



The political-military relations of Pars and Ashur (Parsua, Achaemenid Anshan)

Morad Hossein Papi Balagrivah¹, Mirza Mohamad Hassani²✉, Maryam Kolbadi Nezhad³

1. PhD Candidate in Ancient Iranian History, Department of History and Archaeology, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

2. Assistant Professor, Department of History, Sha.C., Islamic Azad University, Shahrood Branch, Shahrood, Iran. Corresponding author: mirzamohamadhassani@iau.ac.ir

3 Assistant Professor of History, Department of History and Archaeology, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

Article Info

History

Received: June 19, 2025

Accepted: August 28, 2025

Keywords

Parsua

Parsumash

Achaemenid Anshan

Assyria

Pars

Abstract

This research examines the political-military relations between Assyria and Pars (Parsua, Achaemenid Anshan). The term "Pars" first appears in Assyrian annals during the campaign of Shalmaneser III to Zagros in 836 BCE, which mention a land and people called Parsua (Parsuash, Parshuash) in the region of Kurdistan and Kermanshah. This king plundered Parsua again in 835-834 BCE. Under his successors, including Shamshi-Adad V, Queen Semiramis, Adad-nirari III, Shalmaneser IV, Ashur-dan III, Ashur-nirari IV, Tiglath-Pileser III, and Sargon II, significant relations were maintained with other Zagros peoples, especially the Medes, indicating ongoing ties with Parsua. Tiglath-Pileser III campaigned against Parsua in 744 BCE and subjugated it. Sargon II's campaigns in 716-712 BCE ended Assyrian relations with Parsua. The Persians migrated around 700 BCE to Elam (Anshan) and became known as Parsumash (Achaemenid Anshan). Under Achaemenes and his successors (Teispes and Cyrus I), Parsumash had important relations with Assyria, especially during the reigns of Sennacherib (Battle of Halule in 692 BCE) and Ashurbanipal (after Assyria's defeat of Elam in 640-639 BCE). The Persians also played a major role in the Median coalition against Assyria (614-605 BCE), which led to the fall of the Assyrian Empire. The main question is: when and under what designations can the political-military relations between Assyria and Pars be outlined? It is concluded that these relations occurred in two phases: 1. Assyria and Parsua (836-700 BCE), and 2. Assyria and Parsumash (Achaemenid Anshan, 700-605 BCE).

Citation: Papi Balagrivah, M. H., Hassani, M. M., & Kolbadi Nezhad, M. (2025). The political-military relations of Pars and Ashur (Parsua, Achaemenid Anshan). *Archaeology of Iran*, 15(1), 113-132.

<https://doi.org/10.82101/aoi.2025.214797>

© 2025 Authors, *Archaeology of Iran*, Journal of Islamic Azad University, Shushtar Branch.

Introduction

The study of early interactions between Assyria and the emerging Persian groups offers an essential perspective on the political and cultural developments that preceded the rise of the Achaemenid Empire. The origins of the Persians, known initially as Parsua in the Assyrian annals of the 9th century BCE, and later as Parsumash in Elamite and Achaemenid contexts, remain a central issue in reconstructing the formative stages of Iranian history. The term “Parsua” first appears in the inscriptions of Shalmaneser III (r. 858–824 BCE), who conducted campaigns in the Zagros and reported encounters with a land and people called Parsua, located in what is now Kurdistan and Kermanshah. Over the following decades, successive Assyrian rulers, including Shamshi-Adad V, Adad-Nirari III, Tiglath-Pileser III, and Sargon II, maintained varying degrees of political and military interaction with Parsua. These engagements involved tribute collection, territorial subjugation, and occasional alliances, reflecting the shifting balance of power across the Zagros frontier.

Around 700 BCE, the Persians migrated further south and became known as Parsumash in Elamite territory (Anshan). Under Achaemenes and his descendants, they emerged as a more cohesive political unit and gradually engaged in both conflict and cooperation with Assyria. Their role became particularly significant during the late 7th century BCE when they participated in coalitions with the Medes and Babylonians against Assyria, culminating in the fall of the empire in 612–605 BCE. Thus, the trajectory from Parsua to Parsumash not only marks the gradual consolidation of Persian identity but also highlights the broader geopolitical dynamics of the ancient Near East. By tracing these interactions, this research aims to clarify the phases, nature, and implications of Assyrian–Persian relations, thereby contributing to a more precise understanding of the historical foundations of the Achaemenid state.

