



ETIQUETTE I. ETIQUETTE IN THE SASSANIAN PERIOD

The distance in time and the paucity of primary sources from the pre-Islamic period make it hard to establish the boundaries of etiquette in Sasanian culture and to distinguish between what belonged to the sphere of public morality, ethics, and religious duties and what were the rules of etiquette and personal behavior among the higher classes of society. This lack of sources drives us to use, alongside the few allusions found in the Pahlavi texts, early Arabic and Persian texts that contain materials probably derived directly or indirectly from Sasanian literature. It is, however, often impossible to make a clear distinction in post-Sasanian literature between genuine reports of Sasanian practices and fictionalized accounts of customs and norms which were projected back to the Sasanian era as an idealized golden age of fine ceremonies and perfect decorum. This study focuses on a few examples dealing with etiquette in conduct and the art of conversation, table manners, and courtly behavior.

Etiquette in conduct and the art of conversation. An eminent person coming from afar would be met at some distance by a welcoming party (e.g., Wolff, *Glossar*, p. 186, s.v. “*paδīre*”; *Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag* 4.1). When two people met, the one belonging to an inferior rank, or if of equal status the younger of the two, would dismount first. For instance, Zāl dismounts on seeing his father Sām. Gēv and his entourage dismount upon reaching Rostam (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, I, p. 227 v. 938, II, p. 143 vv. 308-10), but it is Rostam who dismounts



first on meeting Esfandīār (ibid., V, p. 331-32 vv. 475-88); when Pīrān meets Rostam, he remains seated in the saddle because he is unaware of who he is; but he quickly gets off his horse as soon as he finds out Rostam's identity (ibid., III, p. 206 v. 1665). After dismounting, those of more or less equal status would kiss the ground before the other. Other features of the manners of encounters included extolling each other and inquiring after each other's well being and that of their relatives and about the hardships of the journey (ibid., I, p. 239 v. 1100, III, pp. 165, vv. 970-76, 173 vv. 1119-125, V, pp. 331-33 vv. 475-94; Wolff, *Glossar*, pp. 134, s.v. "*burdan*," no. 7 and p. 817, s.v. "*namāz*"). On meeting each other, or bidding each other farewell, a son would kiss his father's hands and feet while the father would embrace the son's head, face and eyes (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, I, p. 273 v. 1546). In front of their elders, the young would stand with hands on their chests and heads lowered downwards in respect (ibid., IV, p. 76 v. 1197; Wolff, *Glossar*, p. 382, s.v. "*dast*," no. 45; *Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag* 1.20). A guest would be met and greeted by the host on entering the house (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, I, p. 198 v. 509; *Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag*, 3.7, 4.1; Kaykāwūs b. Eskandar, p. 71). On departure, a high-ranking guest or a person dear to the host would be accompanied for several stations on his way and they would embrace at the point of separation (e.g., *Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, I, p. 275 v. 1578).

As for clothing and the dress-code, observance of religious rules required that a person should not go around without wearing the *kustīg* (the sacred girdle), or without shoes, or with just a single shoe (e.g., *Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag*, 17.9, 12, 25.3; *Pahlavi Rivayat*, ed. Dhabhar, 11.1-2; Junker, ed., p. 31, tr. p. 42; *Sad dar-e naṭr*, 82; *Sad dar-e Bondaheš*, 60, 85, 89). The wearing of hat was also a part of etiquette; the hat would be removed in front of notables as a token of respect or repentance and at times of mourning and worship (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, II, p. 57 v. 780, IV, p. 162 v. 2470; Wolff, *Glossar*, p. 510, s.v. "*sar*," no. 177). The cleanliness of the body and the clothes was stressed, and the wearing of scent was approved of (*Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag* 2.12, 17.9, 12; *Sad dar-e Bondaheš*, 85.1). Flowers were used for general decoration, for decorating dining cloths and votive spreads, or as gifts (*Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag* 15.10; *Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, I, pp. 191 vv. 393-96, 196 vv. 472-73, V, p. 20 vv. 243, 247; *Pahlavi Rivayat*, ed. Dhabhar, 56.6-8, 58.11, 19, 29; *Īrānšāh*, p. 593 v. 10,252). On festive occasions men and women would carry flowers in their hands. Each flower would have its own symbolic connotations (Unvala, tr., pp. 31-34; Faḵr-al-Dīn Gorgānī, pp. 165 vv. 82-84, 403 vv. 17-18; Hoṣrī, pp. 209, 211). On a festive occasion at the time of Bahrām Gōr (q.v.), according to Abū Ḥanīfa Dīnavarī (p. 57), the price



of a bouquet of flowers rose to one dirham. This illustrates the importance of flowers and their role in matters of etiquette in Sasanian culture in general and in the reign of Bahrām in particular. Apart from flowers, the bestowal of gifts, especially to a harbinger of good news, was part of the rules of etiquette (Wolff, *Glossar*, p. 772, s.v. “*mužde*”; E’temād Moqaddam, I, pp. 339-53; see also [GIFT GIVING](#)).

