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CERAMICS AND THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL
ACHAEMENID HORIZON



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2019

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LXXXVI

CERAMICS AND THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL ACHAEMENID HORIZON NEAR EAST, IRAN AND CENTRAL ASIA

edited by
BRUNO GENITO and GIULIO MARESCA



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ROMA 2019

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NAPOLI 2019

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INTRODUCTORY ISSUES ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL ACHAEMENID HORIZONS

BRUNO GENITO

(Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”)

Introduction

It is at the same time source of great pride and pleasure to introduce this volume collecting the proceedings of a workshop in which Italian scholars, from different backgrounds and trainings, defined and allowed us to understand what “Achaemenid” archaeological horizons may mean.¹

Indeed, we all know that the archaeological issues related to the Achaemenid archaeological horizons, as well as that important political unity and dynastic line in the history of the Ancient Near East and the ancient world in general, have never been easy to approach and have rarely been studied with sufficient depth.²

Nevertheless, those issues have represented both the required benchmark for the educational programs that I have been heading during my professorship at this University and the outcome of a long professional history that began decades ago in the same institution.

I am also grateful to Rémy Boucharlat,³ who kindly accepted my invitation to chair a session of the workshop and provided the appropriate conclusions for this volume. I would also like to acknowledge Ernie Haerinck

¹ In particular, this is more significant because they will speak on the basis of ceramic data, within different and even distant areas of that political-imperial formation. Generally, the majority of scholars has neglected this topic.

² Already Herzfeld (1935) has dealt the question of an archaeological history of the Iranian Empires some time ago; more recently, Jenkins (2012) discussed the same issue in a biographical-oriented paper. Related issues in a theoretical framework have been advanced (Genito 1996), and others, more linked to the Achaemenid period, proposed (Genito 2000). The comprehensive volume by Briant and Boucharlat (2005) has definitely given a full global view to the matter, and remains, up to now, the best-realised synthesis on the topic.

³ Rémy Boucharlat is one of the most outstanding scholars dealing with ancient pre-Islamic Iran and now is Emeritus Senior Researcher CNRS, UMR 5133 “Archéorient”, Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée.

from Ghent University, who had to decline politely my invitation due to health problems.⁴

Early Iran

The civilization of early Iran represented an important historical event that, with differing vicissitudes, has been one of the most complex political and cultural phenomena of the antiquity. The area we call now “Iran” has seen a succession of complex historical events that have had a strong impact affecting the overall history of the region. At the end of the second millennium BCE, the first Iranian speaking peoples seem to have arrived, from the north, north-west or north-east⁵ on the plateau.⁶ Almost at the middle of the first millennium CE, the Arabs arrived from the southern deserts.

Geographically, the Iranian plateau is located in an area that seems to naturally fit the prospect of bringing together the east with the west, the north with the south. Iran has lived the last of his ancient political-imperial formations with the Sasanians (3rd-7th century CE). The mid-7th century CE is also the end of an era, when a more modern universal religion, Islam, suddenly interrupted the cultural forces that had shaped the ancient Iranian identity.

In the last century, archaeological research activities have provided both a consistent and elusive picture of early Iran. This framework is based upon the times and the different ways we look at the antiquities, which are located, recognized and identified in the large related territory. There is no doubt, however, that the early-Iranian cultural experience has been, before others, able to develop a modern, for the time, ideological strategy for constructing an

⁴ Sadly, Ernie Haerinck has recently passed away. This tragic event has touched all of friends, colleagues and us. It is understood that his absence will be deeply felt by all of us at the workshop in Napoli. I saw him five years ago in Ghent. We had a fruitful exchange of views on Iran and its archaeological prospects in a nice cafe at one of the canals in that wonderful Flemish town. I mentioned him the possibility of a meeting on the Achaemenid horizon starting from ceramic data, and he was enthusiastic about the possibility of coming to Napoli, as he had never been there. Even when he told me – a couple of months before the workshop – that he could have not made it because of his health, he said that he would have not missed the next scientific occasion, may be related to the Parthian period. I cannot but regret his loss and greet him affectionately wherever he is.

⁵ To be sure, the not-secondary aspect of the places of origin of the ancient-Iranians is not archaeologically clear, despite the numerous attempts to relate the archaeological and linguistic evidences (Genito 1996).

⁶ The plateau takes its name from the Iranian speaking tribes, who arrived and then settled in the related territory.

imperial “policy”, without losing its traditional socio-anthropological characterization of a “clan-type” tribe.

Being able to create a state formation with a socio-political and ideological perspective completely new and modern in the 6th century BCE, on a yet ancient social basis, was an intuition of great importance ahead of its time, which the Achaemenid dynasty (6th-4th century BCE) attempted to realize.

Due to its cultural aspects and the geographical location, the important tradition of historical and philological studies on the ancient Near East has mostly considered Iran as rather marginal, if not a real appendix of a chronologically longer and more complex cultural sequence in the Mesopotamian plain, predominantly ethnically Semitic in character.

