

VISIONS FROM THE PERIPHERY

THE PERSIAN EMPIRE AND THE CONFIGURATION OF GREEK IDENTITY

I. WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND BY “CENTER” AND “PERIPHERY”?

Since the publication of *The Modern Global System* in 1974, Wallerstein's definition of "center" and "periphery" have been extensively debated and applied in different approaches. Although the original application of these concepts was designed to explain the origin and development of modern capitalist societies, they have been used in other historical and geographical contexts. This demonstrates that Wallerstein's model can be used, after being properly adapted. Despite being criticised by scholars such as Worsley (1980), who pointed out the advocated heuristic futility and application of Wallerstein's model to other historical contexts, other researchers such as Algaze (1989) or Stein (1999) have successfully employed it to study of the Mesopotamian context of the mid-4th millennium BC.

According to Wallerstein, his "center-periphery" model is based on the assumption that the underdevelopment of peripheries is a consequence of their relationship with the centers, and vice versa. Centres are characterized by the control of more developed, productive and organizational systems, as well as a political and ideological preponderance that allows them to impose its interests. Regarding peripheries, they have less developed systems and inferior political systems (Rowlands, 1987). One critic to Wallerstein's model could be its denial of the possible development of peripheries and the transfer of hegemony that took place in Antiquity from the Middle East, such as the Achaemenid Empire to the then outlying areas of the Mediterranean area such as Greece throughout the second half of the 1st millennium BC. Persia was the central core from which the confines of the inhabited World were set up, meanwhile Greece (and Europe) were an indefinite and chaotic periphery whose boundaries were unknown (Gómez Espelosín, 2011 :111).

Scholars such as Kohl, provided more flexibility to Wallerstein's model proposing the existence of several centers with their respective peripheries. At that historical time, peripheries had some possibilities to develop and break their relationships with their respective centres because technological differences were not as significant as they would be in later times (Kohl, 1987:23). Larsen (1987) considers that centres were not as stable as we think, and some peripheral regions could develop into new centres.

“Center-periphery” relations involve not only economic differences, but also political and ideological. According to some researchers, it is not essential that these three elements appear at the same time. A civilization can be ideologically peripheral, but not economic or politically (Schortman and Urban, 1994: 403).

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF AN EMPIRE: PERSIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF GREEK IDENTITY

For Greeks, Persians were the paradigm of "*barbarism*". This consideration was extended to other people with whom Greeks shared their borders and was composed by a feeling of superiority. These neighbouring cultures were seen as incomprehensible and reprehensible. However, when dealing with Greco-Persian relations, consideration should be taken of the important cultural transfers that took place between both cultures.

A culture shapes its identity in opposition to others, underestimating the loans and cultural influences received from them, a fact to which Greeks were no stranger when they elaborated their own image of Persia. This would end up generating an ethnocentric discourse that served Greek interests (Isaac, 2004: 257-303). It was so detailed that its influence remains in Western culture, and we only see Greece as our origin, relegating other civilizations whose achievements were equally remarkable (García Sánchez: 2007: 34).

The importance of the Greco-Persian Wars (492-478 BC) displaced other alterities but, unlike Persia, these never constituted a real threat to the Greek World. The Achaemenid Empire shaped its dominions from the centrality of their own political organization, as can be seen in the royal achaemenid inscriptions, its territorial structure in satrapies¹ or in the famous reliefs in Persepolis². However, some details aroused Greeks' curiosity about their powerful neighbour, such as their acceptance of customs and beliefs of the various peoples that made up the Persian Empire, as well as the adoption of political institutions and structures oblivious to them that denoted a remarkable pragmatism.

The Persian menace caused a temporal unión of some Greek *poleis* that created a Panhellenic sense that was not shared by all, as other poleis did not hesitate to support the Achaemenid cause. In some aspects, a possible political unification of Greece was close: in 481 BC and later in 338 BC with the formation of the Corinthian League under Phillip II of Macedon. Constant misgivings and quarrels between *poleis*, gave up with such attempts. The feeling of unity among Greeks did not go beyond the cultural realm, and they did not contemplate a possible political unification such as Agesilaus II of Sparta³ lamented.

