

Walking Down the (Dynastic) Line: Royal Ancestors and Sacred Kingship in Early Achaemenid Persia

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Résumé:

Les grands rois achéménides (vers 550-330 a.n.è.) donnèrent une ampleur sans précédent au discours millénaire du Proche-Orient ancien sur le pouvoir universel et la royauté. Dans le même temps, une nouvelle rhétorique et un nouveau vocabulaire visuel pour exprimer la perception de soi de la monarchie furent développés et propagés de la Macédoine au Pakistan. Pourtant, le cas de la Perse est largement négligé dans les études anthropologiques consacrées à ces sujets. En outre, les spécialistes de l'Empire n'ont pas encore abordé la littérature anthropologique comparative sur la royauté à travers l'histoire du monde. Cet article démontre la pertinence d'étudier l'histoire des premières dynasties perses à travers le prisme de la royauté sacrée, en explorant à la fois les opportunités et les contraintes qu'elle offrait aux rois les plus imposants de l'Empire: Cyrus II et Darius I (les Grands: 530-519 a.n.è.).

Abstract:

Under the Achaemenids (ca. 550-330 BCE), a millennia-long discourse on universal rule and kingship reached unprecedented heights, while a new rhetoric and visual vocabulary to display royal self-understanding was developed and spread from Makedonia to Pakistan. Yet, the Persian case is significantly overlooked in anthropological scholarship focusing on these topics. Moreover, specialists in the Empire have yet to consistently engage with the anthropological literature on kingship across world history. This paper argues for the suitability of looking at early Persian dynastic history through the prism of sacred kingship, exploring both the affordances and drawbacks it provided to the Empire's most towering Kings: Cyrus II and Darius I (the Great: 530-519 BCE).

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«As usual, the human organization reflects the divine, and vice versa, since the two are one».
– ARTHUR MAURICE HOCART, *Kings and Councilors: An Essay in the Comparative Anatomy of Human Society*, Cairo, Printing Office Paul Barbey, 1935, p. 105.

«Wo ihr ideale Dinge seht, sehe ich – Menschliches, ach nur Allzumenschliches!... Ich kenne den Menschen besser...»

– FRIEDRICH WILHELM NIETZSCHE, *Ecce Homo. Wie man wird, was man ist*, translated by GIORGIO COLLI and MAZZINO MONTINARI, Milano, Adelphi, 1970, p. 331.

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1. Introduction. Political Theology: When It All Began

Kingship has arguably been the default mode of political organization of human societies across time and space¹. This appears to have been true even of groups at first blush distinguished for their committed anti-hierarchical attitude towards social organization². Indeed, it has recently been argued that to «reveal the deep structures underlying monarchy» equals understanding how politics works «everywhere»³. The Ancient Near East provides a particularly striking case in point, given that it is in Mesopotamia and Egypt that the two oldest templates of kingship in Afro-Eurasia – perhaps across the world – first developed and proved astonishingly long-lasting⁴. More specifically, the *sacred* (divine) form of kingship turned out to be exceptionally resilient across world history in that it provided an immensely powerful tool for state- and empire-

* To my beloved people: «ناریا یدف مناج نارهد ات نادهاز زا».

1 AZFAR MOIN, ALAN STRATHERN, «Sacred Kingship in World History. Between Immanence and Transcendence», in A. AZFAR MOIN, ALAN STRATHERN eds., *Sacred Kingship in World History: Between Immanence and Transcendence*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2022, pp. 1-3.

2 MARSHALL SAHLINS, «The Original Political Society», in DAVID GRAEBER, MARSHALL SAHLINS, *On Kings*, Chicago, HAU Books, 2017, pp. 23-64.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

4 JAN ASSMANN, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2003, on Egypt; and MARIE OELLIG, *Die Sukzession von Weltreichen. Zu den antiken Wurzeln einer geschichtsmächtigen Idee*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 2023, for a detailed discussion of the Ancient Near East.

building the world over and through the centuries⁵. A point worth stressing is that not only did sacred kingship withstand the all-out assault launched against it by monotheism, but it provided would-be convert kings from medieval Europe and Late Antique Arabia to XIXth-century CE Pacific societies with an irreplaceable repository of social and spiritual power from which to reposition themselves against their peers and adversaries⁶. Once again, Ancient Near Eastern history can be taken as a precocious laboratory of such a form of political organization⁷. While Egypt entered its Dynastic period under the aegis of godly kings (or kingly gods) in the shape of the Pharaohs, Mesopotamia rapidly followed through, experimenting under the kingdom of Akkad with a new organizational, rhetorical, and visual framework of rule, that of the Empire, the legacy of which long outlived its founding dynasty, and it might even be argued that it never actually ended⁸.

2. Forgotten Empire? The Persian Paradox

Sometime around the middle of the VIth century BCE, Cyrus II from the Kingdom of Anšan, once a powerful and highly resilient political entity in the Elamite highlands of southwestern Iran, embarked on a *tour de force* of conquests that culminated in the establishment of the mightiest empire the world had seen up to that point⁹. The Persian Empire inherited a millennia-long tradition of experimenting with empire in the Near East while incorporating several of its predecessors' administrative, rhetorical, and visual traditions (from Egypt to Assyria and from Babylonia to Elam). It thus set a new benchmark for imperial achievement in the process¹⁰. It was a watershed moment in the history of Southwest Asia and beyond. At the borders of the Empire abutting on the Aegean Sea, « the year when the Mede came » became a chronological reference point deeply embedded in cultural memory across the coast of Anatolia¹¹. Within a couple of generations, the first world history of (what would become) Western culture had been penned by Herodotus, who framed it through the prism of Persian expansionism¹². In Xenophon,

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5 ALAN STRATHERN, *Unearthly Powers: Religious and Political Change in World History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 107-117 and now *Id.*, *Converting rulers: Kongo, Japan, Thailand, Hawaii and global patterns, 1450-1850*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024, pp. 35-36.

6 ALAN STRATHERN, *Unearthly Powers*, pp. 255-295, ALAN STRATHERN, *Converting rulers*, pp. 247-311: Hawai'i being a particularly instructive example of the process and the logic(s) fueling it.

7 NICOLE BRISCH, « Introduction », in NICOLE BRISCH ed., *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond*, Chicago, IL, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2008, pp. 1-12.

8 On (Early) Dynastic Egypt see now LAUREL BESTOCK, « Early Dynastic Egypt », in KAREN RADNER, NADINE MOELLER, DANIEL T. POTTS eds., *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to Old Kingdom Egypt and the Dynasty of Akkad*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 245-315. The Akkadian phenomenon is discussed in BENJAMIN FOSTER, *The Age of Agade: Inventing Empire in Ancient Mesopotamia*, London, Routledge, 2016; and INGO SCHRACKAMP, « The Kingdom of Akkad: A View from Within », in KAREN RADNER, NADINE MOELLER, DANIEL T. POTTS eds., *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, pp. 612-685. On the imperial experience through world history, see now PETER FIBIGER BANG, « Empire – A World History: Anatomy and Concept, Theory and Synthesis », in PETER FIBIGER BANG, CHRISTOPHER ALAN BAYLY, WALTER SCHEIDEL eds., *The Oxford World History of Empire*, vol. 1, *The Imperial Experience*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 1-89.

9 See recently ELYNN GORRIS, *Power and Politics in the Neo-Elamite Kingdom*, Leuven, Peeters, 2020, for the prehistory of Cyrus's rise; and MATTHEW WATERS, *King of the World: The Life of Cyrus the Great*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, for a recent, detailed account of the conqueror's life.

10 ROBERT ROLLINGER, « The Persian Empire in Contact with the World », in KAREN RADNER, NADINE MOELLER, DANIEL T. POTTS eds., *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 5, *The Age of Persia*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 887-948.

