Living the Iranian Dolce Vita: Herodotus on Wine Drinking and Luxury among the Persians

by

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Abstract
Commensal behaviour, and in particular wine consumption, is an important field to which strategies of self-identity can be applied. The ethnographic surveys of the Ionian historian Herodotus focus on the cultural and social differences that he believes separate other peoples from the Greeks. This paper examines in what ways he associates wine drinking among the Persians with cultural sophistication, luxury and the good life in general. The dominant view among Greek writers of the Classical period was that luxury was reducible to decadence, and Herodotus is no exception. His detailed accounts of excessive Persian wine drinking and a decaying Persian society are the outcomes of his idea of historical causation, which predominantly is applied to the Achaemenid Empire. Even if he is inclined to explain cultural differences by reference to climate, geography and political system, analysing how these differences arise and change with time, he resorts to literary images and stereotypes about Persian society. This narrative feature, which ultimately derives from his background as oral performer, prevents him from grasping the ideological dimensions of the Persian display of luxury.

Introduction
Wine was a key cultural phenomenon in Achaemenid Iran, as is evident in its widespread prestige, appeal and consumption. In Herodotus’ words the Persians were exceptionally fond of wine, and his proverbial account of their practice of taking counsel on important matters whilst drunk is well known. But is there any historical truth to these and other descriptions that we encounter in the Histories? Real historical processes often inform Herodotus’ narrative, but sometimes his discourse engenders a constellation of literary motifs, themes and images for rhetorical purposes, generating arguments and entertaining audiences. For many Greek writers of the Achaemenid period the Persian came to represent the “foreigner” (βάρβαρος) par excellence, and modern scholars have observed that they often ascribe drunkenness to the Persians and in particular depict their king as a dedicated wine drinker. The aim of this paper is to examine the use of wine and its social significance in Persian society as depicted by Herodotus. The Histories represents an interesting case because of its paradigmatic impact as a source for later historians and also because of its variegated, ambivalent canvas of Iranian matters. The

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following discussion focuses on fundamental aspects of wine drinking perceptions and explores in what ways Herodotus associates Persian wine consumption with cultural sophistication, luxury and the good life in general. The Hellenistic philosopher Heraclides of Pontus interpreted these characteristics as positive qualities that liberate and elevate the spirit, but the dominant view among Greek writers of the Classical period was that luxury (τρυφή, literally “softness” or “delicacy”), perceived as passion for sensual pleasures, was reducible to decadence.²

Archaeological evidence as well as historical and literary material indicates that the local elites in Anatolia, Thrace, Macedonia and Greece proper, were influenced by Achaemenid cultural customs through the import of goods (such as table products) and the local imitation of lavish Persian lifestyle (rhytons, furniture, parasols, peacocks, etc.).³ Particularly intense cultural interaction occurred in the western satrapies of Anatolia, where Achaemenid settlements were common after the mid-sixth century. Margaret C. Miller has revealed the widespread adoption of Iranian drinking practices, for instance the holding of bowls on fingertips, and argues that it reflects a conscious choice by the local elites to embrace Persian status symbols.⁴ These types of borrowing were followed by a change of patterns of social behaviour that indicate that Persia became a model for cultural identity. As Maria Brosius has observed, the diffusion and adoption of Persian lifestyle was not imposed from above, but was indirectly encouraged to bind the local elites to the Achaemenid court.⁵ In the realm of ideas this process stimulated new cultural syntheses and redefined self-conceptions. The early Ionian inquiries into Persian history and ethnography by Dionysius of Miletus, Charon of Lampsacus, and Hellanicus of Lesbos represent creative intellectual responses to a changing world with a dynamic Iranian presence in the Hellenic sphere.⁶ There are plenty of stories in Herodotus’ narrative about contacts between Persians and Greeks, which display that cultural interaction and transfer developed on multiple levels and in many directions.

² Heraclides writes in his dialogue On pleasure: “For, more than any other people in the world, they [i.e. the Persians and the Medes] devote themselves to pleasure and luxury, and yet at the same time they are the noblest and the bravest of the barbarians. In fact, enjoyment of pleasure and luxury is the mark of free men; it liberates and elevates the spirit. Conversely, to live a life of hard labour is the mark of slaves and men of low birth.” (Ath. 7.512a–b). Cf. Briant 2002a, 287–288; Briant 2002b; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987. All translations of classical texts are cited, if not stated otherwise, from the English editions published in the Loeb Classical Library.
³ Cf. Miller 1997. The local imitation of Persian luxury is reflected in Herodotus’ account of Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos (3.125).
⁴ Miller 2011. The Persian practice of holding the cup on the fingertips is attested in Xenophon’s description of the Achaemenid cup-bearer: “Now the cup-bearers of those kings have an exquisite way of serving the wine: they pour it without spilling a drop and they present the cup with three fingers; they proffer the cup on the tips of their fingers and offer it in the most convenient position for the drinker to take hold of it.” (Cyr. 1.3.8). Significant changes in vessels in Sardis and Gordion, with the introduction of Iranian shapes, demonstrates as Elspeth R.M. Dusinberre (2013, 125–129) has shown, that Persian influence extended through all levels of society. By using luxury wine drinking vessels made of bronze, silver and gold that in obvious ways reflected central Achaemenid style and iconography in particular, the local Anatolian elites signified their adherence to the cosmopolitan Achaemenid Empire.
⁵ Brosius 2011.
⁶ Morgan 2016, 190.
Herodotus’ sources on Persian matters

Herodotus was born in 484 BC in Halicarnassus, a Dorian πόλις predominantly Ionian in culture, as an Achaemenid citizen (OPers. bandaka) of Xerxes I. We do not know exactly when the Histories was written (perhaps around 430–425 BC) since nowhere does he claim to have been an eyewitness or participant in the events that he describes; he only records conversations with those who were. Herodotus certainly had direct experiences of Persians and their customs and practices from cosmopolitan Halicarnassus, which long had served as a bridge between Asia and Europe, as well as from his travels to the satrapies of Babylon and Egypt. Given that his aim was to write the story of the so-called Persian Wars, one wonders why he did not visit Pārsa, i.e. Persia proper. In contrast to ancient Greek usage he never refers to the Persian people as Medes even if he is somehow unaware of their common Iranian ancestry. His sources on Persian history, geography, and society were heterogeneous, and it is a difficult task to identify potential informants as sources of specific information because of his unsystematic handling of oral material. Herodotus’ attribution of information to collective informants, such as when he uses the phrase “the Persians say” (λέγουσι Πέρσαι) (1.2), or cites “the learned men among the Persians” (Περσέων λόγιοι) (1.1), does not indicate that “real” Persians gave him that information but merely suggests the existence of an oral tradition. The overwhelming part of his material actually derives from anonymous oral traditions that are very difficult to assess. His background as an oral performer is reflected in his own statement that his Persian "logos", and by extension the work as a whole, is said to derive its authority from his personal knowledge (οἶδα) (1.131).

Herodotus’ narrative is built from smaller narratives often told in rich detail and occasionally equipped with verbatim reports of conversations. He did not speak any language other than Greek but he recounts conversations at the inner circles of the highly organised and hierarchically structured Achaemenid court. Sometimes he records his inability to arrive at a reliable answer to a subject or admits that he knows different versions of a story and has selected one in preference to others. Earlier Greek Persica and reports from people who had visited Pārsa undoubtedly provided him with much information. Evidence from the Persepolitan Archives demonstrates that the Achaemenid administration employed Greeks at a level where official communications were easily accessible to them. Even if Greek professionals, such as physicians, cupbearers, artists, and concubines, served in high positions at the wider court, his narration of speech and dialogue, as an inheritance from epic and tragic poetry, should be assessed with much

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7 For Herodotus’ background as an oral performer and use of oral tradition, see Evans 1991, 89–146.
8 This category includes descendants of people who had resided in the central Achaemenid province of Pārsa, such as the Athenian general Themistocles and the Spartan king Demaratos. The latter had, according to David M. Lewis (1985, 105), accessible descendants in the Kaikos Valley, and there is some reason to believe that Herodotus had visited southern Mysia (Hdt. 2.10.1).
caution.9 Among his informants were possibly Iranian travellers and exiles to Athens, such as Zopyrus the Younger, grandson of Zopyrus the Elder who recovered Babylon in the name of Darius the Great (3.160), as well as eminent officials in the imperial establishment. He may have met and spoken with members of the satrapal families of Tissaphernes in Caria and Pharnabazus in Dascyleium that descended from Hydarnes and Artabazus, two of Darius’ accomplices. Besides imperial beneficiaries, proprietors, priests and merchants, the wider Iranian diaspora consisted of thousands of estate workers, soldiers and guards needed to maintain peace and security. Many Persian settlements in Anatolia endured until Late Antiquity. It is thus very difficult to identify the sources for his information on Persian matters and his potential motives for including certain accounts and excluding others.10

