THE IRANIAN EXPANSE

TRANSFORMING ROYAL IDENTITY THROUGH ARCHITECTURE, LANDSCAPE, AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT,
550 BCE–642 CE

MATTHEW P. CANEPA

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
In honor of beloved Virgil—

“O degli altri poeti onore e lume . . .”

— Dante, *Inferno*
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The Iranian Expanse explores how natural and built environments—everything from paradise gardens, mountaintop sanctuaries, and rock art to royal cities, palaces, fire temples, and tombs—were utilized by kings in Persia and the ancient Iranian world to form and contest Iranian cultural memories, royal identity, and sacred cosmologies. While many studies of ancient Iranian history, art, architecture, and archaeology end or begin with the fall of the Achaemenid Empire, the coming of Alexander, or the rise of the Sasanians, this book reaches before and extends beyond these major points of rupture. At its analytical core lies the means of understanding such revolutions, their aftermath, and the long-term ramifications of Iran’s cataclysms.

Structure of the Book

I offer here an overview of the book’s structure and major themes, which the reader may choose to read now or consult later as a map of the book’s organization and major arguments. The Iranian Expanse is organized into four parts, which serve as thematic chapter groupings, in addition to an introduction and epilogue. Each part focuses on a central problem or institution arising from the intertwined development of Iranian royal identity and the built and natural environments. Chapter 1 introduces the book’s main theoretical and analytical problems and provides an overview of the empires, kingdoms, and dynasties on which the later chapters focus. Part 1, “Ordering the Earth,” examines the creation, transformation, and destruction of the infrastructural and environmental foundations of royal identities, concentrating on changes in Iranian urbanism and its interrelationship with the landscape. Part 2, “Sacred Spaces” studies the natural and architectural contexts of Achaemenid religion and the afterlife of the dynasty’s ritual traditions subsequent to their fall. In doing so, I reevaluate evidence for the development of fire temple architecture and investigate the inscription of new sacred topographies on ancient Western Asian landscapes after Alexander. Departing from previous scholarship, these chapters show that the Achaemenids did not impose a uniform imperially sponsored tradition of fire temple architecture on their empire. The expectation that there should be a continuous transmillennial tradition of Iranian temple architecture stems primarily from a problematic strain of early twentieth-century German scholarship. A diverse array of spaces and structures served Persian religion and received imperial sponsorship; however, the heterogeneous evidence of structures hosting fire cults does not bear the marks of imperial patronage, nor does it represent a dominant tradition of Persian religious architecture, much less an imperially implanted architectural system. Instead, I argue that the Iranian world experienced something like a centrally instituted tradition of temple architecture under the Seleucids. Monumental fire temple architecture, on the other hand, proliferates with imperial support only well after their fall.

Part 3, “Landscapes of Time and Memory,” analyzes the development of Iranian funerary traditions and dynastic sanctuaries and scrutinizes how natural and architeconic space shaped the Iranian memory, royal identity, and perceptions of time. Chapter 10 concentrates on
pivotal moments of innovation in funerary architecture under the Achaemenids, Seleucids, and Arsacids. Focusing particularly on the Perso-Macedonian dynasties of Anatolia and the Caucasus, it examines regional efforts to claim and shape ancient landscapes and regional memory while still connecting to an ancient Persian royal legacy. Chapter 11 argues that the array of dynastic cults that appear across the Iranian world after the fall of the Achaemenids grew primarily from the competitive environment that flourished among ambitious dynasts after the dissolution of the Seleucid Empire rather than from an Achaemenid institution or from a single Iranian religious precedent.

Despite the dynasty’s rhetoric of continuity and renewal, the Sasanians extinguished or radically reshaped many venerable Iranian religious traditions and sites of memory, while promoting new visions of the past and manufacturing “newly ancient” sites that they presented as reflective of the true order of things. Chapters 12 and 13 explore the Sasanians’ relationship with the Achaemenid and Kayanid legacies and investigate the central role ritual and the ruined Achaemenid monumental patrimony played in reshaping Iran’s history around their new dynastic vision. Just as importantly it analyzes the Sasanians’ appropriation or complete construction of a new empire-wide sacred topography related to Iran’s primordial history. This is another place where I depart from previous scholarship. I argue that late antique Iran’s most venerable fire sanctuaries, which were associated with the oldest traditions of Zoroastrianism and linked to toponyms and legends from the Avesta, were founded well after Alexander and substantially reshaped in late antiquity. Rather than ancient institutions whose origins were lost in the mists of time, I argue most (though not all) of these traditions and even the sites were in fact newly ancient complexes rebuilt, moved, or even fabricated outright to emplace a recently constructed primordial history.

Finally, part 4, “Palace and Paradise,” concentrates on the transformation of Persian palace architecture and royal estates. These chapters offer, for the first time, a sustained analysis of the development of Iranian palace and garden architecture from the Achaemenids through the Sasanians, focusing directly on pivotal moments of innovation or change as a result of the impact of non-Iranian influences. For example, departing from previous scholarship, I identify and emphasize the importance of a post-Achaemenid “Perso-Macedonian” architectural tradition for the establishment of the Seleucid Empire and development of later Iranian architecture. Arising out of the Seleucid court, this Perso-Macedonian architectural tradition was subsequently appropriated as an idiom of royal power by both the Greco-Bactrians and early Arsacids to monumentalize their new claims and eventually to challenge and subsume the Seleucid legacy. Chapter 17 turns to gardens, estates, and hunting parks, commonly approached as a single institution. Modern scholarship, following Greco-Roman literary conventions, has frequently applied this term to Sasanian estates as well; however, the term “paradise,” arising from the Old Persian word for Achaemenid imperial plantations, disappears from Iranian usage after the Seleucids. Although Persian hunting estates or gardens have been portrayed as essential and unchanging bulwarks of Persian kingship, as will become clear, massive changes often overshadow even the most noticeable continuities, complicating any narrative of continuous unbroken development of these and other Iranian royal traditions.

Note on Scholarly Conventions, Editions, and Translations

The transcription and transliteration systems for Avestan, Middle Persian, and New Persian adhere as far as possible to those adopted by Stausberg and Vevaina (2015a), as do abbreviations for Avestan and Pahlavi texts. Exceptions or additions include the abbreviations for Old Persian (Old Pers.), Middle Persian (Mid. Pers.), New Persian (New Pers.), Parthian (Parth.), Armenian (Arm.), Šābuhr I’s Ka’ba-ye Zardošt inscription (ŠKZ), and Narseh’s Paikuli Inscription (NPi) and the system of short titles/editions created by Encyclopaedia Iranica. Editions are specified in the notes. If otherwise unspecified, Avestan texts correspond to Geldner 1885–1895 (reproduced in Gippert-Fritz et al. 1985–2008); the ŠKZ corresponds to Huyse 1999; Pahlavi texts correspond to Jamasp-Asana’s Corpus of Pahlavi Texts (CPT; as reedited by Said Orian and reproduced in Gippert, Cereti, and Jügel 2007–2008), and Anklesaria 1908 for the Gbd. Old Persian texts correspond to the edition of Schmitt 2009. Abbreviations for classical authors and texts conform to the Oxford Classical Dictionary. The transcription and transliteration systems for Old Persian and abbreviations for the Achaemenid royal inscriptions conform to Schmitt 2009 and 2014. The transliteration for ancient Greek use the Library of Congress system, while Armenian employs the Hübschmann-Meillet system.