REASSESSING THE MATERIAL CONTEXTS OF RITUAL FIRES IN ANCIENT IRAN

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Abstract: This article reexamines and reassesses some of the pertinent materials, contexts, and historical documents relating to ritual fires, altars, and temples in ancient Iran. It attempts to clarify designations and functions in terms of chronology, identification, and usage.

Keywords: Iran, Central Asia, fire rituals, fire temples, Medes, Achaemenians, Seleucids, Persis, Parthians, Sasanians, religion, Zoroastrianism

Issues

Much attention has been dedicated to the definition, terminology, origin, identification, history, and use of fire, fire altars, fire precincts, and fire temples in ancient or pre-Islamic Iranian religiosity (for example Azarnoush 1987; Boucharlat 1985; Boyce 1968; Boyce and others 1975b; Boyd and Kotwal 1983; Eilers 1974; Erdmann 1941; Garrison 1999; Godard 1938a; Gropp 1969; Houtkamp 1991; Huff 1975; Keall 1973; Kotwal 1974; Schippmann 1971; Stronach 1985; Wikander 1946; Yamamoto 1979, 1981; among many others). Considerable textual, linguistic, archeological, numismatic, sigillographic, and ethnographic data have been garnered in the process — only a portion of which can or need be appraised and cited herein. Yet the discussion hitherto has involved a lack of precision on terminology, objects, structures, and contexts.

Definitions and Alternate Nomenclature

Although beyond the chronological scope of this analysis, it is useful to note that writing in his Wizīdagīhā, “Selections,” using the Middle Persian or Pahlavi language during the ninth century C.E., the magus Zādspram commented: “When the ātakhsh (or fire) is dwelling within the ādurgāh
(place of the fire or fire precinct) it casts radiance in all directions, throws light to the dar (court), and illuminates the srāyān (hallways) .... If it remains without sustenance, it becomes feeble and weak. First the sides of the gumbad (domed roof) cool down. Then when it is completely extinguished, the entire gumbad becomes cold” (29.4). Moreover, the New Persian or Farsi language Revāyat-e Ithoter, “Treatise of Seventy Eight Chapters,” sent by learned Zoroastrians in Yazd and Kerman to their Indian migrant coreligionists, the Parsis, around the year 1773 C.E., notes that at set times a “mōbad (magus) washes the ātashgāh (place of the fire or fire precinct) around the base of the takht-e ātash (throne of the fire) as prescribed by the religion” (30.4). These two passages can assist in elucidation of the precise meanings of certain terms that must serve as the foundation of any investigation into the ritual contexts of fire in the history of ancient Iranian devotional praxes within its main faith Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism.

One area of ambiguity has been in the terminology attached to ritual settings and items associated with holy fires in ancient Iran. The Old Persian (and Avestan) term ātar-, nominative singular ātarsh, “fire,” from Indo-European *āter- (compare Latin āter, ātra), developed into the Middle Persian words ātur or ādur and ātakhsh, “fire” (and New Persian ādur, ātash, ātesh), the Parthian form ātar (later ādar, present in modern Iranian dialects as adar) which came to be pronounced āzar (and, paralleling adar, as azar) after the Arab Muslim conquest of Iran (seventh century C.E.) (on the Indo-European root see Watkins 2000: 5). Fire was spēnāg (a Middle Persian term derived from Old Iranian *spanta- and Indo-European *kwen-, “holy”) to ancient Iranians. Fire was spēnāg because it was believed by ancient Zoroastrians to be a “most holy spirit” (Yasna Haptanghaiti, “Worship or Sacrifice of Seven Chapters,” 36.1, 36.3) and a “son of Ahura Mazdā” (Yasna, “Worship, Sacrifice,” 25.7, 62.1; Ātash Niyāyishn, “Litany to Fire,” 5). Zoroastrians claimed that fire was utilized by Ahura Mazda (Ahura Mazdā, later Ohrmazd) to create humans and other beneficent animals as the male element of genesis (Greater Bundahishn, “(Book of) Primal Creation,” 1a:3; Dēnkard, “Acts of the Religion,” 79.21). Its incense-imbued smoke was believed to purify persons and places (Choksy 1989a: 13, 119). Eschatological writings claimed that the final renovation and restoration of the universe — its “freshening” or frasho-kərtəi (Middle Persian frashagird) — would take place with fire (Wizīdagīthā 34.50). Therefore fire could, and would, be utilized as the central icon in many Zoroastrian rituals.
The Middle Persian or Pahlavi technical term ātakhshgāh (still used in New Persian as ātashgāh, āteshgāh), originally meant a “(ritual) place or space of the fire,” i.e., specifically a “fire precinct.” It had been derived from Old Persian (and Avestan) ātarsh plus Old Persian ḡātu (and Avestan ḡātu, ḡātav), “place, space.” The Old Iranian words ḡāthu, ḡātu, ḡātav, in turn, had developed from Indo-European *gʷa-, “to come, base” (Watkins 2000: 33). Due to the dialectical and chronological variations, discussed above, ātakhshgāh, āturgāh, ātargāh, ādurgāh, ādargāh, and āzargāh all were used at different times and places to denote precincts in which fires burn on fire altars or in fire pits (contra Boyce 1989b: 7, who equates these terms with ātakhshdān and ātashdān on which see below).

Two other important terms used in conjunction with ātakhshgāh were Middle Persian ātakhskakadag and kadag ā ātakhsh (New Persian ātashkada, also pronounced āteshkade), “room of the fire, house of the fire,” commonly translated as “fire temple.” Those terms originated from Old Persian (and Avestan) ātarsh plus Old Persian *katha (and Avestan kata), “room, small house.” Late Sasanian period and early Muslim period, hence sixth through twelfth century C.E., Zoroastrian texts in Pahlavi preserve the alternate terms mān ā ātakhsh and khānag ā ātakhsh, “house of the fire, residence of the fire, fire temple” (the latter term yielding the New Persian words ātashkhāna, also pronounced āteshkhāne, and ātashkhān, also pronounced āteshkhān; see also Boyce 1989c: 9). Usage indicates these terms have consistently been utilized to denote buildings that housed one or more holy fires within enclosed precincts, and so with very few exceptions (discussed below) they should be translated as “fire temple” (contra Boyce 1989a: 2, 1989c: 9).

Yet another designation attested for fire temples probably was derived from Old Iranian *maitṛyāna or *mīthradāna, rendered as mithraion in an Egyptian papyrus record from the third century B.C.E., and later as the Armenian word mehean, “place of Mithra, temple” (subsequently by the fifteenth century C.E., Zoroastrians in Iran were using the phrases dar-e mehr and dar be-mehr both meaning “court of Mithra” as attested in the Persian Revāyats, “Treatises,” 2.18, written 1478–1773 C.E.; see further Russell 1987: 263 with references; Boyce 1993). Mithra (later Mihr, Mehr) as the Indo-Iranian and, later, Zoroastrian divinity of contracts and covenants was believed to traverse the sky “in front of the immortal, swift stallioned sun” with “the radiant fire of liturgical glory before him” (Yasht, “Devotional Poem” 10.13, 10.127). So that spirit’s association, through name and site, with the fires in the presence of which Zoroastrians — clergy
and laity alike — perform devotions directed at Ahura Mazda and lesser divine spirits fit the faith’s religiosity (compare Russell 1987: 262, 265–266). Indeed, even in the ninth century C.E., Zadspram had employed the term dar to refer to the court of the fire temple (Wiżdagihā 29.4). Even later, authors of the Persian Revāyats (1.230) used another portion of the phrase, mehr, to denote the fire temple.

Inside the ātakhshkadag and within a ātakhshgāh, the ātakhsh or ādur itself was placed on a concave brazier in a receptacle. That vessel has consistently been designated by Middle Persian ātakhshdān (New Persian ātashdān) and Parthian *ātarōshan, also preserved in Armenian as atrushan, and usually translated as “fire altar” (which will be used in this discussion), less commonly as “fire holder” (Boyce 1975b: 456, 1989b). The term reflects Old Persian and Avestan nominative singular ātarsh plus stāna, “place.” Thus ātakhshdān may best be translated as “fire stand” since Indo-European *sta-, “to stand,” yielded both stāna and its cognate stand (Middle Persian ēstādan, New Persian istādan) (compare Watkins 2000: 84). By medieval times, the phrase takht ī ātakhsh (New Persian takht-e ātash) was being employed as a euphemism for the altar on which a fire was said to be takht-nishāst (New Persian takht-neshāst), “enthroned.” Zoroastrian books in Middle Persian also mention the ādisht, “place of fire,” originally the “domestic hearth” (Boyce 1989b: 7).

