Encyclopædia Iranica

ACHAEMENID ROYAL COMMUNICATION
Article by **Bruno Jacobs**

Published: April 3, 2015
Last Updated: April 15, 2015

ACHAEMENID ROYAL COMMUNICATION

ACHAEMENID ROYAL COMMUNICATION, the spreading of every kind of information and decision-making needed for governmental control. Under this topic can be subsumed the royal agenda, political objectives, ideological and legitimizing strategies, and orders and messages to subordinates and the general population.

Personal communication. The starting point of royal communication was the court—taking 'court' in a wider sense as the contact–zone with the ruling class—for instance, during audiences or in the course of common meals (Kistler, 2010). Proceeding from the court, a top-down communication was initiated, via the satraps, who were delegated from the imperial center to the cities that had been capitals of the predecessor empires, such as Ecbatana, Babylon, Sardis, or Memphis. Usually these high-ranking officials were princes of the Achaemenid family; at times, from the reign of Darius I on, they were members of the privileged families of his conspirators (Jacobs, 1994, pp. 103 f. with nn. 61-62). It is generally accepted by scholars that, through deployment of these officials, the practices of the Great King's court were spread to the provincial courts as well (cf. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.6.10-12). The modus operandi may, at the same time, indicate a conscious intent to develop channels of empire-wide communication.

Communication by correspondence. Aramaic was the language widely used for

communication. It facilitated the transmission of messages in the multi-lingual context of the empire (Stolper, 2005, p. 21; Schmitt, 2006, p. 238; on the dispersal of Aramaic as a *lingua franca*, see Naveh and Greenfield, 1984; Greenfield, 1985; Rossi, 1986, pp. 68 f.). This practice meant that, in most cases, scribes only needed command of Aramaic beyond their native language (Gershevitch, 1968, p. 4; Schmitt, 2006, p. 41; Tavernier, 2008: pp. 60 f.; Jacobs, 2012a: pp. 101 f.). The role of the lingua franca is exemplarily shown by the letters of the Bactrian satrap Akhvamazda to Bagavant, a subordinate governor, residing in Sogdian Kulmi (Shaked, 2004, esp. pp. 28 f.; Naveh and Shaked, 2012) and by the Aramaic correspondences of the satrap of Egypt, Arshama (Driver, 1957; Porten and Yardeni, 1986, pp. 94-129 ; Taylor 2013). As this kind of document normally was written on perishable materials, royal correspondence in this medium has largely been lost.

As for the Letter to Gadatas, which purported to have been written by Darius himself, its authenticity has been doubted with good reasons (Briant, 2003) and it therefore cannot give a reliable impression of royal correspondence. Its phrase πέραν Εὐφράτου “beyond the river” may be a calque on Aramaic *abar-naharā* (Schmitt, 1998, p. 159; idem, 2006, p. 240) and thus may betray a perspective that looked at the Euphrates from the east. This may, in turn, indicate that the author composed the letter from various disconnected elements, which give only a superficial impression of this facet of royal communication.

A general idea of the employment of the communicative medium can perhaps be based on Neo-Assyrian letters (examples in Radner, 2006, nos. 1.2, 1.3, 2.3, 5.1, 5.7), but perhaps also on the practice of reading royal letters in an auditorium at Babylon, as repeatedly reported in the Astronomical Diaries of Arsacid times (Böck, 2010, p. 42). Beyond that, information on letters as means of royal communication in Achaemenid times mainly comes from classical and biblical sources. Thus, Darius I is said to have sent several letters to be read before Oroetes, satrap of Sardis, as a consequence of which the latter was executed by his bodyguard (Herodotus, *Histories* 3.126-128). Darius II announced the appointment of his son Cyrus as the new satrap of Sardis (Xen., *Hell.* 1.4.3), and likewise Artaxerxes II authorized Tithraustes in written form to dispose the satrap Tissaphernes of his position and to execute him (Diod., 14.80.7-8). In the Book of Esther (1:22, 3:12, 8:9) it is mentioned on various occasions that Xerxes sent letters to all provinces (Macchi, 2005, pp. 108 f.). The “Persian documents” quoted in the Book of Ezra (1:2-4, 4:8-22, 5:7-17, 6:2-12,

7:12-26) may stand isolated with regard to language, orthography, and style, as was expounded by L. Grabbe, but they nevertheless reveal the importance of letters at the service of royal communication; moreover, with the decrees cited in these documents, they give examples of another category of this communication (Grabbe, 2006).

