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ARTICLE

Male Homoerotic Practices in Achaemenid Persia: An Overview

Matheus Treuk Medeiros de Araujoⁱ

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4500-8279>

matheus.araujo@usp.br

ⁱ Universidade de São Paulo – São Paulo – SP – Brasil

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Abstract: Descriptions of Ancient Persian male homoeroticism come mainly from Classical sources, which, however, seem to present divergent testimonies regarding this practice. Some authors apparently provide proof for its widespread acceptance, whereas others, particularly later authors, emphasized its prohibition. Considering the many difficulties involved in the reconstruction of Persian history through the eyes of classical Greeks and Romans, this article aims to provide a brief overview of the subject, with some clues to the question of the origin, form, and tolerance of same-sex love in Achaemenid Persia. We agree that homoerotic practices were

attested and likely accepted at some level in Achaemenid Persia. However, we believe that the evidence available to us is not enough to obtain a full understanding of this phenomenon. It is also stressed that not every Greek or Roman reference to Persian male homoeroticism should be taken at face value, as some are distorted and fictitious or lack firsthand knowledge. Finally, we briefly address the image of eunuchs as sexual partners of Achaemenid kings.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Achaemenids, Persia, Herodotus Eunuchs.

Introduction

The Achaemenid Persian Empire (559-330 BCE) was a large, multi-ethnic, and long-lived polity that is often described by scholars as one of the first “world empires” (Wiesehöfer, 2009, p. 66).¹ It comprised, at its maximum extent, the regions of Anatolia, Persia, Egypt, the Levant, Mesopotamia, Central Asia, India, Nubia, and possibly Thrace (Brosius, 2021, p. 1).

Not surprisingly, this diverse empire had no uniform rules determining the conducts of its subjects. As it is well known, Persians did not normally impose their religion over conquered peoples (Brosius, 2010, p. 136-138). Besides, there was also no Achaemenid law “code” in force (Briant, 1996, p. 526-527; Pirngruber, 2021, p. 1088).² In the same vein, we know that no single situation regarding male same-sex relations existed throughout the empire. Praise of homoerotic love is well attested in some Greek polities that would become part of the empire (Davidson, 2008, p. 415-417). On the other

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² “Persianization” is attested in some provinces and neighboring polities, but it was rarely the outcome of forced acculturation (Brosius, 2010, p. 135; Miller, 2017, p. 49-50).

hand, if we accept Frei's theory of "imperial authorization" (Frei, 2001; Pirngruber, 2021, p. 1091-1092), it should follow that some sort of same-sex sexual intercourse³ was possibly outlawed in Persian Yehud after Artaxerxes supposedly acknowledged Ezra's "law book" (Ezr. 7).⁴ We can deduce that the situation in Egypt,⁵ Mesopotamia, and other parts of the empire was not the same, comprising a rich variety of social rules and ideals related to erotic behaviour.

Therefore, considering such huge diversity, in this article we shall specifically examine how Achaemenid Persians themselves understood male homoerotic behaviour. Since our object of inquiry is related to Persian ideas towards sexuality, we shall approach erotic behaviours and ideals inside and outside the core region of *Fārs*, be it among Persians, or between Persians and non-Persians. Finally, this research aims to analyze not only concrete descriptions of same-sex relations among Persian kings and magnates, but also general remarks about homoeroticism between ordinary Persian men.

Current State of Research

The study of male same-sex relations in the Ancient Near East is a relatively recent enterprise. While many studies have provided important approaches to the subjects of gender and sexuality (Parpola and Whiting, 2002; Ackerman, 2005; Nissinen, 1998; Peled, 2016 etc.), a lot of work still needs to be done in the field.

