
Cherchez la femme:
Power and Female Agency in Bactria
at the dawn of the Hellenistic Age*

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ABSTRACT Due prominently to the scanty nature of evidence on the ground attesting to an imperial presence which, however, historiographical sources claim to have been real and lasting over time, the satrapy of Bactria (roughly embracing northeastern Afghanistan, southern Uzbekistan and western Tajikistan) to this day still struggles to free itself of some prejudices, despite some extremely important discoveries and a more general scholarly reevaluation of previous conclusions. Possibly the most stubborn among these is the image of an ungovernable province, constantly on the brink of dynastic revolts (cf. Hdt. 9.113) or threatened by northern barbarians (against whom Cyrus found his end and whom Darius boasts of having subjected in the famous Bīsūtūn inscription. With the recently published Aramaic Documents from Ancient Bactria, however, we have acquired an incredibly valuable source regarding the functioning of the satrapy at a crucial period in its history (the late 4th century BCE until the years immediately following Alexander). The present study is based primarily on the following: 1) this documentation, 2) the results of some recent and very significant studies on the Persepolis archive and 3) some methodological reflections on the relationship between empire and the local élite(s) suggested by the comparative analysis of the functioning of this relationship in a different phase of Central Asia's imperial history (the 1930s). The study is intended, on the one hand, as a first step towards a new appreciation of the role Bactria and Sogdiana played in the delicate transitional phase

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To this extraordinary young Russian (and Tajik, and Tatar, and much more) belongs this paper as much as anything else of worth which I was and will be ever able to bring to light. Потому что она стала, стает и будет ставать *Жизнью и Судбой*.

from Achaemenid to Macedonian hegemony in the upper satrapies. On the other hand, it seeks to raise some hypotheses about the reasons behind the position held during the stormy years of Alexander's Bactrian campaign and in the subsequent, no less troubled years by two protagonists of these crucial events, who are however still relatively unrecognized in their role as historical agents: the Bactrio-Sogdian princesses Roxane and Apama.

KEYWORDS Achaemenids, Agency, Bactria, Hellenistic Age, Royal Women.

1. INTRODUCTION: *DO YOU KNOW THE ENEMY?*

Despite, or perhaps paradoxically precisely *because* of, some important documentary and archaeological discoveries and, consequently, of a renewed research interest in the region, the historiographic image of the Achaemenid satrapy of Bactria today still lies between the anvil and the hammer of a contradictory dichotomy. This is so in spite of the cautions formulated almost four decades ago by Pierre Briant in several studies of this region of the Persian East which still deserve cautious reading¹. On the anvil side, thanks both to Wouter Henkelman's work on the Persepolis archive and to the recent publication of scraps of what –according to the editors as well as the majority of scholars today– probably was the archive of one of the last Bactrian satraps of Achaemenid history in Central Asia, we now have a body of primary sources which allows us to reconstruct the image of an extremely sophisticated bureaucracy. This system appears to have been able to mobilize men and resources on a trans-regional scale (individuals explicitly designated as 'Arachosian', 'Bactrian' or 'Sogdian' are attested as working in the area of the Persian Gulf, to give just one example) and to have been at the head of a system of territorial control rooted even in the most remote (from the point of view of the administration itself) and inaccessible (from the geo-ecological perspective) niches of the entire satrapy and neighboring territories (including the steppes)². The study of this documentary corpus not only provides the scholar with a remarkable picture of the empire's organizational capacity and political solidity (and this even in times of supposed 'crisis', for example during the reign of Darius III); it also supplies relevant material supporting the view of a perfectly successful integration of the eastern satrapies within the imperial body, and finally points at the high regard (attested by the quantity and quality of the travel rations provided to the Bactrian and Sogdian *kurtaš*) in which the Central Asian populations were kept by the imperial administration. This high regard was probably due in part to their technical skills, for instance in the field of hydraulic engineering: this, indeed, appears to be reason for the presence of some of them in the Būšehr peninsula³.

On the side of the hammer is the opposite image, vigorously outlined by Wu Xin over the last decade on the basis of a detailed study of another primary source: the glyptic corpus composed in particular of the seals also found in Persepolis⁴. The study

¹ BRIANT 1983, 181-238; 1984; 2002, 743-754.

² Cf. especially HENKELMAN 2017; 2018. Concerning the Aramaic corpus (known as *ADAB* and on which more will be said below), cf. the *editio princeps* (NAVEH – SHAKED 2012) as well as the recent studies of Margaretha L. FOLMER (2017) Jan TAVERNIER (2017a; 2017b) and Christopher J. TUPLIN (2017).

³ Cf. BRIANT 2009 and HENKELMAN 2018, 230 (Central Asians employed in the Persian Gulf area).

⁴ See especially WU 2005, 40-100; 2010; 2012; 2014.

of the numerous depictions of war that seem to portray, with particular attention to ethnographic detail (e.g. clothing and weaponry), armed clashes between representatives of the imperial elite (in particular the Medes, Elamites and Persians) on the one hand, and a large number of Central Asian populations (Bactrians, Parthians, Chorasmians and their *Sakā* allies) on the other, has led the Chinese scholar to the conclusion that, throughout the entire history of the Achaemenid imperial presence in Bactria, relations with the locals were constantly characterized by acute tensions, thus making the inhabitants of the Upper satrapies the enemies ‘par excellence’ of the Persian empire, to the point that military engagement in Central Asia would have become a proxy for an individual’s status symbol striving to enter into the imperial ‘ethno-classe dominante’⁵.

