

# PERIPHERAL FIRE: ONCE UPON A TIME IN DASKYLEION AND WESTERN ANATOLIA

**Nevfel Akyar**

*Manisa Celal Bayar University, Manisa-Türkiye*

nevfelakyar@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2712-7576>

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## Abstract

This article investigates the presence and transformation of Iranian religious practices –particularly those associated with Zoroastrianism– in Western Anatolia during the Achaemenid period, with a specific focus on Daskyleion and the Hellespontine Phrygia. By drawing on archaeological, epigraphic, and textual evidence, this study explores how Persian religious traditions were preserved, adapted, and reinterpreted outside the Iranian plateau. The findings reveal a nuanced picture of religious hybridity in which core Zoroastrian concepts such as dualism, fire worship, and clerical purity persisted alongside local Anatolian and Hellenic influences. Special attention is given to material culture that reflects both imperial ideology and regional reinterpretation. Ultimately, Daskyleion serves as a valuable case study for understanding how imperial religions evolved on the periphery and were shaped by negotiation, adaptation, and cultural

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exchange. This article contributes to broader debates on Achaemenid religious policy, the localization of Zoroastrian elements, and the dynamics of identity and belief in the ancient Near East.

*Key Words:* Western Anatolia, Iran, Persia, Zoroastrianism, Daskyleion, Sardes

## **Introduction\***

Daskyleion constitutes a crucial site for understanding the mechanisms through which the Achaemenids established and maintained their authority in Western Anatolia and how this process intersected with religious transformation. Situated at the crossroads of Iranian imperial governance and local Anatolian traditions, the city provides valuable archaeological and epigraphic evidence for examining the ways that Persian religious practices –particularly those associated with Zoroastrianism– were introduced, adapted, or reinterpreted beyond the Iranian plateau. Unlike Sardis, whose cultural and physical stratigraphy was later obscured by intense Hellenistic and Roman influences, Daskyleion’s comparatively uninterrupted Achaemenid horizon allows for a more direct assessment of how imperial power and religious ideology interacted in shaping local belief systems.

This research investigates whether the material culture and ritual indicators from Daskyleion represent a distinct and localized manifestation of Zoroastrianism or rather, a more fluid form of “Iranian religiosity” that evolved through the interaction with indigenous Anatolian beliefs. By examining funerary architecture, iconography, archaeological remains, and classic testimonies, the study situates the region’s religious practices within the broader framework of Achaemenid religious pluralism and imperial administration. Particular attention is given to how dualistic cosmology, fire veneration, and the institutional presence of religious specialists –possibly Magi– were maintained or redefined under Persian rule. By highlighting the

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processes of religious hybridity and negotiation, this work argues that Western Anatolian expressions of Zoroastrianism should be understood not as derivative imitations but as adaptive forms shaped by both imperial ideology and local cultural agency.

Key sources for this study include *Herodotus' Histories*, the *Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, which record the administrative provisions of the Magi (Old Persian: *maguš*) and reveal the institutional framework of Achaemenid religious practice, and *Xenophon's Anabasis*, which offers valuable observations on Persian ritual customs in Asia Minor. Complementing these textual testimonies, excavation reports from Daskyleion provide crucial material evidence for ritual spaces, iconographic programs, and possible fire-related structures. Together, these literary and archaeological materials are employed not only as descriptive data but also as interpretive tools for reassessing how imperial religious ideology was localized, adapted, and expressed on the western periphery of the Achaemenid world.

Arguably, Daskyleion's limited settlement after the Achaemenid period preserved a relatively intact archaeological record that protected it from extensive construction during the Hellenistic, Roman, Parthian, and Sasanian periods. This stratigraphic clarity allows for a more direct examination of Persian-period contexts, particularly those associated with ritual and funerary activity. Architectural fragments, stelae, bullae, and potential hearth structures from the site provide an invaluable perspective on the local expressions of Persian religious practice. However, their interpretation demands a careful comparative approach –by juxtaposing the Anatolian data with contemporaneous material from Iran, Lydia, and other satrapal centers– to establish both the parallels and divergences in ritual form. Accordingly, this study analyzes Daskyleion's religious evidence with particular attention to Zoroastrian features, and it integrates classic testimonies and epigraphic data to assess how imperial religious concepts were materialized and reinterpreted in the western provinces. Among the most informative religious artifacts unearthed at Daskyleion are bullae and stelae adorned with Persian-Anatolian iconography associated with funerary and ritual contexts.<sup>1</sup> Although these objects clearly

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<sup>1</sup> See Margret Nollé, *Denkmäler vom Satrapensitz Daskyleion: Studien zur Graeco-Persischen Kunst* (Berlin: Verlag der Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992); Şehrazat Karagöz, *Kleinasiatisch-Gräko-Persische Kunstwerke im Archäologischen*

display Iranian stylistic traits, they were most likely crafted by local Anatolian artisans, reflecting a process of cultural translation rather than simple imitation. Dated between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, such materials attest to the pervasive influence of Persian artistic and religious symbolism in Western Anatolia.<sup>2</sup> However, scholarly debate continues regarding the extent to which local communities comprehended and internalized Persian religious imagery and ritual practices. Although offering invaluable testimonies, classic writers such as Herodotus nonetheless filtered Persian religion through the lens of local cultural assumptions and limited linguistic access.<sup>3</sup>

Archaeological evidence underscores the pivotal role of Western Anatolia within the Achaemenid imperial framework, as the region hosted at least two major satrapal centers, namely, Sardis and Daskyleion.<sup>4</sup> Located at Hisartepe, near present-day Bandırma, Daskyleion functioned as the administrative and military capital of the Satrapy of Hellespontine Phrygia, which linked the Persian heartland to the Aegean frontier (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> First identified in 1958 by Kurt Bittel,<sup>6</sup> the site has since been systematically excavated by Ekrem Akurgal,<sup>7</sup>

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*Museum von Istanbul* (Tübingen: Wasmuth Verlag, 2013); Deniz Kaptan, *The Daskyleion Bullae: Seal Images from the Western Achaemenid Empire* (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor Het Nabije Oosten, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Margaret C. Miller, "Greco-Persian Cultural Relations", *Encyclopædia Iranica* (Accessed 3 July 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Miller, "Greco-Persian Cultural Relations"; M. Weiskopf, "Asia Minor", *Encyclopædia Iranica* (Accessed 8 December 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Victor Sekunda, "Achaemenid Colonization in Lydia", *Revue des Études Anciennes* 87/1-2 (1985), 7-30; Miller, "Greco-Persian Cultural Relations".

<sup>5</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. George Rawlinson (Idaho: Roman Roads Media, 2013), 381-382 (6.33); Thierry Petit, *Satrapes et Satrapies dans l'empire Achéménide de Cyrus le Grand à Xerxès Ier* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1990), 181; M. J. Osborne, "The Satrapy of Mysia", *Grazer Beiträge* 3 (1975), 291-315.

<sup>6</sup> See K. Bittel, "Zur Lage von Daskyleion", *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 68 (1953), 1-16; Tomris Bakır, *Balıkesir'in Eski Çağlardaki Valilik Merkezi Daskyleion* (Balıkesir: Balıkesir Valiliği, 2011), 17.

<sup>7</sup> See Ekrem Akurgal, "Zur Datierung der Grabstelen aus Daskyleion", *Mansel'e Armağan / Mélanges Mansel II*, ed. Ekrem Akurgal - U. Bahadır Alkım (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1974); Ekrem Akurgal, "Kyzikos ve Ergili Arastirmaları", *Anatolia* 1 (1956), 43-51; Ekrem Akurgal, "Griechisch-Persische Reliefs aus Daskyleion", *Iranica Antiqua* 6 (1966), 147-156; Ekrem Akurgal, "Recherches Faites a Cyzique et a Ergili", *Anatolia* 1 (1956), 15-24; Ekrem Akurgal, *Ancient Civilizations and Ruins of Turkey* (İstanbul: Phoenix, 2025).

Tomris Bakır,<sup>8</sup> and more recently, Kaan İren,<sup>9</sup> whose ongoing work continues to illuminate its Achaemenid layers.

Figure 1: Map of Anatolia (c. 600-400 BC) (created with AI)



- <sup>8</sup> See Tomris Bakır, “Daskyleion”, *Höyük 1* (1988), 75-84; Tomris Bakır, “Anadolu Pers Sanatı ve Daskyleion Satraplığı”, *1993 Yılı Anadolu Medeniyetleri Müzesi Konferansları 3* (Ankara: T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 1994); Tomris Bakır, “Archäologische Beobachtungen Tiber die Residenz in Daskyleion”, *Dans les pas des Dix-Mille, Peuples et Pays du Proche-Orient vus par Un Grec, Actes de la Table Ronde Internationale Toulouse 3-4 Février 1995*, ed. Pierre Briant (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1995), 269-285; Bakır, *Bahkesir'in Eski Çağlardaki Valilik Merkezi Daskyleion*; Tomris Bakır, “Die Satrapie in Daskyleion”, *Achaemenid Anatolia: Proceedings of the First International Symposium on Anatolia in the Achaemenid Period, Bandırma, 15-18 August 1997*, ed. Tomris Bakır - Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2001), 169-180.
- <sup>9</sup> See Kaan İren, “Daskyleion”, *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History* (Accessed 22 December 2025); Kaan İren - Handan Yıldızhan, “Daskyleion 2013 Yılı Kazı Çalışmaları”, *36. Kazı Sonuçları Toplantısı* (Gaziantep: T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2014), 577-600; Atalay Karatak et al., “Daskyleion Arkeolojik Alanı Metal Buluntuları Üzerine Arkeometrik Ön Çalışmalar”, *32. Arkeometri Sonuçları Toplantısı* (Edirne: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2017), 149-166; Kameray Özdemir et al., “Koru Tümülsü İskeletlerinin Osteobiyografilerinin Element Analizi ile İncelenmesi”, *Gaziantep Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 17/3 (2018), 740-760; Özgün Kasar - Kaan İren, “Leaded Bronze Arrowheads at Daskyleion”, *Adalya* 23 (2020), 175-204; Kaan İren - Özgün Kasar, “Disiplinlerarası Çalışmalar Işığında Daskyleion’da Yeni Bulgular”, *Bitig Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 4/7 (2024), 145-160; Kaan İren et al. (eds), *Persler – Anadolu’da Kudret ve Görkem / The Persians – Power and Glory in Anatolia* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2017).

## 1. Persians in Western Anatolia and Daskyleion

Herodotus recounted that the oracles warned Croesus, the Lydian king, that if he waged war against the Persians, then he would bring about the fall of a great empire. Misinterpreting this prophecy, Croesus launched a military campaign that ultimately resulted in the destruction of his own kingdom.<sup>10</sup> Beneath this mythical narrative, however, lies the historical reality that the Persians, following the conquest of Lydia, established dominance over western Anatolia for nearly two centuries.