Letters were distributed either by royal emissaries (Hdt., 3.128; Diod., 14.80.7; Jacobs, 2003, pp. 254-56) or by messengers (Hdt., 3.126, 8.98; Xen., *Cyr*. 8.6.17-18) who, using the royal roads and a relay system, covered the enormous distances within the empire in stunningly short time (Gabrielli, 2006, pp. 45-62; Colburn, 2013; Henkelman and Jacobs, in press).

Achaemenid inscriptions and court art as means of communication. Royal communication is commonly associated with the sculptural decoration at Persepolis and at Susa, the residences (re-)founded by Darius, with the rock reliefs of Bisotun and Naqš-e Rostam, and with the inscriptions found in these places. The trilingual inscription of the Bisotun monument represents a text whose content became part of the royal communication with a wider audience; this becomes particularly clear in § 70, where Darius I mentions that the text was also written on clay tablets and on parchment—i.e., in Aramaic—and that it was distributed. In addition, he exhorts, in §§ 60-61, a future (royal) reader to make its content accessible to the people.

Fragments of a stele copy were found in the excavations of Babylon (Seidl, 1999), and fragments of an Aramaic version were found at Elephantine (Greenfield and Porten, 1982); it has therefore been argued that Herodotus's report about the imperial crisis in the first years of Darius must have been informed by the Bisotun text per se (Dandamaev, 1976, p. 123; Köhnken, 1978, pp. 39 f.) rather than a parallel oral, popular version (see also Tuplin, 2005, p. 236 with n. 47). The Babylon stele also included an abbreviated copy of the relief, showing that royal inscriptions and court art apparently were, with regard to publicity, regulated by the same incentives.

The attitude attested in the Bisotun monument has been generalized in Achaemenid scholarship, and Achaemenid court art and inscriptions were thus credited with a great impact on the public. Terms like *propaganda* (Kelly, 2003, pp. 173-219, esp. p. 174) or even *propaganda program* (Leith, 1997, p. 29) have been variously applied (Briant, 1997, p. 102 has rightly labeled the term *propaganda* fallacious in Achaemenid context), but even the assumption that they were a continuous and essential part of royal communication as such

remains unconvincing:

(a) Soon after Darius's ascendance to the throne, the complexity of the inscriptions with regard to content decreased, so that they decidedly could no longer serve as means of communication supporting the state as such (Jacobs, 2014a; idem, in Jacobs and Trampedach, 2012; on comparable phenomena in late 3rd millennium Mesopotamia cf. Sallaberger, 2002).

(b) The languages in which the Achaemenid inscriptions were composed made them unsuitable for public-oriented communication (Jacobs, 2012, pp. 97 f.). This is, because Old Persian, especially in the stylization cultivated in the inscriptions (Schmitt, 2000b, p. 30; idem, 2006, p. 237), did not play an appreciable role in the empire (Schmitt. 1989, pp. 56 f.; Briant. 2000, p. 96), because Babylonian was limited to Mesopotamia and possibly was already about to fall into disuse as a spoken language (Stolper, 2005, pp. 20 f.; on the lingering existence of Akkadian, see van der Spek, 1988, p. 255; Böck, 2010, pp. 27-38), and because Elamite was in rather wide-ranging use only as a language of administration (Stolper, 2005, p. 20; Kuhrt, 2007a, chap. 16, no. 58, n. 1; Henkelman, 2010, p. 714, n. 174; on the dissemination of Elamite, see also Lecoq, 1997, pp. 51-54). The multilingualism of the inscriptions was not intended for the purpose of reaching a higher number of addressees.

(c) Not the subjects, but the successors to the throne were the proper addressees of the inscriptions. This is even true for the Bisotun inscription, as shown by DB §§ 64-65, notwithstanding that this text laid claim also to a public interest (perceptible in DB §§ 60-61). In the same way, inscription DNb turns to the heirs apparent, as attested by § 11, and DPe § 3 does not make sense at all if the one addressed by the second person singular is not a future ruler (tr. after Schmitt, 2000a, p. 61):

> Proclaims Darius, the king: If thus you shall think: "May I not fear anybody else," protect this Persian people! If the Persian people shall be protected, the blissful happiness existing very far off, the undisturbed one—that will come upon this house.

