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THE EARLY HISTORY AND CULTURE
 OF THE IRANIAN PEOPLES
 OF WEST ASIA



A THE ARRIVAL OF THE MEDES AND PERSIANS IN IRAN

Questions of the time and routes of the movement of the Medes and Persians into Iran and of their gradual settlement there have already been discussed in the scholarly literature for more than a hundred years. Much attention has been paid to this problem by Spiegel, Prášek and König, while in our time it has been examined in the works of Ghirshman, Cameron, Hinz and many other well-known Western scholars. In Soviet literature these questions have been researched in particular detail by Diakonoff and Aliev, while during the course of the past 25 years they have been greatly elaborated by Grantovsky, who in a series of articles and in the book *The Early History of the Iranian Tribes of West Asia* has examined all the material on the history of the Iranian tribes in the Near East up to the formation of the Median and Achaemenid empires and has provided a comprehensive survey of the literature.

Until recently the majority of scholars assumed that the proto-homeland (*Urheimat*) of the Iranians was located in Central Asia and the regions adjoining it and that from there a portion of the Iranian tribes migrated to the plateau. Such, in particular, is the opinion of Meyer and Cameron, and, in Soviet scholarship, of Diakonoff and Aliev, according to whom the Iranian tribes invaded Media from Central Asia and the neighboring regions and occupied the territory of Iran in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C., although, as both previously mentioned Soviet scholars contend, the predominant role belonged to the former local population, which spoke Elamite, Kassite, Qutian, and other non-Indo-European languages [35:137ff; 40:126–30; 8:190ff].

At present this widespread hypothesis is being reconsidered by many scholars. As early as the end of the nineteenth century, some scholars posited that the Iranian tribes moved to the plateau from the south Russian steppes through the Caucasus [see the literature on the subject:

24:10ff]. In the 1930s König wrote that the Persians and Medes arrived in the region of Ecbatana through the eastern Transcaucasus. In 1965 Abaev concluded, on the basis of a study of Scythian–European isoglosses, that the northern Iranian tribes were located in the south of Russia at least from the beginning of the second millennium B.C. and that later a portion of the Iranian tribes moved from there through the Caucasus and along the northern littoral of the Caspian Sea into Iran and Central Asia respectively, while at the same time the Scythians, who were also Iranians, remained in their homeland, i.e., southern Russia. With reference to the works of Ghirshman and other archaeologists, Abaev believes that archaeological materials also testify to the movement of the Medes and Persians not from Central Asia, but from the north; i.e., through the Caucasus [4:121–4; 5:11]. In Grantovsky's opinion data from the cuneiform texts of the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. supports the theory of the migration of the Medes and Persians into Iran through the Caucasus, and not from Central Asia, although it is still not possible to regard this as proven [25:327].

Working on the basis of onomastic and also, partially, toponymic material from cuneiform texts, Grantovsky has shown that during the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. the Iranian element played a much greater role in the regions of western Iran, extending beyond the boundaries of Media proper, than had ever been previously postulated; until now almost all scholars believed that the role of the Iranians among the peoples of western Iran was insignificant until the seventh century B.C. According to Grantovsky, the Iranian tribes spread out across Iran at the beginning of the first millennium B.C.; their appearance there dates to the eleventh century B.C., while their appearance in the regions near Lake Urmia (former Rezaïyeh) and in the Transcaucasus dates to the twelfth century. However, during the ninth and eighth centuries in some regions the old, non-Iranian-speaking population still dominated in political terms, but beginning from the second half of the eighth century B.C. the Iranians constituted the majority in many regions of western Iran, including both the territory of the future Median kingdom and the area to the west of Media. The Median state, like the later Achaemenid empire, emerged in a region where the Iranian ethnic element predominated; it was precisely on the basis of the preceding development of the Iranian tribes that this state emerged. In Grantovsky's opinion, the penetration of the Iranian tribes into Iran did not constitute a conquest, nor was it accompanied by a transfer of power into their hands over significant territories. On the contrary, from the ninth to the seventh centuries B.C. the Iranian tribes were usually politically dependent on Elam, Manna, Assyria and Urartu. Grantovsky rejects the opinion of König, Herzfeld and some other Western scholars that the ruling class originated in the Iranian migrants

