

# **TOMB OF CYRUS THE GREAT**©

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**By: Antigoni Zournatzi**



The tomb of Cyrus is generally identified with a small stone monument approximately 1 km southwest of the palaces of Pasargadae, in the center of the Morgāb plain. According to Greek sources, the tomb of Cyrus II (see iii, above; 559-29 B.C.E.) was located in the royal park at Pasargadae. The most extensive description, based on a lost account by Aristobulus, who had accompanied Alexander the Great (q.v.) on his eastern campaign in the late 4th century B.C.E., is to be found in the *Anabasis* of Arrian (6.29), written in the 2nd century C.E.: "the tomb . . . in the lower parts was built of stones cut square and was rectangular in form. Above, there was a stone chamber with a roof and a door leading into it so narrow that it was hard and caused much distress for a single man of low stature to get through. In the chamber lay a golden sarcophagus, in which Cyrus' body had been buried; a couch stood by its side with feet of wrought gold; a Babylonian tapestry served as a coverlet and purple rugs as a carpet. There was placed on it a sleeved mantle and other garments of Babylonian workmanship . . . Median trousers and robes dyed blue lay there, some dark, some of other varying shades, with necklaces, scimitars, and earrings of stones set in gold, and a table stood there. It was between the table and the couch that the sarcophagus containing Cyrus' body was placed. Within the enclosure and by the ascent to the tomb itself there was a small building put up for the Magians who used to guard Cyrus' tomb." Strabo (15.3.7), who wrote at the end of the 1st century B.C.E., also seems to have drawn on the account of Aristobulus; he described the tomb as "a small tower . . . solid below, and having a roof and sepulchre above, which latter had an extremely narrow entrance," and noted that another companion of Alexander, Onesicretus, had described the tomb as "a tower with ten stories," in the uppermost of which Cyrus lay. According to Arrian, an inscription in Persian characters on the tomb read, "Mortal! I am Cyrus son of Cambyses, who founded the Persian empire, and was King of Asia. Grudge me not then my

monument.” This inscription, with minor variations, was also mentioned by Strabo (15.3.7) and Plutarch (*Alexander* 69.4).

The epitaph mentioned in the texts is not attested on any of the extant structures in the vicinity of Pasargadae. The identification of the stone structure, consisting of a gabled cella on a stepped plinth, on the Morġāb plain as the tomb of Cyrus is based on its resemblance to the descriptions of Arrian and Strabo (Plate LIII). The building, which was incorporated into a mosque by the Salghurid Sa’d b. Zangī (601-28/1203-31; Melikian-Chirvani, pp. 3-4), is known locally as Mašhad-e Mādar-e Solaymān (the tomb of the mother of Solomon).

The tomb is simple in form (Stronach, 1978, pp. 26-39, pls. 19-39), constructed of large, carefully dressed ashlar blocks set with precision and secured by “dove-tail” clamps (see CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES). The estimated total height (including the missing capstone of the pitched roof) is ca. 11.10 m. The base of the plinth, which rises in six receding tiers, covers an area 13.35 x 12.30 m. Whereas each of the three upper tiers is 0.57 m high, each of the lower ones is 1.05 m high; at present, however, the lowest seems taller because part of the foundation is exposed. The base of the cella measures 6.40 x 5.35 m. On the northwest side a narrow doorway, 1.39 m high without the sill and 0.78 m wide, leads through a small passage to a chamber ca. 3.17 x 2.11 m, which is enclosed by walls 1.50 m thick. Originally the side walls of the chamber were bare, except for a narrow, rounded cornice at the top of the wall just below the level of the ceiling. A *mehrab* (Islamic prayer niche) on the southwest wall of the chamber and a “compass” carved on the southern corner of the plinth bear witness to the use of the monument as a mosque in medieval times. The gabled stone roof is hollow.

The decoration on the exterior emphasizes the structural elements of the building. A curved molding encircles the wall at the base of the cella. According to current reconstructions, the door was framed by a double fascia (two flat bands), crowned with a cyma reversa (having a profile consisting of two reciprocal curves, the upper one convex, the lower one concave) topped by a molding with upturned finials. A second cyma reversa, capped by a geison, or cornice, marks the transition between the exterior walls and the roof; on the raking cornice, which is only partially preserved, there are traces of a narrow bead and a shallow cavetto (concave) molding. The lower portion of a raised disk or rosette is carved on the pediment above the entrance; the rest was on the missing capstone.

