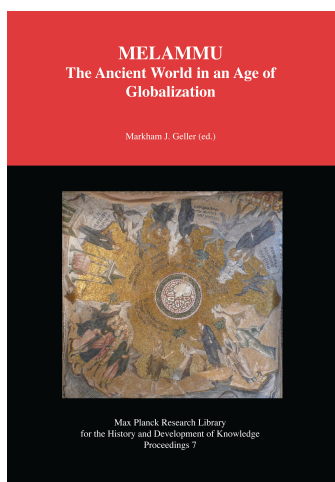


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## Chapter 11

### Power and Ritual in the Achaemenian Royalty

*Antonio Panaino*

The Achaemenian power system developed a number of complex and elaborated ritual patterns, which contributed to emphasize the role of public ceremonies as a means of social control and ideological fascination. The same construction of Persepolis, with its indisputable ceremonial functions, shows the importance given to royalty and its legitimization, which can only in part be imagined in the light of the splendid reliefs there still preserved. The capacity to assimilate Mesopotamian royal language with many Assyrian, Babylonian, Elamite and Egyptian patterns and symbols demonstrates that such a new dynasty was not simply copying its forerunners but that it was able to produce a kind of synthesis, although an unpredictable melange, which at least in the East of the Mediterranean area, offered some support to the later phenomenon of Hellenistic culture.

Unfortunately, the ceremonial aspects which distinguished the external (that is, public) and internal (that is, private) life of the Achaemenian family have raised a lot of questions and sometimes produced a number of false problems, obscuring many other extraordinary points. In particular, the special position attributed to the king has been the controversial object of discussions about his presumed divinization, which actually never occurred, producing additional misunderstandings about the Sassanian period.

In the limits of this short contribution, I would like only to focus on some aspects of the superior dimension of kingship which have nothing to do with a process of divinization, but which could be simplistically associated with such a kind of phenomenon. For this reason, I will not underline well known facts, as for instance, that the king is never called *baga-*, that his image has never been represented with horns, or that his name in the Babylonian version of the Achaemenian inscriptions was neither written with the Akkadian determinative for the gods [*ilu*] which, however, was regularly used in the case of the Iranian gods.

In addition, the Babylonian origin of the *proskynesis* and the Avestan tradition concerning the importance of the ancestors' souls, to which we will come back, do not involve the same phenomena emerging in the Hellenistic context, although their presence can raise some improper comparisons and inferences.

Contrariwise, we may note that, according to the Plutarch's *Life of Themistokles*, XXVIII, 3, Artabanos declared that his king was "like an image of god" (ὡς εἰκόνα θεοῦ),<sup>1</sup> to whom a special devotion (the *proskynesis*, and so forth) was due.<sup>2</sup> The image of the king mirrors that of god, but such a statement does not mean that he was a god. All the Achaemenian documents, in fact, underline the role of the king as the person chosen by Ahuramazdā; it is reasonable to assume that the king was considered as a living image of a superior power, his representative on the earth. Similarity, thus, is not identity. We can add that Huff (2008, 39) recently noted that, for instance, in the Sassanian framework of Firuzabad, "king and god stand on equal footing and only by his gesture of respectful salute does the king acknowledge the superiority of the god." But Huff has also insisted on the comparison with the Achaemenian context, where the difference between these two levels was much stronger, a fact that clearly denies any process of royal divinization in early Persia. At the end of the Sassanian period, under Xusraw II, the king actually became the main figure in the scene, although he was not divine at all. It is more probable that Sassanian kings also actually never presumed to be divine, but that their image was an earthly *speculum divinitatis* as it was also for the Achaemenians; simply they increased the *kosmokratic* function of the king as it happened in the Byzantine context.