There were four Achaemenid satrapies in Anatolia, two of which were in the west (Figure 1).<sup>11</sup> Within this framework, Daskyleion, which was located approximately thirty kilometers inland from the Sea of Marmara, emerged as one of the principal satrapal centers in Western Anatolia.<sup>12</sup> Xenophon noted that the city assumed this administrative role during the early years of Achaemenid rule.<sup>13</sup>

Although the satrapies of Daskyleion and Sardis came under Persian rule, their populations were likely predominantly local. During this period, Iranian authorities allowed Hellenic cities within the satrapy to maintain a degree of civic autonomy while simultaneously supporting the presence and settlement of Persian elites.<sup>14</sup>

Under Achaemenid rule, Daskyleion transformed into an institutionalized urban center.<sup>15</sup> Tomris Bakır, who led excavations in the region in 1988, noted that the reliefs and stelae discovered at and around the site displayed stronger affinities with local artistic traditions than with Greek styles. Based on these observations, she proposed the term “Anatolian-Persian” rather than “Greco-Persian” to describe the hybrid material culture of Daskyleion, highlighting the interplay between imperial Achaemenid influences and enduring local artistic

<sup>10</sup> Herodotos, *The Histories*, 21 (1.53), 31 (1.71), 32 (1.73).

<sup>11</sup> Bakır, “Daskyleion”, 76; Takuji Abe, “Dascylium: An Overview of the Achaemenid Satrapal City”, *The Kyoto Journal of Ancient History* 12 (2012), 2; Petit, *Satrapes et Satrapies dans l’empire Achéménide de Cyrus le Grand à Xerxès Ler*.

<sup>12</sup> Abe, “Dascylium”, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Xenophon, *The Cyropaedia of Xenophon*, trans. C. W. Gleason (New York: American Book Company, 1897), 196 (8.6.7).

<sup>14</sup> Simon Hornblower, *Greco-Persian Cultural Relations* (London - New York: Routledge, 1983), 71; Mehmet Ali Kaya, “Anadolu’da Pers Satraplıkları: Kuruluş, Yönetim ve Etnik Yapı”, *Cedrus* 6 (2018), 176-177.

<sup>15</sup> Abe, “Dascylium”, 3-4; Weiskopf, “Asia Minor”.

expressions.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the establishment of Persian rule, archaeological evidence indicates that Western Anatolia retained strong Lydian cultural features while progressively assimilating elements of the Achaemenid administrative and religious model.<sup>17</sup> The coexistence of Lydian and Persian personal names within the same families points to a gradual process of cultural integration likely facilitated by intermarriage and social mobility within the satrapal administration.<sup>18</sup> The linguistic diversity of the inscriptions further reflects this cultural convergence: owing to its cosmopolitan nature and its status as a prominent Persian satrapal seat, Daskyleion served as a center where numerous languages and cultures –including Old Persian, Late Babylonian (Akkadian), Aramaic, Lydian, Hellenic (Greek), and Phrygian–coexisted.<sup>19</sup> Inscriptions found on monumental stelae, seal impressions (bullae), and ceramics unearthed during excavations attest to this multilingualism. This linguistic plurality demonstrates not only administrative pragmatism but also the permeability of religious and cultural boundaries among local communities.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. Achaemenid Religion

Two centuries of Persian rule in Western Anatolia likely fostered a hybrid cultural landscape in which Persian and indigenous traditions were intertwined. However, contextualizing the transformation of Iranian religious practices within this milieu requires an understanding

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<sup>16</sup> Bakır, “Daskyleion”; Bakır, “Die Satrapie in Daskyleion”; Miller, “Greco-Persian Cultural Relations”; Gürçan Polat, *Anadolu Akbaemenid Dönemi Plastik Eserleri* (İzmir: Ege University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1998), 8.

<sup>17</sup> See Elspeth R. M. Dusinberre, *Aspect of Empire in Achaemenid Sardis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Elspeth R. M. Dusinberre, *Satrapal Sardis: Aspects of Empire in an Achaemenid Capital* (Michigan: University of Michigan, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Bartomeu Obrador-Cursach, “The Closing Formula of the Old Phrygian Epitaph B-07 in the Light of the Aramaic KAI 318: A Case of Textual Convergence in Daskyleion”, *Anatolian Studies* 71 (2021), 47-58.

<sup>19</sup> See Bakır, “Die Satrapie in Daskyleion”, 173.

<sup>20</sup> Miller, “Greco-Persian Cultural Relations”; Elspeth R. M. Dusinberre, *Empire, Authority, and Autonomy in Achaemenid Anatolia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 253; Bakır, “Die Satrapie in Daskyleion”; F. N. Köseoğlu, Interview, September 2024; One of the new findings I saw during this interview, a brick fragment written in the Phrygian alphabet belonging to a Persian named Megabazos, constitutes good evidence for this claim.

of their foundational forms in the Iranian heartland. A significant challenge remains the scarcity of primary evidence regarding Achaemenid-era doctrinal structures and ritual variations. Consequently, despite their inherent biases and external perspectives, accounts by ancient authors offer a comparatively richer, albeit problematic, framework for examining Persian religious life in Anatolia.

There is no conclusive evidence that orthodox Zoroastrianism prevailed in Iran during the Achaemenid period.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, it is particularly noteworthy that some prominent figures found in Zoroastrian mythology –such as Aršāma (Arsames), Vištāspa (Hystaspes), and Hutaosā (Atossa)– also appear within the Achaemenid lineage.<sup>22</sup> The name Ahura Mazdā is mentioned repeatedly in Darius’s Old Persian inscriptions. Although no other god names are mentioned in these inscriptions, the phrase “other gods” is present.<sup>23</sup> Thus, although there are indications that the Achaemenids might have been Zoroastrian, there is also evidence that points in the opposite direction. Examples include the excessive reverence shown toward the gods of non-Iranians in the Cyrus Cylinder<sup>24</sup> and the fact that Achaemenid kings were mummified and placed in tombs,<sup>25</sup> which are practices that are at odds with Zoroastrian funerary customs. Furthermore, the two traditions curiously do not acknowledge one another. The names Cyrus and Darius do not occur in the Zoroastrian tradition, while the name Zoroaster is absent from Achaemenid

<sup>21</sup> Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism II* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), xi.

<sup>22</sup> F. Spiegel, *Ērānische Alterthumskunde I* (Leipzig: Verlag von Wilhelm Engelmann, 1871), 700 (n. 2); Herman Lommel, *Die Religion Zarathustras, nach dem Awesta dargestellt* (Tübingen: Druck von H. Laupp jr, 1930), 16; M. Mayrhofer, *Zum Namengut des Avesta* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1977), 10; Mary Boyce, “Achaemenid Religion”, *Encyclopædia Iranica* (Accessed 12 December 2024).

<sup>23</sup> See Rudiger Schmitt, *The Bisitun Inscriptions of Darius the Great: Old Persian Text* (London: Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, 1991), 70-71.

<sup>24</sup> Antoine Simonin, “The Cyrus Cylinder”, *Ancient History Encyclopedia* (Accessed 12 December 2024).

<sup>25</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 57-60 The practice of placing the body in stone sarcophagi without it touching the ground is not contrary to Zoroastrian principles of purity. Furthermore, a plausible explanation could be that the king and his family were granted special privileges by God.

inscriptions.<sup>26</sup> The insufficiency of the evidence makes it difficult to determine whether the Achaemenids adhered to a clearly defined Zoroastrian faith rather than simply following broader ancient Iranian religious traditions. However, it can be suggested that Ahura Mazdā was regarded as the supreme deity and that even if not in the modern sense, certain beliefs associated with Zoroastrianism were indeed present.<sup>27</sup>

Some later evidence from the early Sasanian period suggests that Zoroastrianism had spread in Anatolia. Kartīr (Kirdīr), the influential high priest and royal ideologue of the empire, declared in his inscription at the Ka'ba-ye Zartosht, "I travelled through many parts of Anatolia and found Zoroastrian heretics and punished and reformed them".<sup>28</sup> This statement suggests that by the third century CE, Zoroastrian communities in Anatolia had developed heterodox or regionally distinct practices. However, notably, the pre-Sasanian Iranian religion itself was far from monolithic. The westward spread of Persian religious traditions was shaped not only by theological evolution but also by Persian administrative structures, military movements, and local processes of cultural accommodation.

Archaeological findings from central and western Anatolia provide important, although often ambiguous, evidence for the diffusion of Persian religious concepts. Examples include the fire altar with Magi figures discovered in Kayseri-Bünyan,<sup>29</sup> the kline reliefs depicting

<sup>26</sup> For discussions and writings on this topic, see below. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 68-69; James Hope Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism* (London: The Hibbert Lectures, 1926); Henrik S. Nyberg, *Die Religionen des Alten Iran* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs Verlag, 1938); Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *The Western Response to Zoroaster* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958); Geo Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1965); Boyce, "Achaemenid Religion"; Albert de Jong, "The Religion of the Achaemenid Rulers", *Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World*, ed. Bruno Jacobs - Robert Rollinger (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 1199-1209; Avram R. Shannon, "The Achaemenid Kings and the Worship of Ahura Mazda: Proto-Zoroastrianism in the Persian Empire", *Studia Antiqua* 5/2 (2007), 79-85; Boyce, "Achaemenid Religion".

<sup>27</sup> See "By the favour of Auramazda...", "Auramazda brought me aid..." Schmitt, *The Bisitun Inscriptions*, 49-76.

<sup>28</sup> Kartīr, "Kartir Inscription on the Kabah of Zartosht", trans. Neil MacKenzie (Accessed 15 April 2023); Mary Boyce - Frantz Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism III* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 254-255.

<sup>29</sup> K. Bittel, "Ein Persischer Freueraltar aus Kappadokien", *Satura: Fru Chte aus der Antiken Welt, Festschrift für Otto Weinreich* (Baden: Verlag für Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1952), 18-29; K. Bittel, "Kapadokyada Bulunan Bir Ateş Sunağı",

Magian officiants in Kastamonu's Tosya district,<sup>30</sup> and the fire-related structures at Oluz Höyük. These materials exhibit iconographic parallels with Achaemenid religious art,<sup>31</sup> but their association with formal Zoroastrian ritual remains tentative. In Western Anatolia, particularly around Sardis and Daskyleion, such artifacts appear within hybrid cultural layers, reflecting both Persian imperial influence and local religious adaptation.