Wine drinking in Iranian sources

Before we discuss the complex issue of the veracity of Herodotus’ accounts of Persian drinking customs it is necessary to initially consider Iranian source material from the Achaemenid period and beyond. The cumulative evidence of historical, archaeological and literary sources undoubtedly reveals the cultural complexity and social prominence of wine drinking in ancient Iran. The Persepolis Fortification Tablets (PF), dating from the 13th to the 28th year of the reign of Darius the Great, i.e. 509–494 BC, mention that wine was used as a common ration for different categories of functionaries and courtiers, including priests who received it as payment for performing ritual services.11 As a rule the archival tablets at Persepolis include letters from an official ordering his subordinate to dispense some amount of wine to specific persons or groups. Princess Irdabama, a highly successful businesswoman, who possessed her own land and work force, once delivered by far the largest amount of wine ordered by a member of the royal family, exceeding 2360 quarts, to Susa.12 The material even contains numerous records of wine rations to animals, normally horses, used in the royal courier system.13 The documentation from the Persepolitan Archives attests that the Magi (Elam. maguš, OPers. magu-) in charge of the sacrifices at the tomb of Cyrus the Great received rations of wine for themselves from the administration. Wine was also used in sacrifices in honour of Iranian and Elamite gods and sacred physical spaces, such as mountains and rivers:

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9 The form and structure of Herodotus’ language and his characters all testify to the pervasive influence of the Greek epic, which is natural given the Ionian tradition of writing historical epic. Homeric language and narrative techniques, such as ring-structure, are especially apparent in speech and composition. Cf. Evans 1991, 5.
10 Hegyi 1973, 83.
11 Garrison 2017. Strabo mentions that Xerxes assigned the Anatolian city of Lampsacus that “abounds with vines” to Themistocles to supply him with wine for the worship of Priapus (Strab. 8.1.12).
12 PF 737. 1 quart = 0,97 litres.
13 PF 1757–1764.
Turkama the priest (Elam. šatin) received 57 quarts of wine, supplied by Ušaya and used them for the gods: 7 quarts for Ahuramazda, 20 quarts for the (Elamite) god Humban, 10 quarts for the river Huputiš, 10 quarts for the river Rannakarra, 10 quarts for the river Šaušaunuš.\(^\text{14}\)

The above reference demonstrates, as Maria Brosius has shown, that the notion that the cult of Ahuramazda (“Lord of Wisdom”), the highest deity of Zoroastrianism, was connected with the Magi alone must be dismissed.\(^\text{15}\)

The responsibilities of the Magi, who upheld the religious ceremonies of the Median population of Pārsa, differed from those of an ordinary priest (Elam. šatin). The Magi performed the lan ceremony linked with Ahuramazda in their capacity of ritual experts, and their mediation allowed the wine sacrifice to be consumed after its consecration:

Hatarbanuš the magus (Elam. makuš) received 300 quarts of wine supplied by Aššaštiya for the libation of the lan (religious ceremony) for one year. Year 23. At Ankarakkan.\(^\text{16}\)

The use of wine in religious sacrifices is attested by literary evidence, such as Herodotus’ account of Xerxes pouring wine out of a golden goblet into the Hellespont (7.54), and Aeschylus’ description of Queen Atossa preparing a libation to raise the deceased Darius.\(^\text{17}\)

Herodotus’ contradictory statement that the Persians do not employ libations (1.132), followed by descriptions of libations performed by the Magi, can be explained by the fact that Greek forms of libations are absent in Iranian rituals.\(^\text{18}\) It is not entirely clear from the narrative context whether Herodotus’ and Aeschylus’ descriptions should be interpreted as representations of Iranian or Greek rituals. The term wine is absent in the oldest parts of the Avesta, the primary collection of Zoroastrian religious texts. It first appears in the Vendīdād (The law of repudiating the demons) (14.17), which most likely was composed in the Arsacid period or the Late Seleucid period. The Avestan word maḏ(a)- (“intoxication”) is attested in the Hōm Yašt and other parts of the Avesta in relation to the haoma, a plant of unknown origin. In the Pahlavi literature this term is translated as md and pronounced may (which is the New Persian word for “wine”). Several chapters of the Nērangestān, a Pahlavi commentary on the Avesta dating from the Sasanian period, are devoted to priests reciting holy texts drunk on wine during religious festivals.\(^\text{19}\) The obvious paradox is how wine could be almost unknown in the Old Avesta and how the Sasanian priests, who used a non-intoxicating plant such as haoma in the yasna rite, could be unaware of its original intoxicating effects. The botanical identity of the haoma is still unknown and there is a lack of convincing evidence that would allow us to identify the intoxicating haoma as wine.


\(^{15}\) Brosius 2000, 90.

\(^{16}\) PF 759, tr. Brosius 2000, no. 193. Cf. Henkelman 2018. The status and role of Zoroastrianism in Achaemenid society has been and still is a highly debated subject among modern scholars. For a non-essentialist approach, see Kreyenbroek 2010.

\(^{17}\) Aesch. Pers. 609–618.

\(^{18}\) de Jong 1997, 353.

\(^{19}\) Kreyenbroek 2004, 321.
Fig. 1. Drinking bowls and spouted amphorae carried by Lydian tribute bearers on the southern wall of the Apadāna at Persepolis. Photo J. Barnes.

Records in the Elamite tablets attest that there was a special wine department in Persepolis with stations and warehouses in various places in the Pārsa region. The Apadāna reliefs give great prominence to the visual representation of different forms of wine vessels, displayed in the Lydian
and Armenian tribute bearers (Fig. 1) and various seals used in the Fortification Archive. The Achaemenid royal inscriptions are almost entirely silent on the subject of wine, except for an Old Persian inscription in the name of Artaxerxes II Mnemon in which the word bātugara-, interpreted as wine cup or saucer, occurs once. Archaeological evidence suggests that the ancient Persians commonly used pierced vessels, so-called rhytons (Greek “pourers”), in the shape of animals and imaginary creatures, for pouring the wine into a mouth or a bowl (Figs. 2–3). This quintessential Persian form of vessel is noticeably absent from depictions at Persepolis that portray official delegations from foreign lands. Vessels, bowls and cups of silver and gold were devised by the Achaemenid court from the sixth century and made for wine drinking according to standardised ideals. The historian Dinon of Colophon mentions that the Persian king had a passion for large golden bowls and drank from a special egg-shaped cup. The eunuch courtier Bagoas tried to assassinate Darius III by pouring poison into this cup, but the king uncovered the plot and compelled him “to take his own medicine”. According to Ctesias, clay vessels were only used for serving wine among the Persian elite when the host wanted to insult a person.

Evidence of the central role of wine drinking is also found in the Persian epic tradition, which reflects a long oral tradition that can be traced back to pre-Achaemenid times. The Old Persian epic has disappeared but fortunately it has left some traces behind, mainly those in the eleventh century Shāhnāma (Book of Kings) but also in earlier Pahlavi material, such as the Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšēr ī Pābagān (Book of the Deeds of Ardashir, Son of Pabag) that narrates the story of the founder of the Sasanian dynasty. Wine and feasting (Pahl. bādag ud bazm) are fundamental to many parts of the stories, and the attitude to wine drinking is entirely favourable. Mas'udi Marvazi, Daqiqi, Ferdousi, and other early Persian epic poets describe excesses in the use of wine, inevitable for the heroic genre, with sympathy. In Ferdousi’s Shāhnāma the discovery of wine is associated with the early king Hōšang (Av. Haošyaŋha) and the institution of the Sade festival, an account that probably reflects a popular Sasanian tradition. The first Iranian king to actually engage in a wine feast with musicians and singers is his grandson Jamshid (Av. Yima Xšaēta), who according to ancient legends established the Nowruz festival. We know very little about the value of wine in Achaemenid medicine. Ferdousi mentions the narcotic use of wine in the story of Rudābeh’s delivery of Rostam, when she has to undergo a caesarean section (therefore called rostamzād in Persian). The medical use of intoxications probably has antecedents among Iranian peoples beyond the Achaemenid period, since Herodotus records that the Iranian Scythians administered hemp for narcotic purposes.

