



DEIPNOSOPHISTAÍ

DEIPNOSOPHISTAÍ (Banquet of the Sophists), a miscellany in the form of dialogues ostensibly conducted at table, including approximately one hundred passages pertaining to Persia; it is the only extant work of Athenaeus (see [ATHENAIOS OF NAUCRATIS](#)), an Egyptian-born author who lived in Rome in the early 3rd century C.E. Charles Gulick (I, p. viii) suggested that one of the participants in the dinner conversation, a man named Ulpian, may have been modeled on the jurist Ulpian of Tyre, who was murdered in the presence of the emperor Alexander Severus in 228; if this identification is correct, then *Deipnosophistaí* was probably completed shortly after that date.

The information on Persia is generally mediocre and unreliable, with emphasis on titillating anecdotes of the luxury and moral laxity at the Persian court, almost entirely compiled from earlier sources, including *Cyropaedia* of Xenophon (ca. 429-375 B.C.E.); *Perì Kyzíkou* by Agathocles (fl. 5th-early 4th century B.C.E.); *Persiká* of [Ctesias](#) (fl. late 5th-early 4th century B.C.E.); *Physikē' Akróasis*, incorrectly attributed to Aristotle (Rose, p. 236); *Perì hēdonēs* by Heracleides of Pontus (fl. 4th century B.C.E.); *En stathmoís Persikoís* by Amyntas (fl. late 4th century B.C.E.); the lost *Bíos Archyta* by Aristoxenus of Tarentum (fl. late 4th century B.C.E.); *Perì Aléxandron historíai* by [Chares of Mitylene](#) (fl. late 4th century B.C.E.); *Bíoi* by Clearchus of Soloi (fl. late 4th century B.C.E.); *Persiká* by Dino (fl. late 4th century B.C.E.); *Persiká* by Heracleides of Cumae (fl. late 4th century B.C.E.); *Perì phyt(ik)ôn historía* by Theophrastus (ca. 372-ca. 287 B.C.E.); *Historíai* of [Duris](#) (fl. late 4th-early 3rd century B.C.E.), a notoriously unreliable author; an unnamed work by Timaeus



(fl. early 3rd century B.C.E.); *Epistolai* by Hieronymus of Rhodes (fl. 3rd century B.C.E.); *Historikà hypomnēmata* of Carystius of Pergamum (fl. late 2nd century B.C.E.); *Geographiká* by Strabo (ca. 63 B.C.E.-ca. 21 C.E.); and *Tà metá Polybion* by Poseidonius (fl. 2nd century C.E.). Athenaeus' work, though thus preserving valuable fragments of earlier writings, must be used with utmost care.

Reports about the Achaemenids. According to Athenaeus (912.513-14), the Persians were the first men in history to become notorious for luxurious living. He quoted from an address by the sensualist Polyarchus, preserved in Aristoxenus' *Bíos Archyta*, in which he claimed that the Persians rewarded anyone who invented a new pleasure. Polyarchus then described the luxuries with which the king of Persia surrounded himself: his servants, his sexual pleasures, his perfume, his elegance and conversation, and his entertainments (Athenaeus, 12.545-46; cf. 12.512a-b).

The Persian kings wintered in Susa and summered in Ecbatana, spending the autumn in Persepolis and the rest of the year in Babylon (Athenaeus, 12.513-14; cf. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.6.22, where it is said that Cyrus customarily spent the winter in Babylon and the spring at Susa). Athenaeus drew from Heracleides (12.514b; cf. Müller, *Fragmenta* II, p. 95) his description of the arrangements in one of these palaces. The king's official throne was of gold with four short posts studded with jewels, over which an embroidered purple cloth was draped. Adjacent to his private chamber there was a court named for his Persian bodyguard, one thousand chosen men known as the "apple bearers" because of the "golden apples" that adorned the butts of their spears. A report by Clearchus (Athenaeus, 12.514d; cf. Müller, *Fragmenta* II, p. 304) suggests that the Greek authors at least associated this emblem with [eunuchs](#), for, after describing the supposed excesses of the Medes, who castrated many men from neighboring tribes, he claimed that "apple bearing" was continued by the Persians, who avenged themselves on the Medes in this way. The king was accustomed to pass through the court of the apple bearers, walking on Sardis carpets reserved for his exclusive use; when he reached the outer court, he would mount his chariot or his horse, for he never went on foot outside the palace. Supposedly 300 women customarily watched over him at night, entering through the court of the apple bearers to sing and play the harp by lamp light while he took his pleasure of them. Concubines even attended him while he was hunting. Heracleides' description was supplemented by an excerpt from Chares, who reported that at the head of the



king's bed there was a chamber, called the "royal cushion," large enough to contain five couches and filled with 5,000 talents of gold coins, while at the foot of the bed there was a chamber called the "royal footstool," large enough for three couches and containing 3,000 talents in silver money. Above the bed itself a golden vine, studded with jewels, formed a kind of canopy (Athenaeus, 12.514b-f; cf. Jacoby, *Fragmente* II B, p. 658), .