The pre-historical background of the Iranian civilization, however, is related to the still controversial and much debated issue of the movement and the arrival of the Indo-Europeans, and in particular of the Iranians.⁷ Historically, the area inhabited by the peoples originally considered speaking Iranian language⁸ was very large: from the Euphrates to the western and central Asia, to the borders of China, from southern Russia to the mouth of the Indus, etc. All this vast “ethnic” complex, akin to the different peoples called by the sources “Cimmerians”, “Scythians”, “Sauromatians”, “Persians”, “Medians”, “Sarmatians”,

⁷ The guidelines for the movement of these groups of populations are still uncertain and subject to many discussions. The following are the two most accredited theories. The Iranians coming from a more unspecified Central Asian area would have crossed the Caspian, north through the Caucasus and the mountains of Armenia and then headed to the south-east. The Iranians would have come directly from the north and north-eastern steppes, and after crossing the Kopeth Dagh (mountain range today marking the border between Iran and Turkmenistan) and the desert of the Dasht-e Kavir, would have been stopped in front of the Zagros Mountain and, a little further north, in the territory of Urartu’s kingdom. Following that stalemate, it would have produced a kind of short migratory stream that would later lead the Persians to the Fars and the Medes in the Hamadan region. For an archaeological perspective of the 1970s, see Young, T.C. (1967). The assumptions made in the last century indicated the period between the 12th to the 9th century BCE as the “central” period of the migration of Indo-Europeans and Iranians (Ghirshman 1977), or the Chalcolithic (Renfrew 1987), or even the Neolithic and Palaeolithic period (Alinei, 1996; 2000, with his theory of continuity). This theory, whose basic concept was first elaborated in the archaeological field by the Belgian archaeologist Marcel Otte, supports the existence of a linguistic continuity from the Palaeolithic. Subsequently, this first nucleus was developed in the linguistic field by the glottologist Mario Alinei, from the 1990s. However, this theory has had very limited follow-up in the field covered by historical linguists, also due to some methodological limitations and some contradictions that have never been resolved.

⁸ Those that made up the eastern branch of the great Indo-European family.

“Corasmians”, “Sogdians”, “Bactrians”, “Kushans”, “Saka”, “Hephthalites”, and the inhabitants of the Chinese Turkestan oases (as the Sai, Yüeh-chih, etc.) (Taishan 1998), was able to create political powers, its own civilization, to form and to shape material, figurative and architectural languages. Part sedentary and part nomadic and mobile, this cluster of ethnic groups managed to divide the ancient world; occupying the centre, it separated the West, where Semitic and the Greek-Roman civilizations had flourished, from the Far East, represented by China and India. Located between Mesopotamia, India and Central Asia, the ancient Iranian sedentary political-imperial formations (from the 7th century BCE to the 7th century CE) have been able to create important political and cultural bridges, between Asia and Europe, thanks to the creation of the first frontier between southern and northern Asia.

The tradition of the Iranian studies has its foundations on the combination of two different aspects:

1) the first related to the recognition of different “ethno-linguistic” identities of the old-Iranian peoples, based on the analyses and the historical-philological interpretations of available texts;

2) the second on the identification of a strong cultural identity, inferred, however, from the “archaeological data” relating to those groups of people who inhabited the plateau from time to time.

The latter aspect refers to the analyses and interpretations of the field that archaeological traditions concretely carried out on the plateau in the last century and the last part of the previous. In particular, it refers to the excavation activities conducted in Iran and Central Asia, by a large number of Iranian and foreigners archaeologists. On this point, an ample debate could certainly be opened on the “national or international dimension”, as well as on the ancient and more recent historical causes that led to the historical and informational framework to which we all now refer. The importance of these issues could constitute, in their own right, the subject of a much broader international conference.

In a “methodologically” more modern way, however, the old Iranian civilization can be more properly considered as constituted by the constant, intense and strong cultural confrontations among the cultures of the ancient Near East, those of the new Iranian political-imperial formations,⁹ and those

⁹ We refer to Median, Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian, and those important Alexandrine and Seleucid periods.

of the large areas of the Eurasian steppes. That civilisation was, therefore, contaminated and “confused” with the neighbouring cultures, such as the Mesopotamian and Indian (with whom it also shared a common ancestral origin), and also with those further away, such as the ancient-Egyptian, Greek and, again, with those of Central Asia, deeply unequivocally marking the material, artistic, and cultural characters of its production.

The ancient Iran (especially during the Achaemenid period) is, indeed, the widest geo-cultural area (from Indus River to Egypt) politically reunited of the ancient world. It is one of the largest political-imperial formations that could be defined with a clear modern forcing terminology, supranational and/or “multi-ethnic” of the antiquity. Established in the 6th century BCE, ancient Iran formed earlier than any other major state political unit, including Rome, with the sole exception of China.

History of studies

There have been many occasions in recent decades where one has tried to circumscribe¹⁰ the texture of the real archaeological remains attributable to the Achaemenid dynasty, the period of its rule and the areas under influence. It was easy to admit that for many cultural grounds (such as religious history, private and public monumental architecture, size of settlements in the centres, as in many peripheral areas or regional satrapies) you often bump, archaeologically speaking, literally in dark. With this workshop and volume, we assess whether this remains true in the light of areal analyses and prospects of study that will be presented to us!

