



COURTS AND COURTIER I. IN THE MEDIAN AND ACHAEMENID PERIODS

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i. In the Median and Achaemenid periods

Available information on the Median and Achaemenid imperial courts is very limited and not entirely reliable. From Herodotus' report (1.114) of the child Cyrus' playing at being king it seems that the Median court included bodyguards, messengers, the "king's eye" (a kind of secret agent; see below), and builders, for it is likely that the game was modeled on the existing court (Hirsch, p. 105). When the boy became [Cyrus the Great](#) (559-30 b.c.e.) he probably continued Median courtly organization and practices, including forms of etiquette, ceremonial, and diplomatic protocol that the Medes had in turn inherited from Assyria, though there is no explicit information on this point (Root, pp. 264-66, 283-84). According to Ctesias, one of the Median court offices was that of royal [cupbearer](#) (König, p. 177).

Although the tablets from the Persepolis fortifications and treasury furnish little direct evidence on the Achaemenid court, the reliefs depicting the royal tribute ceremonies on the [Apadāna](#) are a major source. Among Greek authors Herodotus has provided many apparently reliable details on courtly secrets



and intrigues, and [Ctesias](#), who spent many years as a physician at the Persian court, has also provided much first-hand information about influential courtiers and harem intrigues. The works of later Greek writers, especially Plutarch and Athenaeus, are valuable additional sources. Finally, details of life at the Achaemenid royal court can be found in the Old Testament Book of Esther, which, however, contains many legendary elements and must be used with care.

The royal household. Although Susa was the Achaemenid administrative capital, where royal decrees were issued and provincial officials sent their reports and where visiting dignitaries were received, the Greek authors noted that the king and his imperial court moved from one city to the next, depending on the season. Autumn and winter were spent in Babylon, spring in Susa, and summer in Ecbatana, but the great national holidays were celebrated at Persepolis (Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.6.22; idem, *Anabasis* 3.5.15; Strabo, 11.13.1), and the coronation palace was at Pasargadae (Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 3).

The imperial court comprised a large number of people, with the sacred figure of the king at its center. He lived in seclusion, and beside his mother and his principal wife only representatives of the six noblest Persian clans had the right of unannounced access to him. The clans were those of the six men who had assisted [Darius I](#) (522-486 b.c.e.) in overthrowing the usurper Gaumāta in 522 and thus enjoyed a favored position (Herodotus, 3.84). There is a reference in the Book of Esther (1:14) to “the seven princes of Persia and Media who could see the king’s face and held the first place in the kingdom.” On the [Bīsotūn](#) relief and the tomb at Naqs-e Rostam (Root, pls. VI, XII-XIII) Darius is depicted in the company of his courtiers, whereas in his later reliefs at Persepolis he is usually shown with the crown prince in attendance (Root, pls. XV, XXV, XXVII). That the royal prince (**vis-puθra-*, lit. “son of the (ruling) house”; cf. the calques Aram. *br byt’* and Bab. *mār bīti*, applied to Persian princes [Eilers, pp. 55-63; Benveniste, pp. 23-24] or to all male members of the Achaemenid family [Stolper, p. 60]) came to have a special importance at court is clear from these reliefs (Root, pp. 74-76; see [crown prince](#)).

The king had several wives and many concubines. He could marry women only from the six leading Persian noble families (Herodotus, 3.84). All the wives and daughters of the king bore the title **duxθrī* “royal princess” (lit. “daughter”), which has been preserved in Elamite transcription (*dukšiš*) in one of the Persepolis fortification tablets (Benveniste, pp. 43-48; see [artystone](#)). It



