

IRANIAN WORLD ECBATANA

By: Stuart C. Brown



Iran under Median Dynasty

(Ekbâtân, present-day Hamadân), Imperial capital of the [Median dynasty](#), summer capital of the [Achaemenids](#), and satrapal seat of the province of Media from Achaemenid to [Sasanian](#) times.

Location and environment

Ecbatana (48°31' E, 34°48' N; alt. 1,800 m) is in the Zagros mountains of central-west Iran at the base of the eastern slope of the Alvand range (q.v.; the classical Mount Orontes; Diodorus Siculus, 2.13.7; Polybius, 10.27; "Iasonius mons" of Ammianus Marcellinus, 23.6.39). The city controls the major east-west route through the central Zagros, the so-called High Road. Average annual precipitation is about 385 mm and temperatures range from -25° C in winter to +35° C in summer. On the wide, well-watered, fertile plain to the east, fruits and vegetables were traditionally cultivated near the city, while cereal production predominated in the next zone and pastoralism in the extensive periphery. In antiquity, the area was famed for its horses and wheat (Polybius, 5.44.1). Nearby reserves of graphite, gold, platinum, antimony, iron, and various mineral salts were evidently not exploited in antiquity. Classical authors report oil seeps and flares near the city (Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 31.17; Plutarch, *Alexander* 35.1). There are extensive limestone quarries from pre-Islamic times 6.5 km south-east of the city (Flandin, pp. 388-89).

The major topographical features of Hamadân are the three hills Mosallâ (place of prayer), Tell Hagmatana (Tappa-ye Hagmatâna), and Sang-e Šîr, and the Alûsjerd river, a tributary of the endoreic Qarasû, which bisects the city from south to north (see below; for photographs, see Lockhart, opposite p. 95; Schmidt, pls. 91-92; Moorey, p. 10, pl. 6; for a plan, see Geographical Division).

Name and etymology

In the inscription of Darius I the Great at [Bisotûn](#) the name of the city appears as [Aryan](#) (Old Persian) *Hamgmatâna* (DB 2.76 ff.; Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 122), Elamite *Ag-ma-da-na*; Akkadian *A-ga-ma-ta-nu*. It is usually interpreted as being derived from **han-gmata*- "[place of] gathering" (Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 183, 212) and the inference drawn that, prior to the formation of the Median state, some kind of popular assembly met there (Herodotus, 1.97, does mention a Median assembly that appointed Deioces king, but does not specify its location). The ingenious Elamite **hal.mata.na* "land of the Medes" (Frye, 1979, p.105) is not probable since the Median capital city would not be called "land" or have an Elamite name. Curzon (*Persian Question* I, p. 567), noting that there were seven cities called Ecbatana, four of them in Persia, suggested that the name simply designated a capital or royal city.

In classical and other sources the name variously occurs: Gk: Ekba,tana, Agba,tana (the reading *Apoba,tana* in Isidore of Charax, 6, should be *Agba,tana*), Lt. Ecbatana, Ecbatanas, Ecbatanis Partiorum (*Tabula Peutingeriana*), bibl. Aram. Ahmeta, Arm. Ahmatan, Hamatan, Ekbatan, Mid. Pers. Hamadân, etc. (Weissbach, col. 2155; Ezra 6.2).

On both historical and archeological grounds, the identification of Ecbatana with Hamadân is secure (Bücher; Frye, 1979; Hüsing; Weissbach). However, the scarcity of visible pre-Islamic remains led some early European visitors to suggest alternative locations such as Susa (Chardin, III, p. 15), Kangâvar (Ferrier, p. 32), and Takht-e Solaymân (Rawlinson).

Archeology

European visitors to Hamadân in the 19th century describe Persepolis-style column bases, fragments of ancient structures used in later buildings, and jumbles of stone blocks in the Alûsgerd river (Porter, II, p. 115; Morier, pp. 267-68; Flandin, p. 387). In the late 19th century, Jacques de Morgan (IV, pp. 235 ff.) collected numerous antiquities in Hamadân. The earliest archeological excavations were those conducted by Charles Fossey in 1913 (Chevalier). In 1956, road construction revealed Median and Achaemenid mudbrick walls in Tell Hagmatana (Dyson, pp. 31-33). An archeological survey of the Hamadân area was conducted in 1971 (Swiny, pp. 77 ff.), and a Parthian cemetery of the 1st century B.C.E. to the 1st century C.E. has been partially excavated in the southeast quadrant of the city near Sang-e Šîr (Azamouh).