As it has long been known, understanding the difficult relationships between the material production and its historical and cultural attributions took some time, and this effort has certainly not affected only archaeology. Working for decades on the archaeology of the nomads of the Eurasian steppes, we, already in the 1990s, tried to propose lines and methodological trends of study, taking the two issues separately. At the turn of the new millennium, when it became increasingly possible a return to work on the field in Iran, a major methodological leap was accomplished in that direction. This advancement would expand even in the studies of the Iranian

¹⁰ This has been a methodological effort, beyond the great architectural monuments of historical and epigraphic evidence found, recognised and/or identified on the plateau in the areas dominated by the Achaemenid Empire.

political-imperial formations, some of the theoretical and methodological approach already addressed to the Iranian nomads of Iron age, like the Scythians, the Sauromatians, the Sarmatians, as well as for those of the Middle Ages of paleo-Turkish origin, as the Avars, the Huns, etc.

This began to make us understand (though with some difficulties and resistance), that some of the questions posed by the archaeology about the extent of the nomadic-type policies could find an adequate room even in the issues addressed by the archaeology of the sedentary peoples and politically “evolved”, such as the Iranians of the historical dynasties. Within that framework, in fact, a poor or at least much less archaeological evidence has been available, compared to other great ancient civilizations, such as the Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, Indian, etc. To compare the nomadic peoples, even of a royal lineage, as Herodotus said, like the Scythians with the Achaemenid dynasty, might seem irreverent, even from the point of view of their different historiographical and historical texture.

Yet, the ethno-cultural and the historical-dynastic archaeological and art-historical attributions of material and figurative culture on the plateau, starting from the “Median” question,¹¹ have always found the hardest confirmations among the different interpretative proposals advanced in those years. This is easily demonstrated by the cases relating to the famous “treasures” of Ziwiye, Hamadan and Oxus, all very uncertain and oscillating between a Scythian-Cimmerian, Mannean-Assyrian-Urartian and/or Median-Luristan worlds, not to mention the even “enigmatic” citadels in the so-called “median triangle”: Nush-i Jan, Baba Jan and Godin Tepe in the Malayer plain and surroundings. To those findings of the 1950s and 1960s, it must now be added the newest discoveries and often-unreliable finds in the archaeological contexts. We can just mention the one in Khuzestan at Arjan¹² near Behbahan; another in Luristan in a cave nearby Kalkmakarreh,¹³

¹¹ Today, as it is known, after the sharpest observations of Liverani in an exceptional work (2003, 1-12) the Median question seems rather possibly to be referred to the neo-Elamite world. For the archaeology of the Medes see Genito 1986b; 1995; 2005a; *forthcoming*.

¹² To the north of the Behbahan, capital of Behbahan County, Khuzestan, lie the ruins of the ancient city Arjan, built during the Sasanian period, where important remnants from the Elamite era have been found (Majidzadeh 1991; Alizadeh 1985; Alvarez-Mon 2006; 2010; Alvarez-Mon, Garrison 2011).

¹³ Kalkmakarreh finds were discovered in a cave in 1989 by a local hunter, about 20 kilometres to the north-west of Pol-e Dokhtar, Lurestan Province. The collection is consisted of

where alongside significant and important “artistic” objects, some interesting neo-Elamite inscriptions were also found. In Ramhormoz¹⁴ still in Khuzestan, Qalaichi Tepe¹⁵ and other sites in Azerbaijan, some other inscriptions in Aramaic have been found in the same way, unfortunately without much chance of correlations.

It also known that the abundant Greek-inspired historiographical documentation on the early Iran and Central Asian history had allowed to identify a pre-Achaemenid period. Whereas this historiographical method was first employed to understand the cyclical succession of political-imperial

different metal objects including vessels, *rhytons*, animal and human figurines, masks, plaques, adornments, etc. The presence of neo-Elamite scripts on some artifacts makes it remarkably easy to date. The names on the scripts indicates a close connection to the cultural horizon of Neo-Elamite period. The inscriptions deciphered by Lambert, Vallat and Bashash, alongside with archaeological analysis by the author, revealed a new unknown local dynasty in Lurestan, concurrent with neo-Elamite period; which opens a new discussion in investigating archaeological issues and art history of this period in western Iran. The objects discovered are mostly made of silver. There is also a particular small human statue, which is now in the museum of Falak ol-Aflāk castle in Khorramābād, made by casting method and then decorated by chasing. Objects show a local tradition affected by different exotic issues, especially those of Elam and Assyria (Baššāš-Kanzaq 1997; 2000; Henkelman 2003a; Khosravi 2013, 34-39). Some Neo-Elamite inscriptions have been also identified on many objects coming from *Kalmakarra*. The inscriptions occur in many objects, in particular on dishes and cups. Amongst ca. 65 objects coming from the Falak ol-Aflāk Museum in Khorramābād, almost 20 present inscriptions. Nine of those published are identical and refer ^{DIS}am-pi-ri-iš EŠŠANA sa-ma-tir_e-ra DUMU da-ba-la-na, “Ampiriš king of Samati”. The same inscription is found in Turkey, Tehran, New York, in Louvre and in the Mahboubian collection and refers to the Samati kingdom which is equally mentioned in SAT (Henkelman 2003b, 106-118).

¹⁴ Ramhormoz, capital city of Ramhormoz County, Khuzestan, in ancient times had been known as *Samangan*, having been established during the Sasanian period, although Elamite tombs have been found as well at Jubaji (Shishegar 2015). The historical territory of *Ramshir* is located in this area, only 3 kilometres (1.9 miles) away from the city.

