

Original Research Article

Hoori Davoudi<sup>1</sup> Zahra Hossein Abadi<sup>2</sup>

Received: 13 May 2022

Revised: 4 July 2022

Accepted: 10 July 2022

DOI: 10.22055/PYK.2022.17681

URL: [paykareh.scu.ac.ir/article\\_17681.html](http://paykareh.scu.ac.ir/article_17681.html)

**How to cite this article:** Davoudi, H & Hossein Abadi, Z. (2022). Symbological Investigation and Analysis of Fire Motifs in Pre-Islamic Iran: Emphasizing Works of the Median and Achaemenid Periods. *Paykareh*, 11 (28), pp. 56-69.

The Persian translation of this article is published in the same issue with the following title

بررسی و تحلیل نمادشناسانه نقش آتش در ایران پیش از اسلام با تأکید بر آثار دوره ماد و هخامنشی

## **Symbological Investigation and Analysis of Fire Motifs in Pre-Islamic Iran: Emphasizing Works of the Median and Achaemenid Periods\***

### **Abstract**

**Problem Definition:** By observing the status of fire and fire-place in the reliefs of works left by the kings of the Medes and Achaemenids, it could be understood that fire had a very high and sacred position in Pre-Islamic Iran. In the works left from this era and also in artistic and ceremonial works, the presence and manifestation of fire in catacombs, public ceremonies of kings, and religious and ritual ceremonies can be observed. Therefore, the question raised in this regard is: "What symbolic concepts does the fire motif have in the Median and Achaemenid periods?"

**Objective:** The aim of this study is to Symbologically investigate and analyze the fire motif in the history of Pre-Islamic Iran (the Median and Achaemenid periods) and the status of this element in the culture and art of this period.

**Research Method:** Considering the historical aspect of the present research, the adopted method is descriptive-analytical. The obtained data were classified and reviewed. The data analysis was carried out using descriptive methods and the presentation of images.

**Results:** The results of the research show that in investigating the remaining motifs of the works related to the Median and Achaemenid periods, the symbolic fire always shows the logic of cleansing evil with good. Fire is the manifestation of Asha (piety and truth) on earth, and the fireplace is the place to worship and praise Ahura Mazda. Also, fire is a symbol of purity and peace of being, benefiting from the property of purifying matter and soul essence. In fact, if the fire was devoid of this characteristic, it could never be the connection between the earthly human world and the spiritual realm of Ahura.

### **Keywords**

Fire, Symbology, Pre-Islamic Iran, Medes, Achaemenid

1. Department of Art Research, Faculty of Art and Architecture, University of Sistan and Baluchistan, Zahedan, Iran.

2. Corresponding author, Department of Art Research, Faculty of Art and Architecture, University of Sistan and Baluchistan, Zahedan, Iran. Email: [hosseinabadi@arts.usb.ac.ir](mailto:hosseinabadi@arts.usb.ac.ir)

\*This article is extracted from the master's thesis of the first author, entitled "Fire and its symbols in pre-Islamic Iran" under the supervision of the second author at the Faculty of Art and Architecture of the University of Sistan and Baluchistan.

## Introduction

The study of human social history indicates that the four sacred elements of Water, Air, Earth, and especially Fire have been of special importance and sanctity in human societies since ancient times. The ancient philosophers also considered the origin of the universe and life to be somehow related to one of these four elements; however, it seems that among them, fire had a much more important status. Since ancient times, fire has been respected and sacred among Indo-European tribes and has a divine foundation. In Iran, fire is considered a manifestation of divinity, and its flame is a reminder of God's light, and all the manifestations of nature such as the sun, moon, stars, earth, etc. are surrounded by a focal point of fire. Also, the philosophers of ancient India (Vedic age) believed that the principle of creation of the universe is based on a golden and fiery ball that exploded after a thousand years, and the soul of the world, Purusha, was born from this golden ball. In examining the status of fire in the history of ancient Iran, three groups of sources are more important: First, archaeological documents such as fire temples, reliefs, inscriptions, coins, and seals. Second, written documents recorded by Greek and Roman authors, certainly have strengths and weaknesses and should be looked at more carefully. Third, written documents and sources that are somehow related to the religious and ritual concepts of ancient Iran, like the Avesta and Pahlavi texts, actually express the mythological history of Iran. The advantage of using these sources at the same time is that, on the one hand, by studying archaeological sources, it is possible to identify the ancient place of fire in Iran. Examining the works left by the Elamites shows not only the very ancient history of the fire consecration tradition in this period but also means that it was transferred from the Elamites to the Median and Achaemenid periods. By observing the status of fire and fire-place in the reliefs of the catacombs of the Median and Achaemenid kings and comparing it with the status of fire in the reliefs and seals of the Elamite kings, it is possible to understand the transfer and development of this ancient cultural tradition from the Elamite period to the Median and Achaemenid period. Considering the mentioned ideas, the purpose of this research is to study, examine, and analyze the symbology of fire motif in the history of pre-Islamic Iran with an emphasis on the Median and Achaemenian periods and the status of this element in the culture and art of this period. Therefore, the question raised in this regard is: "what symbolic concepts does the fire motif have in the Achaemenid and Median periods?" According to the research question and the importance of the element of fire and the attractiveness of related topics, including its status in the remaining motifs from ancient Iran and its relationship with the culture, traditions, and customs of the residents of this region, which even today, we witness their continuity with Islamic-Iranian culture, it is necessary to conduct more research studies in this field.

