

## ASSYRIA (ATHURA) UNDER THE ACHAEMENIDS:

### Persian Royal Inscriptions, Persepolis, the Continuity of Assyria and the Assyrian People, and the Absence of KWRT/KRD and Some Other Biblical Ethnonyms

#### Abstract

The destruction of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in 612 BCE is frequently presented as the end of Assyria in historical narratives. The evidence of the succeeding Achaemenid Empire, however, reveals a markedly different reality. Across the reigns of Darius I, Xerxes I, and Artaxerxes II, Persian royal inscriptions consistently preserve **Aθurā (Athura)**, the Old Persian designation of Assyria, as one of the constituent provinces of the empire, while archaeological evidence demonstrates the continued occupation of the Assyrian heartland throughout the Achaemenid period. Contemporary literary testimony, monumental inscriptions, and administrative records further attest the continued existence of Assyrians as a distinct and recognizable people within the Persian imperial system.

This study examines the combined testimony of the Achaemenid royal inscriptions, the Persepolis Fortification Archive, the monumental reliefs of Persepolis and Naqsh-e Rostam, Greek literary evidence, and the interpretations of modern Iranian and international scholarship. Particular attention is devoted to the Achaemenid distinction between the territorial designation **Aθurā** ("Assyria") and the corresponding ethnonym **Āthuriyā** ("the Assyrian")<sup>1</sup>, which appears on the royal throne-bearer inscriptions of Darius I and Artaxerxes II. Together with the Persepolis archives—which identify Assyrians as one of the largest and most clearly attested non-Persian populations—these inscriptions demonstrate that the Achaemenid administration recognized not only Athura as a territorial and administrative entity but also Assyrians as a distinct ethnic community within the empire.

The article further considers the evidentiary significance of ethnonyms absent from Achaemenid records. While the inscriptions and archives preserve numerous ethnic designations—including Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Lycians, Cappadocians, Arabs, Indians, Armenians, Sogdians, Bactrians, and others—they contain no attestation of **KWRT**, **KRD**, **Kurd**, or several ethnonyms that emerge only in later historical traditions. This absence is historically significant precisely because the Achaemenid administration demonstrably recorded ethnic identities with considerable precision.

Taken together, the royal inscriptions, archaeological evidence, monumental reliefs, administrative archives, and classical testimony demonstrate that the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire did not result in the disappearance of either Assyria or the Assyrian people. Rather, both continued as visible, inhabited, and officially recognized components of the Achaemenid world. The evidence points consistently to political transformation rather than demographic, ethnic, or

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<sup>1</sup> Old Persian **Aθurā** denotes the province of Assyria, while **Āthuriyā** is the corresponding ethnonym ("Assyrian"). Throughout this article, the distinction between the territorial designation and the ethnonym follows Kent (1953), Lecoq (1997), and Schmitt (2000).

cultural extinction and provides one of the clearest post-imperial demonstrations of Assyrian continuity in the ancient Near East.

## Introduction

The collapse of the Neo-Assyrian Empire at the end of the seventh century BCE remains one of the defining events of ancient Near Eastern history. The destruction of Nineveh in 612 BCE ended Assyrian political supremacy, but it did not necessarily signify the disappearance of Assyria as a homeland or the extinction of the Assyrian people. Modern scholarship increasingly distinguishes between the collapse of an imperial state and the survival of the population that inhabited it. As numerous historical examples demonstrate, the fall of a political order does not automatically entail the disappearance of the territories, communities, or cultural traditions associated with it.

The Achaemenid Empire provides one of the most important bodies of contemporary evidence for examining this question. Following Cyrus II's conquest of Babylonia in 539 BCE, the former Assyrian heartland became part of the Persian Empire. Yet rather than disappearing from history, Assyria continued to appear in Persian royal inscriptions under the name **Aθurā (Athura)**. Across the reigns of Darius I, Xerxes I, and Artaxerxes II, Achaemenid inscriptions consistently preserve Athura as one of the constituent provinces of the empire, while the corresponding ethnonym **Āthuriyā** ("the Assyrian") appears in the monumental throne-bearer inscriptions accompanying the royal tombs of Darius I and Artaxerxes II. Together, these inscriptions distinguish between the continuity of the Assyrian homeland and the continuity of the Assyrian people, providing direct contemporary evidence that both remained officially recognized within the Achaemenid imperial system.