21 Ath. 11.503f.
22 Diod. Sic. 17.5.6.
23 Ctesias ap. Ath. 11.464a.
24 Ferdousi 2015, 1, 23 (ll. 54–56).
25 Ferdousi 2015, 1, 152 (ll. 1464–1467).
Greek representations of Persian wine customs

Forming part of Herodotus’ ethnographic excurses on the customs of foreign nations – among them the Persians, the Scythians, the Babylonians, and the Nubians – are some intriguing observations about wine and drunkenness. Herodotus’ ethnographic claim that the Persians “are very fond of wine” (οἴνῳ δὲ κάρτα προσκέαται) (1.133) is not unexpected given that ancient Greeks writers comment so frequently on the topic. The Persian propensity for wine is unanimously represented in Greek descriptions of Iranian commensal practices. The word κάρτα means not only “very” but also “extremely” or “exceptionally”. Some scholars, such as Hanneke Wilson, have interpreted κάρτα in this passage as “excessively”, arguing that Herodotus is condemning a general practice of heavy drinking among the Persians.26 Herodotus is intrigued by this foreign drinking habit and therefore he mentions it, but since he is not judgemental here and does not explicitly disapprove of the Persian use of wine, Wilson’s reading is questionable. Herodotus’ ethnographic statement is important since it indicates that the Persians drank wine more than other peoples, or at least that it occupied a more pivotal role within their culture.27 Literary evidence indicates that the typical daily fare in Iranian society, as well as the regular ration for personnel in the multi-ethnic Achaemenid army, consisted of bread, meat, and wine, a feature that fundamentally contrasts with the frugality of the ancient Greek cuisine (2.164–168). The intrinsic association in the Histories between contemporary Persians and the enjoyment of good things reflects this basic dichotomy between Persian luxury and Greek poverty as envisaged in commensal practices, particularly those related to wine drinking.

The Achaemenid Empire covered a vast and highly organised territory. Fast and effective networks made it possible for the Persian elite to obtain exclusive wines from distant places, such as Armenia, Sogdia, Macedonia, Carman and Cilicia. Xenophon mentions that Artaxerxes II Mnemon has his “vintners scouring every land to find some drink that will tickle his palate” and refers to the abundance of wine at the king’s banquet in providing a description of pernicious luxury.28 From an Achaemenid point of view the variety of drinks and dishes at the king’s table was not a matter of sheer self-indulgence, but served as a symbol of the power of the Persian king and elite and his capacity to attract tribute.29 The royal cupbearers were excellent wine connoisseurs, well versed in the knowledge of different wines and their customs. They were among the king’s most trusted courtiers and were

26 Wilson 2003, 126.
27 In contrast to Herodotus’ general observation Plato (Laws 637d–e) and Xenophon are concerned exclusively with the excessive drunkenness of the Persians, not with their drinking or non-drinking of wine. Xenophon gives a sarcastic description of excessive drinking at the Persian symposium: “They had also the custom of not bringing pots into their banquets, evidently because they thought that if one did not drink to excess, both mind and body would be less uncertain. So even now the custom of not bringing in the pots still obtains, but they drink so much that, instead of carrying anything in, they are themselves carried out when they are no longer able to stand straight enough to walk out.” (Cyr. 8.8.10).
28 Xen. Ages. 9.3.
29 Briant 2002b, 209.
charged with managing all the wine-pourers and tasters at the court. According to Heraclides of Cumae the symposium customarily took place after dinner, making it a feast within a feast.\(^{30}\) At the court the king, reclining on a couch, would call up a dozen guests into his presence to drink with him attended by servants, singers, and musicians. Except at public festivals the king and his guests dined in separate rooms, divided so that he could see them, but they could not see him.\(^{31}\) The existence of a well-defined court protocol reflected a strict ranking of the guests according to social status, royal favour and the power structure of empire.

Heraclides mentions that the king “does not drink the same wine” as his companions but has his own choice wine.\(^{32}\) It is not entirely clear from the context if the king was the only one allowed to drink his choice wine, or if his cup was filled from a jug reserved for his sole use. In either case the court protocol was envisioned by the necessity to take precautions for the king’s security and protect the royal drink from poison. According to the polymath Posidonius of Apamea, Darius III exclusively drank wine from

\(^{30}\) This division of eating and drinking is also reflected in Iranian epic material. Ferdousi (2015, 4, 664, l. 1081) sings in the *Shāhnāma*: “When they had eaten bread, they turned to wine” (*co nān kh’ordā shod, jām-e may kh’āstand*). Cf. Ferdousi 2015, 3, 166, ll. 789–796.

\(^{31}\) Ath. 4.145–146.

\(^{32}\) Ath. 4.145c.
Chalybon (Helbon), a district on the slopes above Damascus. The Macedonian author Polyaeus states that the king’s wine menu in Ecbatana differed from that in Susa and Babylon, where half the wine was from grapes and half from the palm. He gives a comprehensive list of his breakfast and dinner, which is said to have been inscribed on a pillar in the royal palace. Even if this report is undoubtedly fictitious, it corresponds to evidence from the Persepolitan Archives, since the emphasis in both sources is on cereals, meat and wine. There are no systematic classifications of different kinds of wine by place of origin, vinification methods, vintage, or variety, in Greek writings from the Classical period, but Xenophon has recorded the importance of quality wine among the Persian elite in one of his descriptions of Cyrus the Younger:

Κύρος γὰρ ἔπημε βίκους οἶνου ἡμιδεδεξίας πολλάκις ὡσπέ τὰν ἡδῶν λάβοι, λέγον δὴ σύνο Δὴ πολλῷ χρόνῳ τούτῳ ἡδῶν οἰνῷ ἐπιτύχοι· τούτοιν οὖν σοὶ ἐπήμησε καὶ δεῖται σου τήμερον τούτον ἐκπείνη σὺν οἷς μάλιστα φιλεῖς.

[For example, when Cyrus got some particularly good wine, he would often send the half-emptied jar to a friend with the message: “Cyrus says that he has not chanced upon better wine than this for a long time; so he sends it to you, and asks you to drink it up today in company with the friends you love best.”]

We know very little of public commensal practices of ordinary citizens in Achaemenid Persa. As far as one can tell there were no dedicated drinking places such as wine bars, but private houses, yards and gardens served as locales for wine drinking among ordinary people. The bulk of information concerns the societal elite and in particular the royal court. The Greeks prided themselves on drinking moderately and contrasted this virtue with the tendency of other cultures, particularly the Scythians, to drink to excess and to be given to intoxication. They unanimously portray the Achaemenid kings as passionate drinkers and generally judge Persian society and culture by what the rulers drank and how they drank it. According to Athenaeus the Persian king was allowed to get drunk in public once a year on the Mithra-kâna (OIr. *Mithrakâna-), the autumn festival dedicated to Mithra, the Iranian divinity of covenants and oaths. On this occasion he danced “the Persian” (περσικόν, sometimes interpreted as a type of shield-dance) alone and in a state of intoxication while everyone else abstained from dance. From Athenaeus’s report it seems as if the normal court etiquette, according to which the king dined in private, alone or in the company of his wife, children or younger siblings, was suspended during the festival.

