

# Pasargadae and the legacy of the Persian garden

Autor(en): **Mousavi, Ali**

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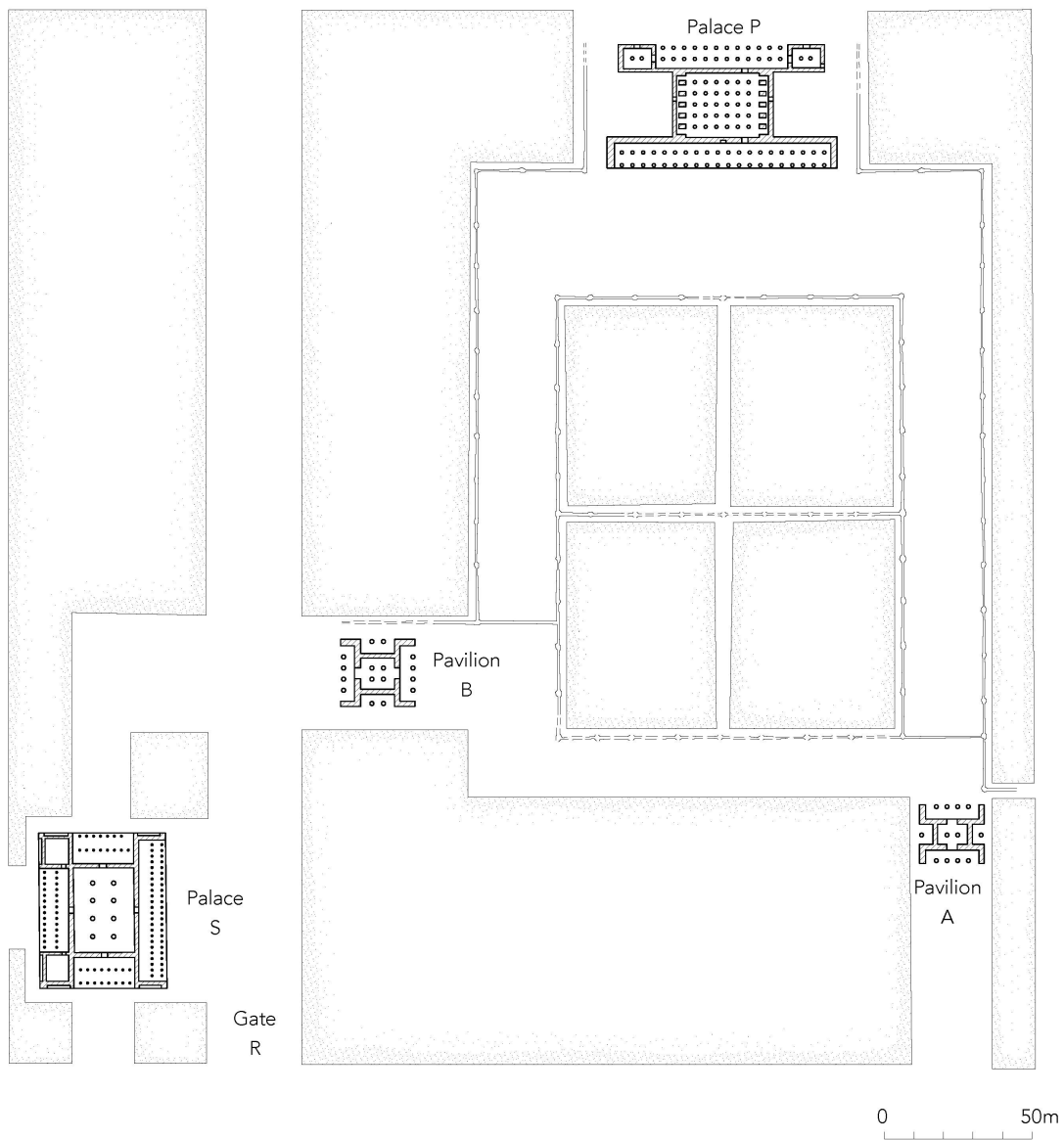
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The Royal Garden of Pasargadae

# PASARGADAE AND THE LEGACY OF THE PERSIAN GARDEN

Ali Mousavi

The ruins at Pasargadae located in southern Iran display the earliest manifestation of Achaemenid art, dating from the sixth century BC. The site was a symbolic place for the Persians, where Cyrus the Great defeated Astyages, the last king of the Medes, in 550 or 549 BC. Pasargadae was not a ruling or political capital, but a royal residence that continued to preserve its symbolic status even after the fall of the Persian Empire. Cyrus brought masons, stonemasons, and artists from newly conquered lands such as Ionia (Asia Minor) and Mesopotamia, which is reflected in the eclectic nature of Achaemenid art and architecture.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the present day, Achaemenid Pasargadae resembled a royal park or paradise, well-furnished with structures. The architectural remains of the site, covering an area of 160 hectares, include the Tomb of Cyrus, a citadel known as Tall-e Takht, the royal compound organized around a fourfold garden with palaces and pavilions, a gatehouse, an enigmatic tower known as Zandan-e Suleiman (Prison of Solomon), and the terraced mound known as the Sacred Precinct with its two stone plinths. The surviving structures are largely built in stone, in contrast to the prevailing traditional mud-brick constructions of the time. The buildings at Pasargadae were made of white and black stones quarried from the mines of Mount Sivan, some thirty kilometers southwest of Pasargadae.