Recent scholarship has considerably strengthened the evidentiary basis for assessing Assyrian continuity during the Achaemenid period. In addition to the royal inscriptions, archaeological investigations demonstrate the continued occupation of the Assyrian heartland, while the Persepolis Fortification Archive provides direct insight into the administrative practices of the empire and the manner in which imperial authorities classified and recorded its diverse populations. The archive reveals a sophisticated system of ethnic identification in which numerous peoples—including Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Lycians, Cappadocians, Arabs, Indians, Armenians, Sogdians, Bactrians, and others—were explicitly recognized and documented within the imperial bureaucracy. The monumental program of Persepolis, together with the throne-bearer reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam, further illustrates how the constituent peoples of the empire were represented within Achaemenid royal ideology.

The significance of this evidence extends beyond the positive attestation of Assyrians. Because the Achaemenid administration demonstrably recorded ethnic identities with considerable precision, the royal inscriptions and the Persepolis archives also permit an examination of ethnonyms that are absent from the Achaemenid record. The contrast between the repeated appearance of **Aθurā** and **Āthuriyā** and the absence of **KWRT**, **KRD**, **Kurd**, and several

ethnonyms known only from biblical and later historical traditions provides an additional perspective on the ethnic landscape of the Achaemenid Empire and the populations officially recognized by its administration.

This study argues that the Achaemenid evidence demonstrates the continuity of both Assyria and the Assyrian people. By integrating royal inscriptions, archaeology, monumental reliefs, administrative archives, Greek literary testimony, and modern Iranian scholarship, it shows that the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire resulted in political transformation rather than demographic, ethnic, or cultural disappearance. More specifically, it argues that the consistent preservation of the territorial designation **Aθurā** and the corresponding ethnonym **Āthuriyā** across successive Achaemenid reigns constitutes one of the clearest demonstrations of Assyrian continuity between the Neo-Assyrian and Hellenistic periods.

### **Athura and Assyrians in Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions**

The strongest contemporary evidence for the continuity of Assyria derives from the royal inscriptions of Darius I, Xerxes I, and Artaxerxes II. In the Behistun Inscription, Darius enumerates the lands under his rule and includes **Aθurā (Athura)** among the constituent provinces of the empire. Similar references recur throughout the reigns of Darius I, Xerxes I, and Artaxerxes II in the Achaemenid inscriptional corpus, including the inscriptions of Behistun, Persepolis, Susa, Naqsh-e Rostam, and other royal monuments.<sup>2</sup>

The significance of these references extends beyond administrative geography. The royal inscriptions do not list vanished kingdoms remembered from antiquity; rather, they enumerate the contemporary lands and peoples forming the empire. Athura appears alongside Egypt, Armenia, Lydia, Babylonia, Media, and other functioning provinces. The Behistun Inscription further records Athura among the provinces that revolted against Darius during the widespread rebellions following his accession, demonstrating that Assyria functioned as an active and politically significant province within the empire rather than merely as a geographical designation.<sup>3</sup> The Susa inscription (DSe) likewise includes Athura among the lands that acknowledged the authority of the Great King, paid tribute, and were governed according to imperial law. Together these inscriptions demonstrate that Assyria functioned as an active and fully integrated province of the Achaemenid Empire rather than surviving merely as an historical designation.<sup>4</sup>

The continuity of Assyria was not merely nominal. Archaeological investigations throughout northern Mesopotamia demonstrate that the principal cities of the Assyrian heartland continued to exist and function under Persian rule. Excavations at Assur, Nineveh, Arbela, and other sites

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<sup>2</sup> Roland G. Kent, *Old Persian: Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1953), **DB I.13–17; DPe; DNa; DSe; DSm; XPh**; Pierre Lecoq, *Les inscriptions de la Perse achéménide* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Kent, *Old Persian*, **DB II.5–8**; Lecoq, *Les inscriptions de la Perse achéménide*, **DB II**.

<sup>4</sup> Kent, *Old Persian*, **DSe**; Lecoq, *Les inscriptions de la Perse achéménide*, **DSe**.

reveal continued occupation throughout the Achaemenid period. John Curtis has argued that northern Mesopotamia experienced continuity rather than abandonment following the collapse of the Neo-Assyrian state, while Amélie Kuhrt emphasizes the persistence of settlement, economic activity, and the continued functioning of Athura within the Achaemenid imperial system.<sup>5</sup>

This archaeological evidence demonstrates that Athura was not simply a name preserved in royal inscriptions. Rather, the province remained inhabited, economically productive, and geographically continuous, with its principal urban centres, agricultural systems, and communication networks continuing to function under Achaemenid administration. The Persians therefore inherited not an empty territory but an existing homeland whose population remained rooted in the region.

