

THE ROLE OF IRAN IN THE HISTORY OF ASIA

BY RÉNÉ GROUSSET

ASIA is divided both historically and geographically into two distinct areas, the Near East and, on the other hand, India and the Far East. Separating them is a formidable barrier of deserts and mountains. India and the Far East are connected by their common orientation toward the Southern Ocean, the ports of Indo-China and the oasis of Serindia, the continental Indo-China, avenues of communication which have helped to maintain constant relations between the two, of which the most striking evidence is the spread of Buddhism. The Near East, on the contrary, with the Mesopotamian hinterland, looks to the West, toward the Mediterranean, as is clear from the diffusion of Alexandrianism and, later, of Islam, not to mention the earlier, Aegean-Asiatic connections.

The link between these two contrasted Orients is Iran, a bridge thrown by nature, in the Myocene period, across the ancient sea of Central Asia or Thētis, joining providentially the Mediterranean countries, the Mesopotamian region and Asia Minor, on the one hand, to the compact area of Turania, India, and Yellow Asia Major, on the other. Thus Iran, the true Middle Kingdom of the Ancient World, is an historical pivot.

This fact becomes evident even in pre-historic times. The latest archaeological discoveries have revealed a series of Eneolithic centers all around the periphery of Iran, distinguished by an admirable painted pottery at Harappa, and Mohenjo Daro in the Indus Valley in the pre-Aryan period: at Nal in Beluchistan; at Anau on the frontier of Russian Turkestan and Khorassan, not to mention the sites found earlier at Susa and in the Transcaucasus region (Page 5). Seals from pre-Aryan India that can be dated accurately between 2500-2200 B.C. found in Chaldea by the Watelin Expedition show that even then continuous cultural relations were maintained between India and Sumer by way of Iran. It was a question whether the Iranian plateau also had had a part in the Mesopotamian-Susa culture, the influence of which was felt even into pre-Aryan India, as the style of cutting in the Mohenjo Daro seals shows; but the excavations of Dr. Contenau at Nihavand in 1932 provided the answer, for an important style of pottery was found which had

relations to both Susa I and Susa II.¹ The pre-Aryan Iran must have been a kind of *Susiana Major* with Susa itself, Anau, Harappa, and Mohenjo Daro perhaps only outlying extensions, and its influence must have been felt even in China, judging from the painted pottery recently found in Ho-nan and Kan-suh by the Swedish expedition directed by Professor Andersson and Professor Arne.

When the Indo-Iranians migrated from the Russian steppes, first into Iran, between 2000 and 1500 B.C., and then into India, between 1500 and 1000 B.C., the "focal" rôle of Iran became both more specific and of wider import.

The Iranians made their first historical appearance in Asia in the Mitanni Empire, about 1500 B.C., Iranian in the names of its aristocracy, and in religion as well, the Mithra cult. This empire was connected with the great Pharaohs of Egypt of the Eighteenth Dynasty, and these two, the Mitanni and the Pharaohs, were responsible for keeping the Orient on an even keel. About this same time (1760-1185) Babylon had been conquered by the Kassites, who had come down from the mountains of Luristan, another people under the rule of an Iranian aristocracy.

This is the racial group who seem to have been responsible for the admirable "Luristan bronzes" recently discovered. These show a style in which new vigor is infused into animal motives that had already been heraldically conventionalized in Susa and Chaldea, a bolder, freer rendition which is both realistic and synthetic and is strikingly individual. This animal art of Luristan, the first Iranian art known, was evidently carried by the Kassites of Luristan to their near neighbors, the Medes of Ecbatana (Hamadan) and Rayy, and still further, beyond these Iranians who had become sedentary population, to the Iranians who were still barbarian and nomadic, up in the Great North, the "Scyths" of the Russian and Turkestan steppes. The Scyth domination of Medea dates from 633 to 615 B.C. Indeed, the animal art of the Scythian bronzes borrows its basic motives from Luristan, adapting them to a more barbaric conception. Thus the Luristan ibex, and all the other members of the goat tribe, to which is now added also the horse of the plains, are contorted in a dramatic struggle with the great cats, which also

¹Susa I being the earlier, Susa II, the subsequent, but related, style of pottery found by the French Expedition at Susa. The question has been even more strikingly and conclusively answered by discoveries of the American expedition at Damghan, soon to be published.—Ed.

came from Luristan, but were endowed by the Scyths with a more violent ferocity. In place of the symmetrical confrontation of Luristan, which becomes rather meager, these northern nomads invent a complex interplay of muscles which are encrusted, indeed smothered, with a flamboyant elaboration of minor details wrought like jewelry.