was unlawful, on pain of death, for anyone but the king, close relatives, and eunuchs to see the royal wives and concubines. In the Book of Esther (1:11-21) there is a story in which the Persian king Xerxes I (486-65 b.c.e.; see [ahasuerus](#)), in his cups, ordered his wife, Vashti, to show herself to the people at a feast in Susa, in contradiction of the law; she refused and, as punishment, was deprived of her title as queen and turned into an ordinary concubine. Although the story is probably fictional, it does suggest the prevailing attitude toward seclusion of the royal women. According to later classical authors, there were 360 concubines in the harem of the Persian king (Diodorus Siculus, 17.77.6; Curtius Rufus, 3.4.24). In military campaigns the most beautiful captives were sent to the court for the purpose. Many eunuchs were required to serve in the harem. The Babylonians annually sent 500 boys as eunuchs to the court (Herodotus, 3.92), and, in addition, the best-looking boys taken in war were castrated for the same purpose. Beginning in the time of Xerxes, the eunuchs gained increasing influence over the king and his court, and constant harem intrigues became characteristic.

Courtiers. There seems to have been a hierarchy of rank among the many groups at court. Any person who had rendered important service to the king was called a “benefactor” (Gr. *euergētai* “benefactors,” *orosangai*, from OIran. **waru-saṃha* “widely renowned”?; Schmitt, p. 131), and his name was entered on a special list (Herodotus, 8.85.90; Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 11.6.4). Royal benefactors were rewarded with special clothing, horses, golden ornaments, vast landholdings, and the like. They included foreigners who lived at court and who might also receive entire villages and cities as gifts (Dandamaev and Lukonin, pp. 138-39). According to Xenophon (*Anabasis* 1.2.27), the normal way in which a Persian king showed favor was through such gifts as a horse with a bridle ornamented in gold, a golden torque, bracelets, a golden *akinakes* (dagger), and a robe. Darius I personally instructed that 530 *karša* (i.e., 44.52 kg) of silver be distributed among thirteen individuals, almost all with Iranian names (Cameron, 1948, pp. 88-89 no. 4).

In terms of their position at court men designated as “relatives of the king” and “friends of the king” followed immediately after the benefactors and had the right to partake of royal meals. For instance, Tiribazes, satrap of western Armenia, was considered one of the second group, and when he was present no one else had the right to assist the king in mounting his horse (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 4.4.4.; cf. Curtius Rufus, 3.3.14.21).

Xenophon (*Anabasis* 1.9.3.) related that the sons of highly placed Persians were



trained at the king's court, where they learned both to command and to obey (cf. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.6.10; Plato, *Alcibiades* 121-22). At various times foreign dignitaries, ambassadors, and local kings dependent on the Achaemenids were also to be found at the imperial court. For example, in the reign of Darius I the Egyptian Ujahorresne stayed in Susa for some time. The Spartan king Demaratus, who had fled his homeland, lived at Xerxes' court and was numbered among his retainers (Herodotus, 7.101.237). The Athenian Themistocles, who had also fled to Persia, became influential there and participated in the king's hunts and domestic entertainments (Plutarch, *Themistocles* 29; cf. Walser, pp. 189-202). Aelianus (*Varia Historia* 1.22) reported that the Persian king usually gave to each Greek or other ambassador who came before him a silver Babylonian talent (30 kg) in minted coinage, two silver vessels each worth 1 talent, bracelets, a Persian sword, a pectoral chain worth 1,000 *darics*, and a set of Median clothing. Egyptian and Greek physicians also lived at the Achaemenid court (Herodotus, 3.1). Democedes of Croton was personal physician to Darius I and was included among the royal table companions (Herodotus, 3.129-33). Apollonides of Cos was physician to Xerxes and Artaxerxes I (465-24 b.c.e.), whereas Artaxerxes II (405-359 b.c.e.) enjoyed the services of both Ctesias of Cnidos and Polycritus of Mende (Hofstetter, pp. 19, 111, 157 nos. 24, 186, 272). Finally, some Greek clowns and dancers also found security at the Persian court (Hofstetter, pp. 185, 190 nos. 327, 337, pp. 213-15).

