

# The rise of achaemenid empire history essay

[History](#), [Empires](#)



The social and political history of Iran has undergone a lot many changes affecting the lives and outlook of its people. Art, particularly performing arts tend to be the reflection of social consciousness. These performing arts have been victim to the ravages of time and social change in Iran. Therefore, it is necessary to assess the development of Persian drama in the context of social changes underwent by Iran. Drama has been greatly influenced by many a events in the Persian history. Hence, to appreciate it, one needs to have comprehensive knowledge of Persian history, its role in the evolution and the development modern drama in Iran There is a dearth of facts and documents to prove the existence of theatre form in ancient Iran.

Nevertheless, we are aware of the fact that the Aryans had such customs and rituals that reflected in some of their festivals and entertainment as well. Gradually, these ritual forms and festivals developed as various theatrical forms and dramatic performances.

### Origin of Theatre in Iran

An illustrated account of dance has been collected from hundreds of artefacts of carved stone and painted scenes on pottery in the Balkans and the Middle East. These artefacts are inclusive of painted pottery from Sialk mound (now known as part of Iran) of the 7000 B. C. Sialk mound is the pre-historic civilization of some people living in the city of Sialk, situated near modern Kashan (a city in the province of Isfahan, a part of central Iran). The traces of human settlement, their evolution, the condition of their lives, and their spiritual growth multiply the importance of Sialk mound. From 4000 B. C. to 3200 B. C. the artists showed a tendency towards realism by drawing images of snake, leopard, goat, horned ram, deer, stork, and heron in

succession or square shape with great skill. These drawings bespeak of a realistic style of art quite different from earlier paintings. No longer were animals drawn by simple lines. More attention was paid to dimension. They observed the balance of ratios in portraying the subjects. This naturalistic approach was brimful of life and motion. Motion and hunting scenes were depicted landscapes full of battles and wild beasts. Sometimes a hunter bends his bow and some other dancers perform a sacred ritual dance. These drawings are exact impressions that the artists see around themselves. Then he draws them on potteries. There are illustrated Sun and sea birds amidst dancers dancing. It can be associated with the worship of the Sun as part of a ritual performance.

Later Aryans settled in Iranian plateau in 2000 BC. It was an Indo-European branch. The term Aryan is derived from the Sanskrit term Arya meaning noble. Historians believe the Aryans hailed from the Ural Mountains. The Ural Mountains is now situated in Kirgizstan. Life got tougher due to shortage of food, drop in temperature, and pressure put by yellow-skinned tribes in the north. The Aryans, thus, began to disperse. Some moved to Greece, others to Iran. Some of them entered in India from the eastern front. The entire process of migration happened all between 2000 BC-1500 BC. The Aryans were a fairly advanced race in respect of material civilization. Basically, they were an agricultural race. The language they used was very complex and well developed. Due to a developed language they were capable of expressing their thoughts clearly and intelligibly. They had a well-developed religious system too. Religion had been successively passed on from

Teachers to students. Many of these teachers are well known and some others are mentioned in the Vedas.

It is apparent that the Aryans had their own customs and fascinating rituals. They employed these customs and rituals in their festivals and for entertainment purposes as well. These rituals and customs etc. evolved into different theatrical forms and dramatic performances. A survey is needed in this area of various theatrical forms and dramatic arts, the different religious practices and rituals they followed in the Ancient World. This will give a clear idea about the roots of this form in Iran.

### Rise of Achaemenid Empire

Parsi culture or Aryan culture rose as an integrated culture on Iranian plateau by Achaemenian Dynasty. In 1930, Professor Ernst Emil Herzfeld found out a few pieces of illustrated pottery in Persepolis, the capital of ancient Achaemenid Empire. The tow ritual performers performing in 1500 BC as in the form of ibex horned men wearing wild goat mask can be seen in one of the pottery pieces. The mask of goat was regarded to be the symbol of the Mountain God. The symbol insinuates the importance of masks in ritual performance

Herzfeld was born in 1879 in Celle. Celle is a Province of Hanover in Germany. He studied architecture, Assyriology, ancient history and art history in Munich and Berlin.