Methodology

This research employs a descriptive–analytical approach grounded in historical source criticism. The primary materials consist of Assyrian royal inscriptions, annals, and cuneiform tablets, supplemented by Elamite and Urartian records, which provide external perspectives on the peoples of Parsua and Parsumash. These sources were systematically collected through archival and library research and examined using textual content analysis. The study applies a comparative method, juxtaposing Assyrian records with later Achaemenid and classical references, in order to identify continuities and discrepancies in the naming, geography, and political role of the Persians. Secondary literature, including archaeological findings and modern historical interpretations, was integrated to contextualize the primary evidence. The methodology also includes critical evaluation of terminological variations (e.g., Parsua, Parsumash, Anshan) to avoid conflation of distinct chronological and geographical phases. Through this combined framework, the study reconstructs the stages of Assyrian–Persian relations in two defined phases: (1) Assyria and Parsua (836–700 BCE) and (2) Assyria and Parsumash (700–605 BCE), highlighting their political, military, and cultural implications.

Discussion

The political–military relationship between Assyria and the early Persians is best understood through a two-phase framework that reflects both geographical shifts and evolving political identities.

Phase I: Assyria and Parsua (836–700 BCE)

The earliest documented encounter occurred during Shalmaneser III’s campaign to the Zagros in 836 BCE. His inscriptions describe the conquest of a region named Parsua, whose

inhabitants paid tribute and were integrated into Assyrian tributary systems. Subsequent rulers, including Shamshi-Adad V and Adad-Nirari III, maintained these relationships, often framed in terms of punitive expeditions against rebellious frontier communities. The geographic location of Parsua—likely in modern Kurdistan and Kermanshah—made it a strategic buffer zone between Assyria and the highland peoples, including the Medes and Mannaeans. The nature of these encounters demonstrates both Assyrian imperial interests in securing control over vital trade routes and the limited but persistent agency of local polities. Tiglath-Pileser III (r. 745–727 BCE) intensified Assyrian dominance by incorporating Parsua more firmly into provincial structures, while Sargon II's campaigns in 716–712 BCE marked the climax of Assyrian intervention. After these campaigns, references to Parsua decline in Assyrian records, suggesting either assimilation or migration of its people.

Phase II: Assyria and Parsumash (700–605 BCE)

Around the turn of the 7th century BCE, the Persians are recorded under a new designation—Parsumash—in Elamite-controlled Anshan. This shift reflects both geographical relocation and a new stage in political development. Under Achaemenes, Teispes, and Cyrus I, Parsumash maintained complex relations with Assyria. At times, the Persians appear as tributaries, particularly after Ashurbanipal's victory over Elam in 640–639 BCE, which temporarily subordinated Elamite and Persian polities to Assyrian authority. However, Persian forces are also documented as active participants in anti-Assyrian coalitions, most notably during the Battle of Halule (692 BCE) under Sennacherib, and later in the Median-Babylonian alliance that decisively destroyed the Assyrian Empire between 614 and 605 BCE.

The duality of Persian relations with Assyria illustrates a pragmatic survival strategy: accommodation when faced with overwhelming power and resistance when opportunities arose. This pattern not only underscores the adaptability of early Persian leadership but also foreshadows the diplomatic and military strategies of the later Achaemenid Empire. The Persian role in the downfall of Assyria was not merely passive but rather integral, as they supplied troops, resources, and strategic depth to the coalition forces. By aligning with the Medes, the Persians secured their position within the emerging post-Assyrian order, paving the way for their eventual rise under Cyrus the Great in the mid-6th century BCE.

Implications for Persian identity formation

The progression from Parsua to Parsumash demonstrates how shifting political and geographical contexts shaped early Persian identity. In the Assyrian records, Parsua was one among many Zagros polities, with limited significance. By contrast, Parsumash emerges as a recognized regional power, linked to Elam and later to the Achaemenid dynasty. These interactions accelerated the militarization and centralization of Persian leadership. Furthermore, exposure to Assyrian imperial practices—tribute systems, military organization, and administrative control—likely influenced the later institutional structures of the Achaemenid Empire. Thus, the Assyrian–Persian relationship was not merely antagonistic but also formative, embedding the Persians in the political culture of the ancient Near East.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the political–military relations between Assyria and the Persians unfolded in two distinct yet connected phases: the Assyrian encounters with Parsua in the Zagros (836–700 BCE) and the later relations with Parsumash in Anshan (700–605 BCE). These interactions reveal a trajectory from marginal tribal entities to a consolidated polity poised to play a decisive role in the collapse of Assyria. The early Persian experience of tribute, warfare, and shifting alliances fostered resilience and adaptability, qualities that became hallmarks of Achaemenid statecraft. Importantly, the fall of Assyria was not an external imposition alone

but involved active participation by the Persians, who thereby secured a place in the coalition that redefined the power map of the ancient Near East. By situating Persian development within the broader Assyrian imperial context, this research highlights the reciprocal dynamics of domination and resistance that shaped the emergence of one of history's greatest empires. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how regional interactions, rather than isolated evolution, laid the foundations for the rise of the Achaemenids.

