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**THE FEMALE HALF OF THE IMPERIAL PALACE AT PERSEPOLIS:  
 ARCHITECTURE AND FUNCTIONAL LAY-OUT**

**ABSTRACT** This article is devoted to architectural features of the well-known palace complex of the Achaemenid dynasty at Persepolis. On the basis of the relevant archaeological material, the author presents various possible reconstructions incorporating architectural fragments from the so-called harem of Xerxes, including ones of its exterior and interior forms. Additionally, an analysis of the functional lay-out of this part of the palace is given. For the reconstruction modern three-dimensional computer visualizations are used.

Keywords: architecture of the Achaemenid dynasty, Persia, Persepolis, palace complex, reconstruction

**ABSTRAKT** W artykule zaprezentowano uwagi na temat architektury pałacu w Persepolis. Na szerokiej bazie źródeł przedstawiono próby rekonstrukcji części tak zwanego haremu Kserksesa, zarówno jego partii wewnętrznej jak i zewnętrznej. Poświęcono też uwagę kwestii funkcjonalności tej części pałacu. Przedstawiono propozycję rekonstrukcji wskazanej części pałacu.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura achemenidzka, Persja, Persepolis, kompleks pałacowy, rekonstrukcja

The palace complex of Persepolis is a masterpiece of world architecture, quite comparable in its value and magnificence to such monuments as the Athenian Acropolis, or the complex of the imperial fora in Rome. Work on it began at the start of the reign of the Persian King Darius I (521-486 BC), and it was completed about a century later, during the reign of his grandson Artaxerxes I. Persepolis was considered as the main ritual capital of the Persian empire, and was burnt and plundered during Alexander the Great's eastern campaign in 330 BC. Archaeological work at the site was begun at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries, however the first systematic research was begun in 1931 by the Oriental Institute of Chicago University under the direction of Ernst Herzfeld and Erich Schmidt. After the events of the Iranian revolution in 1979 all research by western scientists has been interrupted and continued by local archaeologists. The palace ensemble of Persepolis is considered to be understood well, and its layout is included in many modern textbooks.<sup>1</sup>

From the town-planning point of view, the citadel of Persepolis simultaneously performs the

functions of a governmental and ceremonial centre. The complex of buildings is located on a platform measuring 455x305m. (Fig. 1) with brick walls superimposed on it. As regards the town-planning features of the complex, modern researchers have noted: 'Though the palace is divided on various functional public and private sectors, the general style tendency differs from the traditional lines inherent in palaces of Mesopotamia, known since the most ancient times'.<sup>2</sup> The palace complex takes the form of various buildings united by one platform and walls (Fig. 2, 3, 4). It comprises square and rectangular buildings of different sizes and functions, but all with a feature in common: the use of exterior and interior columns in great quantities, surmounted with zoomorphic capitals. Modern researches have revealed that in building the platform, the provision of interior channels to serve as drains to take off the rainwater testify to a high degree of engineering skill.

As a whole the palace complex in Persepolis includes following elements:

- A fortification wall on a rectangular stone platform measuring 455x300 m.

<sup>1</sup> Curtis 2011; Хабиб Аллах Айат Аллахи 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Gates 2003: 187.

- Propyleum, (the so-called 'Gate of all people'),
- The palace of Apadana: a hall for formal receptions,
- The palace of Tachar ('The Palace of Mirrors') a personal palace of Darius I,
- The palace of Hadish, a personal palace of Xerxes I,
- The Hall of a Hundred Columns.
- A palace of Councils (central on a complex composition),
- An imperial Treasury,
- Not Complete Palace,
- A Harem (a female half of palace complex),
- Auxiliary premises (protection and other).

The biggest construction was the Apadana, a ceremonial reception hall whose construction was begun by Darius I. The interior columns reached a height of 20 m. with capitals in the form of lions and bulls. East of the Apadana was another architectural masterpiece, the so-called Hall of a Hundred Columns, which served as the Throne-room of Xerxes. The surfaces of the palace constructions were richly decorated with reliefs containing images of the king and his subjects, bringing him numerous gifts. The king is represented on a relief in the Treasury where he sits on his throne looks out on a procession of subjects bearing him gifts.