The Achaemenid Empire is also known as The Persian Empire. This empire was the successor of the Median Empire. The Median Empire ruled over

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major portion of Greater Iran. The Median Empire is known to be the first Iranian dynasty. The inhabitants of this Empire well known as Medes and their neighbours, the Persians spoke Median languages. They were closely related to the Aryans. Historians have a little about the Iranian culture under the Median dynasty. Of course, they are well aware of their practice of Zoroastrianism and the existence of a priestly community called Magi. The combination of the Persian and the Median Empire was better known as the Medco-Persian Empire. This encompassed the joint territories of several earlier empires.

So far as the height of power concerned, the Achaemenians Empire was the greatest empire in ancient history. The empire was found by Cyrus the Great. It was spread across three continents namely, Asia, Africa, and Europe. At large, the empire incorporated the territories of Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and some territories of Northern India, parts of Central Asia, Asia Minor, Thrace and Macedonia, a large part of the Black Sea Coastal regions, northern Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and highly populated regions of Egypt as far as Libya in the west.

The Ancient Greeks first encountered the Persians on the Iranian plateau. By that time, the Achaemenians were on the move to expand their political command.. The Achaemenians remained a powerful dynasty till the rise of Alexander the Great. The name of Persia came to be used extensively by the Greeks and others to rule over the whole Iranian plateau. The dynasty met its end with the death of Darius III. Darius III was severely defeated by Alexander the Great in 330 BC. The people of the Iranian plateau region

traditionally called their land as Iran (Land of the Aryans). The name 'Iran' was officially adopted in 1935.

### Persian Religion

Zoroaster was a great Iranian prophet and teacher. He probably started preaching in about 600 BC in the northeast of the plateau. The history of this religion is more complicated and controversial than that of the pre-Zoroastrian Iranian Religion. Yet, certain features of this religion make it stand apart. Zoroaster was an ethical prophet of the highest order. He constantly put stress on the need to act righteously, speak truth, and abhor lie. The lie was almost personified as the Druj (the chief in the kingdom of Demons) in his teaching. He relegated Druj to the earlier Indo-Iranian deities. Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord), a creation in name and attributes of Zoroaster was his God. Technically, Zoroastrianism was monotheistic. But by contrast, early Zoroastrianism viewed the world in dual terms. Ahura Mazda and the 'Lie' were seriously involved in a struggle for the human soul. Zoroaster, living up to the expectations, tried to bring a reformation in the earlier Iranian religious practices and beliefs. He sought to replace 'the lie' ritualistic, idol-worshipping cults, and the belief of the Magi priests that Ahura Mazda was the sole god. He is regarded as 'Father of Justice'. He prescribed good and pure thoughts for mind, good deeds for hands, and good words for tongue. If anybody is able to achieve all such qualities, they can easily attain paradise or heaven.

The new religion progressed a little by the time Darius the Great and the then Magi adopted it. Darius the Great was the third king of the Achaemenid

Empire. The Magi interpreted many old gods as lesser deities. And also he added some ritual in the religion. He replaced monotheism with polytheism . Even he transformed the principle of spirit of evil into the powerful god Ahriman(Satan). Ahriman (Satan) was the rival of Ahura Mazda. People had to choose one of them. The origin of Zoroastrianism can be traced in its holy writ Avesta(The Law). It can be seen in its present form having recorded the events from 400 AD to 600 AD. Zoroastrian eschatology , ‘ The Doctrine of Final Things’ details the resurrection of the dead and a last judgment. Zoroastrianism disappeared due to the Muslim conquest of Persia in seventh century AD. But it still exists in India among the Parsees.

#### Achaemenid , Art and Culture

The culture developed under the Achaemenids represented a collection of different cultures and societies. Sometimes it is difficult to find out from this mosaic whether it is distinctively a Persian or an achievement of the Achaemenian period. Therefore, it is perhaps considered to be an early Iranian contribution to Middle Eastern society and culture. This is quite natural that artistic development has followed every major civilization. So also happened in the case of the Persians. By and large, Persian Empire developed an artistic tradition and achieved the status of an Empire. The Persians borrowed largely in art from their predecessors, particularly the Assyrians in the Fertile Crescent.. The Assyrians were Semitic people. They lived in the northern reaches of Mesopotamia. They have a rich history in this area.

