

PERSIA'S INFLUENCE ON THE ARTS OF OTHER LANDS

BY ARTHUR UPHAM POPE

THE IRANIAN plateau, both because of its location and its emphatic, almost magisterial character, not only imposed a common character on all those, however varied their racial origins, who lived under the dominion of its high mountains, lush valleys, and shining deserts, but also, even in the earliest days, it apparently radiated artistic ideas in various directions, enriching, deflecting, sometimes actually determining the arts of other cultures. As yet we can only guess at the larger outlines of this movement. Sir Arthur Keith has argued that the critical passage from nomadism to settled city life, one of the first and almost the greatest upward step the race has taken since it left its home in the trees, stood erect, and grasped a club, took place in Persia. Here, he thinks, men first learned to dwell together on a large scale, to divide labor, organize production, and commence to write laws, to direct and control by ideas, in short, to live the distinctive life of a planned economy. With this sudden enlargement of man's capacities came the birth of modern civilization as we know it, with its attendant art, law, and religion, as well as material invention, so that we are perhaps nearer in all essentials to these first city dwellers than they were to the primitive human groups which preceded them. Their solution of highly organized social life gave them irresistible superiority over neighboring lands, which they seem to have invaded and dominated and to whom they imparted their culture.

There is good reason to think that we may also find in Persia the proximate, if not the ultimate, origins of Sumerian civilization, the oldest and most sophisticated of the early cultures that has yet been studied. For by their own witness the Sumerians came into Mesopotamia from a mountainous land to the east, where all their inventions including the art of writing, had already developed. "Since that time," runs the tablet discovered by Mr. Woolley, "no new inventions have been added."

Sir Flinders Petrie believes that the evidence now available points clearly to an Iranian invasion of Egypt in the 63rd sequence

before the First Dynasty,¹ while Egypt was still in a primitive, stone-age culture, living in an artistic vacuum, and that it was this Iranian invasion which gave Egypt the vital impulsion that initiated her great career in the arts. Crete, in Sir Flinders' opinion, owed a like debt to Iran, while the sudden and almost mysterious efflorescence of Greek sculpture in the few years immediately following the Greco-Persian wars can only be explained on the basis of a direct and effective contribution from the several hundred thousand Persians left on Greek soil, representatives of a race which already had notable achievements in the plastic arts to their credit.

Superior energy, geographical advantages, initiative and the fortunes of war thus sustained the influence of Iran through many centuries and in numerous expansions. But later contributions, almost equally important and quite as varied, cannot be wholly accounted for by these more general attributes of the Iranian culture. For, as Sir John Marshall has said, "The art of Iran has exerted a wider and more continuous influence over the arts of the rest of the world than that which has issued from any land, not excepting Greece." There must have been some force or some appeal inherent in the art itself, intrinsic to its essential character, to carry it to far lands and make it effective in so many places in such varied and remote civilizations.

No art that so perfectly unites reason and sense could fail of emotional power, for Persian art at its best combines, on the one hand, universal principles on which every consciousness is built and by which it functions, and, on the other, an exciting appeal to sensibility, images that achieve their effect not only through recollection and association, but even more because the form itself is appropriate to the emotion, is the product of that emotion, and can of its own power evoke a tense response. It must have been this embodiment of reason in art, this simultaneous appeal to logic, sense, and emotion, carried through in Persian art a little more naturally and completely than in any other, which endowed it with its expansive capacities, the universal attraction that has given it currency across more barriers and into more distant lands than the art of any other people.

The influence of the Sasanian period was especially clear and

¹The evidence and supporting arguments will be set forth in detail in Sir Flinders Petrie's chapter in the forthcoming *Survey of Persian Art*, Oxford University Press.



DOME OF THE MASJID-I JAMI, ISFAHAN

1085

(Photograph by Pope)

enduring over a wide area. The superb metal vessels of the time, usually enriched with decoratively rendered illustrations in high relief (Page 16), were copied in India and prized in Scandinavia, where some early baptismal founts show startling Sasanian similarities. But it was above all the splendid fabrics that were triumphant at the time. Hiouen-tsang, a Chinese traveler who reached the borders of Persia just at the end of the period, speaks of the prestige that not only the silks, but also the wools and carpets of Persia enjoyed in the adjacent lands, and there is conclusive confirmation of this report in the many copies and adaptations of Sasanian textile designs on all sides still in existence. Thus among the frescoes found in Central Asia within recent years, there are a number of accurate copies of Sasanian silks or tapestries, and similarly in Afghanistan a Persian fabric pattern recurs, almost identical with one also used at Ton Houang, the powerfully simplified head of a boar fitted into a rondel, while actual silks of Chinese weave following the Sasanian style have survived both in the Nara treasury and in the oases of Chinese Turkestan. Or, to follow the opposite expansion, there are many copies clumsily rendered in tapestry by Egyptian hands, and for centuries there were lingering traces of the style in most of the fine silks of the western world.

How much Sasanian architecture contributed to the west is still to be adjudged. Quite possibly it saw the tentative beginnings of the structural use of the pointed arch which determined the great building of Europe in the Middle Ages; or, again, there are specific western forms that seem to have been anticipated in Iran, like the row of rondel panels above a round arcade, found, for example, at San'Apollinare in Classe near Ravenna. But these are still moot points. There is, however, no remaining question that to Persia goes the credit for basically important contributions to vault structure, inventions and innovations achieved in Persia in two periods, first, the Sasanian, and then that of the Abbasids and the Seljuks, in the centuries just before Europe's medieval flowering (Page 55). Sasanian vaulted architecture slowly worked its way across Mesopotamia and Syria, as Professor Monneret de Villard has shown, while the brick vaults, domes, and arches of Abbasid and Seljuk Persia were transmitted even to distant Spain. Indeed, the artistic relations between Persia and Spain at this time were very close. Idrisi tells us that even in the tenth century there were as many as

a thousand looms in Almeria weaving textiles in the style of Isfahan, a judgment confirmed by other documents. The merchants from Isfahan, using Egypt as a base of operations, supplied much to Spain. It was at this time that the knowledge of these brick vaults was transmitted, so that in Cordova and Toledo we find ribbed vaults like those of Isfahan, though a century later. From Spain the ribbed and domed vaults apparently passed to Lombardy. Near Milan Professor Monneret de Villard found a dome so much like one of these in the Masjid-i Jami that in photograph they might be mistaken one for the other. From Lombardy the style moved into France, and the great Abbot Suger, who was always looking, as he said himself, to those who had been in the East, always eager to appropriate new ideas, seized upon these elements, and forged them into a new ensemble, out of which emerged the supreme architecture of the Ile de France.

The detailed account of the expansion of Persian art is still to be told. Motives, conceptions, techniques, are still to be not only identified, but, far more difficult, traced. That, however, Iran was one of the great formative cultures in human history is already clear. As India was the mother of religions, so Persia was, if not the mother, at least the nurse and teacher of many arts.