

The Role of Hellenism in the Development and Enhancement of Urbanization in Ancient Persia

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ABSTRACT: In the sixth century BC, Persians and Greeks had been able to establish governments that were different from each other from various aspects. Their political and economic rivalries caused firstly inevitable conflicts that led to long-term war of attrition. Despite all-out wars, caused bout states sustain heavy damages, a cultural and civilization-oriented relation began to establish and that was the outcome of the cohesive civilization of both parties. This relation was so that several exiled Greek warlords preferred the court of Persia as a safe haven for themselves. Upon the collapse of both empires by Alexander of Macedonia, a new season began. Because of the victories of Alexander and its successors, Hellenism made the two cultures become closer. Meanwhile, the growth of urban development and urbanization in its Greek form changed the thoughts and lifestyle of Persians. Hellenism that affected some aspects of Persian life was not limited only to the era of Seleucid dynasty. Parthian Empire adopted the Hellenistic style mixed with Persian culture. This research aims to study the effects of Hellenism on the different aspects of Persian life, especially architecture. The questions of this research are:

- 1- What was the effect of Hellenistic urbanization on Persian architecture?
- 2- Why did the Seleucid Empire use the policy of urban development?

Keywords: Alexander ,Hellenism, Seleucid Empire ,Hellenistic Urbanization, Ancient Persia, Persian culture.

INTRODUCTION

Development of Urbanization in the Era of Alexander

The military campaign of Alexander against other countries caused essential changes in the civilizations of the ancient world. Persia was also among some countries that were subject to such changes. War not only had financial booties, but also paved the way for the change in culture and civilization. For this purpose, it was required Greek culture, beliefs, and traditions to penetrate into the territory of Persia. Therefore, Alexander and his successors started to build towns based on Greek architecture, in order to spread Greek culture by these towns called Alexandria.

Alexander pursues the policy of Hellenization of the conquered territories by encouraging the Greeks to emigrate from their homeland to the newly built towns and rule these territories. He also encouraged the emigrated Greeks to marry local people. Thousands of the Greeks accepted the invitation of Alexander and left their heavily populated and poor towns to earn their bread and find their fortune in the territories conquered and controlled by them. They brought their own intellects and values that were in common use in their homeland (Adler, 2005).

The towns inhabited by Greek and Macedonian people were autonomous regions with their own councils, associations, military defense and financial system, religious and sport centers. These new autonomous towns were called Polis or Politeuma (Boyle, 1989).

By the order of Alexander, twelve towns were built, and they were all called Alexandria. For example, there was a city in Isfahan called "Jay", which was built in form of a snake. Three other towns were also built in Herat,

Merv, and Samarkand. He also ordered the construction of a city in Babylonia (in Iraq) in the name of “*Roshanak*”, daughter of Darius III, and a city for Persians in Hylacus of Greece (Jarir Tabari, 2005).

As these towns were built in military forms and for the accommodation of militants and soldiers, it seems that the urban development policy of Alexander was based on military purposes, rather political or economic ones. However, the increasing number of the towns built with the support of Alexander had consequences beyond the policies intended by Alexander. Thousands of Greek merchants, who travelled to the East for profitable transactions after the military campaigns of Alexander, were accommodated in the new towns. As they had close relations with the trade centers of Greece, commercial transactions between the territories of the East and Greece accelerated considerably (Mirsaidi, 2008).

As mentioned above, the building of new towns equipped with political, commercial, and artistic facilities led to the immigration of the Greeks including a huge number of adventurers, authors, soldiers, merchants, physicians, and scientists to the newly built towns called polis that were (Durant, 2003). Therefore, the population combination of the cities that had up to that time an Persian form changed shortly.

Urban Development in the Era of Seleucid Empire

When the Seleucids came to power in Persia, they applied the policies of Alexander, and their considerable innovation in Persia was the development of different towns of Greek style. It is said that they built seventy-two towns. They mixed the Greek ideas on urban development with the old eastern traditions of Persian Empire, and made the tradition of urban development that was exclusive to the Seleucids.

Despite the contradictions observed in the works of historians on the number of the towns built by the Seleucid Empire, certainly there had been about 25 to 28 satrapies in this era (Mashkour and Rajabnia, 1997). Most cities were built based on a definite plan known as *Hippodamian* plan of city layout (grid plan). According to this plan, cities had two main north-south and east-west streets crossing each other and form a right angle. Other alleys and streets were made parallel or perpendicular to the main streets. This type of urban planning provided square-formed blocks of houses (Ravandi, 2004).

Persian satrapies were also built based on this rule. In these satrapies, new poleis such as Laodicea in Media (Nahavand), were built. In Susa, three Seleucia towns known as Seleucia on Tigris, Seleucia in Ctesiphon, and Seleucia beside Persian Gulf were built, and each of them had their own form and style. For example, several villages were joined to build a city. Moreover, some cities were built in barren areas, maybe in order to establish their Hellenistic culture in the territories controlled by them (Mashkour and Rajabnia, 1997).

New cities were built in the meeting points of the major roads, where commercial transactions were facilitated and important in terms of military. The main objective of the Seleucids was to build new cities in order to establish a powerful state and enhance their empire (Robinson, 1991). As mentioned by Richard Frye, the list of the cities built by the Seleucids shows that they aimed mostly to protect commercial and communication routes to have connection with distant territories in the West and the East. In general, the cities in Persia during the era of the Seleucids can be classified into two general groups: 1) the cities built by the Seleucids based on Greek style; 2) the cities built from the past and survived up to that time.

