



GIFT GIVING II. IN PRE-ISLAMIC PERSIA

GIFT GIVING

ii. In Pre-Islamic Persia

Although giving and receiving gifts played a part in almost all ancient societies, it appears to have assumed a particular significance and a specific manner in the ancient Near East, and especially in ancient Iran. This is already illustrated by the place it acquired in ancient tradition (cf. Strabo, 15.3.21). While the objects offered, the forms of expression, and the occasions of gift giving, as well as the “ideological” framework of this institution, are quite clearly recognizable despite some topical distortions especially in the Greco-Roman tradition, this is not true of its economic implications within the royal financial system.

ACHAEMENIDS

Gifts from the king. Among the characteristic acts of a good ruler, as shown in the royal Achaemenid inscriptions, as well as in Greek sources, were the systematic punishment of evildoers and rebels and the generous reward of benefactors and loyal subjects (cf. DNB 16 f.; Herodotus, 7.27 ff.). The latter, defined by the Greeks as *euergetai* or *orosangai* (< Med. **varusanha-*), were listed at court with their achievements, (inheritable) privileges, and distinctions (Wiesehöfer, 1980). The reward they received could be in the form



of tax exemption (Gk. *ateleia*; Wiesehöfer, 1989), special access to the king and/or gifts such as landed property (or its proceeds and incomes), valuable objects (golden necklaces, armbands, precious garments, weapons, vessels [which were sometimes inscribed], horses with golden bridles, etc.) or merely participation at or shares in royal meals (Briant, 1989; idem, 1996, pp. 314-35; Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1989; idem, 1995). Thus, honored personalities are indeed represented on Achaemenid reliefs and elsewhere (Calmeyer, 1991), and there are grounds to believe that distinctions of this kind were publicly granted (for instance at a royal meal [Gk. *tykta* < Ir. **taug-*]); occasions for granting them might be the king's birthday (Herodotus, 9.110), the designation of the heir to the throne (Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 26.3), or his accession to the throne (Ctesias, in Jacoby, *Fragmente*, no. 688, F 15, 49). On the other hand, it appears that previously honored subjects who had later proved disloyal might be publicly deprived of their privileges and gifts, and, at worst, even publicly tortured and executed. However, Greek tradition also includes the motif of a magnanimous and forgiving ruler (cf. Aelian, 6.14).

Along with the great king's *polydoria* ("open-handedness") which, in the Iranian context, is always to be understood as the mark and privilege of a highly superior sovereign, rather than as a royal gesture within a reciprocal system of exchanging gifts based on equality and the principle of *do ut des*, (lit. "I give to make you give") one may also recognize something like the ruler's obligation to show particular generosity. This is expressed by what the Greeks describe as the *nomos* of the king's obligation to fulfil his subjects' wishes on certain occasions (cf. Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 26.5 ff., an episode which, at the same time, emphasizes the king's full scope of action; or Herodotus, 9.108 ff., a novella in which this custom cryptically alludes to a struggle for the throne; Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1980, pp. 48 ff., 122 ff.).

Presents offered to the king. From the Assyrian context we know of a great variety of gifts with different objectives (Zaccagnini)—spectacular gifts, e.g., for a conqueror or a new sovereign, apparently offered as a form of acknowledgment of a power changeover or as a kind of reconciliation; gifts offered at certain occasions or regularly given can be interpreted as a sign of submission and loyalty; gifts presented to the king by embassies or by individuals when he was traveling through the country; and gifts offered to the king by his independent equals and neighbors. Some of these types of gifts also appear in the Achaemenid context: the *dora* ("gifts") of Herodotus (3.89) which, before the tax reform of Darius I, made up the obligations of the



