals is challenging. These structures could have belonged to the local populace before the Indo-Iranians migrated to the region, or they could have been primarily associated with the cultures of the Indo-Iranian peoples. This is because a homogeneous and equal cult cannot be assumed across all Iranian territories.

The debated and complex issue regarding the religious beliefs of Achaemenid kings or the official state religion revolves around whether it was Zoroastrianism or not. Despite well-conducted scholarly research, there is no universally accepted solution. Another perspective suggests that the court religion of the Achaemenid kings resembled a fourth Iranian religion alongside Magism, Mithraism, and Zoroastrianism. From this examination, it appears to be an independent yet inherently syncretic religion (Cameron, 1948: 18). Even tablets that have survived to the present day have not been able to solve this mystery. Regarding fire worship, unlike in India, traces of the essence of the hearth fire are found in Iranian fire worship. Additionally, there is a respect for fire as a pure element that should not be polluted. However, during the Arsacid period and subsequent periods, according to Greek and Latin writers, Persians have been specifically referred to as fire worshipers or fire worshipers. (Wikander, 1946: 57-9).

Again, based on information from classical sources, it can be inferred that the Achaemenids, unlike other Iranian communities such as the Medes, adhered more closely to nomadic Indo-Iranian traditions in their worship practices. Therefore, it is likely that they utilized open-air temples instead of enclosed ones or practiced an Iranian cult whose definition has yet to be fully established. When the nomadic Iranians encountered advanced civilizations like Elam and Mesopotamia, they may have come into contact with temple cults. However, the mystery of the āyadanā confuses matters at this point, as it could have been used in some kind of temple context. The āyadanā mentioned in the Behistun Inscription, which were destroyed

by Gaumata and rebuilt by Darius I, contradict Herodotus's accounts if they are temples. However, it should not be forgotten that besides physical structures, they could also refer to open-air sacred places. Therefore, there must be a significant connection between the cult of fire and the āyadanā.

In contrast, while the definition of religion, especially in the early periods of the Achaemenid era, remains problematic, the characteristics of ancient Indo-Iranian traditions are similarly not fully elucidated. Therefore, determining precisely when the temple cult was established is difficult. Additionally, debates about Zoroastrianism, the religion's temple structures, and whether the Achaemenids were Zoroastrians have been added to all of this. The developments that Zoroastrianism, which has ancient origins and has continued into modern times, has undergone over this long period should also be taken into account.

Fire altars depicted on Achaemenid seals, coins and bullae are considered by P.S.R. Moorey to be one of the most significant innovations of the period (Moorey, 1978: 149). A similar perspective applies to the connection between temples and Anāhitā. Sarianidi suggests that Persian worship was not directed towards specific gods but rather towards concepts represented by the gods. For example, a temple may be dedicated not only to the god of fire but generally to fire itself (Sarianidi, 1999: 302-3). In this case, the connection or issues between Anāhitā and the cult of fire are noteworthy.

The general view is that Anāhitā's prominence during the reign of Artaxerxes II coincides with the "first" fire temples. It is concluded that the introduction of the cult of Anāhitā coincided with the king's personal relationship and the establishment of temples marked the beginning of idolatry. In Achaemenid Royal inscriptions, thanks are also given to Ahura Mazdā and other gods. Since the names of other gods are not mentioned, we do not know who they are. Therefore, worship of the goddess Anāhitā may have existed before the time of Artaxerxes II. Perhaps this cult was initially visually represented primarily in the western regions (Jacobs, 2001: 90). Similarly, Iranians have been worshiping Miθra since ancient times, but they may not have elevated him to a specific status or official position within the royal court. Rather, while worship among the populace may have been widespread, kings may not have had a special place for him in their official religious practices (Huart, 1998: 82). The reason for these views, of course, is the absence of their names in royal inscriptions before Artaxerxes II. At this point, as in many other matters, a clear conclusion cannot be reached.

In conclusion, many unanswered questions still arise regarding religion in the Achaemenid period. The cult of fire, fire altars, and fire-holders, as well as temple structures, are the best examples of this situation. The limited number of sources from the period, the influence of information found in classical sources on one another, and incomplete or incorrect accounts are among the factors contributing to this situation. Classical sources should be critically examined because they provide information from the Greek perspective. Focusing on the relationship between Anāhitā and the cult of fire may help solve issues related to temple structures. However, it should not be overlooked that while the Persians established dominance over a vast geographical area, the Iranian geography must also be considered. Due to the presence of different communities in various regions of the state, cultural syntheses or interactions are normal. Still, even in the Iranian geography, it is difficult to speak of a single composite culture.

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