It was regarded as bad manners to criticize a person for having given the wrong advice, or, on the other hand, to make a person feel beholden to one after following one’s sound guidance; a person who had suffered as a result of not following good advice was not to be admonished (Ebn al-Moqaffa’, 1936, p. 116). Good behavior, however, required that one express his gratitude (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, II, p. 121 v. 39, III, p. 393 vv. 1217-221; Wolff, *Glossar*, p. 491, s.v. “*sipās*”).

It was important to know one’s place at any meeting and not rise above one’s station (*Andarz ī Ādurbād*, no. 88; Ebn al-Moqaffa’, 1961, p. 74). According to Ebn al-Moqaffa’ (1936, p. 97), one should sit at a station beneath one’s status, while according to Meskawayh (pp. 27, 39), a person should know his place and should sit neither above nor below his rightful seat; arguments about seating positions were discouraged (for seating arrangements at royal courts, see [BĀR](#)).

One should be amicable and courteous, but courtesy and affability should not degenerate into submissiveness and lowliness (*Pahlavi Rivayat*, ed. Dhabhar, 62.20; Meskawayh, pp. 14-15, 26-27, 32-33); one should not appear cheerful in front of a sad person (Ebn al-Moqaffa’, 1936, p. 113); on leaving the bath, one should not walk in the street or visit people while one’s hair is still wet; in chess and backgammon, the player of higher social rank should be given the choice of pieces and the option of starting; when hunting, kings and notables should not ride with cheetahs lodged on the backs of their horses (Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar, pp. 77, 89, 95).

On the art of conversation only the more important points will be mentioned here: one should not be too eager to talk; one must be more willing to listen than to speak, for there is an art of listening as well as an elegant way of speaking, and it entails waiting until the speaker finishes his speech, and looking intently at the speaker in a way that makes it clear that one is paying full attention to the speech; one must speak sedately and eloquently (*Andarz ī Ādurbād*, nos. 62, 63, 85; Ebn al-Moqaffa’, 1936 pp. 26, 63, 115, 118; Meskawayh,



p. 27; Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar, p. 49; Wolff, *Glossar* p. 287, s.v. “čarb” and p. 805, s.v. “narm”); one should not suddenly abandon one’s speech for another date (Ebn al-Moqaffa’, 1936, p. 62), for an unfinished speech was considered as bad as a long one, or, in the words of Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar (pp. 159-160), both “docked-tail” and “long-tailed” speeches were to be avoided; one should reply only when asked directly (Ebn al-Moqaffa’, 1936, pp. 44, 67; idem, 1961, p. 74); over-eagerness in agreeing with a speaker and confirming his words and thereby giving the impression that one claims to be an authority on the subject were discouraged; parading one’s eloquence among people ignorant and oblivious of it was to be avoided (Ebn Moqaffa’, 1936, pp. 69, 118 ff.); in the company of strangers, any criticism of other lands or derision of personal names should be avoided lest somebody belonging to that particular land or sharing that name happened to be present; one should not talk in whispers to another one in the presence of others; startling tales and seemingly incredible anecdotes were best avoided (Ebn Moqaffa’, 1936, pp. 42, 104, 121; Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar, pp. 41-43); those obsessed with particular subjects should bear in mind that not everyone shares their enthusiasm and should therefore avoid repeating and dwelling on them (Ebn Moqaffa’, 1936, pp. 54, 103 ff.); self-adulation, boasting, cursing, swearing oaths, belittling others, contradicting oneself in speech, idle chatter, criticizing people in their absence, threatening and menacing talk, should all be avoided (*Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag* 29.3, 66.3; *Mēnōg ī xrad* 20.11-17, 40-44, 35.26; *Andarz ī Ādurbād*, nos. 16, 40, 44, 62, 63, 65, 85, 88, 92, 93, 96; *Wāzag ī ēčand*, no. 69; *Sad dar-e Bondaheš* 65, 74.8; Meskawayh, pp. 12, 27, 37, 68, 82; Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar, pp. 110, 149); joking and teasing should be avoided unless it is mild and inoffensive (Meskawayh, pp. 12, 38). It should not be regarded as demeaning to apologize; when someone’s misdemeanors have been forgiven and pardoned, there should be no reminding of them; one should not obstinately keep to one’s position; on seeing a beautiful object, God’s name should be recited (Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar, pp. 77 ff., 153; *Sad dar-e naṭr*, 15; Wolff, *Glossar*, p. 334, s.v. “xvāndan,” no. 9).