The Achaemenid inscriptions likewise preserve an important distinction between the territorial designation **Aθurā** ("Assyria") and the corresponding ethnonym **Āthuriyā** ("the Assyrian"). While *Aθurā* consistently denotes the province or country, the monumental labels accompanying the throne-bearer reliefs identify individual representatives by their ethnic affiliation. Thus, the throne-bearer inscriptions accompanying the royal tomb of Darius I at Naqsh-e Rostam (DN/DNe XVII) explicitly identify one of the imperial representatives by the Old Persian inscription *iyam Āthuriyā* ("This is the Assyrian"). Approximately a century later, the same ethnonym reappears on the throne-bearer inscriptions accompanying the tomb of Artaxerxes II at Persepolis (A2Pa XVII). The recurrence of the same ethnonym on two separate royal monuments belonging to different reigns demonstrates that the official recognition of Assyrians formed a stable component of Achaemenid imperial ideology rather than an isolated occurrence.<sup>6</sup>

Rüdiger Schmitt notes that **Aθurā** represents the Old Persian form of Assyria and remained the standard imperial designation throughout the Achaemenid period.<sup>7</sup> References to Athura recur consistently across the principal royal inscriptions of Darius I and Xerxes I—including the Behistun, Persepolis, Susa, and Naqsh-e Rostam inscriptions—while the ethnonym **Āthuriyā** reappears on the royal monuments of both Darius I and Artaxerxes II. Together with the archaeological continuity of the Assyrian homeland, these inscriptions demonstrate continuity rather than historical memory alone. The Persian kings inherited Assyria as an existing province

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<sup>5</sup> John Curtis, "The Achaemenid Period in Northern Iraq," in *L'archéologie de l'Empire achéménide*, ed. Pierre Briant and Rémy Bouchard (Paris: De Boccard, 2005), 151–67; Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (London: Routledge, 2007), 533–39.

<sup>6</sup> Roland G. Kent, *Old Persian: Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1953), **DN I–XXIX**, esp. **XVII** (*iyam Āthuriyā*), and **A?P XVII**; Pierre Lecoq, *Les inscriptions de la Perse achéménide* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), **DNe XVII** and **A2Pa XVII**; Rüdiger Schmitt, *The Old Persian Inscriptions of Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis, Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*, Part I, Vol. I (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Schmitt, Rüdiger. *The Old Persian Inscriptions of Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis. Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum. Part I: Inscriptions of Ancient Iran, Vol. I*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2000.

populated by a people whose identity continued to be officially recognized within the imperial order, rather than creating a new administrative unit or preserving merely an antiquarian name.

### **Assyrians within the Achaemenid Empire**

The evidence for continuity extends beyond the recognition of Athura as a province to the continued participation of Assyrians in the political, administrative, and economic life of the Achaemenid Empire.

An important inscription from Darius' palace at Susa describes the transportation of cedar timber used in royal construction projects. Darius records:

*“The cedar timber was brought from a mountain called Lebanon; the Assyrian people brought it to Babylon.”*<sup>8</sup>

This statement is significant because it refers explicitly to Assyrians participating in imperial logistical operations. The inscription presupposes the existence of a population identified as Assyrian and integrated into the economic structure of the empire. Assyrians appear here not as a vanished civilization but as active participants in the construction of Persian royal monuments, reinforcing the evidence of the royal inscriptions that the Assyrian people remained a living and officially recognized component of the empire.

Independent confirmation is provided by the Greek historian Herodotus, who describes the contingents serving in the army of Xerxes I. Discussing those whom the Greeks called Syrians, he writes:

*“These whom the Greeks call Syrians are called Assyrians by the barbarians.”*<sup>9</sup>

Herodotus is describing contemporary populations of the fifth century BCE rather than the inhabitants of a vanished empire. His testimony demonstrates that Assyrians remained identifiable as a distinct people generations after the fall of Nineveh. Considered together, the Achaemenid royal inscriptions, the archaeological continuity of the Assyrian homeland, the Susa inscription, and Herodotus' testimony present mutually reinforcing evidence that the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire resulted in political transformation rather than the disappearance of either Assyria or the Assyrian people.

### **Persepolis: Administrative and Monumental Evidence**

The Persepolis Fortification Archive provides the most important administrative evidence for the continuity of the Assyrian people under Achaemenid rule. The studies of Wouter F. M. Henkelman and Matthew W. Stolper demonstrate that the Achaemenid administration maintained a highly developed system of ethnic classification and identification in which

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<sup>8</sup> Kent, *Old Persian*, **DSf**; Lecoq, *Les inscriptions de la Perse achéménide*, **DSf**.