33 Polyaeus, Strat. 4.3.32.
34 According to the Elamite evidence the king received an amount varying from 750 to 6900 litres of wine when on the move (PF 728 and P Fa 311). Cf. Henkelman 2010.
35 Xen. An. 1.9.25.
36 Ath. 10.434d–f. The interpretation of περσικόν as a shield-dance derives from Xenophon’s description in An. 6.1.10: “Lastly, he danced the Persian dance, clashing his shields together and crouching down and then rising up again; and all this he did, keeping time to the music of the flute.” I am grateful to Margaret C. Miller for drawing my attention to a visual portrayal of a Persian dance that occurs on an Achaemenid scaraboid from about 400 BC (Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum 81.AN.76.88). Here a Persian man is dancing in a gentle, swaying or whirling posture, not unknown in Greek art.
37 Ath. 4.145d. Cf. Vit. Artax. 5.5.
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reports that Darius the Great ordered the inscription “I was able to drink a good deal of wine and to bear it well” to be carved on his tomb.\(^{38}\) This story is clearly a misrepresentation, but it bears some striking similarities to what actually is stated in Darius’ tomb inscription, known as a Fürstenspiegel, regarding his ability to exert control over his impulses:

\[ \text{I am firmly ruling over my own impulses.} \]

\[ \text{I am not hot-tempered. What things develop in my anger, I hold firmly under control by my thinking power. I am firmly ruling over my own impulses.} \]  

Athenaeus’ rendering of Darius’ inscription indicates that Hellenistic writers had some access to information about Achaemenid royal inscriptions but that they interpreted them according to their own ideological concerns and priorities. \(^{40}\) From Darius’ words “ruling over my own impulses” (\textit{uvaipasiyah}y\textit{a xayamna}) we can infer that the Persians were well aware of self-destructive drinking and the effects of habitual drunkenness. This is reflected in Plutarch’s report that Cyrus the Younger prided himself on his ability to drink more than his brother and carry it better. \(^{41}\) Non-excessive drinking and the acquisition of a moderate intoxication seem to have been the general norm in Persian society. Wine drinking was fully embedded in everyday life and extreme drunkenness was frowned upon, as is evident from Herodotus’ account of Cambyses (see below). Strabo and Athenaeus mention that the food portions of the Persians were varied but relatively modest, and this may have applied to their drinking habits. \(^{42}\) The redactor of Esther 1.3–8 states that wine drinking was not obligatory at Achaemenid royal banquets, since the king had instructed his officials “to treat each guest according to his own wishes”.

In one of the most cited passages in the \textit{Histories} Herodotus remarks that the Persians normally deliberate important matters when drunk on a copious amount of wine and review their decisions the next day when sober, or vice versa. A decision that can survive drunkenness is described as being unshakable:

\[ \text{ταύτα μὲν νῦν οὐτω φυλάσσεται, μεθυσκόμενοι δὲ ἑώθασι βουλεύεσθαι τὰ σπουδαίεστα τῶν προμάτων: τὸ δ’ ἂν ἄδη σφι βουλεύεσθαι, τούτο τῇ υστεραῖψε νήφουσι προτιθὲν ὁ στέγαρχος, ἐν τῷ ἄν ἐόντες βουλεύονται, καὶ ἦν μὲν ἄδη καὶ νήφους, χρέωνται ταὐτῶ, ἢ ἦν δὲ μὴ ἄδη, μετειπτε. τὰ δ’ ἂν νήφωντες προβουλεύονται, μεθυσκόμενοι ἐπιδιαγινόμενοι.} \]

\(^{38}\) \textit{Ath.} 10.434d.\(^{39}\) \textit{DnB, author’s translation after Kent 1953, 140.} \(^{40}\) Another Greek rendering of the inscription appears in Strabo 15.3.8.\(^{41}\) \textit{Vit. Artax.} 6.3.\(^{42}\) Strab. 15.3.22; \textit{Ath.} 4.145e.
Fig. 3. Achaemenid silver and partially gilt rhyton with Caspian red deer protome, discovered in the region of the Black Sea. Late fifth or early fourth century BC. Used with permission of the George Ortiz Collection.

[Moreover, it is their custom to deliberate about the gravest matters when they are drunk; and what they approve in their deliberations is proposed to them the next day, when they are sober, by the master of the house where they deliberate; and if, being sober, they still approve it, they act on it, but if not, they drop it. And if they have deliberated about a matter when sober, they decide upon it when they are drunk.] 43

43 Hdt. 1.133.3–4. Herodotus is not alone in describing serious discussion taking place over wine or claiming that decision-making involves drunkenness among the Persians. This pas-
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Herodotus offers no explanation or comment to this ethnographic account and it can be read in several ways. It has amusing connotations and must have seemed abnormal to his audience, since it differs from Greek customs. Still it represents decision-making as a thoughtful act based on sound discretion and equilibrium between opposing qualities, features that resonate well with the major tenets in Iranian religious philosophy, i.e. the balance of the cosmic opposites in the universe. Far from being regarded as undesirable and immoderate behaviour, drunkenness is grasped as a transformed state of consciousness that is as valuable as sobriety. Neither drunkenness nor sobriety is inherently good or bad, but they are complementary states essential to a balanced existence. Wine drinking and even drunkenness can be seen as conducive to education in temperance or moderation if it is practised in banquets that are well-presided over. It releases the spirit, loosens the tongue, and makes people daring and willing to speak the truth. It is not far-fetched to think that the ancient Iranians believed in the idea that man sees more clearly when drunk since it is a major theme in later Persian literature, which recounts royal and heroic legends deriving from ancient oral traditions. In the Shāhnāma important undertakings, such as councils and military campaigns, are decided upon to the accompaniment of wine. Kay Khosrow, usually identified with Cyrus the Great, drinks wine for a whole week during an assembly with his nobles, and the Sasanian king Khosrow Anōshirvān listens to the discourses of his minister Bozorgmehr while drinking wine.44

The strong association of wine with feasting indicates its high status in the Achaemenid period, and banquets were often – and depending on the context, important – social and political occasions. The Persian symposium functioned as a podium for reinforcing group identity, demonstrating class distinction, and cementing social alliances. The practice of discussing public issues at banquets or symposiums was foreign to mainland Greece, where political debate and decision-making were confined to the central public space (ἅγορα) of the city-state. In Achaemenid Iran drinking as a social activity was combined with the intellectual activity of deliberating and decision-making, not exclusively among the elite but, as Herodotus indicates, on all levels of society. There are also no indications that women were excluded from banquets and symposiums or that their drinking was looked down upon. In contrast to mainland Greece, public drinking was not a gender-exclusive activity; women as well as men were fully included in its performance of status and identity. The association of drinking women and sexual activities, so common in Greek culture, seems to be absent among the Persians. This difference is reflected in Herodotus’ account of the feast prepared by Amyntas I of Macedon for the Persian envoys of Darius:

44 Ferdousi 2015, 1, 455 (ll. 97–98); 4, 664 (l. 1081). Ferdousi (2015, 3, 1, l. 9) suggests that a person under the influence of wine is more likely to speak their hidden thoughts and desires: “In wine too thou wilt show thy quality, and to thine own locked door thyself be key.”
The socialising of “proper” women at symposiums was taboo in ancient Macedonia and mainland Greece, where women were insulated from many spheres of public life. By convention, the symposium was confined to males, and any women present were musicians or prostitutes. Women drinking wine were generally not looked upon favourably, and those who drank wine were suspected of losing their moral bearings and being prone to sexual promiscuity. In the rest of the anecdote, Herodotus exploits the rationale of this misogynistic custom to its limit as the Persians, well-lubricated with wine and allured by feminine beauty, attempt to enjoy the women’s bodies: “When the women had done as they were bidden, the Persians, flushed as they were with excess of wine, at once laid hands on the women’s breasts, and one or another tried to kiss them” (5.18). Since it is highly unlikely that the royal envoys of Darius after receiving the marks of vassalage should demand the “concubines and wedded wives” of Amyntas’ court for sexual company and try to rape them, Herodotus’ handling of the story should be read as a form of artistic mimesis with strong ideological undertones. The setting of the anecdote has many parallels in Greek mythic and folkloric traditions, and it is not implausible to think that these women’s bodies are featured to symbolise the Hellenic world and its vulnerability to barbarian penetration and enslavement. The description of the fatal symposium in which the envoys finally are murdered at the instigation of Amyntas’ son Alexander, reflects Herodotus’ notion of the hazardous nature of intermingling with women and his negative sentiment about luxury and pleasure.

The practice of drinking wine mixed with water (sometimes seawater) was a distinctive mark of Greek cultural identity in Antiquity. The Greeks had strict rules for mixing the two in the appropriate proportions for different social occasions. By contrast the Iranian peoples, such as Persians, Medes, and Scythians, drank it unmixed, a custom considered both eccentric and

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45 Hdt. 5.18.2–3. Visual representations of women alongside men in symposiums in the art of Achaemenid Anatolia suggest, as Elspeth R.M. Dusinberre (2013, 124, 140) has shown, that Persian notions of social status, class and style influenced drinking behaviours among the Greek population of Anatolia. The frequent presence of women at drinking parties is also reflected in Iranian epic material.