Dino (Athenaeus, 12.514a-b; cf. Muller, *Fragmenta* II, p. 92) is cited as the source for a description of the king's fragrant headdress of myrrh and an aromatic known as *lábyzos*; a special attendant carried a golden stool by which the king descended from his chariot, so that no one need touch him in support. Such a stool is represented in the procession on the reliefs at Persepolis (see, e.g., *Survey of Persian Art* VII, pl. 94B). Athenaeus also reported (10.434d), without naming his source, that **Darius I** (r. 521-486 B.C.E.) had inscribed on his tomb "I could drink much wine and yet carry it well" (cf. Schmitt, pp. 26, 30); the trilingual inscription carved on his tomb at Naqš-e Rostam includes no such reference, however (Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 138-40). Much of Athenaeus' other information on drinking at the Achaemenid court was taken from Ctesias, who had reported that the Persian king was allowed to get drunk only on the day of the sacrifice to Mithra, and from Duris, who added that on that day the king alone could dance "the Persian"; such dancing was unique to the Persians, who, according to Duris, learned to dance as routinely as they learned to ride (10.434d-e; cf. Müller, *Fragmenta* I, p. 55, II, p. 472; see [DANCE i](#)).

Dino provided information on the royal meals in the time of Xerxes I. Only the choicest foodstuffs from all over the empire were served, for Xerxes disapproved of foreign food or drink, and his successors actually forbade them; he forbade purchasing Attic figs until he could seize them without buying them, apparently a reference to a proposed expedition to Athens. The most complete report on meals, however, came from Heracleides. The king normally breakfasted and dined entirely alone, though sometimes his wife and some of his sons joined him. All those who were to serve him had first to bathe and don white clothes. The guests were divided into two categories, those who dined outdoors in full view and those who dined indoors, in a separate room, where the king could see them through a curtain while remaining invisible himself. On great public holidays, however, all the guests might dine in the great hall with the king. Furthermore, he frequently sent a eunuch to invite a dozen or so companions to drink with him in his private



room after dinner; at these sessions the guests, who were not served the same wine as the king, sat on the floor, while he reclined on a couch with golden feet. They left only when thoroughly drunk. Throughout the dinner the royal concubines played the lyre and sang, one of them as soloist, the rest as chorus. Despite all this supposed splendor, however, Heracleides emphasized the small portions and general parsimony of the meals served both at court and in the homes of Persian notables (see [COOKING i](#)) and commented that it was customary for guests to carry away any morsels of their food that they did not finish (Athenaeus, 14.652b-c, 4.145b-e; cf. Müller, *Fragmenta* II, pp. 91, 96).

Clearchus (Athenaeus, 12.514-d-e; cf. Müller, *Fragmenta* II, p. 304) claimed that the king took steps to prevent his bodyguards from becoming soft with luxury: “To those, at any rate, who supplied him with any delicacy he gave prizes for the invention, yet when he served these dainties he did not sweeten them by bestowing special honors, but preferred to enjoy them all alone, showing his sense!” From Timaeus Athenaeus drew the story of [Democedes](#) (12.522b-c; cf. Müller, *Fragmenta* I, p. 212), a Greek physician from Croton who was captured by the Persians after the death in battle of Polycrates of Samos in 522 B.C.E. and served at the court of Darius I. Greek notables like Pausanius, king of the Spartans, and Dionysius, tyrant of Sicily, deliberately adopted Persian dress (Athenaeus, 12.535e, citing Duris), and Greek exiles who submitted to Persia, like Themistocles of Athens and Demaratus of Sparta, were required to wear it; among the cities given to Themistocles was Gambreium in Asia Minor, which was to provide his clothing (Athenaeus, 1.29f-30a; cf. Thucydides, 1.138.5).

Reports about Alexander and his successors. Carystius reported that the Persian kings’ habit of getting drunk was emulated by Alexander, who used to carouse in an ass-drawn chariot (10.43-44; cf. 10.434f-435a). He also adopted Persian dress, and Demetrius Poliorcetes, son of his general Antigonos, was noted for wearing expensive Persian shoes (Athenaeus, 12.535f, citing Duris). The Parthian kings, according to Athenaeus (12.513f-14a), continued the Achaemenid practice of shifting the capital according to the season, spending the spring in Rhagae, the winter in Babylon, and the rest of the year in Hecatompylos (cf. Strabo, 16.1.16). Citing Poseidonius, Athenaeus reported that at banquets the Parthian king reclined alone on a separate, more elevated couch; his table, with native dishes, was set somewhat apart, “as to a departed spirit.” The “king’s friend” sat on the ground, while the king tossed him morsels of food as if to a dog; often, on some slight pretext, he would order this



favorite to be taken away and flogged with staves or knouts, after which, covered in blood, he would prostrate himself before the king and do obeisance (4.152f-153b; cf. Müller, *Fragmenta* III, pp. 254, 258).

Greek imports from Persia. Among the products that Athenaeus reported as having originated in Persia were peaches (“Persian apples,” *mēla persiká*), oranges (“Median apples,” *mēdiká*), plums (“Persian sour apples,” *oxýmala persiká*; 3.82e-83a), and walnuts (“Persian nuts,” *persiká*, 2.53e, 54b), though he did not mention the cock and the rose, which had also originated in Persia. Two supposed Persian drinking vessels, *sannákra* (a cup; 11.497e-f) and *batiákē* (“a Persian saucer”; 11.784a-b) are not attested elsewhere. Among Persian words used in Greek Athenaeus cited *parasángēs* “parasang,” *astándēs* “courier,” *ággaros* “mounted courier,” and *schoînon* “rush, reed,” a measure of land (3.122a).

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