Penetration of Iranian Original Roots in Fabric of Greece civilization and Architecture

1Khaled Azizzadeh and 2Sarieh Zareaian
1M.S. in Architecture, Iran Science and Industry University, Tehran, Iran.
2Faculty Member of Islamic Azad University, Saghez branch, Saghez, Iran

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ABSTRACT

The great Cyrus, founder of the Persian Empire, is the first Iranian ruler who conquered the Greek cities along the Aegean cost. Greeks repelled these attacks but the hatred, conspiracy and murder between these two nations endured for two centuries and caused that Greeks considered Iranians as their own deadly enemies. However, we can keep track of Iranian original culture and art in the art and architecture of Greece in many cases. Reports of Greek sources of Iranians are impartial and full of anti-Iranian bias and result in a two-dimensional and distorted vision of Iranians. Authors of ancient Greece have described Iranians as barbaric and slave ethnicity and this hostile attitude had long been common in Europe. Thanks to new archaeological discoveries and fairly revision of Greek ancient texts, there is a more realistic picture of ancient Iranians in recent decades and there are new dimensions of the penetration of Iranian architecture discovered in European architecture, especially that of Greece. This study strives to take an analytic approach to examine the way the western architecture especially that of Greece has been impressed by Iran’s magnificent architecture in the centuries before Christ and clarify the results through analysis of the factors involved in this influence, developing a theoretical framework and examining individual cases.

INTRODUCTION

“it is embarrassing for us, who employ barbarians as servants, to let our public policy and that of our allies to be taken for slavery to this extent” said Greek eloquent, Isocrates, in 380 B.C. ancient Greece considered all non-Greeks as barbarians, but here Isocrates points to Iranians whose Empire at that time was the greatest Empire ever, covering Asia Minor (current Turkey) in the west and India borders in east (figure 1). Isocrates and his contemporary thinkers such as Aristotle, Athenian philosopher, in his treatise have always claimed that Iranians are cowards and have no merit of war. In his policy, Aristotle calls Iranians as “naturally slaver” and the Greeks as inherently noble. Accordingly, the great philosopher draws this conclusion that the Greeks’ ruling over Iranians is quite natural. Nevertheless, undoubtedly, barbarians’ ruling over Greeks is in contrary with the ordinary. All these words address Greek city states which were constantly in fight together to put their disputes aside and get united against Iran. When Aristotle became alexander’s teacher, the Macedonian prince, dictated his own anti-Iranian prejudice and less than a decade later, alexander attacked and eventually conquered Iran.

The study of history clarifies the significance of this issue that no one event, nation or culture can be subject of analysis. The empires like Iran’s powerful one running a quarter of the known world attracted the thoughts, arts and culture of their surrounding communities. There have always existed cultural changes among nations at various intensities and scales. There was even a time when the ancient Greeks denied the influence Persian culture and art. Perhaps the intensity of denying such influence is a representative of this penetration’s power and strength. Otherwise, why do they insist on this widespread denial? Anyway, many western researchers have explored the impact of Greeks on the east, especially after alexander conquests (336-323 B.C.) which are, in itself, another aspect of cultural exchanges among civilizations. Surprisingly, however, is the lack of any literary scripts and texts on the way Greece has been influenced by the orient. Even when there are references to the Persians’ penetration, they are limited to a sideline or a brief reference. This study seeks to gain insights into the way Greeks have developed Iranians’ thought and art and implemented in their own architecture and art. It
begins with this question that how the Athenian- in their post-war era with Achaemenids- introduced Persian thoughts into their own civilization, especially into architecture and governance fields. This study also deals with the penetration of the Orient into Greeks’ art and architecture specifically on some Greek’s art works such as Odeon, Pericles, Pretantium, decorations used in Parteon inscription and the porch of maidens.

Image 1: Achaemenid’s Empire. Source.

Greeks and Iranian Historical Ties:

Since history and destiny of the Greeks have completely intertwined over two centuries, it is impossible for historians and scholars of history and art to study the history, culture and art one without the other in this particular period of time as most of the remaining historical sources of then Iran have been written by Greeks. Unfortunately, this history’s process has often been interpreted with the language and thought of Greeks. The most exaggerated and yet most valid of such inscriptions is “the book of Chronicles” by Herodotus, the greek historian of 5 B.C. on the explanation of Iranian and greek fights of the author time. Comparing with the works of Greek historians and authors on Iran, most of the remained Iranian sources have been discovered in 20th century. These sources include inscriptions, carvings, epitaphs, clay tablets including official reports. These works, except for a few cases, provide us with little information on issues such as pedigree of the kings and elders, important campaigns and large construction projects and refer slightly and partially to historical events, customs, rituals, beliefs and lives of typical people. As a result, the new renovation from the ancient Iran to early 1900 has been exclusively done through the perspective of Greeks. As the great Iran’s scientist, A.T.Olmstead, writes, “most of the available sources on Achaemenid history were in Greek. The natural result was that the history of Achaemenid powerful empire [ in most of the western historical texts] was shown as a string of irrelevant events which got their sense only when they were put into the stories of Greek small states”. This partial understanding and report of Iran’s culture was heavily combined with strong bias and prejudice of anti-Iranian Greek sources and ended in a distorted and two-dimensional view if Iranians. Since Iran was composed of a collection of ethnicities, nations and foreign agencies all working together for one common goal, Iranians, unlike the Greeks, could embrace foreign and novel art and thoughts warmly. Until recent centuries, the greeks believed that the most sublime art and culture belonged to them, so there was obviously nothing to add to them from other nations and the western scholars had long accepted this fairly valid judgment. The more comprehensive and realistic picture of the ancient Iran depicted in recent decades is greatly indebted to more unbiased and recent review of ancient Greek texts and new archaeological discoveries. The first systematic and scientific excavations at Persepolis were in 1310 AD. In the following years, more clay objects and tablets were discovered there and across Iran. These studies and excavations of ancient Iran introduced one of the most spectacular and powerful Empires of world history better.