**Indo-Iranian Ritual, Bronze Age Central Asia, and the Origins of Fire Temples?**

As noted previously, Zoroastrian scripture in the Avesta or Abestāg “Praise,” presents ātar- as a “most holy spirit” who is the “son of Ahura Mazda.” A ritual offering of animal fat was expected to be made to holy fires according to the Young Avestan Nērāngestān, “Ritual Code” (2.19.8). Later, in his History, the Greek historian Herodotus (ca. 484–430 B.C.E.) would claim that “Persians regard fire to be a divinity” (3.16). Indeed, Ātar was considered a male yazata (later yazad) “spirit worthy of worship” whose corporeal manifestation was flames. This divinity even has the ninth day of each māh or “month,” the ninth month of each year, and a niyāyishn, “invocation of praise” or “devotional song,” dedicated to him in the Zoroastrian liturgical cycle (see further Boyce 1979: 28, 71–73; Choksy and Kotwal 2005: 216, 218–219, 227–228, 248–249). Therefore, scholars of religion generally and of Zoroastrianism specifically had assumed that
a temple cult of fire was integral to that faith from its earliest time (as noted by Boyce 1975b: 454–455, 1979: 4).

After the late 1940s C.E., however, that presumption was challenged by studies (Wikander 1946; Boyce 1975b: 455–456; Boyce and others 1982: 228) drawing upon the Indo-Iranian antecedents of Zoroastrian rites, especially through comparison with ancient Brahmanic and Vedic rites in which worship seems to have been performed outdoors upon purified ground demarcated from its surroundings by karsha, “separatory furrows” (Choksy 2003: 26–31). Fire was present, however, as was water, presumably in open clay and metal containers (Boyce and others 1975c: 154–155). Those interpretations were strengthened by drawing upon a statement from Herodotus regarding Persians: “It is not their custom to make and set up statues, temples, and altars …. They offer sacrifice on the highest peaks of mountains …. When about to sacrifice they neither build altars nor kindle fire” (History 1.131–132). Strabo (ca. 64 B.C.E.–25 C.E.) echoed Herodotus in his own writing on Iranians (Geography 15.3.14). A conclusion arose among scholars (championed by Boyce and others 1975c: 156–158, 258–259, 1982: 221–225; Boyce 1979: 6, 60–61; followed for example by Vitalone 2004: 425) that Zoroastrian rites had been performed outdoors, in the presence of hearth fires, until the reign of Artakhshaç or Artaxerxes II (ruled 404–359 B.C.E.) when at a type of cleric perhaps still known then as âthravan, “fire priest” (originally one type of devotional priest but by the Achaemenian period probably a subgroup of the magi or Zoroastrian priests, Old Persian magupati, Middle Persian mowbedân) established a fire cult and set up temples associated with this cult in response to the worship of the feminine divinity Anahita (Anâhita) within temple settings with cult images and water by another type of priest presumably known as zaotar, “libation offerer.” Eventually the Old Persian term magu-, “magus,” would become the standard designation for priests who tended holy fires (Boyce and others 1982: 230). Such Iranian temples would have been modeled after earlier Elamite, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Greek ones for the worship of Inshushinak, Napirsha, Marduk, Ashshur, Apollo, and Aphrodite, it has even been suggested.

Artaxerxes II indeed may have given prominence to Anahita who would be amalgamated with the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar, and the Greek goddesses Aphrodite and Artemis. Yet, it is noteworthy that Artaxerxes II did so in conjunction with the Zoroastrian creator deity Ahura Mazda and the yazata Mithra, as evidenced by the official Old Persian inscriptions
(Susa inscriptions A 4–5, D 3–4, and Hamadan inscriptions A 5–6, B mentions Mithra alone), later paralleled by Artakhshaça or Artaxerxes III (359–338 B.C.E.) (Persepolis inscription A 25) who mentioned Mithra with Ahura Mazda. In each instance, Ahura Mazda was listed first. While it is not clear exactly when first built, perhaps during the reign of Artaxerxes II (contra Azarnoush 1981; see also Boyce and others 1991: 87–88), the temple of Anahita at Kangavar (known to Greeks as Concobar, on which see Isidore of Charax, lived ca. first century B.C.E.–first century C.E., Parthian Stations 6, “where there is a temple of Artemis”) preserves an Achaemenian style apadāna, “platform,” with symmetrical staircases, a columned temple where construction seems to have continued into the Seleucid period, and large stone libation bowls. Anahita’s anthropomorphized physical form had been described in detail by lines of the Yasht dedicated to her (5.126–129). A bust of this divinity has recently been unearthed at the temple in Istakhr which began in Achaemenian times and eventually became the hereditary ātakhshkadag of the Sasanian family (contra Boyce 1975b: 462, who suggests that her individualized worship and figurine were abandoned by the Sasanians; see also Choksy 1989b). Moreover, even prior to the reigns of those two monarchs, Herodotus (History 1.131) had commented upon sacrifices to Anahita — syncretized with Aphrodite — and Mithra confusingly regarding their names as alternate forms used by Iranians for a single divinity. So, structured veneration of Anahita and Mithra, symbolized by water and fire, may not have been separate from one another nor from worship directed at Ahura Mazda (Schippmann 1971: 298–308; contra Boyce 1975b: 460).

In recent years, another set of data has become available through archeological excavations in Central Asia that have revealed the presence of Bronze Age communities. Collectively designated as the Bactrian-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC), those settlements extended across the north-eastern and eastern borders of the Iranian plateau from ca. 2100–1750 B.C.E. with a period of cultural and dispersion onto the Iranian plateau lasting until ca. 1500 B.C.E. or even a few centuries thereafter. The material remains of that culture include buildings which either served as temples or had rooms specifically for religious functions. At the settlement designated Togolok 21, for example, there are remains of fire precincts, mud-brick altar bases, platforms with recessed fire bowls or braziers, and evidence of animal fat offerings (as distinguishable from domestic cooking) to the fires. Togolok 21 contained a central room which, based on remains
of ephedra and poppy seeds, seems to have been utilized for the ritual preparation of libations as well (Sarianidi 1998: 90–98). Other sites, such as North Gonur with its second period fire room, provide parallels including the use of blind or false windows (Sarianidi 1998: 120–126) — an architectural feature later employed in Iranian temples to shield holy fires from direct sunlight and wind but not intended to create a dark room (on which see further below). Thus, it seems that both ritual tending of fires and preparation of libations occurred within buildings and rooms set aside for religious functions by cultures that preceded that of the Iranians — communities with which the origins of the Zoroastrianism and the earliest Iranian language speakers seem to be associated both chronologically and geographically. So, it is by no means clear when the practice of establishing individual rooms, single structures, and multiple buildings, i.e., precincts and temples, specifically for Zoroastrian rites — including those involving fire — began in Iran. It appears, based on the archeological data, that devotional rooms and temples where fire and water were used for rites — in which flames were tended and libations prepared — had already existed among the Proto-Iranians of Bronze Age Central Asia, may have been utilized by the earliest Zoroastrians, and continued as a practice after their migration onto the Iranian plateau. Indeed, subsequently, rooms and temples where holy fires burned on the Iranian plateau have structural and functional similarities with the ritual rooms and buildings of Bronze Age Central Asia.