The summit of the Mosallâ, a steep 80 m high natural rock outcrop in the southeastern quarter, shows stone and brick remains of a rectangular citadel flanked by towers. In addition, several sections of stone columns have been found at the base of the outcrop. Though some have believed that the Mosallâ was the site of the Median citadel (e.g., Flandin, p. 390), the structure is to be dated apparently no earlier than the Parthian period. Fossey's six-week excavation of the Mosallâ ruins yielded a large quantity of glazed bricks and faience tiles as well as a fragment of a column base decorated with arabesques and inscriptions (Chevalier, p. 248).

Chance finds and archeological investigations point to the 30m high mound, Tell Hagmatana, in the northeastern Sar-qal'a quarter (fortress quarter), as the site of the Median citadel and Achaemenid royal construction. Fossey spent three months excavating on the eastern slopes of the mound, prompted in part by the earlier find there of the sculptured head of a prince (Chevalier, p. 248). The excavations were limited by existing structures, an Islamic cemetery, and brickworks which had robbed out much of the area. Surface finds included the base of a rectangular schist pillar. The excavations yielded a Greco-Parthian limestone capital and, in one trench, a series of column bases and foundation stones, all in great disorder. In another trench, Fossey located a stone capital, a piece of fluted column, and the base of an altar or statue.

In 1920 and 1923, two large treasure troves were said to have been found in Hamadân. If so, they were probably from Tell Hagmatana. Both must date from the reign of Artaxerxes II (404-359) or later. The 1920 trove included two gold tablets with Old Persian inscriptions by Aršâma and Artaxerxes II (qq.v.; Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 107, 114, 116, 155) along with sumptuary and furniture ornaments. The 1923 trove included two small foundation tablets, one silver and the other gold, belonging to Darius I (521-485 B.C.E.) with trilingual inscriptions recording the construction of palaces in Ecbatana (Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 111-12, 147). The same inscription appears on larger tablets subsequently found at Persepolis. Other finds included a small gold tablet with an inscription of Ariyâramna (q.v.), an inscription of Xerxes I (486-65 B.C.E.), and an inscribed column base of Artaxerxes II (Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 107, 113-14, 116, 153, 155; Geographical Division, pp. 9-10). All of these finds are preserved in the Iran Bastan Museum. In the two small gold tablet inscriptions, both Arsames and Ariyâramna, respectively the grandfather and great-grandfather of Darius I, take the royal title of "Great King, King of Kings, King in Parsa." The paleography of the texts is 4th century B.C.E., and both are forgeries, probably from the reign of Artaxerxes II.

In the mid-1950s, a major avenue, the Khîâbân-e Ekbâtân, was cut through the Sar-qal'a quarter in a straight line north-northeast from the central Meydân-e Pahlavî across the west slope of Tell Hagmatana. Roadbed excavation cut down through some 7 m of the ancient mound revealed a section of massive zig-zagging outer defensive mudbrick wall. The wall is preserved to a height of 2.5 m, and its width was traced inwards for 13.7 m. Brick size and proportions are similar to those used in the Median levels at Tepe Nush-i Jan (Nûš-e Jân) and Godin Tepe (Gowdîn Tappa). The defensive wall sits on a platform excavated out of the natural rock slope. Its exterior shows evidence of at least one rebuilding phase followed by a burned level and an hiatus marked by erosion. A second phase of wall construction survives in places to a height of 3 m. A third phase is marked by a leveling of the entire area and the construction of cobbled streets and small houses (Dyson, pp. 31-33; Stronach, personal communication). It is reported that a stretch of the wall of Darius' palace has long been exposed on the northern side of the Tell in the present Qal'a-ye Šâh Dârâb quarter (Geographical Division, p. 7). Further finds made in 1963 remain unpublished. Two Achaemenid column bases were accidentally discovered at Tell Hagmatana in the early 1970s (Kleiss, 1972, p. 197, fig. 72; 1975, pp. 76-77, fig. 3). In the mid-1970s, the Persian government purchased part of the Tell for future excavation (Mehryâr, pp. 41-50).