<sup>9</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* 7.63.

workers, travellers, specialists, officials, and other individuals were regularly identified according to their ethnic affiliation. These designations formed part of the ordinary administrative vocabulary of the empire and reveal an official bureaucracy that carefully distinguished among the empire's diverse peoples.<sup>10</sup>

The Persepolis archives preserve references to numerous ethnic groups, including Egyptians, Babylonians, Arabs, Greeks, Lycians, Cappadocians, Armenians, Sogdians, Bactrians, Indians, Skudrians, and Assyrians.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, Assyrians appear among the largest non-Persian populations documented in the archive. Statistical analysis identifies more than 2,600 individuals classified as Assyrians, demonstrating that they remained a substantial and administratively recognized ethnic community within the Achaemenid Empire.<sup>12</sup>

The implications of this evidence are profound. Whereas the royal inscriptions attest Athura as a territorial and administrative reality, the Persepolis archives attest Assyrians as a living and officially recognized population. Together, the two bodies of evidence establish continuity of both homeland and people.

The archive is equally significant for what it does not record. Because the Persepolis administration systematically documented ethnic identities throughout the empire, the absence of particular ethnonyms becomes historically meaningful. While Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Lycians, Cappadocians, Arabs, Indians, Armenians, Sogdians, Bactrians, and numerous other peoples are explicitly recorded, no ethnonym corresponding to **KWRT**, **KRD**, **Kurd**, or related forms appears anywhere in the surviving corpus.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, several ethnonyms and ethnocultural designations attested only in biblical and later historical traditions are absent from the surviving Achaemenid record.

Although such silence cannot by itself establish the non-existence of every ancestral population, it does demonstrate that these ethnonyms were not recognized by the Achaemenid administration as distinct ethnic communities comparable to those explicitly documented in the archives. The evidence therefore reinforces the conclusion that Assyrians remained a visible and administratively recognized component of the imperial system.

The monumental program of Persepolis complements the administrative evidence preserved in the archives. The reliefs of the Apadana depict representatives of the constituent peoples of the empire bringing tribute before the Great King. Henkelman and Stolper observe that the "wide range of peoples constituting the Great King's realm" was celebrated both in the royal inscriptions and in the visual program of Persepolis.<sup>14</sup> Although the delegations are not

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<sup>10</sup> Wouter F. M. Henkelman and Matthew W. Stolper, "Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Labelling at Persepolis: The Case of the Skudrians," in *Organisation des pouvoirs et contacts culturels dans les pays de l'empire achéménide*, ed. Pierre Briant and Michel Chauveau, *Persika* 14 (Paris: De Boccard, 2009), 271–79.

<sup>11</sup> Henkelman and Stolper, "Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Labelling at Persepolis," 273–75.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 274–75.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 300–303.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 273–75, 300–303.

individually identified by inscriptions, the delegation traditionally numbered XVII has long been identified by numerous scholars as representing Athura (Assyria) on the basis of costume, hairstyle, beard style, and tribute objects.<sup>15</sup>

Margaret Cool Root, Pierre Briant, and Shahrokh Razmjou have emphasized that the artistic program of Persepolis was designed to portray the constituent lands and peoples of the empire within a unified imperial framework that celebrated both diversity and political cohesion.<sup>16</sup>

While the identification of Delegation XVII cannot be regarded as inscriptionally certain because no label accompanies the relief itself, the interpretation remains widely accepted. Considered together with the royal inscriptions, the throne-bearer inscriptions identifying *Āthuriyā*, and the Persepolis Fortification Archive, the Apadana reliefs provide compelling visual confirmation that Assyria occupied a recognized place among the constituent lands of the empire and that Assyrians remained a living and visible population within the Achaemenid world.

### **Iranian Scholarship and the Survival of Assyria**

Modern Iranian scholarship has made a significant contribution to understanding the place of Athura within the Achaemenid Empire. A. Shapur Shahbazi consistently recognized Athura as the Persian continuation of historical Assyria and emphasized the Achaemenid policy of preserving long-established territorial identities inherited from earlier imperial traditions. Shahrokh Razmjou has likewise highlighted the multinational character of Persepolis and the participation of the empire's diverse peoples in its ceremonial and ideological program.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, *Encyclopaedia Iranica* identifies Athura as the continuation of the historical Assyrian homeland incorporated into the administrative structure of the Achaemenid Empire.<sup>18</sup>

These interpretations are particularly important because they derive directly from the study of Persian inscriptions, archaeology, and administrative records rather than from later classical or biblical traditions.