¹⁵ Qalaichi Tepe (also known as Haidar Khan Qal’e) and Qal’e Bardine, in the county of Bukan, and in Rabat Tepe, in the county of Sardasht, both in Western Azerbaijan province, as well as at the cemetery of Kul-e Tarike in Kurdistan province, represent some of the very few sites of Mannean attribution. Most distinctive among the materials excavated at Qalaichi and Rabat are the multi-coloured glazed tiles depicting animals and composite creatures used to decorate walls. The most spectacular find is certainly a broken stone stele from Qalaichi with 13 lines of an incised Aramaic inscription. The so-called Bukan Stele is dated to the early 8th century on the basis of the palaeography of the Aramaic letters and parallels to the inscriptions from Sfire and Tell Fekharyah in northern Syria. Unfortunately, only the curses at the end of the text survive (Fales 2003, 131-147).

formations,¹⁶ it is now also used to explain the *continuum* in the archaeological horizons, in the context of an increasingly sophisticated archaeological practice in the field. Indeed, this approach helped to fill in the chronological gap between an “apparent *vacuum*” in Iron age and the equally “apparent” sudden explosion of political-imperial dynastic levels from the mid-6th century BCE.

Above all, within the works of the ancient Hellenic logographers and Hecateus, the names of the peoples different from the Greek, although phonetically similar to those of autonyms or original ethnonyms, were generally traced back to the genealogical lines of the *mythoi*, in order to make them more understandable to the common Greek man. This is the case for example of Perseus and Medea, who became in the Herodotean historiography “the Medes, originally named Aryans, changed their name in honour of Medea”), in the tragedy of Euripides and in Pseudo Apollodorus (Bibliotheca II, 4, 4-5) the ancestor eponym of Persians and Medes. This is also the case with the very origin of the Greek name of Persepolis,¹⁷ which was immediately understood by the Greeks as an “alleged” urban characterization of a centre located on the terrace beneath the Kuh-e Rahmat in Fars and that, at a more deep reading, is certainly not a city.

In the meantime, methodological approaches began to change. The archaeological records of the so-called peripheries, once identified as “outside Iran”, is now greatly enriched. Given the now larger volume of archaeological records in the peripheries, especially when compared to those of the centres, scholars are encouraged to provide more historical answers. Indeed, more research is necessary with regards to the peripheral areas of Drangiana, Bactriana, Sogdiana and some others, which has been lacking since the 1960s.

In the late 1990s a methodological distinction had already started distinguishing three different levels:

- 1) Achaemenid/dynastic-political;
- 2) Achaemenid/chronological;
- 3) Achaemenid/Iranian material culture (Genito 1998a, fig. 1).

¹⁶ The traditional paradigm of historiography in vogue in the 19th century considered in strict chronological order, the Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian-Babylonian Elamite, Median and Persian.

¹⁷ The common modern Persian name is Takht-e Jamshid, which connects with the poetic mythical Islamic tradition of Ferdousi.

This puts significant doubts, for some time, about the interpretative mechanisms acquired in the schools of thought during that period.

It was no longer sufficient to find an object in Persepolis in Fars to be consequently considered *tout court* as Achaemenid, etc., if it was not placed, first, in an archaeological, if not a stratigraphic context, and better to frame it in all its informative potential. All this could have not happened for the great architectural monuments of Persepolis, Pasargadae and Susa emerging on their respective planes, as it has been still very recently pointed out, and for which they had not necessarily planned any specific archaeological approaches to identify the stratigraphic horizons.¹⁸

In addition, it is painful, too, to admit that there have been few reasons for such a deficit in the archaeological documentation of that time. In some ways, even today, for a period historically important so little archaeologically is known. Such unbalanced relationship between these two grounds of scientific knowledge has not occurred for many of the other most important state political entities of the ancient world.

A good part of the reasons for this state of art may be precisely attributed within the dynamics of the same methods and approaches of the archaeological research conducted. Those approaches, in some way, have been based on the particular and more directly perceptible importance of macroscopic monumental remains, of casual and incidental findings, and of those precious objects present in museums and private collections. However, the same approaches have done little to developing a strategy for a field survey with a more modern understanding of the territorial aspects of an archaeological site. In this sense, unfortunately, even the art-historical and historical architectonic research, while highlighting new aspects of an autonomous and syncretistic figurative and architectural language, has often exceeded in a sort of extreme tendency to attributions favouring the studies and analyses based on precarious pseudo-archaeological contexts, and even those of a scientifically devastating antique market, yet alas, in vogue today.

¹⁸ To sum up, using a somewhat provocative concept, it can be asserted without fear of being denied that where there are palaces and inscriptions there are no stratigraphic horizons of Achaemenid period, and where there are stratigraphic horizons of Achaemenid period there are no palaces and inscriptions. This is, of course, a hyperbole, but it is often confirmed in the archaeological documentation, as it is free of any stratigraphic references and archaeological trust. We are facing a still blank page to fill in with the data of future research activities!

