

PERSIANISM IN ANTIQUITY

An international conference held at the Netherlands Institute in Turkey (Istanbul) in the spring of 2014, to be organized by Rolf Strootman (University of Utrecht) and Miguel John Versluys (Leiden University).

Introduction

Persia was one of the great Empires of Antiquity and, as all great Empires, it has known an enduring legacy. In modern Iran, the Achaemenid Empire has been conceived as a cultural predecessor and (moral) point of reference. The evocation of Achaemenid grandeur by the last shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, at the 2,500 year anniversary of Iranian monarchy at Persepolis in 1971 is a well-known example of the use that a later ruler could make of the “heritage” of Persia to legitimize his own rule. But already the Sasanians referred back to the Achaemenids to legitimate their own rule (Wiesehöfer 1986; Canepa 2010; Daryae 2012).

In the centuries in between, “Persia” developed into a civilizational ideal, an “empire of the mind”, to quote the title of a recent book on the cultural history of Iran (Axworthy 2008; cf. Frye 1962). This development has been well studied for post-antique periods, while it is also now becoming more clear that these ideas on “Persia” have influenced (and distorted) our scholarly, historical reconstruction of the Achaemenid Empire to great extent. Studies of the post-antique reception of the Persian Empire however are usually more concerned with the *idea* of Persia than with the first Persian Empire as a historical reality. Studies of the influence of the Achaemenids in Antiquity itself, on the other hand, often think in terms of actual historical continuity. We argue that for ancient history and archaeology the strict dichotomy between real Persia and an imagined Persia is unhelpful. The idea of Persia plays an important role in cultural and political developments in Antiquity. Various post-Achaemenid contexts seems to be able to construct their own “Persia”, resulting in the existence of many different, sometimes even conflicting or incoherent, “Persias”.

Aims of the Conference

The aim of this conference is to trace the origins of the concept of “Persia” in post-Achaemenid Antiquity. It was in the Hellenistic and early Roman Near East that the *idea* of

Persia fully developed. From the second century BCE, a varied cultural style developed that can best be described as “Persianism” – the appropriation of an idealized past through the re-use or invention of imagery and concepts associated with that past (cf. Assmann 1992). The iconographical program of Antiochos I of Kommagene at Mount Nemrut or the quasi-traditional coin images and titulature of the *fratarakā* rulers of Fārs bear witness to this development: both seem to construct an Achaemenid identity but in both cases this takes place in a Hellenistic context (Strootman forthcoming).

It is through the continuous appropriation, reception studies have taught us, that there (slowly) develops some core understanding of what the idea of “Persia” is about. It is important to realize that this process started already in Antiquity itself from the moment the Persian Empire came into being to play its remarkable historical role on the Mediterranean and Near Eastern stage. Subsequently, large parts of post-Achaemenid Antiquity can be characterized as “living in the shadow of Cyrus” (to paraphrase Fowden 1993, 7).

There exists, however, no comprehensive study of the idea of Persia, what we perhaps should call the *cultural memory* of Persia, in Antiquity. Most scholars understand the relations between the Achaemenid Empire, its neighbors and its successors in the ancient world in terms of acculturation and cultural tradition: what one could call *Persianization*. As a necessary additional perspective, we argue that it is the idea of Persia that mattered greatly with these cultural dynamics, too: we call this *Persianism*. Persianism differs from Persianization in that it is less a response to the Achaemenid Empire as a political reality than the post-Achaemenid construction of cultural memory in the context of new and varied political and cultural contexts (e.g. the collapse of the Seleukid Empire in the later Second Century BCE or new cultural encounters in the Roman Mediterranean). Of course, Persianism will have been in part informed by, and itself will have influenced, ongoing processes of Persianization. Studying Persianism therefore is not only important to better understand Persianization in Antiquity but also to understand the “birth” and the first and formative phase of that remarkable long and still enduring fascination with the idea of “Persia”.