Similarly, traditional sources imply that the Achaemenid authorities adopted a policy of religious tolerance rather than of proselytism.<sup>32</sup> If systematic conversion efforts had taken place, then ancient authors – otherwise attentive to Persian customs– would likely have provided more detailed descriptions of such practices. Instead, their accounts remain fragmentary and impressionistic and offer glimpses of ritual gestures and ethical concepts instead of liturgical or doctrinal content.

Mary Boyce argued that Iranian religious traditions did not spread into western Anatolia through autonomous migration movements; rather, Zoroastrian clergy generally remained embedded within established Iranian communities and did not relocate to areas without a Persian presence.<sup>33</sup> This pattern is consistent with the broader tendency of Iranian priests to avoid proselytizing among non-Iranians. Accordingly, the appearance of Iranian religious elements in Anatolia is best understood as a response to the ritual and ideological needs of Persian administrators, military personnel, and settlers who accompanied Achaemenid expansion into the region rather than as the result of organized missionary activity.

### 3. Iranian Gods

In the Iranian heartland, figural representations of Ahura Mazdā appear to have been uncommon, although the available evidence does not permit a definitive statement about strict aniconism. Achaemenid

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*Türk Arkeoloji Dergisi* 6/2 (1956), 35-42; Murat Tosun, "Pers/Akhaemenid Dönemi'nde Anadolu: Bölgeler Arası Karşılaştırmalı Bir Değerlendirme", *OANNES* 4/2 (2022), 393.

<sup>30</sup> Polat, *Anadolu Akhaemenid Dönemi Plastik Eserleri*, 183-190; Tosun, "Pers/Akhaemenid Dönemi'nde Anadolu", 193.

<sup>31</sup> See Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 113.

<sup>32</sup> Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 77.

<sup>33</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 230-231.

royal iconography, including the winged-disk motif at Persepolis, demonstrates a symbolic representation of divine authority instead of a cult statue; however, this should not be misinterpreted as a universal doctrinal prohibition against depictions of gods. In regions where Iranian communities interacted closely with Anatolian artistic traditions, the local adoption of cult statues is more securely described.<sup>34</sup> The sporadic evidence for images of Anāhitā in pre-Sasanian contexts similarly underscores that attitudes toward divine representation varied regionally.<sup>35</sup> Thus, rather than assuming a monolithic “aniconic” Iranian religious culture, the archaeological and textual record indicates flexible practices shaped by local artistic and ritual environments.

The most substantial primary evidence for Persian religious influence in Anatolia derives from epigraphic sources. The appearance of the name Ahuramazda (“whrmzd”) in the Cappadocia-Arebsun inscription of the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century BCE<sup>36</sup> refers to Mithraic elements in the Farasha bilingual inscription, and a mention of Anāhitā in a text from Aksaray collectively attests to the westward diffusion of Iranian religious vocabulary.<sup>37</sup> The name “Zeus Baradates” appears in the Sardis inscription that dates from 365 BC,<sup>38</sup> and Boyce interpreted this as the Greek equivalent of Ahura Mazdā; however, in the absence of the original text, this interpretation remains speculative.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the formula “Zeus Megistos,” which was widely demonstrated in western Anatolia during the Roman period,<sup>40</sup> has been associated with the prestige of a supreme deity analogous to Ahura Mazdā, but such correlations must be approached with caution, as local reinterpretations, localizing tendencies, and administrative conventions likely shaped the terminology. Overall, the epigraphic record indicates a heterogeneous reception of Iranian religious

<sup>34</sup> For detail information see Albert de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 350-351.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Briant, *A History of Persian Empire*, 264-265.

<sup>36</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 274-275.

<sup>37</sup> Dusingberre, *Achaemenid Anatolia*, 237-238; Muhammet Yücel, “Dinî Bir Zümreden Politik Bir Nesneye: Akamenidlerden Sasanilere Kapadokya Zerdüştileri”, *Mukaddime* 13/2 (2022), 417-418.

<sup>38</sup> Briant, *A History of Persian Empire*, 677-678.

<sup>39</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 255.

<sup>40</sup> Şengül Dilek Ful, *Yazıtlar Işığında Mysia Bölgesi Kültürleri* (Erzurum: Atatürk University, Social Science Institute, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2008), 61-62.

concepts instead of a uniform Persian imposition.<sup>41</sup>

The reference to Zeus Baradates in the aforementioned inscription<sup>42</sup> (Figure 2) concerns a series of regulations addressed to temple officials regarding the maintenance of a cult statue. As the original Aramaic version is lost and the surviving text is mediated through Greek, the precise identification of the deity remains uncertain. The instructions concerning purity restrictions likely reflect Iranian ritual norms, but their application within a Greek-inscribed administrative context complicates a straightforward interpretation. Although Boyce's proposal that the underlying deity may have been Ahura Mazdā is plausible,<sup>43</sup> alternative explanations –including a fully localized divine title– cannot be ruled out. The inscription therefore illustrates not a standardized Persian model of image worship but a localized intersection of Iranian purity concepts with Anatolian cultic practices.

Figure 2: Inscription of Zeus Baradates, (367–366 BC) IN74.001,

<https://sardisexpedition.org/en/artifacts/r2-273>



<sup>41</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 250.

<sup>42</sup> See G. M. A. Hanfmann, "Restoration and Excavations at Sardis- 1973", *Archaeology* 27 (1973), 138; Briant, *A History of Persian Empire*, 677-678.

<sup>43</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 256.

Epigraphic evidence does indicate that from the reign of Darius onward, Persians acknowledged Ahura Mazdā as their highest deity.<sup>44</sup> Although the cult of Anāhitā held prominence in parts of Iran – particularly Azerbaijan– she is absent from the inscriptions of Darius I and Xerxes,<sup>45</sup> indicating possible regional variation within Iranian religious practice. The earliest explicit royal references to Anāhitā appear only under Artaxerxes II.<sup>46</sup> Ancient authors identified her with Aphrodite or at times, with Athena;<sup>47</sup> however, modern scholarship largely considers her closest Greek analog to be Artemis.<sup>48</sup> These associations demonstrate that Greek descriptions of the Persian religion were often filtered through Hellenic interpretive frameworks, which reinforces the need to avoid the assumption of doctrinal uniformity or direct equivalence between Iranian and Anatolian manifestations of the cult.

As Persian influence in Anatolia increased, the cult of Anāhitā appears to have become more visible in the region. Literary sources suggest that the introduction of this cult may date to the reign of Darius I, with its prominence growing under Darius II and especially Artaxerxes II.<sup>49</sup> Anāhitā's attributes overlapped with those of Artemis – particularly in relation to purity, fertility, and water– resulting in a degree of syncretic identification.<sup>50</sup> Evidence for Anāhitā worship is attested to in several regions, including Cappadocia, Pontus, Phrygia, and Lydia.<sup>51</sup> Pausanias' later testimony indicates that even after the end

<sup>44</sup> See Schmitt, *The Bisitun Inscriptions*, 70; Esko Naskali, "Iran", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2000), 22/394-395.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Boyce, "Anahid", *Encyclopædia Iranica* (Accessed 11 September 2024).

<sup>46</sup> Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives: XI Aratus, Artaxerxes, Galba, Otbo*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), Artaxerxes 3.

<sup>47</sup> Herodotos, *The Histories*, 61 (I.131-132).

<sup>48</sup> Boyce, "Anahid".

<sup>49</sup> Marijana Riel, "The Cult of the Iranian Goddess Anahita in Anatolia Before and After Alexander", *Živa Antika* 52 (2002), 197-210; A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), 479; Serap Özkan Kılıç, *Pers Hakimiyeti Altında Batı Anadolu* (İstanbul: İstanbul University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2011), 137.

<sup>50</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 29-30; Boyce - Grenet, *Zoroastrianism III*, 262; Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, "Zoroastrian Religion", *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 873-874; Yücel, "Kapadokya Zerdüştileri", 415.

<sup>51</sup> See Riel, "Iranian Goddess Anahita".

of Persian rule, Lydians continued to venerate Anāhitā at Hypaipa and Hierokaisareia and performed hymns reportedly in the Persian language.<sup>52</sup> The goddess's strong visual and cultic presence –as expressed through temples, statues, and ritual performances– may have contributed to the durability of her worship in local contexts. In contrast, local sources provide only limited information regarding Ahura Mazdā in Anatolia, a gap that likely reflects the interpretive constraints of local authors rather than the actual religious priorities of Persian communities.

Evidence indicates that Anāhitā worship particularly occurred in Lydia and western Anatolia, with Sardis serving as a key center.<sup>53</sup> However, documentation from Lycia and Pamphylia remains limited. Established sources, although sometimes indirect or anecdotal, provide additional testimony: Tacitus reported that Cyrus the Younger constructed sanctuaries dedicated to Anāhitā at Hiera Kome, and Xenophon mentioned reports of Anāhitā worship at Sardis.<sup>54</sup> According to Xenophon, the Persians assigned considerable importance to the cult of Artemis-Anāhitā.<sup>55</sup> Plutarch provided similar observations regarding Ephesus, and Pausanias noted the existence of a shared Artemis-Anāhitā sanctuary (hieron) in Lydia.<sup>56</sup> These accounts suggest widespread veneration, but the precise nature and local variations of Anāhitā worship remain difficult to reconstruct because of the interpretive limitations of the sources.

Archaeological evidence in Western Anatolia attests to the veneration of Anāhitā through inscriptions, votive altars, tombstones,

<sup>52</sup> Pausanias, *Pausanias' Description of Greece*, trans. Arthur Richard Shilleto (London: George Bell and Sons, 1886), 1/357-358 (5.27.5-7); Özkan Kılıç, *Pers Hakimiyeti Altında Batı Anadolu*, 134.

<sup>53</sup> Pierre Debord, "La Survie des Cultes Iraniens en Anatolie. L'exemple d'Anāitis en Lydie", *Les Grandes Figures Religieuses: Fonctionnement Pratique et Symbolique Dans l'Antiquité. Actes du Colloque International (Besançon, 25-26 Avril 1984) (Annales Littéraires de l'Université de Besançon, 329)* (Besançon: Université de Franche-Comté, 1986), 85-92.

<sup>54</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, trans. John Jackson (London: William Heinemann, 1931), 621 (3.62).

<sup>55</sup> Xenophon, *Anabasis*, trans. Carleton L. Brownson (London: Harvard University Press, 1980), 59 (1.6.7); Özkan Kılıç, *Pers Hakimiyeti Altında Batı Anadolu*, 134.

