

RE-AWAKENING THE POWER OF PERSEPOLIS – Annelies Van de Ven

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Founded by Cyrus the Great and first built upon under Darius I, Persepolis or Taqs-e Jamshid was one of the Persian royal capitals until it was burned to the ground by Alexander in 330 BC. Both internationally renowned and locally celebrated, Persepolis is a site that functions as far more than a mere tourist attraction. Throughout its history, the site was an active player in the construction of Iranian identity, more recently through its centrality to the national myth of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and his celebration of 2500 years of Persian Empire

'O Cyrus, great King, King of Kings, Achaemenid King, King of the land of Iran. I, the Shahanshah of Iran, offer thee salutations from myself and from my nation.'

Thus begins the royal address of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Shah of Iran at the tomb of Cyrus the Great at Pasargadae on the 12th of October 1971. In front of a swarm of visiting notables and media, the second shah of the Pahlavi dynasty proclaimed himself heir to the Persian Empire.

This speech was part of the opening event in a 4-day festival at Persepolis put on by the shah and his cabinet to celebrate 2500 years of the Persian Empire. Labelled 'the biggest party in history' by Times Magazine, the celebration was a spectacle of dazzling proportions by any standard. The grand tents, elaborate parades and scrumptious feasts that featured in the festivities emulated the great banquets and tributary processions of the shah's of old. It was this emulation, this re-enactment of past glory that stood central to the event's main message: one of continuity, power, wealth and legitimacy personified in the modern shah.

As we now know, with more than 40 years of hindsight, this event marked the beginning of the end for the shah. The authoritarian symbols of power he was intent on deploying could not espouse the changing tides of Iran's political scene.

This paper will briefly discuss the three main symbols deployed by the shah in the conceptualisation of his grand celebration at Persepolis: his adoption of the ancient Persian title of Shahanshah, his in situ military re-enactments, and his re-creation of the Persian itinerant court.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi formally took the ancient title of shahanshah on the 26th of October 1967. Much like in the investitures of Achaemenid or Sassanid rulers, the ceremony was meant to ideologically transform the shah into a sacred entity, an embodiment of his people and lands.

By enacting the title of Shahanshah at the ancient royal city at Persepolis in 1971, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was attempting to appropriate the prestige and absolute authority of the ancient shahs, consciously creating a mythology for his reign that was founded in both ancient Persian and modern racial-cultural imperialist imagery.

This title was not the only symbol redeployed by the modern shah, another piece central to his revival of the Persian Empire was the Persian's mythical military prowess. Anyone who has read Herodotus' Histories, or come in contact with any popular reconstruction of the Battle of Thermopylae is familiar with the fabled greatness of the Persian army. Xerxes' army was so vast that when they all 'discharged their arrows they obscured the light of the sun by the multitude of their arrows' (Hdt 7.226).

With this ancient example in mind Mohammad Reza Pahlavi reformed the army to once again be the greatest in the region. A force of transformation and integration, the army also took on public health, education, agricultural development and construction. Their importance to his modernised state secured them a key place in his celebrations. On the second day of the festival, the Shah presented his guests a military parade, complete with meticulously replicated Achaemenid trumpets, three war ships and a siege tower. The show was even taken off the parade ground with men dressed in Achaemenid uniforms stationed among Persepolis' ruined structures. All this represented a highly choreographed image of imperial glory throughout the ages, culminating in the modern state. Along with a belief of cultural superiority through its ancientity, the parade promoted modernised Iran and its leader as a contender to global politico-economic power.

Expressions of the Shah's superiority extended beyond the military parade, and they connect to yet another layer of Achaemenid tradition: the royal court. Those within it were considered the most powerful people in the empire, not only because of their individual wealth or profession, but because of their station, their proximity to the king, accompanying or hosting him on his journeys through the empire.

This image of the Achaemenid itinerant court formed much of the inspiration for Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's own tent city set up to house the 2500 year anniversary's most prominent guests. The 50 tents were laid out in a radial star pattern around a central royal tent belonging to the shah. This concentric arrangement of guest tents was not only aesthetically pleasing, but it reinforced the shah's own myth of rulership, as he publically embodied his own desired role of a modern day Cyrus or Darius. The numerous foreign dignitaries who had come to witness the grand event then became his vassal kings mirroring the lesser kings and satraps bringing tribute to the great Shah as depicted on the Apadana staircase relief.

His grand royal court was also his audience, the target group towards which his scripted performance of an idealised Iran was directed. The site of Persepolis would have been familiar to them through the Classical histories of the West. The immediacy of the ancient site gave the foreign experience a sense of authenticity.

Though all these performances were meant to be understood as direct equivalents to their ancient predecessors, the context in which they were performed had drastically changed. Talin Grigor calls the shah's celebration 'mimicry-as-camouflage' stating that Mohammad Reza Shah was attempting to become that which he performed, a role dictated by foreign perceptions of Persia's past. His celebrations had become an unauthorized version of otherness, inducing a kind of Fanon-like "black skin/white masks" effect. The shah was attempting to translate the legitimacy and authority of the rulers of old into his modern secularized nation. However, in doing so he disassociated these concepts from their own networks of associations and meaning. Fragmented, these symbols no longer had the power to bridge the increasing gap between the glorified ideal of imperial Iran and the difficult reality of a society in flux. To the local population who were excluded from high culture, and the Islamic intellectuals whose history had been strategically ignored for most of the Pahlavi dynasty, his celebration seemed to be an attempt at expunging rather than commemorating the 2500 years of Persian culture.