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Egyptising Lintels as a Decorative Element in Persian Architecture

As is well known, Egypt was part of the Persian Empire¹ from Cambyses' campaign in the year 525 B.C. This fact not only had far-reaching political consequences, but also exposed vast territories of the new empire, and in particular the lands originally Persian to the influence of foreign cultural elements which were "exotic" from the Persian point of view. I would like to discuss in this paper the appearance and presence of certain architectural borrowings resulting from contacts between Persians and Egyptians.

This text is not intended to be an analysis, of whatsoever kind, of the Persian presence on the Nile. I should like to demonstrate, focusing on one architectural element of clearly Egyptian origin, the presence of Egyptian decorations, and their functions, in the Persian architecture of the Achaemenid dynasty period, as well as how this motif appears in the subsequent history of Persian architecture.

What I should like to discuss here is the door-way decorations which appear in Persia at the time of the first rulers from the Achaemenid dynasty. Those moulds, known as *cavetto moulds*, highly popular in Egypt, were borrowed by Persians in an almost unchanged form.² They imitate sheaves of reed placed over the door-way, and impart a certain air of lightness even to heavy stone structures, which, combined with their decorative feature, lays an extra emphasis on the monumental character of the architectural design. What can be considered of certain interest is that the said architectural elements do not appear in Persia in Cambyses' time, which may be because he did not have the good fortune to come back from the Egyptian campaign. It might seem that, with the king's death before he set out from home in Egypt to Persia his emerging fascination with Egyptian culture, or at least with certain aspects of it, might have died away as well.

The oldest door-frames, or rather lintels, which are undoubtedly derived from Egyptian architecture, are to be found in Darius the Great's³ palace in Persepolis. That gigantic palace complex, totally subordinated to the ideology of power, was raised at the very heart of Fars province, which was the cradle of the ruling dynasty. As the structures, located on a high stone terrace, were to demonstrate the power and glory of Persia they could not lack any details capable of making an extra contribution to Persia's splendor.

What can be counted among such details are the above-mentioned lintels, which were designed to imitate similar elements known from Egypt. On the one hand, one may arrive at the conclusion that such decorations must have been well known to the main investor, i.e. Darius, who accompanied Cambyses on his Egyptian campaign. Darius might have admired them personally in the edifices raised in the Nile valley. On the other hand, in Egypt lintels, which were very much alike, supplemented with winged sun disks, were strongly associated with divine power and royal glory. If this is true, Darius, employing this very kind of lintels in

¹ P. BRIANT, *From Cyrus to Alexander. A History of the Persian Empire*, Winona Lake, Indiana 2002, pp. 50-61.

² S. CLARKE, R. ENGELBACH, *Ancient Egyptian Construction and Architecture*, New York 1990, pp. 162-169; J. BOARDMAN, *Die Perser und der Westen, Eine archäologische Untersuchung zur Entwicklung der Achämenidischen Kunst*, Mainz am Rhein 2003, p. 94.

³ H. KOCH, *Persepolis, Glänzende Hauptstadt des Perserreichs*, Mainz am Rhein 2001 (hereinafter referred to as: KOCH, *Persepolis*), pp. 45-50; W.F. DUTZ, S. MATHESON, *Persepolis*, Teheran 2001 (hereinafter referred to as: DUTZ, MATHESON, *Persepolis*), *passim*.

his palace erected in Persepolis, showed his perseverance in achieving strong ideologisation and legalisation of his rule. As is well known, before coming to the throne Darius had to put down a rebellion provoked by magus Gaumata, who strove to take over after Cambyses' death.⁴ Therefore, it is quite clear why Darius had to underpin his ideology with elements supplementary to those belonging to the original Persian ensemble. Besides the Egyptian elements, which are to be found in all the monumental door-ways, the ideological aspect of the whole edifice is emphasised with the combat scenes carved in relief in which the ruler struggles with monsters (fantastic creatures) personifying not only his enemies, but also the chaos which he had to overcome.

Egyptian-style lintels must have entered the Persian architectural and ideological methodology comparatively quickly. Darius' successor, Xerxes, who erected his palace in Persepolis, south of his father's complex, also makes endeavours to ensure the right setting for the splendour of royal power and, following in the footsteps of his father, uses the same decorative elements which the former introduced to the monumental Persian architecture.⁵

Additional motifs, extremely important in terms of ideology, appear in other structures to have been erected in Xerxes' time. This refers e.g. to the monumental Gate of All Nations, which he delegations seeking audience with the Great King used to enter ascending the Persepolitan platform. Huge winged bulls, borrowed from the Mesopotamian heritage and the ideology of power, were placed at the Gate, much bigger than their prototype and constituting a perfect and harmonious element of the architectural decoration of the Gate. Therefore, not only Egyptian, but also Mesopotamian elements were in the service of the ideology of power in Persia.