<sup>56</sup> Plutarch, *Lives*, Lysander 3.2; Özkan Kılıç, *Pers Hakimiyeti Altında Batı Anadolu*, 134; Pausanias, *Pausanias' Description of Greece*, 1/201 (3.16.8-9).

and honorary stelae.<sup>57</sup> Xenophon additionally reported an altar dedicated to Artemis at Sardis, where Persians performed acts of confession.<sup>58</sup> He identified the high priest of this sanctuary as a Persian cleric named Megabyxus (Bagavazdā or Bagabāzu in Persian).<sup>59</sup> This evidence may indicate a degree of syncretism or transformation in cult practice, where rituals originally associated with Artemis in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE were adapted to Anāhitā worship by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE by incorporating notable modifications.<sup>60</sup> Although the continuity of ritual forms suggests cultural persistence, the precise nature of these adaptations remains difficult to reconstruct as a result of the interpretive constraints of the sources.

#### 4. Temple and Ritual

Zoroastrian worship is traditionally performed in the ancient Iranian language, and since antiquity, it has included the recitation of the Gathas and the Yasna Haptanghaiti as hymns.<sup>61</sup> Zoroastrian clergy were expected to memorize and orally recite these texts, even without a full comprehension of their meanings. Pausanias, writing in the second century CE, reported that the Magi recited hymns from a book during rituals, but the content was largely unintelligible to him.<sup>62</sup> This demonstrates the enduring continuity of Persian religious practices. A similar observation was made in a poem of Diogenes quoted by Athenaeus, which describes ritual worship accompanied by music and hymns in regions influenced by Persian culture. These testimonies, despite their chronological distance, provide valuable insights for understanding the transmission and adaptation of Iranian ritual traditions in peripheral regions, including western Anatolia.

And now I hear women in turbans,  
The followers of Asiatic Cybele,

<sup>57</sup> Anders Hultgård, “Invoking Anāhitā – from Iran to Asia Minor”, *Achaemenid Anatolia: Persian Presence and Impact in the Western Satrapies 546–330 BC*, ed. Ashk Dahlén (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2020), 175.

<sup>58</sup> Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 57–61 (1.6).

<sup>59</sup> Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 371 (5.3.6–7).

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Mitchell, “Iranian Names and the Presence of Persians in the Religious Sanctuaries of Asia Minor”, *Old and New Worlds in Greek Onomastic*, ed. Elaine Matthews (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 164; Yücel, “Kapadokya Zerdüştileri”, 416–417.

<sup>61</sup> Almut Hintze, “Who Are the Zoroastrians?”, *The British Academy* 28 (2016), 14.

<sup>62</sup> Pausanias, *Pausanias' Description of Greece*, 1/357–358 (5.27.5–6).

The daughters of the rich Phrygians  
 Drums, roaring and clanging bronze  
 With cymbals, banging hands in unison,  
 They pour out a wise and healing hymn to the gods.  
 Likewise, Lydian and Bactrian girls  
 Those who live beside the Halys,  
 They worship the Tmolian goddess Artemis loudly,  
 Loving the laurel shade of the thick-leaved grove,  
 The one that shoots the three-cornered pectis,  
 Raising melodies that respond to Magadis,  
 Persian flutes accompany the choir.<sup>63</sup>

The passage suggests that women from Lydia, Phrygia, and Bactria participated in the worship of Artemis using musical instruments and Persian flutes, indicating syncretic rituals shaped by Persian liturgical practices.<sup>64</sup> Such evidence highlights the permeability of religious boundaries in Anatolia and demonstrates how local and imperial elements could merge, reflecting the hybridization of ritual forms under Achaemenid influence.

One of the most distinctive features of the Persian religion is the fire ritual, which the Persians introduced to Anatolia upon their arrival. Herodotus reported that Persians offered sacrifices to fire alongside other deities,<sup>65</sup> while Strabo later documented the presence of perpetual fires in Anatolian fire temples and noted that priests performed fire worship daily at fixed hours.<sup>66</sup> Pausanias corroborated Strabo's observations.<sup>67</sup> Fire worship appears to have expanded further into Anatolia following the Persian victory over the Sakas near Zela (Zile/Tokat).<sup>68</sup> A temple dedicated to Anāhitā was constructed in Zela, and the cult spread southward to Cappadocia and Cilicia, where Magi—the guardians of the sacred fire—recited prayers at designated times.<sup>69</sup> This evidence illustrates not only the diffusion of Persian religious

<sup>63</sup> Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists or Banquet of the Learned of Athenaeus*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), 1/131 (3.14.636 A/B).

<sup>64</sup> Sekunda, "Achaemenid Colonization in Lydia", 8.

<sup>65</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 61 (1.131), 182-183 (3.16).

<sup>66</sup> Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. Duane W. Roller (London: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 685-686 (15.3.15).

<sup>67</sup> Pausanias, *Pausanias' Description of Greece*, 1/357-358 (5.27.5-6).

<sup>68</sup> Strabo, *The Geography*, 493 (11.8.4).

<sup>69</sup> Strabo, *The Geography*, 685-686 (15.3.15).

practices but also their adaptation within local Anatolian contexts.

In ancient Iran, the sacred fire was kindled in elaborate ceremonies that constituted the central focus of societal spiritual practices. Initially, this form of worship did not involve temples; rather, fire temples appear to have emerged later in the evolution of Iranian religious practice.<sup>70</sup> No references to fire temples exist in Assyrian sources from the Median period, suggesting that such structures were absent before the Achaemenid era.<sup>71</sup> Evidence of fire temples in the Avesta and early Achaemenid periods remains inconclusive, and it is generally assumed that they developed in the second half of the Achaemenid period.<sup>72</sup> The Bisitun Inscriptions mention “houses of the gods” and “place of worship” (ayadana), which likely refer to sanctuaries where ritual activities were conducted.<sup>73</sup> Herodotus reported that the Persians initially performed rituals in the open air, without temples, images, or statuary.<sup>74</sup> Dino of Colophon and Clement of Alexandria verified that sacrifices were conducted outdoors,<sup>75</sup> and Xenophon mentioned Cyrus as offering sacrifices on a hill without referring to temples.<sup>76</sup> Collectively, this evidence indicates that early Zoroastrian feasts and sacrifices were performed at elevated sites, such as mountains and hills.<sup>77</sup> In later periods, however, ritual practices evolved to include both open-air and covered ceremonial spaces.<sup>78</sup>

At the excavation site of Oluz Höyük in Cappadocia, adjacent to the so-called “Persian Road”, there are remains identified as an *ātaškada*

<sup>70</sup> Mary Boyce, “On the Zoroastrian Temple Cult of Fire”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95/3 (1975), 454-465; de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 344; See also Jamsheed K. Choksy, “Reassessing the Material Contexts of Ritual Fires in Ancient Iran”, *Iranica Antiqua* 42 (2007), 229-269; Matthew P. Canepa, “Persian Religion and Achaemenid Sacred Spaces”, *Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity Through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE-642 CE* (Oakland: California Scholarship Online, 2018), 149-169.

<sup>71</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 21.

<sup>72</sup> Choksy, “Reassessing the Material Contexts of Ritual Fires in Ancient Iran”; Mary Boyce, “Ātaškada”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Accessed 15 September 2024).

<sup>73</sup> Schmitt, *The Bisitun Inscriptions*, 53.

<sup>74</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 61 (1.131); Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 21.

<sup>75</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen: (Protrepticus)* (New Jersey: Beloved Publishing, 2016), 5.65.1.

<sup>76</sup> Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 198-199 (8.7.3); de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 345.

<sup>77</sup> Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London - Boston - Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 46.

<sup>78</sup> Nevfel Akyar, *Eski İran'da Rabipler* (İstanbul: Kabalcı Yayınevi, 2023), 162-163.

(fire pit) dated to 450 BC (Figure 3a).<sup>79</sup> The location of the remains makes it possible to conclude that there was a channel for the blood of the victims south of the fire pit and to the east and northeast, a masonry “Sacred Area” (temenos) with platforms (Figure 3a).<sup>80</sup> The sacred fire pit is believed to be situated on one of the two stone-paved roads that were utilized for ritualistic purposes. A cult road of a similar nature to that found at Oluz Höyük has also been identified at Daskyleion (Figure 3b). The road, which terminates at a dead end in the south of Akro-Daskyleion, features paving stones very similar to those observed at Oluz Höyük. It is hypothesized that this road forms part of a sacred area that was associated with religious rituals.<sup>81</sup> To the south of this road at Daskyleion lies a complex of buildings, presumed to be two-story, which are now recognized as the “Three Chambered Building”. Excavations in 2007 uncovered appliqué ornaments in this area believed to have been worn by Persian priests.<sup>82</sup> The cult path, the pavement, and the Three Chambered Building may constitute components of a religious site.

When the photographs of the paved paths at Oluz Höyük and Daskyleion are examined side-by-side, the two structures appear to have been built for a similar purpose. The Three Chambered Structure at Daskyleion may have been used for the same purpose as the “sacred area” at Oluz Höyük. Perhaps it is a more advanced version of it. To date, no structure of this kind has been identified in Iran. If they were indeed built for a religious purpose, then one may reasonably conclude that they reflect an Anatolian-Persian architectural style. These findings may represent early forms of Mazdeism’s transition from open-air spaces to enclosed worship spaces. Of course, future discoveries and further research may revise this interpretation.

<sup>79</sup> Mona Saba, *Oluz Höyük Geç Demir Çağı Bulguları Işığında: Zerdüştîliğin Anadolu’daki Yayılımı* (İstanbul: Kabalcı Yayınevi, 2022), 5.

<sup>80</sup> Şevket Dönmez, “Amasya-Oluz Höyük Ateşgedesi ve Erken Zerdüşt Dini Kutsal Alanı”, *TÜBA-AR Türkiye Bilimler Akademisi Arkeoloji Dergisi* 22 (2018), 152-153; Şevket Dönmez - Mona Saba, “Demir Çağı Kappadokia’sında İlk Tapınak: Oluz Höyük İbadethane ve Ateşgedesi”, *Höyük* 12 (2023), 59-60.

<sup>81</sup> Bakır, *Balıkesir’in Eski Çağlardaki Valilik Merkezi Daskyleion*, 81-85; İren - Kasar, “Disiplinlerarası Çalışmalar Işığında Daskyleion’da Yeni Bulgular”, 149.

<sup>82</sup> İren - Kasar, “Disiplinlerarası Çalışmalar Işığında Daskyleion’da Yeni Bulgular”, 149.

Figure 2: Cult roads unearthed in (a) Oluz Höyük (Oluzhoyuk Instagram page) and (b) Daskyleion (Daskyleion Excavation House)



In addition to the previously discussed examples, a Persian temple dedicated to Artemis at Sardis is supported by epigraphic texts that date to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE and a passage in Xenophon.<sup>83</sup> An Achaemenid inscription found near the temple contains the Persian word “Mitrastadas”.<sup>84</sup> Apparently, this Persian was influential in the construction of the temple. This may be unclear evidence that identifies Artemis in Sardis with Anāhitā. Pausanias and Strabo also recorded a temple specifically dedicated to Artemis Persica.<sup>85</sup> Briant explained that the worship of Artemis Persica in Sardis would be

<sup>83</sup> Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 59 (1.6.7).