Thus at the dawn of history, the "Scythic" world, nomadic populations of Scyths, Sarmathians, and Sacians who covered the whole of the area that is today Southern Russia, Russian Turkestan, and part of Chinese Turkestan, was like a vast Outer Iran, producing a variant of the Iranian style, which was carried still further east to determine the art of Siberia and of the Huns, thereby exerting a great influence on the Chinese art of the Han dynasty.

While the first great wave of Iranian influence was spreading out in this way to the northeast through the nomadic Iranians of the steppes, the settled Iranian populations to the west, in Iran proper, under the Persian dynasty of the Achaemenids, were subjugating the whole of Hither Asia and reaching beyond this to Africa, on the one hand, and the Balkan Peninsula, on the other, creating the first really organized empire of the ancient world (550-330). It was, indeed, so remarkably organized that it took on a special ethical character, very tolerant, the conscious protector of the subject peoples, until, thanks to the *missi dominici* of the successive rulers, a Darius or an Artaxerxes, and to the Royal Roads and the unflinching, watchful guardianship of the court at Susa, there gradually grew up, in place of race hatred and conflict, an *Achaemenian Peace*, the prototype of the Pax Romana. The advantages of this peace were not only political, but, as we are just beginning to realize, also cultural. It was the Achaemenian state that first gave the Orient the idea of a Universal Empire from which the Buddhists, as M. Przyluski has just shown, derived the notion, reinterpreted to their ends in spiritual terms, of King Chakravartin, the Universal Monarch. In the same way it was the hypostyle halls of the Achaemenids, adapted from the colonnades of Egypt, and the palace of Persepolis fashioned on the model of a Pharaonic temple, which gave the Indians, influenced by the long Achaemenian domination in the Punjab, the idea of the Maurya palace of Pataliputra (about 300 B.C.) Thus Achaemenian Persia served as intermediary between Egypt and India. Later she served

as intermediary between Ionia and India, as is evident in the first Indian reliefs, those of the capitals of Asoka (274-237), and those of Sanchi (first century, B.C.), where the Greco-Achaemenian influence is very marked.

After the maelstrom of Alexander, in the Parthian period (250 B.C. to 224 A.D.), Iranian influence continues without diminution. The rôle of the Parthian dynasty of the Arsakids is usually dismissed with the generalization that it was profoundly influenced by the Hellenic culture to the west, without taking account of the fact that while the Parthian culture was being Hellenized from the Mesopotamian side, it was also, in the opposite, eastern direction, carrying an Iranian influence into India. Too little recognition is made of the fact that, at the beginning of the Christian era, Parthian dynasties were ruling on the lower Indus, one of the best known being that of Gondopharès, who was reigning when Saint Thomas went to preach in India. Or, again, there is Indian evidence of the importance of the Parthians in their land in the tradition that Pahlava families, that is, Pehlevies or Parthians, imposed their rule even to the Dekhan. It is even more interesting to note that a number of these Parthians who were in close touch with the civilization of India were converted to Buddhism, some becoming so devout even that they entered Buddhist religious orders and went as missionaries to China. The Chinese texts tell of a number of Parthian princes who were among the first Buddhist apostles to proselytize in China during the Han period. They are always called Anshe, which is the Chinese version of Ar-sak or Arsakides. Thus Anshe-kao, who went to China about 150 A.D., did more than any other person to convert the country to Buddhism, and according to M. Sylvain Lévi and M. Masson-Oursel, it was apparently the influence of the Mazdean angelology which gave rise in Buddhism at about this time to the so-called Amida cults, which were Anshe-kao's special interest. The cults of the Maitreya Bodhisattvas, which were derived from Mithra, and of Amitâbha, are other contributions from Iran to the Mahâyâna Buddhism. Finally, in the arts, it seems probable² that the only explanation for the character of the first Indian school, that of Mathurâ, which took shape in the Indo-Scythian period, is the importance in its formation of Parthian art.