The most important work of the Persians can be traced in the beautiful architecture of palaces. The best example of it can be found at the remains of Persepolis. The royal palace was built on a high terrace. It could be reached by a grand stairway facing with beautiful reliefs. These reliefs did not depict the warfare and bloody violence that characterized the Assyrian sculpture. Rather, they presented hundreds of soldiers, courtiers, and representatives of twenty-three nations of the empire offering gifts to the king for the festival of the Norouz(New year)

Achamenian art is a blend of many elements. It was an imperial art on a scale. Such a unique art was never seen before. Materials and artists were drawn from all the lands ruled over by the great king. So also tastes, styles, and motifs were mixed up in an eclectic art and architecture. That art mirrored the empire and the Persians' understanding how that empire should function. The Achaemenids were tolerant in local governance and custom affairs so long as the Persians had a control on the general policy and administration. They were also tolerant in art as long as the finished and total effect was Persian. The trace of a foreign origin can be found in almost all the construction and sculpture reliefs at Pasargadae and Persepolis.

Pasargadae was the capital of Cyrus the Great and Persepolis was a neighbouring city founded by Darius the Great. But the conception, planning, and overall finished product cannot be credited to any foreign civilization. They were distinctly Persian. This was also true with regard to the decorative arts. The Persians excelled in decorative arts. It consisted of fine metal tableware, jewellery, seal cutting, weaponry and its decoration and pottery.



## Theatre in Achaemenid Era

Theatre forms were known much earlier in Greece and India (from 1st to 5th century AD) than in Iran. Some of the exciting and interesting rituals took shape of dramas and other forms of performances. Kings and commoners were regaled alike by comic theatre in 500 BC. Sometimes theatres used musical instruments. The dancers often wore masks. Masks were a vestige of an earlier era when these dances were performed as religious rites. Comic drama took a slapstick form. Slapsticks used to present social situations. They lampooned and criticized these absurd situations through dramatic form. They mimicked some people they thought to have wrong impact on society. The use of zoomorphic masks and disguises had been prevailing through centuries . Man existed as a complete head-to-foot goat guise for dancers in popular rejoicings. These are depicted frequently in miniatures and drawings in the 16th and 17th centuries. Some scholars consider these dancers as wandering dervishes or extremist mystics. In fact, certain archaeologists believe that the proto histories ibex horned man could be a sort of shaman, it being generally accepted that the trances of a shaman are a kind of a mystical experience. It should also be noted that some Sufis in the Islamic period in Iran were Malamati, (people of blame), who performed the worst shameless deeds in order to elicit scorn and derision. Rejection by the populace made their devotion more sincere and disinterested. This school existed from the 9th to the 14th centuries. In the latter part of the tenth century, the Qalandaris appeared who sometimes wore the skins of lions or leopards and used to shave their heads, beards and even eyebrows. Some drawings of the 16th and 17th centuries showcase dancers and

musicians incognito. They played roles of goats playing castanets. They are buffoons, jesters and comedians.

A tradition continued in the forests of Gilan( one of the provinces of the present day Iran) till 1940. It lies along the Caspian Sea ). A dancer-pantomime enacted the story of a bride abandoning her groom, eloped with her lover. The performers wore masks and apparel made of goat skin. This dance is presumed to be pre-Islamic due to its amoral content.

Puppetry was yet another ancient dramatic art. It existed much earlier than its recorded date of about 1000 BC. Only glove and string puppets were popular in Iran. Shadow puppetry failed to attract an audience. Like dance and mime, narrative drama too originated from religious rites. Secularization of these rites produced an epic tradition that was very popular in pre-Islamic Iran.

There was no difference between high and low culture in traditional Iranian performance. In fact, the artists attached to the royal court and sponsored by the rich were more competent than the artists performing for the public.