This dialogue initiated by Darius I was taken on by his successors, who adopted whole passages from texts of their predecessors (Jacobs in Jacobs and Trampedach, 2012). In the same way the later kings reproduced the canon of picture themes implemented by Darius I as architectural decoration of their residences (Root, 1979, p. 40; Jacobs, 2002, pp. 351-61). Similarly, the relief

décor was, in view of limited accessibility, surely not intended for a wider public.

Only secondarily Achaemenid inscriptions and court art were thought for the gods and finally, as far as they were visible and accessible, also for persons of the "inner court."

Representative art of the western provinces. The representative pictorial art of the western provinces is not part of royal communication, as was often postulated (Courtils, 1995, pp. 363 f.; Dusinberre, 1999, esp. p. 73, n. 1), and not even a reflection of it. This is demonstrable already by the fact that this medium was common only in very limited regions of the empire, mainly in the far west, and did not reach at all the majority of the population. The choice of topics, widely different from Achaemenid art, but homogenous beyond all provincial borders from Phrygia at the Hellespont to Phoenicia, results from a consensus of the elites about what activities and areas of life were appropriate to their respective social affiliations. This consensus was certainly shared in most parts of the empire, the Achaemenid court included, but a commitment to this consensus was given via pictorial art only within a limited regional scope (Jacobs, 2014b).

Summary. Royal communication took place on various levels, beginning verbally in the circle of the "inner court." A top–down communication, indispensable for the existence and coherence of a state, was channeled via the imperial administration. Besides, it was mediated by letters and decrees conveyed by emissaries and messengers using the empire–wide road system and its way stations (Briant, 1996, pp. 377-89; Henkelman and Jacobs, 2013, in press; cf. the sources assembled by Kuhrt, 2007, pp. 730-51). A real ideological penetration of the empire by the Achaemenid rulers did not take place (cf. Briant, 1996, pp. 887 f.).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

B. Böck, "Keilschriftliche Texte," in U. Hackl, B. Jacobs and D. Weber, eds., *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches – Band III: Keilschriftliche Texte, Aramäische Texte, Armenische Texte, Arabische Texte, Chinesische Texte*,

Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus 85, Göttingen, 2010, pp. 1-178.

P. Briant, *Histoire de l'empire perse de Cyrus à Alexandre*, Achaemenid History X, Leiden, 1996.

Idem, "Bulletin d'histoire achéménide," *Topoi – Supplément* 1, Lyon, 1997, pp. 5-127.

Idem, "Inscriptions multilingues d'époque achéménide: Le texte et l'image," in D. Valbelle, ed., *Le Décret de Memphis,* Paris, 2000, pp. 91-115.

Idem, "Histoire et archéologie d'un texte. La *Lettre de Darius à Gadatas* entre Perses, Grecs et Romains," in M. Giorgeri, M. Salvini, M.-C. Trémouille, and P. Vannicelli, eds., *Licia e Lidia prima dell'ellenizzazione – Atti del Convegno internazionale Roma, 11-12 ottobre 1999*, Istituto di Studi sulle Civiltà dell'Egeo e del Vicino Oriente – Monografie scientifiche – Serie scienze umane e sociali, Rome, 2003, pp. 107-44.

H. P. Colburn, "Connectivity and Communication in the Achaemenid Empire," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 56, 2013, pp. 29-52.

J. des Courtils, "Un nouveau bas-relief archaïque de Xanthos," *Revue archéologique*, nouvelle série, fasc. 2, 1995, pp. 337-64.

M. A. Dandamaev, *Persien unter den ersten Achämeniden (übersetzt von Heinz-Dieter Pohl)*, Beiträge zur Iranistik 8, Wiesbaden, 1976.

G. R. Driver, *Aramaic Documents of the Fifth Century B.C.,* Oxford, 1957.

E. P. M. Dusinberre, "Satrapal Sardis: Achaemenid Bowls in an Achaemenid Capital," *American Journal of Archaeology* 103, 1999, pp. 73-102.

M. Gabrielli, *Le cheval dans l'empire achéménide*, Studia ad Orientem Antiquum Pertinentia 1, Istanbul, 2006.

I. Gershevitch, *Old Persian Literature*, Handbuch der Orientalistik, 1. Abt. 4.2.1, Leiden, Köln, 1968, pp. 1-30.

L. L. Grabbe, "The 'Persian Documents' in the Book of Ezra: Are They Authentic?" in O. Lipschits and M. Oeming, eds., *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period,* Winona Lake, 2006, pp. 531-70.