11 XENOPHANES OF KOLOPHON, fr. 22 (ed. DIELS, KRANZ: DK 21[11] 22).

12 ROBERT ROLLINGER, « Herodotus and Empire: Ancient Near Eastern Monuments and Their Cultural Recycling in Herodotus' Histories », in JONATHAN BEN-DOV, FELIPE ROJAS eds., *Afterlives of Ancient Rock-cut Monuments in the Near East: Carvings in and out of Time*, Leiden, Brill, 2021, pp. 186-221.

Cyrus II, now called the Great, the mastermind of this unprecedented achievement, became the quintessential model of kingship, bringing together in an unsurpassed manner the characteristic of what Alan Strathern has called the heroic and the righteous mode of kingship¹³. However difficult to properly assess, there is nevertheless evidence that, in the imperial heartland, the now-dead founder received cultic honors up until Alexander showed up, thus suggesting his achievement of what Marshall Sahlins has called the status of metaperson: (perhaps) less – or something *different* – than a god, but undoubtedly more than a man¹⁴.

Against such a background, a two-pronged paradox emerges. To begin with, anthropological scholarship on comparative sacred kingship in world history has yet to include a detailed treatment of the Persian imperial experience in its purview¹⁵. This is striking, not least because, from Cyrus onwards, the Great Kings left behind an impressive legacy of royal inscriptions, material culture, palaces, and reliefs, which transformed the built environment as well as the social imaginary of Afro-Eurasia down to and arguably beyond the rise of the Islamic Caliphate, providing would-be rulers with material and spiritual resources to craft their own royal persona between immanence and transcendence¹⁶. At the same time, specialists on the Achaemenid period – and Near Eastern history at large – have proved regrettably reluctant to engage with anthropological theory and the ethnohistorical record systematically, if at all, as a fruitful avenue to understanding the phenomenon of Persian sovereignty both in its historical singularity and in a comparative, world-historical framework¹⁷.

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- 13 ALAN STRATHERN, *Unearthly Powers*, pp.164-204. On Xenophon and Cyrus see JULIAN DEGEN, «Ancient Near Eastern Traditions in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*: Conceptions of Royal Qualities and Empire», in BRUNO JACOBS ed., *Ancient Information on Persia Re-assessed: Xenophon's 'Cyropaedia'*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2020, pp. 197-240.
- 14 MARSHALL SAHLINS, *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe: An Anthropology of Most of Humanity*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, pp. 70-123. TOURAJ DARYAEE, «Alexander at Pasargadae and the Frawašī of Cyrus», in ROBERT ROLLINGER, JULIAN DEGEN eds., *The World of Alexander in Perspective*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2022, pp. 357-368, on the cult of Cyrus in the Persian heartland according to the extant sources. See more generally CHRISTOPHER J. TUPLIN, «The Intersection of Gods and Kings in Achaemenid Iran», in ELENI PACHOUMI, ed., *Conceptualising Divine Unions in the Greek and Near Eastern Worlds*, Leiden, Brill, 2022, pp. 45-73.
- 15 Ancient Iranian empires are remarkably absent in the otherwise astonishingly broad range of comparative case studies discussed in the most important volumes on sacred kingship recently published: DAVID GRAEBER, MARSHALL SAHLINS, *On Kings*; ALAN STRATHERN, *Unearthly Powers*; A. AZFAR MOIN, ALAN STRATHERN eds., *Sacred Kingship in World History*.
- 16 See MATTHEW P. CANEPA, *The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity Through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE-642 CE*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2018; for a recent, synoptic treatment of the *longue durée* of Perso-Iranian cultures of power, see MATTHEW P. CANEPA, «Introduction: Toward a New Transmillennial Understanding of Perso-Iranian Visual, Material, and Political Cultures and Their Global Impact», in MATTHEW P. CANEPA ed., *Persian Cultures of Power and the Entanglement of the Afro-Eurasian World*, Los Angeles, CA, Getty Research Institute, 2024, pp. 1-45.
- 17 JÖRG RÜPKE, MICHAL BIRAN, YURI PINES eds., *Empires and Gods: The Role of Religion in Imperial History*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2024, is a recent missed opportunity, given that the Achaemenids are entirely missing from the picture; while the otherwise promising essay by MATTHEW P. CANEPA, «Envisioning Dualism and Emplating the Eschaton: Apocalyptic Eschatology and Empire in Sasanian Iran», in JÖRG RÜPKE, MICHAL BIRAN, YURI PINES eds., *Empires and Gods*, pp. 135-174, does not engage with anthropological literature at all. BEATE PONGRATZ-LEISTEN, «Some Thoughts on the Origins of the Divine and Interaction with Divinity in the Ancient Near East», in ALAYA PALAMIDIS, CORINNE BONNET eds., *What's in a Divine Name? Religious Systems and Human Agency in the Ancient Mediterranean*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2024, pp. 829-841 is very critical of the anthropological approach. Yet, her arguments apparently rest on the misunderstanding (or the misrepresentation) of the literature, with which some of her conclusions seem paradoxically in agreement: a case in point at p. 832: «Beyond playing a protective role, divine agents in polytheistic systems function as carriers of identity either for individuals or groups and as intermediaries in a chain of divine command. They define not only the self, but also membership in a family as well as in larger social entities such as the tribe or city state.». This is what Strathern would subsume under the category of «Durkheimian insight» (ALAN STRATHERN, *Converting rulers*, p. 414 for a synthetic definition).

However, this is not to say that the question of whether and to which extent it is possible to speak of divine kingship in the case of the Achaemenids has never been asked. On the contrary, since the earliest day of Achaemenid studies as an academic field of and on its own, scholars have pointed out the exceptional qualities of kingly self-fashioning in the Persian imperial world as it emerged especially in monumental architecture and glyptic art¹⁸. Furthermore, sustained engagement with the visual record from across the Empire has made clear that, since at least the time of Darius I (520-486 BCE), a sustained effort was put in place by the Persian kings to promote an intentionally ambiguous understanding of their kingship (as individuals *and* as office-holders), with rhetorical and semantic slippages between the human and the numinous realms carefully embedded in media as different – and yet closely related – as courtly protocol, sartorial attire, epigraphic habits, and dining practices¹⁹. And yet, the divine aspect of Achaemenid kingship, or of its *performance*, is conspicuously absent from specialist discussions of both Persian religion *and* politics²⁰. This is striking for at least two reasons. First, scholars have begun to pay increasing attention to the wider Ancient Near Eastern background of Achaemenid kingship, exploring the intellectual inheritance of previous empires such as, most notably, Assyria and Elam, whose kings spared no effort in associating themselves or their office with the divine realm, and in some cases might even have attempted to explicitly present their persona as such²¹. Secondly, because there is at least one prominent and recent effort to address aspects of Achaemenid history and culture through the interpretative lens of the anthropological record (which, however, does not primarily engage with religion)²².

3. Unearthly Powers: Towards an Anthropology of Achaemenid Religions (and Kingship)

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One possible reason behind this deadlock is arguably related to the Zoroastrian conundrum in which the study of Persian (imperial) religion has been enmeshed since the very beginning of Ancient Iranian Studies and the – at times inconvenient – legacy of early xxth-century Indo-

18 See the foundational MARGARET COOL ROOT, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire*, Leiden, Brill, 1979; as well as, more recently, MARK B. GARRISON, *The Ritual Landscape at Persepolis: Glyptic Imagery from Persepolis Fortification and Treasury Archives*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2017.

19 MARK B. GARRISON, « By the Favor of Auramazdā: Kingship and the Divine in the Early Achaemenid Period », in PANAGIOTIS IOSSIF, ANDRZEJ CHANKOWSKI, CATHERINE LORBER eds., *More than Men, Less than Gods*, Leuven, Peeters, 2011, pp. 14-104; MARGARET COOL ROOT, « Defining the Divine in Achaemenid Persian Kingship », in LYNETTE MITCHELL, CHARLES MELVILLE eds., *Every Inch a King*, Brill, Leiden, 2013, pp. 23-66; MATTHEW WATERS, « To Be or Not to Be (Divine): The Achaemenid King and Essential Ambiguity in Image, Text, and Historical Context », in KAREN SONIK ed., *Art/facts and ArtWorks in the Ancient World*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2021, pp.159-182; and CHRISTOPHER J. TUPLIN, « The Intersection of Gods and Kings in Achaemenid Iran », in ELENI PACHOUMI ed., *Conceptualising Divine Unions in the Greek and Near Eastern Worlds*, Leiden, Brill, 2022, pp. 45-73.

