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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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An orgy of Oriental dissipation? Some thoughts on the ‘Camel *lekythos*’

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This short note examines a single artefact: a red-figured *lekythos* dated c. 370 BCE.¹ The vase depicts a procession, at the centre of which is a fine Bactrian camel carrying an important personage on its back. The vase, known as the Camel *lekythos*, is a particular favourite of mine for although the painter is unknown, not only does it have its artistic merits, which are many, but also the iconography encodes some interesting ideas about Greek perceptions of the Persians and, importantly, some reflections on how the Achaemenids projected a self-image.

The vase forms part of a sizable corpus of images of Persians created by the Greeks in the period 510-330 BCE. It comes towards the end of the period of the Greeks' visualization of Persia, an era which eschewed the aggressively belittling 'othering' of the Persians seen, for instance, most infamously in the Eurymedon vase of c. 465, and focuses instead on the world of *le roi imaginaire*.² In the artworks created

1- British Museum 1882,0704.1; see further Sánchez (2009), p. 314 and fig. 38; Isaac (2004), fig. 3.

2- For a new reading of the Eurymedon Vase see Llewellyn-Jones (Forthcoming 2016). On the image of the Persian in Attic art, as well as on diplomacy between Greece and the Empire see most importantly Miller (1997).

c. 410-330 BCE, we are permitted access into the inner court of the Persian ruler and we encounter a rich mélange of subject matter and a heady mixture of themes: revelry, sport, slavery, power, riches, and sheer opulence - in brief, the Greek artists fixate on the most eye-catching of all the Orientalist clichés.

So what is happening on the Camel *lekythos*? How can we read it? Much, of course, depends on one's starting point and what one wants to see in the iconography. Benjamin Isaac in his work on the creation of racism in antiquity uses the vase as evidence for a deep-set Athenian xenophobia. He sees the procession of Persians as 'a hotbed of orgiastic dissipation' which, in turn, reminds him of the salacious tales of Ctesias' *Persica*.³ This interpretation may say more about Isaacs than it does about Persian decadence *per se*.

In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, actual decadence (in the sense of sexual license and debauchery) is hard to find in Ctesias' work and neither his later epitomists or critics ever cite him as an author with a particular penchant for the spicy or salacious; this is a modern misconception of his work.⁴ And no more is there anything scandalous or depraved to be found in the fourth-century vase-paintings studied here. The Camel *Lekythos* may be Orientalist in the richness of its depiction, but it is not decadent.

Alan Shapiro entertains the idea that the *lekythos* depicts Bendis or Sabazios or some other foreign deity whose popular cults erupted in Athens during the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War and that therefore the vase attempts to show the oriental origins of 'the source of beliefs and practices that were now *au courant* in Athens.'⁵ Certainly the embracing of exotic gods in this period is consistent with the vogue for enthusiastically welcoming many aspects of Persian culture into Athens - 'everything from dress and drinking vessels to music, dance, and religious ritual.'⁶

But I am less convinced that this is a religious *pompē* being shown here than one of a distinct kind of Persian spectacle: it shows the peripatetic court of the Achaemenid monarch on the move, a spectacle that had enthralled the Greeks for more than a century before this image was created. Many stories of the Great King on the move are to be found in the works of Classical authors who seem to have a fascination for the notion of the peripatetic court and what it means for Persian identity. Some anecdotes tell of the enormous efforts undertaken to ensure that the ruler's passage is both safe and smooth while others take an unexpected turn and depict the Great King as a kind and gentle recipient of humble gifts presented by the poorest people of the Empire who turn out to see the royal progress pass by.⁷ Greek authors display more awe than approbation for the nature of the royal progress although one perverse expression of the Greek obsession with both Persian decadence and court nomadism is given voice by Aristophanes who conjured up an absurd fantasy wherein the Persian state *en masse* moved with the monarch merely to satisfy the king's desire to empty his bowels, and the comic play-

3- Isaac (2004), caption to fig. 3.

4- Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2009).

5- Shapiro (2009), p. 79. Boardman (2015), p. 216 reads the vase as a depiction of Dionysus, his maenads, and dancing Persians. The scene has been variously described as an episode in the story of Midas (Polyaen. *Strat.* vii, 5), as the triumph of the Indian Dionysos, of Dionysos as conqueror of the East, of Dionysos Bassareus. There is, however, little to distinguish the scene as Dionysiac at all.

6- Boardman (2015), p. 216. See further Miller (1997).