²This is the writer's own theory.



SILK TAPESTRY
Sixteenth Century
(Collection of Mrs. William H. Moore)

There is noteworthy evidence of the Parthian indebtedness in the peculiar conventions of the drapery folds.

In the Sasanian period the influence of Iran on the rest of Asia became tremendously important. The true Iranian culture, freed from the superficial Hellenistic veneer imposed by the Parthians, was deliberately reëstablished, not only in politics, where the Sapurs and the Chosroes resumed the direct succession of the Darius and the Artaxerxes, but also in the arts where, in the third century A.D., the monuments of Naksh-i Rustom and Naksh-i Rostam carry on the great traditions of Persepolis and Susa, and it was this resuscitated Iranian spirit which began again a wide expansion. On the west the Byzantine culture, which does not really begin until the time of Diocletian, was really just Greece and Rome Iranized. The last Roman emperors and the first Basileis of Byzantium simply copied the Persian conception of monarchy, even to imitating the court of the great Sasanian king, and the fashion was followed, even to such details as nomenclature. How significant it is that the "Roman" general who, under Justinian, reconquered Rome from the German bore the typically Sasanian name Nerses!

To the east and the northeast the civilization of Afghanistan and all Chinese Turkestan was in all material aspects Sasanian, though oddly enough, despite the fact that in Persia itself the Sasanian culture was profoundly Mazdean, it was here closely associated with Buddhism. M. Hackin, Director of the Musée Guimet, has discovered at Bamian, west of Kabul, great Buddhist frescoes in which, beside the Buddha and Buddhist monks, Sasanian princes are shown, typical Sapurs and Chosroes, bearded and crowned as they appear in the standard representations on the bas-reliefs and coins, and also elegant Iranian "knights." These figures show that these Buddhist frescoes, which date from the fifth century A.D., are really the earliest Persian paintings known. Moreover, this school of Irano-Buddhist painting was not limited to Afghanistan, but in the seventh and eighth centuries it spread to the oases of Chinese Turkestan, where it appears especially around Khotan, in the paintings of Dandan-Uilik, at Kutsha in the frescoes of Kizil, and at Karashar, that is to say, both north and south of the Tarim basin. Especially at Kizil in the Buddhist paintings that date between 550 and 750 A.D., which Von Le Coq brought back to Berlin, there is a whole repertoire of elegant knights, pages, and lovely ladies, so unmistakably

Iranian that they are the immediate link between the Sasanian paintings of Bamian and the first Persian Islamic miniatures. The Oasis of Kutsha, right in the Gobi Desert, was at this time a kind of Persian Sasanian colony, differing from Persia only in that these Iranians in Chinese territory, instead of being Mazdean, were fervent Buddhists. Thus Iranian culture persisted after the Sasanian Empire was overwhelmed by Islam. Moreover, the Iranization of this region was continued from the seventh to the ninth century by the Manicheans, who were driven out of Persia by the persecution, first of the Sasanians, and then of the Muhammadans, and went, about 750, to convert the kingdom of Uigur in the Turfan district, where their priests produced decorated books in the first half of the ninth century, fragments of which have come down to us to represent the first known Persian illuminations.

The very individual Iranian spirit had such vitality that, instead of being crushed by Islam, as might be expected, it was really fortified thereby. For really, from the ninth century on, Islam put its incomparable expansive power at the service of Persian culture. Everywhere to the east, where the Koranic faith took root, whether in Turkestan or India, it carried with it the triumph of Persian culture. The two were as closely connected as, in the classical world, Buddhist proselytizing had been with the Hellenistic Gandhâra style. Especially the Samanids, an Iranian dynasty that reigned over Khorassan and Transoxiana in the tenth century (874-999), accomplished a great deal in this respect. Crusaders of Islam, the great Samanid Emirs, forcibly converted the Turkish tribes beyond Tashkent and the Aral region, and in imposing the Muhammadan faith, they also imposed upon them, as a cultural model, the ideal of Iran. This made such an impression that a century later, about 1000 A.D., when the Turks took their revenge and, first under the Ghaznavids and then under the Seljuks, conquered in their turn East and West Iran, their domination made no break in Persian history, for they were already, in spirit, three-quarters Iranian. It was at the court of the first Turkish Sultan, Mahmud of Ghazna (998-1030), that Firdausi composed the *Shah-nâmeh*, and eighty years later the great Seljuk monarch, Malek Shah (1072-1092), was, as his name indicates, a great Paniranian ruler, restoring the ancient empire of the Darius and the Chosroes. And what is more, these Iranized Turks undertook on their own account to recom-