In the case of Achaemenid Persia, the subject of male homoerotic practices was only briefly examined by Sergent (1996, p. 520-526), Bremmer (1980, p. 282), Briant (1996, p. 944-945), and in a very short commentary by Bouché-Leclerq (1899, p. 341-342, n. 2). The study of Persian court eunuchs, who are usually presented as

³ Lev. 18:22; 20:13. This prohibition from the "Holiness Code" was possibly aimed at the passive male partner in a homoerotic intercourse (Ackerman, 2005, p. 25-27; Dershowitz, 2017).

⁴ See Grabbe (2004, p. 173-175; 337).

⁵ In Middle Kingdom Egypt, for instance, there is evidence for negative views on male same-sex relations (Brancaglion Junior, 2011).

homoerotic partners of Persian kings in the Classical sources, has received considerable scholarly attention in the last decades (Guyot, 1980, p. 80-91; Grayson, 1995, p. 88-89; Briant, 1996, p. 279-289; 2015, p. 348; Lenfant, 2014; 2021; Llewellyn-Jones, 2002; 2013, p. 38-40; 2020, p. 372-375; Pirngruber, 2011). However, only a limited consensus was reached about this institution. Consequently, we still lack a comprehensive study of male homoeroticism in Achaemenid Persia.

The study of Classical homoerotic practices, on the other hand, has now a long history, having promoted theoretical discussions that reached far beyond its field (Skinner, 2014, p. 1-28). Accordingly, and given the overwhelming importance of Greek and Roman sources to our knowledge of Persian homoeroticism, a brief description of the research on this topic is unavoidable.

The current consensus on Greek and Athenian homoerotic practices was framed by Kenneth Dover's *Greek Homosexuality* (1978), a work which supported the argument that the ideal, legitimate homosexual eros between citizens in Athens followed some conventions, such as intercrural, non-penetrative sex, with partners standing face-to-face, and usually between an older citizen playing the "active" role (the *erastes*) and a younger citizen, or "stripling", with a "passive" role (the *eromenos*) (Dover, 1978, p. 16; 100-103; see also Halperin, 1990, p. 5; Skinner, 2014, p. 7-8). Foucault's *History of Sexuality* was also fundamental to the field, since it stressed that sexuality was a contingent, variable historical phenomenon, and demonstrated how modern categories of "sexuality" were inexistant or unimportant to ancient Greeks, whose sexual morality would rather be concerned with the polarity of "activity" (penetration) against "passivity" (being penetrated), regardless of the partners being of the same sex or not (Foucault, 2010, p. 10; 269-281; see also Dover, 1978, p. vii-viii). Foucault also stressed the importance of other categories in Greek moral evaluation

of sexual behaviour, especially a general praise of moderation (*enkrateia*) and sexual abstinence (Foucault, 2010, p. 28-32; 47-49).⁶

In the case of Roman homoerotic practices, authors such as Paul Veyne (1991, p. 111-119), Eva Cantarella (2016), and Craig A. Williams (2010) demonstrated that the Romans accepted male same-sex intercourse as a legitimate practice, provided, however, that some protocols concerning “masculine behaviour” were observed. Williams specifies some important protocols whose transgression could lead to legal or moral consequences, such as the need for a “self-respecting Roman” citizen to play the penetrative (“active”) role in sexual acts in general, and the fact that, apart from his wife, a freeborn Roman should engage in sexual acts only with partners from a lesser social status, such as slaves and prostitutes. The Greek practice of pederasty was generally deemed by the Romans to be a *stuprum*, that is, an illicit sexual conduct (Williams, 2010, p. 18-19; 67-68; Cantarella, 2016, p. 129-138).

