

Rock Tombs of Naqsh-e Rostam

Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds

Built: ca. 490–404 BCE,
Marvdasht, Iran

The four kings buried here were revered as earthly representatives of Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian creator god.



Four monumental rock tombs, carved cross-shaped into the sheer cliffs of the Kuh-e Rahmat (“Mountain of Mercy”), dominate the landscape of Naqsh-e Rostam. Here, surrounded by mountains and the deserts of southern Iran, lie the resting places of four of ancient Persia’s most powerful rulers: Darius I, Xerxes I, Artaxerxes I, and Darius II. Exquisite reliefs above the entrances to the burial chambers depict these rulers, immortalized in stone alongside Ahura Mazda, the “Wise Lord” and chief deity of Zoroastrianism.

This religion, one of the world’s oldest monotheistic faiths, is rooted in the teachings of the Persian philosopher Zarathustra, who is believed, depending on the source, to have lived sometime between 1500 and 500 BCE. In an age dominated by polytheistic traditions, Zarathustra proclaimed a revolutionary message: Ahura Mazda as the supreme god, the creator of the universe, the source of all that is good, and the embodiment of truth, wisdom, and light. Spenta Mainyu, the Good Spirit, and his adversary Angra Mainyu, the Evil Spirit, were locked in a cosmic struggle. At the center of this conflict stood humanity, endowed with free will and tasked with choosing good to uphold *asha*, the divine order. The tenets of Zoroastrianism are clearly outlined to guide the faithful: nurture good thoughts (*humata*), speak good words (*hukhta*), and perform good deeds (*huvarshta*).

Protecting *asha*—which also translates to “divine will”—was also the duty of the kings. This helped preserve the connection between the divine and mortal realms, much like the deeply revered element of fire. Every Zoroastrian fire temple contains an eternal flame, which must never be extinguished. The Ka’ba-ye Zartosht, a rectangular stone structure located below the tombs at Naqsh-e Rostam, may once have been such a fire temple. Its precise function, however, remains a subject of scholarly debate.

What is certain is that the majestic rock tombs of the Achaemenid kings at Naqsh-e Rostam were created during the first golden age of Zoroastrianism. The religion reached its zenith during the Sassanid era (224–651 CE), when it became a state religion. Islam began displacing it in the mid-7th century, yet Zoroastrianism did not vanish entirely. Today, Iran is home to approximately 30,000 practicing Zoroastrians. The world’s largest Zoroastrian community now resides in India, descendants of those who fled persecution in Iran during the 8th and 9th centuries. Additionally, small diaspora communities exist in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe, continuing the long history of this faith based in good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.