The purpose of this study is an attempt to negotiate a middle path between these two contrasting positions: while recognizing in the results of the analysis conducted by Henkelman a ‘framework of possibilities’ within which the various social actors involved in the sociopolitical arena of satrapy were in some ways forced, but in some others (by virtue of the opportunities it offered) eager to move within this framework, the following pages will examine, on the one hand, some of the most relevant socio-political ‘governmentality’ devices within what Henkelman has called the Achaemenid ‘imperial paradigm’⁶. At same time, however, it will try to highlight the room for manoeuvre this very paradigm made available to local elites for the pursuit of agendas that were not always congruent with, and sometimes in open opposition to, that of the satrapal (which is to say imperial) administration. Beginning with these premises, the fourth and last paragraph attempts, through a closer examination of the position assumed within the *Brave New (Hellenistic) World* by two figures, namely Apama and Roxane, to put forward some hypotheses regarding the capacities of some particularly prominent representatives of the Bactrio-Sogdian elite. Their main goal, I argue, was to fully exploit the tactical advantage deriving from being simultaneously members of the imperial ruling class and of strictly regional power groups during the most difficult socio-political repositioning of their lives, i.e. the two-year military campaign led by Alexander the Great in Central Asia.

Before moving on to the analysis of the key features of the Achaemenid imperial paradigm, it is nevertheless advisable to briefly discuss an example which, in my view, clearly shows both the coercive capacity of the ‘framework of possibilities’ developed –for distinctively socio-political and economic purposes of territorial control and resource extraction– by a political entity such as an empire within a given territory in view of both the potential that this very entity makes available to certain social groups at a strictly local level in order to negotiate their own political positioning both in relation to the imperial government and, most importantly in this context, within the local political arena itself, that is, in relation to *other*, competing social groups. The importance of this brief ethnographic digression lies in the fact that it shows how the hypothesis of a model of 1) widespread and 2) enduring conflict between ‘the’ empire and ‘the’ peoples of Central Asia is highly unlikely, and this for two reasons: first of all, because it does not adequately take into account the internal complexity of the latter

⁵ WU 2014, 259-271. Cf. also WU 2017.

⁶ HENKELMAN 2017 on the Achaemenid ‘imperial paradigm’. Most recently, MEIER 2020 has been able to show in much detail how important the sociopolitical and economic structures of a polity such as Rome, Byzantium, the Sāsānian Empire (and, I would therefore argue, the Achaemenids) were also for the *internal* organization of polities such as the Vandals, the Goths and even the Huns or the Avars – supposed ‘archenemies’ of a given empire. This seriously questions the plausibility of an eminently oppositional model of cultural contacts such as that developed by Wu Xin.

and, secondly, because it ignores the adaptive capacity of these communities and of their representatives facing both an adversary and a partner which, although impossible to remove from the political chessboard, could nevertheless be navigated –at least in part– to one’s own advantage, both on the ‘local’ as well on the ‘global’ (i.e. ‘imperial’) scale.

2. TAMING THE OXUS: IMPERIAL NEEDS AND LOCAL μῆτις

The third book of Herodotus’ *History* contains the story describing how the Great King of Persia had succeeded, through monopolistic control of water resources, in securing for himself tribute, social order and political supremacy in a large region of Central Asia⁷. Leaving aside some unmistakably Herodotean rhetorical *colores*, it is remarkable to note that in the scholarly opinion, exemplarily represented by Briant, the historical value of this passage for our perception of some of the characteristics of the Achaemenid strategies of sociopolitical control in Central Asia has never been seriously questioned⁸. And yet, an approach of this kind runs the risk of making the imperial administration the *only* social actor within a scenario that was undoubtedly much more complex than Herodotus describes it. Moreover, by focusing exclusively on imperial interests, it underestimates one aspect of paramount importance, namely how, for the very purpose of pursuing these interests, the empire itself was deeply dependent on factors such as the technical competence and territorial knowledge of the local population, to say nothing of the capability of the latter’s representatives to mobilize it in the service of the satrap. A few years ago, James Scott summed up all these factors within the concept of μῆτις, and was able to convincingly demonstrate the extent to which such know-how can be an extremely effective asset available to a given state’s subjects in order to negotiate their position within it⁹.

The following discussion is intended to show the heuristic potential of Scott’s analysis applied to the context of Achaemenid Central Asia. Take Bactria as an example: a king or a satrap who wanted to behave in that region according to Herodotus’ model, could not do otherwise than take control of the course of the Āmū Dāryā (ancient Oxus), which was however much easier said than done. For especially the first is in fact a river extremely difficult to manage, and its canalization has challenged –and defeated– the most talented engineers who have ever ventured into the enterprise, at least from the nineteenth century onwards, according to the technical reports that have reached us¹⁰. However, since the lives of entire communities on either side of the modern Uzbek-Turkmen border depended on the mastery over that river’s course, despite their status as ‘barbarian’ and ‘uncivilized’ nomads, the only ones with the appropriate skills to profitably exploit the Āmū Dāryā’s waters were (and continue to be) the local populations.

Fayzulla Xo’jayev (1896-1938), a prominent figure of the Uzbek Communist Party, was well aware of this. A few months before his arrest at the height of the *Ežovščina* (1937-1939), he was charged by Stalin himself with the thorny task of preventing a flood that threatened to destroy the neighbouring cotton fields, and with them the entire local ruling class, including himself. The situation seemed particularly desperate

⁷ Hdt. 3.117.

⁸ BRIANT 2002, 415-417.

⁹ SCOTT 1998, 309-341.