Assessing the Evidence from Antiquity

Archeological excavations at the Median citadel of Tepe Nush-e Jan (ca. mid-eighth century–sixth century B.C.E.), south of the northwest Iranian city of Hamadan, have revealed two rooms having square, raised, mudbrick *āтарштāna with broad, stepped, tops bearing shallow hemispherical fire bowls or braziers (Stronach and Roaf 1973; contra Boyce 1975b: 457, who dismisses those fire altars as “alien influences which were exerted on the Western Iranians by their numerous subjects and neighbors” because they were “not deep enough, however, to have held an ever-burning fire;” Houtkamp 1991: 34). The altars and the platforms on which they sat were located inside buildings with vents for the smoke (Stronach 1978: 135 n. 52) — one (Figure 1) in the inner room of the freestanding so-called central temple, with its false windows, access to which was via an antechamber
with a wall trough for ritual ablutions prior to worship, and the other across a columned hall in the inner room of the western building. Given that there was and is no precondition that a holy fire be constantly-burning, the altars would have served Median Zoroastrians in a ritually fitting manner. Excavations at the Median city of *Hangmatāna or Hagmatāna (Ecbatana, now Hamadan), from the same period as the site of Tepe Nush-e Jan, have revealed a small open-sided room with four corner columns supporting a domed ceiling (Figure 2) attached to adjacent structures that seems to be a precursor of the chahār tāq style of *āтаршгāthu that became popular in Sasanian times. The Median evidence supports suggestions that the style may have been assimilated by early Iranians from their Mesopotamian neighbors (Huff 1990: 635). A relief carved above the entrance to a possibly late Median-era or early Achaemenian period rock tomb, now located in Iraqi Kurdistan, at Qyzqapan depicts a priest on the left and a warrior on the right, both in Median garb appropriate to their occupations, flanking a square, raised, altar or *āтаршстāna with a stylized semicircular flame (Porada 1965: 138 with Fig. 74). It is not known, however, whether
specific ritual ranks had been assigned to holy fires during the Median kingdom (ca. 673–550 B.C.E.) or whether such fires burned constantly.

Beyond the Median context, a complex that appears to have included a temple in which ritual fire(s) burned has been located at the site of Tash-K’irman Tepe. That site is located within the Tash-K’irman oasis south of the Aral Sea (now in northwestern Uzbekistan). The ruins date from the fourth century B.C.E., perhaps going back to the seventh or sixth centuries B.C.E., with use having terminated during the fourth century C.E. (Helms, Yagodin, Betts, Khozhaniyazov, and Kidd 2001: 119, 134–136). Although situated in ancient Chorasmia, the complex’s direct connection with Iranian ritual remains unclear.

Among the earliest places for holy flames during the Achaemenian empire (550–331 B.C.E.) was the open air fire precinct at *Parsarga or Pasargadae (Stronach 1978: 138–141 with Figs. 70–71, 74 and Pls. 103–106; Yamamoto 1979: 28–29), the royal capital of Kūrush or
Cyrus II (ruled 550–530 B.C.E.). It contains two hollow white limestone plinths aligned north to south, with the southern one having stairs attached (Figure 3). The plinths’ function is indicated by reliefs carved above the rock cliff tombs of seven subsequent Achaemenian rulers, including Dārayavaush or Darius I (ruled 522–486 B.C.E.) and Khshayārshā or Xerxes I (ruled 486–465 B.C.E.), at Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis (Schmidt 1970: 80–86, 92, 95, 96–98, 99–100, 102–106, 107 with Pls. 19, 22, 40–42a, 48–50, 56–58a, 63, 70, 78). The king or magus climbed to the top of the southern plinth, faced the northern plinth which bore a fire altar with flame, and performed devotions facing Zoroastrianism’s main icon (Figures 4 and 5). Indeed, three fragments of stone fire altars having deep bowls, stepped tops, and bases have been recovered at Pasargadae (Stronach 1978: 141–142 with Fig. 72 and Pl. 107; accepted by Boyce and others 1982: 51–52; Houtkamp 1991: 37). These are characteristic of the most common form of fire altar known from the material remains of ancient Iran. A holy fire or its embers may have been carried, in a brazier (as is still done in modern praxis in Iran and India; compare Boyce 1989c: 9) to an altar on the northern plinth for public rites. So the complex seems to have functioned as an *ātarshgāhu.
Fig. 4. Achaemenian Tomb Relief, Darius I on Platform before Stepped Fire Altar, Naqsh-e Rostam.

Fig. 5. Achaemenian Tomb Relief, Xerxes I on Platform before Stepped Fire Altar, Naqsh-e Rostam.
A stout column (Figures 6a and b) on a crag of the western corner of Naqsh-e Rostam, above the Achaemenian royal tombs and Sasanian rock reliefs, has been identified as having possibly functioned as the base of an Achaemenian period pillar or tower style fire altar (Vanden Berghe 1959: 26 with Pl. 31b; Matheson 1979: 224–225). But it would have been difficult to access, so a suggestion has been advanced that the column served as a base on which an ossuary box was placed (Huff 2004: 613), or is merely a column fragment moved there at a later time (Schmidt 1970: Fig. 2). But precisely because Naqsh-e Rostam was a funerary site, the column may very well have functioned as pillar altar upon which a small fire or oil lamp was lighted — for Zoroastrians believe that each person’s urvan (later ruwān), “mortal soul,” is comforted and protected by a fire’s light which should be kindled by relatives while it sits at the head of the decomposing body until proceeding to judgment on the fourth morning after death (see further Choksy 1998: 256–257 with references to the textual sources). Later custom supports such as interpretation because many a premodern dakhma, “funerary tower,” had a building with a windowed chamber, the ātashsuu or sagri, with an altar or pilaster, for a fire’s light to shine through to the exposure area — for example at Cham, Yazd, and Kerman (Modi 1937: 69; Huff 2004: 622–623, 624–625, 627, 629 with especially Pl. 7.6, also Pls. 9.19, 9.22, 11.25, who does not make the connection). In modern times, oil lamps are used at funerary sites and at the deceased’s home for the same purpose (Boyce 1977: 152; Shahzadi 1994: 5; Choksy 1998: 253; Firouzgary 2000: 21). So the column at Naqsh-e
Rostam and other like it are best interpreted as pillar fire altars unless a bone repository is present or a funerary inscription clearly states that it served as an ossuary.

The site of Baq-e Borda, in Fars, might provide another example of an Achaemenian period pillar style *ātarshštana (the architecture of which may have been assimilated from ones used in Neo-Assyrian ritual) carved of rock — now called the sang-e sanduq, “box stone” — which bears similarities to the twin stone fire altars at nearby Naqsh-e Rostam (Vanden Berghe 1959: 45 with Pls. 61e and f; Stronach 1966). In Sistan, the site of Dahan-e Golaman bears evidence of an Achaemenian building (QN3) that housed three rectangular *ātarshštana plus a building (QN6) with a stepped base of an altar, although identification of the complex as a Zoroastrian one remains contested (Scerrato 1966; Schippmann 1971: 50–57 with Figs. 6–7; Boyce 1975b: 458; Matheson 1979: 285). In addition, there is the four-sided fire altar from Achaemenid Cappadocia showing priests on each side (Moorey 1979: 222). Other altars and altar fragments from the Achaemenian empire may also have survived (compare Garrison 1999: 616).

Most intriguing, however, are two objects usually assumed to be fire altars (some scholars, such as Vanden Berghe 1959: 26 with Pl. 31a; Matheson 1979: 225, suggest these date much later from the Sasanian period, although their form reflects the fusion of Iranian and Greek styles evidenced in Achaemenian art and architecture as noted by Godard 1962: 88; Schmidt 1970: 11–12 with Pl. 9a and references), hewn from stone and aligned north to south next to one another, at the base of the north-western corner of the funerary cliff at Naqsh-e Rostam. Both (Figures 7a and 7b) were carved to resemble four-columned domed rooms, like the Median *ātarshgāthu excavated at Hamadan. It has been suggested that both were pillar ossuaries, with hemispherical lids, from the Sasanian period (Huff 2004: 609–610). However, no lids have been located — on the other hand, regular on-ground ossuaries have lids and in-cliff rock cut ossuaries show evidence of door mounts. Moreover, the architectural style of those two objects would come in time to be so characteristically associated with the holy that it is highly unlikely to have been used for a function that Zoroastrians have long regarded as extremely polluted. In addition, their platform bears traces of a protective awning which would have shielded the flames from direct exposure to wind, rain, and sunlight during rituals (Schmidt 1970: 11). Hence as *ātarshštana they presage, rather than derive
Fig. 7a. Achaemenian Twin Fire Altars (side view), Naqsh-e Rostam.

Fig. 7b. Achaemenian Twin Fire Altars (top view), Naqsh-e Rostam.
from, the later Sasanian chahār tāq style of ātakhshgāh and must have been produced in the Achaemenian period (contra Erdmann 1941: 13).