7- Ael. *An.* 15.26; *Hist. Misc.* 1.31-33.

wright subsequently pictures the ruler surrounded by his entire entourage defecating in the privacy of the mountains before returning to the royal place.⁸

The vase image is full of movement, life, and detail and easily captures the Greek fixation with Persian court-nomadism. It is full of detail, some observed from Achaemenid practices, although, as is always the case, many specifics are misread. The vase certainly opens up notions of how the Greeks of the fourth century conceived of the Persians and suggests modes in which the Achaemenids themselves spread a *bone fide* Iranian self-image.

In the centre of the scene a well-observed and well-crafted Bactrian camel is guided forward with a halter by a Persian who points forward, as if to the path ahead. He looks upward towards the rider, the Great King himself, who is sitting in a kind of *howdah* decorated with richly woven cloths and with a projecting foot-rest.⁹ He cuts a dashing figure; his body is depicted front-on and his legs, resplendent in zig-zag-pattern trousers, are splayed apart as he balances nonchalantly between the camel's humps, a short whip in one hand - used to spur the beast forward no doubt - while his right arm is outstretched to afford some balance perhaps as the camel lurches along. Margaret Miller suggests that the camel was 'not an elegant or even prestigious mount: it was in fact the donkey of the east.' But for the Persians the camel was a status-enhancing animal: camels are not native to Iran and were therefore considered *exotica* by the Achaemenids. At Persepolis, Bactrian camels are included in the representations of several delegations from the north-eastern provinces of the Empire as high-status gifts and single-humped dromedaries are depicted with the Arab delegation too. One seal-image shows the Great King in a chariot pulled by a team of dromedaries and another illustrates the Great King spearing a lion whilst seated on a dromedary, suggesting that camels could be used in the royal hunt.¹⁰ Darius I certainly employed camel troops (*ušabari*) in his campaign against the rebellious Babylonians and large herds of camels belonging to Darius' personal estate are attested in the Persepolis cuneiform texts being driven back and forth between Persepolis and Susa, following the route taken by the monarch.¹¹ Occasionally a king's much-beloved camel is attested in the sources - like the fortunate one housed in the royal stables by Darius I.¹² This suggests that the camel was very much regarded as a prestigious animal fit for the monarch's usage, in war, in sport, and in royal procession.¹³

For his part, sitting on camel-back, the Great King cuts a very dashing figure. His face is rendered in sharp profile; he is a handsome man. While the origin and significance of the tradition of the good-look-

8- Ar. Ach. 81-83.

9- A similar contraption, and the same manner of depicting a seated rider (this time on mule-back), is represented on a red-figure *oinochoe* of c. 450 BCE; BM 1912.7-9.1; see Isaac (2004), fig. 4b and Sánchez (2009), p. 316, fig. 44.

10- See Rehm (2006), p.135 and Collon (1987), p. 156-57, fig. 700. The two species of camel were used by the Persian cavalry. See Sánchez (2009), p. 313, fig. 32 and p. 314, fig. 36 for further images of camels in red-figure representation. For camels in Darius' quelling of a Babylonian revolt see DB I §18; see further Sekunda and Chew (1992), p. 51. Camels are also found on seal images: see, for instance, a chalcedony sacraboid in London, BM, Walters no. 547, see Boardman (2015), p. 35, fig. 12. See Sánchez (2009), p. 313, fig. 32 and p. 314, fig. 36 for further images of camels in red-figure representation.

11- PF 1787 and PF 1786; Briant (2002), p. 464.

12- Str. 16. 13.

13- *Contra* Miller (2006/7), p. 121: the scene 'reduces the potency of Persian elite cavalry by portraying a low-class mount and equestrian style.'

ing king is unclear, from early on Greek texts and images fixate on the body and looks of the Persian monarch and they take an obvious delight in his splendid appearance, making him into an attractive, albeit inherently despotic, ruler. In literature successive kings are noted for their handsome demeanour and their impressive stature (and coincidentally, a hallmark of Achaemenid art is that kings are made taller and more masculine than their subjects);¹⁴ they are all ‘the most valiant of men’ or ‘the best-looking of men’ and their wives and daughters are equally beautiful – a ‘torment’ for Greek eyes no less – and together Persian kings and queens are habitually tagged as being ‘the best looking in all of Asia.’¹⁵ Of course, every prince and monarch aspired to match the standard of masculine good looks set by Cyrus the Great – his aquiline nose was allegedly the benchmark of beauty for generations of Persians: ‘Because Cyrus was hooked-nosed, the Persians – even to this day – love hooked nosed men and consider them the most handsome.’¹⁶ In the vase painting though the king’s nose is straight and flawless – and very much the Greek conception of a handsome masculine profile.