References

- Akbarzadeh, D. (2005). *The Bisotun inscription*. Tehran: Khaneh-ye Farhikhtegan (in Persian).
- Behmanesh, A. (1995). *History of the ancient nations of Western Asia* (5th ed.). Tehran: University of Tehran Press (in Persian).
- Briant, P. (2013). *The Achaemenid Empire, Vol. 1* (N. Foroughan, Trans., 3rd ed.). Tehran: Farzan-Rooz (in Persian).
- Calicān, W. (2005). *Archaeology and art history in the period of the Medes and Persians*. (Trans. Goodarz Asad-Bakhtiar). Tehran: Pazineh (in Persian).
- Cameron, G. G. (2008). *Iran at the dawn of history* (H. Anousheh, Trans., 5th ed.). Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi (in Persian).
- Chilingir-Oghlu, A. (2011). *The eighth campaign of Sargon II* (S. Alioun [Khaje-Dizaj], Trans.). Tehran: Akhtar (in Persian).
- Diakonoff, I. M. (2016). *History of the Medes* (K. Keshavarz, Trans., 8th ed.). Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi (in Persian).
- Durant, W. (1964). *The story of civilization, Vol. 1* (A. Aram, Trans., 2nd ed.). Tehran: Eqbal (in Persian).
- Frye, R. N. (2003). *The ancient history of Iran* (M. Rajabnia, Trans., 2nd ed.). Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi (in Persian).
- Gershevitch, I. (2011). *History of Iran in the Median period: From the Cambridge Ancient History* (B. Shalgouni, Trans.). Tehran: Jami (in Persian).
- Ghirshman, R. (2004). *Iran from the beginning to Islam* (M. Mo'in, Trans.). Tehran: Mo'in (in Persian).
- Henkelman, W. (2019). *Iranian and Elamite acculturation* (Y. Safaei, Trans.). Tehran: Hekmat Sina (in Persian).
- Hinz, W. (2009). *The lost world of Elam* (F. Firooznia, Trans., 4th ed.). Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi (in Persian).
- Herodotus. (2007). *Histories* (A. Vahid Mazandarani, Trans., 3rd ed.). Tehran: Donyaye Ketab (in Persian).
- Herzfeld, E. (2002). *Iran in the ancient East* (H. San'ati-Zadeh, Trans.). Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies (in Persian).
- Howar, C. (2011). *Iran and Iranian civilization* (H. Anousheh, Trans., 6th ed.). Tehran: Amir Kabir (in Persian).
- Landellon, C. de. (2011). *World history, Vol. 1* (A. Behnamnesh, Trans., 13th ed.). Tehran: University of Tehran Press (in Persian).
- Majidzadeh, Y. (2013). *History of Mesopotamian civilization, Vol. 1* (3rd ed.). Tehran: Markaz Nashr Daneshgahi (in Persian).
- Mashkour, M. J. (1953). *History of the people of Urartu (Ararat)*. Tehran: Shargh Press (in Persian).
- Nardo, D. (2011). *The Assyrian Empire* (M. Haghighat-Khah, Trans., 6th ed.). Tehran: Qoqnoos (in Persian).

- Novotny, J., & Jeffers, J. (2023). *Royal inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian period* (S. Firoozi, Trans.). Tehran: Artamis (in Persian).
- Olmstead, A. T. (2005). *History of the Persian Empire* (M. Moghaddam, Trans., 6th ed.). Tehran: Amir Kabir (in Persian).
- Patts, D. T. (2012). *The archaeology of Elam* (Z. Basti, Trans., 4th ed.). Tehran: SAMT (in Persian).
- Rawasani, Sh. (2007). *Union of the peoples of the East*. Tehran: Amir Kabir (in Persian).
- Rigg, H. A. (2011). *The eighth campaign of Sargon* (S. Alioun [Khaje-Dizaj], Trans.). Tehran: Akhtar (in Persian).
- Rou, G. (2011). *History of ancient Iraq* (A. A. Tabatabaei, Trans.). Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies (in Persian).
- Smith, S. (2011). *The Assyrian age: Ashurbanipal, Cambridge Ancient History* (T. Ghaderi, Trans.). Tehran: Mahtab (in Persian).
- Stolper, M. W. (2010). *History of Elam* (Sh. Jalilian, Trans.). Tehran: Toos (in Persian).
- Zarrinkoub, A. (2011). *History of the people of Iran, Vol. 1: Iran before Islam* (13th ed.). Tehran: Amir Kabir (in Persian).