Another monumental structure of Xerxes' time was the hall of a hundred columns located east of the Apadana.⁶ It is also here that Egyptian-style lintels can be found, placed not only in the door-ways, but also in the numerous recesses decorating the interior of that representative and monumental hall. There are as many as twenty-seven of these highly decorative recesses placed at intervals in such a manner that they would be visible between the rows of columns in the hall. This is also where we can see door-posts richly carved in relief. Some of them feature the king defeating fantastic monsters, which, as has already been mentioned, is strongly connected with the ideology of power. Also found among the decorative elements are a winged sun disk, the king enthroned, royal guards and representatives of the nations making up the Persian Empire. This can serve as an example of how important it was to develop an ensemble of iconographic and ideological means intended to emphasise in an explicit manner the power of the ruler. The highly decorative portals, or rather lintels, suited the whole ensemble perfectly.

Emphasising the fact that the characteristic moulds were deeply rooted in the Persian ideology of power is their presence, as a regular decorative element, in all the rocky tombs of kings from the Achaemenid dynasty known to us. This motif seems to emphasise and complement the symbolism of the scenes carved in relief on the façades of the tombs. It seems to suggest that the place is reserved for the king and his closest relatives, like in the palaces, where the moulds were designed to stress the relationship between the edifice and the ruler. Therefore, these motifs are to be found in the tombs of: Darius the Great, Darius II, Artaxerxes I and Xerxes I from Naksh-e Rostam,⁷ as well as in the tombs of Artaxerxes II and III from Persepolis.⁸

⁴ J. WIESENHÖFER, *Das Frühe Persien, Geschichte eines antiken Weltreichs*, München 1999, pp. 28-30.

⁵ H. KOCH, *Es kündigt Dareios der König... Vom Leben im persischen Großreich*, Mainz am Rhein 1992, pp. 133-154; KOCH, *Persepolis*, pp. 51-54.

⁶ DUTZ, MATHESON, *Persepolis*, pp. 78-83.

⁷ L. TRÜMPPELMANN, *Zwischen Perspepolis und Firuzabad, Gräber, Paläste und Felsreliefs im Alten Persien*, Mainz am Rhein 1991 (hereinafter referred to as: TRÜMPPELMANN, *Zwischen Perspepolis und Firuzabad*), p. 41.

⁸ KOCH, *Persepolis*, pp. 104-105.

The motif of an Egyptian lintel appears in the history of the Persian architecture again five hundred years later, i.e. in the early period of the Sasanian dynasty rule. This means that the decorative element ceased to be employed, for a short time, under Greek rule and in the Parthian period. Why it revived later may be explained by the history of Persia in the first half of the 3rd century A.D. When the Sasanian dynasty came to power in Iran as a result of a coup d'état it had to legalise its claim to the throne. That event, quite dramatic in character, took place in 226 A.D. Ardashir I, who unleashed the revolt against the last Parthian king Artabanus IV or V, killed the king of Parthia in the battle of Hormizdagan, which brought him military success and, shortly afterwards, the longed-for crown as Persian ruler, but was not decisive in terms of the legitimacy of his claim to the throne.⁹ In other words: the manner of his coming to power cast a shadow on the image of the new ruler, which needed improvement. To this effect, it was decided to employ a whole ensemble of ideological and legitimising means, an important element of which was resorting to Persian virtues and to the power and glory of Iran under the Achaemenid dynasty. Strange as it may seem, that confusing pursuit of the glory of the past resulted in a revival of the long since forgotten Egyptising decorative elements. Those elements are to be found in the oldest Sasanian palace, Qaleh Dukhtar, erected by Ardashir I¹⁰ on a rock difficult to access. What changes in the Sasanian period, however, is the manner of rendering architectural details. Unlike in the Achaemenids' times, when such elements were chiseled in stone, in the Sasanian period the elements invoking the earlier norms were a stucco decoration.

This decorative element was undoubtedly intended as a referral to the Achaemenid tradition, but one can hardly expect the motif and its application to remain unchanged. In the first half of the third century there could hardly be petrified decorative elements. One can no longer see rectangular door-ways. They are no longer topped with transverse beams, but with arches. As a consequence, the Egyptian decorative motif ceased to be of any importance as a constructional element, but maintained the symbolic significance attributed to it in the earlier Achaemenid period. In the palace of Ardashir I in Qaleh Dukhtar Egyptian-style lintels, rendered in stucco, are placed above the arches. By way of digression, the whole setting of the arched door-way was given such a finishing touch that the door-way looked as if a Persepolitan door-frame was rendered in stucco and provided a setting for the Sasanian door-way. What is interesting is that it was not only the door-ways in Ardashir's palace that were given such a setting, but also recesses in the walls. An analogy to the hall of a hundred columns dating from Xerxes' time can be drawn here.

Another monumental edifice ordered by Ardashir I, probably erected after his coming to the throne, is a palace situated several kilometers from Firuzabad, a town located on the plan of a circle by order of the new king of Persia.¹¹ It was also there that the Egyptising lintels were employed. However, they were not introduced in the whole of the edifice, but only in its main part intended for the ruler. Therefore, an invocation of both the Achaemenid tradition and the symbolism of those elements linking them with a still earlier period is quite clear here.