Greek authors frequently referred to and admired Persian gardens as paradises. The word was first and frequently used by Xenophon in reference to enclosed parks and pleasure grounds of Persian princes and satraps (for example, in *Anabasis*, 1.2.7; 2.4.14; *Cyropaedia* I. 3.14; *Oeconomicus* IV. 22; *Hellenica* IV.1.15).<sup>2</sup> Specific reference to Pasargadae's garden appears much later with the historians of Alexander (see below). Except for the citadel that overlooks the plain, all of the monumental structures at Pasargadae were built in a garden.

1 Two excellent publications deal with that question specifically: Nylander, Carl: *Ionians in Pasargadae. Studies in Old Persian Architecture*, Uppsala, 1970; Tilia, Ann-Brit: "A Study on the Methods of Working and Restoring Stone and on the Parts Left Unfinished in Achaemenian Architecture and Sculpture". In: *East and West*, 18 (1968), no. 1–2, pp. 68–75.

2 For a full discussion about the meaning in Old Persian and Greek, see Tuplin, Christopher: *Achaemenid Studies*, Stuttgart 1996, pp. 82–88;

idem, "Paradise revisited". In: Gondet, Sebastien; Haerinck, Ernie: *L'Orient Est Son Jardin: Homage à Rémy Boucharlat*, Acta Iranica 58, Leuven 2019, pp. 492–495; Boucharlat, Rémy: "Gardens and parks at Pasargadae: Two 'paradises'?" In: Rollinger, Robert; Truschnegg, Brigitte; Bichler, Reinhold: *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich. Akten des 3. Internationalen Kolloquiums zum Thema "Vorderasien im Spannungsfeld klassischer und altorientalischer Überlieferungen"*, Innsbruck, 24.–28. November 2008, Wiesbaden 2011, pp. 558–559.

## The Tomb of Cyrus and the paradise garden

The Tomb of Cyrus stands in the southern part of the site, apart from all other major buildings. The monument, probably built between 540 and 530 BC, combines two distinctive elements: an imposing tiered platform and a chamber with a gabled roof that seems to preserve a very early form of wooden houses. The total height of the monument is eleven meters. The tomb chamber is a small room with smooth and flat walls.<sup>3</sup> A shallow prayer niche (*mihrab*) in the southwest wall was carved in the thirteenth century, which with the compass carved at the southern corner of the third tier is a visible sign that the tomb served as the central part of a medieval mosque founded in the thirteenth century AD.<sup>4</sup>

Classical authors refer to the presence of a garden with trees in the proximity of the Tomb of Cyrus: “The tomb of the famous Cyrus was in the royal park (*paradeisos*) Pasargadae, and around it, a grove of all kinds of trees had been planted. It was also watered by a stream, and high grass grew in the meadow.”<sup>5</sup> Since then, the area of the tomb has undergone a number of changes, in particular under the Atabegs of Fars in the twelfth century, when the tomb became a mosque bordered by pillars (taken from Achaemenid buildings) and a cemetery; later, the remains of the mosque were removed to make room for an esplanade for the visit and speech of the last Shah of Iran in 1971. As for the stream locally known as the Rudak-e Lah (literally meaning “the watercourse by grasslands”), it still runs some 200 meters north of the tomb.

<sup>3</sup> See Stronach, David: *Pasargadae*, Oxford 1978, pp. 24–43.

<sup>4</sup> Sami, Ali: *Pasargadae. The Oldest Imperial Capital of Iran*, Shiraz 1956, pp. 108–109; Stronach (1978), p. 37; Kleiss, Wolfram: “Madar-e Suleiman. Das Grab des Kyros als islamisches Heiligtum”. In: *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, 12

(1979), pp. 283–286; Mousavi, Ali: “Pilgrimage to Pasargadae”. In: Daryaei, Touraj: *Cyrus the Great. An Ancient Iranian King*, Santa Monica CA 2013, pp. 31–32.

<sup>5</sup> Arrian, *The Anabasis of Alexander*, vol. 29, 4–7; Roller, Duane W.: *The Geography of Strabo*, book XV, 3, 7, Cambridge 2014.