Sang-e Šîr

Flandin (p. 389) observed that the area around the colossal stone lion on top of the hill of Sang-e Šîr was covered with small fragments of limestone, basalt, marble, and granite, suggesting the possibility of further remains at the spot. However, excavations in front of the statue by Fossey (Chevalier, p. 247) were fruitless. The statue is badly damaged, at least in part because it has been moved from another location. In the Parthian period, it is supposed to have been located near the western gateway to the city, later known as Bâb-al-Asad (The Gate of the Lion), which was destroyed by the Mardâvîj b. Zîâr in 319/931 (Mas'ûdî, *Morûj*, ed. Pellat, V, pp. 267-68; Ebn al-Faqîh, pp. 240-43).



The lion is variously attributed to the Achaemenids or the Parthians (Nadjamabadi and Gropp, pp. 123 ff.). Lushey (pp. 121-22) suggests that it was erected by Alexander II of Macedonia [the Great] as a memorial to his boyfriend Hephaestion (cf. Mas'ûdî, loc. cit.).

Two additional excavations by Fossey, one close to the so-called tomb of Esther and Mordechai (q.v.) and the other at an unspecified location in the city, yielded nothing of note. Despite long tradition associating the tomb with Esther, the Jewish bride of Ahasuerus (q.v.), and her uncle Mordechai, and the alternative suggestion of Herzfeld (p. 106) that the tomb was probably the sepulchre of Šûšandokht, the Jewish consort of Yazdegerd I (399-420), the precise date and original function of the oldest part of the structure remain to be determined.

History. Given its strategic location and resources, the site of Ecbatana was probably occupied before the 1st millennium B.C.E., although there is no historical or archeological evidence of this. According to Herodotus (1.98), Ecbatana was chosen as the Median capital in the late 8th century B.C.E. by Deioces (q.v.), founder of the Median dynasty which ruled Media for one and a half centuries. Herodotus describes the royal complex as a palace, treasury, and military quarters built on a hill and encircled by seven rings of walls so that each out-topped the one beyond it by the height of the battlements. Such a citadel on a prominence surrounded by concentric rings of walls corresponds to representations of Median strongholds in Neo-Assyrian reliefs (Gunter, pp. 103 ff., and pls. II-III, IVa). Despite two centuries of involvement in Median areas of the central Zagros, the Neo-Assyrians make no obvious reference to Ecbatana, and it is possible that they never penetrated east of the Alvand (Brown, p. 116).

penetrated east of the Alvand (Brown, p. 115).

Alternative foundation traditions attribute the origins of the city to the mythical Semiramis (Ctesias apud Diodorus Siculus, 2.13) or Jamšîd (Yâqût, *Boldân* IV, p. 983, who added that the citadel was fortified by Darius and completed by Bahman, ancestor of the Sasanians).

The Achaemenid period

The entry for the 6th year (550/549 B.C.E.) of the Nabonidus Chronicle records that [Cyrus the Great](#) defeated his grandfather, Astyages, the last emperor of Median dynasty, and captured Ecbatana, and removed its treasury to Anshan (qq.v.; Grayson, p. 106, 2.1-4). Cyrus and his successors used Ecbatana as a summer capital and as a treasury (Weissbach, cols. 2156-57; Herodotus 3.64). It is frequently assumed that the city was also a royal archive because Cyrus' order for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple was found there (Ezra 6.2; Josephus, *Antiquitates* 11.99; but cf. Frye, 1962, p. 99), but in fact neither source actually mentions an archive. Little can be made of Pliny's claim that Ecbatana belonged to the Magi (*Naturalis Historia* 6.116).

In 521 B.C.E., Darius the Great remained there until the Median pretender Fravartîš (Phraortes) was captured and returned to the city for mutilation and execution (DB 2.76 ff.). Achaemenid expansion of the royal complex is attested by the foundation tablets of Darius I and the inscribed column base of Artaxerxes II; the latter recapitulates the description of his palace at Susa, but it is thought to refer to some building activity in Ecbatana (Stronach, 1985, p. 437). Berossus (Burstein, p. 29) states that Artaxerxes, presumably Artaxerxes II, also erected a statue of [Anâhitâ](#) in Ecbatana as he did in several other of the major cities of the empire.