Yet another Sasanian monument where the elements described here are to be found is the palace of Shapur I¹² erected in Bishapur. In this splendid and sumptuous palace, in its central hall topped with a marvellous dome, one can see Egyptian lintels similar to

⁹ A. CHRISTENSEN, *Iran sous les Sassanides*, Copenhagen 1936, pp. 79-91; J. WOLSKI, *L'Empire des Arsacides*, Louvain 1993, pp. 195-199; A. VERSTANDIG, *Histoire de L'Empire Parthe, (-250-227)*, Bruxelles 2001, pp. 349-353.

¹⁰ D. HUFF, *Ausgrabungen auf Qal'a ye Dukhtar bei Firuzabad 1976*, *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 11 (1978), pp. 117-147; TRÜMPPELMANN, *Zwischen Perspepolis und Firuzabad*, pp. 65-69.

¹¹ TRÜMPPELMANN, *Zwischen Perspepolis und Firuzabad*, pp. 69-71.

¹² R. GHIRSHMAN, *Bischapour I*, Paris 1971, pp. 21-36 (hereinafter referred to as: GHIRSHMAN, *Bischapour I*); R. GHIRSHMAN, *Bischapour II*, Paris 1956 (hereinafter referred to as: GHIRSHMAN, *Bischapour II*), pp. 11-36.

those which we already know from Firuzabad or Qaleh Dukhtar in the door-ways and in its numerous recesses. The hall was part of the most representative parts of the palace where the king used to give audiences.

Last but not least, an edifice which also deserves a mention is the temple of goddess Anahita, located several dozen meters from Shapur's palace in Bishapur.¹³ In that partly underground structure four door-ways with stylised Egyptian lintels attract visitors' attention. They look the same as in Achaemenid structures. This means that there are no arched door-ways in the temple and the lintels are in the shape of a flat beam.

It is only at first view that the presence of this type of constructional and decorative elements not in a palace, but in a structure performing sacral functions, may seem surprising. The more so because the introduction of the said motifs to Anahita's temple was not accidental. That goddess was specially worshiped by the members of the last pre-Muslim Persian dynasty. She even became the patroness of Sasanian rulers who stemmed from the priests and guardians of Anahita's temple in the town of Ishtakr founded several kilometres from the ruins of Persepolis. This is why that element, which may be associated with the royal power, could be intentionally used in a temple dedicated to that very goddess. This might have been one of the ways to express gratitude for her favour which enabled Sasanians' descendants to come to the throne.

To recapitulate, it can be observed that the appearance of Egyptian-style lintels in the Achaemenid period and tying them down to the ensemble of means employed to enhance the image and the power of the ruler created a perfect harmony with the monumental architecture of Persia. Moreover, that element, we can guess, was assigned a very specific function: it was used to decorate edifices which served as a royal residence. Other places, also connected with the presence of the ruler or his closest relatives, were the tombs of the Achaemenid dynasty. This is also where we can find Egyptian lintels which, undoubtedly, emphasise the uniqueness of the rulers whose mortal remains were placed in the tombs.

In the period of the Sasanian rulers, who both consciously and unconsciously modelled themselves on their great predecessors, the Egyptian-style lintels were revived. Surprisingly, the history of both the dynasties was strikingly similar, what has recently been pointed out, among others, by Roaf¹⁴ who summarised certain similarities in the history of both the royal dynasties.

As has already been mentioned, the Sasanians, legitimising their power and invoking the tradition of the Achaemenids, employed Egyptian-style moulds as part of their policy of building up their image and power. However, it seems that in their desire to invoke the Achaemenids and in their almost obsessive inclination to refer to the Persian character and to everything that was Persian, the Sasanians recognised the Egyptian-style lintels as one of the elements of the very Persian character, which they cherished so much. In other words, that element was so deeply rooted in the representative and ideological architecture of Persia that its Egyptian source was forgotten. This means that in the third century A.D., in the period of the first Sasanian rulers, the lintels continued only as a Persian ideological element and their Egyptian origin was not only unimportant, but also forgotten, which proves the predominance of the symbol over its provenance.

¹³ GHIRSHMAN, *Bischapour I*, Paris 1971, pp. 21-36; GHIRSHMAN, *Bischapour II*, pp. 11-36.

¹⁴ M. ROAF, *Persepolitian Echos In Sasanian Architecture, Did the Sasanians attempt to re-create the Achaemenid empire?*, [in:] V. SARKHOSH CURTIS, R. HILLENBRAND, J.M. ROGERS (eds.), *The Art and Archaeology of Ancient Persia, New Light on the Persian and Sasanian Empires*, London, 1998, pp. 1-7.



Fig. 58 Persepolis. The palace of Darius the Great.



Fig. 59 Persepolis. The palace of Darius the Great. Fragment of a lintel with a scene representing combat between the King and a monster.



Fig. 60 Persepolis. The tomb of Artaxerxes III?



Fig. 61 Firuzabad. Decorated niches in the interior of the Ardashir I palace.



Fig. 62 Bishapur. Lintel from the temple of Anahita.