46 For Homer’s analogy linking the rape of women with the rape of territories, see Nagler 1974, 44–60.
harmful by Greek writers.\textsuperscript{47} In his highly satirical play \textit{The Acharnians} Aristophanes complains, “And those pitiless Persian hosts! They compelled us to drink sweet wine, wine without water, from gold and glass cups.”\textsuperscript{48} Herodotus records that the Spartan king Cleomenes learned the barbarian way of drinking wine from some Scythian envoys and ultimately went mad from it (6.84.1–3). This episode indicates that the theme of drinking undiluted wine had become a symbol of degeneracy in contemporary Greek literature. From the fourth century drinking unmixed wine was no longer a clear-cut cultural distinction between Persians and Greeks, but had become a source of dispute among many Greeks, probably due to Iranian acculturation. Xenophon speaks of Greeks drinking large cups of undiluted wine, and Plutarch refers to Greeks indulging in undiluted wine at “wild parties” organised by Alexander in honour of the Indian philosopher Calanus.\textsuperscript{49} It is well known that Alexander preferred to drink unmixed wine, from large golden cups in the Achaemenid manner. Chares of Mytilene mentions that his court historian Callisthenes, great-nephew of Aristotle, once refused to drink at a symposium organised by the young conqueror since he did not want to be in need of Asclepius’ draughts.\textsuperscript{50}

**Wine as a marker of cultural sophistication**

In the \textit{Histories} wine is a mark of civilisation and cultural sophistication. Herodotus includes it among the “good things” (ἀγαθός) in life. This is reflected in his account of how Cyrus the Great incites the Persians to revolt against Astyages, the king of the Medes, by promising them imminent wealth and luxury (1.126). One day Cyrus makes his people clear a field of thistles to illustrate their present condition of enslavement, and the next day he serves them a banquet with much wine as a symbol of the prosperous life to come if they win their freedom.\textsuperscript{51} The purpose of Herodotus’ anecdote is to explain the cause of Cyrus’ rise to power and to highlight the conflict between Cyrus and the Medes, as he defines the condition of the Persian tribes as a form of “enslavement” (δουλοπρεπέα). The uprising was engendered by Cyrus’ vision of political freedom, but more importantly, in Herodotus’ view, it succeeded because of the Persians’ desire to pursue a lifestyle focused on the good things embodied in wine drinking, as well as an insatiable lust for lavish comfort. Cyrus generally enjoys enormous prestige in Greek literature and it is not entirely clear from the narrative context if he considers luxury to be a mark of free men or only performs a trick to

\textsuperscript{47} The Persians did filter the wine, and according to Alexander’s general Parmenion, seventy wine strainers were found among the kitchen personnel of Darius III after the battle of Issus (Ath. 13.608a). This is confirmed by the existence of filters, including on a rhyton, which suggests that the Persians sieved the wine as it was poured and that the liquid was impure as a result of its storage in earthen containers. Cf. Gignoux 1999, 39.

\textsuperscript{48} Ar. \textit{Ach}. 72–73.

\textsuperscript{49} Xen. \textit{Sym}. 2.23; Plut. \textit{Vit. Alex}. 70.1–2.

\textsuperscript{50} Ath. 434d.

\textsuperscript{51} According to Ctesias and Xenophon the young Cyrus served as cupbearer at Astyages’ table and in that capacity drew the attention of Astyages himself.
provoke his own people. Nonetheless his monarchical rule brings civic freedom (ἐλευθερία) as well as the strength and stability needed to have an empire. When the Lydian king Croesus made preparations to march against Cyrus and invaded the Cappadocian city of Pteria he made the tragic error of disregarding the advise of his counsellor Sandanis, who pointed out that the affluent Lydians would gain very little from conquering a territory of water-drinkers:

“O King, you are getting ready to march against men who wear trousers of leather and whose complete wardrobe is of leather, and who eat not what they like but what they have; for their land is stony. Further, they do not use wine, but drink water, have no figs to eat, or anything else that is good. Now if you conquer them, of what will you deprive them, if on the other hand you are conquered, then look how many good things you will lose; for once they have tasted of our blessings they will cling so tightly to them that nothing will pry them away.”

It is interesting that Herodotus mentions that the Persians originally were water-drinkers due to their harsh environment and modest living conditions. Wine is an indication of cultural sophistication, but in his descriptions of the Persians it is also intimately associated with luxury. Before Cyrus’s arrival on the scene, the Greeks considered luxury to be a distinct characteristic of Lydia. Its capital Sardis was renowned for the lavish lifestyle of its rulers and Croesus is proverbially associated with the degenerative effect of wealth. In the same story Herodotus clarifies that in comparison to the Lydians the Persians had “no luxury (αβρόν) and no good things (ἀγαθὸν)” — including wine — before their conquests (1.71.4). His assertion that the early Persians did not consume wine is difficult to corroborate, since we do not have much reliable information about the court protocol in Cyrus’s reign. All descriptions of Pasargadae are of later date, and archaeological findings do not give unequivocal evidence on whether the Persians produced wine before becoming sedentary. Even if their nomadic lifestyle did not accommodate viticulture they could still obtain wine through contact and trade. Herodotus’ sketch of the region of Pārsa in the early sixth century BC and of its inhabitants as hunter-gatherers lacks historical accuracy and consistency. His assertion that the Persians were ignorant of weaving and only made clothing of animal skins is inaccurate given their close economic, social and cultural relations with the Elamites, but it is intended to contrast their original toughness with contemporary Greek conceptions of Persian costume as flowing robes and trousers of soft materials. Herodotus exaggerates their primitive

53 Hdt. 1.71.2–3. If we are to believe Herodotus, Cyrus makes the same military miscalculation with regard to the Sakas that Croesus made with regard to the Persians (1.207.3).
lifestyle in order to make them conform more closely to an idealised conception of uncivilised man. The general impression one gets from the *Histories* is that there was no Persian culture, or history for that matter, before Cyrus.

Classical and modern historians have emphasised that the ethical pattern of Cyrus’ conquests went beyond the inter-tribal struggles of the Mesopotamian warrior states, which destroyed cities and deported large populations as part of their policy.\(^54\) This view has been partly revised in contemporary scholarship demonstrating the pervasive influence of Near Eastern traditions on Cyrus’ policies in Babylon and exhibiting how he manipulated local traditions to legitimise his conquests and rule.\(^55\) Cyrus’ major political innovation in comparison with his Mesopotamian and Elamite predecessors was not his religious tolerance or pragmatic treatment of new subjects, which were quite common in ancient, polytheistic empires, but the larger scale of his political venture and the enduring legacy of his cosmopolitan vision. His conquests were followed by a period of peace and prosperity within the empire – the *Pax Persica* – that facilitated extensive communication, the development of international trade from the Aegean Sea to India, and the economic growth of cities in Iran and Central Asia. The citizens of the empire became accustomed to regulated, cooperative relations with their neighbours and turned into active participants in an extensive network of social, cultural and intellectual interactions. The cosmopolitan worldview of the Achaemenids is elegantly represented in the architectonic narrative of Persepolis where foreign peoples are portrayed, not as inferior or humiliated enemies, but as individuals and with respect for their local cultures.\(^56\) Herodotus never comments on the pluralistic foundations of Cyrus’ and Darius’ governmental and legislative policies or considers the cosmopolitan features of their political legacy. He remarks instead on the Persians’ cultural adaptability and is quite confident that they are more adaptive to foreign cultural customs (νόμιμοι) than others. Their adaptive ability creates opportunities for innovative learning and gives them the ability to experiment, but above all it makes them copy the luxurious ways (εὐπαθείας) of their subjects. In the case of Persians luxury is highly infectious, since it can be transmitted from one people to another through imitation:

\[\text{ξεινικά δὲ νόμιμα Πέρσαι προσέχενται ἀνδρῶν μάλιστα. καὶ γὰρ δὴ τὴν \text{Μηδικὴν ἐσθήτα νομίζοντες τῆς ἑωτῶν ἐναι καλλίῳ φαρέουσα, καὶ ἐς τοὺς πολέμους τοὺς Ἀγιαίους ἀρωμάς καὶ εὐπαθείας τὲ παντοδαπὲς πυνθανόμενα ἐπιτιθέουσι, καὶ δὴ καὶ ἀπ’ Ἑλλήνων μαθόντες πασί μίσχονακ.}\]


\(^{55}\) As shown by Amélie Kuhrt (1983) the *Cyrus cylinder* was closely modelled on Neo-Assyrian prototypes, not only in form but also regarding the policy of rebuilding Babylon and re-establishing citizen’s rights and local cults. It is clear that Cyrus’ decrees were intended primarily for Babylon and Western Iran since only gods, peoples, and places from these parts of the empire are mentioned in the text. See also van der Spek 2014.