and that the basic population remained autochthonous; instead he holds that both the rulers and the common population were Iranian-speaking even prior to the emergence of major Iranian state formations, after which even the non-Iranian population began to shift to the Iranian languages. Grantovsky also considers erroneous the rather widespread opinion on the backwardness of the Iranian tribes in comparison with the old local populations of the Iranian plateau. He assumes that, when the Iranians appeared in Iran, they already had developed cultural and socio-economic traditions and were engaged in agricultural production, as well as livestock breeding, and that they were well acquainted with metals, used the chariot, and bred horses [25:289, 314–20].

Diakonoff and Aliev, the two chief opponents of Grantovsky, are now agreed that the latter succeeded in determining the time of the appearance of the Iranian-speaking population in the regions of western and central Iran and of Iranian Azerbaijan; (*i.e.*, no later than the ninth century B.C.); however, they continue to assume, apparently with total justification, that Grantovsky has underestimated the role of the autochthonous populations, which continued to occupy significant territories of the Iranian plateau [40:129–30; 38:90; 9:172ff]. In general, one must acknowledge that the works of Grantovsky have forced us to re-examine many traditional views on the early history of the Iranian tribes and have shown that the process of the formation of Iranian state unions was much more lengthy and complex than scholars had previously thought.

Let us turn now to facts that have been attested to in the cuneiform texts. The most ancient history of the Iranians is only very tenuously reflected in the written sources. The Persians are mentioned for the first time in Assyrian texts from the ninth century B.C. An inscription by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, which was written around 843 B.C., mentions the region of Parsua. In 834 B.C. the Assyrians received taxes from 27 “kings” of this region. Until recently scholars thought that Parsua was situated near Lake Urmia. It is the almost unanimous opinion of historians and archaeologists that Parsua was inhabited by Persian tribes, from whom this region also received its name. The Persians were still not yet united and were under the leadership of their own numerous chiefs, who were independent of each other. Somewhat later, at the end of the eighth century, the Assyrian texts mention the country of Parsu(a)mash, which was situated somewhat east of the present-day city of Sulaimaniya; *i.e.*, to the northeast of Elam. It has been assumed that around 800 B.C. the Persians detached themselves from the Median tribes and, faced with the onslaught of the Uartians and Manneans, moved south into the valleys of the Zagros mountains and then gradually migrated further to the southeast. In 714 B.C. they are mentioned as subjects of the Assyrian king Sargon II. Gradually the Persians occupied Elamite territory in southwes-

tern Iran, which received the name Parsumash after the name of the new arrivals (this form is attested in the Assyrian texts; it appears as Pārsa in the Old Persian sources and Persis in the Greek authors; *i.e.*, the modern province of Fars). Such, in any case, is the opinion of the majority of scholars concerning the routes of penetration into Iran by the Persians [186:141ff; 379:115].

Moreover, some archaeologists (for instance, Ghirshman) assume that changes in the material culture (burial features, ornamentations of the harnesses used on horses, ceramics) also testify to the direction of movements of the Iranian tribes. As Ghirshman has contended, the Persians came into Elam not as conquerors, but obtained lands for habitation after having entered into the service of local rulers as mounted horsemen, inasmuch as cavalry was unknown in western Asia prior to the arrival of the Iranians on the plateau.