The theme of our research is so-called Harem of Xerxes, or the female half of palace complex, as is indicated by its volume-spatial features, and the functional lay-out of the premises. The term 'harem' is a mere label attached to the building, because the word belongs to much later epoch, being derived from the Arabian term 'Haram', designating a place as 'forbidden'. In the texts of the Classical authors we have some material relating to the everyday court life of the Achaemenid rulers. So, in the fragments of Ctesias of Cnidus, a Greek historian of the fourth century BC, some curious facts about women at the court of the Persian kings are mentioned. Ctesias was the court doctor of Artaxerxes II, who ruled during the years 404-359 BC. Ctesias enjoyed the special trust of the royal mother Parysatis. According to him, the behavior of the women at court posed a definite threat to imperial power. Ctesias is thinking of the marriage customs of the Achaemenid rulers, who were supposed to take in marriage first of all representatives of the notable aristocracy, in order to secure the unity of the huge empire. Frequently, the kings operated on an absolutely opposite basis, and married according to the their own will.

The Greek historian Herodotus tells about the 'crimes' of king Cambyses II, who was the first ruler to contract an endogamic union, by marrying his own sister. 'Before this Persians did not have the custom to marry their sisters. Cambyses blazed with

passion for one of his sisters and conceived the idea to take her in marriage. For this purpose the king called his imperial judges and asked, whether there is no the law prohibiting marrying your sister. ... and so the judges answered ...: there is no such law prohibiting marriage to one's sister; but... there is, of course, another law which permits the king to do everything he wishes'.<sup>3</sup>

Equally 'revolutionary' was the wedding of Artaxerxes II to his own daughter Atossa. Plutarch in his biography of Artaxerxes writes: 'Parysatis in all that pleased the king, did not oppose any of his actions, and thus acquired enormous force, for his son granted her any desire. And here she finds out that Artaxerxes was madly enamored of one of his daughters, Atossa, but hid and suppressed his passion ... Parysatis ... eventually, convinced the king to marry her daughter, and to name her his lawful spouse, against the judgments and laws of Greeks'.<sup>4</sup> In general, the image of Artaxerxes II among ancient authors was a rather positive one. He died in 359 BC at the age of 86 years, having ruled for 45 years. He had 336 wives and concubines and had from them 150 sons.<sup>5</sup>

Modern researchers have noted that as polygamy became widespread, the children from such marriages normally became successors to the throne, as the king would chose one of the sons as his successor. Thus, the sisters and daughters of the king became potential candidates for marriage, thereby promoting the security of the throne and communication between the king and the aristocracy. Overall it is possible to observe that the women of the Royal house came to play a huge role in the state. The data supplied by the remaining Persepolis inscriptions testify that they actively participated in all important events: festivals and banquets, they travelled over all the empire, issued instructions to the satraps of the provinces. The Alexander Historians also testify that women accompanied the king on campaigns in time of war: 'as a rule, barbarians are extremely attentive to their wives, and all Persians treat them with the great respect. Not only their wives, but also their concubines, they hold in high in esteem, and anybody who is a stranger is not permitted to see them. They live in their own rooms, and, if they should travel, they do it in special vehicles closed by draperies'.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Herodot, Hist., III, 33: 148.

<sup>4</sup> Plut., Artaxerxes, 23 T.2.

<sup>5</sup> Дандамаев 2015: 248-249.

<sup>6</sup> Дандамаев 2015: 85.

