

Abstract

Historical Iranian and Greek relations in retrospect

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Two important ancient civilisations, the Iranian and the Greek, played a significant role in the development of the ancient world from the sixth century BC onwards. The annexation of Lydia, one of the richest lands, by Cyrus the Great inaugurated the cultural contact between the two civilisations. Apparently the coexistence of the two cultures led the two peoples to a level of mutual knowledge about each other's culture. In fact, there developed a spirit of competition between the Iranians (Persians) and the Greeks, who were identified with the eastern and the western world respectively.

Ancient Greeks were pioneers in various fields, such as philosophy, medicine, art and sailing. The Achaemenid kings benefited from the presence and work of Greek philosophers and scientists in their court. For example, Herodotus' work, the nautical-geographical account of Scylax, a traveller who lived at the Persian Gulf's coast. Greek physicians, such as Democides and Ctesias lived at Sousa. Hippocrates was Ardashir I's personal physician. In the late sixth century BC democracy was already developed in Greece but there were still supporters of tyranny. The supporters of democracy held more political power and claimed that whoever went against the people should be ostracized. Sousa was a safe refuge for those Greek politicians who were expelled from the Greek city-states: for example, Hippias, son of the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus; the victor of Salamis, Themistocles; Demaratus, a king of Sparta; and the victor of Plataea, Pausanias. These important personalities remained for many years in the Achaemenid Empire and became familiar with the Persian language, serving as counsellors of the Great King. Darius I and Xerxes entrusted various Greek artists, such as Telephanes, with the task of decorating their throne.

Alexander conquered all lands and reached Iran proper, being accompanied by historians, artists, philosophers, merchants and artisans. Alexander was Aristotle's disciple and knew that he could not rule by force a country of great cultural background. To ensure the hellenization of Iran, Alexander ordered that all provinces should be ruled by members of the Macedonian elite. He himself married an Iranian and convinced many others in his retinue to do the same. Similarly, ten thousand Greek soldiers married Iranian women at Sousa. Seleucus I married Apame, daughter of an Iranian aristocrat, and for this reason the Seleucid dynasty is of Graeco-Iranian background. The Seleucids founded various Greek cities in Asia and these acted as centres of expansion and preservation of Hellenism.

In general, the efforts of Alexander and his successors to hellenize Iran lasted for two centuries. Meanwhile, the influence of the Iranian civilization on the Greeks was equally considerable. Alexander adopted the use of the Iranian throne and royal clothing and continued the tradition of *proskynesis*. In the Parthian period the use of the Greek language was restricted within the Greek elite. The combination of Iranian and Greek forms of art led to an artistic syncretism that influenced Sasanian and Islamic art.