As ever, dress, appearance, and accoutrements are important signifiers in this lively scene. Near to the king a clean-shaven attendant waves a fan. Another beardless Persian strums the *kithara* with a plectrum and another plays a *chelys* and one further smooth-cheeked individual holds (what appears to be) a flaming torch, although in all likelihood, this, in its original Achaemenid context, is a fly-whisk. There is little doubt that these beardless individuals are eunuchs, the most fascinating of all the Great King’s courtiers as far as the Greeks were concerned. These castrated males served at court as high-ranking officials, bureaucrats, and attendants and as a kind of ‘third-sex’ they were able to negotiate the permeable barriers of the court in their crucial capacities as messengers and trusted body-servants.¹⁷ Eunuchs are frequently attested in the Achaemenid sources carrying fly-whisks, towels, and perfume bottles and it is probable that they were fan-bearers and musicians too; the Greek artists are certainly able to imagine them as such and on the tragic stage Helen’s Phrygian fan-bearer is most probably based on a Persian court eunuch.¹⁸

Alongside the eunuchs, the *lekythos* also represents female musicians – concubines, no doubt – and

14- See further Llewellyn-Jones (2015).

15- See Hdt. 7. 187; Pl. *Al.* 121d; Plut. *Art.* 1.1; *Alex.* 21.6.11.

16- Plut. *Mor.* 281e.

17- Llewellyn-Jones (2002).

18- Eur. *Or.* 1528.

bearded courtiers dancing the so-called *oklasma*.¹⁹ The world of the performing arts was an important part of Achaemenid court culture and we know of a courtly tradition for stories told though music from passing references to singers at the court. In the sources, royal concubines are expressly noted for their musical skills: ‘During dinner (the king’s) concubines sing and play the harp, one of them taking the lead as the others sing in chorus’ and we learn that, ‘at night they sing and play on harps continually while the lamps burn’, which feasibly suggests that the court enjoyed a ‘complex and developed form of musical entertainment.’²⁰ Where there was music, there must have been dance, and we learn that the court was not only entertained by professional dancers like Zenon of Crete, ‘who was, by far, Artaxerxes [II’s] preferred performer’, but by the Great King himself, who during the feast of Mithra, was encouraged to drink and then dance the so-called *persica*, a war-dance, by ‘clashing shields together, crouching down on one knee and springing up again from earth... in measured time to the sound of the flute.’²¹ Dance, it seems, was both a courtly art and an expression of manliness, ‘for the Persians learn to dance as they learn to ride and they consider dance movements related to riding and very suitable for getting exercise and increasing fitness.’²²

The Camel lekythos may well draw on genuine Achaemenid visual motifs, but they have a distinctly *laissez-faire* Hellenic flavor to them, typical of other themes found in Greek art of this period. Without doubt this and other scenes of Persian monarchs and their courtiers, of women and eunuchs, of entertainers, camel-leaders, and even of the Persian elite relaxing, and dancing are very much in the spirit of Classical Greek art. The Persian protagonists adopt decidedly Hellenized modes of behavior and, in a way, they are merely masqueraders in Oriental fancy dress.

In *bone fide* Achaemenid art the kinds of pedestrian subjects encountered in a vase-painting like the Camel *lekythos* are exceptionally rare and if they are encountered at all then they are seen only in small-scale glyptics but never in monumental imperial sculpture or relief.²³ The official art of central Iran tended to concentrate on representations of audiences and tribute-bearers, or on heroic images of monarchs fighting ferocious beasts and thereby reconfirming Achaemenid world order. There was no room in the official art of Persia for depictions of the minutiae of daily life at court because, as odd