20 WOUTER F. M. HENKELMAN, *The Other Gods Who Are: Studies in Elamite-Iranian Acculturation Based on the Persepolis Fortification Texts*, Leiden, NINO, 2008; as well as the seminal PIERRE BRIANT, *Histoire de l'empire perse de Cyrus à Alexandre*, Paris, Fayard, 1996.

21 SALVATORE GASPA, « State Theology and Royal Ideology of the Neo-Assyrian Empire as a Structuring Model for the Achaemenid Imperial Religion », in WOUTER HENKELMAN, CELINE REDARD eds., *Persian Religion in the Achaemenid Period*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2017, pp. 125-184; GIAN PIETRO BASELLO, « L'uomo e il divino nell'antico Elam », in GIAN PIETRO BASELLO, PAOLO OGNIBENE, ANTONIO PANAINO eds., *Il mister oche rivelato ci divide e sofferto ci unisce*, Udine, Mimesis, 2012, pp. 143-220; JAVIER ÁLVAREZ-MON, *The Monumental Reliefs of the Elamite Highlands*, Winona Lake, IN, Eisenbrauns, 2019.

22 DANIEL T. POTTS, *Aspects of Kinship in Ancient Iran*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2023.

Europeanist scholarship on the subject²³. Research carried out in the last two decades has come a long way in showing the depth of Elamite cultic tradition in shaping the Achaemenid pantheon and imperial practice of worship in the heartland and across the kingly domain, including in the alleged cradle of Zoroastrianism, namely Central Asia, and particularly Baktria²⁴. In the process, the supposed preeminence of *the one* supreme god (Ahuramazda) inside *and* outside the realm of royal inscriptions has been put into perspective and forcefully deemphasized²⁵. And yet, the political role of, to be cautious, Zoroastrian(izing) traditions, at least since the time of Darius and *within* the close-knit realm of the royal descriptions, can hardly be denied²⁶. The same goes for the part assigned to Ahuramazda in relation to dynastic fortunes.²⁷ The famous Bīsutūn inscription of Darius I (ca. 519 BCE) provides an outstanding case in point, but the same could be argued for other exemplars from the (royal) epigraphic corpus, in which phrasings and word-plays (for example with dynastic names) have been detected that seem to lay bare a close knowledge of *certain* versions of the (Old and Young) *Avestān* language and the religious tradition it preserved²⁸.

23 Cf., paradigmatically, MARY BOYCE, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 2, *Under the Achaemenids*, Leiden, Brill, 1982. Critical discussion of Iranocentric approaches to the topic can be found, recently, in WOUTER F. M. HENKELMAN, *The Other Gods Who Are*, pp. 215-253; and, more recently, Id., « God Is in the Detail: The Divine Determinative and the Expression of Animacy in Elamite with an Appendix on the Achaemenid Calendar », in EVA CANCEK-KIRSCHBAUM, INGO SCHRACKAMP eds., *Transfer, Adaption, und Neukonfiguration von Schrift- und Sprachwissen im Alten Orient*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2022, pp. 406-477.

24 Cf., within a steadily growing bibliography, WOUTER F. M. HENKELMAN, « Persians, Medes and Elamites. Acculturation in the Neo-Elamite Period », in GIOVAN BATTISTA LANFRANCHI, MICHAEL ROAF, and ROBERT ROLLINGER eds., *Assyria, Media, Persia: Proceedings of the International Meeting in Padua, 26th-28th April 2001*, Padova, SARGON, 2001, pp. 73-130; Id., « Parnakka's Feast: *šjp* in Parsa and Elam », in JAVIER ÁLVAREZ-MON, MARK B. GARRISON eds., *Elam and Persia*, Winona Lake, IN, Eisenbrauns, 2011, pp. 89-166; Id., « Elamite Administrative and Religious Heritage in the Persian Heartland », in JAVIER ÁLVAREZ-MON, GIAN PIETRO BASELLO, YASMINA WICKS eds., *The Elamite World*, London, Routledge, 2018, pp. 803-828; Id., « The Heartland Pantheon », in BRUNO JACOBS, ROBERT ROLLINGER eds., *A Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire*, vol. 2, Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2021, pp. 1221-1242; Id., « Practices of Worship in the Achaemenid Heartland », in BRUNO JACOBS, ROBERT ROLLINGER eds., *A Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire*, vol. 2, pp. 1243-1270.

25 WOUTER F. M. HENKELMAN, « Humān & Auramazdā: Royal Gods in a Persian Landscape », in WOUTER F. M. HENKELMAN, CÉLINE REDARD eds., *Persian Religion in the Achaemenid Period*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2017, pp. 273-346. On religious traditions in Baktria, see e. g., JAN TAVERNIER, « Religious Aspects in the Aramaic Texts from Bactria », in WOUTER F. M. HENKELMAN, CÉLINE REDARD eds., *Persian Religion in the Achaemenid Period*, pp. 97-124; with WU XIN, « The Sacred Landscape of Achaemenid Central Asia in the Achaemenid Period », *Studia Hercynia* 23.1 (2023), pp. 13-53; and MICHELE MINARDI, « Ossuary Burials of the Sultan-uīz-dag. Some Considerations on the Relation between Archaeology and Vendīdād », *Ancient Civilizations from Scythia to Siberia* 29 (2023), pp. 86-132, discussing evidence favoring the *local* permanence of possibly Zoroastrian-related cultic traditions during the Achaemenids, which raises the issue of whether and how this influenced imperial strategies of negotiation with local (religious) élites, as it is known to have happened for example in Babylon: MICHAEL JURSA, « The Neo-Babylonian Empire », in KAREN RADNER, NADINE MOELLER, DANIEL T. POTTS eds., *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 5, *The Age of Persia*, pp. 91-173, here p. 136.

26 For an entry into the debate from a Zoroastrian perspective, cf., recently, KATHARINA KNÄPPER, *Die Religion der frühen Achaimeniden in ihrem Verhältnis zum Avesta*, München, Utz Verlag, 2011; ALBERTO CANTERA, « La liturgie longue en langue avestique dans l'Iran occidental », in WOUTER F. M. HENKELMAN, CÉLINE REDARD eds., *Persian Religion in the Achaemenid Period*, pp. 21-68; as well as JEAN KELLENS, « Les Achéménides entre textes et liturgie avestiques », in WOUTER F. M. HENKELMAN, CÉLINE REDARD eds., *Persian Religion in the Achaemenid Period*, pp. 11-20; and PRODS OKTOR SKJÆRVØ, « Avesta and Zoroastrianism under the Achaemenids and Early Sasanians », in DANIEL T. POTTS ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 547-565.

27 HILMAR KLINKOTT, « The "Achaemenids" – "Our House". The Creation of a Dynasty with an Imperial Aura », in KAI RUFFING, BRIGITTE TRUSCHNEGG, ANDREAS RUDIGIER, JULIAN DEGEN, SEBASTIAN FINK, KORDULA SCHNEGG eds., *Navigating the Worlds of History. Studies in Honor of Robert Rollinger on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2024, pp. 913-944.

28 This argument has been developed in detail in PRODS OKTOR SKJÆRVØ, « Avestan Quotation in Old Persian ? », in SAUL SHAKED, ADAM NESTZER eds., *Irano-Judaica*, vol. 4, Jerusalem, Society for Biblical Studies, 1999, pp. 1-64; and Id., « The Achaemenids and the Avesta », in VESTA SARKHOSH CURTIS, SARA STEWART eds., *The Idea of Iran. Volume I: The Birth of the Persian Empire*, London, IB Tauris, 2005, pp. 53-85. See moreover ALBERT DE JONG, « Religion and Politics in Pre-Islamic Iran », in MICHAEL STAUSBERG, YUHAN SOHRAB-DINSHAW VEVAINA, ANNA TESSMANN eds., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, Chichester, NH, Wiley, 2015, pp. 85-102.

