



CLASS SYSTEM II. IN THE MEDIAN AND ACHAEMENID PERIODS

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The almost complete lack of Persian written material from the Achaemenid period makes it difficult to know how the Persians conceived of their society. There are strong grounds for supposing that, for some purposes at least, they still defined it in terms of the ancient Iranian social divisions outlined in parts of the Avesta, where individuals are classified by basic function as priests, warriors, and farmers (see i, above). Performance of the religious function by priests and of the defensive function by warriors was seen as necessary to enable farmers to till the soil. This functional division is generally described as a “system of social classes,” but “class” here should not be understood in the modern sense of the term; rather, it was a matter of categories and status, though the Avestan texts seem to depict the third category (farmers) as definitely subordinate to the first two. The following passage from one of the inscriptions of [Darius I](#) (521-486 B.C.E.; DPd 13-24; Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 135-36) was interpreted by Émile Benveniste (1938, p. 543) as proof that the ancient Iranian concepts were still alive in the early part of the Achaemenid period: “May Ahuramazdā guard this country against the (hostile) army



(*hainā*), the bad harvest (*dušiyāra*), the lie (*drauga*)!" (cf. Avestan *druǰ-*, *dužiiāiriia-*, *haēnā-*). Evidently a new use was found in the monarchical ideology for the Avestan concepts, as warrants of the great king's legitimacy. Like Zoroaster (Yt. 13.88-89) the Achaemenid king was the first priest, first warrior, and first farmer. As the matchless warrior the king was best able to defend the farmlands against invasion; as mediator with the divine beings he could bring back their blessing on the lands; and, finally, he took pleasure in presenting himself as a good gardener (see Briant, 1982, pp. 435-56). It should be borne in mind that the word "lie" in this context has a political as well as a religious meaning. Among those counted as "liars" (*draujana*) are all opponents of the royal order, itself the earthly image of the divine order.

Such survivals, however, are clearly not the only factors to be considered in an analysis of the structure and dynamics of Persian society in the Achaemenid period, when royal omnipotence and imperial conquests were the salient features. About the Median society we know even less (Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1988). According to Herodotus (1.125), Persian society in the reign of **Cyrus the Great** (559-29 B.C.E.) was made up of "numerous tribes" (*génea*), chief among which were the Pasargadai, the Maraphianoï, and the Maspianoï, and each tribe was divided into "clans" (*phrātría*), the most respected of which was the clan of the Achaemenids, who belonged to the tribe of the Pasargadai. This general outline by the Greek writer reflects the concept that the social groups to which individuals belong are the family (Av. *nmāna*), the clan (Av. *vīs*, OPers. *viθ*), the tribe (Av. *zantu*), and the country (Av. *daŋ'hu*, OPers. *dahyu*; cf. Benveniste, 1969, II, pp. 293-319). In the royal inscriptions Persia is called the finest country; the king obtains "good men" and "good horses" from it and seeks Ahuramazdā's protections for it through his prayers (DPd, DNa 47-55; Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 137-38). Darius describes himself as a Persian, the son of a Persian, and an Achaemenid (DNa 9-15). Although the clan affiliations or tribal connections of important individuals are seldom mentioned in texts from the Achaemenid period (e.g., in Herodotus, 4.167, and in DNC: *Gaubaruva Pātišuvariš* "Gobryas, a Patischorian," Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 140), there can be no doubt that the Persians still identified themselves by their relations to family (father's name), clan, and tribe. In all probability the Medes had done so too, because, according to Herodotus (1.101), their nation was also made up of tribes (*génēa*).

Social stratification is known to have existed within the Persian nation (*ethnos*) and to have become more marked as a result of the imperial



conquests. The texts show that the empire was administered by members of great families, comparable to European nobles, whom the Greek authors described as “well-born” or, more comprehensively, as “esteemed,” “respected,” “honored,” and sometimes also as “princes” (*prôtoi*; Briant, 1988). The corresponding term in Old Persian, and in the Iranian languages generally, is **āzāta*, which means basically those born into a clan (de Blois, 1986; see also [ĀZĀD](#)). It is only natural that the word *azētai* should have been interpreted, for instance, in a gloss by the commentator Hesychius (*Alexandri Lexicon* 1442, s.v. *azatē*), as “those nearest to the king.” During the Achaemenid period nobility and authority were in fact conferred not solely by birth but also by royal favor. It was from the king that members of the great families received appointments as governors or commanders, and it was owing to the conquests and royal favor that they enjoyed manifold economic advantages, particularly land grants in conquered territories. Such awards were precarious, as the king could withdraw them at any time. These nobles came to be incorporated in the palace hierarchy established by successive rulers of the dynasty. A new nobility, which may be designated “the royal nobility,” thus took shape during the Achaemenid period; it overshadowed but did not displace the old nobility of blood. All the nobles were “devoted servants” (see [BANDA i. THE TERM](#)) of the great king, bound to him by ties of personal loyalty that had to take precedence over family or clan solidarity.

In some of the royal inscriptions, nobles (*āmāta*) and strong men (*tunuvant*) are contrasted with weak or poor people (*skauθi/škauθi*). The last of these terms (translated as *muškēnu* in Akkadian) apparently refers to the lowest class of the people who, although free, did not belong to the nobility (Dandamaev, pp. 643-46). The Greek authors recorded many instances of differences in status and wealth among the Persians, for instance, in their [clothing](#), diet, ways of greeting one another, and education (which was available only for the chosen few). These “poor people,” who were called *autoûrgoi* by certain Greek authors, were evidently smallholders, who tilled their plots on their own account. They figure in several anecdotes related by Aelian, in which the emphasis is on their trust in the king, who used to visit them during his tours through Persia. The kings, as their declarations show, were eager to present themselves as the defenders of the land and the peasants (Briant, 1982, pp. 182-88, 362-71, 441ff.).

Also living in Persia were people who belonged to another category: those who were not of the Persian nation. In the Persepolis tablets they are called *kurtaš*.



They were employed in the building operations at Persepolis and also in agricultural and pastoral undertakings and workshops in other centers in Persis under the Achaemenids. They were not prisoners of war who had been enslaved but workers who were recruited and paid by the state (Stolper, pp. 56-59). The diversity of their ethnic origins (Babylonian, Egyptian, Lydian, Lycian, and others) indicates that they were picked from all regions of the empire and assigned to workplaces permanently or temporarily, as required.

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