¹⁰ WESTERMAN 2002, 176.

because, despite the astronomical sums invested by Moscow –which was now beginning to ask for the bill– in the construction of dams, containment canals and other infrastructure, nothing had thus far succeeded in containing the Āmū Dāryā’s floods. Fully realizing that he would have paid for a failure with his life, but also that in case of success he could have got rid of his rivals within the party (at local and perhaps even pan-Soviet level), Xo’jaye’v did not hesitate to disband the teams of the most prestigious engineers in charge of the dams and hastened to hire in their place, thanks to the valuable help given him by members of his entourage, a handful of local experts (shepherds, village chiefs, semi-sedentary farmers). Against all expectation, the flood was thwarted. In different times, such a result would have enabled Xo’jaye’v to dispose of all his opponents –of whom he had several– within the party, while at the same time ensuring huge dividends in terms of local power to the members of his faction, whose ecological expertise had proved to be indispensable for the protection of a strategic asset, namely Uzbek cotton¹¹. Similar stories abounded also within the Tajik SSR whose president, Abdurraxim Xodšibaev, informed Moscow that, in 1932, the camel still represented by far the most effective means of transportation in the entire republic; and as if this was not enough, the tragicomic attempt to build a colossal dam in the – then– remote Vaxš valley (a strategic region in the Achaemenid and Hellenistic period) clearly shows how both trained engineers and workers sent from Moscow and Dušanbe had to rely on the generosity and resources of the local inhabitants (in this case, again, mostly mobile shepherds) in order to navigate through extremely hostile territory¹².

The importance of these anecdotes lies in the fact that they make it possible to (re)read Herodotus (3.117) in the light of Xo’jaye’v’s hydraulic triumph: the Persian ‘κράτος’ in Central Asia might therefore rather be interpreted as the result of negotiations with representatives of the local communities, who alone (1) possessed the knowledge and skills needed to make economic profit (or at least avoid cataclysms) from a river such as the Āmū Dāryā, and (2) were the only ones able to find and mobilize the necessary workforce¹³. To take up Briant’s terminology, the real stakeholders of the Central Asian ‘modes of production’, therefore, would *not* (or not *only*) be the imperial officials, but the Chorasmian (or Bactrian) elites: as for Darius, it appears reasonable to argue that, in exchange for the accessibility of that stretch of river flowing through Chorasmia, he transformed into imperial officials the (luckier) predecessors of Xo’jaye’v who, before the advent of the Achaemenid power, were nothing but modest local ‘big men’, likely accustomed to rivalry amongst themselves. The most evident benefit of this interpretation lies in the fact that, while sticking to the text, it offers a more complex sociopolitical picture of the mechanisms underlying the functioning of imperial power in a pre-modern context which takes into consideration the most recent critical trends concerning such phenomena¹⁴.

It is in the light of this dialectic between imperial ambitions and local constraints that the present study aims to analyze more closely an institution of great socio-political importance within the Achaemenid Empire, namely the ‘Royal Table’, which grew out of a strategy of administering the King’s domains in Fārs, built on what Wouter Henkelman characterizes as

¹¹ TEICHMANN 2016, 199-200.

¹² TEICHMANN 2016, 140.

¹³ Cf. the category of ‘social relationship’ developed by William HONEYCHURCH (2015, 34-36) in the context of his study on the co-dependent and mutually conditioned rise and organization of the hàn and xiōngnú empires.

¹⁴ ANDO 2017a.

“A pyramidal model describing assets, human resources, production and transactions in an ascending hierarchy: a basis that is formed by the Persepolis economy at large, upper layers consisting of the royal domain in the strictest sense, i.e. the House of the King and the estates of royal women, and intermediate layers that are ‘royal’ in a more general sense”¹⁵.

Two aspects of this definition deserve emphasis. The first concerns the nature of the administrative model (not only an example of courtly lavishness and aristocratic consumption) of an institution such as the royal table, as well as the economy it generated. Like other administrative devices (e.g. the treasuries and the archives), the table can therefore be interpreted as part of a well-thought-out strategy of territorial government showing a ‘systematic attitude’, capable of manoeuvring ‘between deployment of templates and locally-determined flexibility’ which characterizes, in Henkelman’s view, the distinctive feature of the Achaemenid ‘institutional landscape’, even in its eastern provinces¹⁶. The second concerns the role played within that institution by actors other than the Great King or the satrap (on whom the sources, especially the Graeco-Roman ones, tend to focus), that is to say, the princesses of the royal house.

In exploring the scope of action of some exponents of the Persian aristocracy in Fārs as it emerges from the Persepolis archives, the next paragraph seeks to highlight some structural aspects of the administration of the empire’s territories that (1) according to the sources could be managed, with a wide margin of freedom, even by individuals who were *not* the sovereign or the satrap and (2) show interesting affinities with the *ADAB* corpus. Based on these convergences, the third paragraph suggests that, by virtue of the effectiveness of such a device as the royal table in terms of socio-economic control, it could have been adopted also *outside* Fārs (after all, this was one of the paramount goals behind the development of the ‘imperial paradigm itself’) by representatives of the Central Asian elites in order (1) to advertise, through imitation of the King’s household, their affiliation to the imperial ‘ethno-classe dominante’ of the empire and (2) to take advantage of the instruments of socio-economic control (e.g. redistribution mechanisms) that such an institution offered for purposes of *internal* political struggle (e.g. against rival elites)¹⁷.

Taking up an observation by Brian Bosworth, according to whom Alexander was pushed to the famous marriage with Roxane because already in 336

“He had had a painful object lesson in his wooing of the daughter of Pixodarus of Caria, and the result of that episode had been the demonstration that with the princess went the satrapy”¹⁸.