Fortunately, there have recently been commendable and much appreciated exceptions, such as those of the French and Italian-Iranian activities at Pasargadae, Persepolis and surroundings, in which the traditional and rigorous method of investigation were complemented by more sophisticated spatial analysis. We can consider these activities as the heirs of some sporadic interventions of the same nature of the late 1960s.

It would have been, perhaps, more useful to consider that if, on the one hand, there are dynastic successions, with their political events and epigraphic, as well as official data, on the other hand, there are also archaeological horizons, whose historical interpretation cannot always coincide with the former. To be sure, several attempts, in this new direction were made already in the 1980s with regards to the archaeology of the Sasanian dynasty. More recently Whitcomb (1999, 210-211), had also warned against seeing the dynastic successions and lists of kings as guiding elements for an archaeological history. This observation can be applied *a fortiori*, to ancient times such as those to which we are referring here!

The Achaemenid Political-Imperial Formation, political and socio-cultural aspects

The geo-morphological setting of the Iranian plateau is not composed of large floodplains, but by mountainous and desert regions with a semi-arid continental climate, and a small water system medium in size with seasonal and torrential rivers.¹⁹ This geo-morphological setting has certainly contributed, though it did not determine, many of the formative processes of the whole cultural and social evolution within the plateau and of the Achaemenid political-imperial formation as well. At the same time, this geo-morphological setting was undoubtedly less suitable, from a general point of view, to develop large urban centres, and is distinctive from the areas of the Mediterranean Sea, Mesopotamia, India and China, where the great plains of the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates, Indus and Yellow and Yangtze River are located. During the Achaemenid period, major cities are not documented within the plateau. Meanwhile are present large architectural monuments and remains, large and numerous iconographic remains, and very few settlements in the meaning that must be given to those sites that have a specific “urban”

¹⁹ For a general outline of the geographical landscape of the Iranian plateau see Ehlers (1980).

characterization. The forms of peopling and of the territorial occupation within the plateau present a very different character from those of the great sedentary civilizations, spread throughout the ancient Near East. The establishment of, then, of a number of villages of different sizes, as early as the Neolithic, Bronze and the Iron Ages, had begun to determine, among the peoples who had settled the plateau, the birth and the development of a defined social and political organization. In particular, those methods of settling favoured the creation of cultural realities very different from those in use in the western and eastern areas. And the mode of economic production, of a more “collectivist/state-type”, dominated by a common property of land and by an apparent absence of slaves and private property, was probably also partly conditioned by the geomorphological setting of the plateau as well.

This hypothesis is based on the well-known paradigm of Karl August Wittfogel of the 1950s (1957),²⁰ with his theory of the “hydraulic” societies, which has never been fully accepted by most scholars who have dealt with the issue. Indeed, it is easy to see that the ancient Iranian culture has presented very few typical aspects of a “hydraulic” society as Wittfogel had imagined. The “hydraulic” society would fit, in fact, much better ancient Egypt, India, Mesopotamia and China, which in turn greatly differs from the Greek-Roman world. Even Mikhail Rostovzeff (1926; 1941) had dealt with these issues with its monumental works,²¹ which now seem no longer feasible research. The actual reality of these differences is still very far from being clarified and fully recognised. This is also the case according to the contribution of Arnaldo Momigliano (1977), which had not given, however, the same importance to the economy as Rostovzeff and Wittfogel.

The scarce “urban” characterization of the areas of the plateau is rather clear from the unearthed archaeological remains, especially in historical time, which are mostly made up of isolated concentrations of architectural buildings, rather than of “urban” settlements and layouts.

²⁰ The author was particularly involved in political affairs and for that, he was relating his historical interpretation of the ancient hydraulic societies to the birth of the modern communist societies as well in the same areas.

²¹ The volumes of Rostovzeff for a long time have been the main contributions to an economic reconstruction of the ancient societies.

Consequently, analysing one of the largest political-imperial formation of the antiquity lacking any “urban tracks”, is a particularly difficult task without critically deepening the concept of “state” and/or “empire” of Iranian dynasties, like the Achaemenid.

The long debated question, about the origin, development, and the different ways with which in the ancient Near East “urban” evidences were actually realized, has always been particularly fascinating to the background of the grandiose concept of “city”.

Historically, the existence of “urban” models in some way pre-formed, such as the Mesopotamian and Greek-Roman, has strongly influenced the research activities and the interpretive criteria used for the examples of other areas, although dealt with different points of view (economic, political, sociological, literary, anthropological). The geo-cultural conceptual category of “Mesopotamia and surroundings” (Liverani 2013, V), dominant even today in the studies of the ancient Near East, has for a long time strongly influenced the way of thinking about the cities as immutable “entities”, fixed once and for all: geographically and topographically clear, as well as territorially defined (and perhaps also of divine origin). Other and different remains cannot be classified under that category, because they completely disappeared or were completely neglected. Changing the direction of a well-established tradition in a completely different way is not easy; the ideological equation between “city”, “state”, “empire”, “civilizations”²² does not find easy implementation in the areas and territories in which the concepts of “city”, “planning”, “urbanization”, have important differences.

Archaeological problems

Let us now briefly mention the main archaeological issues of the Achaemenid period, with the hope of not exceeding with a long, perhaps sterile discussion of the many issues on the table. The key point in relation to the issues discussed, as already mentioned, is the scarcity of real “urban” settlements or even proper “cities” in the plateau. This absence did not favour the discovery of archaeological horizons, with the usual presence of materials such as ceramics and others.