## The royal garden

It seems that designing a garden was the first step in the construction of the royal compound at Pasargadae. A glance at the layout of the palatial area at Pasargadae reveals that all the palaces and pavilions form the boundaries and extremities of the garden. Cyrus's architects designed a twelve-hectare, well-watered area with rows of trees (probably local pistachio trees known as *baneh*, wild almond and plane trees), shrubs, and grasses. The royal garden is a flat ground, approximately 350 × 300 m, lying between Palace P to the north, Palace S to the southwest, and the gate to the southeast. The center of the garden, equipped with stone water channels, consists of two equal rectangles, each 112.50 × 72.50 meters. The water channels of the royal garden, discovered in archaeological excavations, cover a length of over 1100 m. They are set in an asymmetrical pattern, which must have determined the original position of the paths, the trees, and grassy areas within the garden.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the present-day impression of barren land, the landscape of Pasargadae consisted of a lush verdure combined with local pistachio trees. At least two watercourses feed the plain of Pasargadae: the stream known as Rudak-e Lah to the northwest and the Polvar River running on the southeast of the royal compound. Recent archaeological fieldwork has shown that a branch of the Polvar carried water to a large trapezoidal basin almost 200 meters long. A bridge equipped with valves regulated the water level of the basin.<sup>7</sup> It has been said that such a symmetrical design of the water channels and the two pavilions provided the prototype of the famous fourfold garden, or *chahar bagh*, widely appreciated during the millennium that followed, particularly in Safavid Iran and Mughal India.<sup>8</sup> The *chahar bagh* represents a cosmological idea of the universe as divided into four quarters by four rivers.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Sami (1956), pp. 75–76; Stronach (1978), p. 109.

<sup>7</sup> Benech, Christophe; Boucharlat, Rémy; Gondet, Sébastien: Organisation et aménagement de l'espace à Pasargades Reconnaissances archéologiques de surface, 2003–2008, ARTA 2012.003. Internet: [http://www.achemenet.com/document/2012.003-Benech\\_Boucharlat\\_Gondet.pdf](http://www.achemenet.com/document/2012.003-Benech_Boucharlat_Gondet.pdf), consulted 30.12.2019.

<sup>8</sup> Stronach, David: "The Royal Garden at Pasargadae: Evolution and Legacy". In: De Meyer, Leon; Haerinck, Ernie (Ed.): *Archaeologia Iranica et Orientalis. Miscellanea in Honorem Louis Vanden Berghe*, vol. 1, Gent 1989, p. 482.

<sup>9</sup> Pope, Arthur Upham; Ackerman, Phyllis: "Gardens". In: Pope, Arthur Upham (Ed.): *A Survey of Persian Art*, vol. 3, Tokyo 1964, ch. 44, p. 1429.

The main entrance to the royal compound and the royal garden at Pasargadae was a monumental gate or Propylaeum at the eastern edge of the site. The gate is a freestanding, rectangular building (28.50 × 25.50 meters) with a columned hall entered by two main and two side doorways which were once decorated with winged figures or human-headed bulls. In the northeastern doorway, the main part of one of the white stone door jamb still stands in place, bearing the famous representation of the four-winged figure. Beyond the gate, a bridge provided access to the garden and the palace area.

The first structure of monumental scale inside the compound is Palace S otherwise known as the “Palace with the Column”, which lies on the southwestern corner of the garden. Because of its proximity to the bridge and the gate, it has also been called the audience hall, where visitors and envoys to the court of Cyrus were received. This palace represents some outstanding elements such as the still-standing, thirteen-meter-high column in white stone and the three-stone antae which bears a trilingual inscription with the name of Cyrus. The building consists of a columned hall (32 × 22 meters) surrounded by four columned porticoes. Four pairs of reliefs, depicting winged genii or eagle-footed griffins, once decorated the four entrances of the hypostyle hall.

The second palatial building, Palace P, lies on the northwestern side of the garden, and is sometimes referred to as the private palace of Cyrus the Great. The palace consists of three main parts: a central, columned hall (31 × 22 meters) flanked by two large porticoes. In contrast to Palace S which has no direct view of the garden, the southeastern portico of Palace P was equipped with a long bench and a seat, thus providing a contemplative view of the garden for the king and his entourage. At the southwest end of the southeastern portico, an anta bears a trilingual inscription that reads: “I, Cyrus, the king, an Achaemenian”. The doorways of Palace P are decorated with reliefs that show a king followed by an attendant leaving the hall.

Remains of a ruined tower known as Zendan-e Soleyman (the Prison of Solomon) appear to the north of the palace area. The prison originally consisted of a square tower, capped with a pyramidal roof, with buttressed corners and three rows of false windows on three sides of the building. On the fourth side, there was a staircase leading to a

small chamber. Though the tower was built outside the garden area, it certainly lay in the parkland that once covered the site.