The last paragraph puts forward a hypothesis about the importance, not only in terms of social of symbolic capital, but also of real socio-economic power, of some of the Central Asian magnates’ daughters, especially Oxyartes’ and Spitamenes’, which could

¹⁵ HENKELMAN 2010, 673.

¹⁶ HENKELMAN 2017, 149 and 186.

¹⁷ HENKELMAN, 712 explicitly notes that, at least in Ēlām, individuals are attested (a certain Karkiš, satrap in Kurmana) who 1) had his own households, 2) as a satrap had his own table and 3) ‘consciously imitated’ the King’s court: cf. also BRIANT 2002, 194-195.

¹⁸ BOSWORTH 1980, 11.

have been decisive in orienting the diplomatic and marital strategies of both Alexander and Seleukos, probably the shrewdest among the contenders to the latter's inheritance.¹⁹

3. *THAT LAND BECAME OURS: PARADIGMS OF POWER*

We start with the Persian royal women: as the archives make clear, their role within the mechanisms of the itinerant court was of great importance, for among other things they enabled the diversification of precious logistical resources by controlling through regular visits different imperial *voῦοί* (Old Persian *dahayāva*) at the same time. This was, for example, clearly the case with Irdabama, presumably the mother of Darius I or, according to some sources, one of his wives²⁰. Irdabama's court appears to have had at its disposal a dedicated economy. She had an estate at Šullaggi, in the surroundings of Persepolis, and, interestingly enough, she had at her disposal an entire entourage of *puhu* ('servants', 'pages') as well as of *kurtaš* (coming from various regions, for example from Lycia)²¹. Some of her *kurtaš* teams amounted to no less than 490 men, and some of them even received ducks as food rations, a striking exception which may point either to Irdabama's liberality or to some kind of hierarchy among the *kurtaš*, be it related to the work they were performing or to their origin²². Given the fact that it is known from other tablets within the archive that parties of Bactrian *kurtaš* were given similar rations of 'luxury food', one is left wondering whether Bactrians were included among Irdabama's workers.²³ Irdabama had control of large quantities of commodities, such as the 2220 *qts.* of 'apples of Irdabama' mentioned in one of the Persepolis tablets²⁴. The mention of the apple is of some interest if compared with the *grīv* of

¹⁹ Cf. VAN OPPEN DE RUITER 2014 as well as VAN OPPEN DE RUITER 2020 for analogous considerations concerning, on the one hand, the conflicting interests of the Diadochi and of their wives after the Susan nuptials, on the other, the very concrete example of Amastris, a former royal princess who also was able to live and act, in his words, as "the first Hellenistic Queen".

²⁰ HENKELMAN 2010 p. 693. She is not known to Classical sources.

²¹ PF 1002, PF 1005. In PF 1947 Bactrians and Lycians are attested as working within the same group: could it be possible that Irdabama had Bactrian *kurtaš* at her service as well?

²² PF 1028, PF NN 0845.

²³ Henkelman records the allocation of 46 sheep or goats to a group of Bactrian *kurtaš* (PF NN1507). This is virtually unparalleled in the entire Persepolitan corpus. From other tablets it is known that meat was reserved for the royal court, high-ranking officials and people with certain professional skills, such as the *hallinup* mentioned in Fort. 0472-101. Dependent workers very rarely received meat rations and only at special occasions, such as large sacrificial feasts (Cf. HENKELMAN 2005). In addition, their portions usually are relatively small. The Parikānans of PF NN0646, for example, had to share a single sheep (maybe it was a goat) among their group of 40 men, which makes the 46 sheep given to the Bactrians all the more remarkable. Other texts mention daily allowances of only portions of animals (1/10, 1/20, 1/30 and 1/100: Cf. HENKELMAN 2018). By contrast, the Bactrians received no less than a (admittedly small) herd of animals. In theory, this could imply a very large group (one daily portion for 1000-4000 individuals), as well as an extended period of time. However, according to Henkelman, "the absence of a ration list renders both these scenarios less likely". Worth mentioning is also the particular phrasing of the text, which does not say that the livestock were given, but that they were 'paid to', or 'put at the disposal' of, the Bactrian *kurtaš*. Though the implications of this kind of phrasing cannot be fully understood, the text seems to hint at a certain level of autonomy and internal organization. "Some groups strike one as special in the sense that the administration allocated bulk amounts of commodities to them; the members of such groups may be described as Bactrian *kurtaš* or merely as Bactrians. The use of the ethnonym here gains new force, as it alone serves as justification for the undifferentiated allocation of relatively large quantities of beer, flour and animals" (HENKELMAN 2018, 242). What is striking here is the fact that, apparently, 'Bactrian' by itself seems to have indicated a well-defined community with internal cohesion, perhaps consisting of specialists like Irdabama's *puhu*.

²⁴ PF NN1849.

plums (*wrdwš*) delivered to a certain *B[ys]* (possibly the Greek Βήσσος) as attested in the *ADAB* corpus: fruit and dried-fruits were delicacies often related with the Royal court²⁵. Thus, it is all the more remarkable to see that the Persepolitan administration provided a group of Bactrians with a yearly apple provision²⁶. We know that Irdabama had the authority to give commands to the administrative hierarchy working in her estates, at Šullaggi as well as at Tirazziš, in the modern Šīrāz province²⁷. She sealed documents with her personal seal (PFS 0051) and issued order letters. From one of those letters, we gain the impression that, in Henkelman's words,

“Irdabama's own administrative staff was able to link up with the intricate Persepolis administration on various levels and in various languages”²⁸.