mence the Islamic campaign of conquest which had been allowed to lapse for several centuries. Thus, about 1000, Mahmud of Ghazna conquered northwest India, the Indus basin, and opened up the way for his successors, the Afghans, pure Iranians these, under Muhammad of Ghor (1187-1206) to conquer even the Ganges Valley (1200). In four centuries of unbroken progress from Muhammad of Ghor in the thirteenth century to Akbar in the sixteenth, the Turco-Afghan sultans who came down from the Khyber Pass subjugated almost the whole of India, creating an immense Indo-Muhammadan empire which is called, thanks to goodness knows what historical romanticism, Moghul, but which was really purely and simply an Indo-Iranian empire. What are the Taj Mahal or the Mosques of Bijapur and Golkonda, what are the Moghul miniatures, but a new chapter in the art of Isfahan?

Meanwhile in Iran proper the dynasties of Iranized Turks who followed the Seljuks had in the thirteenth century been swept out by the Mongol conquest of Genghis Khan and his followers. Surely the Iranian culture would be wiped out by such a devastating catastrophe? But once more Iran's destiny reversed all expectations, for from the day when the dynasty of the Ilkhans (1256-1349), a branch of the Genghis-Khans, was established on the throne in the person of Hulagu, Persia became, along with China, the chief beneficiary of the Mongolian unification of Asia and the Mongolian peace which prevailed from Tabriz to Peking. It is most significant that, as M. Pelliot has just pointed out, Marco Polo and his uncles in all their travels across Central Asia and China (1260-1295) depended entirely on the Persian language to make themselves understood. Marco Polo never knew Chinese, yet even in China itself he could get along with Persian, for Persian had at that time become a kind of *lingua franca* or *hindustani* all across Central Asia to the chief commercial cities of the Celestial Empire, the common language of business and trade. By 1300 it was as if the Mongol conquest in Central Asia had been intended only to advance the spread of Persian culture.

The Timurid conquest checked, to a certain extent, the progress of Iranian prestige, for while the Timurid Emirs (1369-1500) were always faithful disciples of Persian literature, they did undertake to create an independent Jaghatai—Turkish literature, based on Persian models. In spite of this, however, the prodigious develop-

ment of Persian miniature painting under the last Timurids (1500) and under their successors, the Shaibanides (1500-1599) at Bukhara, Samarkand, and Herat, shows how faithful these Turko-Mongul dynasties of the sixteenth century still were to the great tradition of the Iranian aristocratic art patrons.

Finally, with the Safavids (1502-1736) and the current Pahlevi dynasty, purely Persian rulers came to the throne, so that Iran once more returned to its own native tradition, undeflected. Isfahan under Shah Abbas I (1587-1629) was to the rest of Asia what the Versailles of Louis XIV was to Germany, Italy, or Moscow, the ideal city of dreams, the model of ambitious imitation. From the frontier of Godāvārī to the Golden Horn, in the *yourte* of the Kashgar chiefs, as in the palace of the Uzbek Khans, Isfahan was copied. For the Persia of Shah Abbas was the great Asiatic power, and the first Asiatic state which undertook to combine, with a perfect classicism in literature and the arts, an adaptation in politics to European forms, an adjustment which was again attempted in the eighteenth century by the Moscow of Peter the Great, and in the nineteenth by the Japan of Meiji-tennô. Everyone who has travelled in the East knows that the Persia of today, under His Majesty, Pahlevi Shah, holds the same place as the great cultural power of Middle Asia.