Another limestone altar that heralds the chahār tāq style may be one at the Achaemenian quarry of Darrabara near Naqsh-e Rostam (Stronach 1966; Matheson 1979: 225) — it too is unlikely to have functioned as a pillar ossuary (contra Huff 2004: 610) because there is no evidence of a lid under which bones would have been deposited or a box for similar purposes. A building with four columns and a domed roof, having an antechamber, was excavated at Susa in Khuzistan, construction of which has been attributed variously to the reign of Darius I or Artaxerxes II (Dieulafoy 1893: 411–415; Godard 1938a: 12–13; Schippmann 1971: 266–274, 496 with Fig. 38; Yamamoto 1979: 37–38; Hannestad and Potts 1990: 114–115; contra Stronach 1985: 619–621). Scholars disagree whether the structure held a fire altar and/or some other cult image such as a statute of the female divinity Anahita or was a temple at all (Erdmann 1941: 15–16; Boyce 1975b: 459; Boyce and others 1991: 178). But its physical structure broadly conforms to the earlier buildings that housed ritual fires in Median times and to later buildings that served similar functions under the Parthians or Arsacids and the Sasanians.

One important source for comprehending the ritual role of fire in the Achaemenian empire is seals. An agate cylinder seal whose style syncretized those of the Neo-Babylonians and the Achaemenians, and dates to the sixth regnal year of Darius I, depicts the monarch as royal hero combating two fabulous beasts while a priest performs worship with raised hand before a stepped altar on which burns a Median style semicircular flame (Collon 1988: 90 with Fig. 418; Choksy 1990a: 31). Other Achaemenian cylinder seals show the monarch and priests performing worship with raised hand before crenellated pillar and stepped ātarshstāna (Moorey 1979: 220 with Figs. 2b–c; Choksy 1990a: 32; Yamamoto 1979: 30–36 suggests that three forms of altars were utilized). One cylinder seal depicts an animal-offering to a flame upon a stepped altar (Moorey 1979: 222 with Fig. 3b). Yet another seal shows libations proffered to a flame upon a stepped altar (Moorey 1979: 222 with Fig. 3d).

The Achaemenian archeological evidence in conjunction with that from Median times, suggests that ātarshstāna or fire altars were utilized both within open air and enclosed ātarshgāthu or precincts for Zoroastrian holy fires. In the case of each outdoor ātarshgāthu, the fire or embers would have been carried there, perhaps from an ātarshkatha or enclosed
fire temple, and placed within the bowl of an exposed *ātarstāna. Comparison may be made with a statement by Curtius Rufus (lived first century C.E., History of Alexander 3.9), following earlier sources, that a holy fire had been transported in front of Dārayavaush or Darius III’s (ruled 336–331 B.C.E.) army on a silver altar. Diodorus Siculus (writing 60–30 B.C.E.) commented that, upon the demise of his companion Hephaestion, Alexander (ruled 331–323 B.C.E.) commanded that a holy fire be extinguished as was the established custom of Iranians when kings died (Library of History 17.114). It is clear that fire played a central role in religiosity, both royal (compare Boyce and others 1982: 50–62, 112–116; Yamamoto 1979: 25–36) and common, and was not merely a means of affirming authority via Ahura Mazda. Herodotus’ statement on the absence of temples, altars, and ritual fires in Iran during the fifth century B.C.E. cannot, therefore, be regarded as comprehensive of Zoroastrian praxis but may reflect one of several variations.

Strabo (ca. 64 B.C.E. – 25 C.E.) mentioned the open air precinct at Zela (now Zile) in Cappadocia (now eastern Turkey) for Ahura Mazda, Anahita, and other divinities (Geography 11.8.4). He also described rituals by magi — referred to as pyraithei, “fire makers” — at pyraitheia, “fire temples,” where fires were kept burning constantly on bōmos, “fire altars,” in the “midst of these” (Geography 15.3.15; see further Boyce and others 1991: 269–270). Such activities at those locales may have begun during Achaemenian rule, survived under the Hellenism of the Seleucids (312–175 B.C.E.), and persisted thereafter. Reverses of local di-drachmas from Hierapolis or Bambyce, ca. 330–320 B.C.E., depict a Seleucid priest praying before a stepped fire altar (Zahle 1990: 128–129, 136–137 with Fig. 5). A rock relief, above a cliff tomb at Eshaqvand or Sakavand in Kermanshah, presents a similar image of a Seleucid magus or other individual facing a stepped fire altar (Figure 8) in prayer (Vanden Berghe 1959: 105 with Fig. 32 and Pl. 132c; Matheson 1979: 132; both with references) rather than a Median personage (contra von Gall 1966). Another relief, at Dokkan-e Da’ud in Kermanshah, presents a similar figure with outstretched hands before a fire altar (Herzfeld 1941: 201 with Pl. 25; Vanden Berghe 1957: 103 with Pl. 125f and references; von Gall 1966: 23–25 with Figs. 9–10; Matheson 1979: 135). A probable third
century B.C.E. date makes that image contemporaneous with the Frātadāra Temple near Persepolis, and attests to continuity of Zoroastrian praxis among Iranians despite Hellenism.

The Frātadāra Temple, probably dating to the minor state of Persis (ca. 250 B.C.E.–224 C.E.), bears parallels in imagery with the Parthian fire temple at Kuh-e Khaja in Sistan (Herzfeld 1941: 276 with Pls. 85–85; Matheson 1979: 282–283 with additional references; Stronach 1985: 612–617; Hannestad and Potts 1990: 111–113; Garrison 1999: 616; contra Schippmann 1971: 177–185, 514 with Fig. 24 who dates its beginnings to the Achaemenian period; and Boyce and others 1982: 226, 1991: 118, who date its beginnings to the late Achaemenian period, and Boyce 1975b: 460, who regarded it as a *bagin, “place of the divinities,” but did not address the architectural evidence suggesting an *ātarshkatha). The situation becomes clearer when coinage minted by those rulers and their successors in Persis is examined (Yamamoto 1979: 45–49; Houtkamp 1991: 44–45; Boyce and others 1991: 110–116). Oborzos or Vohuborz, Artaxerxes or Artakhshahr I, and Autophradates or Vātāfradāt I (ruled ca. 180–160 B.C.E.) had coins struck with reverses bearing their images worshiping in front of an altar with triple fire braziers (Sellwood 1983: 301–302 with Pls. 10.2–4, 10.6; Choksy 1990b: 202 with Fig. 1; Alram 1987 with Figs. 11–12, 14–15). Autophradates I, Shikandāt, Darius or Dārayaw I (ruled ca. 150–100 B.C.E.), and Autophradates II (ruled 80s B.C.E.) had coins produced with reverses bearing images of crenelated pillar fire altars, some times with a divinity emerging from the flames (Mitchiner 1978: 128–129 with Figs. 736, 739–741; Sellwood 1983: 303–304 with Pls. 10.5, 10.9–11; Choksy 1990a: 33 with Pl. 2, Fig. 4). Images of fire altars on the reverses of coins minted by Darius II (ruled 70s B.C.E.) and Oxathres or Vohukhshahr are of the popular stepped type, and in issues by Oxathres some degree of hemisphericality is retained in the flame’s depiction (Mitchiner 1978: 129 with Figs. 742–743; Sellwood 1983: 304, with Pls. 10.2, 11.1). In Khuzestan, at the valley of Shimbar northeast of Shustar, a pillar fire altar may signal that the nearby structure called the Qal’a-ye Dokhtar was used for Zoroastrian fire rituals during the state of Elymais (ca. 162 B.C.E.–224 C.E.) (Bivar and Shaked 1964). This site may indicate that the association of ritual fires with the yazata of victory Verethraghna (Varathraghna or Wahrām) who came to be depicted in Hellenized form may already have occurred rather than simply a veneration of the Greek Heracles (contra Colledge 1977: 92 with Pl. 18;
Matheson 1979: 164; Kawami 1987: 178–182). Unlike the detailed evidence from Persis (on which in general Wiesehöfer 1994), unfortunately nothing has been found from the period of the kings (ca. 125 B.C.E.–224 C.E.) of Characene or Mesene (Meshan) in southern Iraq that enhances knowledge of Zoroastrian fires and related rites.