\(^{56}\) Nylander 1979, 355.
It is commonplace among Greek writers to claim that the Persians, and in particular their elite, became corrupted by luxury and were subjected to its corrosive effects as a result of the early conquests. Plato’s polemical statements that Cyrus’ children were “bursting with luxury and lack of restraint” and that Cambyses’ rule was destroyed because he was “maddened by drunkenness and lack of education” are typical of their representations of Persian decadence. The notion that luxury unmistakably causes society to lapse into moral corruption and military weakness is further elaborated by Xenophon in the final chapter of the Cyropaedia. His conclusion is that the contemporary Persians have lost the honourable virtues bequeathed by Cyrus and no longer are reputable enemies. The Greeks clearly did not invent the luxurious habits of the Persian elite out of nothing, but their obsession with the subject as a literary Leitmotiv and the resulting misrepresentation of Persian matters is best explained with reference to the Athenian ideal of austerity of lifestyle and eschewal of luxury in the Classical period. The Athenian statesman and lawmaker Solon expresses this critical attitude toward wealth in a conversation on happiness (εὐδοκία) with Croesus very close to the start of the Histories:

έμοι δὲ σὺ καὶ πλουτέειν μέγα φαίνει καὶ βασιλείς πολλῶν εἶναι ἀνθρώπων· ἐκεῖνο δὲ τὸ εἰρέο με, οὐκὸ μὲν ἐγὼ λέγω, πρὶν τελευτῆσαν καλὸς τὸν αἴωνα πῦθομαι. οὐ γὰρ τὶ ὁ μέγα πλοῦσιος μῆλλον τοῦ ἐπ᾽ ἡμέρην ἔχοντος ὀλβιώτερος ἀντί, εἰ μὴ οἱ τύχη ἐπίσηπτοτά πάντα καλὰ ἔχουσα ἐν τελευτήσαι τοῦ βίου. πολλοὶ μὲν γὰρ ἐξιποτεινόν ἀνθρώπων ἀνόλβιοι εἰσὶ, πολλοὶ δὲ μετρίων ἔχοντες βίον εὐτυχέες, ὁ μὲν δὲ μέγα πλοῦσιος ἀνόλβιος δὲ δυσί προέχει τοῦ εὐτυχεῖς μουν, ὡςτὸς δὲ τοῦ πλουσίου καὶ ἀνόλβου πολλοῖσι· ὁ μὲν ἐπίθυμην ἐκτελέσαι καὶ ἄτην τὴν μεγάλην προσπέποσον ἐνέκι ὁμιστήρος, ὁ δὲ τοίοτε προέχει εὐκείνων· ἄτην μὲν καὶ ἐπιθυμήν πάντως ὅποιος δυνότος ἐκεῖνο ἐνέκι, ταῦτα δὲ ἡ εὐτυχεὶς οἰ ἀπερίκε, ἀπηρος δὲ ἀστι, ἄνους, ἀπαθῆς κακῶν, εὔπαις, εὐειδῆς.

57 Hdt. 1.135.1.
58 Pl. Leg. 695b. In the words of Plato, the decline of the Achaemenid Empire was due to the fact that the royal children, in particular Cambyses and Xerxes, were educated by women and eunuchs in the Median style: “It was a womanish education, conducted by the royal harem. The teachers of the children had recently come into considerable wealth, but they were left alone, without men, because the army was preoccupied in the field.” (Pl. Leg. 694e). Xenophon dates the gradual political decline of Persia from the reign of Cambyses to its final deterioration during Artaxerxes whom he claims became “the victim of wine” and gave up the salubrious exercise of hunting (Cyr. 8.8.12). Plato’s statement is pure fantasy since the children of the Achaemenid kings and the sons of courtiers and nobles were formally educated to a high standard by Magi and other royal tutors, and also received rigorous training in agriculture, horsemanship and archery. In contrast to Plato, Herodotus depicts the culture of the Persian court as possessing an intellectual sophistication equal to that of the Greeks (cf. Briant 2002a, 522). According to Ferdousi (2015, 3, 166–167, ll. 799–803) the art of drinking wine was an important item in the programme of education of Iranian princes. He tells for instance that Zoroaster’s patron Kavi Goshtäš taught his son Peshôtan among other things the proper etiquette for drinking wine.
59 Xen. Cyr. (8.4.1–27, 8.8).
60 See Kurke 1992.
To me you seem to be very rich and to be king of many people, but I cannot answer your question before I learn that you ended your life well. The very rich man is not more fortunate than the man who has only his daily needs, unless he chances to end his life with all well. Many very rich men are unfortunate, many of moderate means are lucky. The man who is very rich but unfortunate surpasses the lucky man in only two ways, while the lucky surpasses the rich but unfortunate in many. The rich man is more capable of fulfilling his appetites and of bearing a great disaster that falls upon him, and it is in these ways that he surpasses the other. The lucky man is not so able to support disaster or appetite as is the rich man, but his luck keeps these things away from him, and he is free from deformity and disease, has no experience of evils, and has fine children and good looks.\[^{61}\]

In the Classical period the word τρυφή had largely negative associations in mainland Greece and was associated with the Persian βάρβαρος. It was not until Hellenistic times, when enormous treasures entered Athens in the wake of Alexander’s conquests, that luxury ceased to be an iconic symbol of decadence. No longer exclusively understood as a force of historical degeneration, it became a sign of prestige and power with reference to Iran – as in the case of Heraclides.

Wine and madness: the case of Cambyses

Drinking wine undiluted is invoked in the Histories as a cause of madness, as noted in the fate of Cleomenes of Sparta. Herodotus’ description of Cambyses also evokes the portrait of a paranoid personality and has some striking similarities with Cleomenes. Cambyses receives the most negative portrayal among the Achaemenid kings in Herodotus’ account, for obvious reasons second only to Xerxes, the demolisher of the Acropolis. The Ionian historian attributes the king’s madness primarily to his lack of respect for Egyptian religious cults and customs, but mentions that the Persians themselves attribute his personality disorder to drunkenness (φιλοινία, “love for wine”), thereby indicating that his commensal behaviour diverged from the social norm in his own society (3.34). He uses the words “half mad”, “mad” or “madman” on several occasions when narrating Cambyses’ decisions and activities from the moment he slides into lunacy until his inglorious end. The Persian king is charged with desecrating the corpse of the pharaoh Amasis (3.16.1–4) and committing sacrilege against the divine bull Apis, the animal incarnation of the god Ptah.\[^{62}\] He not only scorns the religious sensibilities of his Egyptian subjects but commits atrocious acts against his own people: marrying his own sister (according to Egyptian custom) and then killing her when she becomes pregnant, ordering the execution of his brother Smerdis, and shooting the son of his most faithful servant (3.30–32; 3.34–35). After recording these many instances of Cambyses’ deranged behaviour Herodotus justifies his explanation of the king’s megalomania: insanity:

\[^{61}\] Hdt. 1.32.5–6.
\[^{62}\] Herodotus admits that the burning of Amasis was a transgression of Persian religious rules but he mistakenly states that they believe “fire is a god” (3.16.2–3).
This statement demonstrates that Herodotus is explicitly conscious of the relativity of cultural customs, i.e. the notion that each people makes sense of its own customs on its own terms. Cambyses’ madness represents a kind of ōbris or reckless arrogance that brings disaster on itself. Herodotus seeks the source of the his madness, but leaves it open whether it was caused by his sacrilege against the Apis, as his Egyptian sources seem to believe (3.27–29), or a hereditary disease, possibly epilepsy (3.33). The ring structure of the narrative suggests that the cause is focused upon Cambyses’ slaying of the Apis, since in the end the king dies after injuring his thigh at the very spot where he struck at bull. Iranian religious and mythical motifs are prominent in the narrative, and the ritual slaying of bulls, often connected with legendary figures and deities, such as Yima and Mithra, might very well have been distorted into an act of madness, so as to denigrate the Persian king. The image of the mad ruler also emerges in the description of Cambyses’ ill-prepared expedition against the Nubians, called Ethiopians in the narrative. Here his military folly is the main feature of an account that seems to have been modelled on Homer’s story of the blameless Ethiopians. Among the luxurious gifts Cambyses offers to the king of the “milk-drinking” Nubians is a jar of precious palm-wine. After learning about its manufacture and delighting in its flavour, the Nubian king identifies the consumption of wine as the only way in which his people are inferior to Persians: they drink it, the Ethiopians do not (3.20–23).