## Research Method

Regarding the historical aspect of the present research, the adopted method is descriptive-analytical. For this reason, in the current research, the data were examined and introduced using a descriptive and image presentation method. Then, the obtained data have been classified, and by analyzing the data, an attempt has been made to scrutinize the fire motif in pre-Islamic Iran (Median and Achaemenid periods) from a symbological perspective, in order to provide an opening for a more accurate understanding of the symbol of fire. Also, library resources and databases have been used to collect information and data.

### **Research Background**

«Nabizadeh» (2013) in his master's thesis entitled «Investigating the symbol of the sun in the visual arts of pre-Islamic Iran», examines the objective emergence of the sun motif in the visual arts of Iran and the evolution of the meanings and the symbology and semantics of the sun. He has analyzed the sun motif in the prominent works of Iranian visual arts before Islam. Also, in this thesis, the analysis of different aspects of the symbol of the sun among different people, its connection with religious religions, and the investigation of the sun in ancient Iran, rituals of Mehr, Mitra, Divine Grace, Zoroastrian religion, and its relationship with the sun and fire have been discussed. «Qa'em Maghami» (2011), in an article entitled «Investigation of the status of fire in the history of ancient Iran», examines and compares the status of fire in historical and archeological works and documents left by local tribes and Aryan newcomers and the fire consecration tradition from the Elamites period to the Median and Achaemenid. «Maleki» (2010), in an article entitled «Comparative study of the myths of Iran and India in the ancient era», while looking briefly at the geographical and historical situation of Iran and India in the ancient era and mentions the cultural and religious characteristics, studied the myths and hybrid creatures in these two lands and finally, with a comparative analysis of the above topics, provided judgments and conclusions. «Farboud» (2003), in his master's thesis entitled «Comparative study of fire and its symbols, between the two cultures and civilizations of India and Iran», investigated the beliefs of different ethnic groups and their shared beliefs, which are the result of a common nature. Therefore, in order to understand how the ancient cultural patterns of a nation evolve, it seems necessary to investigate the influence of the surrounding civilizations on each other. For this purpose, the different forms of the emergence of fire, its symbolic aspects, and its duties and functions in religious beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies, in these two civilizations, have been investigated and compared.

### **Investigating the fire status in the history of ancient Iran**

Research shows that after the Aryan nations entered the Iranian Plateau, which took place in several stages from the middle of the third millennium to the beginning of the first millennium BC, following the racial mixing and especially the cultural exchanges they had with the natives of the plateau, especially the Elamites, some of the traditions of the consecration of fire have been learned from the natives of the plateau. Although we know that “Classical (Four) Elements” and especially fire have been very sacred among the Aryans since the earliest days, the observation of some religious traditions related to the tradition of consecrating fire in Elamite reliefs, as well as images such as the Barsam ceremony near the fireplace in Elamite seal motifs, suggest a hypothesis that perhaps the tradition of consecrating fire and some related rituals, due to its very ancient history in the society of ancient Elam, was accepted by the Aryans after the cultural exchange between the Elamites and the Aryans, and after that, there were changes and transformations following the Aryan culture, especially with the influence of the teachings of the Zoroastrian religion, especially in the Sasanian period (Qa'em Maqami, 2011, p. 166). Ancient Iranians considered fire as a gift from God and called its flame reminiscent of the divine light. They used to place burning fireplaces as altars in temples. The religious leaders of Iranians and Hindus in Avesta and Rig Veda are «Atravan» which means «fire attendant or caregiver» and the one who is assigned to guard the fire. In ancient Rome, chaste and wise maidens from noble families were required to guard the sacred fire in the temple, and they were called «vestalis», and this guard should spend thirty years in perfect chastity and not let the

sacred fire, which was thought to be the support of the Roman government, be extinguished. Zoroastrians also trained and employed people named Atashbod to maintain and guard the fire, and today the family name of some of them is Atashbod because of their father's profession. Fire is also called Azar, Ador, Atar (Farhoshi, 1976, p. 21).