I. First Historical Relationship between Greece and Iran:

Iranians, like many near east ethnicities, inherited a significant portion of their own political, military and cultural thoughts from very successful civilizations along with the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Mesopotamia, with its abundance of water source and fertile soil, was one of the first regions of Near East in the development of agriculture, road buildings and small states and Empires.

In 571 B.C., Cyrus king of Persia brought Turkey and Greek cities of western Turkey called Inoaie under his own domination. His son, Kambodgiiyeh, annexed parts of the East which had not yet been occupied to Iran’s territory and tried to annex Egypt to this great Empire. In 499 BC. Ionian cities decided to rebel against Iranians who had been ruling over them for half a century. Athens and Artrya sent considerable forces to help Ionians. According to the statements of Herodotus, Darius punished those Greeks supporting the rebels and this was the reason why Ionians rebelled against him. Having passed through the Aegean, Iran’s army conquered Artrya but some weeks later was defeated in Marathon plain, northeast of Athens. Xerxes in 480 BC. Raided Greece and conquered many cities including Athens, defeating his enemies. However, for some reasons he relegated the rest of the fight to his commander in chief, Mardounieh. Someone, Europeans claim, who destroyed Athens, two years later, one of the Athenian’s illuminati got together the greek cities which were
constantly in fight together under an alliance called the Delia League against Iran’s powerful force. But it was decades later that his dream realized. Iran and Greece had been in fight for ages and Iran managed to keep Greece as its territory for nearly half a century. In 334 BC, Alexander the Macedonian raided Iran with ambition and strong belief that Greece overweighed Iran culturally. He officially announced that he would like to take revenge of Darius and Xerxes’ attacks to Greece about one and a half century ago.

2. Architecture:
   When the Persian commander, Mardouniyeh, destroyed Athens in 479 BC, many cities suffered damages. Although the Athenians saw lots of ruins, they managed to get great wealth from Iran’s army. Herodotus writes on this following plateau war that “Greeks dispersed around the Persian campsite and gained tents and beds decorated with gold and silver and golden bowls, cups and drink containers. They also found bags of gold and silver on chariots. They looted golden wristbands, necklaces and swords of Iranian dead fighters and commanders, even their golden clothing whereas there were no reports on them”.


   Pictures 3, 4, 5: Athenians’ Rhytons. Source: MunseoDi Archaeologia, Genova

1-3: Odeon or Music Hall:
   Innovation, creativity and perseverance of Xerxes in preparing massive musical instruments are of features referred to repeatedly by historians like Herodotus and skillful architects and designers were the sustainable components of Iran’s army. Engineers and workers built a huge floating bridge over the strait of Hellespont’s (Dardanelles) to facilitate Iran’s army crossing to Europe. Also, Xerxes, to show his visionary, ordered digging a channel at Athos peninsula in the Aegean Sea so as to make an extra way for faster crossing of Iranian ships and facilitate a business route to Greece Satrapy. Therefore, it can be concluded that the engineers professionally and were continuously able to design and construct smaller structures. After Plath battle, Xerxes spectacular desert tent brought to Athens. In several history books, it has been noted that Xerxes’ tent was not just a family tent but a portable palace. So, it is of no surprise that it has attracted the attention of the Greeks this way.

   After Athens was hit by the destruction and damages left by long years of war, Athen’s rapid renovation was important. So the rapid construction of buildings consistent with the essential urban needs was expected and the king’s royal tent was appropriate in terms of construction technique, materials and implementation. It is said that part of this tent was used in 472 BC. As the décor of the tragic show of “the Persians” written by Aeschylus [3]. The other possible assumption is that its wooden equipment was used in the construction of Odeon Music Hall and renovated later with footnotes. This issue can be deduced from Plutarch Greek author’s texts: inner part of Odeon or music hall was packed with chairs and rows of pillars. The external part had a sloping roof descending from a central point above. We believe that it was a mimic of Iran’s desert tent constructed on the orders of Pericles.