In the ancient world Ecbatana had a reputation for vast wealth and splendid royal architecture that encouraged exaggeration (Judith, 1:1-4; Diodorus, 17.6; Pseudo-Aristotle, *De mundo* 6), though according to Aelian (*De natura animalium* 13.18) Indian palaces were more splendid. The most detailed and probably the most reliable ancient description of the city comes from Polybius (10.27.1-13), who described the palace area as having a circumference of nearly seven stades (1.4 km), a measurement corresponding to that of Tell Hagsmatana. The imported cedar and cypress woodwork was covered with plates of silver and gold, and the roofs were laid with silver tiles. Josephus' claim (*Antiquitates* 10.264) that the prophet Daniel built a magnificent palace in Ecbatana and that it contained the tombs of Median, Achaemenid, and Parthian kings, all guarded by Jewish priests, is total fantasy.

Alexander of Macedon visited the city twice. In the spring of 330 B.C.E., following the barbaric conquest of [Persepolis](#) and [Pasargadae](#), he marched in pursuit of Darius to Ecbatana, where he looted the Persian treasury (Diodorus Siculus, 17.64; Strabo, 15.3.9; Justin, 7.1.3). Parmenio, Alexander's second-in-command, was left there to oversee communications but was assassinated shortly afterwards on Alexander's orders (Arrian, *Anabasis* 3.19; Strabo, 15.2.10). Before continuing east, Alexander stored the pillaged Persian treasure in Ecbatana and looted much of the gold and silver decoration of the palace (Polybius, 10.27.11). During Alexander's second visit in the autumn of 324 B.C.E., his male lover, Hephaestion, died there (Arrian, *Anabasis* 7.14.1, 5; Diodorus Siculus, 17.110.6). Arrian records, though with skepticism, that Alexander in his sorrow had the Temple of Asclepius torn down. Aelian (*Varia Historia* 7.8) claims that the city and its walls were pulled down. The reference may be to the citadel walls since Polybius (10.27.6) explicitly asserts that the city itself had no walls.

In 328 B.C.E., Alexander replaced Oxydates with Atropates as satrap of Media. At Alexander's death in 323, Perdikkas assigned the satrapy of southern Media, including Ecbatana, to the Macedonian Peithon, who was later executed by Antigonos and replaced by Orontobates, an Iranian. Cook (p. 259, n. 2) suggests that the satrap's seat, rather than being in Ecbatana itself, may have been the palace in which Antigonos wintered in 316 (Diodorus, 19.44.4) and infers from Isidore of Charax that the palace was in the Asadâbâd valley immediately west of Mount Alvand. This, however, may have simply been a winter residence preserving communications to the west when the Alvand passes were snowbound.

The city later fell to Seleucus I Nicator (305-281 B.C.E.), who followed the example of Antigonos in plundering the city's gold and silver. However, according to Pliny (*Naturalis Historia* 6.17), he also did much to restore its former importance, and in the time of Antiochus III (222-187 B.C.E.), the temple of Anâhitâ still had gilded pillars, some silver tiles piled up inside, a few gold bricks and many silver bricks (Polybius, 10.27.11). Out of this material, Antiochus minted royal coinage to the value of nearly 4,000 talents to fill his depleted treasury. In the course of his program to hellenize the kingdom, Antiochus IV Epiphanios (175-64 B.C.E.) renamed the city Epiphania after himself (Stephanus Byzantinus, *De urbibus*, s.v. Agbatana; Morkholm, pp. 117, 171-72. n. 22). This may be the Seleucid refounding of the city to which Pliny (*Naturalis Historia* 6.43) refers. Timarchus, the Milesian satrap of Media named as "King of Media" in the prologue to Pompeius Trogus (*lib.* 34), rebelled against Demetrius I (161-50 B.C.E.) and minted coins in Ecbatana (Le Rider, pp. 332), as did Demetrius I (161-50 B.C.E.) and his successor, Alexander Balas (150-48).

