Detail from above the entrance of Tehran’s fire temple, 1286/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad
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Reviews


Review Article


Special Issue

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Methodological and Historiographical Notes on the ‘Paradise’ as an Iranian Royal Institution.

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The purpose of this short essay is to draw attention to important continuities and ruptures in what has often been portrayed as one of the most enduring institutions of ancient Iranian kingship, that is, the ‘paradise.’ A large and extremely learned literature has grown up, especially around the Achaemenid paradise, which we need not review again here exhaustively. Here, I would like to draw attention to moments where assumptions inherited from one discipline, be it philology, history or archaeology, have been brought to bear on another, and in so doing, have shaped our understanding of ancient phenomena in ways that do not cohere with the extant evidence.

I. Paradise Palaces

The word *paradajda*- appears in the Old Persian version of Artaxerxes II’s four-line, trilingual inscription from Susa (A²Sd), which was engraved on at least eight square column bases from the porticos of two structures in his palace near the Šāhur River. The inscription contains many irregular spellings, which have sometimes been interpreted as orthographic errors. Such errors could have resulted from the work of a less skilled engraver, however, many of the departures from expected spelling (like using a long ā for a short ‘a’ to indicate the masculine accusative singular) likely reflect changes in the Old Persian language as it moved towards Middle Persian. Extrapolated from exceptional descriptions of paradises, the conviction that ‘paradises’ were one and the same as a hunting park or garden even led to faulty interpretations and emendations of Artaxerxes II’s *paradajdā*- inscriptions. For example, privileging the view given by some (though not all) classical authors like Xenophon, P. Lecoq understood the Achaemenid paradise to be exclusively a hunting park and thus could not accept that the word *paradajdā*- actually referred to the very garden palace whose column bases preserved the inscription itself. Before suggesting an alternative, he emended the reading and interpretation of the aforementioned inscription, stating “[…]il ne paraît pas possible de transformer un édifice en parc à gibier.”

Scholarship has made great strides in understanding the nature of the Achaemenid institution. Quite different than a hunting park, the Achaemenid ‘paradise’ (OPers. *paradajdā*- [*paradajda*-], Elamite *partetaš*; cf. Av. *pairi.daēza*) was a specially delimited space that encouraged and, in some instances, showcased agricultural, animal and human productivity. In special cases palaces, formal gardens and even hunting enclosures were associated with paradises, but, it must be stressed, such features were neither constant nor necessary constituents of paradises any more than paradises were exclusively found with them. Paradises could be freestanding installations, located adjacent to other paradises or associated with another feature, such as a treasury, fortress or palace. Although they are more prominent in the literary sources and modern scholarship, paradises that contained, or were associated with, palaces and ornamental gardens should be thought of as prestigious exceptions rather than the rule in the Achaemenid period. When considering the full sweep of the evidence, it is more accurate to characterize paradises as powerful- even necessary- symbolic adjuncts to royal palaces, country manor houses or hunting estates rather than vice-versa. Even paradises that were a part of royal or aristocratic residences showcased practical, productive features. This was certainly the case at our best-

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4- Tuplin, “Parks and Gardens,” 95-96 and 111-14.
known Achaemenid palace associated with a paradise: Pasargadae. In my opinion, W. Henkelman’s frequent translation of partetaš in the Persepolis archival tablets as ‘plantation’ is the most accurate general translation available, which can be modified according to what other features were associated with it, be it palace, garden, storehouse or stockyard. Artaxerxes II’s paradise palace is exceptional in the same way that Pasargadae is.

The inscribed column bases recovered from the Šāhur Palace provide a nuanced view of how such institutions—either workaday or palatial—participated in Achaemenid royal ideology and the special role that the palatial ‘paradises’ played. The Šāhur Palace’s inscribed bases were found in the vicinity of the southern portico of Building II. Others were thought to have come from the western portico of Building I. Thus all originated from the highly visible, focal points of both structures. Both the Elamite and Babylonian versions ‘translate’ hadiš with the Old Persian word tacara, a different Old Persian word for ‘palace.’ In the Old Persian version of the inscription Artaxerxes II uses a different Persian term for palace, hadiš, and includes an added descriptor stated that he created, “this palace, which is a living paradise” (ima hadiš taya jīvadi paradajdām). The Elamite and Babylonian versions of the inscription simply state, “I built this palace.” In addition, the Elamite and Babylonian versions either ignore the phrase jīvadi paradajdār or consider tazara/tašara as a simplified translation for the entire phrase, ima hadiš taya jīvadi paradajdām. Here, it is possible we are dealing with a proper name or institution, which did not need to be- or could not be- translated because of its heavy Mazdaean connotations. In all other occurrences of the word in the royal inscriptions, the royal author programmatically deploys it in opposition to mṛta- ‘dead,’ suggesting a specific usage growing from Achaemenid royal ideology.