Archeological grounds for dating the construction of the Mašhad-e Mādar-e Solaymān to the Achaemenid period, and more specifically to the reign of Cyrus, involve a combination of factors related to the technical execution and planning of the monument. Ashlar masonry, use of *anathyrosis* (in which perfect jointing of contiguous blocks is achieved by means of smoothing a band along two or three of the edges of each

surface to be jointed and rough-cutting the central portions to a deeper level), and dovetail clamps are also found in the other structures at Pasargadae ascribed to Cyrus. These features are characteristic of Ionian and Lydian building practices of the 6th century B.C.E. and were introduced in Persia during the reign of Cyrus (Nylander, especially pp. 91-102). The application of the cyma reversa and the geison on the cornice of the tomb chamber is thought to represent an early, experimental stage in the evolution of these basic elements of the Ionic entablature in about 540-30 B.C.E., the period when the tomb of Cyrus must have been under construction (Stronach, 1978, p. 42).

Furthermore, parallels to the various component elements of the Morḡāb monument can be found in other 6th-century B.C.E. and earlier buildings in territories ruled by Cyrus. As no precise antecedent for the entire structure has been discovered, however, there are conflicting opinions about its architectural origins. Scholars have variously stressed the contribution of building traditions from Mesopotamia (Herzfeld, p. 215; Parrot, p. 50; Barnett, p. 74; Nylander, pp. 99-102), Elam (Ghirshman, 1964, p. 135), Urartu (Culican, p. 58; Barnett, p. 74), Greece and western Anatolia

(von Bissing, pp. 4-6; Krischen, p. 70; Nylander, pp. 91-102), and Persia (Sarre, p. 4; idem and Herzfeld, p. 178; Ghirshman, 1954, p. 83; idem, 1964, p. 135; Stronach, 1964, p. 27; Nylander, p. 102).

The following comparisons call for special emphasis (cf. especially, Nylander, pp. 91-102; Stronach, 1978, pp. 39-43). Mesopotamian and Elamite ziggurats could have provided a ready model for the plinth, even though local Persian models for it, and especially for the chamber and the gabled roof, cannot be definitively excluded. Nevertheless, the tendency to a tripartite division, apparent in the articulation of the monument into upper and lower plinth and cella, and the use of moldings to articulate the exterior of the cella seem to indicate a debt to Ionian architecture. Anatolian tumulus burials of the 1st millennium B.C.E. appear to provide much the closest parallels to the cella. A type of tomb chamber with a gabled roof, constructed in timber, is found in a Phrygian tumulus ("the tomb of Midas") from the late 8th century B.C.E. at Gordion (Young, pp. 85-100). Stone tomb chambers with flat roofs would seem to have become standard for burials in Lydia starting in the 6th century B.C.E.; of Lydian examples that of King Alyattes (ca. 560 B.C.E.) at

Sardis is remarkably similar in technical execution and nearly identical in interior form and dimensions, to the Morḡāb monument (Hanfmann, p. 55; idem and Mierse, p. 57). While significant in itself, this striking similarity takes on even greater weight owing to the unquestionable affinity of the Morḡāb monument with western Anatolian traditions of construction and planning. The eclectic synthesis of foreign elements apparent in the Morḡāb monument, in itself a concrete expression of imperial vision, is the signature of royal Achaemenid art as a whole. The prominence of western Anatolian elements in particular is characteristic of Cyrus' building program.

Comparisons between the Morḡāb monument and the classical descriptions of the tomb of Cyrus must be confined to architectural parallels, for there are no surviving traces of the luxurious furnishings described by Arrian and Strabo; indeed Cyrus' tomb was said already to have been rifled between Aristobulus' two visits (Strabo, 15.3.7). The "Morḡāb tomb" conforms to the descriptions of the tomb of Cyrus in that it has two distinct parts, of which the upper one resembles a house with a roof (comparable to the "roof and sepulchre" mentioned by Strabo) and a narrow doorway. Although extant descriptions of the lower part of the tomb are admittedly ambiguous, Onesicretus' characterization of the tomb as "a tower with ten stories" may reflect the stepped configuration of the plinth, and Arrian's description of the lower part of the monument as square, or rectangular, may be an approximation of the shape of the plinth, which is only slightly longer than it is wide. The "squared stones" of the lower part of the tomb mentioned by Arrian could certainly be the ashlar masonry.

There is no fully convincing explanation for the complete absence of the epitaph mentioned in the Greek texts. Epitaphs appear not to have been the rule in Achaemenid funerary architecture, however, and it is possible to question the reliability of Greek testimony on this detail. In the case of Aristobulus it is specifically stated that he reported on the inscription "from memory." As the alleged epitaph has the somewhat modest ring of other inscriptions found at Pasargadae, it may be postulated that it was those inscriptions that supplied the model for what Aristobulus, Onesicretus, and others later "recalled" (Stronach, 1978, p. 26; cf. Schmidt, pp. 17-25; Stronach, 1990, especially p. 198 n. 29).

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