²² Behind this concept are hidden the complex “revolutionary” concepts, now accepted, of the “Neolithic” and “urban” revolution by Gordon Childe (1925; 1950; 1954).

Let's start from the great centres which have never had, until very recently, purely archaeological investigations on the related occupied territory, and that were explicitly aimed at identifying phases and horizons of Achaemenid dynasty: Persepolis, which from some epigraphic evidence may be the ancient Parsa;²³ Pasargadae, which from some tablets with cuneiform inscriptions found in nearby Persepolis, perhaps Pâthragâda.²⁴ The archaeological remains of these two centres, are certainly not those of a city, rather, they represent a number of sumptuous architectural monuments, representative in character, placed and arranged in a town planning logic, but certainly not "urban" in character. I myself had defined these centres as town/palaces (Genito 2000).

The architectural typologies of such "palaces" were elaborated and influenced by the Achaemenid dynasty. They are based on a central spatial unit covered with pillars, placed inside arches in Pasargadae, or porches and rooms at Persepolis, where the very high stone columns supporting the ceilings, which are also one of the most characteristic architectural elements.

The monuments are often built on an artificial raised terraced "flooring floors", and present bas-relief sculptures on the stairways as an integral part of the architecture. The latter, in its stone collection, is treated as a large sculpture; doors or windows, for example, are designed, and they often consist of monoliths.

Sculptural and artistic evidence in Persepolis and, to a lesser extent and with different characteristics, even Pasargadae, represent at large-scale²⁵ human figures that constitute a sort of "iconographic anthology" of the political-imperial formation's groups of different peoples with significant ethnographic or ethno-archaeological implications as well as a sort of *Summa Enciclopedica* of the cultural knowledge of the time.

The depicted groups of people may represent the so-called political delegations belonging to the different *dahyu* (pl. *dahyāva*) (*satrapēiē*) of the political-imperial formation's, according to most of the different scholarly interpretations and the iconographic order in which they occur. The list of which,²⁶ as it is known, is located on some of the most important official

²³ However, the term can very likely be both a name and an ethnonym.

²⁴ The name would derive from the transliteration of the name in ancient Greek of the Old Persian name Pâthragâda (of uncertain meaning).

²⁵ These representations are mainly on the two northern and western stairways of the meeting hall, in the first case, the apadana.

²⁶ The identification is still a very controversial matter.

epigraphic dynastic remains (in Old Persian, Accadian and Elamite). The figures wear different clothes, personal effects and objects, animals, inserted into a sort of “ambassadors” scenes with gifts, or “rituals”, in a general *scenario* suggesting some collective ceremony solemn in character, which, perhaps, occurred for the New Year at Persepolis.

The identification of these delegations has always been the subject of an extensive and complicated scientific debate (Junge 1942; Tourovetz 2001). Indeed, based on lists of people described in the direct epigraphic evidence and in the Classical sources (imperial inscriptions, Hecataeus, Herodotus, etc.), it has always been very difficult to find a match with the geographic-spatial sequence and the order of the political rank, to which the same figures could be attributed. At Pasargadae, 80 kilometres north-east of Persepolis, thanks to the work of David Stronach in the 1960s (1980), it was possible to reinterpret the data that had already been partially excavated and brought to light by the Americans in the 1930s.

In this case, one cannot speak, as with Persepolis, of the existence of a proper city or even a settlement, but only of that of a set of large buildings.²⁷ These were located in a particular order in the plain of Murghab River, and disposed within and between gardens, where in the 1960s were unearthed flow channels for water. On some of the piers of the buildings at Pasargadae, figures are depicted referring to the stylistic and iconographic tradition of ancient Egypt, Assyria and of the ancient Near East in general, which is different from the great anthology of iconographic representations of the Persepolis delegations. This makes the cultural world inspiring these particularly complex and heterogeneous shapes, a puzzle yet to be deciphered, partially interpreted in an earlier constructive phase with respect to Persepolis.

The large peripheral areas are even less documented than the centres, with rare exceptions such as in Drangiana (Maresca *infra*, 123-152), Margiana (Cattani and Genito 1998; Genito 1998a; 1998b; 1998c) and Sogdiana (see Raiano *infra*, 153-166), and in some other cases almost unknown in relation to the identifications of archaeological levels, strictly dynastic or even chronologically related to them.

²⁷ The most important buildings are a Gate, an *atrium*, a meeting place, the yet enigmatic Zendan-e Suleyman, and the so-called Cyrus' tomb.

The importance of the pottery study for the reconstruction of ancient societies

The history of the pottery studies has always seen in ceramics something more relevant for the historical-cultural phenomena than the technical and production instances. This is the case despite the very considerable progress in recent years, especially in relation to a more archaeometric (Olcese and Picon 1995, 429-432; Artioli 2007), chemical-mineralogical and statistical approach, compared to an earlier stage.²⁸ It is not necessary to recall the interpretations in *vogue* again until the 1960s, when the gray-coloured ceramic was strongly associated to the ethno-linguistic groups of the Indo-European populations (see n. 7).