Let us now consider the lay-out of the female half of palace complex in Persepolis, for the first time named such by the German archeologist Hartsfield. Erich Schmidt, the Director of the expedition of the Oriental Institute of Chicago University, describes these premises in this way: ‘Two columns in antis, some doorways, windows and niches from stone – that is all that remains of so-called “Southern Building” before Hartsfield could analyze this structure carefully and define it as “The Harem of Xerxes”. The identification has been based first of all on the building plan which represented a number of monotonous premises which incorporated among themselves one or two additional rooms’.<sup>7</sup> The main wing of the Harem (Fig. 5) runs on a south-north axis and occupies the space from the southern edge of the platform to the Throne-room. On the east side a street separates the building from the Imperial Treasury, and on the west side it borders on the Hall of Council and “Palace D” which is identified as “The Army Banquet Room”. The western wing of the Harem proceeds from the southern part of the main wing in a western direction, towards the Palace of Xerxes. A part of premises of the Harem have been rebuilt, converted into working premises of the archaeological expedition, preserving the existing lay-out of the premises. As a whole the space occupied by the Harem consisted of twenty two small two- or three-roomed premises where their inhabitants lived.

The possible lay-out of the Harem is presented in Fig. 6. The author of this article offers a possible outline of the spacial planning of the complex, taking into account several obvious functional zones:

1. A Residential zone for the wives, children, and the Head Queen,
2. A Recreational zone (green sites, fountains and pools),
3. An Auxiliary zone for services (eunuchs, slaves, protection).

On Table 1 the Explication of the Harem premises, based on the measurements made by the Oriental Institute is presented, and on existing reconstructions of the Harem. The scheme presented affords a view of the plan of the female half of the Palace, taking into account both the functional zones and premises, and the spaces for rest (fountains, pools, green areas).

It is difficult for a modern person to accept the concept of residing in a harem. Inside a harem a strict system of rules was in place, a hierarchy

of attendants and concubines who were under the vigilant supervision of the king’s wife. Lower down in the hierarchy were the sisters of the ruler, then the other wives, living with the children and the older women.

In the harem, along with its small rooms and narrow, dark corridors, an atmosphere of refined luxury reigns. All the wives and concubines spent a life in an environment of magnificent palace interiors. Besides the living quarters, in the harem there were spaces for rest: a garden, the general lobby and spaces for the rest of the Head Queen.

The Harem is a complex and integral part of the Palace as a whole. The interior, undoubtedly, will have been decorated in a complimentary colour scheme. However, female influence will have made a strong impact on the lesser details. The expressive elements of any applied art, any ornament, and the fountains in the Harem would have strengthened the refinement and tenderness of its atmosphere.

The internal garden formed from two parts is surrounded by the basic building of the Harem, and at the other end terminates in a covered portico with columns which have been decorated by painting; the capitals of the columns have been executed as bulls-heads. The covered space between the columns forms a canopy under which it was possible to take cover from the sun or light rain. Placed centrally in the garden is a fountain revetted with claret stone, running with crystal-clear water.

Special attention has been devoted to the plants in the interior reconstruction. Trees and bushes in gardens were presented to visitors, above all blossoming plants on account of their aroma and colour.

Figures 7, 8 and 9 feature the author’s variants of computer reconstructions of interiors of some residential quarters of the Harem, made by the Chair of the Theory and History of Architecture in Saint Petersburg State University of Architecture and Civil Engineering in 2016.

In summary it appears that the king’s architects and designers could create a comfortable, well laid-out environment for residential purposes, using for this purpose difficult engineering systems, elements of spacing design and landscape architecture. In the variants of computer reconstructions of interiors which have been presented above, it is possible to see how they could have looked in the 4th century BC – the time of the blossoming of Persepolis.

<sup>7</sup> Schmidt 1953: 255.

**Table 1. Explication of premises of the Harem**

№	Names	Notes
1	Auxiliary premises for attendants	Eunuchs, slaves, cooks, musicians, dancers
2	Recreational zone of rest, green areas	Open space
3	Smart Lobby with a fountain	The main representational part of the harem
4	Children's premises with attendants	Sleeping and dining areas
5	Premises for young wives of the King	Sleeping and dining areas
6	Premises for elderly wives of the King	Sleeping and dining areas
7	Smart premises for the Head Wife of the King	Sleeping and dining areas
8	Banquet room ('The Army Hall')	The so-called Palace 'D'