She seems to have enjoined a ‘Royal Table’ for herself, since we know of goods “Irdabama tibba makka” (that is ‘consumed before Irdabama’), and we are informed that products such as flour, various cereals and barley, as well as sheep, goats, lamb, wine and even beer were consumed/poured in her presence²⁹.

Irdabama used to travel quite a lot. We know of commodities consumed ‘before her’ in different localities in Fārs, such as Hidali, Kandama, Liduma and Persepolis, Susa, Šursunkiri and Tandari³⁰. In only two cases, at Persepolis and at Susa, we have evidence that the king *may* have (but he may equally have not) been present at the same place and at the same time. It is highly unlikely that this was due to chance: Irdabama appears in fact to have had her own staff, her own table, her own court, thus acting as a representative of the king and therefore making the ‘imperial signature’ even more visible through the Achaemenid territory³¹. Given the position of the royal ‘big men’ such as those aristocrats we encounter in the narrative of Alexander expedition through Central Asia, one may ask if there was something similar going on in Bactria as well. After all, if the *B[ys]* mentioned in the *ADAB* corpus really was Bessus, he was a member of the imperial family and, consequently, these practices must have been well known to him. Moreover, we know that Stateira, one of Darius III's daughters and would-be wife of Alexander, also used to travel the entire empire³². It may be suggested that this way of administering power by means of the physical presence on the imperial territory of some representative of the royal aristocracy was characteristic of the eastern satraps, who had to rule over geographically as well as ethnically heterogeneous territories, where the presence of pastoral-nomads was particularly significant. If we look at the evidence coming from Fārs, it seems that the network of estates owned by royal women was a very effective instrument of both social and political control as well as of economic exploitation, which consequently may have been willingly adopted by representatives of the local elite (one need only think of the fortresses (πέτραι)

²⁵ NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 174ff. C1 (=Khalili A21, l.18).

²⁶ Fort. 2319-101.

²⁷ PF NN1946.

²⁸ HENKELMAN 2010, 694.

²⁹ E. g. PF NN 0641, PF 0737, PF 0738, PF 0740, PF NN 0855, PF NN 1332, PF NN 1773.

³⁰ HENKELMAN 2010, 714ff.

³¹ HENKELMAN 2010, 697: “Documents like the one drafted at Susa and sealed with PFS 0051 in any case shows that Irdabama was surrounded by a private staff that travelled with her, just as the holders of seals PFS 0007*, PFS 0066a, b, c* and PFS 0093*, who were responsible for the King's Table, accompanied the migrant court”.

³² Plu. *Art.* 5.3.

described by the historians of Alexander, some of which, for example that of Arimazes, were clearly built according to ‘royal’ parameters, for example in terms of size)³³.

Worth noting is the fact that Irdabama’s was not an isolated case. Just like her, Irtaštuna (Gr. Ἰρταστώνη, possibly one of Darius’ wives) used her own seal, which has been recognized on eight letter orders. In nine other documents, commodities ‘consumed before Irtaštuna’ are listed as well³⁴. The documentation pertaining to Irtaštuna shows that prominent figures like her possessed estates which were at least partially autonomous from the Persepolis economy: this is why they appear only rarely in the Fortification texts. This remark should serve as a methodological *caveat* when drawing conclusions from the evidence (or the absence thereof) relating to regions of the empire other than Persepolis. Since in fact (1) the royal table was an important institution of the Achaemenid court, (2) high-ranking women appear to have taken part in the administration of this institution in the absence of the sovereign *or* administrated *another* ‘queenly table’ on their own, and finally (3) given the fact that local elites (beginning with the satraps) can be shown to have been extremely receptive throughout Achaemenid history in adapting the customs and institutions of the Persian court to their own socio-political context, it is not too far-fetched to put forward the hypothesis that figures similar to Irdabama or Irtaštuna also existed in other regions of the empire, including the upper satrapies, and that they fulfilled functions similar to those we see entrusted to the former in the Persepolis’ documents³⁵. A good example may be Spitamenes’ wife who, according to the historiographic tradition at least, was able to interact on an equal footing with Alexander.

It is true that, at the moment, the available evidence (including the *ADAB*) does not *directly* attest to the existence of land properties managed by female representatives of the local aristocracy, but this fact could, paradoxically, provide an element in favour of the hypothesis that such properties did indeed exist, for also in the case of Irdabama and Irtaštuna their names are underrepresented in the archives not because of their minor importance (or because they did not administer their own estates, which they did), but precisely because they enjoyed a certain degree of *autonomy*, which implied that they had their own administration, which consequently made their mention in the Persepolis archive superfluous³⁶. Based on this premise, the *ADAB*’s silence could therefore be justified by the structural parallel with the properties of the Fārs’ princesses: as in their case, the administrative autonomy of their Central Asian counterparts could have placed them beyond the horizon within which the administration of the Bactrian archive *as we have it* was moving. This may, for example, have been the case with Apama (whose social standing as the daughter of Spitamenes, who was *not* a gang leader, but an Achaemenid official, and a high ranking one at that), for her estates (or those of her father, which he, following Irdabama’s example, helped to administrate) would have been located mostly around the Zarafšān

³³ On Arimazes’ rock cf. e. g. Curt. 7.11.1-29, *Epit. Mett.* 15-18, Polyæn. *Strat.* 4.3.29; Strab. 11.11.4.

³⁴ PFS 0038. Cf. HENKELMAN 2010, 699ff.