Another apparently negative witness, which could be used in favor of the royal divinization, is attested in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (IV, 1, 24); here Cyaxares with reference to Cyrus says that "he himself would never leave the noblest and best of men, and what was more than all, a man descended from gods" (οὐκ ἀπολεψείτο ἀνδρός καλλίστου καὶ ἀρίστου, καὶ τὸ μέγιστου, ἀπὸ θεῶν γεγονότος). It is to be noted that this sentence is only an homage to the generosity of Cyrus and it cannot be considered *per se* as consistent evidence of his divinization, in particular if we consider that the present speech was delivered when Cyrus was not yet king. I do not think we can take literally (or better politically and institutionally) a formula like ἀπὸ θεῶν γεγονότος as an official mark of Persian royalty.

I would also like to mention that the Achaemenian king as well as the Sassanian one was initiated into the "secrets" or "mysteries" of sacred royalty<sup>3</sup> and, for this reasons, he also endorsed the living image of the divine power. If in Sassanian times, the *šāh* became the centre of a complex court's ritual, which made of him a *kosmokrator*, we may suppose that all the rituals taking place within the framework of Persepolis gave to the king the same function; in particular, they

<sup>1</sup> See (Panaino 2003, 269; Panaino 2007, 123 with detailed bibliography).

<sup>2</sup> And this could explain, according to (Calmeyer 1981, 58), the representation on the winged sun of a man with a horned "polos," which perhaps represents the deceased king.

<sup>3</sup> According to Agathias (*Historiae*, II, 26, 2–3) the king Ardashīr was initiated to religious mysteries.

underlined his centrality in the empire. Furthermore, we cannot forget the importance attributed to the ritual of royal initiation (connected with the investiture and the legitimacy of the new king, as mentioned by Plutarch, *Life of Artaxerxes*, III, 1–2), a fundamental ceremony which was regularly organized in Pasargadae. This is what Plutarch wrote with reference to Artaxerxes II, son of Darius II: “A little while after the death of Darius, the new king made an expedition to Pasargadae, that he might receive the royal initiation at the hands of the Persian priests. Here there is a sanctuary of a warlike goddess whom one might conjecture to be Athena (2). Into this sanctuary the candidate for initiation must pass, and after laying aside his own proper robe, must put on that which Cyrus the Elder used to wear before he became king; then, he must eat of a cake of figs, chew some turpentine-wood, and drink a cup of sour milk. Whatever else is done besides this is unknown to outsiders.”

Such initiatory access to royalty does not involve any kind of divinisation, but it represents an esoteric tradition based on the exaltation of the founder of the empire, Cyrus, with whom the new king probably entered in spiritual contact assuming his robe. But with regard to this particular subject I would like to draw attention to the fact that Cyrus’ robe was what he used to wear *before* he became king, and not what he was wearing as full king; this symbolically means that the new king, at his first step, assumed some external qualities that made Cyrus able to ascend the throne; in other words, the first part of the ritual is a preparation of the new king, and not yet his royal transformation. Once robed, Cyrus had to eat and drink and, only then, must he pass a series of rituals that were kept secret for uninitiated. We must remark that this rituals probably took place in a temple dedicated to Anāhitā, if, as is probable, the reference to Athena has to be interpreted this way; this piece of news is of relevant importance, since Anāhitā doubtless has been a goddess strongly linked with various Iranian royal families from the Achaemenians till the Sassanians; also among the Kušānas we can find the same tradition regarding such a goddess. The fact that the royal initiation took place in the sacred space of Anāhitā’s temple does not happen by chance.<sup>4</sup>

Before concluding this short contribution, I would like to mention the important attempt offered by Taylor (1931, 247–255) to emphasize the divinity of the Achaemenian king; although an old work and some of its results cannot be now accepted, it still deserves to be considered. Presently, we can maintain the focus attributed to the dynastic cults (for instance of Cyrus the Great), in particular in the case of the dead king seen as an *artāvan-* and with regard to the worship to be offered to his soul (probably his *frauuāši*), as well as to the importance of the royal person (dead or alive) in official ceremonies. As I have already noted in other contributions (Panaino 2009b; Panaino 2009c), Taylor (1927) assumed in

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<sup>4</sup>See (Panaino 2009b).