Organization of the court. The Persepolis documents in Elamite are evidence that representatives of many peoples worked at Persepolis and that a large number of translators was required to coordinate their work; similarly at Susa a staff of interpreters was maintained for civil servants, who arrived from all parts of the empire (e.g., Syloson of Samos; Herodotus, 3.140), which extended from Egypt to India. A substantial proportion of the servants at the Achaemenid court (bakers, cooks, wine stewards, etc.) was recruited from among vanquished peoples (cf. Dandamaev and Lukonin, pp. 170-72).

The most powerful court official was the **hazāra-patiš* "master of a thousand," or *chiliarch*, who was responsible for security and order in the palace. As chief of the court and all its officials and commander of the royal bodyguard, which consisted of 1,000 Persian noblemen, he enjoyed the confidence of the king, to whom he reported on all important matters. Except for a few intimates anyone who wished an audience with the king had to make application to the **hazāra-patiš*, who would conduct him into the royal presence (see Benveniste, pp.



67-70, for further references). According to Cornelius Nepos (*Conon* 3), the chiliarch occupied the second position after the king. Under Artaxerxes III (359-38 b.c.e.), however, the authority of the chiliarch Aristazanes was subordinate to that of the eunuch *Bagōas* (Diodorus Siculus, 16.47).

Another important official was the steward of the royal household, who apparently managed a single administrative department responsible for all the royal palaces and properties within the empire. Walther Hinz argued that his title was **viθa-patiš* “marshal of the court” and that he controlled the storehouses, wine cellars, and herds; Hinz also concluded that this official was always a Mede because in the Persepolis reliefs he is depicted in Median costume (1971, pp. 301-08; idem, 1979, pp. 79-89; but cf. Frye, 1984, p. 108 n. 75), but this conclusion can hardly be correct (see [clothing ii](#)). During the reigns of Cambyses and Darius I, between 529 and 497 b.c.e., the manager of the royal household was Pharnaces (Dandamaev, 1972, p. 19).

Other prominent court dignitaries were the royal spear carrier (**arštibāra*) and bow carrier (**vačabāra*), who were probably officers of the king’s bodyguard (see [aspačanā](#); cf. Frye, 1984, p. 108), and the royal charioteer (depicted on a seal of Darius I; see Wiseman, pl. 100). Under Xerxes I this last position was occupied by Patiramphe, son of Otanes (Herodotus, 7.40). There was also a royal cupbearer (Herodotus, 3.34; Xenophon, *Hellenica* 7.1.38); under Artaxerxes I this important post was held by the Jew Nehemiah, who lived at the court in Susa (Nehemiah 2:1).

A number of “royal judges,” appointed for life from the Persian nobility, lived at court and advised the king on the law and custom (Herodotus, 3.31; cf. *dātabara*). Royal emissaries, called “secretaries” of the king, were attached to each satrap, constituting the main administrative link between the imperial court and local governments (Herodotus, 3.128). The entire court, as well as the provincial governments, was under constant supervision of the “ears” and “eyes” of the king (Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.2.10-12; see Hirsch, pp. 131-34, with further references). Like the secretaries these secret agents were independent of the satraps and other local authorities and reported any seditious speech or act directly to the king.

The following civil servants also usually formed part of the royal court, though their titles were not necessarily court titles: announcers (*azdākara*), who proclaimed official decrees; treasurers (*ganzabara*; see Dandamaev and Lukonin, pp. 206-07, with further references); accountants (*ha(m)māarakara*;



see Greenfield); judicial investigators (**frāsaka*; Stolper, p. 31 n. 116); security police (**vistar-bara*; Stolper, p. 63 n. 51); and scribes who could write in Elamite, Aramaic, or Akkadian (Dandamaev and Lukonin, pp. 114-15).