<sup>84</sup> Roberto Gusmani, *Lydisches Wörterbuch: Mit Grammatischer Skizze und Inschriftensammlung* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1964), 47.

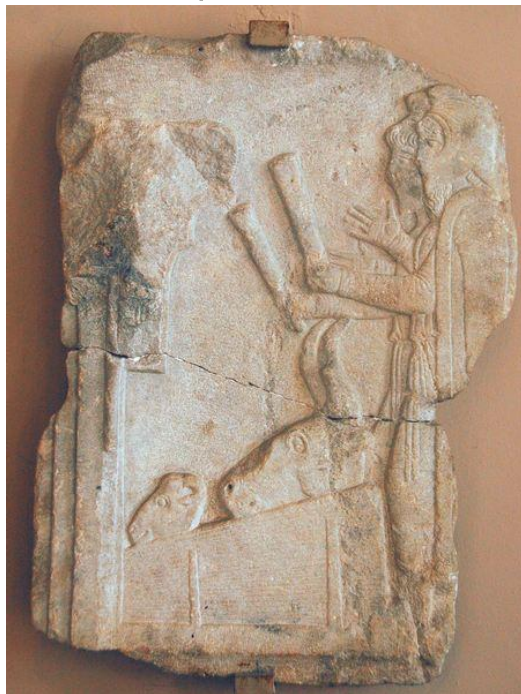
<sup>85</sup> Pausanias, *Pausanias' Description of Greece*, 2/12-13 (7.6.6); Strabo, *The Geography*, 360-361 (8.4.5).

influenced by the presence of the Maibozenoi community, which was of Iranian origin and had come from Cappadocia;<sup>86</sup> this suggests a potential connection between this temple and Anāhitā. Furthermore, Strabo reported that the Persians constructed a temple on a hill at Zela that included communal areas dedicated to Anaitis, Omanos, and Anadatos.<sup>87</sup>

## 5. Clergy

Within ancient Iranian tradition, clothing functioned as a visible marker of social hierarchy, and color played a significant role in distinguishing social groups. Warriors wore red and similar garments, while priests wore white. It can be argued that these priestly garments, which were borrowed from the Median tradition, have relatively preserved their form to this day.<sup>88</sup>

Figure 4: Funerary stele unearthed at Daskyleion that depicts two Magians during a ritual, Istanbul Archaeological Museum/Env. 2361 (c. 430-330 BCE)



<sup>86</sup> Briant, *A History of Persian Empire*, 703-704.

<sup>87</sup> Strabo, *The Geography*, 493 (11.8.4).

<sup>88</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks (London: William Heinemann, 1925), 1/9 (1.6-8); Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 21.

According to literary and iconographic evidence, this outfit consisted of white cavalry-style trousers, a fitted tunic, and a mantle known in ancient sources as the *kandys*. Iranian clerics in western regions during the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE likewise used this attire, albeit with minor regional variations (Figure 4). The most distinctive feature of Iranian priestly dress was their specialized headgear. Felt hoods, called *tiara*, had side flaps that could be drawn forward to cover the mouth and nose during ritual acts – particularly to prevent the pollution of the sacred fire by human breath.<sup>89</sup> The clearest and most explicit description of this ritual function appears in Strabo’s account of Persian priests in Anatolia, which confirms both the practical and symbolic significance of this headgear within Achaemenid religious practice:

In Kappadokia –where the clan of the Magoi (who are also called the Pyraithians) is numerous and there are many sanctuaries to the Persian gods– ... There are also the Pyraitheia, certain notable enclosures, with an altar in the middle of them, in which there are many ashes and an inextinguishable fire that the Magoi guard. They go in each day and make incantations for about an hour, holding the bundle of wands before the fire, having felt tiaras wrapped around them that come down their cheeks on either side far enough to cover their lips.<sup>90</sup>

The bundles of wands held by the priests represent *barsom* (Av. *barəsmān*), the ritual twigs used in Zoroastrian ceremonies.<sup>91</sup> The cloth that covered their mouths and cheeks corresponded to the *padam* (*paiti-danā*, *padān*), which was worn to prevent the ritual pollution caused by human breath – an impurity explicitly mentioned in several Avestan and Pahlavi passages.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>89</sup> J. D. Beazley, *The Lewes House Collection of Ancient Gems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), 82-84; Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism I* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 306-309; Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 20.

<sup>90</sup> Strabo, *The Geography*, 685-686 (15.3.15).

<sup>91</sup> “Vendidad (Vidēvdād) or Laws Against the Demons Avesta”, trans. James Darmesteter, *The Sacred Books of the East 4* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895), 19.18-19; Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees*, ed. Joseph H. Peterson (Bombay: Jehangir B. Karani’s Sons, 1937), 219-222.

<sup>92</sup> Just as everything that comes from a human being is unclean, so the breath contaminates everything it touches; therefore priests, while on duty, and even laymen, must wear a mouth covering called a paitidana when praying or eating.

A comparable depiction occurs on a stele discovered near ancient Daskyleion (Figure 4), which shows priests conducting a ritual with veils extending from their *tiaras* to cover the mouth area. Both priests wear tunics with embroidered sleeves and a protective girdle identifiable as the *kusti*.<sup>93</sup> The two ends of the *kusti* hang visibly from the waist to approximately the knee level, which is consistent with parallels from Achaemenid iconography. This stele housed in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum is examined in detail in the following sections.<sup>94</sup>

Although certain material aspects have changed over time, the essential components of Zoroastrian priestly vestments remain recognizably continuous from the Achaemenid period to the present. Modern *barsom* bundles are typically made of metal and are shorter than those represented in the reliefs; the *padam* is worn independently of the headdress, and the *kusti* continues to be tied as part of the ritual outfit. Crucially, the priestly garments remain white, which maintains the traditional association of purity with ritual attire.

Another grave stele, also discovered at Daskyleion and dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, depicts a male figure whose head is partially damaged, although part of his beard remains visible (Figure 5). The individual is shown wearing a reddish Median-style costume and holding a *barsom* bundle in his right hand and a staff in his left hand (Figure 5). His attire corresponds to the typical Median ensemble: a long-sleeved tunic that extends below the knees and a *kandys* –a longer outer garment– draped over the back. The relief appears to have originally been painted; traces of pigment survive on the *kandys*, the shoes, and parts of the tunic’s front, while the collar edges remain uncolored.

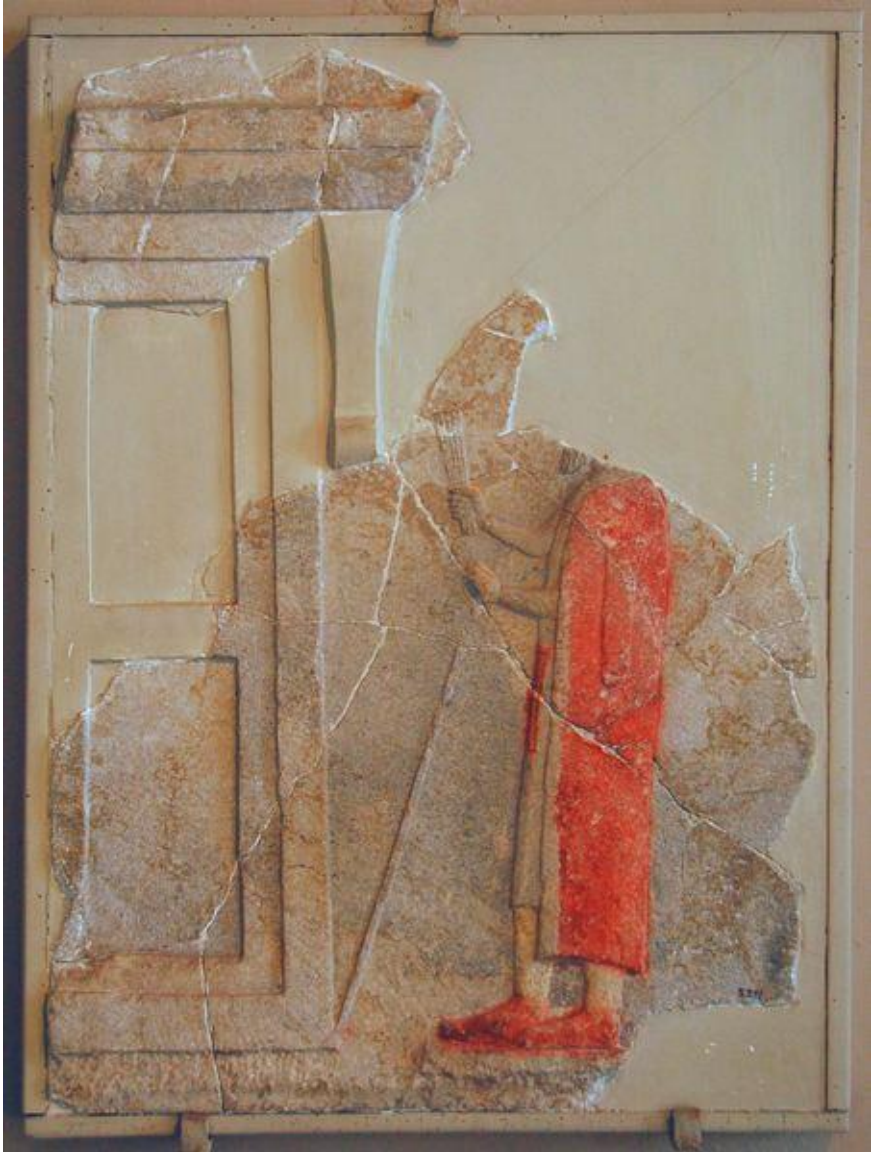
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Vendīdād 14.8, 18.1; Martin Haugh, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings and Religion of the Parsis*, ed. E. W. West (London: Trübner & Co., Ludgate Hill., 1878), 243 (n. 1); Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies*, 136.

<sup>93</sup> See Vendīdād 18.53-54; Yasna 9.26; “The Zend-Avesta Part III”, trans. L. H. Mills, *The Sacred Books of the East 31* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1887), 1-400.