³⁵ One could of course argue that the portrait of Spitamenes’ wife drawn by Greek and Roman sources is nothing more than a literary construction, whose purpose is to represent a society ‘upside down’, summarized in the outrageous behaviour of a woman who moves within the political space of her husband and goes so far as to physically eliminate him. However, one could respond to this by referring to the ethnographic evidence collected by anthropologists in Central Asia (e.g. DAVID 1976), which shows that, in fact, within local societies (and not least within mobile ones, whose environment was undoubtedly known to Spitamenes: cf. RAPIN 2018) women played many roles of great importance, including political ones. On Spitamenes’ wife cf. e.g. Arr. *An.* 4.17.7 and Curt. 8.3.1-16.

³⁶ Cf. PF 0733; PF 0724; PF 2035.

valley (one of Spitamenes' power-bases), and thus out of reach for the Bactrian archives, in which there is no mention of territories north of Šahr-e Sabsz³⁷.

Let us return for a moment to what we know about the administration of the 'queen's table' in Fārs. On the basis of the tablet's text's phrasing, Henkelman has argued that, in order to feed the economy of their properties (including of course their tables), both Irtaštuna and Irdabama drew from resources outside their own domain. Some of the receipts connected with Irtaštuna's name are in fact acknowledgements of debts³⁸. This provides an interesting parallel with a section of the *ADAB* corpus which, although it has so far received less attention than, for example, the exchange of letters between Axvamazdā –perhaps one of the last satraps of Achaemenid Bactria– and his subordinate Bagavant, is nevertheless extremely valuable material³⁹. I am referring to a small database of 18 wooden sticks, which as in the case of Irtaštuna's, were also debt acknowledgements: although, for the reasons given earlier, we do not have –say– Apama's name (or that of Spitamenes' wife) on the tallies, their existence at the very least shows that, just like in Fārs, also in Bactria not all land and/or the resources drawn from it were considered as royal or of satrapal pertinence⁴⁰. Another example of the semi-autonomous units such as Irtaštuna's estates is provided by Ušaya, the wine supplier of a man from Naširma named Karkiš, who is well recorded in the Persepolis archive⁴¹. In Fort. 3544, an employee of Ušaya is mentioned as *mardam* (O. P. **varda-*, 'workman'): in every context in which it is mentioned, the word seems to denote a direct relation between a high-ranking Persian and a subordinate of the type we also see attested in the *ADAB* (for instance in document C1 ll.46-47), where a supply chain involving Vahya-ātar, Vakhšubandāka and 'the ration providers' (*ptpk<n>y*', from O. P. *piθva-kāna-*) is attested⁴². The most conspicuous parallel case in the Persepolis archive is however that of the Patischorians: here *mardam* seems to indicate a particular legal as well as social status. In Henkelman's words,

“It denotes personnel or other subordinates of high-ranking Persians who acted directly on behalf of their masters and who fell under their patron's jurisdiction. In other words, people referred to as 'mardam of PN' belong to the external sphere of the Persepolis institution and are indicative of semi-autonomous units, i. e. probably the houses of Noble Persians and their supporters”⁴³.

As a consequence of the evidence discussed so far, it follows the necessity, for the empire's lieutenants in the upper satrapies, of negotiating the remuneration terms with the holder of these estates, who in the Central Asian context can be identified with men such as Chorienes, Sisimithres, Arimazes (and of course, Spitamenes and Oxyartes), who held the famous *πέτραι* which cost Alexander so much effort to conquer.

³⁷ According to Arr. *An.* 4.15.7, Alexander put a *new* (and unnamed) satrap at the head of Sogdiana, which probably helped a great deal in causing Spitamenes' revolt, for he was likely either, according to RAPIN 2018, 276, the (now dispossessed) Achaemenid satrap or a distinct member of the local aristocracy who felt put aside by other, internal rivals (one thinks of Artabazus) as well as by the Macedonians. So, if Spitamenes was an Achaemenid satrap and if we know of other satraps (such as the above-mentioned Karkiš) as administering 'royal' tables in Ēlām, why should that not be possible in Central Asia?

³⁸ E. g. PF 0732.

³⁹ HENKELMAN – FOLMER 2016.

⁴⁰ HENKELMAN 2010, 701.

⁴¹ PF NN 0306; PF 0683. Cf. HENKELMAN 2010, 710. It is unclear whether he may have been the same person attested as satrap in Ēlām.

⁴² NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 174ff. C1 (=Khalili IA21).

⁴³ HENKELMAN 2010, 711. On the Patischorians cf. HENKELMAN – STOLPER 2008, 286ff.

4. ROYAL TABLES IN BACTRIA?

THE *ADAB* CORPUS SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF THE ‘IMPERIAL PARADIGM’

Already mentioned several times in the previous pages, at this point the 48 documents (30 on parchment the 18 tallies) that make up the corpus of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Bactria (*ADAB*) deserve a closer look, based on the following questions. Firstly: is it possible to find in this documentation evidence of local administrators’ estates that can be compared with what we know from the Persepolis archives? Secondly: is there any trace in this corpus of the involvement of individuals belonging to the local ruling class and whom we can reasonably compare with Irdamaba or Irtaštuna?