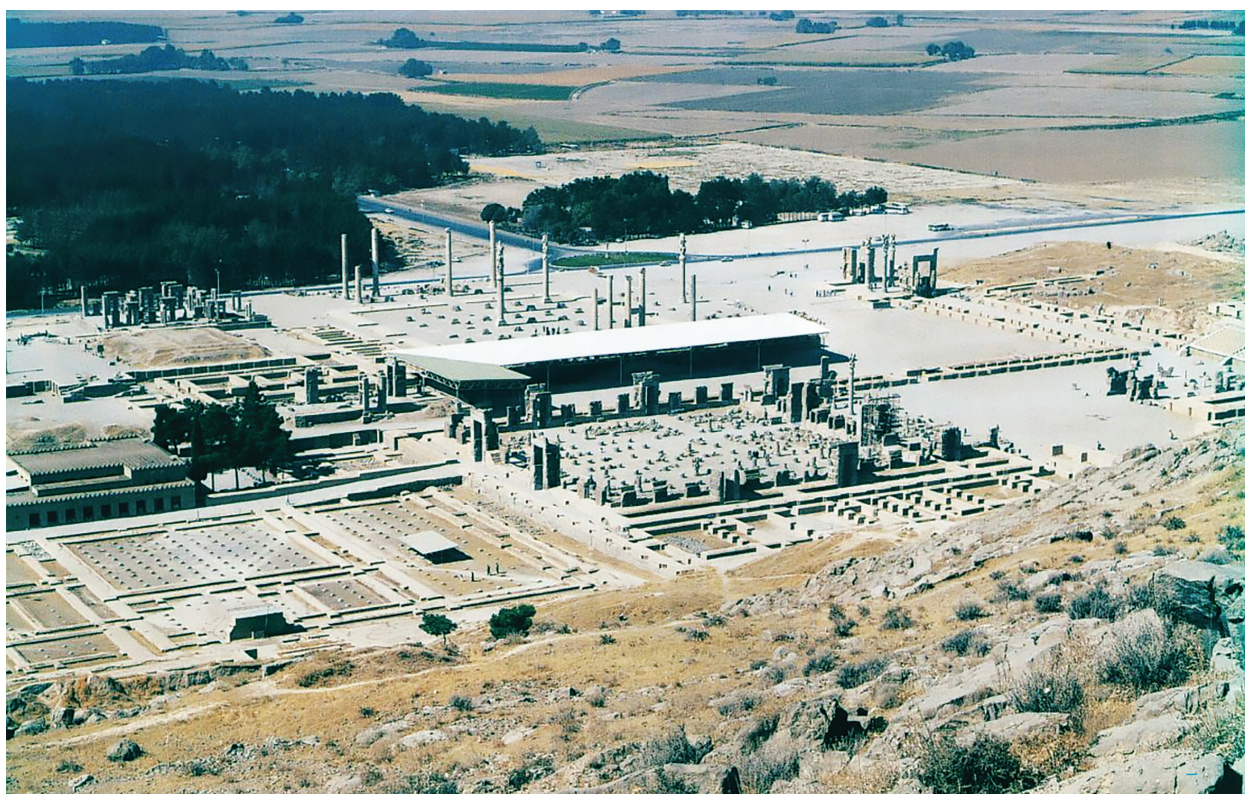


Fig. 1. View from air on a terrace of Persepolis and its vicinity  
 [after: CurtiusJ., Tallis N. Forgotten Empire: The World of Ancient Persia. London, 2005, p. 32]