### **Symbology of fire in pre-Islamic Iran**

The attractiveness of fire evokes the primary strands of our instincts. Here we are talking about the wonderful deception of the flames in the fireplace, the image of which remains in our children's and later youth's minds. This continuous rotation and enchantment is enough to make the burning of the flame look like a sublime phenomenon of chemistry. Gaston Bachelard also mentions the memory of the fireplace fire in his childhood (Bachelard, 1949, pp. 25-26). In fact, it is the social characteristic of fire, in other words, its practical, artistic, and spiritual dimension, which shows its potential symbolic power by presenting an acceptable and distinctive status. From Pearce's point of view, a symbol means a phenomenon that indicates a subject and evokes it (Ducrot & Schaeffer, 1996, p. 215). The symbolic power of fire has made it an ideal instrument in religion. This point proves the existence of fire in different rites, especially in the 3,000-year-old Zoroastrian religion. Today, the Zoroastrian religion in present-day Turkmenistan assigns a divine place to fire and tries to preserve it in the daily life of the followers of this religion and their children through rituals and beliefs (Esfandi & Gholami, 2007, p. 6). Today, the Zoroastrian religion in present-day Turkmenistan assigns a divine place to fire and tries to preserve it in the daily life of the followers of this religion and their children through rituals and beliefs (Esfandi & Gholami, 2007, p. 6). «Pope» says: «The attention of Iranians was to symbolic concepts rather than to creating abstract formal perfection». About 700 to 800 thousand years ago, when the use of fire started, various uses were observed such as heating to cooking food and human awakening and night security, hunting to praying and worshiping it, and creating the god of fire (Pope, 2003, p. 71). The shrine of the God of the sun in the outer area of Choghazanbil temple is known as Nosko, which had an open roof and the god of light was praised in it. The metal related to this god was mercury because it had a lot of brightness and the name of this god is related to religious hints and implicit arguments concerning fire and light, and perhaps Choghazanbil was also a place to keep the holy fire. Because in some of the royal tombs of this temple, the remains of burnt bodies have been found, which shows the burial ceremony of the dead who were probably burned during a ceremony. Ilam has been a land producing precious metals, so he had a god of fire to protect the metal workers. The function of the solar observatory of Chaghazanbil and even the sloped ground next to the temple is inclined towards the sun and is very polished and smooth like a mirror, which shows the use of sunlight as a source of light and energy production (See Figure 1). In the past, Iranian tribes had the custom to bury all their dead towards the sun, which is rooted in the sanctity of light. All the celebrations of the year and prayers are related to the observatory of the temple, which somehow goes back to the sanctity of fire, light, and sun (Safaran & Bahmani, 2010, p. 41).

## PAYKAREH

Journal of Art Faculty, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

**Symbological Investigation and Analysis of Fire Motifs in Pre-Islamic Iran: Emphasizing Works of the Median and Achaemenid Periods**

Volume 11 Issue 28 Page 56-69

60



**Figure 1.** Choghazanbil temple fireplace, Middle Ilam.

Source: [Safaran and Bahmani, 2-010, p. 41.](#)

During the Aryans era, the prayer and sanctity of light and fire entered a newer stage. "Ghirshman" believes that the Aryans took most of their material and spiritual symbols from the Elamites; such as using open temples, reciting, following the fire, being with the king with the holy fire (in the Sassanid and Ashkan period, which is seen on their coins and motifs), Magi, placing fire bowls, using four arches, circling the fire, which is all taken from the Elamite ritual ([Ghirshman, 1992, p. 51](#)). In the beginning, fire had secret functions for humans, and all sacred beliefs believed that fire is a basic element and a kind of condition that cannot have a concrete reality because intimate fire is alive in the heart and on the earth, and in the universe, and it is in both heaven and hell ([Safaran & Bahmani, 2010, p. 35](#)). The symbol of fire has undergone numerous and noticeable changes throughout history, and their classification forms the basis and body of this research. However, despite the multiplicity of virtual meanings and formats adopted for this symbol, the general and intermediate examination of its different forms provides the opportunity to reveal two distinct and at the same time opposite characteristics of this prominent element out of the four main elements. Destruction and fertility form our first classification, respectively, negative and positive values ([Esfandi & Gholami, 2007, p. 6](#)). Regarding what is related to the Zoroastrian ritual, the special status of fire does not need to be proved. It is enough to walk a little in the land of Iran to find the remains of ancient places dedicated to the ritual of divine fire. Zoroastrian fire is a phenomenon that is more than anything else, spiritual and free from any pollution. From this point of view, the penetration of a small amount of a different substance, real or imaginary, pollutes and damages the harmonious purity of the flame. Therefore, the Zoroastrian view of the symbolic status of fire stands against other rituals and denies them. This different view seeks a completely different concept of the hellish world while in all major religions, the sign or even the main material of the structure of hell is fire. However, this element as the only value (in the Median and mystical sense) is not present in the Zoroastrian hell; In this way, in the eyes of Zoroastrians, the most torturous punishments are entering a dark hell, which is also a symbol of the negative characteristic of death ([Farhoshi, 1976, p. 135](#)). In this hell, darkness dominates light. Despite this, such an intercultural interaction between darkness and light in both its meanings is acceptable because in the realm of the mortal world, according to tradition, darkness has an unbreakable connection with mourning, grief, and humiliation. Thus, the Zoroastrian equation, based on which hell is equal to darkness and impurity, proves its correctness in this way;(Fire= purity, darkness= impurity, so hell= darkness) All the