The present paper contends that a fruitful way out of this theoretical and methodological dead end is to turn to the ethnohistorical record and to treat Achaemenid *imperial* religion (as it emerges from the inscriptions) as one prominent – though neglected – case of an immanentist worldview according to the typology developed by Strathern²⁹. Accordingly, what is at stake would be the reservoir of social power afforded by the divine *as such*, not (only) by this or that specific god³⁰. That, at times, one of – in Darius's words – « the other gods who are » might be pushed upfront as *the* supporter of one particular individual (and/or) his social group does not present a problem within an immanentist worldview, especially in contexts of militaristic élites' self-promotions or attempts at power bidding on an imperial scale (Strathern's heroic mode of kingship)³¹.

Other aspects of the Achaemenid religious worldview fit nicely into an immanentist framework. A few prominent examples are appropriate here to make the argument more transparent. To begin with, there is the couching of the imperial discourse within a rhetoric oriented towards the elicitation of earthly benefits: as the Wise Lord Ahuramazda did when he created the universe, it is the duty of the Persian kings to deliver « happiness for mankind », of which the Empire is the material embodiment³². This is perhaps the most enduring feature of *any* immanentist worldview across world history³³. Secondly, one can point towards the « translatability of power across the boundary between the roles of "political" and "religious" specialists » characteristic of immanentist systems³⁴. Although as yet unexplored, this seems a particularly profitable avenue to account for the remarkably blurred line separating, in at least one inscription from Susa (DSk), the human nature of Darius and his identification with Ahuramazda³⁵. Such a hypothesis is consistent with another aspect of immanentism, namely the « modes of identity from personification to incarnation » it affords to ambitious individuals to acquire political power in what Sahlins calls « heroic acts of hubris »³⁶. It is hard to find better words to describe Darius's rise to power, the aftermath of which prompted an extensive epigraphic program geared towards establishing narrative validity for an extremely violent and, to all intents and purposes, unwarranted seizure of power³⁷. Violence, then, deserves mention here as it can be taken as perhaps the most straightforward way to assert (and prove) one's « charismatic (heroic) authority ». This is especially true of founding figures or conquerors, which both Cyrus II and Darius I clearly and proudly were³⁸. Finally, it is relevant to underscore the striking but, once

29 ALAN STRATHERN, *Unearthly Powers*, pp. 27-47. See ALBERT DE JONG, « The Religion of the Achaemenid Rulers », in BRUNO JACOBS, ROBERT ROLLINGER eds., *A Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire*, vol. 2, pp. 1199-1210, for a fruitful distinction between imperial, dynastic, and family manifestation of Persian religion.

30 ALAN STRATHERN, *Unearthly Powers*, pp. 108-116.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 133, discussing the Neo-Assyrian precedent of King Sennacherib. The case of Cyrus in Babylon also fits the pattern: MATTHEW WATERS, « The Persian Empire under the Teispid Dynasty: Emergence and Conquest », in KAREN RADNER, NADINE MOELLER, DANIEL T. POTTS eds., *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 5, *The Age of Persia*, pp. 376-416, here pp. 398-400. For Darius's words cf. DBP col. IV, § 62 = DBE col. III § 50 = DBB § 50, ll. 103-104.

32 BRUCE LINCOLN, « The Role of Religion in Achaemenid Imperialism », in NICOLE BRISCH ed., *Religion and Power*, pp. 221-242; *Id.*, « Happiness for Mankind »: *Persian Religion and the Imperial Project*, Leuven, Peeters, 2012, pp. 3-88.

33 ALAN STRATHERN, *Unearthly Powers*, p.105.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

35 Note, moreover, how closely this attitude resembles the posture of mythical kings such as Yima (Jamshid) in certain *Avestān* texts such as the *Yasna* hymns: PRODS OKTOR SKJÆRVØ, « The Achaemenids and the Avesta », p. 58.

36 MARSHALL SAHLINS, « Kings Before Kingship: The Politics of the Enchanted Universe », in A. AZFAR MOIN, ALAN STRATHERN eds., *Sacred Kingship in World History*, pp. 31-52, here p. 39.

37 See the insightful SETH RICHARDSON « Down with "Legitimacy" : On "Validity" and Narrative in Royal Tales », in ELIZABETH WAGNER-DURAND, JULIA LINKE eds., *Tales of Royalty*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2020, pp. 243-260.

38 ALAN STRATHERN, *Unearthly Powers*, p. 186. On violence and kingship in Teispid (Cyrus's dynasty) and Achaemenid (from Darius I onwards) Iran, see MELISSA BENSON, « Violence at Behistun », Ph.D. dissertation, University College London, 2019.

again, overlooked, both by anthropologists and Achaemenid historians (of religion), structural similarities between the « hypostatized » divine power known to the ethnohistorical record under names such as *mana*, *semangat*, or *wakanda* on the one hand and the concept of *khvarena* (Elamite *kiten*, Akkadian *melammu*), the radiant light crowning Ancient Near Eastern kings as a sign of their divine sanction, which features in Achaemenid inscriptions (and glyptic)³⁹. In one case, as in the other, although it can be transferred to the human king, its origin remains within the god(ly): this shows, consequently, that the ultimate source of earthly power is located *outside* of the realm accessible to humans, with the metapersons who empower them⁴⁰. As in every immanentist world known to anthropologists, in ancient Persia, too, « acquisition of spirit powers is the necessary *means* of political authority, not just its post factum justification »⁴¹.

Hopefully, the evidence presented here has suggested how fruitfully such a theoretical framework is for properly contextualizing Achaemenid religion *as such* and within its broader Ancient Near Eastern framework. To prove the point further, the final section of this paper offers a foray into early Persian dynastic history to further elucidate the implications of the approach suggested here. If kingship indeed came to earth from heaven (and not the other way around) and, moreover, if its sacred or divine mode encodes the secrets of politics *everywhere*, it is worth having a closer look at what this meant for those with most at stake – namely (would-be) Kings of Kings – at a time when the mightiest empire on earth had been established for barely one generation⁴².

4. From Long Ago We Are Royal: Troubling Ancestors, Ambitious (Would-Be) Kings, and Their Gods (In the Making)

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Darius's rise to power is arguably the most controversial chapter of Persian history⁴³. One prominent reason for this is the most likely intentionally ambiguous relationship between the new king (Darius) and the imperial founder (Cyrus II), whose legacy the former had to win on the tip of a spear in a quintessentially heroic mode of kingship, as he did not fail to remark in one particularly famous inscription⁴⁴. Indeed, among all of Darius's predecessors to the imperial throne, by virtue of his position as the establisher of Persian power across the entire known world, Cyrus

39 Compare, on the one hand, MARSHALL SAHLINS, « Kings Before Kingship », p. 36; and, on the other, WOUTER F. M. HENKELMAN, *The Other Gods Who Are*, pp. 9-10; SHAWN ZELIG ASTER, *The Unbeatable Light: Melammu and its Biblical Parallels*, Münster, Ugarit Verlag, 2012; JULIAN DEGEN, « Xenophon and the Light from Heaven », *Ancient History Bulletin* 33.3-4 (2019), pp. 81-107; MATTHEW WATERS, « Aura Auramazda: Divine-Royal Shared Essence », in KAI RUFFING, BRIGITTE TRUSCHNEGG, ANDREAS RUDIGIER, JULIAN DEGEN, SEBASTIAN FINK, KÖRDULA SCHNEGG eds., *Navigating the Worlds of History. Studies in Honor of Robert Rollinger on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2024, pp. 1109-1124.

40 MARSHALL SAHLINS, *The New Science*, pp. 16-33, on human finitude and divine-given power.

41 MARSHALL SAHLINS, « Kings Before Kingship », p. 42. Emphasis in the original.

42 MARSHALL SAHLINS, *The New Science*, pp. 34-70. See also DAVID GRAEBER, MARSHALL SAHLINS, « Introduction: Theses on Kingship », in DAVID GRAEBER, MARSHALL SAHLINS, *On Kings*, pp. 1-22.