As far as the first question is concerned, the answer can only be positive. From the correspondence between Axvamazdā and a direct (but occasionally undisciplined) subordinate of his named Bagavant –in all probability a local notable who, judging from a very harsh letter forwarded to him by Axvamazdā (*ADAB* A1), from which can be deduced that the former has been extremely well connected sociopolitically with other important individuals within the local context (*ADAB* A1 recto ll.1-2 mentions some –unnamed– ‘magistrates’) to the point that he could act in his own interests regardless of the complaints that flocked to the court of his superior– we know of the existence of numerous land properties, from those of the satrap, which Bagavant has culpably neglected, to the point that now the roofs of the barns are in disrepair and the fields at risk of being invaded by grasshoppers, to those of Bagavant himself, which Axvamazdā threatens to mortgage if his orders are not executed in the near future⁴⁴. Equally important is a group of texts (section C) cataloguing supplies and travel rations made available in the Bactrian territory. In one of them, the aforementioned *ADAB* C1, we are confronted with a long list of such provisions made available by the local administration for a certain B[ys], whom scholars have identified with the regicidal satrap of Bactria⁴⁵. One of the most interesting aspects in this parchment is the mention, in the very first line, of a ‘king Artaxerxes’ in whose year the document is dated, which immediately precedes the reference to Ba[yāsa].

Recently, Rachel Mairs convincingly put forward the hypothesis of recognizing in this apparent anthroponomic redundancy (if we assume the man in question was Bessus, he was already King Artaxerxes V, as the text can be dated to 330 B.C.; so why did he choose to call himself other than with the royal name?) two conflicting needs the issuing authority was trying to harmonize. On the one hand, that of being recognized as the legitimate sovereign (“in the first year of Artaxerxes the King”), and on the other hand, that of continuing to act on the territory as Ba[yāsa] because it was from this second identity –not from the first– that he was able to draw the resources by which he was able to distinguish himself among his peers until he ascended to the imperial throne⁴⁶. Seen from this perspective, the allocations of *ADAB* C1 thus gain new significance. A former satrap now acting as a king against another claimant who accused him of regicide, Bessus may have tried to mobilize the economic resources the institutions he (like Karkiš and many others) controlled as a satrap –including the king-like table– in order to strengthen his political position in a time of dire need. This may not have been the first time something akin to this happened, for during Darius’ civil war in the last

⁴⁴ Cf. NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 76ff. A2 (=Khalili IA4) as well as NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 112ff. A6 (=Khalili IA5).

⁴⁵ NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 174ff. C1 (=Khalili IA21).

⁴⁶ MAIRS 2016.

quarter of the 6th century we know from the Bīsutūn inscription of a certain Vivāna (“satrap in Arachosia”), owning a (fortified) *irmatam*, that is an estate which closely resembles Axvamazdā’s one in the *ADAB* and which was “possibly included in an institutional network and possibly subjected to service or tax obligations”. This estate, “Vivāna’s personal feud” as Paul Bernard has called it, was targeted by some of Darius’ most dangerous enemies (Vahêyazdāta’s troops), which emphasizes, in Henkelman’s view, “the satrap’s ex officio tenure of it. As part of the local institutional system it was an appropriate symbol of satrapal and state power, in both economic and political sense”. The case of Vivāna’s *irmatam* is strong evidence that such entities existed in Arachosia even before Darius came to power; given his prominent role in repressing the turmoil of 522-521 in the east alongside Vivāna, it seems fair to assume that Dādêr̥šiš, the satrap of Bactria at the time, could have had similar estates as well. Furthermore, since in the Persepolis archive the *irmatam* appears to have been “thoroughly embedded in the overall administrative network”, the existence of similar structures in Arachosia, and probably in Bactria-Sogdiana, “gives us one more probable element of the local institutional landscape”, which the Achaemenids appear to have developed not *in vacuo*, but starting from precedents deeply rooted in the socio-economic and political context of each region of the would-be empire, thus effectively transforming into ‘global’ actors (i.e. operating on an *imperial* scale) those who before the 6th century were nothing more than petty *local* potentates, thus enormously increasing the position of the latter, in following a dialectic which, as the case of Bessus and, on a smaller scale, that of Bagavant, clearly show, could constitute for the empire a precious resource as much as a danger for the stability of its territorial control⁴⁷. For the purposes of the present argument, however, the most important aspect is to be able to support with a reasonable degree of confidence the possibility that, even in Bactria, the ‘imperial paradigm’ has been reproduced –among other things in the form of the royal table– as useful to a very large number of social actors: the King, the satrap, his entourage and those depending on it down to the countless anonymous people who, as is clear from the Persepolis archives, saw in the activities generated by these devices of royal (and satrapal, and local-elitarian) self-representation an immense flywheel for the economy of their community (consider, for instance, the sacrificial animals required for religious ceremonies).

As for the possibility of finding in the *ADAB* traces of female political agency even comparable to that of Irdabama or Irtaštuna, it must be admitted that, despite the methodological *caveat* made in the previous pages, the documentary situation is extremely unfavourable. However, this is not, perhaps, a completely dead-end perspective. A dramatically mutilated snippet within the corpus, in fact, mentions Bagavant’s wife (as said, a minor officer within the hierarchy that can be reconstructed using the *ADAB*’s, but still endowed with a certain influence) interacting in the name and on behalf of her husband with another individual, whose precise role the terminology adopted to describe him (“judge of the drugs”?) makes extremely difficult to understand –but which must nevertheless have been a magistrate of some importance, given Bagavant’s social position in order to negotiate an economic transaction⁴⁸. It is to me perfectly clear that such a fragile documentary basis makes any hypothesis

⁴⁷ HENKELMAN 2017, 166-167. Cf. the text in DB_e 3.30-2: “Then, the man whom Vahêyazdāta had made leader of the troops, fled with a few mounted men and went (to) a fortress named R̥šādā, (in) Harauvatiš, an estate of Vivāna”. In the other versions of the inscription (DB_p 3.70-2, DB_b 82 f, Db_e 59f.), R̥šādā is mentioned only as a fortress.