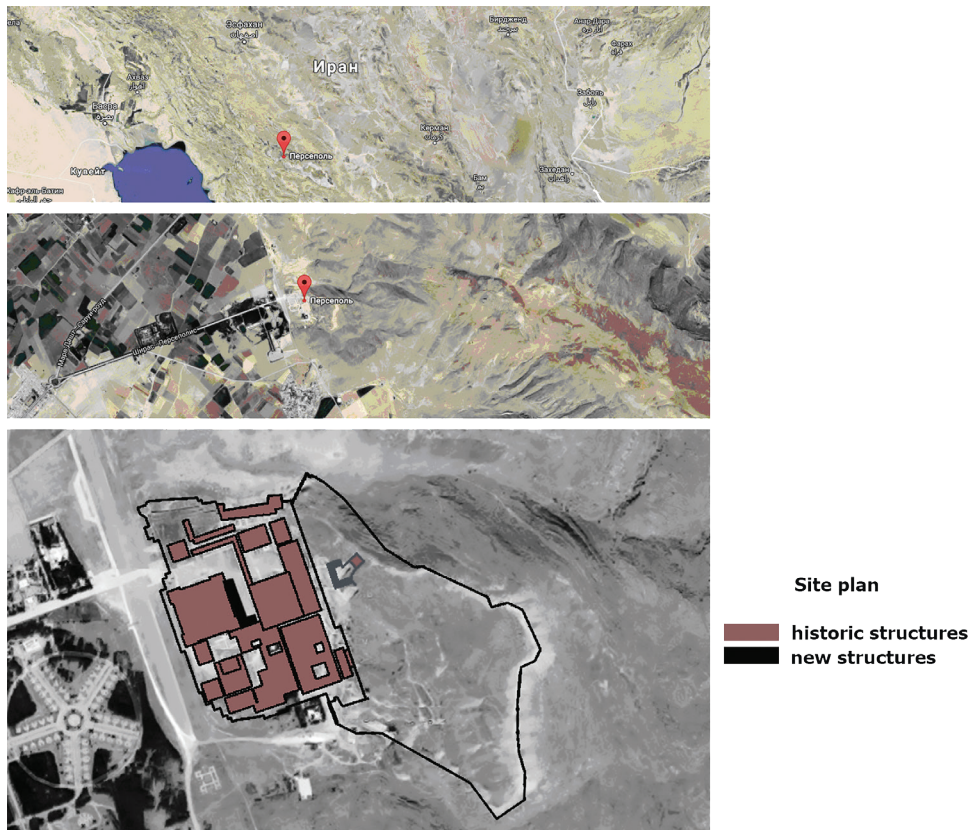


Fig. 2. Situational plan of the areas in 2016



Fig. 3. Plan with a designation of inhabited, public and recreational areas



Fig. 4. Explication of the buildings and stages constructions at Persepolis in the 6th-4th centuries BC