Although Persians would end up being defeated thanks to decisive Greek victories such as Marathon or Salamis, the Achaemenid Empire continued to dictate, to some extent, Greek politics grading its threats according to the wishes of the Persian kings. This was clearly exposed during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) between Athens and Sparta, as well as in later occasions⁴.

¹ Hdt. III, 89, 1-3.

² These reliefs show both geographically, politically and ideologically, the centrality of the Persian Empire, where from this, the Greek world occupied a peripheral place.

³ Xen. Ages., 7, 4-7.

⁴ Thuc. II, 67; VIII, 18; 37; 58.

The creation and development of a Greek identity was largely elaborated in opposition to the Persian Empire and its ideals, that Greeks did not hesitate to ridicule and label them as “*barbarians*”. This discourse was impelled with the outbreak of the Greco-Persian Wars, a relevant moment in the ideological construction of a Greek identity based on several ethnic, linguistic and religious elements shared by most Greeks⁵. They never intended to shape a possible political unification, fact that became obvious after the Peace of Callias (449 BC) and later on the Peace of Antalcidas (386 BC).

Some recurrent topics used by Greeks to expose Persia as the “*epitome of barbarism*” were, among others, the Eastern despotism, conceived as the antithesis of Greek freedom and, particularly, of the Athenian democracy. This idea was a reaction against the establishment of tyrannical regimes, that were highly valued by some *aristoi* in several *poleis* (Bichler, 2001). Likewise, other elements used by Greeks to differentiate themselves from the “*barbarians*” were based on natural⁶, philosophical⁷ or geographical considerations (Jacob, 1991).

The Greco-Persian Wars served as catalyst for a speech that would eventually be used by Athens to justify its growing imperialism and the formation of the Delian League between 478-477 BC, using a discourse that allowed to show itself as the defender of Greek freedom against Persian despotism. Although the Delian League was created to fight future Achaemenid invasions, it revealed as a mere instrument to replace one imperialism with another. Athens was not the only one that used this discourse to legitimize its political expectations, and other *poleis* that took part in the conflict, especially those that had seen how Persia supported the establishment of tyrannical regimes at the beginning of the 5th century BC⁸. Despite that, during the 5th and 4th centuries BC, Sparta and Athens would reach various agreements with the Persian Empire (Schrader, 1976).

This juncture would print an ideological nuance to the discourse based on Persian alterity. A series of antagonistic concepts such as “*freedom*” against “*slavery*” or “*democracy*” against “*despotism*” were extensively used. Unlike other similar ideological discourses, the one against Persia demanded a more elaborated rhetoric that could go further than a simple criticism of Persian customs. The result of this dialectical association between “*the Greeks*” and “*the Persians*” would create an image of the East closely linked to the Achaemenid Empire and its monarchy, identified by the Greeks as a “*barbaric*” institution. The lack of reliable information about Persia would be supplemented with fantastic elements that led to the construction of an ethnogeography based on myths.

Alongside this will emerge a more rigorous and truthful geography that will allow to define both the Greek space of its own and the “*other*”. Thanks to it we know some interesting aspects about Greek mentality of that time. It is possible that many accounts of the Persian Empire reflected real experiences of Hellenic artisans who had worked in Persepolis, or physicians such as Ctesias of Cnidus, who lent their knowledge at the

⁵ Hdt. VIII, 144.

⁶ Hdt. I, 60, 3.

⁷ Arist. Pol. 1287 b17.

⁸ Thuc. III, 62.

Persian court. Trade relations also played an important role in spreading customs and ideas between both cultures.