material and psychological themes traditionally attributed to hell originate from this equation: disorder and chaos, emptiness and destruction, anxiety and confusion, pessimism and misfortune, and pain and sorrow. All these cases indicate the hypothesis that divine justice and its human representative in this mortal world have fought with the above cases, and it is contradictory at these points that the destructive power of fire appears as a symbol of purity in only one of the religions. The Zoroastrian tradition assigns fire the role of a savior and a fighter whose potentially destructive abilities are opposed to evil and its earthly manifestations (Esfandi & Gholami, 2007, p. 9). Fire, a symbol of the purity and tranquility of existence and the supernatural, benefits from the property of purifying matter and soul essence. In fact, if it was devoid of this feature, it could never be the link between the earthly world of man and the spiritual realm of *Ahura*. The tradition gives the name Varha or *Bahram* on the basis that from the Zoroastrian point of view, fire is one of the best. Due to its purifying and divine nature, Zoroastrians keep it away from impure substances. This is a reason to justify the belief of the followers of this ritual that they never burn the bodies of the dead. These bodies, like the customs of some North American tribes, are placed on top of mountains with special customs and ceremonies so that scavengers and jackals can take them away. This practice is due to not burning mother earth (by burying the corpses) and mostly due to not burning the fire by burning the corpses (Qa'em Maqami, 2011, p. 169).

## Fire Temple

The fireplace is placed where the surrounding area is open. In each fire temple, there is a special center for lighting the fire, which no one except the Atorban (fire guard) is allowed to enter. When the Atorban goes to the fire, he wears a Panam (special mouth cover) so that the holy fire would not be polluted by his breath. On the right side of the fireplace, there is a wide and square room that is divided into many equal parts, each of which is assigned a specific task. This room is called «Yazeshngah» (place of worship). According to the degrees that existed in the dynastic rule of ancient Iranians, there were different fires; such as «AtashKhaneh (firehouse)» and «AtashQabileh (fire tribe)» or «Qaryeh (village)» (Azaran), and «AtashBlock (fire block)» or Eyalat (state) (Vahram). The guard of the firehouse was called «Manbaz» (that is, the head of the house) and there were two clerics to guard the fire (Azaran) and to guard the Varhran fire, a group of clerics was assigned under the leadership of a Zoroastrian priest. One of the conditions for entering the fire temple was to wear white clothes (Razi, 2010, p. 345).

## Types of Fire Temple

- 1. Dadgah fire:** It was a small family fire. Zoroastrian priests set the Dadgah fire but ordinary people could serve in it. Usually, powerful Zoroastrians had court fire in their houses.
- 2. Adoran or small local fire temple:** this fire was not lit continuously and was lit only during ritual ceremonies. According to the Zoroastrian tradition, in every house where food was cooked for three days, the fire of the stove was transferred to Adoran for purification.
- 3. Bahram fire temple:** which is a common name for the three big fire temples of Zoroastrian ritual; That is, Azar Gashtsab, Azar Barzin Mehr, and Azar Farnbagh (Oshidari, 2000, p. 42).

## Types of fire

In the Avesta, five types of fire that Ahura Mazda created are mentioned:

1. Atash Afzoni, that is generally called Bahram fire. The Median manifestation of this fire is the earthly burning fire and its extension is that it increases every species in its nature.
2. Atash Beh Frantar which is in people and sheep and digesting food, warming the body, and lighting the eyes is its duty.
3. Uravazišta, which is in the body of plants. It is responsible for perforating, boiling, and warming water, as well as making the flowers of plants beautiful, pleasant, and fragrant, and making and delivering fruits with various tastes.
4. Vohufryāna: It is the fire that resides in the clouds, moves with them, and destroys the darkness of the air. Its duty is to lighten the air pollution and melt the hail, and it is the same as heating, warming and making water in clouds.
5. Atash Blandsood which is also in the sky. This fire conflicts with lies and its duty is to defeat magic and guard the sleeping ones at night or to be with the pious Gabriel (Mole, 1998, p. 92).