Today, such a kind of pot-people relationship²⁹ does not seem to have, fortunately, more legions of followers, as in the past. It is more reasonable to place ceramic fabrics in the context of the recognition of pottery productions more or less related to technological and cultural changes, which are still topical, yet much more difficult to interpret.

However, I heard even among many colleagues phrases like “... organize a workshop on the Achaemenid ceramics...?”, betraying with the use of this expression a misunderstood sense of dynastic membership that can only be, however, of chronological and/or cultural or technological character at best.

Though it has been impossible, in fact, to identify the relationships between the ceramic production and peoples, to hope of identifying relationships between them and a dynastic line seems impossible as well, unless, as in certain realities of the ancient Mediterranean, the places of production and of the producers themselves.

²⁸ This new approach has been unknown and certainly not extensively used by archaeologists until a few years ago, who were previously focused almost exclusively on the types and forms of classifications.

²⁹ The issue has been widely debated by scholars of different orientation. Today, the idea of correlating material production, such as ceramics, to ethnic groups (Kramer 1977, 91-112) seems to be obsolete and no longer accepted by the majority of scholars. This is also for reasons of merit, inherent in the same archaeological evidence (much less readable than previously thought), for both methodological reasons, where cultural changes linked to technical and/or technological transformations cannot be justified simply in ethnic terms. First Jean Deshayes (1969), then more than one authoritative scholar had considered this hypothesis, albeit with different accents (Medvedskaja 1977a; 1977b; Grantovskiy 1970; 1971; 1998).

The pottery has always been considered the “fossil guide” *par excellence* of each archaeological context. This is due to the inexhaustible morphological and typological varieties that characterizes it, and that testifies to a long and complex chronological evolution, as well as commercial distribution of a given production, and because it can be found in all the types of ancient archaeological sites (settlements, architectural monuments, tombs, drains, etc.). Finally, pottery has also been considered, in general, the most conspicuous and frequent archaeological material and, although in fragmentary conditions, is virtually indestructible, a feature that is not reflected in any of the other “classes” of materials. The ceramic articles can provide relevant chronologically information, even when they exist in the form of fragments of infinitesimal magnitude and almost invisible. The ceramic bodies can also provide those specific chronological information since, once broken, are almost never reused, as it often happens in the case of metals (Peacock 1981, 187-193).

The study of the forms and types of ceramic of a given area, or that of the chemical and mineralogical composition of the materials used for the production of the same, allows us to understand what were the changes in fashions and techniques in use in the ancient societies. Furthermore, this study allows for a better understanding of whether you are experiencing some sudden or gradual changes, due to and/or through external contributions. It also testifies to the level of economic exchange reached by peoples, notably by providing vital information regarding the function of a particular class of ceramics and to the *status* of those who produced and used it. This is, in turn, evidenced by the choice of a material rather another, or by the presence of more or less complex decorations.

According to Hodder (1981, 215-220) (in the so-called “processual” archaeology), should you not have useful material data for a global reconstruction of the “ancient”. It must then be traced back to the production process: observing the typology and the pottery styles, avoiding cultural parallels and trying to better interpret the data related to the context in which the ceramic in question was produced and used. Ceramics and other ancient artefacts are nothing more than the real reflection of the transformations within the organization of the social systems. Ceramics also mirror the variations of forms and decorations, which depend on the degree of specialization of craftsmanship capabilities and, consequently, on the economic development of ancient societies, the productive knowledge, organization of manufacturing activities and the social hierarchies that oversaw them.

They connect to the same other issues, such as those proposed by Luttrell (1972, 139-148) for the medieval archaeology, which referred to ceramics as a combination of artistic product and critical aspect of the history of technical and industrial development. This artistic and technical history perfectly falls within general history, of which the economic and social aspects are perhaps the most significant in the cultural-historical reconstruction, intended as research of historical and economic changes of an entire region in a specific period. The dating of an artefact (ceramic or not) can be of crucial importance, especially in the field of the proto-historical period in the absence of other types of documentary evidence. However, scholars are not able to move away from the conception elaborated by Hurst (1962-63, 135-155) and recovery by Blake (1970, 239-251), according to which the ceramic alone cannot be dated in a multi-layered way in particular “urban” or often not reliable contexts.

Following this line of thought, Young C.J. (1981, 209-214) and Wickham (1988, 105-124) connect. The first stated that, although the ceramic constitutes the most important “fossil guide” for the interpretation of the socio-economic sphere of any ancient society, the archaeologist and the historian, should try to understand whether the fair amount of recovered ceramic, within a more or less vast territory, faithfully represents the magnitude of the trade in an ancient society. Adding also that pottery could also be only a find discovered, capable of referring to the economic sphere or a, much more complex and articulated culture.

According to Wickham, ceramics cannot always provide an overall vision that considers all the possible variables in the old (ancient time?), as well as all the modes of production and social relations within the economic and political sphere. Ceramics can also offer important “ethno-archaeological” insights (Vidale 1992), allowing to use ethnographic evidence to identify the cultural and technological processes, originally made between the objects and the people who produced and used them. The ceramic can be used to rewrite economic history, understood as the history of the modes of production, exchange and consumption, in order to validate and update the documentary evidence that, alone, cannot give comprehensive information about ancient societies.

