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Achaemenid Religion

Arshak Iravanian¹ 

Achaemenid Religion, Reza MehrAfarin, Tehran, Aryaramna Press & Tissaphernes Archaeological Research Group, 2022, ISBN: 978-622-9253-12-0, 662 pp.

Achaemenian Religion consists of seven chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by conclusion, bibliography and an index.

The religion during the Achaemenid or the Achaemenian Empire, also called the First Persian Empire is one of the very important topics of ancient Iran that has arguably been discussed. Reza MehrAfarin, a professor at the University of Mazandaran, who has written many articles about the Achaemenids (see MehrAfarin, 2021) has recently written a book on the Achaemenian religion that has jointly published by Aryaramna Press and Tissaphernes Archaeological Research Group.

The title of the first chapter is **Religion in Achaemenian Apparatus**, which discusses archaeology of religions. Since the religion has been one of the most important realities of social and individual existence of human beings, it influences various issues like politics, economy, art, social and cultural subjects among others. And with development and evolution of communities from primitive to modern, the form of religion has been evolved consequently and in this approach we can see a metamorphosis.

Religion also belongs to a kind of terminology where every science, based on its nature and goal, has a specific definition of it. In other words, psychologists, sociologists and theologians define it anything but identical where they fail to come up with similar reasons for the advent of religion hence, we can observe key terminologies like god, the world and the hereafter, resurrection, and divine punishment and rewarding system. Since archaeology examines and projects ancient communities with various scopes, religion is one of investigative factors of these silent and long passed communities. When we go deep into history, we encounter with decreasing religious evidence but probably in the eyes of some inexperienced archaeologists even those little traces become aspects of religion and they view them in the realm of religion.

In this chapter, Mehrafarin has incorporated the views of scholars of Achaemenian religion. "The religion always has been one of the most controversial and contradictory civil issues of this dynasty. One major reason of this controversy may have been different approaches, prejudice and malice and affection of historians and scholars. Some of the scholars, who entered this area through their specialty and information,

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consider this matter with a specific viewpoint and do not take all aspects of it into account. In another words, partiality, impatience and lack of familiarity with science like archaeology, arts or history of religions resulted in not being able to reach an accurate and sensible conclusion. While religion is one of the most delicate, problematic fields of study in liberal arts especially ancient societies, entering in this realm needs a lot of patience and research" he said.

The second chapter of this book deals with **Religious Policy of Achaemenian Kings**. In this chapter, the author hints to religious likeness and its evidences of every great king of this dynasty such as the Cyrus the Great, Darius the Great and Xerxes.

The chapter three is entitled **Ecology of Satrap Religion**. The author has surveyed the arts and architecture prevalent in the Achaemenian period and how it was influenced by contribution from different nations of that time. As a matter of fact, a breakdown of them shows each method and style belonged to one specific country. In other words, the Achaemenian apparatus is like a puzzle which consists of a lot of section but these sections are put together artistically. Of course this point is not unique to the Achaemenian Empire. All the governments and sovereignties are using their subjects, affect them and are being affected by them. When Sumerians had the ultimate power in southwest Asia, they succeeded in importing their culture and civilization to adjacent territories. When they replaced by Babylonians, the gods and temples of Babylonia revered in other places as well, say Elam. Although religious nonchalance of Achaemenians was rooted in their ethics and principles, but the role of thoughtful policy of their kings for having solidarity with different nations was considerable.

In the fourth chapter with the theme **Religious Antiquities**, the author considers physical body of religions and is consisted of three sections:

1. Courtyards, spaces and places and religious natural elements like cliffs, shelters, mountain peaks, springs as well as natural elements like water, soil, fire, metal, stone and unique trees.
2. Artificial spaces and places that are built by humans or artificial spatial variables like graves, shrines, pantheons, temples, ziggurats, fireplaces and fire-boxes.
3. Physical articles and religious findings like clothing, food, various types of statues, religious utensils (goblets, rhytons etc), coffins, candlesticks and sacrificial altars.

The title of fifth chapter is **Mystifying Symbols and Forms, Religious Sites**. The author in this chapter has studied symbols and religious sites related to the Achaemenian religion. There are geometrical and combined human and animal rock reliefs that repeated continuously and their repletion tell us about a unique concepts and belief that were tightly related the Achaemenian era. These forms not only repeat identically into the whole period of this dynasty and show the continuity for about 220 years but some of them repeated even after the Achaemenian reign, i.e. those religious and cultural practices continued thereafter. We can divide these symbols and mystifying forms of the Achaemenian period into several categories: geometrical shape, celestial bodies, floral, animal and humanistic forms or a combination of them.



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In the chapter sixth entitled **Religious Ceremonies and Procedures**, the author has considered religion and nationality as two of the basic and constructive elements. However, religious ceremonies and procedures and other peripheral and dependent factors never remained constant and intact. Social conditions and cultural links resulted in change and metamorphosis in this area. Therefore, some of the local and superficial ceremonies with the test of time and cultural clashes lose their identity and replaced by new ones. National costumes also sometimes shed and resurrect with a new appearance. But the kernel pass through generations and with little change in concepts and functions continue to live on.

The seventh and the last chapter, **Acheamenians were Zoroastrian**, where the author tries to convince the readers that based on his survey while writing his book, he found Acheamenians to be Zoroastrian.

This book is a comprehensive one which has thoroughly studied the Achaemenian religion and presents valuable information about religious beliefs prevalent at that time.

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