### Fire in the Medes period

Since relatively few historical and archaeological works and data have been obtained from the Medes period, it is not possible to comment with certainty about the religious beliefs of the Medes and, accordingly, the status of fire in the Median culture. So far, with the help of archaeological investigations and excavations, traces of this period have been discovered, the most important of which are castles and catacombs. Castles are very important in historical and archeological research because of having fire shrines and catacombs due to prominent figures whose concepts are related to fire. Among the most important of these castles, one is Nooshijan Castle near Hamadan and the other is Babajan Castle in Lorestan. Also, among the most important physical catacombs in the center of mountains and rocks for the burial of high-status people, we can mention the "Qizqapan" catacomb located in Shahrizor valley, near Sulaimaniyah, Iraq, and the "Dokan-e-Dawood" catacomb in the southeast of Sarpol-e Zahab. It seems that the concepts of reliefs on the entrance facade of these catacombs, in a way, indicate the importance of the fire consecration tradition in this period. The exterior of the "Dokan-e Dawood" catacomb relief (See Figure 2) shows a magus wearing a long dress that covers his ankles. The important point is that he is holding a bunch of a branch (barsom plant) in his hand (comparable to holding a plant branch in Elamite seal motifs) and he has raised his right hand in front of the fire for prayer and respect (Diakonov, 2001, p. 379). Some consider these catacombs to belong to Astyages, the last king of the Medes (Qa'em Maghami, 2011, p. 169). Above the entrance of the Qizqapan catacomb (See Figure 3 & 4), there are also relief motifs as follows: two men are depicted in a standing position, and between them is shown a hearth with burning fire. It seems that the person on the left is a Median Magus because this person is wearing a special dress for Magi, which has long sleeves. Also, the person on the right, who may be the king of the Medes, Cyaxares (Hovakhshatareh), has a bow and arrow in his hand; but his clothes are not well-defined. It seems that these people put a cloth (Panam) over their mouths to prevent fire contamination (Ghirshman, 1992, p. 88). The posture of these people standing on both sides of the fireplace and also using Panam well expresses the sanctity of fire in their eyes. One of the special features of this catacomb is that above the heads of these two people (probably the priest and the king), there are three figures, in one of them, the half-body of a man, in the other, rays of light, and in the third, wings, which perhaps these motifs are symbols of Mehr (sun), Ahura Mazda, and the Moon. Among the other examples that show the sanctity and prayer of fire in the Medes period is the "Sakavand" catacomb located in

the south of Bistun - on the road that goes from Lorestan to Shush (See Figure 5). Here also, a person (king or priest) stands in front of a fireplace in a state of prayer or respect and raises his hands in front of it, another person is shown on the other side of the fireplace in a smaller size, who also paid his respects in front of the fire (Ghirshman, 1992, p. 89).



**Figure 2.** External view of Dokan-e Dawood catacomb.

Source: <https://kojaro.com/attraction/6319lhob>



**Figure 3.** The relief of fire worshipers in Qizqapan catacomb located in Shahrizor near Sulaymaniyah.

Source:

<https://google.com/search?source=univ&tbm=isch&q>.



**Figure 4.** Painting of the relief of fire worshipers in Qizqapan catacomb.

Source: Von Gall, 1988, p. 564.



**Figure 5.** Sakavand catacomb.

Source: <https://gardeshgari724.com/attractions>.

Undoubtedly, the results obtained from the archaeological excavations of the "Noushijan" fire temple and castle, located twenty kilometers west of the city of Malayer (See Figure 6), are one of the most important historical and archaeological documents and indicate the importance of the fire consecration tradition in the Medes period. Archaeological excavations in this place in 1969 was done under the supervision of David Stronach and finally, after examining the data obtained from stratigraphy, Stronach announced three «settlement» cultural periods for this place. According to him, the first period of settlement in Noushijan was the period of the Medes (from the second half of the 8th century to the first half of the 6th century B.C.) and the surviving works from that period include: the western temple or shrine, which represents the first fire temple in this castle; The pillared hall and the central hall which represent the main and central fire temple in this castle.





**Figure 6.** The fire temple of Noushijan, the only remains of the Medes.

Source:<https://google.com/search?source=univ&tbm=isch&q>.

The fire chapel, which is located on the west front of the castle, consists of two adjacent rooms. The first room, which actually forms the entrance, is smaller compared to the second one, which is the main room of the temple. From this room, after passing through a gentle slope (slope instead of stairs), one can reach the entrance of the main room, whose interior space is rectangular and measures 880 x 450 cm. Among the very interesting features of this room are niches and crescent-shaped holes in its walls, which were probably made to place votive objects or to improve airflow (Stronach, 1969, pp. 15-17). It seems that after some time, the residents of Noushijan Castle have created new changes and developments in the architecture of this castle, an example of which is the abandonment and blocking of the western fire temple. At first, when they built the pillared hall, they blocked the entrance of this temple with the western wall of the hall, after completing the construction of the pillared hall, they built a bigger chapel in the center of the castle. Here also, the first room or the entrance is smaller than the chapel or the main room. The opening leads to a ninety-centimeter-wide entrance to the prayer room (chapel) where the fireplace is located (Stronach, 1969, pp. 5-8). Due to the fact that these two temples, especially the central temple, in a way express the tradition of sanctifying fire in the Medes period, they are very important from the point of view of archaeological studies. In addition to «Noushijan» castle, in «Babajan» castle located in Delfan valley of Lorestan, a building with the same design (Noushijan's central chapel) but engraved has been seen. However, it is not clear whether this carved room had a religious use or not.

