

IRAN SCENES

Treasury relief, National Museum of Iran, Teheran



This carving of a Persian king and crown prince is one of a matching pair from Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of ancient Persia. The reliefs are mirror images of each other, and were located so as to face anyone entering the palace. The consensus is that this carving represents Xerxes (Scripturally speaking, Ahasuerus, husband of Esther). The prince standing behind the throne is therefore Artaxerxes, Xerxes' heir, to whom Nehemiah was later cupbearer. The picture shows just part of the whole relief, in which the king is enthroned before members of the court, whose importance is indicated by the relative size by which they have been depicted (the king, naturally, being much bigger).

Both King Xerxes and Prince Artaxerxes wear Persian court dress with wide sleeves, and a distinctive headdress. It

may have been such "royal apparel . . . which the king useth to wear . . . and the crown royal which is set upon his head" in which Haman was commanded to dress Mordecai, "the man whom the king delighteth to honour" (Est. 6:8,11), to reward him for saving the king's life. The hairstyle of tight curls was adopted from Assyria, and in Ezra 6:22 Xerxes' father Darius is referred to as "king of Assyria". The king and prince clutch ceremonial lotus flowers, and, interestingly, Xerxes also holds a golden staff pointing in the direction of the subjects who are approaching him, perhaps indicating his permission for them to draw into his presence, just as we read of Esther: "when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court . . . she obtained favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand" (Est. 5:2).

The penalty for offending the king was, of course, death. The relief includes the figure of a Mede with his hand raised in front of his face, believed to signify a gesture of courtesy to prevent the official's bad breath reaching the king!—*Jeremy Thomas*