<sup>94</sup> Env. 2361; Şevket Dönmez, “Kapadokya’da Ateş Kültü”, *Türk Dünyası İnanç Merkezi Kongresi Bildirileri: 23-27 Eylül 2002 Mersin* (Ankara: Türksev, 2004), 477 (n. 17); Karagöz, *Kleinasiatisch-Gräko-Persische Kunstwerke im Archäologischen Museum von Istanbul*, 72; Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, “Ancient Iranian Motifs and Zoroastrian Iconography”, *The Zoroastrian Flame: Exploring Religion, History and Tradition*, ed. A. V. Williams et al. (London - New York: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 179-181; Akyar, *Eski İran’da Rabipler*, 440-448.

Figure 3: A relief that depicts a Persian during worship at Daskyleion, Istanbul Archaeological Museum/5391 Env. (c. 430-330 BCE)



Dönmez suggested that the figure may represent a cleric.<sup>95</sup> However, red clothing is commonly used in Achaemenid visual culture as an indicator of aristocratic or military status. Consequently, the

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<sup>95</sup> Dönmez, “Kapadokya’da Ateş Kültü”, 478 (n. 18).

figure is more plausibly understood as a nobleman engaged in an act of worship rather than as a member of the priesthood.<sup>96</sup>

The object positioned opposite the figure has been interpreted either as a fire altar<sup>97</sup> or as a doorway,<sup>98</sup> both of which suggest a ritual context. If the scene indeed depicts a ritual performed before a fire altar, then one might expect the presence of a *padam* covering the mouth and nose. However, since only the lower portion of the figure's beard is preserved, the available evidence does not allow for a definitive conclusion. *Barsom* was not exclusive to clerics and could be employed in various ritual contexts.<sup>99</sup> Thus, the stele may well portray a nobleman performing an act of worship – possibly even the deceased individual interred within the tomb.

## 6. Sacrifice and Libation

Although some scholars argue that the Gathas of Zarathustra opposed bloody sacrifice on the grounds that such acts caused suffering to cattle,<sup>100</sup> others regard this interpretation as anachronistic.<sup>101</sup> Classic sources describe bloody sacrifices as one of the most significant forms of worship among Persians. Moreover, *Yasna Haptañhāiti* –the text closest in date to the Gathas– presents sacrifice as an integral part of ritual activity.<sup>102</sup>

Given this framework, it is plausible that the Persians who invaded Anatolia conducted numerous bloody sacrifices, both to procure food and to secure divine favor. Herodotus recounted that the Persians

<sup>96</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 146-147.

<sup>97</sup> Saba, *Zerdüştîliğün Anadolu'daki Yayılımı*, 66; Karagöz, *Kleinasiatiscb-Gräko-Persische Kunstwerke*, 72.

<sup>98</sup> Gürçan Polat, "Bir Anadolu-Akhaemenid Dönemi Ölü Kültü Geleneği: Tümülsüz Önünde Steller ve Seremoni Alanları", *OLBA* 11 (2005), 14.

<sup>99</sup> Herodotos, *The Histories*, 61 (1.132); In *Sbābnāmāh*, the final Sasanid Shah Yazdegerd requests that Barsom engage in worship from the miller to whom he had sought refuge. See Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 848.

<sup>100</sup> *Yasna* 44.20, 32.12; Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism*, 395; Gherardo Gnoli, *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland: A Study on the Origins of Mazdeism and Related Problems* (Naples: Stituto Universitario Orientale, 1980), 33; de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 357.

<sup>101</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism I*, 215; Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia the Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009).

<sup>102</sup> *Yasna* 41.6.

could not perform a sacrifice without the presence of a magus.<sup>103</sup> This testimony suggests that members of the clergy accompanied the army and that a ritual procedure –although its full liturgical structure remains uncertain– was enacted during sacrificial ceremonies.

According to Herodotus, the Persians dedicated their sacrifices to Ahura Mazdā –whom he identified with Zeus– and performed these rites in open fields. They also offered sacrifices to the sun, moon, earth, fire, water, and wind, all of which were regarded as sacred elements.<sup>104</sup> Herodotus further stated that sacrificial rites did not require an altar or fire; instead, it was sufficient for the person making the sacrifice to slaughter the victim in a clean place, wear a crown of myrtle, and invoke the name of the deity. Following the sacrifice, the Magi divided the meat and recited a series of prayers.<sup>105</sup> In contrast, Xenophon emphasized the pre-battle sacrifices performed by the Persians and confirmed the involvement of clergy in these rituals.<sup>106</sup> His account complements that of Herodotus by illustrating the military-ritual context in which sacrificial practices could occur.

Xenophon noted that sacrificial rites were performed on elevated ground.<sup>107</sup> However, his description of the burning of animals – including horses and bulls– stands in sharp contrast to established Iranian religious norms in which fire was regarded as sacred and corpses as inherently polluting.<sup>108</sup> Although such cremation practices were observed among the local peoples, they never gained acceptance within the Iranian cultural and religious milieu.<sup>109</sup> Arguably, during their prolonged presence in Anatolia, the Achaemenids may have adopted hybrid practices by incorporating local ritual elements.

The choice of animals offered in sacrifice appears to have varied according to the specific ceremony and ritual context. Herodotus explicitly conveyed that the Magi did not kill dogs or humans, a prohibition similarly confirmed in the Vendīdād, where the killing of a dog is regarded as a grave sin.<sup>110</sup> Archaeological evidence supports

<sup>103</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 61 (1.132).

<sup>104</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 61 (1.131).

<sup>105</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 61 (1.132).

<sup>106</sup> Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 104 (4.5.14), 110 (4.5.51), 114 (4.6.11), 120 (5.3.4).

<sup>107</sup> Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 198-199 (8.7.3).

<sup>108</sup> Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 185-186 (8.3.24).

<sup>109</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 215; de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 361.

<sup>110</sup> Vendīdād 3.36-38; 13.1-19.

these textual accounts: the relief from Daskyleion (Figure 4) and the findings from Oluz Höyük attest to a range of animal sacrifices, but none involved dogs.<sup>111</sup> In this context, there is no evidence to suggest that the Persians in Anatolia failed to adhere to Iranian religious law.

Strabo related that a priestly class known as the Pyraithēia in Cappadocia performed sacrificial rituals in which the victims were killed not with a sword but with a type of club.<sup>112</sup> Accordingly, Dönmez and Saba proposed that the barsom sticks held by the Magi in the Daskyleion relief (Figure 4) might represent clubs used in sacrificial rites.<sup>113</sup> Although it cannot be entirely ruled out that Persian priests may have used clubs in certain ritual contexts, the object in the relief is more plausibly a barsom bundle, a ritual implement integral to Zoroastrian ceremonies, rather than a weapon because barsom is an ancient and fundamental part of the sacrificial ritual.<sup>114</sup>

Within the broader framework of Indo-Iranian religious traditions, libation (the ritual pouring of liquid offerings) emerged as a distinctive component of the sacrificial rite and played a prominent role in Zoroastrian ritual practices.<sup>115</sup> Although Herodotus claimed that the Persians were unfamiliar with libations (a claim that may reflect Greek interpretative bias instead of factual absence),<sup>116</sup> he nevertheless described a libation ceremony performed by the Persian army under King Xerxes near the River Scamander (modern Karamenderes) in the Çanakkale region.<sup>117</sup> Notably, however, the rituals reported by the Persians before crossing the Dardanelles differed markedly from known Iranian practices. According to Herodotus, the Persians burned incense on the bridges at sunrise and adorned the roads with myrtle branches. At sunrise, Xerxes poured a libation from a golden vessel into the sea and offered prayers while facing the sun.<sup>118</sup> These actions may signal Hellenic interpretations or localized adaptations instead of strictly Iranian ritual forms. Nevertheless, the timing of the ceremony – at sunrise – and the orientation toward the sun are consistent with

<sup>111</sup> Dönmez - Saba, "Oluz Höyük İbadethane ve Ateşgedesi", 62.

<sup>112</sup> Strabo, *The Geography*, 685-686 (15.3.15).

<sup>113</sup> Dönmez - Saba, "Oluz Höyük İbadethane ve Ateşgedesi", 62.

<sup>114</sup> See Yasna 24.12; Yasna 62; Visperad 11.2; Yasht 10.91.

<sup>115</sup> de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 353.

<sup>116</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 61 (1.132).

<sup>117</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 447 (7.43).

<sup>118</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 451-452 (7.54).

Persian religious norms.<sup>119</sup> Xenophon provided a comparable description of Cyrus's morning worship.<sup>120</sup> Ancient authors may have imposed their own religious frameworks on Persian practices, but it is plausible that Persians in Anatolia selectively adapted their rituals in response to local traditions or pragmatic concerns, exhibiting a hybridization of ceremonial forms.

The Persepolis Fortification Documents refer to a ritual practiced during the Achaemenid period that involved wheat, beer, and wine, which was known as the Lan Lirira (or Lan) ritual, a ceremonial libation possibly tied to agricultural and religious observances.<sup>121</sup> Ashk Dahlén suggested a potential connection between the record of the magus Hatarbanuš receiving 300 liters of wine for the Lan ritual in a single year and Herodotus's description of Xerxes pouring wine into the Hellespont from a golden goblet, although this association remains tentative.<sup>122</sup> The exact nature of the Lan Rite remains debated, as the Avesta does not provide any direct references to this ritual or to the use of wine, which highlights the difficulties in reconstructing its meaning and function. Nonetheless, it is conceivable that the Lan Rite represents a form of libation ritual adapted by Persians in Western Anatolia – potentially indicating a syncretism between Iranian ceremonial practices and local or Hellenic influences, which may explain Herodotus's account.

## 7. Funeral and Cemetery

Zoroastrian funeral rites are deeply shaped by a dualistic cosmology unique to Iranian religious thought, which posits a constant struggle between Ahura Mazdā, the god of good, and Angra Mainyu, the embodiment of evil.<sup>123</sup> Human and canine corpses, which were believed to be immediately inhabited by malevolent spirits upon

<sup>119</sup> De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 366; Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 32-33.

<sup>120</sup> Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 172 (8.1.23).

<sup>121</sup> Richard T. Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 753-755, 757, 768, 2036.

<sup>122</sup> Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, 759; Herodotus, *The Histories*, 451-452 (7.54); Ashk Dahlén, "Living the Iranian Dolce Vita: Herodotus on Wine Drinking and Luxury among the Persians", *Achaemenid Anatolia: Persian Presence and Impact in the Western Satrapies 546-330 BC*, ed. Ashk Dahlén (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2020), 103.

<sup>123</sup> Nevfel Akyar - Süleyman Sayar, "Zerdüşti Cenaze Geleneklerinde Düalizm", *Bahkesir Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 4/2 (2018), 55-80.

death, are regarded as inherently impure.<sup>124</sup> Fire, earth, water, and air are classified as pure elements, and it is considered a grave sin to contaminate these elements through contact with impure substances. As a result, the most appropriate funerary practice in Zoroastrian orthodoxy involved exposing the corpse on a rock under the sun and allowing it to be consumed by scavenging animals.<sup>125</sup> However, it is reasonable to hypothesize that funerary customs during the Achaemenid era were characterized by a greater diversity and regional variation that signified local traditions and administrative influences.