Collectively, they demonstrate that Iranian scholarship generally understands Athura as a living province inherited from the Assyrian past, inhabited by a continuing population, rather than as an antiquarian designation detached from historical and demographic reality.

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<sup>15</sup> Erich F. Schmidt, *Persepolis I: Structures, Reliefs, Inscriptions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Gerold Walser, *Die Völkerschaften auf den Reliefs von Persepolis* (Berlin: Mann, 1966); Margaret Cool Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art and Ideology* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 182–95; Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 249–63.

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Cool Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art and Ideology*, 182–95; Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 249–63; Shahrokh Razmjou, studies on Persepolis and Achaemenid imperial representation.

<sup>17</sup> A. Shapur Shahbazi, “The History of the Idea of Iran,” in *Birth of the Persian Empire*, ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 100–111; Shahrokh Razmjou, studies on Persepolis and Achaemenid imperial representation.

<sup>18</sup> Rüdiger Schmitt, “Assyria ii. Achaemenid Aθurā,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 2 (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 806–07.

## Conclusion

The cumulative evidence of the Achaemenid period demonstrates continuity rather than disappearance. Across the reigns of Darius I, Xerxes I, and Artaxerxes II, the Persian royal inscriptions consistently preserve **Aθurā (Athura)** as the official designation of Assyria, confirming its continued existence as an active and fully integrated province of the empire. Far from representing a mere historical memory, Athura appears in the royal inscriptions as a functioning administrative and political entity that paid tribute, observed imperial law, and participated in the affairs of the Achaemenid state. Archaeological evidence likewise confirms the continued occupation of the Assyrian heartland, demonstrating that the Persians inherited not an empty territory but an inhabited homeland whose principal cities, population, and economic infrastructure remained intact.

Equally significant is the inscriptional evidence for the Assyrian people themselves. The Achaemenid inscriptions preserve not only the territorial designation **Aθurā**, but also the corresponding ethnonym **Āthuriyā** ("the Assyrian"), explicitly identifying Assyrians on the royal throne-bearer reliefs of Darius I at Naqsh-e Rostam and again approximately a century later on the tomb of Artaxerxes II at Persepolis. Together with the Susa inscription recording that "the Assyrian people brought [the cedar timber] to Babylon," these texts demonstrate that the Achaemenid court officially recognized both Assyria as a province and Assyrians as one of the constituent peoples of the empire.

The Persepolis Fortification Archive provides perhaps the strongest administrative confirmation of this continuity. The archives reveal a sophisticated system of ethnic classification in which Assyrians appear repeatedly and in substantial numbers, demonstrating that they remained a distinct and officially recognized ethnic community within the imperial system. At the same time, the archive's silence regarding **KWRT**, **KRD**, **Kurd**, and several ethnonyms known only from biblical and later historical traditions is itself historically significant.

The monumental program of Persepolis complements this documentary evidence. The Apadana reliefs present the constituent peoples of the empire in visual form, and although the identification of Delegation XVII as Athura remains an iconographic interpretation rather than an inscriptional certainty, it accords closely with the independent testimony of the royal inscriptions, the throne-bearer labels, and the Persepolis archives. Considered together, these sources consistently portray Assyria as one of the recognized lands of the empire and the Assyrians as one of its acknowledged peoples.

Herodotus provides an independent classical corroboration of the same historical reality. Writing in the fifth century BCE, he distinguished between the Greek usage "Syrians" and the native designation "Assyrians," demonstrating that the Assyrians remained a recognizable people generations after the fall of Nineveh. His testimony complements rather than replaces the Achaemenid evidence, showing that the continuity preserved in Persian administrative and monumental sources was also recognized beyond the imperial court itself.

Taken together, the royal inscriptions, archaeological evidence, monumental reliefs, administrative archives, and classical testimony provide one of the clearest demonstrations of Assyrian continuity after the collapse of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The evidence consistently distinguishes between the end of an imperial state and the survival of its homeland and people. From the perspective of the Achaemenid kings themselves, Athura remained one of the constituent lands of the empire, while the ethnonym *Āthuriyā*, the Persepolis archives, and the testimony of Herodotus attest the continued existence of the Assyrian people. The Achaemenid period therefore forms a crucial historical bridge between the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the later Classical, Syriac, and medieval attestations of Assyrian continuity, demonstrating that the fall of Nineveh marked a transformation of political sovereignty rather than the demographic, ethnic, or cultural disappearance of Assyria and its people.

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