A five-tiered spiritual ranking of holy fires is discussed in the Avesta (Yasna 17.11; see further Boyce 1989a: 3). But that list may have been incorporated into Zoroastrian scripture during the Achaemenian period or the early Parthian or Arsacid period (238 B.C.E.–224 C.E.). On the other hand, the Vidēvdād, “Code to Ward Off Evil Spirits” (8.81–96), a Young Avestan text codified under the Achaemenian regime, provides the first contemporaneous scriptural reference to the establishment of a holy fire of the highest ritual grade. Possibly termed *ātar vratrāghana, “victorious fire,” in Old Persian, it is definitely attested as ādar varahran in Parthian and ātakhsh wahrām in Middle Persian, (now called ātash bahrām in New Persian and Gujarati), “fire of Verethraghna.” Located within an dāityāgātu, called dādgāh in Middle Persian, “fixed place or appropriate precinct,” which apparently was another term for an ātarshgātu, an ātakhsh wahrām would be created by purification and fusion of flames that previously had been used for sixteen different functions. The Vidēvdād also prescribed that holy fires must remain free of impurities, be tended with appropriate rites, and that magi should perform all such rites while wearing a paitidāna, later rendered as Parthian *patām and Middle Persian padām (now New Persian panām, Pārsi Gujarati padān), “mouth and nose mask,” so as not to pollute the flames with breath (Vidēvdād 8.73–74, 18.1; see further Choksy 1989a: 84–85 with Fig. 12, on this issue of purity and pollution). Strabo also observed that magi avoided their breath blowing over holy fires when “they make offerings to fire by adding dry wood without bark and by placing fat on top of it” (Geography 15.3.14). Archeological evidence supports the textual ones already cited because a stone panel from a temple complex for Ahura Mazda, Mithra, and Anahita at Bard-e Neshanda in Khuzestan, dating after 140 B.C.E., depicts a magus wearing a *patām while pouring an offering into the flame of a small *ātarōshan (Schippmann 1971: 251–258 with Fig. 37; Kawami 1987: 182–183 with Pl. 26; in general see Godard 1949a).

Isidore of Charax (lived ca. first century B.C.E.–first century C.E.) wrote that in the town of Asak, near Nisa, burned a holy fire before which Arsaces or Arshaka I was proclaimed king around the year 238 B.C.E.
Scholars have suggested that this flame may have been the Parthian regnal one (see further Schippmann 1971: 33–34; Boyce 1975b: 461–462; Yamamoto 1979: 40–41). Parthian kings continued to acknowledge the centrality of fire in their rites as evidenced by an inscribed free-standing boulder relief at Bisitun (Bisotun) or Behistun which depicts a Parthian king of kings Walakhsh or Vologases (based on the poorly preserved inscrptional genealogy perhaps Vologases IV, ruled ca. 148–192 C.E.) making an offering to a fire upon a stepped *ātarōshan (Kawami 1987: 160–162 with Pl. 4; Mathiesen 1992: 1.52, 56, 2. 175–175; recently this relief could no longer be located at Bisitun). Another rock relief, ca. 100–225 C.E., at Shimbar, depicts two men — perhaps of royal or priestly office — with a pillar *ātarōshan between them (Kawami 1987: 79, who interprets it as part of the cult of Heracles; Mathiesen 1992: 1.57, 60, 2. 126). The figure on the left appears to hold a shallow cup in his left hand — perhaps preparing to offer a libation to the fire. Such imagery is not surprising for fire altars also had been depicted sporadically on Parthian coinage beginning with Vologases I (ruled ca. 51–77 or 80 C.E.) and including Vologases IV (compare Colledge 1977: 14, 140). The simultaneous persistence of divinized figures on coins and sculpture indicates that no dissonance was perceived between those and the fire icon (contra Boyce 1975a; 1989a: 3).

Kuh-e Khaja southwest of Zabol in Sistan, a late Parthian fire temple complex (Figure 9) now weathered and ruined, began functioning in the first century C.E. (Herzfeld 1941: 291–302 with Pls. 96–98, 100; partially contra Schippmann 1971: 57–70 with Figs. 8–12, who dates its beginnings to the Achaemenian period; Boyce 1975b: 458, 461; Yamamoto 1979: 43; Hannestad and Potts 1990: 112–113; Ghanimati 2000: 145, discussed more extensively in Ghanimati 2001). It is located on the eastern shore of Hamun lake believed, in Zoroastrian eschatology, to hold the prophet Zarathushtra’s semen so that a woman would get impregnated and bear a sōshāns, “savior,” close to the end of time.
A stepped *ātarôshan of stone vividly attests to the site’s ritual function (Herzfeld 1941: 301 with Pl. 99; Van-" 
den Berghe 1959: 16 with Pl. 15c; Matheson 1979: 282–283). The basic architecture of the ātakhshkadag there is that of a centralized square type with four columns and a squinch vault and dome surrounded by an ambulatory corridor, a yazishngāh, storage rooms (Colledge 1977: 66 with Fig. 16d; Ghanimati 2000: 139, 144 with Fig. 3 and Pls. 26 a–c, 29 b–c). Room 5 of site 4 at the Parthian city of Hekatomplyos (now Shahr-e Qumis) has produced an *ātarôshan as well (Hansman and Stronach 1974; Colledge 1977: 49; Yamamoto 1979: 44–45). Likewise the Greco-Bactrian period site of Tang-e Sangin, on the east bank of the Oxus river or Amu Darya, may attest via small fire altars to influence of Zoroastrian praxis involving holy fires and rules of purity surrounding such icons (as noted by Boyce and others 1991: 173–178).

In the northwest, mehean were present in Armenia with hubak serving as the local term for a fire temple and bagin (modeled on Greek bômos) for an altar during Parthian and early Sasanian times (Russell 1987: 297, 483, 486). Armenian writers such as Moses Khorenats’i (lived eighth century C.E.) noted the presence of holy fires dedicated to Ahura Mazda (ormzdakan krak) and Verethraghna (vrâmakân krak) on altars in those temples (History of the Armenians 2.53; see also Russell 1987: 483). Pau-" 
sanias (writing ca. middle second century C.E.) confirmed the location of *ātarôshan within ātargāh or ādargāh situated in the central part of each ātakhshkadag or mehean in his description of constantly-burning fires within temples located at the Lydian cities of Hierocaesarea and Hypaipha (see further Boyce and others 1991: 235–238): “In each of these temples there is an inner chamber and in this is an altar upon which there are some ashes …. A magus enters the chamber, bringing dry wood which he places on the altar. After this he chants an invocation” (Description of Greece 5.27.3–6).

Establishment of the three most famous ādar warahrân of antiquity is difficult to date, for each has a set of founding myths with allusions to both Avestan geography and Iranian epic, although based on anecdotal evidence they seem to have been established by mid Achaemenian times at the earliest and mid Parthian times at the latest (Boyce 1975b: 459–460; Yamamoto 1979: 42, 1981: 74–75, 84–85; Boyce and others 1991: 74–81). Possibly relocated more than once, their fire temples continued to be funded, staffed, and well maintained in Sasanian times. Each is mentioned
repeatedly, but usually drawing upon the same corpus of original materials, in the Zoroastrian Pahlavi books. Ādur Farrōbay, considered the ādar warahrān of clergy and nobility, may have always been enthroned in Fars perhaps at the site of Kariyan. Myths claiming that its original ātakhshkadag had been at a site called Khwarrahomand in Khwarazm (Wizīdagīhā ī Zād-spram 3.85) coupled with theology that linked its radiance to the notion of divinely-bestowed glory resulted in this fire eventually also being known as Ādur Khwarra or Ādur Farrā, in addition to a variety of other even later derivative names such as Ādur Karrād, Ādur Kharā, and Ādur Khorra (Schippmann 1971: 86–94; Boyce 1985b: 474). Its ātakhshkadag was visited for worship by kings and commoners alike, according to anecdotal information. Ādur Gushnasp, linked to rulers as the ādar warahrān of warriors, seems to have been originally established within an ātakhshkadag somewhere in Media (Kurdestan). At some point in time, perhaps under the early Sasanians during the third century C.E., it was moved to the site of Takht-e Sulayman southeast of Lake Urmiya (now in Iranian Azerbaijan) (Figure 10a), a sublimed volcanic crater with a deep blue central lake, which was surrounded by defensive walls and visited by kings (Osten and Naumann 1961: 54–60; compare Naumann 1967: 3051, 3053–3055; see also Schippmann 1971: 340–357; Boyce 1975b: 464–465, 1985c; and Yamamoto 1981: 75). The fire’s location there within a ātakhshkadag (Figure 10b) is confirmed by eighteen clay sealings from the site that refer to the “chief magus of the residence of Ādur Gushnasp.” Despite being at least partially razed by troops of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (ruled 610–641 C.E.) during his invasion of Iran in 623 C.E., it continued to func-

Fig. 10a. Sasanian Fire Temple Complex of Adur Gushnasp, Takht-e Sulayman.
tion for at least two hundred years thereafter as confirmed by the magus Zādspram (Wizīdagīhā 3.85) in the ninth century C.E. Ādur Burzēnmihr, regarded as the holy fire of farmers and pastoralists, seems to have been burned within an ātakhshkadag on a mountain called Revand northwest of Nishapur in Parthia (now Khurasan) as noted by Zādspram (Wizīdagīhā 3.85) (compare Boyce 1985a: 472). But that site has not been located, and the site of Kuh-e Tafresh in central Iran has been suggested as another possible locale (Vanden Berghe 1968; Matheson 1979: 190). It is possible that as the number of Zoroastrians in Khurasan declined through conversion to Islam and immigration to avoid such conversion, the fire was transferred from eastern to central Iran some time after 1300 C.E.