The contempt that Greeks felt towards Persia should be taken with some reservations. Although it is clear that this sentiment existed, as attested in a significant number of literary works and their political use, there was little curiosity and receptivity towards most Persian innovations among some sectors of the Athenian aristocracy, as well as a certain fascination with the Achaemenid monarchy (Miller, 1997).

Many Greek prejudices were based on a “supposed” weakness of character attributed to Persians due to their usage of fine fabrics, parasols and fly swatters...or by having eunuchs⁹. As for the use of sunshades, while in Persia their users were exclusively male, in Athens they were used by women. Greeks interpreted this custom as an obvious feminization of Persian males and as a manifestation of their cultural and moral decline (Harrison, 2000: 11).

Athenian aristocracy had ambivalent feelings towards Persia and, at the same time they were showing their strongest rejection, they did not despise the luxurious goods from the East that many of them enjoyed. This behaviour among Athenian aristocrats must be carefully examined if we take into consideration the reaction of the *demos* towards Phrynichus’ representation of the siege of Miletus between 493-492 BC, or in some plays by Aristophanes¹⁰. In Athens existed a dilemma between the fascination that Persian opulence caused and the censorship of some customs considered by Greeks as “*barbaric sins*” that should be avoided at all costs. However, some of these prejudices were quickly forgotten by significant Greek personalities such as Xenophon, Ctesias or Alcibiades when they went on to serve the Persian monarchy.

Some decisions taken by Persian sovereigns were used by Greeks to shape a discourse to denigrate their most powerful and fearsome adversary and by to all things Eastern. Likewise, the image of the Persian kings was conveniently manipulated to present them as a paradigm of despotism. Other elements used for this purpose were the succession to the Persian throne, which some Classical Greek authors related to fratricidal struggles and conjures arising from the court (García Sánchez, 2007: 46). For Greeks, the indolence of the Persian kings and their pernicious influence exerted by their many wives and eunuchs were decisive for their cultural and moral decadence. At the time of Cyrus, the royal heir was educated by eunuchs and at the harem, a place where laxity reigned¹¹.

The alleged incestuous relationships that Persians used to have with their female relatives was harshly criticized by Greeks, as well as the Persian inability to suppress their sexual desires¹² which led them to commit extravagant acts such as those of going to war

⁹ Aristoph. Vesp. 1137-1147; Eccl. 319; Nub. 151; Ran. 937.

¹⁰ Schol. Aristoph. Eq. 580.

¹¹ Plat. Lg. 694d-696a.

¹² Hdt. I, 135.

accompanied by their women and lovers¹³. This was the custom that scandalized the most to Classical Greek authors, that used it to further denigrate the Persians¹⁴.

Persian religion did not escape criticism and was seen as extremely ungodly¹⁵ and led by monarchs who rejoiced in the desecration of shrines in which they later worshipped themselves as true gods¹⁶. Likewise, Persian gastronomy was heavily criticized, considering it as a good example of the characteristic excesses of the “*barbarians*” (Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1995). This manifested itself after the Persian conquest of Lydia, when the Persian army exposed his vices and love for wine¹⁷. Persians were also presented by Greeks as relentless tax collectors, putting many Ionian *poleis* in a complicated situation (García Sánchez, 2007: 48).

CONCLUSION

Persia’s influence on Greek culture is evident thanks to the different relationships maintained by both, of which we have a good number of testimonies, especially from the Greek side. However, these discourses had, in some cases, much manipulations but some aspects corresponded to the Persian reality. In most Greek literature, as well as in other cultural manifestations, the image of Persia is certainly negative. For Greeks, Persians were the perfect example of “*barbarism*” and this reaction can be considered a defense mechanism against a powerful enemy that threatened to eradicate the Greek World. In the other hand, Greeks needed an enemy to shape their own identity, and Persia was the most representative of their potential enemies.

¹³ Hdt. VII, 83.

¹⁴ Hdt. III, 31.

¹⁵ Xen. Cyr. VIII, 8, 7.

¹⁶ Isoc. IV, 155-156.

¹⁷ Strab. XV, 3, 19-20.

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