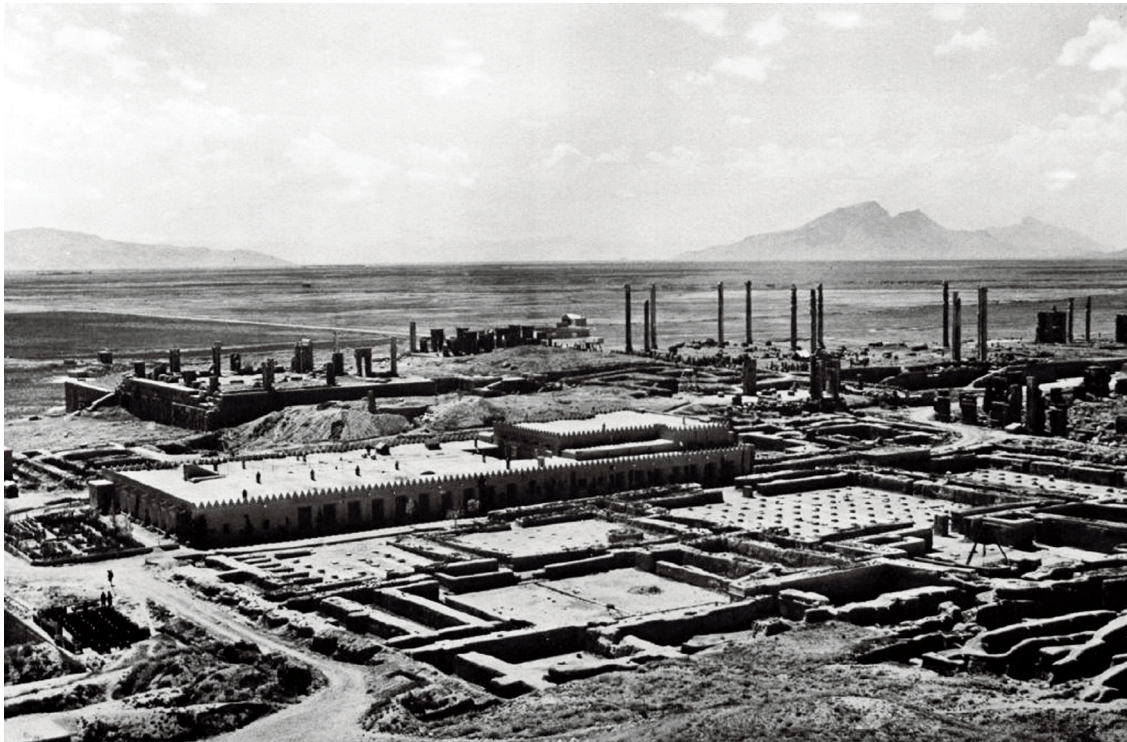


Fig. 5. Harem of Xerxes, photo of 1936  
[after: Schmidt E. F. Persepolis. Vol. I: Structures. Reliefs. Inscriptions. Chicago, 1953, pl. 189]

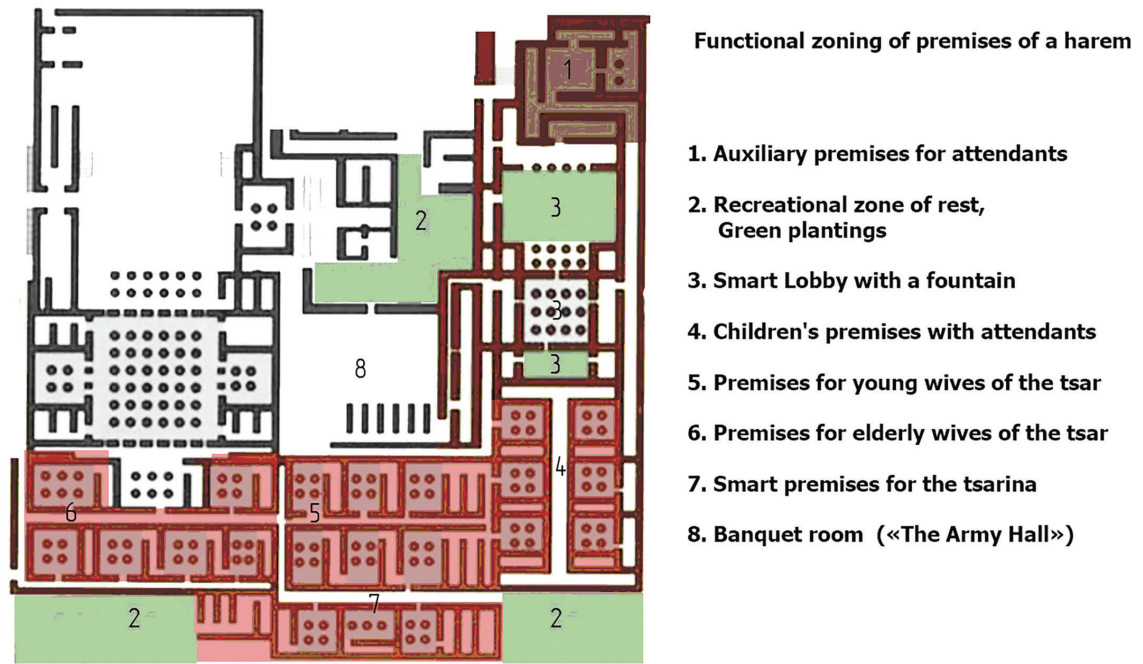


Fig. 6. Reconstructed lay-out of the Harem in the palace of Xerxes.  
Reconstruction by A. Sil'nov and N. Shituhina, 2016



Fig. 7. Interior views of the Harem of Xerxes.  
Computers visualization by N. Shitukhina, 2016



Fig. 8. Interior views of the Harem of Xerxes.  
Computers visualization by N. Shitukhina, 2016



Fig. 9. Interior views of the Harem of Xerxes.  
Computers visualization by N. Shitukhina, 2016



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