⁴⁸ NAVEH – SHAKED 2012, 122ff. A9 (=Khalili IA 15).

extremely risky, but by virtue of the figure of Bagavant as it emerges from his correspondence with Axvamazdā, the fact that his wife was able to perform administrative functions (from the context of the document it does not appear to have had been a private transaction) should at least raise the question about the socio-political role (1) within their community and (2) in the wider context of the Achaemenid empire of young princesses, such as Apama and Roxane, whose belonging to the highest strata of Persian provincial society is beyond question; moreover, economic reasons behind this ‘social capital’ help explain, at least in the case of the future Seleukid queen mother, the role apparently played by the latter during her spouse’s expedition to Central Asia⁴⁹.

5. ALEXANDER AND SELEUKOS, ROXANE AND APAMA: SOME FINAL EDUCATED GUESSES

In a recent contribution, Branko van Oppen re-examined the information available to us about the Susa wedding, convincingly showing not only that the *communis opinio* still firmly circulating in historiography about the exceptional nature of Seleukos’ marriage with his Iranian bride is not supported by the sources, but also that Alexander’s heirs had considerable interest in using their Persian spouses also by virtue of their political abilities⁵⁰. The most sensational case we know of to date, as discussed by him in another study, is that of Amastris, who went as far as minting money in her name and calling herself ‘queen’ (acting *both* on her own as well as in Lysimachus’ interests), and it is legitimate to wonder whether similar agency should not be assumed for the other Persian princesses, beginning with Apama and Roxane⁵¹. The purpose of this contribution was to suggest other reasons (1) not mutually exclusive, but complementary to, concepts such as ‘prestige’, ‘influence’ or ‘ideological capital’ and (2) more closely linked to the socio-political and cultural context of the origin of the Macedonians’ spouses that might help explain the position they seem to have enjoyed within the new environment they came to live in, and this despite extremely fierce competition (it should not be forgotten that, at the time of Alexander’s death, the possible heir to the throne would have been the son of Roxane and not, for example, one of Darius’ III daughters).

The case of Apama is particularly interesting in this respect: although it cannot in fact be excluded a dynastic legend was born that around the Sogdian princess –possibly built and put into circulation by the Seleukid court itself– with the intention of reinforcing, (also) from a genealogical point of view, Seleukos’ right to the inheritance of the upper satrapies, the case of Amastris (to say nothing of Irdabama and Irtaštuna) shows beyond any doubt the decision-making autonomy and the capacity for influence –at supra-regional level and even more so within their own context of origin– of these

⁴⁹ According to Plu. *Artax.* 27, Artaxerxes II had a daughter called Apama, and a second one is known as the bride of Ptolemy at Susa (Plu. *Eum.* 1.7). In Arr. *An.* 7.4.6 she is called Artakama, which may have been her first name. A third Apama is known to Joseph. *AJ.* 11.49 as one of Darius’ mistresses. Contrary to the image given to us by the Greek stereotype of a decadent and luxurious Persian court, these courtesans played a role of absolute prestige within the king’s entourage. For example, they were allowed to join him during the royal hunts: see *FGrHist* 689 F 1 and *FGrHist* 690 F 27. The fact that they could not be of Persian origin (BROSIUS 1996, 31-32) makes plausible the hypothesis that, had it not been for Alexander’s campaign, Apama or Roxane could someday have been part of such a courtly milieu. On Apama’s role during Seleukos’ campaign cf. also KOSMIN 2014, 59-68.

⁵⁰ VAN OPPEN DE RUITER 2014.

⁵¹ VAN OPPEN DE RUITER 2020, 27.

exponents of the Achaemenid aristocracy, as well as the clear existence of different agendas (which went so far as to include the economic sphere) pursued by them⁵².

Hopefully, a more in-depth study –not least from a comparative point of view– of the *ADAB* corpus on the one hand and, on the other, the pursuit of research on the Persepolis’ archives, will make it possible in the near future to shed further light on the dynamics of the socio-political and economic dialectic involving the –indeed much more numerous as the dichotomy between ‘center’ and ‘satrapy’ or ‘imperial’ and ‘local’ would suggest– social actors within the empire (among them, as it has been argued in these pages, the wives and daughters of the local ‘big men’ appear in the foreground) also in the upper satrapies, without having to resort to the two models we sketched at the beginning, opposite but equally –and excessively– simplifying. That is, on the one hand, the idea of an imperial administration understood as *primus* (and sometimes *solus*) *movens* of the socio-political dynamics within the satrapies; on the other hand, the picture of an anachronistic and stereotyped image of Bactria and its inhabitants as ‘enemies of the empire’, worthy of historiographical attention not as such but only by virtue of their oppositional role towards the governmental –and without doubt often repressive– apparatus of the Achaemenid empire⁵³.

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⁵² Apama’s dynastic legend: ENGELS – ERICKSON 2016; ENGELS 2017, 220-227. See however RAMSEY 2016 for a detailed study of the multiple levels of Apama’s agency potential within the context of her homeland and the ways in which this might have influenced Seleukid strategies in the east.

⁵³ That the latter in particular is a rather pressing imperative is shown in an exemplary way by a recent study by HOLT 2005 (repr. 2012), which builds the entire narrative of Alexander’s Central Asian campaign from a parallel between the Bactrio-Sogdian-Sakā coalition and the Basmāčī uprisings of the 1930s in the Caucasus and Central Asia (Басмачество) on the one hand and the Afghan *mujāhidīn* (مجاهدين) on the other, according to an analogy as misleading as it is widespread, not only among the general public: cf. HOWE 2016 for a careful reassessment of the question.

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