Expenses of the court. Although no comprehensive information on the imperial budget is available, several sources provide clues to the levels of expenditure required to maintain the court. Persepolis documents drafted between 509 and 458 b.c.e. reveal that even the highest courtiers and officials received their salaries in unminted silver and in kind, for in the Achaemenid period there was no coinage in Persia (Dandamaev, pp. 19-22). Normally 15,000 people were fed daily at the king's expense; the total cost of such a dinner was 400 talents (12 tons) of silver (Athenaeus, 4.146c). Polyaeus (*Strategemata* 4.3.32) mentioned an inscription that Alexander the Great had found in the palace of the Persian king, recording daily expenditures for provisioning the royal household. The long list included 1,000 *artaba* (1 *artaba* = 30 liters) of the finest barley flour for the royal table; the bodyguard received 500 *artaba* of wheatmeal and other provisions (Bivar, pp. 638-9; Lewis, pp. 79-87; cf. cooking i). An official decree in 501 b.c.e. specified the issue of 12,610 *bar* (123,217 liters) of flour at Persepolis (Hallock, no. 701). Hinz (1971, p. 287) has suggested that this quantity was probably intended for the New Year's celebrations; it would have provided sufficient bread for nearly 10,000 of Darius I's guests over the course of ten days. Such large state receptions were no doubt held in the Apadāna.

Life at court. The dress and hairstyles of Median and Persian courtiers are reproduced in a number of Persepolis reliefs, where the courtiers are shown wearing torques and bracelets and sometimes carrying flowers (Roaf, pp. 94-103). One relief shows the ceremonial of the public audience. The king is seated beneath a canopy, wearing a long garment and a tall, crenellated tiara, with a staff in his right hand and a lotus blossom in his left. Behind him a man in Persian attire and a floppy pointed cap comparable to the later Turkish *başlık* holds a large fan above his head to keep the flies away, and behind him is a guardsman armed with a long spear. A man in Median costume with an *akinakes* at his side and a short staff in his hand stands before the king to present visitors to him (Walser, 1980, p. 79, pl. 81; cf. Root, p. 233). Before addressing the king, it was necessary to prostrate oneself (*proskynesis*) as a sign of respect (Bickerman). Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 8.3.10; *Hellenica* 2.1.8) reported that in the king's presence courtiers had to thrust their hands into their sleeves (but cf. Root, p. 277).

Less is known about the ruler's private life. Although meals were served to



large numbers of people in the palace each day (see above), the king dined in privacy with the queen and his mother in a separate room, from which, seated on a couch with golden legs, he could watch the guests through curtains. A servant wearing a bandage over his mouth, in order not to defile the king with his breath, waved a large fan over his head to keep away flies. Sometimes the king would invite a dozen or so favored courtiers to join him; they, however, sat on the floor. During the meal concubines sang and danced (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistai* 4.145-46, citing Heracleides of Cyme; cf. Cameron, 1958, p. 172 n. 50). According to the Book of Esther (6:1), when the king suffered from insomnia he would summon a secretary to read to him from chronicles of the events of his time and those of his predecessors. When traveling he was cared for by royal carpet bearers, who spread soft rugs for him at every halt and also exercised a police function, using whips to clear the road of strangers (see Stolper, p. 63 and n. 51, with further references).

Provincial courts. The satrap's court was a miniature version of the imperial court, including courtiers and civil servants. He, too, was responsible for feeding large numbers of people. For example, the governor of Judah had 150 regular table companions, and each day an ox, six sheep, fowls, and wine were required (Nehemiah 5:17-18). Information about the courts in Phoenician cities, Cilicia, and other parts of Asia Minor is very limited (see, e.g., Elayi, p. 20), but many Greeks are known to have lived at the courts of the satraps in Asia Minor, some of them as interpreters (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.8.12, 2.5.35, 4.4.5; etc.), and Greek girls were included in the harems (Hofstetter, p. 33 no. 55). According to the Babylonian and Aramaic documents, members of the Achaemenid family and influential dignitaries who owned extensive estates in Babylonia and Egypt had their own courts and judicial administrations (Dandamaev and Lukonin, pp. 135-37).

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