

The Way Achaemenid Kings Used Zoroastrianism to Gradually Strengthen Their Power

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ABSTRACT. As the dominant religion in the ancient Persia, Zoroastrianism played a great role in the lives of the Old Persians. Thus, it's really important to research the relationships between the ancient Persian Kings and the Zoroastrianism because the kings' authority depend largely on the Zoroastrianism. This paper will specifically focus on how the Achaemenid Kings employed Zoroastrianism to help them control their countries. This paper is divided into three different aspects of how the kings use religion to strengthen and consolidate their power. The first is about how the Achaemenid kings legitimized their taking thrones by referring to God empowering them. The second is about how the Achaemenid kings justified their actions of aggressive invasion to foreign lands by endowing their action with Ahuramazda's will. The last is about how the Achaemenid kings usually glorified themselves by regarding them as the only ones that were under Ahuramazda. With specific examples and details, this paper successfully explains how the kings achieve these. Although this paper only involves discussions about the Achaemenid kings in ancient Persia, it implies a common strategy for the kings to establish authority in their countries.

KEYWORDS: Achaemenid empire, Zoroastrianism, Persian symbolism, Power structure, Wars, Ahuramazda

1. Introduction

Zoroastrianism, as one of the oldest religions in the world, was closely related to the kingship during the Achaemenid period in the Old Persian. Zoroastrianism originated from the eastern Iranian world (in places like Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) around 1000 B.C.E.^[3] Ahuramazda was the chief God of goodness, while the opposite of Ahuramazda was the Lie, which later became Ahriman. The ancient Persians held a dualist view of the world, which was mainly the confrontation between good and evil or truth and lie. Thus, all the Persians believed that their actions would be judged in the afterlife, and the sacrifice performed by priests was the most important ritual, which happened in the fire altars. The Zoroastrian beliefs were deeply rooted in all the Persians. Therefore, the employment of Zoroastrianism was important for the Achaemenid kings to control their people and establish the authority. This paper will focus on how the Achaemenid kings appeal to religious beliefs to strengthen their powers.

2. Taking the Thrones

First of all, the Achaemenid kings legitimized their taking thrones by referring to God empowering them. In the Achaemenid Dynasty, the succession of kings did not follow the regular Primogeniture, which was an exclusive right of inheritance belonging to the eldest son.^[5] Thus, there were fierce competitions between the family members for the thrones, and after one of the candidates became the king, he would appeal to the Ahuramazda to legitimize his action of taking the throne in order that he could establish authority among all his people. One of the most prominent examples was Darius' usurpation of the throne. Although there were no accurate records of this period, the two widespread versions of the rise of Darius the Great were Darius' version and Herodotus's version.[Hdt] It was hard to say which one was more correct because obviously, the two both wrote down this event from their own perspectives. However, through Darius' version, we could see how he appealed to the Ahuramazda to justify his usurpation of the throne. At the very beginning, Darius directly related the rise of the Gaumâta (who might be the real Bardiya, the brother of the previous king Cambyses) to the spread of the Lie, who was the opposite to their belief: Ahuramazda, by mentioning that "When Cambyses had departed into Egypt, the people became hostile, and the Lie (=opposite of the God Ahuramazda) multiplied in the land, even in Persia and Media, and in the other provinces." [DB] In this way, Darius could explain why Gaumâta wanted to fake his identity and later his murder of Gaumâta. Based on the fact that "Cambyses died his own death in Egypt" and "Gaumâta became the king" after the rebellion, Darius decided to act against the Gaumâta by saying that "Then I prayed to Ahuramazda; Ahuramazda brought me help." Darius was claiming that all his actions

were under the will of Ahuramazda to fight against the consequences of the Lie. After Darius successfully slew Gaumâta and dispossessed his dynasty, he again attributed his success to the Ahuramazda by pointing out that “By the grace of Ahuramazda I became king; Ahuramazda granted me the kingdom.” The last sentence, “Ahuramazda granted me the kingdom” became the final justification for Darius’ usurpation of the throne that deep in all his people’s minds, they were convinced of that it was the choice of Ahuramazda to let Darius, who defeated the Lie, to become the king. Therefore, with such strong religious support, Darius was able to establish his authority in his own kingdom.

Another excellent example of this was King Xerxes, as recorded in XPh. When Xerxes, son of King Darius claimed his throne, he, again, referred to Ahuramazda by first reckoning the superior status of Ahuramazda “A great God is Ahuramazda, who created this earth...” to introduce the superiority of himself “who made Xerxes king, one king of many, one lord of many.” This idea of glorifying Ahuramazda in order to glorify himself was further developed when Xerxes described how he smote a rebellion against his taking throne. Using the same sentence as his father did “By the grace of Ahuramazda”, Xerxes was able to justify for both rebellions suppression and thrones succession.