43 See, among an overwhelming bibliography, JOSEF WIESEHÖFER, *Der Aufstand Gaumatas und die Anfänge Dareios I*, Bonn, Habelt, 1978; and, most recently, DANIEL T. POTTS, « The Persian Empire under the Achaemenid Dynasty: from Darius I to Darius III », in KAREN RADNER, NADINE MOELLER, DANIEL T. POTTS eds., *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 5, *The Age of Persia*, pp. 417-520, here pp. 417-438.

44 DNa, § 4 (Old Persian and Elamite): « If now you should think: "How many are the countries which King Darius held?" , look at the sculptures (of those) who bear the throne, then shall you know, then shall it become known to you: the spear of the Persian man has gone forth far; then shall it become known to you: the Persian man has delivered battle far indeed from Persia », translated according to AMÉLIE KUHRT, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 503.

remained by far the most awe-inspiring. Hence, in the light of the fiercely competitive outlook of Ancient Near Eastern kingship, which was shared by all the Persians' forerunners from Assyria to Babylonia and Elam, his shadow loomed large upon Darius's credentials as Great King⁴⁵.

Henceforth, coping with this past was a particularly pressing issue, especially in light of the devastatingly violent resistance Darius's bid for power faced across the entire Empire, including the Persian heartland⁴⁶. As a consequence, the new king went above and beyond in order to cut off his enemies (whom he, for good measures, chastised as rebels threatening to tear apart the political creature both Cyrus and Ahuramazda had entrusted him) from the source of authority represented by the founder's lineage by occupying the place himself and securing it for his offspring. The outcome of this strategy is shown by two apparently unassuming inscriptions that were set up at Pasargadai, the great imperial foundation of Cyrus in the modern province of Fars. In both texts (known to scholars as CMA and CMc), the dead king is made to proclaim, from beyond the grave, that he belongs to the Achaemenid family⁴⁷. The possibility of Darius's having had a hand in genealogic creativity is strongly suggested by the fact that, in the *only* inscription coeval to – and, in the light of its paramount ideological role in sanctioning *his* political validity as king, whose crafting was doubtlessly supervised by – Cyrus and/or his scribes, there is no Achaemenid to be seen, not even the putative dynastic founder, whose name Darius gives in the Bīsūtūn inscription, a sort of political testament and sacred history of his rise to power, as Achaemenes (Haxāmaniš)⁴⁸. Darius's marriage policy then provides another telling piece of evidence, for he wasted no time in claiming all the Cyrus-related royal women he could lay his hands on in a sustained attempt at, literally, land grabbing, targeting the material as well as spiritual resources that came with it⁴⁹. Third, and equally significant, Darius tried hard to incorporate Cyrus into *his* line: the specular tactic adopted in CMA and CMc. However, in doing so, he adopted a circuitous path, for Cyrus is never *explicitly* named at Bīsūtūn, where the Achaemenid dynasty is most conspicuously displayed. Instead, the ancestral catalog related to the founder's lineage opens with a man named Teispes (Čišpiš/Zišpiš/Šišpiš according to the three languages of the inscription: Old Persian, Akkadian, and Elamite). He also features in Cyrus' own genealogy as recorded in the famous Cylinder from Babylon as « Great King, the King of the city of Anšan, eternal royal offspring »⁵⁰. However, in a dramatic variation, the

45 See MATTHEW WATERS, « Ashurbanipal's Legacy: Cyrus the Great and the Achaemenid Empire », in TOURAJ DARYAEE, ROBERT ROLLINGER eds., *Iran and Its Histories: From the Beginning to the Achaemenid Empire*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2021, pp. 149-161; ROBERT ROLLINGER, « From Assurbanipal to Cambyses », in BRUNO JACOBS, ROBERT ROLLINGER eds., *A Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire*, vol. 1, Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2021, pp. 365-388; Id., « Empire, Borders, and Ideology », in BRUNO JACOBS, ROBERT ROLLINGER eds., *A Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire*, vol. 1, pp. 815-834.

46 GUNDULA SCHWINGHAMMER, « Imperial Crisis », in BRUNO JACOBS, ROBERT ROLLINGER eds., *A Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire*, vol. 1, pp. 417-429.

47 MATTHEW WATERS, *King of the World*, pp. 136-137.

48 MATTHEW WATERS, « The Persian Empire under the Teispid Dynasty », pp. 379-387. ROBERT ROLLINGER, « Der Stammbaum des achaimenidischen Königshauses oder die Frage der Legitimität der Herrschaft des Dareios », *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan* 30 (1998), pp. 155-209 (esp. p. 162) and HILMAR KLINKOTT, « The "Achaemenids" », p. 934 have argued that « Achaemenes has never been a *heros eponymos* in the eyes of Darius ». This seems at least questionable against the comparative evidence of similar cases from the anthropological record. At any rate, he was presented as the remotest ancestor of the ruling house, which allows his case to be scrutinized in light of ethnohistorical data.

49 WOUTER F. M. HENKELMAN, « Elamite Administrative and Religious Heritage in the Persian Heartland », p. 811.

50 CYRUS CYLINDER (K2.1), ll. 20-22 according to the translation provided by HANS-PETER SCHAUDIG, *Die Inschriften Nabonids von Babylon und Kyros des Großen, samt den in ihrem Umfeld entstandenen Tendenzschriften. Textausgabe und Grammatik*, Münster, Ugarit Verlag, 2001, p. 555.

Bīsutūn text makes Čišpiš the son of Haxāmaniš⁵¹. The implications of such a move could not be more explicit. Cyrus's kingship is made dependent on Darius's forefather and *his* family, who, it deserves to be stressed, are both completely missing from Cyrus's own royal statement(s). To hammer the point home even more, the Bīsutūn inscription goes one step further, claiming that the Achaemenids had been royal for *nine* generations by the time Darius (re)conquered the throne⁵². As Sahlins evocatively puts it, this is evidently the time of gods and heroes, so remote is it from the realm of commoners⁵³.

These are clearly contradictory attempts at retrospective rationalization of familial and political ties, which, out there in the world of power politics where Darius' voice was not the only one to be heard, would have looked significantly different⁵⁴. That they were nevertheless stubbornly undertaken indicates a *structural* problem of (immanentist) kingship that faced Darius as he bid for the legacy of Cyrus's memory and the otherworldly power this association afforded him: namely the paradox of status regression⁵⁵. The issue came down to this: to acquire the charisma of Cyrus, Darius had to tap into his lineage, which he did by presenting the Achaemenids as a *collateral* branch of Cyrus's family and, just in case, by marrying all the Teispid women he could find (and producing offspring with them: Atossa, Xerxes's mother, being the most well-known case). By doing so, however, he only extended the Teispid house. The immediate outcome of such a move was a horizontal (*inter-dynastic*) loss of prestige and, therefore, political validity⁵⁶. As perhaps most dramatically attested in the case of Inka dynastic history, the further a lineage moves away from its origins, the less respected it becomes among its peers (and, importantly, rivals)⁵⁷. It is worth emphasizing, at this point, that the principle of sinking status would have applied even more ruthlessly had Cyrus truly being an Achaemenid: it follows that, dynastic fabrication or not, Darius's problems would not have gone away: indeed, they might have even worsened⁵⁸. More of this in a short while.

At the very moment he made Cyrus his ancestor to appropriate his inheritance, Darius ended up being *less* entitled to it than other competitors who could claim a more direct (closer in time) descent. This model goes some way in explaining why, in the Bīsutūn text, Darius put

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51 MATTHEW WATERS, *King of the World*, pp. 13-33, for the historical background of Čišpiš in 1st millennium BCE Elam (and Assyria).

52 MATTHEW WATERS, «Darius the First, the Ninth King», in TOURAJ DARYAEE, ALI MOUSAVI, KHODADAD REZAKHANI, eds., *Excavating and Empire: Achaemenid Persian in the Longue Durée*, Costa Mesa, Mazda Publishers, 2014, pp. 63-70.