Table manners. Certain rules of conduct were recommended for both the host and the guest: moderation in invitations was recommended (Meskawayh, p. 26), or in the words of Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar (p. 71), it was more fitting to invite once rather than thrice in a month, but be flawless in one’s hospitality. The most important obligation of the host was the fulfillment of the custom of *kerām* (see *EIr.* I, p. 432b). Other duties included welcoming guests according to their rank and status; when the cloth was spread and the guests had sat down, the host at first remained standing and did not sit until he was asked by



the guests (Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar, pp. 71-72). Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar points out that the custom at his own birthplace, Gorgān, as well as among Arabs, was for the host to be absent from the feast and appoint someone else to serve the guests. As for laying out the meal, he mentions two customs (pp. 65-66). One was to place the food first in front of the host and then in front of the guest, and the second was the reverse. The author preferred the second and labeled the first custom expedient and the second gracious. From this we can deduce that in feasts given by kings and rulers, the food would be placed first in front of the host, and in other feasts the guests would have the priority. Other manners included refraining from constantly apologizing to the guests for shortcomings and pressing them to have more (Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar, p. 72); the host should not elaborate on the relative merits of different dishes in relation to health (Asadī, pp. 28 v 11. 131-32); the host should not look cheerful at the feast; after the meal, when the drinking began, the host had to make sure that he did not become drunk before the guests and when they became somewhat tipsy, he was to pretend that he too felt light-headed with wine and drink to the company (Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar, pp. 66, 74).

The major principle was never to go to a feast uninvited (Meskawayh, p. 39). One should go to a feast feeling neither too full nor too hungry and know one's place and position at the host's table (*Wāzag ī ēčand*, no. 17; *Sad dar-e naṭr*, 13.3 ff.; Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar, p. 75); one was to pray and thank God both before and after the meal (*Sad dar-e Bandaheš*, p. chap. 59); one should not help oneself to food before others and not look in the direction from which the food was being brought in (Ebn al-Moqaffa', 1961, p. 75 ff.); the meal should be eaten slowly and one should engage others in conversation, but the head must be lowered and one should refrain from watching others while they eat (Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar, p. 65). Conversation at meal time is, however, regarded as a major sin in Zoroastrian religious texts. According to them, a deity stands and at the sides of each guest, and if the guests talk while eating, the deity departs and a demon takes his place (Kotwāl, ed., chap. 18.4; *Mēnōg ī xrad* 1.33; *Pahlavi Rivayat* 56.10 ff.; *Sad dar-e naṭr* 21.2 ff.; *Sad dar-e Bandaheš* 94.8). It is, however, possible that the religious texts were concerned primarily with votive meals (*mezd*). Guests should not quarrel (*Andarz ī Ādurbād*, no. 28) or insult the host (Meskawayh, p. 39) or give orders to the servants of the house (Asadī, p. 216 v. 60), so that, in the words of Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar (p. 75), a guest might pretend to others that he was himself a part of the household. When drinking, one should not reach the state of intoxication, which manifests itself by exaggerated behavior like excessive chatter, over-



indulgence at eating side-dishes, singing and dancing too much, being over solicitous, and laughing and crying a great deal (Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar, p. 76). At the end of the feast, someone should briefly thank the host. There is a short text in Pahlavi which provides an example of this kind of discourse (*Pahlavi Texts* II, p. 155-59).

Courtly etiquette (for a detailed discussion see BĀR). Important practices included: the custom of kissing the ground; holding one's hand or handkerchief in front of the mouth when speaking to the king; always beginning one's address to the king with the words “*anošag bawēd*” (may you live forever); using the toothpick; carrying a pleasant scent but not a strong perfume; not spitting; refraining from coughing and sneezing as far as possible; not speaking except to answer a question from the king; speaking in a measured tone and not repeating oneself; never attempting to correct the king. Laughter, backbiting, mentioning adverse omens, and relating unpleasant events or impossible adventures, were all to be shunned. On leaving the king's presence, one should avoid turning one's back at him; one should not look at the servants and wine-servers lest the king become suspicious (Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar, p. 205); not only criticizing the king but also praising his good deeds was against courtly etiquette (Ebn al-Moqaffa', 1936, p. 58); if the king addressed someone as “brother,” he should call the king “father” and if the king showed him greater respect, he should also show the king greater respect (Ebn al-Moqaffa', 1936, p. 26). The king in his turn had to conform to certain rules. He should not swear oaths (Ebn al-Moqaffa', 1936, p. 21); he should not laugh to such an extent as to show his teeth but be content with a smile; he should not use rude and vulgar words even when angry (Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar, p. 234).

Much subtlety was shown in courtly and aristocratic circles in conveying intentions obliquely. There are many instances in the *Šāh-nāma*. For example, when the priests and notables do not approve of Zāl's love for Rūdāba, they say to him, “The fact that we remain silent and with heads bowed is a token of our obedience and not a sign of our amazement at your conduct” (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khalegh, I, p. 204 v. 602). Or when Zāl wants to convey the message to his father that if he talks roughly to him on the question of his proposed marriage, he too will respond roughly, he says, “If my father speaks to me with reason, the conversation will not take long; but if he speaks in anger, my eyes will be filled with tears of his shame” (*Sāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, I, p. 228 vv. 945-46).

See also: AKLĀQ; ANDARZ; BĀR; ETHICS.



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