But Diakonoff contends that the names Parsua and Parsumash do not at all suggest the directions of movement of the Persian tribes. It is his opinion that Parsua and Parsumash are different toponyms that existed simultaneously; moreover, the region of Parsua at Lake Urmia did not have any relationship to the Persians, while Parsumash as early as the end of the ninth century B.C. coincided in terms of territory with the later Pārsa (Persis) and was already occupied at that time by the Persians. Furthermore, Diakonoff believes that Parsua and Parsumash were not connected with the age-old self-designating name of the Persians, which was transferred to the population that inhabited these regions, but are toponyms which designate "outskirts" in respect to Media [35:69, 161, 224; 38:90–1; 40:130]. In rejecting this opinion, Grantovsky has assumed that the terms Parsua, Parsumash, Parsamash and Pārsa relate to people and designate "broad-breasted", "strong-sided" and "big hipped" (*i.e.*, people of strong build), and that all the regions with this ethnonym testify to the movement of the Persian tribes from the northwest to the south, indicating the routes of their migration and subsequent settlement in separate locations [25:312]. Labat likewise assumes that, in all probability, the Persians were already in Parsua when the Assyrian troops of Shalmaneser III entered it, inasmuch as a chief with the indisputably Iranian name of Artasari ruled near this region [450:19].

In Levine's opinion, there are no grounds for locating the region of Parsua on the shores of Lake Urmia in any period and all the sources testify to the fact that this country was located in the mountains of the central Zagros, to the south of the Mannaeans and to the east of Namru. In the late Neo-Assyrian period, as Levine notes, references in the texts to Parsua in the central Zagros disappear, and under Assurbanipal this region, to all appearances, was situated far to the south, in the modern-day province of Fars (467:106ff). Parsua is likewise mentioned in the

Uartian texts of the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. in the form of Parshua [*cf.* 60:422], which, strictly speaking, also served as the grounds for locating this country near Urmia. However, Levine directs attention to the fact that Parsua is mentioned in the Uartian texts when Assyria was weak, when the Uartians could advance to the Zagros, and that when, on the contrary, Assyria was at the zenith of her might, the Uartian inscriptions say nothing at all about Parsua.

Stronach assumes that there are no archaeological proofs in favor of the hypothesis that the Persian tribes arrived in Khuzistan earlier than the year 700 B.C. and that they then slowly advanced to the east, to the fertile valleys of modern-day Fars. It is his opinion that the Persian tribes approached Fars directly from the north (and, perhaps, simultaneously also from the east) and then began to advance to the west. Kutir-Nahhunte (reigned 693–692 B.C.) was the last Elamite ruler to bear the title of “king of Anshan and Susa.” According to Stronach’s assumption, soon after 700 B.C. a substantial area of Anshan was abandoned by the Elamites and settled by the Persians. In such a case, the first permanent inhabitation settlements of the Persians in southern Iran must be sought closer to the province of Fars, and not beyond the hills of Susa [654:247–8; *cf.* 186:158–65].

Thus, the question of the specific routes of the penetration of the Persian tribes into Iran still remains very much a matter for discussion. At any rate, in the ninth century B.C. they began to move into Persis, which became their new homeland. Up till the beginning of the forties of the seventh century B.C. the Persians were in a state of dependence on the Elamite kings, and then for a brief period they became tributaries of the Assyrians. Apparently, at this time the Persians had already formed a tribal union, which was headed by chiefs from the clan of the Achaemenids. Tradition has considered Achaemenes as the founder of the dynasty (this opinion already prevailed at least by the time when Darius I seized the throne). His activity, if indeed he was a real person, can be attributed to the end of the eighth and the first quarter of the seventh centuries B.C. However, it is possible that Achaemenes was only an eponym, a mythical ancestor. Cyrus II does not mention him at all in a detailed list of his own ancestors given in the Babylonian cylinder, although he also had a vested interest in tracing his line to more remote times. One scholiast to Dionysius Periegetes wrote that the Persians received their name from Perseus, the son of whom was Achaemenes [*Schol. Dion. Per.* 1053]. Nicolaus of Damascus says: “Achaemenes was a hero from whom the Persian Achaemenids had their origin” [*FGrH* 1, 2, p. 361].¹ It is possible to agree with Diakonoff when he writes that a small Persian kingdom existed in Fars as early as in the second half of the ninth

¹ It is true that the name Achaemenes has a rather simple etymology; namely, “of a friendly will.”

century B.C., and that Achaemenes was not the chief of some Persian tribes that invaded this region in the seventh century B.C., since Persians had lived there even earlier than that [40:130). Around the years 675–640 B.C., the confederation of Persian tribes was headed by Chishpish (Teispes in Greek transcription), who, according to later tradition, was the son of Achaemenes.

B THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF IRAN IN THE IRON AGE: (PERIODIZATION AND FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM)

Intensive archaeological work on numerous sites (settlements and cemeteries) has been conducted during the past two decades in Iran, throughout a vast area bordered roughly on the northwest by the shore of Lake Urmia, on the northeast by the southern shore of the Caspian, on the southeast by the center of the Iranian plateau (the region near Kashan), and on the southwest by the province of Luristan. All of these sites are dated roughly from 1300 to 600 B.C. and are attributed to a period generally designated the Iron Age.

At present, cemeteries have been excavated in the previously mentioned regions at the following locations: Sialk (near Kashan); Gheytyeh and Khurvin in the region of Teheran; Marlik and Kaluraz in the Caspian littoral region; War-Kabud, Kal-i Chinan, Tattulban, and others in western Luristan; Dinkha-tepe in the region of Urmia; and a series of others. Settlements have been investigated at Hasanlu near Urmia; Baba Jan and Surkh Dum (eastern Luristan); Godin Tepe and Tepe Nush-i Jan (Kurdistan); the "Achaemenid Village" in Susa, Pasargadae, and Tepe Malyan (Fars); and some others [see 700b].

The division of the Iron Age in Iran into periods was elaborated in the 1960s, after multistratified archaeological sites (particularly Hasanlu) attributed to this period were investigated, and after sufficiently large collections of materials (ceramics, arms, ornaments, burial features, and public and private architecture) were assembled to make comparative analyses possible. Cuyler Young presented highly developed arguments for his conclusions on the periodization of the Iron Age, basing his research on ceramics from Hasanlu, Tepe Giyan and Geoy-tepe (all of which monuments were characterized by complex stratification) which he compared with ceramic complexes from the cemeteries of Sialk and Khurvin, and some sites from pre-Achaemenid times (Zendan-i Sulaiman, Ziwiye, etc.) [734a; 734b].

Basically, Young established that the archaeological culture of western Iran, the beginning of which can be dated at c.1300 B.C., was a new phenomenon for the plateau, where an "archaeological revolution" was occurring at the time. This "revolution," Young held, was characterized

by a total replacement of the forms and ornamentation of ceramic vessels. Painted pottery forms disappear, and monochrome ceramics (dark grey, black, and buff) are widely distributed in their place throughout all of western Iran. New forms of vessels closely similar to each other appear at various sites, while burial rites also undergo a change (individual burials in extramural cemeteries that were located some distance from the settlements take the place of the repeatedly used burial vaults inside settlements that were characteristic of the Bronze Age). Young believes that these features suggest that the entire region was culturally unified, and that they indicate a common origin for this new culture. Through studying "typological ceramic parallels," he distinguished the following periods for the Iron Age, which he called "ceramic horizons":

I . The Early Western Grey Ware Horizon or Group (1300/1250–1000 B.C.);

II . The Late Grey Ware Horizon or Group (1000–800 B.C.);

III. The Late Western Buff Ware Horizon or Group (750/700–550 B.C.).

After having determined that by 1300 B.C. the characteristic forms of ceramics – vessels with free-standing long spouts (the so-called teapots), pedestal-based goblets with loop-shaped handles, and some other forms – were distributed at all the sites (settlements and cemeteries) then known in western Iran, Young concluded, from his tracing of the development of these forms, that – although the traditions of the first "horizon" continued into the second – the past "ceramic uniformity" had disintegrated and that a period of "considerable ceramic diversity" had taken its place. In the third "horizon" grey ceramics had been replaced almost everywhere by plain buff-coloured pottery, sometimes painted (the so-called "triangle wares" or "festoon wares") or incised. Although both this fact and the appearance of new ceramic forms could be regarded as indicating a certain shift in culture, Young suggested that this "horizon" (the time preceding the Achaemenids) should be regarded as continuing the "past cultural development". "The origins of Achaemenid pottery in Iran," Young wrote, "lie in the Iron III period, and no break in the record marks the transition from pre- or proto-historic times to the historic age of Cyrus and his successors" [734b:27].