subjects in a less rigid and less legalized form; the *dora* of the same author (3.97), the delivery of which by partially autonomous populations, together with the payment of the *phoros* ('tribute') by the fully subjugated people (and military service), marks the status of subjects during the period after Darius (Wiesehöfer 1989, pp. 184 ff.; cf. Briant, 1996, pp. 406 ff.); the gifts received by the king in the country or on certain occasions, and which may be illustrated in the Persepolis reliefs (Root, p. 228; Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1989, pp. 134 f.). These kinds of gifts seem to have been obligatory for the inhabitants of Persis, too, but at the same time they documented the special position of the Persians among the peoples of the empire (cf. Aelian, 1.31 f.; Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 4.5, 5.1; *Moralia*, 172b; Briant, 1996, pp. 409 f.). An exchange of diplomatic presents between independent partners could also involve political claims of supremacy, which is shown by the episode about the contact between the king of Ethiopia and Cambyses (Herodotus, 3.20 f.).

Gifts not only filled the royal treasuries, out of which generous rulers could help themselves on suitable occasions for redistributive purposes (Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1989, p. 137), but also were, as a rule, promptly and more than aptly repaid. This kind of repayment of favors, however, ought not to be interpreted as a form of reciprocal exchange of the kind appearing in Homeric epics (cf. Wagner-Hasel); they rather follow Marcel Mauss's rules of the *magister-minister* opposition (Mauss, tr. Cunnison, p. 51): The king gives or returns presents in a royal manner, rather than in an egalitarian or indeed subservient way.

PARTHIANS AND SASANIANS

Despite problems concerning records, there are references showing that the giving and receiving of presents remained significant in Iran during the Parthian-Sasanian period. Thus the Adiabene (q.v.) king Izates was rewarded by Artabanos (Ardavān) II for his loyalty and support with particular emblems of dignity (the *tiara orthe*) and with an expansion of his territory (Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicæ* 20.67 f.). Posidonius attests the newly hierarchized and conceptually consolidated (cf. *Orientalis Græci Inscriptiones Selectæ*, no. 430) system of court titles based on Hellenistic models, and, together with the reliefs from Elymais (Vanden Berghe and Schippmann, pp. 66 ff.; Kawami, pp. 196 ff.), the significance of royal banquets (Jacoby, *Fragmente*, no. 87, F 5), while treasuries from ancient Nisa and elsewhere point to the storage of precious stones and metals.



Evidence of the Sasanian inscriptions points to the survival of the tradition of giving and receiving gifts by the sovereign in the Sasanian period: For instance, in connection with the royal proclamation, four different groups of aristocrats are named and numerous court titles are referred to in the inscriptions of Šāpūr I at Hājīābād (ll. 1-6) and at Ka'ba-ye Zardošt (22/17/39 ff., 30/24/59 ff.) and of Narseh at Paikuli (ll. 2-3, § 5; Wiesehöfer, 1996, pp. 171 ff., 183 ff.); the reliefs of the same period feature noblemen wearing tiaras in certain colors or with certain heraldic insignia, as well as special belts and earrings (Gall, pp. 23 ff.; Peck, pp. 739 ff.); according to Ammianus Marcellinus, Šāpūr II decorated a Roman deserter with a tiara (18.5.6; cf. inscriptions of Kirdir at Ka'ba-ye Zardošt, l. 4 and of Kirdir at Naqš-e Rostam, ll. 9 f. and at Sar Mašhad, l. 5), allowing him to participate at the royal banquet and at royal *contiones* ('assemblies'). It appears, however, that for a long time the rank of a Parthian or Sasanian nobleman depended not only on the benevolence of the king, but also on his own descent and on the sovereign's recognition of ancient privileges (Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.6.13, 13.16). This did not change until the late Sasanian period, when the wearing of belts, rings, buckles, and other insignia, at least temporarily, required royal approval (Theophylactus Simocatta, 1.9; Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1. 17. 26 ff.; cf. Theophylactus Simocatta, 3.8; Ṭabarī, I, p. 990; Dīnawarī, ed. Guirgass, p. 85), and the awarded rank, the presence at court and loyalty towards the sovereign were more highly esteemed than name, origin, and particular family interests.

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