J. C. Greenfield, “Aramaic in the Achaemenian Empire,” in I. Gershevitch, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran – II. The Median and Achaemenian Periods,* Cambridge, 1985, pp. 698-713.

J. C. Greenfield and B. Porten, *The Bisitun Inscription of Darius the Great, Aramaic Version*, Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum I.V.I, London, 1982.

W. Henkelman, “Consumed before the King”. The Table of Darius, that of Irdabama and Irtaštuna, and that of his Satrap, Karkiš,” in B. Jacobs and R. Rollinger, eds., *Der Achämenidenhof / The Achaemenid Court – Akten des 2. Internationalen Kolloquiums zum Thema “Vorderasien im Spannungsfeld klassischer und altorientalischer Überlieferungen,” Landgut Castelen bei Basel, 23.-25. Mai 2007*, Classica et Orientalia 2, Wiesbaden, 2010, pp. 667-775.

W. Henkelman and B. Jacobs, “Roads and Communication,” in B. Jacobs and R. Rollinger, eds., *A Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire,* London, New York, 2013, in press.

B. Jacobs, *Die Satrapienverwaltung im Perserreich zur Zeit Darius’ III.*, Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients – Reihe B Nr. 87, Wiesbaden, 1994.

Idem, “Achämenidische Kunst – Kunst im Achämenidenreich: Zur Rolle der achämenidischen Großplastik als Mittel der herrscherlichen Selbstdarstellung und der Verbreitung politischer Botschaften im Reich,” *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan* 34, 2002, pp. 345-395.

Idem, “Mechanismen der Konfliktbewältigung in der Verwaltungsorganisation Kleinasiens zur Achämenidenzeit,” in W. Henkelman and A. Kuhrt, eds., *A Persian Perspective. Essays in Memory of Heleen Sanicisi-Weerdenburg*, Achaemenid History 13, Leiden, 2003, pp. 239-263.

Idem, “Sprachen, die der König spricht – Zum ideologischen Hintergrund der Mehrsprachigkeit der Achämenideninschriften,” in R. Rollinger and G. Schwinghammer, eds., *Gegenwart und Altertum – 125 Jahre Alte Geschichte in Innsbruck, Akten des Kolloquiums Innsbruck 2010*, Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft, Neue Folge 3, Innsbruck 2012, pp. 95-130.

Idem, “Kriegsentscheidung durch göttliche Gunst – Zur Bewertung von DBi §§ 72 und 75,” in H. Neumann et al., eds., *Krieg und Frieden im Alten Vorderasien – 52e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale Münster, 17.-21. Juli 2006*, Alter Orient und Altes Testament 401, Münster, 2014a, pp. 391-99.

Idem, “Bildkunst als Zeugnis für Orientierung und Konsens innerhalb der Eliten des westlichen Achämenidenreichs,” in R. Rollinger and K. Schnegg, eds., *Kulturkontakte in antiken Welten: Vom Denkmodell zum Fallbeispiel. Proceedings des Internationalen Kolloquiums aus Anlass des 60. Gebrutstags von Christoph Ulf, Innsbruck, 26.-30. Januar 2009*, Colloquia Antiqua 10, Leuven, Paris, and Walpole, Mass., 2014b, pp. 343-68.

B. Jacobs and K. Trampedach, “Das Konzept der achämenidischen Monarchie nach den Primärquellen und nach den *Historien* des Herodot,” in N. Zenzen, T. Hölscher, and K. Trampedach, eds., *Aneignung und Abgrenzung – Wechselnde Perspektiven auf die Antithese von ‘Ost’ und ‘West’ in der griechischen Antike*, Oikumene – Studien zur antiken Weltgeschichte 10, Heidelberg, 2013, pp. 60-92.

Th. Kelly, “Persian Propaganda – A Neglected Factor in Xerxes’ Invasion of Greece and Herodotus,” *Iranica Antiqua* 38, 2003, pp. 173-219.

E. Kistler, “Achämenidische Becher und die Logik kommensaler Politik im Reich der Achämeniden,” in B. Jacobs and R. Rollinger, eds., *Der Achämenidenhof / The Achaemenid Court – Akten des 2. Internationalen Kolloquiums zum Thema “Vorderasien im Spannungsfeld klassischer und altorientalischer Überlieferungen,” Landgut Castelen bei Basel, 23.-25. Mai 2007*, Classica et Orientalia 2, Wiesbaden, 2010, pp. 411-57.