Since Cambyses is portrayed as an excessive drinker there is, in the words of James S. Romm, an implicit critique of Persian sophistication at work: “The Ethiopian king praises wine as a salutary beverage, capable of extending the lifespan of those who drink it; whereas in fact it has the

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63 Hdt. 3.38:1–2.
64 According to Herodotus the Persian idea of cultural and ethnic superiority is based on a preconception of their central position in the world: “They [the Persians] honor most the peoples nearest to themselves, next the people next to those, and others in proportion to their remoteness, and those dwelling furthest from themselves they hold in the least honor.” (1.134)
65 See Konstantakos 2016, 54–57.
66 Cf. Hdt. 3.21.2. See also Balcer 1987, 83, 85.
opposite effect on Cambyses.”

The tragic image of Cambyses culminates when he proceeds to kill his royal cupbearer, the son of the Persian noble Prexaspes, a member of the highest nobility and a royal messenger, after having learned that his own people attribute his madness to his taste for strong wine:

... and pursuing... and monumental sources. As is widely acknowledged in modern research, the entire story is a fictitious invention based on combined Egyptian and Persian propaganda transmitted and represented in accordance with Herodotus’ own agenda. There seem to have been no sacrileges committed by Cambyses against Egyptian gods or temples, and no Memphite bull seems to have been slain in his reign in Egypt. Archaeological evidence shows that Cambyses maintained satrapal order and engaged in systematic preservation of religious cults in order to display continuity. He is depicted on a hieroglyphic stele as kneeling before the Apis as a pious worshipper and pursuing his father’s policy of religious tolerance. His treatment of the local cults was probably selective, since fiscal documentation in the Demotic Chronicle indicates that his reforms focused on curbing the immense power of some temples that had been favoured under the Saite. Herodotus was probably misled by an anti-Persian tradition that prevailed among some of his informants who may have been descendants of the priests whose revenues and privileges had been curtailed (3.16.5; 3.30.1). The stories about the king’s atrocities against his

68 Hdt. 3.34.1–3. Cf. 3.74–75.
70 Brosius 2000, no. 24. Cf. Boyce 1982, 74. Nor do we have evidence from Babylonian material of misbehaviour on Cambyses’ part. His eight years as crown prince, at times as the satrap of Babylonia, his masterly campaigns and policies in Egypt, Libya and northern Nubia, which brought these areas into the empire, indicate sound decisions and rulership.
own family that form the basis of Herodotus’ account come from Darius and his fellow conspirators, who generated such themes in order to defame him.\textsuperscript{71} Herodotus’ account of Cambyses cannot be claimed to represent historical facts but, philosophically speaking, it reveals that wine is a pharmakon; it can be both a remedy and a poison depending on whether or not one knows how to use it.\textsuperscript{72}

Herodotus’ criticism of luxury

The corrupting effect of good things on human nature and the conduciveness of a wealthy environment to luxurious living and its accompanying customs, is a recurrent theme in the \textit{Histories}. Herodotus generally contrasts the poverty and sparse life-style of the Greeks, in particular the Spartans, with the lavish lifestyle of the Persians to provide an explanation of Xerxes’ military setback in Greece (9.82). The experience of the Persian Wars constitutes the overall historical backdrop of his theoretical analysis, which is not unexpected since the military conflict brought the Persians perilously close and made them a fact of life for the vast majority of Greeks. As a result of the Persian invasions, the notion of cultural self-consciousness intensified among the mainland Greeks and gave rise to Panhellenic ideas. Many Greek writers (Ctesias, Plutarch, Isocrates, and to a lesser extent Herodotus) resorted to polemical stereotypes about the splendour of the Persian palaces, banquet, costumes, leisure and sexual pleasures, to make them more manageble psychologically. The Greeks were particularly impressed by the luxury of the king’s table and the opulence of his banquet and drinking parties. Aelian wrote in literal terms that the Persians “exhibit their luxury in the pleasures of the bed”, referring to their habit of having many wives and concubines.\textsuperscript{73} The concept of τρυφή thus relates to a broad range of cultural and social practices involving various types of pleasure, in particular gastronomic and erotic.

The Persians play a dominant and more or less uniform part in Herodotus’ ethnographic treatment of τρυφή and his central distinction between “hard” and “soft” societies. As noted above, he recalls their hardiness and dignity in past times, asserting they lacked luxuries and good things, such as wine, before Cyrus’ conquest of Lydia. When the Median noble Artembares suggests that Cyrus ought to abandon the small and harsh land of Pārsa and occupy a more prosperous territory, Cyrus warns his fellow Persians that they cannot expect to inhabit affluent lands and remain rulers over men: “Soft lands breed soft men; wondrous fruits of the earth and valiant warriors grow not from the same soil” (9.122.3). This apothegm on softness (μαλακία) closes the \textit{Histories} and virtually celebrates the Persian king as a powerful model of wise counsel. Interestingly the Greek word μαλακία has

\textsuperscript{71} See e.g. Briant 2002a, 97–106. In contrast to his father, Cambyses did not receive an official grave.

\textsuperscript{72} This theme is also elaborated in the story of Cyrus’ expedition against the Sakas, where he secures an early victory by means of a trick with wine (Hdt 1.212).

\textsuperscript{73} Ael. \textit{NA} 1.14.
strong moral, psychological and sexual implications in addition to its physical and social connotations. It means not only “softness” but in a transferred sense also “effeminacy” and “weakness”. In the latter meaning it is associated with feminine social identities and is used metaphorically of male individuals and whole societies with regard to social behaviour improper to manhood. A logical consequence of this primitive notion of gender is that a loss of masculinity reduces a biological male to effeminacy.

In Herodotus’ view external factors, such as climate and geography, are primary factors in the evolution of human society. The Persians initially led hard lives and the severe land made them tough and brave warriors, similar to the Greeks, but they soon became “softened” by the increasing cultural sophistication and luxuries that resulted from their empire building. A process of social change occurred in which they gradually abandoned their originally semi-nomadic life on the Iranian plateau and embraced a cosmopolitan and mercantile lifestyle. Their capacity for acculturation is already displayed when Cyrus borrows the attire and urbanite culture of the Medes after his conquest of Ecbatana. The Histories is replete with examples of “soft” societies succumbing to “hard” invaders and “soft” invaders capitulating to “hard” societies, but his implicit theory of historical causation is almost exclusively applied with reference to the Persian people in order to display the weaknesses of the Achaemenid Empire. There are no signs in Herodotus’ narrative of Lydian or Assyrian political decadence or martial weakness, despite the fact that luxury was a characteristic of both these peoples.