53 MARSHALL SAHLINS, «Kings Before Kingship», p. 45. How *this* specific chronology may have been received elsewhere in the empire, where even more developed claims to more-than-human sources of royalty were deeply engrained, remains a topic worthy of further research. Egypt would seem to provide the ultimate testing ground: cf. now STEFAN PFEIFFER, «Eine prospektive Erinnerungsgemeinschaft. Dynastie und Genealogie in der Representation der Ptolemaier», in CHRISTOPH MICHELS, HANS BECK, ACHIM LICHTENBERGER, eds., *The Same, but Different? Monarchical Rule and Representation in the Hellenistic World*, Stuttgart, Steiner, pp. 153-180 (esp. pp. 170-173).

54 ROBERT ROLLINGER, «Der Stammbaum des achaimenidischen Königshauses».

55 CLIFFORD GEERTZ, *Negara: The Theater State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 26-32, for a classic treatment of the subject. See more recently MARSHALL SAHLINS, «Kings Before Kingship», pp. 40-43, on ancestors and «the cosmic production of power».

56 SETH RICHARDSON «Down with "Legitimacy"», pp. 243-260; DAVID GRAEBER, MARSHALL SAHLINS, «Introduction: Theses on Kingship», pp. 9-10.

57 BRIAN BAUER, *The Sacred Landscape of the Inca*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 125-126. See also PETER GOSE, «Immanence in the Andes (1000-1700 CE): Divine Kingship, Stranger-Kingship, and Diarchy», in A. AZFAR MOIN, ALAN STRATHERN eds., *Sacred Kingship in World History*, pp. 53-71.

58 This is an important point, because, in the end, it makes immaterial the vexed question of whether or not Cyrus had been an Achaemenid all along: see most recently MICHAEL ROAF, «Was Cyrus II an Achaemenid?», in GIAN PIETRO BASELLO, PIERFRANCESCO CALLIERI, ADRIANO VALERIO ROSSI eds., *Achaemenid Studies Today*, Napoli, "L'Orientale" University Press, 2023, pp. 265-288.

so much rhetorical effort into making access to Cyrus's lineage his own *exclusive* domain. That this was an issue is shown by the fact that he *had* to admit that others tried, most notably the Magian Gaumata, who, according to the account provided by Darius at Bīsutūn, first rose to power upon Cambyses's death, and Vahyazdata, among the most formidable adversaries Darius had to face⁵⁹. Tellingly, both individuals, at least according to the version of the events eternalized by Darius, claimed to be Cyrus's *sons*. The scale of the physical punishment the victorious king rained upon these men is indicative of the magnitude *their* claims posed to Darius's position⁶⁰. Equally important, ultimately, it does not really matter if and to what point either side was telling the truth. For the purpose of this argument, what counts is that all the claimants played their cards at the table of dynastic filiation, genuine or putative. Eventually, Darius poured enough violence into the field to sanction his version of the story as the definitive one (indeed, the only one that survived): this is another hallmark of divine kingship within an immanentist conceptual framework⁶¹.

At least in principle, the most straightforward way to get around this problem would have been to get rid of Cyrus's entire lineage (the human one, the divine, and everything in between), and in order to achieve such an outcome, the easiest way was to *incorporate* it in (hence *replacing* it with) Darius's family, now turned dynastic, history. Gregory Bateson famously called a procedure such as this complementary schismogenesis, and since his seminal study, it has been ethnographically recorded from all over the world whenever a (would-be) king decided to cut the Gordian knot of *inter*-dynastic validity issues by, very simply, making up his own, brand new one⁶². Supporting the hypothesis that dynamics comparable to those attested by anthropologists were at play already in 6th-century BCE Persia, there is a compelling suggestion by Bruno Jacobs, according to whom the famous winged symbol towering upon Darius and acknowledging (or sanctioning) his status as unchallenged king in the Bīsutūn relief might not *necessarily* be the god Ahuramazda, as almost unanimously assumed in scholarship⁶³. On the contrary, the possibility remains open, and there are indeed stylistic arguments suggesting that this might, in fact, be the most plausible option, that the figure was meant to be recognized as Haxāmaniš, the primeval ancestor of Darius's family⁶⁴. The implications are significant (and entirely consistent within an immanentist cosmology): Darius's (successful) bid for power upscaled his

59 DBP col. I § 11 = DBE col. I § 10 = DBB § 10, ll. 11-15.

60 MELISSA BENSON, « Violence at Behistun », pp. 225-230.

61 BRUCE LINCOLN, « *Happiness for Mankind* », pp. 393-424. See moreover DAVID GRAEBER, « Notes on the Politics of Divine Kingship; or, Elements for an Archaeology of Sovereignty », in DAVID GRAEBER, MARSHALL SAHLINS, *On Kings*, pp. 377-464, here p. 458.

62 GREGORY BATESON, « Cultural Contact and Schismogenesis », *Man* 35 (1935), pp. 178-183. MARSHALL SAHLINS, « The Cultural Politics of Core-Periphery Relations », in DAVID GRAEBER, MARSHALL SAHLINS, *On Kings*, pp. 345-376, here pp. 350-365.

63 BRUNO JACOBS, « Die ikonographische Angleichung von Gott und König in der achämenidischen Kunst », in WOUTER F. M. HENKELMAN, CÉLINE REDARD eds., *Persian Religion in the Achaemenid Period*, pp. 247-273, here pp. 258-260. Compare now MATTHEW WATERS, « Aura Auramazda », providing strong support for the line of argument(s) pursued here.

64 Given the overwhelming scholarly consensus favoring Ahuramazda, this might appear at first a heterodox suggestion. However, the evidence from Persepolis's visual culture as reflected in the glyptic (by far the most encompassing and varied corpus available to access the religious worldview of both kings and subjects in ancient Persia) strongly implies that human, divine, and numinous were not watertight categories: in fact, slippages and cross-pollination were arguably sought-after outcomes of a carefully devised strategy. See MARK B. GARRISON, « Beyond Auramazdā and the Winged Symbol: Imagery of the Divine and Numinous at Persepolis », in WOUTER F. M. HENKELMAN, CÉLINE REDARD eds., *Persian Religion in the Achaemenid Period*, pp. 185-246.

forefather from a family tutelary metaperson into a dynastic patron⁶⁵. It bears emphasis here that, pivotal as Ahuramazda's support might be in the deafening repetition of his support of Darius against all his enemies, it is the Achaemenid genealogy more than this or even military prowess that is *the* ultimate reason why Darius made it to the throne. According to the categories elaborated by Albert de Jong, a family (religious) tradition of ancestry cult was transformed into an imperial genealogy and dynastic religion as both an effect and (retrospectively) cause of Darius's victory in a vicious inter- and intra-aristocratic free-for-all to claim Cyrus's legacy upon Cambyses's death⁶⁶. Once more, the inner logic of immanentism helps explain the Achaemenid evidence, for according to Strathern, in a non-transcendentalist framework, kingship is invariably the deification of kinship, as the royal family group becomes exalted over all the rival ones upon dynastic establishment and, *ex post facto*, provides a much-needed sense of inevitability to the contingencies of power politics⁶⁷. Cyrus had become king (in Babylon) thanks to Marduk and his heroic feats on the battlefield: in the end, he had made the Persians from an unremarkable people on the outskirts of the Assyrian geographical and conceptual world into the undisputed hyperpower of the age⁶⁸. Interestingly, one might note in passing that a very similar argument is behind the famous speech Arrian of Nikomedia put in Alexander's mouth as the Makedonian conqueror had to face his soldier's mutiny at the Egyptian town of Opis⁶⁹. Given the extent to which the great conqueror (as well as already his father Philip II) was aware of Persian tropes of – divine – kingship and did his best, or, according to the extant narrative sources, his worst, to shape his royal (semi)divine or metahuman persona according to their template, it seems promising to address Hellenistic kingship along the same line as suggested in this paper for the Achaemenids: as yet another manifestation of immanentist cosmology and politics⁷⁰.