Another well-known ādar warahrān, probably established during Parthian times and still important during the Sasanian period, was called Ādur Karkōy. It was housed in an ātakhshkadag, northwest of Zabol in Sistan (Figure 11 represents a renovated medieval Islamic mosque modeled out of original chahār tāq on the site) (see further Schippmann 1971: 37–45; Boyce 1975b: 461, 1979: 88). The building’s exterior once was adorned with bull’s horns symbolizing the yazata Verethraghna after whom the highest rank of fire was named (Choksy 1997: 101). Further to the West, in the
Bolagi valley of Kermanshah, a Parthian fire temple possibly with Achaemenian antecedents and Sasanian renovations is present (FEZANA Journal 2005: 30).

Assimilation of Anahita into the Zoroastrian pantheon was complete during Parthian times as a lesser divinity of water and sovereignty created by Ahura Mazda to assist in maintaining *asha* or *arta*, “order” later “righteousness,” and combating *drug* or *drauga*, “confusion,” later “deception” and “falsehood.” Independent temples for that goddess would not have been incongruous with the faith or its central icon of fire (Azarnoush 1987). Indeed, the central rite of worship or sacrifice, the *Yasna* — attested in the *Avesta* — involves the preparation of a libation called *haoma* (Vedic *soma*) for which plants such as ephedra are pounded and mixed with milk and water in the presence of a fire. So temples for Anahita came to have fire altars, even though statues of her may have continued to be used as evidenced by the fairly standard image found later on Sasanian silver coins of the king of kings Warahrān or Wahrām II (ruled 276–293 C.E.). Likewise ritual precincts dedicated to Anahita were present within fire temples, such as at the fire temple of Ādur Gushnasp at Takht-e Sulayman. Even at Bishapur, later under the Sasanians, the main copula may have housed an *ātakhshgāh* with the lower level or so-called Anahita temple serving as an *urwīsgha*, an arrangement that explains the ritual architecture there (Gropp 2002). Such interweaving of the ritual uses of fire and water with its antecedents in the *Yasna* ceremony (Darrow 1988) laid the basis of gradually locating all major acts of worship within *ātakhshkāda*. The same would have occurred for other divinities whose *Yasht* were being incorporated into the *Avesta*. So the distinction once observed in Cappadocia by Strabo (*Geography* 15.3.15) between “temples to the Persian divinities” and “temples of fire” would have ceased — indeed it seems never to have existed among Zoroastrians in regions like Lydia (compare Boyce 1991: 270), and may not have been widespread on the Iranian plateau either.

**Praxes in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages**

By late antique and early medieval times, fire was thought to have been created in *garōdmānā* (Pahlavi *garōdmān*), “abode of song,” or highest heaven by Ahura Mazda (as recorded subsequently in the *Wizīdagīhā* of Zādspram 3.78). Moreover, it had come to be regarded as a corporeal representation of Asha Vahishta (Ardwahisht), “Best Order,” one of the
Amesha Spentas (amēsha spēnta), “holy immortals,” believed to have been created by Ahura Mazda (Greater Bundahishn 3.7-19). Ahura Mazda was thought to have utilized fire in the creation of humanity (Greater Bundahishn 1a.3) as the male element of genesis acting in conjunction with the female element water (Dēnkard 79.21) — so theologically explaining the presence of fire and water, Mithra and Anahita, in rituals. Eschatological belief proclaimed that the final renovation of the universe would occur through the medium of fire just as cosmogony supposedly involved water (Wizīdagīhā of Zādspram 34.49–50). Ātakhsh zōhr, “ritual offerings for fire,” of animal flesh and fat are mentioned not merely within historical contexts but as ongoing praxis in magian documents from the late ninth and early tenth centuries C.E. (Pahlavi Revāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg, “Pahlavi Treatise Accompanying the Book of Religious Judgments,” 58.72; Nāmagīhā ī Manushchihr, “Epistles of Manushchihr,” 1.8.3; see also Boyce 1966a). The necessity of wood and incense offerings was noted by Manushchihr, a ninth-century C.E. high priest of Fars and Kerman, while discussing the proper maintenance of holy fires (Nāmagīhā 1.3.11, 2.9.3). Expenses for maintenance of the fires and officiating priests were met through pious foundations, state support, and charges from devotees (partially Menasce 1964; Boyce 1968: 56–57, 1989a: 3).

The ranks of holy fires were standardized during the Sasanian period (Schippmann 1971: 510–513; Vitalone 2004: 425; those ranks are retained by Zoroastrians to the present). At beginning of Sasanian period, distinctions existed between flames of ātakhsh wahrām or ādur ī wahrām rank and fires termed ādurān (mentioned by the third century C.E. high magus Kirdīr in the Sar Mashhad inscription 3, 17, Naqsh-e Rostam inscription 5, 12, 18, 34, 44, Ka’ba-ye Zardosht inscription 2, 5, 6–7, 11, 13, 14, 15, and Naqsh-e Rajab inscription 23). The ādurān may have been a second grade of ritual fire (with hearth fires being unmentioned) or else simply designated all other holy fires tended by magi within Iran and outside its borders. By late Sasanian times the term had become specific for a second grade of ritual flames known as ātakhsh ādarān, “fire of fires,” or simply ādarān. A third rank of holy fires was recognized as well: the ādurōg ī dādgāh, “small fire in a fixed place,” or simply dādgāh. Although classical writers such as Ammianus Marcellinus (ca. 325–395 C.E.) noted that magi tended ever-burning fires (History 23.6.34), in practice only ātakhsh wahrām had to burn constantly according to religious stipulation. Flames
of the ādarân and dādgâh ritual grades could and would periodically be allowed to burn out (see also Boyce 1975b: 462–463, 1979: 110).

A degree of regularity in praxis relating to various types and styles of ātakhshgâh appears to have occurred under the early Sasanians as well, as commented on by the magus Tōsar (lived third century C.E.), with regional holy fires allowed to burn only in their established ātakhshkadag and only one regnal flame, that of the ruling dynasty and not those of regional lords, permitted (Tōsar nāma, “Book or Letter of Tosar” 22). The dynasty’s founder Ardâshîr I (ruled 224–240 C.E.) is said by the Armenian historian Moses Khorenats’i to have “ordered that the fire of Ahura Mazda which was on the altar at Bagavan be kept perpetually burning” (History of the Armenians 2.77; see further Wikander 1946: 96, 107). The second Sasanian king of kings Shāpūr I (ruled 240–272 C.E.) claimed to have founded many ātakhsh wahrâm and ādarân fires named for himself, his daughter, and sons (Naqsh-e Rostam inscription, Parthian text, 17–19). Founding of fire temples continued to be one means by which Sasanian monarchs publicly affirmed their commitment to Zoroastrianism (Boyce 1989a: 4). As evidenced by materials remains, open air rock-cut fire pits and fire bowls were used during Sasanian period (224–651 C.E.) funerary services at Naqsh-e Rostam and at Kuh-e Zakah adjacent to astōdānân, “sepulchers, rock ossuaries.”