The development of new cities by the Seleucids underpinned the establishment of Hellenistic city-states for the newcomers. The inhabitants of these cities were either Greeks or local residents that were proponents of the Seleucids (Habibi, 1987). These cities or colonies had their own councils, associations, elected officials, schools, temples, sport fields, etc. Markets that were the most important part of Greek cities were built enough in the new cities. Greek city-states were built very fast, and they formed a vast network of about 400 new cities beside military castles. Antigonus was the first satrap who made the Greeks to immigrate to the eastern territories.

It is interesting to mention that the Seleucids change the name of all Mesopotamian cities into Greek equivalents, except “Babylonia”, which remained intact (Majidzadeh, 1997). Although Greek was the language of the educated people of the Greek colonies, the eastern thinking method and lifestyle of the local inhabitants prevailed over those of the Greeks (Adler, 2005).

Moreover, the effects of Hellenistic culture varied considerably from one city to another city. The Greek colonies of the Asia Minor, in which military aspects eliminated gradually and socioeconomic issues attracted attentions, became hellenized more than other cities of the eastern territories did (Ghaffarifar, 2008). This change resulted in the subsequent changes in urban lifestyle, in such a form that the communication between the furthest areas was so enhanced, for the first time in the territories controlled by Alexander and his successors, that any problem in a region affected other regions consequently. In the Greek colonies, agriculture improved and commercial transactions promoted. A vast communication network was also established throughout the territory.

The Effects of Alexander's Military Campaign on the Art and Architecture of Hellenistic Cities

The art that attracted the attention of Alexander, his successors, and the newcomers was not of Persian nature. The artists emigrated from Greece or other points of the Hellenistic world had to satisfy their Greek customers. Moreover, the hellenized Persians were of the wealthiest and the most elite class of Persians. They adapted themselves to the Hellenistic lifestyle under the influence of the Hellenistic culture. In addition, the local artists, who cooperated with their Greek colleagues, were influenced by the Hellenistic art. As a result, the products made by these artisans were neither of Greek style nor of Persian nature. They preserved the form and lost the content. This was the Persian-Greek art developed as the result of the conquests of Alexander of Macedonia. This was the subsequence of Greek-Syrian, Greek – Mesopotamian arts and prior to the Indian or Buddhist – Greek arts (Ghirshman, 2002). Indeed, the artistic works of this era lacked any cohesion like the conquered country, suffering from a revolution happened in Persian civilization. When the Seleucid dynasty replaced by the Parthian dynasty, Hellenistic architecture could not survive in Persia, since in addition to the fact that Hellenistic models were not welcomed by Persians, the Hellenistic architectural materials like stone that was in abundance in Greece were not available sufficiently in Persia; therefore, different materials were used based on climatic and geographical differences. Moreover, as the construction materials used in Greece were inconsistent with the climate of Persia, therefore, sundried bricks were used instead.

Perhaps the most important effect of the Hellenistic art on the architecture of this era was the urban development in order to accommodate the Greek and Macedonian immigrants in poleis and colonies. Moreover, the art of architecture, which was at the service of religion, changed its purpose and used for political, religious, and economic purposes (Sarafraz and Firouzmandi, 2004).

As mentioned by William Durant, the age of return to religion integrated increasingly the cultures of the West and the East, and caused religion to spread among the Greeks. Moreover, the competitions among new cities and newly built capitals improved the science of urban development and art of architecture.

The Hellenist architects used the entire surface area of a parcel of land, and determined the location of each building on the draught drawing. Water supply using piping and drainage systems improved and private houses built based on new architecture were constructed more splendidly (Robinson, 1991). Hellenization was the political, social, and cultural purpose of the poleis. In these newly built towns, a national association consisted of the individuals with full rights, an elected council, and judges were elected. People of these towns were entitled to own and possess estates in addition to the social rights accepted by the rulers.

It must be mentioned that the Hellenistic poleis had not full authorities, and their power was not beyond their internal life and affairs. According to Hellenistic laws and regulations, the poleis followed immediately the King, who seemed not to interfere directly in the affairs of these poleis. However, the policies of these cities were implemented based on the opinion of the royal party that had power in the poleis.

CONCLUSION

After the death of Alexander, the Seleucids came to power. The immigration of the Greek newcomers to Persia required large and small cities to be built, firstly for military purposes, and this caused a change in urban lifestyle of Persians leading to the gradual spread of Hellenistic culture in these newly built cities. Gradually the effects of the Hellenistic culture went beyond these poleis, and spread in other regions of Persia leading to the structural change of the cities, populations, and cities with social and political orientations. Although it seems that the main purpose of the Seleucids was to defend their sovereignty and prove their cultural superiority in a foreign territory, it can also claim optimistically that Alexander and his successors' purpose was also to build new cities with Hellenistic culture in Iran to provide a safe place for the conquerors, and pave the way for the friendship of two states of Iran and Greece.

The long-lasting civilization and culture of the territory conquered by the Greeks, was important enough to attract the attention of Alexander and his successors. Therefore, the marriage of the Greek soldiers and Iranian girls was a realistic decision and a link between two cultures of the same class and level, which could meet the political objectives of the conquerors without any subsequent humiliation.

In addition, the enduring Iranian culture did not defeated by the interaction of the integration of two cultures and the effects of the Hellenistic culture on urban development; rather the link that formed an Iranian-Hellenistic culture

could meet the final goal of Alexander to eliminate the long-lasting hostility between Iran and Greece, which had its root in political conflicts.

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