Written texts were hardly used except in religious and narrative drama. Whether comedian, mime, puppeteer, elegist or storyteller- all of them performed in public and private places as well. Narrative drama also originated from religious rites like comic dance and mime. Secularization of these rites generated a very popular epic tradition in pre-Islamic Iran. The bard played an important role in social life. He was sought in the verbal art of poetry; storytelling, elegy and recitation too. He was often accompanied by

music. Folk theatre mime, puppetry, farce, juggling-all of them had a ritual context. All of them had a special occasion when to be performed. They were performed at religious/social gatherings like naming day of a baby, circumcision, and marriage etc.. The performance of the plays was seasonal due to the agricultural calendar. Moreover, performance required some audience. Most of the audience belonged to the peasants' community. So, the performance was completely subject to the availability of the peasants. By the by, some of these contextual ritual enactments were removed from their religious statements. Gradually, they were performed round the year.

### Magophonia Performance

Darius the great killed the Magi, usurper of the Iranian throne in 522 BC. Hereafter there began a trend to massacre the Magis. The Behistun is a multi-lingual inscription. It is located on Behistun Mountain in the Kermanshah Province of western Iran. The Behistun Inscription was authored by Darius the Great(third king of the Achaemenian Empire from the summer of 522 BC to autumn of 486 BC). The inscription begins with a brief introduction of Darius, his ancestry and lineage. In this Behistun inscription, Darius describes how he killed the Magi, the usurper. Bardiya was the younger son of Cyrus the Great and brother of Cambyses II. Cambyses II surrogated Bardiya. According to Ctesias, Cyrus appointed Bardiya as Satrap(governor) of some of the far-eastern provinces on his death bed.

Ctesias was a Greek physician belonged to hailed from Cnidus, Caria. He lived in the 5th century BC. He was a famous author. He wrote treatises on rivers, on the Persian revenues, In addition to, he also wrote an account of

India named 'Indica' and a history of Assyria and Persia in 23 volumes named 'Persica'. 'Persica' was written in opposition to the works of Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian. Herodotus wrote in Ionic dialect and founded the Persian royal archives.

According to Darius the Great's Behistun inscription, Cambyses II killed Bardiya after coming to the throne of Persia. He kept it secret and never disclosed it. However, Herodotus gives two detailed narratives. According to Herodotus, Bardiya went to Egypt with Cambyses II and stayed there for some time. Later, Cambyses sent him back to Susa (An ancient city of the Parthian Empires of Iran) out of envy. Bardiya alone could lift the bow brought from the Ethiopian king. This gave rise to the envy of Cambyses. Furthermore, Herodotus detailed that Cambyses had a dream that his brother sat on the throne. Being afraid of losing the throne, Cambyses sent his faithful counsellor Prexaspes from Egypt to Susa in order to kill Bardiya.

People never got to know how the death of Bardiya occurred. This was followed by another incident.. A usurper, in fact a Magian priest, pretended to be Bardiya in the spring in 522 BC. He proclaimed himself the king of Persia on a mountain township of Paishiyauvada, a Persian city during the Achaemenid era. The Persians, the Medes and all other nations acknowledged him as king because he granted a remission of taxes for three years.

Cambyses was a despotic ruler. Most of the time he remained absent from Egypt. This compelled his subjects (The Persians and the Medes) to accept the usurper as king. Cambyses attempted to fight against the usurper but

lost his life in disputed circumstances. He reportedly made a public confession of the murder of his brother before his death. But it was not believed. None had the courage to go against the new king. He ruled for seven months.

Darius claimed the real name of the usurper was Gaumata, a Magian priest. His death also

occurred in a different circumstance. A group of seven nobles made a plot to kill him. They surprisingly stabbed him to death in 522 BC. One of the seven nobles was Darius. He proclaimed himself as king soon thereafter. According to Herodotus, later on, this day came to be celebrated as the feast of Magophonia(The day of slaughter of the Magi). On this day, the Magians do not dare to appear in public. He says that the Persians observe this day with much sincerity and with one accord. They follow all the rituals very strictly. He also asserts that this day is the holiest day for all Persians. This anti-priest popular continued for at least 120 years.

Herodotus was an ancient historian of Greece. He was born in Halicarnassus, Caria(a region in western Anatolia, Turkey ) He lived in the 5th century BC(c. 484 BC-c. 425 BC.). He is also called the ' Father of History'. This is so because he was the first historian ever to have collected all the materials systematically. He examined the accuracy of the materials to a certain extent and arranged them in well-constructed vivid narrative.