A Middle Persian inscription on a decorative column capital from Shapur I’s reign, found at Barm-e Delak, confirms that the term adurgah (l.1) was used by Zoroastrians in the Sasanian empire to designate a “fire precinct” (Tavoosi 1989; contra MacKenzie 1993). That column was part of a chahâr tâq, “four arches,” technically four columns supporting a gumbad, “domed roof” (a term which eventually came to serve as a alternate for chahâr tâq), and forming a hall or portico whose four sides were open, yet often surrounded by ambulatory corridors and other roofed ritual precincts, storage rooms, and congregational halls. Now there is general scholarly consensus that the chahâr tâq become the quintessential architectural form for an ātakhshgâh or fire precinct during the Sasanian period (see also Schippmann 1971: 504–506; Boyce 1975b: 464). That style is seen in ruins (some restored) at numerous locales on the Iranian plateau and Central Asia. However, it is necessary to remember that the chahâr tâq style was not restricted solely to fire temples — its structural utilitarianism resulted in palaces, lodges, and public monuments incorporating aspects. Many of those buildings (Huff 1990: especially 637) seem
to have been multipurpose — religious and secular. Such may have been the case at Tepe-Mill (Figure 12) and Takht-e Kay Kawus (Siroux 1938d; Vanden Berghe 1959: 122 with references; Naumann 1964; Matheson 1979: 49, 61) near Ray and Tehran. The same may hold true for the building known as Chahar Qapu at Qasr-e Shirin west of Kermanshah (Vanden Berghe
1959: 98 with Pl. 125a–b; Schippmann 1971: 282–291 with Fig. 39; Matheson 1979: 137). Sarvestan in Fars probably served as a Sasanian fire temple with an attached lodge (Figure 13) (on stylistic grounds contra Bier 1986: 55–67, where it is construed as a fire temple alone and dated to the ninth century C.E.).

Yet, multiple functions aside, the link between the chahâr tâq and Zoroastrian fire rituals was firmly established in the Sasanian construction of ātakhshgâh and ātakhshkadag. A chahâr tâq form of the ātakhshgâh or ādurgâh usually was situated inside an ātakhshkadag — with or without a series of surrounding hallways, and it was within the ātakhshgâh created by the chahâr tâq that a holy fire burned upon an ātakhshdân under a gumbad (as noted in the passage from the Wizîdagîhâ of Zâdspram 29.4 cited above; compare also Herzfeld 1941: 301–302; Keall 1973: 16–17; Yamamoto 1981: 79; Boyce 1989c: 9; Huff 1990: 636–637). Indeed, most chahâr tâq now seen in solitary ruins display evidence of having once been part of larger temple complexes (Stronach 1966: 219–220, 226, 1985: 623–627; contra Godard 1938a: 7–10; and Erdmann 1941: 35–36). These interpretations are confirmed by a passage in the later Persian Revâyats (2.18 with illustration) where it was written that within a “dar-i mehr (court of Mithra, i.e., a fire temple) there should be a dome over the ātashgâh (fire precinct) with four portals …. The yazishngâh (place of rituals for worship) for the magi should be laid out around and close to the ātashgâh.” In those columned halls across the Sasanian empire (and, later, in Caliphal Iran), bôy, “incense,” was ritually offered to holy fires on ātakhshdân — as attested by the magus Zâdspram (Wizîdagîhâ 3.82, 29.4). It is interesting to note that the English term atrium, “columned hall or courtyard, central portico,” from Latin ātrium, also originated in Indo-European *ātr-yo-, “belonging to fire,” hence “place of fire,” possibly the room where fire burned and its smoke exited through a vent in the roof (Watkins 2000: 5). But, not all members of the Zoroastrian community had equal access to those fires, precincts, and temples. Fears of impurity attributed to menstruation and childbirth periodically constrained women’s presence there (in addition to denying them membership in the hereditary clergy) (Choksy 2002: 91).

A few of the extant Sasanian fire temples, many of which have only the chahâr tâq remaining, may be listed here (moving roughly counterclockwise around Iran). Near Takht-e Rostam, in the Shahriyar area southwest of Tehran, all that remains of a fire temple are two stone ātakhshdân
Fig. 14. Sasanian Fire Precinct, Kheyrabad.

(Siroux 1938d; Matheson 1979: 60). West of Ray, above the town of Sahrestanak, are the ruins of an ātkhshkādag now called the Qal’a-ye Dokhtar (Siroux 1938a; Erdmann 1941: 56; Vanden Berghe 1959: 122; Schippmann 1971: 393–397 with Fig. 58; Matheson 1979: 61). In Mazandaran, however, few traces remain of four ātkhshkādag that functioned at Sari as late as the eighteenth century C.E. (mentioned by Matheson 1979: 64). Ruins of a chahār tāq are present, however, at the site of Qal’a-ye Dokhtar near Qum (Siroux 1938c). In Khuzestan, another chahār tāq still stands (Figure 14) at Kheyrabad (Godard 1949c: 367–368; Vanden Berghe 1959: 59 with Pl. 86c; Schippmann 1971: 160–161).

In Fars, one chahār tāq was located west of Dogonbadan (Matheson 1979: 245). Just east of Kazerun a single arch is all that remains of a chahār tāq (Siroux 1938b; Godard 1938a: 29; Vanden Berghe 1959: 52 with Pl. 74b, 1961: 189; Matheson 1979: 237). The chahār tāq at Jirra is better preserved (Godard 1938a: 30–32, 58, 1938b; Vanden Berghe 1959: 52 with Pl. 74c; Huff 1995). At Konar Sya a large ātkhshkādag, probably dating from the fifth century C.E., displays not only a chahār tāq style ātkhshgāh but also of quarters for magi and supplies (Vanden Berghe 1961: 166–169; Schippmann 1971: 97–99 with Fig. 13; Matheson 1979: 255–256). Old Shiraz, or Qasr-e Abu Nasr as it came to be called later, must have possessed at least one ātkhshkādag possibly at the summit of the site paralleling the locations of many other chahār tāq (Upton 1973: 13). Indirect confirmation comes from clay sealings that refer not only to magi in a variety of ecclesiastical and administrative positions but also to
the high priest of Shiraz (Frye 1973: 48–51). At Firuzabad (Godard 1938a: 8–9), there is a ruined *chahār tāq* (Figure 15). East of Sarvestan, toward Kerman, is the site of Tang-e Chakchak with the fire temple complex known as Qasr-e Dokhtar possessing a *chahār tāq* within an *ātakhshkadag* (Vanden Berghe 1959: 20 with Pl. 19; Schippmann: 82–83; Matheson 1979: 261–262; all with references). Two *chahār tāq* are also found at Mil-e Naqara Hana (Azarnoush 1989).

In central Iran, Isfahan’s large *ātakhshkadag* (Figure 16) was located atop a hill with several *ātakhshgāh* (Godard 1937, 1938a: 60–62; Schippmann 1971: 460–465). The village of Abyana gained a *chahār tāq* toward the end of the Sasanian period, with rituals performed there until Zoroastrians residents were persecuted in the early sixteenth century by the newly established Safavid regime (Siroux 1967; Schippmann 1971: 446–450 with Fig. 74; Matheson 1979: 296). On a hill near the town of Neyzar or Naysar (Godard 1938a: 41–42, 1949b: 196–197; Hardy 1938; Schippmann 1971: 442–445; Vanden Berghe 1959: 126 with Pls. 160 a and b; Matheson 1979: 172; Kleiss 1989) stands a restored *chahār tāq*. The remains of a *chahār tāq* (Figure 17) are present at Natanz (Godard 1936: 79–82; Vanden Berghe 1959: 126 with references; Schippmann 1971:
Fig. 17. Sasanian Fire Precinct, Natanz.

450–451), a site which serves as an excellent ongoing example of how the building blocks of ātakhshkadag have been reused repeatedly in construction of a mosque, houses, and orchard walls beside the site. Another is found at the town of Atashgah (Godard 1938a: 32–40; Matheson 1979: 189 with references). West of Qum and north of Arak, in the mountains around Tafresh is yet another ruined chahār tāq which some scholars suggest may have been one of the temples for Ādur Burzēnmehr (Vanden Berghe 1968; Matheson 1979: 189–190). In Kerman province, between Kerman city and Negar, a hillside chahār tāq and Nestorian church suggest that the local community adopted Christianity and utilized materials from the ātakhshkadag to construct the church (Schippmann 1971: 74–75; Matheson 1979: 267 with references). In Khurasan, between Mashhad and Torbat-e Haydariya is the chahār tāq of Baz-e Hur (Figure 18)

Fig. 18. Sasanian Fire Precinct, Baz-e Hur.
dating from the third century C.E. (Godard 1938a: 53–58; Vanden Berghe 1957: 15 with Pl. 15b; Matheson 1979: 205). At the site of Bandiyan (now near the border with Turkmenistan), northwest of the town of Dargaz in northeastern Khorasan, a chahâr tâq with antechambers has been excavated recently. One of those antechambers housed a three-stepped fire altar. The fire temple complex seems to date from the reign of Wahrâm V (ruled 421–439 C.E.) perhaps having been erected to commemorate a victory over the Hephthalites. Possibly destroyed during Hephthalite incursions in 484 C.E., the site later was reused as a mosque (as were many Zoroastrian fire temples) (Rahbar 2004: 9, 10–11, 17–20, with Figs. 1, 3).