Herodotus’ notion of the transition from primitive society to universal empire is essential to the thematic structure of the Histories, but is incoherent as an account of historical change since the model he established for the Achaemenid Empire cannot easily be applied to the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War. More importantly, the Persians followed Cyrus’ precedent and continued to inhabit and rule from Pārsa. Even if they were transformed by the power and wealth of their vast empire they never forsake their relatively small and harsh land on the Iranian plateau. Herodotus’ general model of the rise and fall of empires is problematic because it ignores the underlying mechanisms of the successful maintenance of the Achaemenid Empire and the continued reproduction of its ruling class from the time of Cyrus down to his own time. In spite of his claim that the Persians are unbiased with regard to foreign customs, he is hesitant to attribute their military and political successes to their adaptive capacity. The problem with Herodotus’ scheme escalates when he resorts to stereotypes about Persian luxury to explain political and cultural developments during the reigns of Cyrus’ successors. The assertion that Persian society gradually underwent a continuous process of “softening” or decay after Cyrus, with a brief recovery under Darius, is highly questionable since he completely avoids answering the question of what kept the declining empire together for more than a century. Instead of providing a political, military and social analysis, he adopt the spectre of decadence to disguise Persian realities. In this respect Pierre Briant convincingly argues that the dominant place of τρυφή provides simplistic explanations of the political development and
social structures of the Achaemenid Empire, and generally results in the absence of a coherent notion of the evolution of human society.\textsuperscript{74}

The idea of hard culture as an explanatory principle of imperial expansionism is important enough to form the final paragraph of the \textit{Histories} and runs as a key theme throughout the whole work in many variations. Focusing on the rise and fall of empires, Herodotus implicitly formulates a theory of historical causation that unequivocally serves to set Persian luxury and decadence against Greek austerity and rigour.\textsuperscript{75} He refers to the hardness of Greek culture at the time of the Persian Wars and reprimands the Athenians for becoming “soft” due to wealth and influence acquired from their successful defence of the Attica Peninsula. Writing in the early years of Peloponnesian War, he finds clear parallels between Persian and Greek imperialism in his descriptions of the corruptive activities of several Athenian leaders following Xerxes’ withdrawal from mainland Greece. Some of his stories reveal that Persia was a powerful model in his own day. In the scene after the battle of Plataiai when the Greeks create a lavish Persian banquet, Pausanias “could hardly believe his eyes for the good things set before him” (9.80). The Spartan king laughingly ridicules the opulent lifestyle of the Persians questioning why they ever bothered to occupy Greece (9.82). But as Herodotus’ audience knew, Pausanias soon afterwards embraced luxurious Persian practices (regarding clothing, bodyguards, and dining) and was stripped of his power under accusation of treasonable negotiations with Persia. His narration of the story therefore serves as an ironic symbol of the weakening of Greece by Persian wealth and luxury.\textsuperscript{76}

Herodotus’ notion of a decaying Persian society generates a collection of stereotypes about Persians as being servile, effeminate and weak. These representations usually have less to do with documented inquiry or empirical observation than ideological standpoints and literary rhetoric. In the end he never endorses a clear-cut moral dichotomy between Persians and Greeks, or thinks that the two cultures are generically opposed to each other. Cultural characteristics are not immutable, but subject to dynamic change due to climate and environment.\textsuperscript{77} Herodotus believes that the νόμος (custom-laws) of a people is an outgrowth of its φύσις (natural order) but in some respects he agrees that sociocultural surroundings have a more direct, immediate effect than biological factors. His distinction between hard and soft societies is not only a way of reading the dynamic of history, but is also a geographical category. Persians and Greeks are placed at the centre of the world on Herodotus’ historical map, a natural sphere of cultural mixtures, in

\textsuperscript{74} Briant, 2002a, 14, 535. Cf. Briant 2002b, 201.
\textsuperscript{75} Cf. Hdt. 7.102.1, 8.26.3, 9.82.
\textsuperscript{76} Thucydidides completes this story in The Peloponnesian War, revealing that Pausanias used to dress in Persian clothes and set his table in a Persian fashion (τράπεζαν τε Περσικὴν παρετίθετο) (Thuc. 1.130). The good living that in Herodotus was enjoyed by the Persians and by implication threatened Greeks had five centuries later become a Roman habit.
\textsuperscript{77} Herodotus is open-minded toward Persian culture overall, and many have noted his fairmindedness. He portrays the Persians as truth-speaking and morally righteous, and when they commit wicked acts they are often represented as transgressing the moral and religious standards of their own culture. He explicitly commends the Persian practice of weighing good deeds against misdeeds before turning their anger into punishment (cf. 1.136–137).
contrast to the edges of the earth inhabited by Scythians, Nubians, and other peoples immune to outside influence.\textsuperscript{78} Persians and Greeks have very much in common, since they both adopt foreign customs and are transformed by contact with each other. According to Herodotus this interaction is particularly evident in Ionia, which in his view, represents the centre of the world. The historical predicament of both peoples is very similar as they are living at the juncture between an original hardness and a potential softness, perhaps much more similar than Herodotus sometimes is willing to admit.

**Conclusion**

Greek literature reflects multifaceted views of the Persians. In Herodotus’ case Persian customs and practices related to wine drinking facilitate a primary theme that stimulates ethnographic reflection on the evolution of human society. His treatment of Persian wine drinking is complex and ambiguous, since he relies on a limited repertoire of stereotypes to produce a recognisable representation of the Persians. The issue of how much empirical authenticity that can be deduced from the *Histories* regarding Persian drinking practices is an ambivalent subject. As we have seen above, Greek categories and assumptions dictated his portrayal of the subject to a higher degree than any duty of historical accuracy. His conception of “historical truth” is also unlikely to be same as ours since the modern distinction between representation (fiction) and reality (non-fiction) cannot be precisely applicable to his writings.\textsuperscript{79} The sensational nature of several of Herodotus’ descriptions ultimately derives from his background as an oral performer and suggests that they were intended largely for entertainment and instilling moral values. For instance, his assertion that the Persian king makes political decisions whilst drunk and reviews them in a sober state may not have any reference within the historical narrative. Nowhere in the *Histories* are Persians portrayed as engaging in policy making in inebriated state, not to speak of banquets or drinking parties, which were considered external manifestations of Persian wealth and luxury by Greek writers.

Wine is, philosophically speaking, a pharmakon in the *Histories* with regard to human nature; it acts as both a remedy and a poison, depending on the context. It is a sign of cultural advancement and sophistication, but in Herodotus’ descriptions of the Persians it is also intimately associated with luxury and softness. We do not know if he had any personal antipathy toward the phenomenon of τρυφή but he systematically takes the word in a pejorative sense. The overall theme of Persian softness not only aims at reminding his audience of the deleterious effects of luxury but also at representing the Achaemenid Empire as culturally decadent and militarily weak. His notion of Persian society as in a state of constant decline is largely informed by ideological premises, which provided an expedient justification of Greek moral superiority and patriotism. The moral lesson for his audience was not only that luxury is harmful to the people who enjoy it, but that it

\textsuperscript{78} See Redfield, 2002, 39–40.

\textsuperscript{79} Flower 2006, 278.
involves a process of acculturation that could undermine Greek identity and self-localisation. Drinking wine the Persian way, i.e. undiluted, is also invoked as a cause of madness in the *Histories*. The similarities between Cambyses and Cleomenes are striking as regards madness resulting from wine. In Herodotus’ case, drinking patterns constitute an important area to which strategies of self-identity can be applied and play a decisive, effective role in the ethical construction of the Persians.

Herodotus writes of the differences that distinguish the Persians from other peoples but he is relatively unsuccessful in understanding how their world works objectively. He is correct that wine was not only consumed as part of the daily diet in ancient Iran, but that it also was employed in ceremonies, often being poured as a libation as prayers were said. He underscores the extravagance of the Persian banquets and symposiums, and interprets these phenomena as mere culinary lavishness and drinking to excess. Herodotus is inclined to explain cultural differences by making reference to climate, geography and political system, analysing how these differences arise and change with time, yet he never grasps the philosophical dimensions of the Persian display of luxury. For the Achaemenids luxury was not merely a sign of the paramount position of the elite, especially of the king, but it played an important part in “the redistributive system of interchange between king and subject in view of social and political relations”. The Persian elite consciously employed τρυφή as a matter of state policy. It not only embodied refinement, wealth and power, but also provided an opportunity for rewarding royal loyalty and implementing political strategy. The banquets and symposiums were inherently public and political acts, central to the construction of royal identity, demonstrating that the empire was a supreme player on the world stage. The prosperity of the empire was ultimately a manifestation of the favour of Ahuramazda and the other gods (aniyāha bagāha), and royal prestige depended upon exhibiting it.

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80 This theme is more fully elaborated by Xenophon in his long speech to the Greek army, as he seeks to convince the commanders of the mercenaries to return to Greece after Cyrus’ death. The narrative expresses the sense of being potentially lost in a remote, alien environment, and the danger of cultural displacement illustrated by the alluring luxury of Persia and the erotic pleasures of its seductive women (Xen. An. 3.2.25).

81 Wiesehöfer 2001, 41.

82 The Old Persian expression auramazdā utā aniψāha bagāha (“Ahuramazda and the other gods”) appear in numerous Achaemenid royal inscriptions, e.g. Darius’ trilingual inscription on Mount Behistun (DB 4.60–61) (Kent 1953, 132).
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Bibliography