By studying not only ceramics, but also the entire complex of Iran's Iron Age material culture, Dyson came to similar conclusions (although differing in some details) and proposed calling its periods "Iron Age I–III" – with the same dates [254a]. Like Young, Dyson believed that the "archaeological revolution" of Iron Age I was caused by the arrival on the plateau of a new population.

In the beginning of the second millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia and Western Iran, painted ware cultures (with local variants) continued to develop. The cultures of Godin III, Hasanlu VI and Dinkha IV are

attributed to this period in western Iran. But in the second half of the second millennium B.C., “at first perhaps gradually, and then with striking suddenness”, all of western and northwestern Iran was overwhelmed by the grey and grey–black ceramic culture, a ceramic tradition which prior to that time had developed for more than 1,000 years in areas farther to the northeast. Young wrote:

Here the impact of these influences is such as definitely to suggest a major cultural dislocation and the introduction of a whole new culture and probably a new people into the Zagros. It is this development that marks the end of the Bronze Age in western Iran and ushers in the early protohistoric period [734c:831].

Thus, as Muscarella has noted, “the Iron I culture represents a new phenomenon in western Iran . . . Culturally the break is equally clear and dramatic, notably in the pottery and in the burial customs” [523a:52].

On the basis of a study of cemetery materials, Vanden Berghe singled out the following features characterizing the change in burial customs that took place in Iron Age I, and, correspondingly, indicative of the “archaeological revolution” of the Iron Age as a whole:

- 1 The dead were no longer buried under house floors; rather, extra-mural cemeteries were now set up at some distance from the settlements.
- 2 The dead were interred with various objects in graves primarily constructed of stone.
- 3 The funereal inventories consisted mainly of ceramics with the same forms as those that were also characteristic of Iron Age I settlements. The painted pottery was replaced by grey–black and buff ware.
- 4 In addition to ceramics, the funereal inventories included diverse items made from metal, which in Iron Age I consisted of weapons, personal ornaments, etc. that were still exclusively made of bronze, whereas iron appeared only in the Iron Age II period.
- 5 The grave goods sometimes included works of art (mainly gold and silver vessels with various images, as well as gold, silver and bronze ornaments), which represented the nascent art of the “animal style” that later became the distinctive feature of Iranian (Scythian, Median) art.

All of this has provided us with the opportunity to suggest that the new population that had brought a new archaeological culture to the Iranian plateau consisted of tribes of nomads (Vanden Berghe points to the presence of burials with horses) [700a:41–2].

Thus, the excavations of Iron Age sites that have been conducted in Iran have been concerned with the reconstruction of the character of the culture of the new tribes; the establishment of the initial date of their

penetration into the plateau; and the determination of the routes of their migration and the stages of development of the culture that led to its florescence in the historic (Achaemenid) period. This excavation work had been inspired by a definite idea, and its aim was to make as complete a survey of the sites as possible. The implementation of the plan basically began in the 1950s, and the work has united archaeologists from various countries and from numerous archaeological missions, museums and institutes. Although so far the results of the majority of excavations have been published only in the form of preliminary reports, the material which has been accumulated during this time has seemed sufficient for the formulation of definitive conclusions. Now details are being rendered in more precise form and the dates of individual sites and their connections are being discussed; although until now no definite data have been obtained on the problem of the direction of migrations, the basic conclusion for archaeologists who have worked in Iran is considered to be firm: the culture of Iron Age I is a uniform culture that was brought to the plateau by new tribes.