A. Köhnken, “Herodots falscher Smerdis,” *Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft – Neue Folge* 4, 1978, pp. 39-50.

A. Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, London and New York, 2007.

P. Lecoq, *Les inscriptions de la Perse achéménide traduit du vieux-perse, de l’élamite, du babylonien et de l’araméen*, Paris, 1997.

M. J. Leith, *Wadi Daliyeh I: The Wadi-Daliyeh seal impressions*, Discoveries in the Judean Desert XXIV, Oxford, 1997.

J.-D. Macchi, “Le livre d’Esther: regard hellénistique sur le pouvoir et le monde perses,” *Transeuphratène* 30, 2005, pp. 97-135.

J. Naveh and J. C. Greenfield, “Hebrew and Aramaic in the Persian Period,” in W. D. Davies and L. Finkelstein, eds., *The Cambridge History of Judaism – I.*

Introduction; The Persian Period, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 115-29.

J. Naveh and Sh. Shaked, *Aramaic Documents from Bactria (Fourth Century B.C.E.) from the Khalili Collection*, London, 2012.

B. Porten and A. Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Egypt – I. Letters*, Jerusalem, 1986.

K. Radner, "Briefe aus der Korrespondenz der neuassyrischen Könige," in B. Janowski and G. Wilhelm, eds., *Briefe*, Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments – Neue Folge 3, Gütersloh, 2006, pp. 116-57.

M. C. Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art – Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire*. Acta Iranica 19, Leiden 1979.

A. V. Rossi, "I materiali iranici," *Rivista Biblica Italiana* 34, 1986, pp. 55-72.

W. Sallaberger, "Stillstellung von Geschichte in den Texten des Herrschers im frühen Mesopotamien," *Archiv orientální* 70, 2002, pp. 117-24.

R. Schmitt, "2.2 Altpersisch," in R. Schmitt, ed., *Compendium Linguarum Iranicarum*, Wiesbaden, 1989, pp. 56-85.

Idem, "Übersetzung im Dienst der Politik: Die mehrsprachigen Königsinschriften im Achämenidenreich," in P. Anreiter and H. M. Ölberg, eds., *Wort – Text – Sprache und Kultur – Festschrift für Hans Schmeja zum 65. Geburtstag*, Innsbruck, 1998, pp. 157-65.

Idem, *The Old Persian Inscriptions of Naqsh-i Rustam and Persepolis*, Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum I.I.II., London, 2000a.

Idem, *Die iranischen Sprachen in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Wiesbaden, 2000b.

Idem, ",König der Länder und der Gesamtheit aller Zungen' – Die Sprachen des multikulturellen Achämenidenreichs," in Historisches Museum der Pfalz, *Pracht und Prunk der Großkönige – Das persische Weltreich*, Stuttgart, 2006, pp. 237-43.

U. Seidl, "Ein Monument Darius' I. aus Babylon," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie* 89, 1999, pp. 101-14.

Sh. Shaked, *Le satrape de Bactriane et son gouverneur – Documents araméens*

du IVe s. avant notre ère provenant de Bactriane, Persika 4, Paris, 2004.

M. W. Stolper, "Achaemenid Languages and Inscriptions," in J. Curtis and N. Tallis, eds., *Forgotten Empire: The World of Ancient Persia,* London, 2005, pp. 18-24.

J. Tavernier, "Multilingualism in the Fortification and Treasury Archives," in P. Briant, W. Henkelman, and M. Stolper, eds., *L'Archive des Fortifications de Persépolis –État des questions et perspectives de recherches*, Persika 12, Paris, 2008, pp. 59-86.

D. Taylor, *The Arshama Letters from the Bodleian Library*, Vol. 2: *Texts, Translations, and Glossary*, Oxford, 2013.

Chr. Tuplin, "Darius' Accession in (the) Media," in P. Bienkowski, Chr. Mee, and E. Slater, eds., *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society: Papers in Honour of Alan R. Millard*, London, 2005, pp. 217-44.

R. J. van der Spek, "Cuneiform Documents on Parthian History: The Raḫimesu Archive. Materials for the Study of the Standard of Living," in J. Wiesehöfer, ed., *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse– Beiträge des Internationalen Colloquiums, Eutin (27.-30. Juni 1996)*, Historia – Einzelschriften 122, Stuttgart, 1998, pp. 205-58.