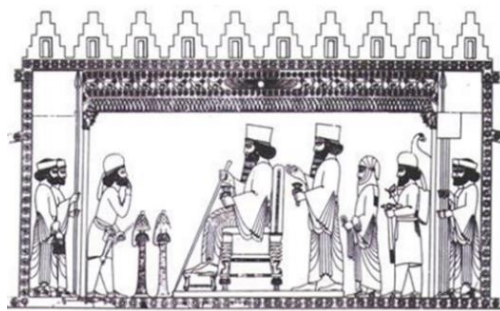
### **Fire in the Achaemenid period**

It can be said that during the Achaemenid period, the tradition of sanctifying fire had a positive role in the social life of ancient Iranians and since then it has had a progressive trend so that in the Sassanid period, due to the formalization of Mazdeyasna religion, this tradition appeared in all aspects of the social life of Iranians. According to Herodotus' report, one can partially understand the importance of the fire consecration tradition in the Achaemenid period. He believes that Persians do not have the custom of establishing statues, shrines, and altars for their gods. It is the custom of Persians to climb to the highest mountain and offer sacrifices to the great God of the heavens. They also make offerings and sacrifices to fire, wind, sun, moon, and earth. These are the gods for whom the Persians have been providing sacrifices since ancient times (Herodotus, 1961, p. 215). It seems that at the beginning of the Achaemenid rule, since the Median Magi did not want to lose their political-social base and influence, they somehow adapted themselves to the new situation caused by the emergence of the Achaemenids so that "the turning point of this adaptation can be seen in the excessive consecration of fire among the Magi, to the extent that they gave them the nickname «Atash Bar (Fireman)» (Koch, 1997, p. 327). In historical studies, especially the history of ancient Iran, it is difficult to understand the Achaemenid religion.

For this reason, the experts do not agree with this and have not yet given a satisfactory answer to it. In this regard, the interesting point is that, in fact, the importance of the tradition of sanctifying fire in this period has caused the opinions of experts to differ in this matter so that a group such as «Lomel», «Kayber», «Mary Boyce», etc. considered the Achaemenid kings to be Zoroastrian. Another group, such as «Herzfeld», considers the first Achaemenid kings as non-Zoroastrian, but Dariush and the kings after him as Zoroastrian. «Emile Benonist», «Christensen», «Wieden Gren», etc. do not consider the Achaemenians as Zoroastrian. In the meantime, «Bahar», «according to the study of the early and late Achaemenid inscriptions and the comparison of their content with contemporary and later Avestan texts, has concluded that the religion of the Achaemenid kings has a close connection with the Zoroastrian religion» (Bahar, 2001, pp. 48-49). Therefore, it seems that the consecration of fire in the Achaemenid period is one of the most important reasons that have led researchers to the conclusion that the Achaemenids are Zoroastrian. In the famous relief known as «Treasury Palace» which represents the public and formal sitting of Dariush I (See Figure 7 & 8), it is seen that the Achaemenid king is sitting on the throne in a royal dress and with a formal posture, and welcomes one of the nobles of the court who is standing in front of him with full respect. Behind Dariush, his crown prince, Khashayar Shah, and behind him are two of the nobles of the court. The presence of a lotus flower on the right side of the king and his crown prince is a significant point because we know that this flower was a kind of symbol of Mehr or the sun, which is the manifestation of heavenly fire. Between the king who sits on the throne and the great court who is in front of him, there are two things similar to a hearth. Whether these two things are in front of the king of the hearth or the censer has caused many debates among experts while «Ghirshman's» opinion is that both of these are hearths (Ghirshman, 1992, p. 230). «Schmidt» also considers the possibility of these two being censer (Schmidt, 1963, p. 157).



**Figure 7.** The relief of the Achaemenid Treasury Palace. Source: Koch, 1997, p. 111.



**Figure 8.** Painting from the petroglyph of the treasury of Persepolis. Source: Bakhturtash, 2008, p. 99.

As it was said, the commentators of these roles have presented different opinions about whether these two things are «hearth» or «censer» in front of the king. «Vandenberg» considers these two things to be censers. An interesting point is that in a part of the relief of the door of Khashayar Shah's palace in Takht Jamshid, a servant can be seen holding this kind of hearth or oud censor in one hand while carrying a bucket -probably made of coal- with the other hand, which may be a sign that these objects (in front of the king) were used for both purposes, i.e. hearth or censer (Vanden Berghe, 1966, p. 37). A number of tombs or catacombs of Achaemenid kings, including Dariush I (See Figure 9), is located on the

wall of a high mountain called Naqsh-e Rostam near Takht Jamshid. On the top of the tomb of Dariush I, magnificent reliefs are carved, which are considered a model for the catacombs of the kings after him. In these motifs, Dariush, while standing on the rows of bridges, has raised his right hand in a state of respect and prayer in front of the holy fire that he lit in the hearth in front of him. The fireplace or hearth consists of two lower and upper parts, each of which has three steps. The people representing the nations that make up the Achaemenid Empire carry the throne with Dariush and hearth on it (Boyce, 2002, p. 86). It is interesting that in these motifs, between the king and the holy fire, there is an image of Divine Grace in the form of a winged tablet with the image of a man imprinted on it. It should be noted that this image is seen in most of the Achaemenid reliefs as a symbol of Divine Grace, that is the supporter of kings; So that there are many images of it in the reliefs of Takht Jamshid, Naqsh-e Rostam, Bistun and even the seals of this period. About the concept of this role, different interpretations have been presented. But it is almost certain that this role or images represent Divine Grace, that is always the supporter of kings, and in this way the king could legitimize his reign under Divine Grace's support and benefit from its support in all matters. Other tombs of Achaemenid kings also have such prominent figures that in all these motifs, we can see that the Achaemenid kings were supported by Divine Grace on the one hand, and on the other hand, they paid respect to fire and actually prayed to it. In addition to the reliefs, on some other works left from the Achaemenid period, a pattern of fire and hearth has been seen. It seems that these motifs contain religious concepts.