The Parthian Period

The Greek inscription on the statue of Herakles at Bîsotûn dated 149/48 B.C.E. still refers to Cleomenes as satrap of the "upper provinces" (Media); it would appear that Media and Ecbatana did not fall to the [Parthian](#) king Mithridates I until 147. The attempt by Antiochus VII in 130 to restore Seleucid power in Persia probably stopped short of Ecbatana, as did the invasion by Tigranes II of Armenia in the later years of Mithridates II, the Great (123-87; Frye, 1984, pp. 212, 215). The Parthian dynasty continued to use Ecbatana as a imperial summer residence (Strabo, 11.13.1, 16.1.16; Curtius Rufus, 5.8.1; Tacitus, *Annales* 15.31) and as a royal mint. Parthian buildings in the city included the citadel on the Mosallâ.

The Sasanian Period

Ecbatana remained subject to the Parthian dynasty until 226 C.E. when, along with Atropatene (today Azerbaijan province) to the north, it was captured by Ardašîr I (224-41; q.v.). There is conflicting evidence as to whether it continued to be used as a summer palace. According to Ebn al-Faqîh (q.v.; p. 229, tr. p. 277), Sasanian constructions were strung out between their capital at [Ctesiphon](#) and Mount Alvand but not beyond this, not even in Hamadân. The city fell to the Muslims shortly after the battle of Nehâvand in 23/642 and became a provincial capital.

Objects

A provenance in or near Hamadân is claimed for a number of pre-Islamic objects. These include cylinder seals, various bronze objects such as figurines, heads, and the Abdadana inscribed plaque, as well as various items in gold including a figurine, applique, a rhyton, a dagger, and the Cincinnati bowl. Most are attributed to either the Median or Achaemenid periods; few, if any, of these claims can be validated (Calmeyer, pp. 65-66; Muscarella, 1980, pp. 31-35; idem, 1987, pp. 109ff.). Apart from coins, few objects ascribed to the Hellenistic, Parthian, or Sasanian periods have been reported. It should be noted that both Brûgšch (I, p. 364) and Flandin (p. 383) refer to a thriving trade in the production of fake antiquities for the European market, especially Hellenistic and Sasanian coins bearing the effigies of Alexander or Ardašîr. In the late 19th century, the excavation for antiquities in large areas in and around the city was "a systematic industry, farmed out by the government for revenue" (Wilson, p. 156).



Achaemenid Golden Rhyton - Picture courtesy of Iran Bastan Museum

[\(Click to enlarge\)](#)

Bibliography

(For cited works not given in detail, see "Short References.")

- M. Azamouh, "Survey of Excavations in Iran. Hamadan," *Iran* 13, 1975, pp. 181-82.
- W. Barthold, *An Historical Geography of Iran*, tr. S. Soucek, Princeton, 1984, pp. 129-32.
- S. C. Brown, "Media and Secondary State Formation in the Neo-Assyrian Zagros," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 38, 1986, pp. 107-19.
- H. K. Brügsh, *Reise der K. Preussischen Gesandtschaft nach Persien 1860 und 1861*, Leipzig, 1862.
- V. F. Bücher, "Ekbatana-Hamadan," *OLZ* 17, 1914, pp. 301-04.
- S. M. Burstein, *The Babyloniaca of Berossus*, Malibu, 1978.
- P. Calmeyer, "Hamadan," in *RIA* IV, 1975, pp. 64-67.
- *Cambr. Hist. Iran* II, index, s.v. Ecbatana.
- N. Chevalier, "Hamadan 1913. Une mission oubliée," *Iranica Antiqua* 24, 1989, pp. 245-53.
- J. M. Cook, *The Persian Empire*, New York, 1983. Dâ`era-ye jôghrâfiâ`î-e setâd-e arteš. *Râhnemâ-ye šahr-e Hamadân*, Tehran, 1342 Š./ 1963.
- M. A. Dandamayev, *A Political History of the Achaemenid Empire*, tr. W. J. Vogelsang, Leiden and New York, 1989.
- J. de Morgan, *Mission scientifique en Perse...*, 5 vols., Paris, 1896.
- I. M. Diakonoff, *Istoriya Midii*, Moscow and Leningrad, 1956; tr. K. Kešâvarz as *Târikh-e Mâd*, Tehran, 1345 Š./1966.
- R. H. Dyson, Jr., "Iran, 1956," *University Museum Bulletin* 21/1 (University of Pennsylvania), Philadelphia, 1957, pp. 27-39.
- J. P. Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan and Beloochistan*, London, 1857.
- E. Flandin, *Voyage en Perse...*, Paris, 1851.
- R. N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, London, 1962.
- Idem, "Hamadhân" in *E2* III, pp. 105-06. Idem, *The History of Ancient Iran*, Munich, 1984.
- A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, Locust Valley, N.Y., 1975.
- A. Gunter, "Representations of Urartian and Western Iranian Fortress Architecture in the Assyrian Reliefs," *Iran* 20, 1982, pp. 103-12.
- E. Herzfeld, *Archaeological History of Iran*, London, 1935.
- G. Hüsing, "Hagbatana," *OLZ* 16, 1913, pp. 537-39. W. Kleiss, "Bericht über