particular that the king's δαίμων should correspond to the Av. *frauuāši*, a solution that was strongly criticized by Tarn (1928, 207–210). But, in this case, we must remark that Taylor's basic idea concerning the existence of a kind of sacrifice dedicated to the soul of the Achaemenian living king (a fact denied by Tarn), may be sound; for instance, the worship of the *uruuan*- and of the *frauuāši* belonging to living beings or to dead ones (and sometimes also to persons who are not yet born) is well known in Avestan sources.<sup>5</sup> Contrariwise, the conclusions suggested by Taylor that the offerings to the δαίμων corresponded to a *divine* cult of the Persian king do not take into consideration the negative evidence that every person can offer a sacrifice in favor of his own soul or to that of any living or dead person. For instance, sacrifices in honor of ancestors are well attested also in the framework of the great inscription of Šābuhr (ŠKZ); in this framework, the ritual was offered to kings and their relatives, but also to minor persons. The same tradition is confirmed with reference to the cults dedicated to the soul of Cyrus the Great in Pasargadae. In fact, a short passage of Arrian's the *Anabasis* (VI, 29, 7), originally belonging to a lost work by Aristobulos of Cassandreia, mentions the office performed by the Magi in honor and memory of Cyrus the Great: a sheep a day, a fixed amount of wheat and wine, and a horse each month. Such a triad is not isolated, but it appears also in Elamite tablets of Persepolis, and corresponds to the same pattern later attested in the sacrifices that Šābuhr I ordered (ŠKZ) to prepare (one lamb and one and a half *modius* of bread, four *pās* of wine) in favor and in memory of his own soul, of those of his relatives and ancestors, but also of his own and their friends and officers.<sup>6</sup> What is also very interesting concerns the esoteric potential dimension of this sacrifice; in fact, in the so-called vision of the high priest Kirdīr, which presents some esoteric aspects, he saw “bread and meat and wine” in presence of the golden throne and of God Wahrām. We can probably have an idea of how the Mazdean clergy symbolically interpreted the result of the sacrificial offerings, in particular those *pad ruwān*. The mention of such a triad in presence of the golden throne and of God Wahrām appears to be a kind of celestial “reification” of the sacrifice, the new food of the paradise. What men will offer to the gods and *pad ruwān* in life but also afterlife (by means of their own descendents) will be found again in paradise and distributed in happiness.<sup>7</sup> The consistence of this simple but seminal idea, which probably inspired also those who ordered the ritual in memory of Cyrus the Great, seems to be confirmed by some additional Greek sources mentioning the practice of honoring the king's δαίμων at banquets (Taylor 1927, 54–55). Theopompus, in his *Philippica* quoted

<sup>5</sup>See (Panaino 2004, 66–75).

<sup>6</sup>See in particular (Panaino 2009a).

<sup>7</sup>As Boyce (1968, 270) underlined, many modern Zoroastrian rituals “are accompanied by offerings of food and drink, which are afterwards partaken of by the living in communion with the dead, the soul being invited back to join its kinsmen and friends, not in grief but in companionable happiness.”

by Athenaeus (VI, 60), noted that the Persians, every day [καθ' ἐκάστην ἡμέραν], prepared a separate table for the δαίμων of the king (Taylor 1927, 55).<sup>8</sup> As I underlined before, Taylor's connection (1927, 54) of this homage to the δαίμων of the *living* king with the daily offerings to Cyrus mentioned by Arrian seems to be very seminal, although her general conclusions about the Achaemenian kingship cannot be accepted. In any case, the mention of banquets in honor of the royal δαίμων offers a direct connection between food and spirit; a daily terrestrial banquet celebrates the incorporeal being of the king. I cannot say that this custom was (*ante litteram*) a kind of dinner or of supper *pad ruwān*, but it is clear that good food and a nice table opened the door of the "paradise" (in every possible meaning) to the king (but also to his relatives and *obviously* "obedient" servants).

Then, it would be a cultural mirage to explain all these offerings as an example of divinization in a strict Hellenistic sense.

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<sup>8</sup>The frequency of references to a daily ceremony must be carefully considered.