From Persianization to Persianism

In studying the “Persian legacy” in the post-Achaemenid Near East and Iran, scholars have rarely made use of a reception-studies approach and concepts such as collective (cultural)

memory or invention of tradition. Instead, they seem to reason, often implicitly, in terms of diffusion and tradition: “things Persian” in the Hellenistic, Roman and Parthian worlds would have something to do with Persia, with Persians (in diaspora or not), or with things “originally Persian”. The scholarly discussion on the “Persian” god Mithras provides a significant example (see Gordon 2007). Our evidence for the cult of the Old-Persian deity Mithra in the Middle East ends in the fourth century BCE, as this god apparently was somehow linked to the Achaemenid monarchy. From the Flavian period onwards, after a period of 400 years, Mithras becomes popular once again, but now in the Roman Mediterranean. What about the relation between the Persian god of Mithra and the Roman god of Mithras? Reasoning in terms of diffusion presupposes some kind of direct link between the Persian and the Roman Mithra(s) and many scholars have intensively searched for precisely that. Thus far, however, no evidence has been brought to light that there indeed was a Hellenistic phase between the Old-Persian and Roman Mithraic cult (Jacobs 1999). A reception studies approach might therefore be more useful in understanding the Roman Mithras. It will redirect our attention to the contemporaneous *use* of the idea of Mithras and Persia. This will also raise a new and perhaps more fruitful question: *why* did people in the second-century Roman Mediterranean find it important to invent such a tradition and claim that the deity they worshiped was really “Persian”?

There thus seems to be a significant distinction between *Persianization* on the one hand and *Persianism* on the other. *Persianization* can be described as “the cultural influence of Achaemenid Persia on other peoples and cultures resulting in the adoption of Persian cultural traits” (after Brosius 2011). *Persianism* is something different and implies that there is a certain distance, in time and/or space, between the Persian Empire as a historical reality and Persia as a concept or idea. Differences between the two were not as clear-cut, of course, as these definitions suggest. There may well have been functioning Persianisms within Persian Empire itself (“Persianisms from the heart”, to speak with Margaret Cool Root) while at the same time the diffusion of Persian cultural traits may stretch over time when they have taken the form of a genuine “Persian tradition”. However, still it seems to be useful to try and distinguish between what most often are very different cultural processes. Drawing in, as a comparison, the discussion on the difference between *Hellenization* and *Hellenism* immediately makes the importance of the differentiation clear (see, for instance, Rajak 2002). That debate has clearly shown that where the majority of scholarship used to think in terms of *Hellenization* until not so very long ago, the employment of *Hellenism* to

understand what is “Greek” in particular the Hellenistic and Roman world might be more appropriate. It is that perspective—that of *Persianism* (the appropriation of a concept) as opposed to *Persianization* (an acculturation process)—that we would like to investigate in this conference. We will deal, therefore, in the first place not so much with history but with mnemohistory; not with diffusion and acculturation but with appropriation and *koine*; and not with tradition but with the invention of tradition. To try and put the theoretical point of departure of our project in one sentence: in order to understand “Persia” in Antiquity we need to understand continuity as a historical product.

Approaches to Persianism

Above it has been explained why we have chosen a “reception studies approach” as the theoretical angle for this conference. We will focus, therefore, not on Persia but on the reception, appropriation and use of “Persia” as a cultural concept in Mediterranean and Near East in the Hellenistic, Parthian, Roman and Sasanid worlds (ca. 200 BCE – 600 AD).

The results of this investigation are of importance for two discussions: 1. the cultural influence of Persia and the idea of Persia in Antiquity (and the relations between “tradition” and “invention of tradition” in this respect) and 2. The coming into being of the cultural concept of Persia as it plays an important role until the present day.

In doing this we also aim to add to two even larger debates for which our project on Persianism in Antiquity serves as a case study: the transference of “cultures” and the concept of “materiality”.