According to this archaeological model, the appearance of the earliest bearers of the new archaeological culture in the Zagros could be dated from the period of Iron Age I (*c.* 1300/1250 B.C.). To judge from archaeological evidence, the culture of Iron Age II (*c.* 1000–800 B.C.) can be regarded as a development of Iron Age I; with somewhat less certainty the same can be said also of the ties between Iron Age II and Iron Age III (*c.* 800–550 B.C.). The dissemination of the culture of Iron Age I–II in Zagros was limited spatially and, it would seem, in principle could be correlated with the settling of the Iranian tribes into new areas, a movement which is known from written sources. The spread of the Iron Age III culture, on the other hand, was (at least in the seventh century B.C.) much more widespread; in fact, this culture embraced all of western Iran.

Thus, the arguments that unite these archaeological models with the written evidence on the migration of the Iranians into these regions associate the cultures of Iron Age I–II with the early penetration of the Iranian tribes into the most eastern regions of the Zagros, followed by their gradual infiltration to the west along the main roads that crossed the mountain valleys.

As has been assumed until now, the cultures of Iron Ages I–II must have been absent in the areas which were under the control of non-Iranian state formations that were subordinate to Urartu, Assyria and Elam. The widespread dissemination of the culture of Iron Age III in these areas is associated in such a case with the strengthening of the Median kingdom in the seventh and beginning of the sixth centuries B.C., and with the Iranization of the Zagros [734c:832]. This essentially is how the basic

culture-historic problem of the Iranian Iron Age has been formulated in almost all the works on Iranian archaeology.

As previously stated (pp. 2–3), extraordinary ethnic and political diversity was characteristic of Iran in the second and beginning of the first millennia B.C. Arguments concerning the location of various petty state formations mentioned in cuneiform (chiefly Assyrian) sources [24; 467], which have not been definitively resolved, and the uncertain ethnic map of Iran for this period, naturally do not permit us to link directly the spread of the new culture with one or another set of ethnic or political changes in Iran.

Nevertheless, many scholars believe that the hypothesis associating the “archaeological revolution” with the migration of the Iranians on to the plateau has been confirmed. This point of view is so deeply rooted in the archaeological literature that the arguments for its substantiation are transferred from work to work and are now no longer being supplemented with new data. It would seem that for archaeologists there is no alternative; there are no other historical facts which could explain the unique ceramic (and in a broader sense, cultural) unification of the period of Iron Age I, which they have defined. The attention of archaeologists is concentrated for the most part on the question of routes of penetration of the Iranians on to the plateau – from the north (through the Caucasus) or from the east (*cf.* above, p. 1). Thus, according to Ghirshman, the Persian tribes travelled through the Caucasus, at first settling down on the west or southwest of Lake Urmia (Parsau; *c.* 850 B.C.); after the eighth campaign of Sargon (in 714 B.C.) they moved south, at first into Khuzistan, where they settled near Susa, Masdjid-i Sulaiman, and Bard-i Nishandeh, and then into Fars and Pasargadae. Correspondingly, a number of archaeological sites – Masdjid-i Sulaiman, Bard-i Nishandeh, and the Achaemenid Village I in Susa – have been dated from pre-Achaemenid times [309:22]. By noting some similarity of the grey–black ceramics of western Iran with those discovered in Tepe Hissar near Damghan (Hissar IIIC, which, according to radiocarbon dating, dates *c.* 1800 B.C. [624a]) and comparing it with other data, Young (and many others) postulated that the Iranians moved from the east to the west [734b]. This view, in turn, gave rise to arguments on the dating of some sites: for instance the cemetery of Khurvin, which was the nearest known cemetery to Hissar. Despite all the efforts to date Khurvin as early as possible (for instance the fourteenth century B.C.), the gap between it and Hissar IIIC remained too significant: no less than 400 years!

All of these works, to one extent or another, took into account the linguistic research that was devoted to the analysis of the toponyms and names in the annals of the Assyrian kings from a period no earlier than the ninth century B.C. And here, as has been pointed out, we cannot consider