At Mala Hayram (now in Turkmenistan) near Sarakhs, a Sasanian period fire temple with two rooms having mudbrick platforms for fire altars with traces of ash has been excavated (Kaim 2000: 165–166 with Pl. 30a).

The above-mentioned sites are by no means intended to serve as a comprehensive list; they are merely selected examples for the preponderance of the four arch, domed, form of atakhshâh from the third century C.E. onward. It has been observed that many documented ruins of Sasanian period atakhshdân, atakhshâh and atakhshkadag are in western Iran (Garrison 1999: 618 with addition locales and references). The discrepancy may very well reflect not simply the popularity of an architectural form in a particular region. Rather, it could represent a combination of the limited nature of modern archeological survey work in eastern Iran focusing on such ruins and the gradual disappearance of Zoroastrian fire precincts and fire temples when the chahâr tâq and its surrounding hallways were incorporated into early Muslim hypostyle mosques (contra Schippmann 1971: 505; Boyce 1975b: 462).

In addition to sites and ritual objects, fire altars and worship before them were depicted on rock reliefs and on the coins of every king of kings during Sasanian times. The stepped altar was usually depicted flanked by a king such as Wahrâm II (ruled 276–293 C.E.) (Figure 19a) with his patron divinity Anahita (Choksy 1989b) or Hormizd II (ruled 302–309 C.E.) with a divinity emerging from the flames (Figure 19b) or by two figures as on issues of Khusrô I (ruled 531–579 C.E.) (Figure 19c). The stepped altar was occasionally depicted supported by lion-pawed legs (but sans individuals) as seen on reverses of silver coins (dram) issued by Ardashîr I (Göbl 1971: 17 with Pl. 1). A small pillar altar supporting a brazier is depicted on the relief of Ardashîr I’s investiture by Ahura Mazda at Tang-e Ab near Firuzabad (Vanden Berghe 1959: 50 with Pl. 70b;
Matheson 1979: 253). Sasanian stamp seals with fire altar images are also well known (compare Yamamoto 1981: 68–71). Both stepped and pillar ātakhshḍān were depicted, the pillar fire altars sometimes having ribbons or legs (Gignoux and Gyselen 1987: 196–197 with Pls. 12.60.1–60.3). Those ātakhshḍān could bear a single flame (Brunner 1978: 120 with Figs. 111, 118, 140) or even triple flames (Brunner 1978: 120 with Figs. 101, 107, 133). The fire altars were flanked by one magus (Bivar 1969: 56–57 with Pls. BD1–5, 15; Brunner 1978: 65 with Fig. 125; Gignoux and Gyselen 1982: 61 with Pl. 3.16.2) or sometimes by two individuals (perhaps magi) (Brunner 1978: 65 with Fig. 52). Less frequently were female devotees shown in front of holy fires (Gignoux and Gyselen 1982: 61 with Pl. 3.16.1).

**Concluding Comments**

Is the modern terminology of “fire precincts,” “fire temples,” and “fire altars” accurate historically, religiously, and/or linguistically? As discussed earlier, the second part of the compound term ātakhshḍaḥ reflects Indo-European *gʷa-. So an ātakhshḍaḥ is the base, place, or space in which the ātakhshḍān stands. Yet it is bound or surrounded by furrows and walls that ritually distinguish that location from all others — simultaneously separate from and yet connected to the rest of the ātakhshḍaḥ. A gāḥ is thus indeed a “precinct,” a term deriving from Indo-European
*kenk*-1, “to gird, bind, surround” (Watkins 2000: 40). It is fitting, therefore, to render ātakhshgāh as “fire precinct.” The phrase “fire temple” was first applied by westerners to settings like the ātakhshkadag — now it has been assimilated by Zoroastrians themselves. It is based on transference of the word temple, “place of worship,” commonly regarded as a “building dedicated to divinities and to their worship,” to Iranian religiosity. That term derives from the Latin templum, “cut-off space, separated area,” plus the Greek words temenos, “walled area, compound with building(s) used for religious purposes,” and temnein, “to cut, separate,” all of which derive from Indo-European *tem*, “to cut, separate” (Watkins 2000: 90). Essentially, spaces when physically cut off or demarcated from larger areas and then assigned with ritual functionality become religiously significant places (Choksy 2003: 29–30, 37–39). Each ātakhshkadag or house of fire is a place structurally set apart or cut off from its surroundings and assigned ritual functionality. Therefore the term’s translation as “fire temple” is appropriate. As for the term ātakhshdān, although it directly represents a fire stand, its consistent Greek translation as bōmos precisely captures the Iranian word’s practical purpose of “fire altar.”

From when does the earliest extant historical evidence for holy fires and fire temples in Zoroastrian ritual date? Based on the available evidence, it could be postulated that the Bronze Age ritual room at Togolok 21 with its ātarshštāna may have been a pre-Zoroastrian or even a very early Zoroastrian ātarshgātu. More important, the Median period building now known as the central temple at Tepe Nush-e Jan with its ātarshštāna within an ātarshgāthu seems to be among the earliest ātarshkatha excavated to date on the Iranian plateau. That structure had a fire altar within a fire precinct inside a fire temple for use by residents and visitors, just as Zoroastrians still go to fire temples to pray in the presence of fires within fire precincts around the world. So it is possible that the basic form of fire temple architecture begin in Central Asia and eastern Iran at sites like Togolok 21 and then spread westward while assimilating Mesopotamian styles (compare partially Stronach 1985: 624–627). So, at Hamadan in Median times a small precursor of the chahār tāq came to be constructed — establishing an architecture for the ātakhshgāh that would gain popularity until it became the standard model from the Sasanian period to the present, a fire precinct tucked inside a fire temple where a holy fire could burn on an altar. Moreover, even modern ātashdān, although made of metal, mimic the style of the stepped altars of ancient and medieval times.
Essentially, a holy fire or ātakhsh used for ritual purposes by Zoroastrians in ancient Iran did have to be a constantly-burning fire, or to have been one of the highest ritual rank, nor be tended solely by the Zoroastrian magi or clergy. In practice, an ātakhshgāh did not have to be an enclosed building but could even be an outdoor fire precinct — as is demonstrated by the archeological remains from various periods of Iranian history. Its ritual layout thus broadly paralleled those of the urwīsgāh, “place of the ritual table,” or yazishngāh, “place of the rituals for worship,” where magi performed high liturgies inside fire temples, and the barashnūmgāh, “place of purification,” which used to be located on the outskirts of towns until premodern times (after which those places came to be built adjacent to and connected with fire temples so that priests would not have to mingle with nonbelievers after purificatory rituals). So ātakhshgāh, urwīsgāh, yazishngāh, and barashnūmgāh, although having functional differences, share structural parallels as places separated from the surroundings and made pure for religious purposes (Choksy 2003).

Finally, were eternally-burning flames the most central aspect of fire in ancient Iranian ritual? Based on the history of holy fires in Zoroastrianism it would seem that perpetually-blazing flames — especially of the ātakhsh wahrām rank — in deep bowled fire altars within fire precincts located in large temples were as infrequent in ancient times as they are now-a-days and that they developed gradually as major public symbols (thus contra Boyce’s suggestion 1975b: 457, that only altars with deep bowls housing ever-burning fires should be counted as marks of Zoroastrian temple praxis). Rather, fires for ritual purposes usually burned in shallower altars within interior precincts of neighborhood temples where the flames could be kept secure from accidental or intentional extinguishment, moved rapidly if the need arose due to political or religious strife, and were relatively inexpensive to tend. From the evidence, analyzed in this article, it must be concluded that the holy nature of ātakhsh was not grounded by the Zoroastrians of ancient Iran on whether it burns permanently or temporarily in a temple. Moreover, it has become clear from the data, those Zoroastrians did not base definitions and usage of terms like ātakhshgāh or ādurā ḡā and ātakhshkadaq, or khānāq ātakhsh on whether fires located within precincts and temples were constantly-burning. Neither was an ātakhshdān assigned a particular bowl depth to hold specific quantities of ash. Nor did an ātakhshdān have a specific height or size. At different times the precincts, buildings, and altars were designed according to prevailing styles, some of
which have been discussed herein, utilizing available materials and technologies while maintaining ritual requirements. Continuity and change in praxes of ritual fires occurred in the centuries that followed, as a result of the Arab conquest and the transformation of ancient Iranian religiosity into minority status (Choksy 2006).

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