**Figure 9.** Dariush's tomb in Naqsh-e Rostam

Source:

<https://google.com/search?source=univ&tbn=isch&q>



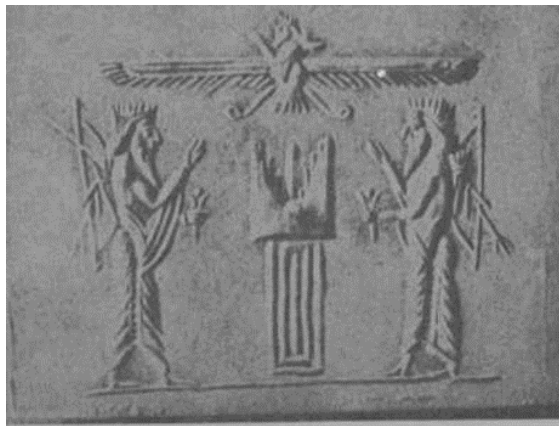
**Figure 10.** A design of Frataraka coins in

Persepolis. Source: Christensen, 2008, p. 62.

Among the most important of these works are seals and a piece of Pazirik rug, which we will discuss briefly. On the right side of one of the surviving seals from the Achaemenid period (See Figure 10), a half-face image can be seen. In front of him is a table on which there is a dish on a stand. Since in this picture, a hearth with a burning fire is seen, maybe this container contains aromatic substances or firewood to keep the fire burning. It should be mentioned that the base dish on the table is similar to the mortar that is used for pounding or burning ephedra in the religious ceremony of lighting the fire. If this is the case, it should be said that the person seen in the image of this seal is a magician who performs the ritual of offering fire (Qa'em Maqami, 2011, p. 179). Also, in another seal of the Achaemenid king, it is engraved on both sides of the hearth (See Figure 11). Here, he holds the bow, which is a symbol of power and kingship, on his shoulder and a lotus flower on his left hand, and this is while the image of Divine Grace is seen on the top of the picture in the



form of a winged tablet with a figure in the middle of it (Ghirshman, 1992, p. 269). These motifs can indicate that the king is under the protection of Divine Grace and also the holy fire. The Pazyrik rug, which is actually one of the most exquisite works left from the Achaemenid era (See Figure 12), well expresses the special and sacred place of fire in the Iranian culture of the Achaemenid era. Because in this rug, we see a scene of fire prayer by the queens and ladies of the Achaemenid court. «Ghirshman» describes the images of this ritual as follows: On this rug, there are images of Achaemenid queens holding a lotus in their hands. They are standing in front of the hearth and it seems that they are engaged in a religious ceremony. The hearth in this rug is similar to the hearths of Takht-e Jamshid (Ghirshman, 1992, p. 362).



**Figure 11.** A cylindrical seal from the National Library of Paris collection of one of the Achaemenid kings with the crown prince. Source: Ghirshman, 1992, p. 269.



**Figure 12.** Pazyrik carpet.  
Source: Ghirshman, 1992, p. 362.

The study of the remaining works shows that the Iranian society of the Achaemenid era, almost from the time of Ardeshir I's reign, faced the ever-increasing sanctity of the two gods Mehr and Anahita, which probably resulted in the construction of statues of these gods for worship in some parts of Iran. However, this has resulted in the negative reaction of many people, especially the Magi or clerics, which resulted in the construction of holy centers and buildings as religious centers with the difference that in such buildings and centers, instead of the above-mentioned statues of Gods, the fire was not worshiped as a symbol of God or Gods, but rather prayed and praised, which is the beginning of the construction of fire temples and fireplaces in this period.

### Conclusion

According to what is elaborated on and the research question, «What symbolic concepts did fire have in the Median and Achaemenid periods?», in the ritual of ancient Iran, to please the angel of fire, fragrant wood was constantly used in fire temples and hearths of houses. In Mazdeyasna religion, fire has been a sign of purity and truth. With the discovery of fire in the Paleolithic period, according to the application that this phenomenon had in the development of human social life, it gradually created a tremendous transformation in human society and gradually covered it with an aura of sanctity to the extent that in some ancient cultures, especially in the East, fire has been considered not only as an intermediary between gods and humans sometimes it is also considered as one of the groups of gods.