   Pictures 6, 7, 8: Plan and Perspective of Pericles Odeon in Acropolis. Source:

   Picture: Plan of Sad Setun Palace in Persepolis. Source: Pirniya, 1990

2.3 Prytaneum:
   The hall and vestibule of Prytaneum were the gathering place of the executive committee of Greek democracy in Athenian market (Agora) built in 465 BC. The building is in the shape of a very simple circle and devoid of any complexities. Athenians called this structure Tholos or Umbrella building. It was probably rounded like an umbrella or a parasol with a pointed ceiling.

   Iranian kings and governors have often been depicted with an umbrella-shaped parasol it is assumed that the Greeks have renovated this form much similar to royal tents with durable materials. However, the initial form has been preserved. The same also happened for Pericles Odeon. This assumption is valid if we figure out that rounded buildings in Athens were completely unprecedented before the construction of this Prytaneum in Agora.
Athens. There were rounded buildings, though. But they were all surrounded with roofed porches and this was obviously different from Tholos circumstance. Although the impression of such buildings was not high and later similar buildings were constructed differently, one can well observe the Greeks’ exploitation of Iranian booties and the forms it inspired.

**Picture 10:** Inscription of Zenos in Present Turkey. Satrapi is meeting a visitor. Source: BritishMuseum Website

**Picture 11:** One of Persepolis Inscriptions. Source: [3].

3. 3. Parthenon Decorations:

Parthenon was one of the great architecture projects of Pericles in 449 BC. Like the Temple of Athena the guardian deities of Athens, this structure was great and magnificent to the point that, the Athenians could put on display what they had learnt from their ancestors, land and gods and what they were proud of. The Athenians had significant motivations for constructing a temple worthy of the powerful gods and their guards. Thus, Parthenon was the best place for self-expression and showing the world that Athens and Athenians are the finest Greek rulers. Parthenon, an ambitious project, seemed like conveying this point to the other power of the time, Persians. In the meantime, the hum of Greek Empire was heard.

About 70 years ago before Parthenon, a set of palaces called Persepolis founded during the reign of Darius, was a center for holding rituals, court etiquettes and ceremonies, especially Nowrouz, in which the king received the gifts of representatives of his obedient provinces. Thus, the plan of this collection reflected the spirit of king’s discipline and regulations. Based upon clay writings discovered in Persepolis, there were a large number of architects, artists, craftsman, labors, men and women participated from all territories of Empire in the construction of this structure. In addition to wages, they used labor insurance perks [6]. Europeans think that Ayunani artists played a role in making carvings of Persepolis because at that time, they were the only people being able to design completely human statues. But, the certain precision employed to engrave the statues can be a reminder of outstanding role of Assyrians.

**Conclusion:**

Analyzing the events like individual components, not as part of a process that works its way into historical environment bears no result but an invalid attitude. Apart from all the writings on the style, register of Greek architecture, Greeks optimized and transformed the thoughts, rooted in adopted forms, in the greatest and most admirable way and/or they may have been in search of such forms as a basis to believe their thoughts. They could adopt many Iranian initiatives in governance, politics and architecture in 5 B.C. and apply to their own art and architecture. This happened in two ways in architecture filed: they imitated practically what they had seen with slight, intangi ble modifications or they only chose ideologically the background idea and thinking of the form and with the contribution of their own specific architecture language and obviously in a more open and flexible manner, they could speak their mind better. The first method can be found in the elaborate construction of Rhytons, Odeon or Music Hall which was an outstanding adoption of SadSetoun Hall of Persepolis. Pritanum or Toulouse/umbrella building as Greeks call it is quite similar to the original form of royal tents or king’s special canopies. Although Iranian’s royal tent was a temporary structure, it was a portable palace which had raised the admiration of Greeks. When Athens turned into a ruin during the war time, it was an appropriate time to reconstruct the city in terms of structure, efficiency, form and an environment for cultural and political activities. The second method of such sampling can be tracked in the construction of Caryatids or female-shaped pillars, and simulation of carved statues of Parthenon inscription. These two method’s difference lies in two points: first, Caryatids or the carved inscription of Acropolis were not based on a certain, tangible case like sheer copy of Rhytons or royal tent of Xerxes and one can say that in the first method the adoptable case is quite certain. In the second method, however, the general hidden idea within the spirit of Persians’ art and architecture had highly attracted their attention. They managed to preserve the form and shape to a certain extent, though. In Parthenon, Iranians’ major goal on Persepolis carvings which was to present the unity of obedient nations under the rule of the king was interpreted and translated into Greek. This was also the case on Caryatids. The initial
form of these women carrying an eternal burden has been neglected in Iran where they were generally in the form of legendary animals such as lions and winged cows and the general nature and thinking have just been adopted. Apparently, Athenians had better recognized the Caryatid women from their main function and this was, in itself, an eternal punishment for betrayers.

In short, analyzing the aforementioned factors, we can realize how Greek’s art and architecture were influenced by Iranian Achaemenid. European historians of the 19th century often denied the participation of Iran in Greek’s culture. They more or less believed the ancient scholars’ attitude, which was a uni-dimensional and independent view and they could by no means accept the cultural touch of a race they called barbarians. They believed in “Greek Miracle” and they couldn’t accept the orient’s penetration. Nowadays, due to archaeological evidence one can take quite a fairer stand towards the impact of cultures and civilizations on each other.

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