Figure 4: The Pyramid Tomb in Sardis, the Persian Tomb (Stone Tower) in Phocaea and the Tomb of Cyrus in Pasargardae, respectively



<sup>124</sup> Vendīdād 6.44-46.

<sup>125</sup> Akyar - Sayar, “Zerdüşti Cenaze Geleneklerinde Düalizm”.

Figure 5: Üçpınar Tumulus: A Persian buried in dorsal position on a marble kline in a tumulus in Balıkesir, Bursa Archaeological Museum (a reconstruction of the original tomb)



Despite the limited data concerning the funerary customs of the general populace, Achaemenid elite funerary architecture clearly exhibited a diversity of forms, including rock-cut tombs carved into steep cliffs, platform tombs, and mausolea that resembled pyramid-shaped structures. In contrast, Western Anatolia housed not only rock-cut tombs but also the emergence of distinct funerary practices, such as tumuli, the use of funerary stelae, Lycian-style sarcophagi, and columned tombs – funerary elements largely absent from core Iranian traditions.<sup>126</sup> These practices were adopted or adapted by Achaemenid nobles who incorporated Ionian and Attic cultural elements into their iconography, especially in the design of stelae.<sup>127</sup> These methods

<sup>126</sup> Carl Nylander, *Ionians in Pasargadae: Studies in Old Persian Architecture* (Uppsala: Academiae Ubsaliensis, 1970), 93.

<sup>127</sup> O. P. V. L'vov-Basirov, "Achaemenian Funerary Practices in Western Asia Minor", *Achaemenid Anatolia: Proceedings of the First International Symposium on Anatolia in the Achaemenid Period, Bandirma, 15-18 August 1997*, ed. Tomris Bakır - Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2001), 101.

indicate a selective process of cultural assimilation in which Persians accommodated local funerary customs while maintaining adherence to fundamental Zoroastrian principles. However, there is no evidence of cremation and burial practices that are explicitly opposed to dualistic theology.<sup>128</sup> Although burial on marble klinai within chamber tombs does not necessarily contradict Zoroastrian dualism, it remains uncertain whether Persian elites consistently observed orthodox Zoroastrian funerary rites.

One of the most magnificent Persian monumental tombs in Western Anatolia is the Taş Kule Mausoleum at Phocaea (modern Foça), which is dated to the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Architecturally, it bears a resemblance to the tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae and the so-called Pyramid Tomb at Sardis. The latter, although it is now largely in ruins with only a few steps of its staircase remaining, has been frequently compared to Cyrus's mausoleum, but this analogy remains debated among scholars (Figure 6).<sup>129</sup> Among these three tombs, all dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Taş Kule stands out as being carved directly from rock. Importantly, the presence of human remains or bones preserved within stone sarcophagi in these tombs does not necessarily contravene Zoroastrian religious prescriptions, as the practices may represent adaptations to local funerary traditions while maintaining essential doctrinal principles.

The construction of tumuli, sarcophagi, and tomb stelae predates Persian rule, with the most notable examples found in Lydia and Daskyleion. These monumental tombs are typically composed of earth mounds erected over a burial chamber of cut stone.<sup>130</sup> Although they

<sup>128</sup> See Vendidad, 1.15; 3.35-36; 5.11-14; 6.44-51; 7.25 and 49-51.

<sup>129</sup> Howard Crosby Butler, *Sardis: The Excavations Part I 1910-1914* (Leiden: Brill, 1922), 1/154, 166-170; Nicholas Cahill, "Taş Kule: A Persian Period Tomb near Phokaia", *American Journal of Archaeology* 92/4 (1988), 490; Tosun, "Pers/Akhaemenid Dönemi'nde Anadolu", 387; Farzad Abedi, "Sarveis Mezar Tipleri", *Amisos* 3/5 (2018), 305-321; Andrew Ramage et al., "Lydian Excavation Sectors", *Sardis from Prehistoric to Roman Times: Results of Archaeological Explorations of Sardis 1958-1975*, ed. George M. A. Hanfmann (Cambridge, MA - London: Harvard University Press, 1983), 42; Lucia Nováková, "People, Tombs, and Religious Practices in Achaemenid Anatolia", *Nunc Decet Caput Impedire Myrto Studies Dedicated to Professor Piotr Dyzek on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (Warsaw: The Center for Research on the Antiquity of Southeastern Europe, 2021), 121-122; also see Miller, "Greco-Persian Cultural Relations".

<sup>130</sup> Sevgi Sarıkaya, *Anadolu'da Persler: Daskyleion Satraplığı* (İstanbul: Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları, 2018), 17.

share certain architectural traits with Iranian models, these tombs retain local characteristics that set them apart from other contemporary monuments. Notably, some of these tombs display Zoroastrian-inspired iconography, which displays the cultural and religious influence of the Achaemenid period.<sup>131</sup>

Stone, wooden, or bronze klinai were placed within tumulus burial chambers to accommodate the deceased. In the Achaemenid period, the tumuli surrounding Daskyleion suggest that the bodies were laid in a dorsal position on the stone or marble klinai.<sup>132</sup> A notable example of this practice is shown in the reconstruction of the Üçpınar Tumulus (Figure 7).<sup>133</sup> According to Zoroastrian doctrine, a corpse—considered ritually impure—should not be placed on a wooden kline, as wood was deemed a ritually clean material. Furthermore, any contact between a corpse and wooden grave furnishings was considered ritually inappropriate.<sup>134</sup> The shift from wood to stone in tomb construction across Anatolia—from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when the Persians began their incursions, to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE—supports the view that this was an adoption of Persian beliefs.<sup>135</sup> Similarly, the cessation of cremation practices in Lycia during the Achaemenid period, despite earlier archaeological evidence from the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, exhibits the growing influence of Zoroastrian religious principles.<sup>136</sup>

Zoroastrian funerary rites involved placing the corpse on a stone-built platform known as a dakma (tower of silence), where it would be

<sup>131</sup> L'vov-Basirov, "Achaemenian Funerary Practices in Western Asia Minor", 102; Dusinberre, *Achaemenid Anatolia*, 145.

<sup>132</sup> F. N. Köseoğlu, Interview, September 2024.

<sup>133</sup> In the burial chamber of the tumulus, which was unearthed during a rescue excavation and had been looted in antiquity, a kline—intended for the deposition of the deceased—was found instead of a sarcophagus. See Polat, *Anadolu Akbaemenid Dönemi Plastik Eserleri*, 223.

<sup>134</sup> The Vendīdād's rulings on this issue are unambiguous. This has been the case from the past to the present. Among today's Zoroastrians, it is strictly forbidden to put a body in a wooden coffin or to carry it in a wooden coffin. See Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies*, 51.

<sup>135</sup> See Olivier Henry, "Wood Reflections on Stone Tombs in Southwest Asia Minor", *Tatarlı: The Return of Colour*, ed. L. Summerer - A. von Kienlin (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2010), 296-298.

<sup>136</sup> Sven Ahrens, "Whether by Decay or Fire Consumed: Cremation in Hellenistic and Roman Asia Minor", *Death and Changing Rituals: Function and Meaning in Ancient Funerary Practices*, ed. J. Rasmus Brandt et al. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), 188-189; Nováková, "People, Tombs, and Religious Practices in Achaemenid Anatolia", 123-124.

consumed by birds of prey (and occasionally dogs), after which the remaining bones were collected and deposited into an ossuary called an *astōdān* (*uz-dāna*). Oval-shaped stone structures referred to as *dakma* were constructed for this purpose. However, it can be argued that these formal architectural structures did not exist in pre-Islamic Iran, where corpses were instead placed on natural rocky outcrops located in remote, uninhabited areas. This view is corroborated by the account of Agathias, a 6<sup>th</sup>-century CE historian who wrote during the final period of the Sasanian Empire and described the burial of a Persian named *Mihr-Mihroe* in the following manner:

The servants of *Mihr-Mihroe* took his body and carried it out of the city, and, in accordance with the custom of their ancestors, left it out in the open and unattended to be eaten by dogs and fowl birds that feed on carrion. Persian funeral customs are regularly of this kind. Thus the flesh is torn off and the bones are scattered on the plains and left to rot. It is strictly forbidden to put their dead in any kind of grave or coffin, or to cover them with earth.<sup>137</sup>

The origins of these funerary rituals can be traced to Zoroastrian principles of ritual purity and the sacredness of cleanliness. The *Vendīdād* section of the *Avesta* provides important insights into these practices, but it also contains internal inconsistencies and ambiguities concerning funerary conduct.

... Where shall we bring, where shall we put the bodies of the dead? ... To the highest peaks, where they know there are always corpse-eating dogs and corpse-eating birds, ... let them tie the corpse there by its feet and hair with irons, stones or clay, so that the corpse-eating dogs and corpse-eating birds do not carry the bones to the water and the trees.<sup>138</sup>

... The worshippers of Mazda shall lay the dead body down on the ground (in *Dakma*) with its eyes toward the sun.<sup>139</sup>

If a dog or a man or a goat ... dies, what shall the worshippers of Mazda do? Ahura Mazda answered: Let them seek a

<sup>137</sup> Agathias, *The Histories*, trans. Joseph D. Frendo (Berlin - New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1975), 55-56 (2:22.6-23.1).

<sup>138</sup> *Vendīdād* 6.44-46.

<sup>139</sup> *Vendīdād* 5.13.

Dakma. Let them seek a Dakma throughout the surrounding area.<sup>140</sup>

Some information on Persian funerary practices can be derived from ancient authors of antiquity. For instance, both Herodotus and Strabo, although far apart in time, suggested that the bodies of Persian nobles were preserved intact, but the corpses of the Magi were exposed to scavenging birds and dogs.

...It is said that the body of a male Persian is never buried, until it has been torn either by a dog or a bird of prey. That the Magi have this custom is beyond a doubt, for they practise it without any concealment...<sup>141</sup>

They bury the bodies of the dead plastered with wax, yet do not bury the Magoi –who by ancestral custom have intercourse with their mothers– but leave them to be eaten by birds.<sup>142</sup>

Numerous tumuli have been identified in the southern sector of Daskyleion.<sup>143</sup> Achaemenid elites were typically interred in stone sarcophagi or placed on marble klinai within tumuli. Some scholars argue that this reliance on stone may represent a compromise to accommodate Persian religious beliefs; because stone was considered an impermeable barrier according to Zoroastrian purity laws, its use would have served to prevent the corpse from ritually contaminating the sacred earth.<sup>144</sup> Given the high cost of such funerary practices, it is likely that ordinary individuals, including soldiers and clergy, either buried their dead in simpler graves or left them exposed to scavenging animals.<sup>145</sup> The lack of a designated necropolis for commoners in Daskyleion further supports this interpretation.