Since fire was not only consecrated as one of the four elements among the different Aryan tribes, especially the Aryans of Iran, rather, they considered it the most sacred element of existence, that is, a symbol and manifestation of Ahura Mazda. Many researchers consider the beginning of the tradition of consecrating fire in Iran at the same time as Aryans entered this land. According to the above cases in this research and the symbolic features of the role of fire in the Median and Achaemenid eras that were described, the works left from the Median period also show the importance and sanctity of fire in this era. Therefore, it can be understood that fire had a very high and sacred position in Iranian society before Islam so in the remaining works from this period, the presence and manifestation of fire can be seen in the public ceremonies of kings, religious, and ritual ceremonies, as well as artistic and ceremonial works of these periods. The results of the research show that the symbol of the sun is mostly used for the process of death and life again in ritual codes, and it is even the symbol of Simorgh, and the sun as the god of light is its source. Ancient Iranians did not believe in darkness and the final victory of light over darkness is one of the special features of their ancient religion. In the past, the celebration of fire was considered a prayer to ward off the devil and purification because according to their belief, fire was the only factor that makes judgments to identify good from bad. The symbolic role of fire, which is capable of fertilizing nature, expands to the point where it becomes the companion of human birth. The primary coexistence of nature and man is such that focusing on one does not lead to neglecting the other. Among the four main elements, only wind and fire are considered male elements. Also, the followers of Zoroastrianism always light the fire so that it never goes out, and the fire symbolically shows its desire for immortality, resumes its appearance, and starts its power again from within a never-ending cycle. The fire is reviving, which with its "action" and sanctity determines the correctness of the sublime movement of the soul toward its final destination. Fire is a sign of purity and peace of being and benefits from the property of purifying matter and soul essence. In fact, if the fire was devoid of this feature, it could never be the connection between the earthly human world and the spiritual realm of Ahura.

### References

- Bachelard, G. (1949). *Le Rationalise applique*. Paris: puf.
- Bahar, M. (2001). *Asian religions*. Tehran: Cheshme Publications.
- Bakhturtash, N.A. (2008). *The history of the flag of Iran from ancient times to today*. Tehran: Behjat Publications.
- Boyce, M. (2002). *Zoroastrians, their religious beliefs and practices* (A. Bahrami, Trans.). Tehran: Khorshid Publishing House.
- Christensen, A. (2008). *Smeden Kavah og det gamle persiske rigsbanner* (M. Ahadzadegan Ahani, Trans.). Tehran: Tahuri Publications.
- Diakonov, I. M. (2001). *History of media* (K. Keshavarz, Trans.). Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publications
- Ducrot, O & Schaeffer, J.M. (1996). *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*. Seuil.
- Esfandi, E. & Gholami, F. (2007). Explanation of the duality of the fire symbol in Zoroastrian ritual. *Research of foreign languages*, (38), pp. 5-17.
- Farbod, F. (2003). *A comparative study of fire and its symbols, between the two cultures and civilizations of ancient India and Iran* (Master's thesis in art research). Faculty of Arts, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran.
- Farhoshi, B. (1976). *World of Farvar*. Tehran: Tehran University Press.
- Ghirshman, R. (1992). *L'Art del' Iran, Made et Achemenide (Iranian Art in the Median and Achaemenid Periods)* (I. Behnam, Trans.). Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publications.



- Herodotus. (1961). *The histories of Herodot* (H. Hedayati, Trans.). Tehran: Amir Kabir Publications.
- Koch, H. (1997). *Persepolis, the capital of Achaemenid kings, with photos by Afshin Bakhtiari*. Tehran: Printing and Publishing Organization of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.
- Maleki, M. (2010). A comparative study of the myths of Iran and India in ancient times. *Naqshmayeh visual arts scientific-research quarterly*, 3(6), pp. 68-59.
- Mole, M. (1998). *L'Iran ancien (Ancient Iran)* (J. Amoozgar, Trans). Tehran: Toos Publications.
- Nabizadeh, M. (2013). *Examining the symbol of the sun in the visual arts of pre-Islamic Iran* (Master's thesis painting). Faculty of Visual Arts, Tehran University of Art.
- Oshidari, J. (2000). *Light, fire, fire temple in Zoroastrian ritual*. Tehran: Saadi Publications.
- Pope, A.U. (2003). *Iranian architecture* (G. H. Sadri Afshar, Trans.). Tehran: Farhangian Publications.
- Qa'em Maqami, M. (2011). Investigating the place of fire in the history of ancient Iran. *Islamic and Iranian History*, 21(12), pp. 181-163.
- Razi, H. (2010). *Iran and Iranian culture in the age of Avesta* (Collection of articles). Tehran: Behjat Publications.
- Schmidt, E.F. (1963). *Takht-e Jamshid* (A. Faryar, Trans.). Tehran: Amir Kabir and Franklin Publications.
- Safaran, E & Bahmani, P. (2010). *The course of transformation and evolution of role and symbol in traditional arts of Iran*. Tehran: Payam Noor Publications.
- Stronach D. (1969). Excavations at Tepe Nūsh-i Jān, 1967. *Iran*, 7(1), pp. 1-20.
- Vanden Berghe, L. (1966). *Archeologie de L'Iran ancien (Archeology of ancient Iran)* (I. Behnam, Trans.). Tehran: Tehran University Press.
- Von Gall H. Das Felsgrab von. (1988). Qizqapan Ein Denkmal aus dem Umfeld der Achämenidischen Königstrasse. *Baghdader Mitteilungen*, (19), pp. 557-82.