A low mound and two freestanding stone structures constitute what is known as the Sacred Precinct that lies beyond a canal that joins the Polvar River, some 1300 meters northwest of the royal compound. The excavations of the mound revealed a series of terraces and a fire altar in mud-brick that once belonged to a sanctuary. The ground between the terraced mound and the stone plinths is a grassland on the north side of the Rudak-e Lah.

The royal compound at Pasargadae was originally set within a large park. Taking into account the other green spaces in the site, one needs to add the “paradise” around the Tomb of Cyrus, the grassland in the Sacred Precinct, and the hunting ground in the gorge known as Tang-e Bolaghi, through which the main Pasargadae—Persepolis road passed. The Polvar River crosses this 17-kilometer-long sinuous gorge that begins two kilometers south of Pasargadae. Archaeological fieldwork in 2005–7 revealed the remains of two royal pavilions, along with other structures including dams and enclosure walls.<sup>10</sup> In fact, until fairly recently, the plain of Pasargadae was covered with grasslands for at least half of the year. As David Stronach rightly points out, the ingenuity of the builders of Pasargadae lies in the fact that they designed an open, welcoming setting of gardens and parks in contrast to the long tradition of walled and protected palaces in Southwest Asia.<sup>11</sup>

The Achaemenid kings after Cyrus returned to the tradition of walled gardens within their magnificent monuments at Susa and Persepolis. But later, stone-lined water channels, lofty pavilions, and geometric layout of gardens in Iran and India revived Cyrus’s fourfold garden at Pasargadae. Though little is known about the Persian garden after the fall of the Persian Empire, remains in Sasanian sites such as Ctesiphon and Qasr-e Shirin reveal the existence of such gardens. The Emarat-e Khosrow at Qasr-e Shirin was conceived as a paradise

<sup>10</sup> Boucharlat (2011), pp. 566–568; Atayi, Mohammad T.: “Tang-e Bolaghi: An Achaemenid hunting ground”. In: Gondet, Sebastien; Haerinck, Ernie: *L’Orient Est Son Jardin. Homage à Rémy Boucharlat*, Acta Iranica 58, Leuven 2019, pp. 11–26.

<sup>11</sup> Stronach, David: “The Royal Garden at Pasargadae: Evolution and Legacy”. In: De Meyer, Leon; Haerinck, Ernie (Ed.): *Archaeologia Iranica et Orientalis. Miscellanea in Honorem Louis Vanden Berghe*, vol. 1, Gent 1989, p. 486.

garden with a rectangular *chahar bagh*. Historians such as Tabari inform us that the splendidly silk woven carpet known as Baharestan or the Spring of Khosrow, which reproduced a fourfold garden, dazzled early Muslim conquerors who entered the throne hall of the palace at Ctesiphon in 639.<sup>12</sup> The Sasanian royal sites were all equipped with green quarters in the form of designed or wild gardens. The round city of Ardashir Khwarrah in Fars, founded by Ardashir in the years 220–224, is divided into four main quarters each covered with buildings and gardens. The Persian garden remained a popular design throughout the medieval period. Samarkand, the capital city of Timur (Tamerlane) possessed gardens and vineyards and King Babur of the Mughal Empire recorded in his memoirs that there was a fifteenth century *chahar bagh* at Samarkand built on a hill.<sup>13</sup> The Safavids revived the *chahar bagh* garden design in their highly embellished town planning in Qazvin and Isfahan.<sup>14</sup> Outside Iran, the fourfold garden triumphed in Mughal India and in Spain where the rulers of the Nasrid dynasty (1230–1492) copied the Persian garden design of *chahar bagh* for the sumptuous Court of the Lions in the Alhambara.<sup>15</sup> The design, often reproduced on Persian carpets and miniatures, is undoubtedly one of the most enduring elements in the history of architecture in Iran.

**12** Khansari, Mehdi; Moghtader, M. Reza; Yavari, Minouch: *The Persian Garden: Echoes of Paradise*, Washington D.C. 1998, p. 54.

**13** Wilber, Donald: *Persian Gardens and Garden Pavilions*, second edition, Washington D.C. 1979, pp. 24–25.

**14** For survey of Iranian gardens, see Golombek, Lisa: *Garden ii. Islamic period*, Encyclopaedia Iranica.

Internet: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/garden-ii>, consulted 30.12.2019.

**15** Hunt, Patrick: *Persian Paradise Gardens: Eden and Beyond as Chahar Bagh*, *Electrum Magazine*. Internet: <http://www.electrummagazine.com/2011/07/paradise-gardens-of-persia-eden-and-beyond-as-chahar-bagh>, consulted 30.12.2019.