II. What did the Arsacids and Sasanians call their ‘Paradises?’

The other problem is that of continuity. The Macedonians initially used the palaces of the Achaemenids and these provided them both a template and departure point. In narratives of Alexander’s

10- Schmitt, Inschrift, 195.
11- Schmitt, Beiträge, 82. Werba, “(Indo-)Iranische Rekonstrukte,” 282n103.
13- Schmitt Wörterbuch, 197.
conquest and the wars of the Diadochoi, paradeisoi appear as a normal part of the economic and cultural landscape of the former Persian Empire. These are visible both as freestanding plantations and, occasionally, as a component of a palace or the extended royal holdings in the environs of a royal residence city. Toponyms and scattered mentions indicate that some of the old practical, work-a-day paradises not connected to a palace still functioned too. In Hellenistic Western Asia, what are referred to as paradeisoi are associated primarily with royal residences, and the term as deployed in later literature is most closely associated with royal palaces or estates. While imperially sponsored agricultural production, estates and storage depots were important in the Seleukid Empire, the ideological apparatus of the Achaemenid imperial project that once animating them and provided a larger conceptual unity no longer was intact. In fact, it survives as a technical term in Egypt much longer than it did in Iran. Ptolemid tax registries indicate that a number of Achaemenid agricultural paradises survived in Egypt even if they were no longer associated with a memory of the Persian legacy.

The Parthian and Sasanian kings established numerous country estates where the kings kept royal hunting preserves, developed grand plantations and kept treasuries. The Middle Iranian words by which these institutions are most often referred to in indigenous ancient sources is dašīgīrd (‘property,’ ‘estate’), though scholarship often refers to them as ‘paradises,’ using the same name as the Achaemenid material or Greek descriptions. The complete continuity between the two institutions that this nomenclature implies is by no means securely continuously documented, least of all linguistically. As far as I can tell (and I would welcome learning of more evidence if I have overlooked something), the word appears to have dropped out of use as both a technical and general term for a royal garden or estate by the Sasanian period. To my knowledge no Middle Iranian version of the word, such as *pārdīz, *pārdiz, *pālīz, or *pardēz, appears in any Sasanian inscription yet discovered or late Pahlavi text to refer to a royal estate or garden. The Zoroastrian and Manichaean literature that refers to gardens use a different term, even when speaking of a heavenly garden: bōyēštān or boštān. Needless to say, in the Middle Iranian linguistic realm, this term was not applied to a Zoroastrian or Manichaean otherworldly Paradise. It never appears in the place of Avešan-derived terminology: garodmān or wahišt. Linguistically speaking at least, Classical Armenian partēz reflects Parthian pardēz. Armenian retained several archaic words rooted in Old Persian, for which different terms arose in Sasanian Middle Persian. It is tantalizing to think that this instead reflects the impact of a wider usage of the Parthian word for this institution, but, more significantly, this term is never used when referring to the hunting enclosures as maintained by the Orontid, Artaxiad or Arsacid kings. When it is used, which is only seldom, however, it translates ‘garden’ (Gr. kēpos) but not a heavenly ‘paradise’ in a Judeo-Christian sense, for which term the Iranian loanword, draxt was employed.

Tantalizingly, an ostrakon from the archives in Nisa provides precious evidence of the continuity of the word “paradise,” pardēz, in Parthian. Using one of the common bureaucratic formulae found in the archive, it records the contents of an amphora brought to Nisa from an estate: “In this amphora, from an uzbarī (vineyard), which is in Sēgabič, Pardēz by name, (is) wine: 17 mari...”18 The majority of the archive records payments from royal estates. The technical terms for royal estates that paid their incomes in kind were uzbarī (ʾwzbry, cf. OPers. *udbaryya-, Av. *uz-barya-) and patbāžīk (ptbzyk < OPers. "patibâji-) estates.19 In the majority of the cases in the Nisa documents, they are vineyards that paid the king’s share in wine, though in Mesopotamia such crown lands along the royal canals grew grain.20 However in this ostrakon it is the proper name of an estate, not a common bureaucratic designator as in the Persepolis archives. The significance of this is not entirely clear, but given that the Nisa archive does not systematically designate all or a certain class of the estates as a pardēz, as did the Achaemenid material, it suggests that the word was no longer was a common term for a royal estate in the Parthian period. Thus in the Nisa archive, Pardēz is the proper name of an uzbarī estate, placing it firmly in the continuum of agricultural estates versus hunting or palatial traditions. The early Armenian usage seems to reflect this too. The word survives in New Persian pālēz as the word for a domestic vegetable garden. Without further indigenous primary source evidence, it is seems to me, at this point, that any Roman authors who used the term in describing a dasṭīgird likely did so independent of common Sasanian usage and applied it as a learned antiquarian term. That they were tempted to do so, however, is not surprising given that the Sasanian estates held much of the same ideological charge and fulfilled many of the same logistical purposes as the Achaemenid estates. The processes by which Iranian aristocratic culture preserved and cultivated these royal practices is a problem for another work.21

21- To be dealt with more fully in Matthew P. Canepa, The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE–642 CE (Berkeley: University of California Press [forthcoming])