3. Aggressive Invasions

Next, the Achaemenid kings also justified their actions of aggressive invasion to foreign lands by endowing their action with Ahuramazda’s will. In order to consolidate the imperial power, suppress rebellions, and expand their territories, the Achaemenid kings usually conquered foreign territories to show their military strength after they claimed their thrones. By appealing to the will of Ahuramazda, the kings persuaded their people to participate in the war with high morale. Additionally, by attributing the victory to Ahuramazda after the war, the kings successfully glorified Ahuramazda, which further justified his following conquests. One telling example would be King Darius. After Darius claimed himself as the king of Persia, to eliminate the threat of Gaumâta, he suppressed the rebellion held by Gaumâta. According to Behistun inscription, Darius quoted Ahuramazda several times, like “Then I prayed to Ahuramazda; Ahuramazda brought me help.” By doing so, he showed that he was taking actions under the will of Ahuramazda, which provided the perfect justification for his ambition. By appealing to Ahuramazda, he persuaded his subjects to act under his ambition. Also, King Darius attributed all the help or success during his military conquests to Ahuramazda. In almost every military conquest, according to Behistun, King Darius used the same saying that he defeated the enemies “by the grace of Ahuramazda,” through which Darius puts the Ahuramazda in a very high place that brought the country victory. The often-repeated line “Ahuramazda bore me aid” also implied that Darius attempted to show that Ahuramazda was with him and attribute all the efforts to Ahuramazda. Each victory made by King Darius would further deepen people’s beliefs in Ahuramazda. Thus, by mentioning that all these were under the will of Ahuramazda, King Darius could justify his actions, including the military conquest and being the king. This claim made by King Darius eliminated all the potential objections to all his aggressive actions.

For all the military conquests, although King Darius reckoned all the causes of the revolts to be the lies of the leaders, he still claimed that it was Ahuramazda who brought these revolt leaders to him, and he did not go for them by himself. Ahuramazda also played an essential role in these aggressive conquests. According to Herodotus 7.40, in the conquest of Xerxes, it is said that “Behind these ten horses was the place of the sacred chariot of Zeus”. With the incorporation of the word “sacred” and the particular position of the chariot of Zeus behind the whole army, Herodotus showed us how vital Ahuramazda (“Zeus” in Greek) was in the army. The “chariot of Zeus” served as a guardian and symbol for the whole army that would bring victory to the army. However, the king, Xerxes, himself was actually behind the “chariot of Zeus”, as indicated in the line “After these came Xerxes himself in a chariot drawn by Nesaeian horses”^[1]. The location of the king was a direct implication that they were equal to Ahuramazda. To some extent, they were even higher than Ahuramazda and thus can consolidate their powers as kings by showing their unique status in the power structure^[2].

4. Glorification

Last but not least, the Achaemenid kings usually glorified themselves by regarding them as the only ones that were under Ahuramazda. Since the superiority of Ahuramazda and the unique status of the Zoroastrianism were deeply rooted in the Persians’ minds, the Kings, by comparing themselves to Ahuramazda, could easily ensure their unmatched power in the society, implicitly implicating that they were representatives of or even equal to Ahuramazda. This specific belief was held by many Achaemenid kings, and one of the most prominent examples is the relief of the Behistun, where Darius the Great recorded his victory over other rebellious leaders. On the relief, Ahuramazda, as the king of the Gods, was placed at the top part of the whole relief and Darius the Great was engraved as the largest among all the immortals and occupied almost the bottom part of the relief. According to Bruce Lincoln^[4], the Behistun relief was organized on two axes: from top to bottom and from left to right. The top-bottom structure represented the equal status of both Ahuramazda and Darius the Great, while the left-right structure only showed the overwhelming power of Darius over other kings since Darius was the largest and all the other figures were in a state of enslavement, which implied

their obedience to Darius. No matter from what perspective the relief is examined, the only conclusion will be that Darius, as the king of the Persia, was showing his special status to all the citizens that he was the only one under the Ahuramazda or even equal to Ahuramazda. Also, in Cyrus Cylinder, when Cyrus was talking about religious measures, he mentioned, "I returned the images of the Gods, who had resided there, to their places and I let them dwell in eternal abodes." In line 32. By pointing out that he could bring back the Gods to their homes, Cyrus the Great was implying his power that only he could get access to those Gods rather than anyone else. This specific privilege, especially so connected with the Gods, could glorify Cyrus the Great, who was the king of the country that he had the power of God. All these reliefs served as propaganda for the kings to establish their authorities. By connecting them directly to Ahuramazda while diminishing others' powers, the kings successfully instilled their sacred figures into their citizens' minds. Thus, by employing similar methods, the Achaemenid kings could glorify themselves to establish overwhelming authorities over their countries.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Achaemenid kings consolidate and strengthen their powers by using religious beliefs to legitimize their role as kings, justify their aggression and glorify themselves. This paper focuses on the relationships between religion and kingship. Although this passage only involves discussions about the Achaemenid kings in ancient Persia, it implies a common strategy for the kings to establish authority in their countries or even control. Not only would the ancient Persian kings employ the strategy in this way, but many other kings in different locations and different times would also adopt similar strategies. This passage delves into how the kings consolidate their powers by prioritizing and highly appreciating religious beliefs.

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