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None of this in the end mattered, however, because Darius would still have had an edge on both his foremost imperial forerunner and his most formidable (putative) successor⁷¹. Not only was he, too, backed by a (according to the Bisutūn inscription *the*) great god, in the same way

65 MARGARET COOL ROOT, «Defining the Divine in Achaemenid Persian Kingship», pp. 23-66; MARSHALL SAHLINS, «Kings Before Kingship», p. 47.

66 ALBERT DE JONG, «The Religion of the Achaemenid Rulers», pp. 1205-1207.

67 ALAN STRATHERN, *Unearthly Powers*, p. 190. Compare CHRISTOPHER W. JONES, «Failed Coup: The Assassination of Sennacherib and Esarhaddon's Struggle for the Throne, 681-680 B. C.», *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 10.2 (2023), pp. 293-369, here pp. 327-341, for the strategies enacted by Esarhaddon of Assyria in order to persuade current and potential allies of his inevitable victory in the struggle to succeed his father Sennacherib; HILMAR KLINKOTT, «The "Achaemenids"». Note that Darius' strategy proved so successful that, until Alexander created *his own* empire (JULIAN DEGEN, *Alexander III. zwischen Ost und West: indigene Traditionen und Herrschaftsinszenierung im makedonischen Weltimperium*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 2022), *only* members of the Achaemenid «house» could ever claim the throne of Persia: thus offering a particularly accomplished case of state-building under immanentist conditions. Cf. ALAN STRATHERN, *Converting rulers*, pp. 250-268.

68 See KIUMARS ALIZADEH, «The Earliest Persians in Iran: Toponyms and Persian Ethnicity», *Dabir* 7 (2020), pp. 16-53.

69 ARRIAN OF NIKOMEDIA, *Alexander's Anabasis*, VII,9,1-8.

70 See JULIAN DEGEN, «Alexander III, the Achaemenids and the Quest for Dionysos: Framing and Claiming Universal Rulership in the Macedonian World Empire», in TOURAJ DARYAEE, ROBERT ROLLINGER eds., *Iran and Its Histories*, pp. 239-287; as well as Id., *Alexander III. zwischen Ost und West*, pp. 302-408; M. RAHIM SHAYEGAN, «Contesting the Empire: Dareios III and Alexander», in ROBERT ROLLINGER, JULIAN DEGEN eds., *The World of Alexander in Perspective*, pp. 285-314. On divine kingship in the Greek world see now LYNETTE MITCHELL, «King, Divinity, and Law in Ancient Greece», in A. AZFAR MOIN, ALAN STRATHERN eds., *Sacred Kingship in World History*, pp. 111-137.

71 This is most likely the context behind the presence in the Bisutūn relief, of the belatedly added Skunḥa: ROBERT ROLLINGER, JULIAN DEGEN, «Conceptualizing Universal Rulership: Considerations on the Persian Achaemenid Worldview and the Saka at the "End of the World"», in HILMAR KLINKOTT, ANDREAS LUTHER, JOSEF WIESEHÖFER eds., *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Kultur des alten Iran und benachbarter Gebiete. Festschrift für Rüdiger Schmitt*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 2021, pp. 187-224. On post-Achaemenid traditions claiming Achaemenid descent for Alexander (as the half-brother of Darius III) see PIERRE BRIANT, *Darius dans l'ombre d'Alexandre*, Paris, Fayard, 2003.

that Marduk and Zeus might have served the purpose for Cyrus and Alexander. Furthermore, he managed to outperform Cyrus by allegedly subduing those pointed-hatted *Sakā* – Scythians for the Greeks – against whom the imperial founder ignominiously died around 530 BCE, and which even Alexander, although he tried hard, did not succeed in bringing to heel⁷². To top everything off, thanks to his metahuman ancestor, Darius could furthermore claim he had been king ever since the beginning of historical time, if not beforehand, should one accept the hypothesis that *Avestān* traditions of heroic kings circulated in Western Iran and were known to the Achaemenids, who might also have taken them from their putative eastern homeland⁷³. In this model, upon death, Haxāmaniš was translated into divinity, and his primordial, mythological lifetime (the nine generations separating him from Darius's) gave the first/ninth Achaemenid king's power the hallmark of the extra-human⁷⁴.

Mission accomplished, one would think. When metapersons are involved, however, things are never quite so straightforward. The dark side of such a strategy was the vertical (*within* a given dynasty) descending regression of status⁷⁵. As Graeber explains, « all things being equal » (for example, divine support or military virtues), a dynastic founder such as Haxāmaniš necessarily ranks higher than his descendants, for the same reason that gives fathers authority over their children. Once again, his historicity is, of course, not the point here, and in fact, the more remote his chronology, the stronger the power emanating from him. In the words of Marshall Sahlins, « the ruling god is at once the most remote and the most powerful »⁷⁶. The implication becomes obvious upon recollection that, by Darius's own statement, the Achaemenids had been kings for *nine* generations already. Such an enormous time span (even by Ancient Near Eastern standards) only exacerbates the consequences of vertical sinking status. The longer a dynasty, the further away an incumbent ruler will be considered from the primeval sources of his power, which, in an immanentist worldview, are by definition located *outside* of his sphere of action⁷⁷. It follows that, be they human, divine, or something in between, ancestors can act simultaneously as a tremendous repository of unearthly powers and, hence, as a formidable tool for aspiring kings, and as equally significant sources of threats. This is especially the case in societies that see history as a process of rupture or decline from an original time: a fitting framework for the Achaemenid (political) theology⁷⁸. It consequently becomes easier to provide a *structural* explanation for the visual uniqueness characteristic of the Bīsutūn monument (text as well as relief), which is rooted in *universal* paradoxes of kingship and not (only) internal to Ancient Near Eastern traditions⁷⁹. Indeed, this exceptionalism can be seen as an extreme

72 On the northeastern borderlands of the Achaemenid Empire see now MICHELE MINARDI, « The Northeastern Regions of the Persian Empire: Bactriana, Sogdiana, Margiana, Chorasmia, Aria, Parthia, the Sakas, and the Dahae », in KAREN RADNER, NADINE MOELLER, DANIEL T. POTTS eds., *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 5, *The Age of Persia*, pp. 784-837.

73 ALBERTO CANTERA, « La liturgie longue en langue avestique dans l'Iran occidental », p. 62; and PRODS OKTOR SKJÆRVØ, « The Achaemenids and the Avesta », pp. 80-81.

74 MARSHALL SAHLINS, « Kings Before Kingship », p. 37.

75 DAVID GRAEBER, « Notes on the Politics of Divine Kingship », p. 431.

76 MARSHALL SAHLINS, « Kings Before Kingship », p. 36.

77 *Ibid.*, pp. 36-39; and MARSHALL SAHLINS, *The New Science*, pp. 34-69.

78 BRUCE LINCOLN, « Happiness for Mankind », pp. 357-392.

79 ROBERT ROLLINGER, « The Relief at Bisitun and its Ancient Near Eastern Setting: Contextualizing the Visual Vocabulary of Darius' Triumph over Gaumata », in CARSTEN BINDER, HENNING BÖRM, ANDREAS LUTHER eds., *Diwan. Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean / Untersuchungen zu Geschichte und Kultur des Nahen Ostens und des östlichen Mittelmeerraumes im Altertum. Festschrift für Josef Wiesehöfer zum 65. Geburtstag*, Duisburg, Wellem, 2016, pp. 5-51.

response to the kingship conundrum Darius faced, both on Cyrus's and on Achaemenes's fronts. Particularly in their kingly mode, ancestors have the regrettable tendency to make themselves felt in undesirable ways⁸⁰. Worse still, those who once might have been unmistakably human sooner or later invariably become a problem for their heirs or aspiring ones.