<sup>140</sup> Vendidad 8.1-2.

<sup>141</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 61 (1.140).

<sup>142</sup> Strabo, *The Geography*; 687 (15.3.20).

<sup>143</sup> F. N. Köseoğlu, Interview, September 2024.

<sup>144</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 56; L'vov-Basirov, "Achaemenian Funerary Practices in Western Asia Minor", 104.

<sup>145</sup> Shapur Shahbazi, "Astōdān", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Accessed 26 August 2023); Boyce, *Zoroastrianism I*, 111; Mary Boyce, "Arsacids iv. Arsacid Religion", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Accessed 1 March 2024).

Figure 6: Area near Gelenbe thought to be suitable for Zoroastrian funeral practices



To date, no rocky or desolate areas suitable for the exposure of bodies have been identified within the boundaries of Daskyleion.<sup>146</sup> However, the rocky terrain located in the area of Gelenbe Town, Hamitli Village, and Bostancı Village (Figure 1) could have functioned

<sup>146</sup> F. N. Köseoğlu, Interview, September 2024.

as a dakma. L'vov-Basirov further suggested that similar rocky sites might have existed on the island of İncir, which is opposite Phocaea and near the ancient city of Amyzon in northern Caria.<sup>147</sup>

The rock-cut features at the Gelenbe site correspond with the funerary practices outlined in the Vendīdād. L'vov-Basirov compared the collapsed cist of one rock-cut tomb at the site to analogous structures at Qizqapan in Iraq, observing that the cist is smaller than an adult human corpse. This indicates that it may have functioned as an astōdān, a structure for the secondary deposition of bones after the body was consumed by scavenging animals, as similarly identified at Qizqapan.<sup>148</sup> Given the limitations of existing photographs in conveying the layout and characteristics of the area, I conducted an onsite inspection in 2024 to obtain additional visual documentation and evaluate its potential function as a dakma. Despite extensive damage from illegal excavations, several features remain discernible, including rock-cut tombs, stairways, potential corpse-laying platforms, circular depressions for bones, rectangular grooves or basins suitable for corpses, niches resembling astōdān, cavities potentially intended for scavenger birds, ritual and observation areas, fire pits, and traces of burning or ash (Figure 8).

Returning to the relief that depicts two priests at Daskyleion (Figure 4),<sup>149</sup> based on the testimonies of Herodotus and Strabo, Macridy-Bey assumed that the relief represents a sacrificial ritual. This interpretation is further elaborated by Şevket Dönmez.<sup>150</sup> The presence of two priests corresponds to an ancient Zoroastrian funerary practice in which the ritual was required to be performed in pairs.<sup>151</sup> Boyce noted that this ritual (offering the heads of animals sacrificed to the yazata Haoma for the soul of a deceased nobleman) continued among Zoroastrians until

<sup>147</sup> L'vov-Basirov, "Achaemenian Funerary Practices in Western Asia Minor", 106; Nováková, "People, Tombs, and Religious Practices in Achaemenid Anatolia", 123.

<sup>148</sup> L'vov-Basirov, "Achaemenian Funerary Practices in Western Asia Minor", 106.

<sup>149</sup> Gustave Mendel, *Catalogue des Sculptures Grecques, Romanes et Byzantines* (Istanbul: En Vente au Musée Impérial, 1914), 2/570-572; Karagöz, *Kleinasiatisch-Gräko-Persische Kunstwerke*, 72.

<sup>150</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 61 (1.131-132); Strabo, *The Geography*, 685-686 (15.3.15); Theodore Macridy Bey, "Reliefs Gréco-Perses de la Région de Dascylien", *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 37 (1913), 348-352; Dönmez, "Kapadokya'da Ateş Kültü", 477 (n. 17).

<sup>151</sup> Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies*, 43; A. V. Williams Jackson, *Persia Past and Present* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1906), 387.

the twentieth century.<sup>152</sup>

The presence of charcoal layers on the ceiling beams of certain tumuli in Western Anatolia –including smaller tumuli from the Lydian and Achaemenid periods– has been documented by researchers. This observation suggests that rather than cremation, a fire ritual may have been performed within the burial chamber. It is hypothesized that such rituals, possibly of local origin, could have evolved into forms incorporated into Persian funerary practice. This hypothesis gains nuance when considered alongside the Vendīdād, which explicitly states that the presence of fire in proximity to a corpse is ritually inappropriate.<sup>153</sup> Although fire plays an essential role in Zoroastrian post-mortem rites, these ceremonies are typically conducted at a safe distance from the body or in a separate space altogether.<sup>154</sup> If it is assumed that Persian priests indeed performed fire rituals within tumuli, then it may be surmised that these rituals served apotropaic functions –such as expelling demons– or were performed to ritually purify or bless the chamber prior to the deposition of the body.

The 2013 excavations conducted under the direction of Kaan İren provided concrete evidence regarding this phenomenon. Notably, a burnt layer had already been identified in 2010 at the Koru Tumulus, which is situated to the south of Daskyleion and provisionally dated to the Achaemenid period.<sup>155</sup> Subsequent analysis of the 2013 excavation confirmed that this burnt stratum extended throughout the dromos and into the vicinity of the tomb chamber. Several significant findings were documented, including fragmented ceramic vessels, bones, and a large animal jawbone. Importantly, it was determined that the tomb structure had been erected directly atop the sacred area where the ritual activity took place. The assemblage –particularly the ceramic sherds and faunal remains– indicates the occurrence of a funerary banquet or a ritual in which vessels were deliberately placed into the fire and broken.<sup>156</sup> The architectural elements of the Koru Tumulus, including the dromos, traces of burning, and the fragment of a large

<sup>152</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 117-118.

<sup>153</sup> B. K. McLaughlin, *Lydian Graves and Burial Customs* (California: University of California at Berkeley, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1985), 156-158; Dusinberre, *Achaemenid Anatolia*, 145.

<sup>154</sup> Vendīdād 3:15-17, 5:39-40 etc.

<sup>155</sup> İren - Yıldızhan, “Daskyleion 2013 Yılı Kazı Çalışmaları”, 2/583.

<sup>156</sup> İren - Yıldızhan, “Daskyleion 2013 Yılı Kazı Çalışmaları”, 2/589-590.

animal skull, align with the iconographic features depicted on the Daskyleion stele (Figure 4). Collectively, these features may constitute parts of a complex funerary ritual that involved sacrificial offerings, feasting, and fire-based ceremonies.

The proposition that the door-like motifs on the two Daskyleion stele represent the tomb entrances within tumuli is corroborated by the analysis of eroded reliefs found on a rock-cut tomb in Ravansar.<sup>157</sup> These reliefs depict a comparable ritual scene wherein an actual doorway is present, as opposed to the symbolic door motif featured on the steles. Such imagery may represent Persian funerary rituals performed at the threshold of the tomb that involved sacrificial offerings and facilitated the soul's ascent to the afterlife.<sup>158</sup> This interpretation implies the existence of designated ritual areas in front of tumulus entrances. Arrian, citing Aristobulus, recorded that a similar ritual was performed at the tomb of Cyrus the Great in Pasargadae.<sup>159</sup> According to his account, Cambyses and his successors provided priests with a sheep for daily sacrifices and a horse for monthly offerings.<sup>160</sup> Xenophon also attested to the sacrifice of cattle and smaller animals at the entrance of a nobleman's tomb in the Pactolus River (Sart River), paralleling rituals performed at Cyrus' tomb.<sup>161</sup> The decorative false doors of the Phocaeen Monumental Tomb –dated to 546 BCE– closely resemble those of Cyrus' tomb at Pasargadae, the symbolic entrances of the Zendān-e Solaymān and the Naqš-e Rostam reliefs. According to Özyiğit, the Phocaeen tomb predates all of these structures and likely served as their architectural prototype.<sup>162</sup> These accounts support the notion that although Persian religious practices were shaped by local traditions, they also transmitted certain ritual elements and architectural motifs from Western Anatolia to Iran.

The arrival of the Persians in Anatolia during the mid-sixth century BCE is widely considered a pivotal moment in the regional

<sup>157</sup> P. Calmeyer, "Das Grabrelief von Ravansar", *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 11 (1978), 73-85.

<sup>158</sup> Polat, "Bir Anadolu-Akhaemenid Dönemi Ölü Kültü Geleneği", 12-15.

<sup>159</sup> Arrian, *The Annabasis of Alexander*, trans. E. J. Chinnock (London: The Selwood Printing Works, 1884), 365-367 (6/29.4-11).

<sup>160</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism II*, 70-71.

<sup>161</sup> Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 162 (7.3.6-7).

<sup>162</sup> Ömer Özyiğit, "Phokaia'da Akurgal'ın Kazıları Işığında Son Dönem Çalışmaları", *Anadolu* 25 (2003), 106.

development of Zoroastrianism. Scholars have attributed several significant transformations in ritual and funerary practices to this Persian presence. Key indicators of this transformation include the replacement of wooden grave materials with stone, the introduction of fire and sacrificial rituals, the discontinuation of corpse cremation, and the presence of two officiating priests during funerary ceremonies. Collectively, these practices serve as strong evidence for the integration of core Zoroastrian theological principles and their influence on Anatolian ritual practices.

### **Conclusion**

The presence of Persians in Western Anatolia –particularly in Daskyleion and Sardis– did not merely transplant Iranian religious traditions into Anatolia but also contributed to the development of regionally adapted religious forms. The available evidence suggests that although fundamental tenets of Zoroastrianism, such as dualism, fire rituals, and clerical purity, were largely preserved, they were also modified through interactions with local cultic practices and local cultural contexts. This dynamic process reflects the broader patterns of religious accommodation and transformation typical of the Achaemenid imperial milieu.

Importantly, Zoroastrianism in Anatolia appears not to have been enforced as a state religion but was practiced selectively among Persian settlers, nobility, and clergy. The absence of formal missionary initiatives and the broad cultural tolerance of the Achaemenids allowed for the preservation of local Anatolian religious traditions while facilitating selective adaptation. The persistence of Iranian funerary elements, fire worship structures, and Zoroastrian iconography in Western Anatolia well beyond the fall of the Achaemenids points to a lasting cultural and religious imprint. These findings suggest that religious identity under Persian rule was negotiated, flexible, and pluralistic and that Anatolia served not only as a recipient of imperial religion but also as a contributor to its dynamic evolution.

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