19- With its distinct posturing, this dance is a standard in the Greek artistic repertoire. See, for instance, Athens, National Archaeological Museum 12683, c. 400 BCE; Shapiro (2009), fig. 3.20. Historically, at least in the Greek (and Hebrew) sources, Persian royal concubines were generally considered to be beautiful girls, see Plut. *Art.* 27; D.S. 17.77.6; Esther 2.3; they could be bought as slaves (Hdt. 8.105; Plut. *Them.* 26.4), or were received as gifts and tribute from different parts of the vast empire (Hdt. 3. 97; Xen. *Cyr.* 4.6. 11, 5.1. 1, 5, 2, 9, 39; Esther 2.2-3). Concubines could also be regularly acquired as war booty or were captured from rebellious subjects (Hdt 4.19, 7. 83, 9. 76, 81). Herodotus (6.32) confirms that after the crushing of the Ionian uprising, ‘the most beautiful girls were dragged from their homes and sent to Darius’ court’. Of course, the Greeks too acquired Persian concubines as war prizes: 329 concubines were part of Alexander of Macedon’s post-Issus booty. Likewise, Parmenion captured a number of Persian women, of high status, at Damascus in 333 BCE. These included the wife of Artaxerxes III and three of his daughters, including Parysatis whom Alexander later married. On concubines see further details in Llewellyn-Jones (2010) and (2013), p. 116-119.

20- Heraclides F1 & 2; Kuhrt (2010), p. 907.

21- Ctesias F31 = Athen. 1.22c; Xen. *An.* 6.1.10.

22- Athen. 10. 434e.

23- Llewellyn-Jones (2010).

as this may seem given the centrality of the court to Achaemenid dynastic policy, such images would not have served the purpose of reflecting Persian imperial dogma.²⁴ The Greek vase-images are as far removed from the artistic ideology promoted by the official centralized art of the Achaemenids as can be imagined.

There can therefore be little doubt to my mind that the Persian court we encounter in the Greek art is by and large a locale of Oriental fabulousness; an image like that of the Camel *lekythos* has a fairy tale quality to it, a feeling of being set ‘Once Upon a Time in a Kingdom Far, Far Away’. As Alan Shapiro notes of the fourth century vase scenes, ‘In one sense, they are descendants of the *Persians* of Aeschylus, with its imagined scenes of life at the Persian court, based on no first-hand knowledge... there is nothing “realistic” about the scenes that appear to have a Persian setting.’²⁵ The scenes may nod towards Oriental *realia* such as dress and equipment but even these are, at best, rudimentary. The Greek artworks must be regarded as important contributors to a long line of beautiful, if deeply misunderstood and precarious, Orientalist clichés that permeate other Greek conceptions of the Achaemenid world.

Even so, the royal court of Persia may be opulent, but it is free from any kind of lascivious carrying-on identified by Isaacs.²⁶ Even with the ubiquitous presence of eunuchs and concubines, the camel *lekythos* lacks erotic sensuality. It is rich in its evocations of joy and celebration, though, and I suggest that court festivity is the central theme encountered here.

24- See the classic study by Root (1979). See pertinent comments by Colburn (2013).

25- Shapiro (2009), p. 72, 76.

26- This is a feature, in fact, even of depictions of the Great King among his women – which is in sharp contrast to the erotic imaginings of Greek literature which tends to fixate on the sex-life of the Persian king. See for instance, Louvre, Campana collection 11164, c. 440 BCE – see Shapiro (2009), fig. 3.13; Stockholm Historical Museum V294, c. 430 BCE – see Shapiro (2009), fig. 3.14-15), and Rome, Vatican 16536 (H530), c. 450 BCE – see Miller (2006/07), fig. 1a-b); the scenes of the king with his wives and concubines are entirely humdrum, and lack any kind of exotic frisson, let alone sexual titillation. Interestingly, the queens and concubines are always dressed in Greek clothing (occasionally with a sleeved undergarment and a pinned cloth headdress) suggesting that the artists had no model for thinking about the appearance of Achaemenid women. The painters clearly had no pattern for representing Persian royal women and so they dress them as elite Athenian wives. Shapiro (2009), p. 76 makes a similar observation: ‘no attempt is ever made to Orientalize the women.’ They perform submissive gestures of offering cups or dinking horns and are hardly the powerful viragos of the Greek literary tradition. A badly weathered stone base from Olympia, dating to 330 BCE which once held a statue of the celebrated Thessalian pankratiast Poulydamas, shows the court of Darius II, including figures of the royal women. These court ladies are certainly conjured from the Greek imagination and are dressed in Greek *chitōnes* and *himatia*, much in the style of the depictions of Hellas and Asia in the top register of the Darius Vase; the female at the front of the group is even shown in the standard Greek pose of raising her robe in a veiling gesture (on this gesture see Llewellyn-Jones (2003), p. 98-120). For a discussion of the Poulydamas base see Kosmopoulou (2002), p. 156-64. For the erotic adventures of Persian kings see Bridges (2015), p. 127-54.

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