Furthermore, the closer they live(d) to the present, the bigger the challenge they pose⁸¹. How serious a trouble a framework such as this represented for Darius becomes apparent once it is remembered that, as he fought for dear life (and throne) in the succession struggle, Cyrus's ghost was barely a decade away⁸². His status as imperial founder made him an incredibly cumbersome forefather, hence an obstacle to Darius's own claims as an unsurpassed ruler.

It is significant to point out a pattern here. Indeed, the same logic applies to Xerxes one generation later. In fact, upon accession to the throne, he had to deal with his own father, Darius, the ultimate expander of the Persian realm, as he successfully campaigned, or at least convincingly claimed to have done so, even further than Cyrus, while living to tell the tale. The solution? Subdue Greece, Darius's most immediate stain in an otherwise unblemished record. It did not turn out well, and new strategies had to be elaborated to cope with the failure. It is henceforth perhaps not chance that, with Xerxes, the Greeks were bluntly counted as subjects as if Salamis simply did not happen.⁸³ Alternatively, they were just erased from the epigraphic space of the inscriptions and, therefore, from the imperial mental mapping (hence from the world as such, given that the two were represented as coterminous in Ancient Near Eastern imperial cartography)⁸⁴. This was also true in the generation *before* with Cambyses (the fix: conquering Egypt, apparently the only place on the map Cyrus had not had the time to target and, if possible, to push further south, into Nubia). It might have been the case for Cyrus himself, confronted as he was with the Elamite or Assyrian, if not even Sargonic paradigms (in the latter case, the dawn of imperial history in Mesopotamia), of kingship and universal rule. He got away with it by outdoing them all in founding the greatest empire on earth⁸⁵. Crucially for the purpose of a comparative study of Achaemenid (cosmic) politics and divine kingship, approached from an immanentist standpoint, these paradoxes of power emerge as a structural outcrop of Ancient Near Eastern royal ideology and its tradition of ever-increasing competition: « generations fall in rivalry with one another. Living kings find themselves choked and surrounded by the dead »⁸⁶.

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80 MARSHALL SAHLINS, « Kings before Kingship », pp. 34-39.

81 DAVID GRAEBER, « Notes on the Politics of Divine Kingship », p. 436.

82 Compare ECKART FRAHM, *Assyria: The Rise and Fall of the World's First Empire*, New York, Hachette, 2023, pp. 177-190, for another compelling case of imperial ghostly (and ghastrly) ancestors haunting royal pretenders.

83 See now JOHN O. HYLAND, « Xerxes' Greek Spectacles and the Royal Campaign Tradition », in PETER FUNKE, GYÖRGY NÉMETH, ANDRÁS PATAY-HORVÁTH, JOSEF WIESEHÖFER, eds. *Xerxes against Hellas. An Iconic Conflict from Different Perspectives*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 2024, 33-50; HILMAR KLINKOTT, « The Greek-Persian 'State Contracts' from an Achaemenid Perspective », in *Ibid.*, pp. 69-90.

84 JOHN O. HYLAND, *Persia's Greek Campaigns*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, for Xerxes's display of royal power in competition with Darius; as well as SAMANTHA BLANKENSHIP, « The Persian Charts of the Greek Historians », *Syllogos. Journal of Herodotean Studies* 1 (2022), pp. 65-115, on Achaemenid technologies of memory.

85 This scenario is indirectly supported by the evidence of Herodotus's *Histories*, given that the author spared no effort in turning what doubtlessly were royal tales of successful conquest at and beyond the furthest corner of the earth into ludicrous accounts of Oriental haughtiness chastised by the gods, as definitively demonstrated by ROBERT ROLLINGER, « Herodotus and Empire », pp. 186-221.

86 DAVID GRAEBER, « Notes on the Politics of Divine Kingship », p. 434.

The ethnohistorical record shows that a favorite way to address these problems, each an epiphenomenon of the status regression conundrum, was to overshadow one's own ancestor *somehow*: the bolder, the better⁸⁷. Already in the IIIrd millennium BCE, Narām-Sîn had to deal with an ancestor (Sargon of Akkad) who *invented* empire in Mesopotamia. Having run short of options in the realm of human politics, he deified himself⁸⁸. Establishing monuments and conquering new territories proved another particularly popular strategy. Symptomatically for the plausibility of the argument developed through this paper, the Bīsutūn monument stands alone as, at the same time, the *summa (theologiae) politicae* of Ancient Near Eastern kingship and a unicum: the unsurpassed achievement of a truly Great (sacred) King⁸⁹. Reading Darius's most extreme testament through the prism of immanentism gives a new texture to the agonistic logic of Ancient Near Eastern kingship and helps to frame the Achaemenids into a wider context for further historical comparison. The premium of the ethnohistorical record is that it illuminates the logic behind Darius's choices as a *structural* feature of kingship *as such*. The sociocultural context behind the monument's genesis and the politics it served emerge as one yet unexplored manifestation of the atemporal dimension of history⁹⁰.

5. Conclusions. Cosmology as Politics: Immanentism and Achaemenid Kingship

This paper has tried to approach the history of (early) Achaemenid imperialism through the insights provided by historical ethnography and anthropological theories on (sacred) kingship. It has shown how this evidence and theoretical background can expand current understandings of Persian religious thought as well as political praxis. Furthermore, the methodological framework underpinning the foregoing discussion can be taken as a first foray into a wider, ideally collaborative project aimed at a comparative study of Teispid-Achaemenid Persia and other traditions of divine kingship within as well as outside the horizon of Ancient Near Eastern History⁹¹. On a significantly more modest scale, the evidence presented here will hopefully convince anthropologists and social scientists at large of the benefits of engaging with the Persian Empire and kings' genealogies for world-historical studies on kingship, ancient and

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 436. Perhaps the most impressive example available worldwide is that of Qín Shǐ Huáng Dì (秦始皇帝), also known as Zhào Zhèng (趙政, ca. 250-210 BCE), who decided to overshadow all his predecessors down to the mythical Yellow Emperor by having built what is held to be the most enormous burial ever constructed for a single individual: see GIDEON SHELACH, «Collapse or Transformation? Anthropological and Archaeological Perspectives on the Fall of Qin», in YURI PINES, LOTHAR VON FALKENHAUSEN, GIDEON SHELACH, ROBIN D. S. YATES eds., *Birth of an Empire: The State of Qin Revisited*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2014, pp. 113-138; MICHAEL PUETT, «Humanizing the Divine and Divinizing the Human in Early China: Comparative Reflections on Ritual, Sacrifice, and Sovereignty», in A. AZFAR MOIN, ALAN STRATHERN eds., *Sacred Kingship in World History*, pp. 137-161. The experiment was so successful that ten years after his death, the dynasty collapsed under the social and ecological pressure of feeding such a monstrous mausoleum: BRIAN LANDER, *The King's Harvest: A Political Ecology of China from the First Farmers to the First Empire*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, pp. 111-189. Yet, the First Emperor of Qin remained a (contested) model for Chinese rulers down to and perhaps beyond the Communist revolution.

⁸⁸ INGO SCHRACKAMP, «The Kingdom of Akkad», pp. 619-634; NICOLE BRISCH, «Gods and Kings in Ancient Mesopotamia», in A. AZFAR MOIN, ALAN STRATHERN eds., *Sacred Kingship in World History*, pp. 72-93, here pp. 75-76.

⁸⁹ MARGARET COOL ROOT, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art*, pp. 182-226, is still arguably the unsurpassed treatment of the inscription's visual program.

⁹⁰ MARSHALL SAHLINS, «The Atemporal Dimension of History: In the Old Kongo Kingdom, for Example», in DAVID GRAEBER, MARSHALL SAHLINS, *On Kings*, pp. 139-221.

⁹¹ An instructive template has recently been provided by ANTHONY J. BARBIERI-LOW, *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2021.

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modern. At the same time, and from an even more parochial standpoint, the paper will have fulfilled its purpose if scholars of Ancient Iran will prove willing to address the ethnohistorical record in more depth than has been the case so far⁹².

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⁹² The (astonishingly recent) precedent set by DANIEL T. POTTS, *Aspects of Kinship in Ancient Iran*, is illustrative of the potential this approach entails.