Erkundungsfahrten in Iran im Jahre 1971," *AMI*, N.S. 5, 1972, pp. 135-242.

- Idem, "Fundnotizen zu einigen Säulenbasen aus West-Iran," *AMI*, N.S. 8, 1975, pp. 75-79.
- G. Le Rider, *Suse sous les Seleucides et les Parthes*, Paris, 1965.
- L. Lockhart, *Persian Cities*, London, 1960.
- D. H. Lushey, "Der Löwe von Ekbatana," *AMI*, N.S. 1, 1968, pp. 115-22 and pls. 45-50.
- M. Mehryâr, "Pîš-darâmad-e yak barnâma-ye 'azîm-e bâstân-šenâsî dar Tappa-ye Hagmatâna" in *Gozârešhâ-ye majma' -e sâlâna-ye kâveš wa pa'ûhešhâ-ye bâstân-šenâsî dar Îrân*, Tehran, 1342 Š./1963, pp. 41-50.
- P. R. S. Moorey, "Archaeological Sites in Media," in J. Boardman, ed., *CAH IV, Plates*, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 5-10.
- J. Morier, *A Second Journey Through Persia, Armenia and Asia Minor to Constantinople Between the Years 1810 and 1816*, London, 1818.
- O. Morkholm, *Antiochus IV of Syria*, Copenhagen, 1966.
- O. W. Muscarella, "Excavated and Unexcavated Achaemenian Art," in D. Schmandt-Besserat, ed., *Ancient Persia. The Art of an Empire*, Malibu, 1980, pp. 23-42.
- Idem, "Median Art and Medizing Scholarship," *JNES* 46, 1987, pp. 109-27.
- S. Nadjamabadi and G. Gropp, "Mittelalterliche Arabische Quellen zum Löwen von Hamadan-Ekbatana," *AMI*, N.S. 1, 1968, pp. 123-28.
- R. K. Porter, *Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, Ancient Babylonia, 1817-20*, 2 vols., London, 1821.
- H. C. Rawlinson, "On the Site of Atropatenian Ecbatana," *JRGS* 10, 1841, pp. 65-158.
- E. F. Schmidt, *Flights over Ancient Iran*, Chicago, 1940.
- W. H. Schoff, *Parthian Stations by Isidore of Charax*, Philadelphia, 1914.
- D. Stronach, "The Apadana. A Signature of the Line of Darius I" in *De l'Inde aux Balkans. Recueil a la memoire de Jean Deshayes*, Paris, 1985, pp. 433-45.
- S. Swiny, "Survey in North-West Iran, 1971," *East and West* 25, 1975, pp. 77-96.
- L. Vanden Berghe, *Archeologie de l'Iran ancien*, Leiden, 1959.
- F. Weissbach, "Ekbatana," in Pauly-Wissowa, V, cols. 2155-58.
- S. G. Wilson, *Persian Life and Customs*, Chicago, 1895.

Please note: CAIS has the privilege to publish the above article originating from the above-mentioned source, **for educational purposes only (Read Only)**. This article has been published in accordance with the author(s) / source' copyright-policy -- therefore, the ownership and copyright of this page-file remains with the author(s) / source. For any other purposes, you must obtain a written permission from the copyright owner concerned. (Please refer to CAIS Copyright Policy).