Equally important is the “anthropological” approach, which aims at defining the use of vessels, evaluating the testimonies of literary and

iconographic sources and the morphological data. The artefact is seen as an object that has its own role within the activities of the society and food habitudes of an ancient community. Thus, the artefacts provides evaluable information with regard to behaviour, eating habits and some aspects of the social and economic life of those who produced and used it.

In sum, ceramic production in addition to being an important source for archaeological dating also provides essential contributions to the reconstruction of the economy of the ancient world's craft and technological knowledge, of the manufacturing organizations, and social hierarchies that these oversaw.

Pottery studies, then, are no longer a "subsidiary science" of archaeology, but are one of the most important means to address central issues of the economic and social life of the ancient world. The results of the analysis of ceramics are much more than just a contribution to dating the original contexts: they refer to the extension, the function and the *status* of the site and its inhabitants. That is because ceramics plays an important role within the social interaction and of a given context emulation systems.

It is easy to understand, however, that with regards to the classification of the finds, we witness different investigation methodologies, resulting from the scope of each archaeologically concerned discipline. Prehistoric archaeology uses classifications to date and distinguish ethnic groups; historical archaeology associates the classification of the finds and the contexts where they are placed, to the amount of written sources available. These should be compared with the ancient documentary evidence; medieval and post-medieval archaeology, which consistently refers to history (as opposed to art-history and to antiquary), and denounce the partiality of the ethnic approaches or those exclusively focused on chrono-typological aspects, allowing only those researches enabling a wider social and economic assessments.

With rare exceptions, of artefacts bearing engraved dates, printed or painted at the factory, pottery dating is a very complex task, requiring a careful evaluation of all the possible interactions between various dating elements and the contexts associated with them. As in stratigraphic analyses, the steps are two: to determine the relative sequences and to assign them an absolute chronology.

Transforming from absolute to relative and from relative to absolute chronology is substantially the final task of a good research activity, by comparison the ceramic with non-ceramic materials with the same origin and with those fitted to absolute dating from other contemporary sites.

Processing a chronology (be it either relative or absolute) faces these three challenges:

- 1) the lifespan of the ceramics (and also of the coins and other artefacts) before to be part of a given context;
- 2) its residual nature, i.e. the horizontal and vertical location of the ceramics in the moment in which it definitively abandons its original deposition;
- 3) the intrusiveness, when ceramics of more recent archaeological levels converge in the lower layers, both for the history of post-depositional³⁰ and for excavation mistakes.

Generally, we try to limit these problems by identifying the later finding, as *terminus post quem* of an entire layer.

There is a visible relationship between the manifestations of human activities (ceramics is only one of many human creations) and man-made changes in the environment due to natural factors. Although these are not directly observable in the succession of the archaeological layers. The layer, properly identified, is undoubtedly one of the most important archaeological source, since it indicates both a given state of the man-made socio-cultural system, and the action of environmental factors, which can provide basic information on the social past and on the natural environment where a human group is experienced. The level of conservation of the original layer must be identified to optimally recover these data, recognizing any subsequent human action to its creation and the action of the external environment. This occurs analysing the process of stratification from the socio-cultural to the stratigraphic context.

Every element of the socio-cultural sphere (in our case the ceramic artefacts), between the abandonment of the culture to which it belonged and underground immobilization, will be subjected to surface forces, both natural and cultural, that can lead to both the loss of its features and of its original reports and the loss of the element itself.

In conclusion, the interpretation of the archaeological layers must not only separate the natural effects from the cultural ones, but it is first necessary to

³⁰ We refer to cultural processes or physical processes – chemical and biological – typical of the environment of the surface in anthropic conditions.

identify the processes (natural and cultural) that have contributed to the disturbance of the original cultural relics.

It is important, for a more complete scientific approach, to also take into account the state of conservation of the fragments, and of the presence on the surfaces or on the interiors of different tracks. For example, those of burns,³¹ or of external materials, carbonate of lime, mortar, concretions, red-brown staining, purple-black, grey and pink, due to the various forms of oxides and hydroxides of iron and manganese, the formation of dust or silica deposits or some other.³²

The archaeologist, in short, must take into account that the set of finds at its disposal, collected from an archaeological dig in a specific area, may have been preserved until recently by the simultaneous action of several factors, i.e.:

1. number of vessels, divided by types, which were simultaneously in use in the unit of investigated areas;
2. speed of the breaking of vessels depending of the types and functional categories of membership;
3. duration of frequentation and its eventual cyclicity;
4. activities effected at the site;
5. composition of the human group and presence of pets that are responsible for at least 10% of the breakings;
6. the replacement rate of broken pots with the new;
7. exceptional incidents during the use and transport;
8. repairs, recycling or reuse of broken pots.

The quantitative research is, perhaps, the most complex from the scientific inquiry point of view. Hence, one should, from time to time, expose the problems related to quantitative data and be cautious in proposing hasty conclusions. This applies even in the case of the study of non-ceramic artefacts. It must also be taken into account, however, you will need to make assumptions about the “likely” average life of the artefact, because the abovementioned factors may change significantly according to each individual case.

³¹ These traces are usually indicative of the original function of the vessel, which were linked to the cooking of food as well as secondary aspects and moments from the time when the object was still functional.

³² These clues illustrate an often non-primary arrangement of the find and the composition of the soil in which it is found.



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