In the first place we would like to compare these different appropriations of “Persia” in different historical contexts to see how this works as a *process*. Are always the same characteristics of “Persia” selected? Can we make a kind of definition what, in its core-essence, the concept of “Persia” consists of? And have these different uses and appropriations of “Persia” influenced each other? Can we, in other words, say something about “Persia” in terms of a vertical transmission of cultural elements? Why, in other words, was “Persia” such a fertile symbol to create meaning and what does that tell us in a comparative perspective about cultural elements like “Greece” or “Egypt” in Antiquity. Through this focus the project will be able also to generate important conclusions for scholars not directly working on Persia, *Persianization* or *Persianism* but being interested much more generally in culture contact in the ancient world.

In the second place we would like to give material culture an important role in our investigation. “Persia” clearly was a “cultural concept” in the sense that there were all kinds of (intellectual) ideas associated with it. But at the same time there was material culture *looking* distinctly Persian but not necessarily having anything to do with those same ideas. Recent debates within material culture studies speak of “*materiality*” to underline this different place of material culture within historical analysis. In our conference we will investigate is such an approach if really worthwhile. In other words: was material culture we call “Persian” selected not because it *was* “Persian” but because it *looked* “Persian”? Through this focus our project will be both cultural historical and archaeological.

The conference and its significance

The conference will be hosted by the Netherlands Institute in Turkey, a modern and well-equipped venue in the center of Istanbul. All participants to the conference will be housed in (or close by) the Institute. We hope to be able to publish the conference proceedings soon after our meeting in the series *Oriens et Occidens* of Franz Steiner Verlag.

The East-West dichotomy that still characterizes contemporary politics and social imagination, as well as much modern scholarship, was created in Antiquity. It goes back first of all to a “Greek” grammar of identity and alterity, constructing “the Persian” as Other. This process is commonly referred to as Orientalism. Our conference will generate important insights in how this process was taken up and shaped in Antiquity and therefore adds to a debate that is crucial for contemporary society.

It is clear already now that it will be impossible to maintain the East-West dichotomy so passionately evoked by (some) ancient authors—and followed by a quite substantial amount of scholarly research. Already the categories of “Greek” and “Persian” were much more relative than we often think (as Margaret Miller has so well shown throughout her work) and especially from the Hellenistic period onwards societies in the Ancient World are neither Eastern nor Western, as these are essentially modern concepts closely linked to the self-assigned cultural boundaries of contemporary Europe. As new directions in Hellenistic research have shown, there is little use in debating the Eastern *or/versus* Western nature of cultural developments in the context of the Middle East in the period after Alexander the Great (see *i.a.* Stavrianopoulou 2013). It is much more worthwhile to look how, for example in the context of dynastic legitimization, the Seleukid Empire and its successor states used contemporaneous ideas associated with “Greek” and

“Persian” and how, simultaneously, they were influenced by those concepts. Of significance, too, is the fact that the appropriation of “Persia” in the Near East itself might well be a form of *eastern* Orientalism; an observations that provokes interesting conclusions on the functioning of “Orientalism” (and “Occidentalism”) in general (see Buruma & Margalit 2004).

Themes

In order to apply this perspective we have selected the three main periods in Antiquity that are undeniable post-Persian but where what we call “Persian elements” play an important role: (1) The middle and late Hellenistic Eastern Mediterranean and Near East (including Ptolemaic Egypt and the early Parthian Empire); (2) The Roman world; and (3) Sasanian Iran. For these periods we will try and look in depth what role “Persia” plays in society and material culture. In all three cases “diffusion” and “tradition” have been put forward as an important background for our understanding of the “Persian element”; we think that thinking in terms of *Persianism* will provide important additions and alternatives for such interpretations. In order to investigate how *Persianization* and *Persianism* might overlap and influence each other, the conference will also deal with two much discussed cases of clear *Persianization*: the adoption of Persian cultural traits in fifth-century BCE Athens and the taking over of Persian (material) culture in Asia Minor (in particular Lykia).

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