The Rise of Alexander The Great

Alexander defeated the Persian king Darius III in November, 333 BC. Darius III was the last king of the Achaemenid Empire of Persia from 336 BC to 333 BC. Alexander was born in a royal family in 333 BC at Persepolis. This is symbolic of the passing of the old order and introduction of the Greek civilization into western Asia. A huge number of Greek and Macedonian soldiers in Mesopotamia and Iran. Alexander promoted intermarriage and fostered Greek culture. At the same time, he retained major portion of Achaemenid administrative structure. He also introduced Oriental elements and Greek political institutions.

The death of Alexander in 323 BC signalled the beginning of an era of prolonged internecine warfare among the Macedonian generals for the control of the absolute power. Towards the end of 4th century BC, Seleucus I had consolidated his control over the territory of Alexander. This part corresponded to the Achaemenid Empire.

Seleucus was an officer in the court of Alexander. He along with his son, Antiochus I grabbed supreme power. They set up a government with two capitals namely, Antioch on the bank of Orontes river in Syria and Seleucia on the bank of the Tigris in Babylonia. Antiochus I was a half Persian. . His mother Apama was one of the eastern princesses. She was given to Seleucus by Alexander in 324 BC. . The largest part of Asia from the Aegean to the Punjab belonged to the kingdom of Seleucus. and to its diverse and varied populace must be added several allied Greek cities, both in Greece and in Asia Minor. Seleucus I and his successors aspired to Hellenize Asia. They had a conviction of the Greeks and the Macedonians being a strong and superior

race. They thought they were the flag bearers of a superior civilization. Cities and military colonies were constructed to ensure the stability of a state. The Asians would be the inhabitants of these cities and colonies. Greek language made great impact particularly on them who had established either marital relationship or engaged in trade and commerce. However, the Greco-Macedonian immigration slowed down much after the 2nd century BC. This affected Greek language badly and thus it lost its ground too. The local languages became prominent.

### Influence of Greek Theatre

The elite Iranians borrowed only the external form of Hellenism Since the time of Alexander the Great, i. e. 334 B. C. to 323 B. C. Greek theatre had been performing in Greek in Iran. Greek mimic drama was also being played in pre-Islamic Iran. The first of this kind of recorded performance was detailed by Xenophon around 400 B. C. :

After this [a dance by Thracians] some Aenianians and Magnesians [both Aeolian groups from Thessaly] got up and fell to dancing the Carpaea, as it is called, under arms. This was the manner of the dance ; one man lays aside his arms and proceeds to drive a yoke of oxen, and while he drives he sows, turning him about frequently, as though he were afraid of something; up comes a cattle-lifter, and no sooner does the ploughman catch sight of him afar, than he snatches up his arms and confronts him. They fight in front of his team, and all in rhythm to the sound of the pipe. At last the robber binds the countryman and drives off the team. Or sometimes the cattle-driver

binds the robber, and then he puts him under the yoke beside the oxen, with his two hands tied behind his back, and off he drives.

After this a Mysian came in with a light shield in, either hand and danced, at one time going through a pantomime, as if he were dealing with two assailants at once; at another plying his shields as if to face a single foe, and then again he would whirl about and throw somersaults, keeping the shields in his hands, so that it was a beautiful spectacle. Last of all he danced the Persian dance, clashing the shields together, crouching down on one knee and springing up again from earth; and all this he did in measured time to the sound of the flute.

Greek theatres were formed during the reign of Seleucus after Alexander's conquest of Iran. They existed after Seleucus and were carried on by the Parthians too. This is not only known from written classical sources, but also from excavations of theatres and a form for the making of a comedy mask from Nisa.

### Storytelling and Narrative

Gosan was a minstrel-poet in the Parthian period. The Parthian period was preceded by Seleucid period. Gosan sang songs with the tune of a musical instrument. Parthian Gosans were imitated by the Armenian Gusan and Georgia Gagosanni. Some objects recovered from those regions prove that they used animal masks. These animal masks were of monkeys.

Georg Goyan who was a researcher of Th