Since the studies of Dover, Foucault, Veyne and others, scholars have discouraged the use of the terms “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” to describe ancient realities, because, besides having no precise correspondence in the ancient languages, these words are indissociably linked to a modern conception of sexuality, with its particular emphasis on the sex/gender of the object of desire, having also a strong identitary dimension in the present (Halperin, 1990, p. 5-7; Halperin, Winkler and Zeitlin, 1990; Ackerman, 2005, p. 4-11). Some authors, therefore, avoid the terms altogether and

⁶ This scholarly consensus is not free of relevant criticisms (Skinner, 2014, p. 8-12). Authors such as Eva Cantarella (2016, p. 44-45) and James Davidson (2001; 2008, p. 120-121; 2009, p. 353) question the idea that legitimate male same-sex intercourse in Ancient Greece required no penetration and believe there was probably no such convention (see Skinner, 2014, p. 91). Davidson also questions the high “sexualization” of Greek homosexual love as presented by Dover and others, emphasizing that homoerotic relations included expressions of romantic love as well (2001; 2008, p. 101-121; 2009, p. 353). He supports the existence of an ideal of lifelong male “homosexual” relationships and downplays the notion of age asymmetry usually linked to Greek homoerotic male relations, highlighting that age asymmetry was often higher among heterosexual couples (2008, p. 68-71; 2009, p. 353-355; for criticisms of Davidson’s views, see Skinner, 2014, p. 12).

prefer alternatives such as “homoerotic practices” and “homoeroticism” instead (Nissinen, 1998, p. 16-18), although the term “erotic” bears some problematic meanings as well, having acquired a sexual connotation to modern readers (Davidson, 2008, p. 36-37).⁷ For lack of better words, we shall use the expressions “same-sex love,” “homoerotic practices” and “homoeroticism” interchangeably in this paper, but the reader must be aware that they are heuristically applied to denote a wide range of same-sex male relations, from “romantic” love to sexual interactions.

Zoroastrianism and Homoeroticism

Most scholars agree that the Achaemenid Persians were “Zoroastrians,” following a dualist religion whose supreme creator is the god Ahura Mazda (Skjærvø, 2014). Early Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion known mainly through its sacred text, the *Avesta*, which was probably composed between the second millennium BCE and the first half of the first millennium BCE and which was (likely) transmitted orally until it was finally written down in the 7th century CE under the Sasanians (Skjærvø, 2004; 2014, p. 175-176; see however Kellens, 2021, p. 1212). Nonetheless, some scholars have raised doubts about the nature of Achaemenid Zoroastrianism and its identity with the practices and rules known from the *Avesta* (Garrison, 2011; Skjærvø, 2014, p. 181-183). The controversy has focused on the lack of direct quotations between the Achaemenid and Avestan texts (Waters, 2014, p. 151-156), the fact that we do not know exactly how the Avestan corpus looked like at the time of the Achaemenids (Henkelman, 2008, p. 10; Skjærvø, 2014, p. 182), the

⁷Studies of ancient sexuality constantly oppose two main theoretical positions. The “constructionists,” such as Foucault and Halperin, believe homosexuality is a modern creation, whereas “essentialists” believe homosexuality has always existed, even if the name and concept for this phenomenon did not. Constructionists deny that Greeks thought some people were naturally born homosexuals or heterosexuals, whereas essentialists think ancient authors were quite aware of it. There is no easy way out of this debate. Davidson has proposed a “soft constructionism,” which sees culture as framing and shaping realities rather than creating them (Davidson, 2009, p. 364-365).

evidence for State-sponsored cults of non-Zoroastrian deities in the Achaemenid Heartland (Henkelman, 2008, p. 58), and other minor inconsistencies (Skjærvø, 2014, p. 182). In any case, and even if they do not “directly” quote one another, the Old Persian Inscriptions and the *Avesta* have several relevant concepts in common, as well as strikingly similar formulas. Such fact cannot be easily overlooked (Skjærvø, 2014, p. 177; Kellens, 2021).

The Young Avestan Videvdad and the Pahlavi Zoroastrian texts condemn anal intercourse between adult men, consensual and non-consensual alike, both the passive and the active partner being regarded as *daēuua* worshippers (8.26-32; Darmesteter; Peterson, 1898, p. 73-74; Skjærvø, 2012; Moazami, 2014, p. 237-239). This reproach is linked to the Zoroastrian dualist perception of the world as reflecting the constant state of war between Ahura-Mazda, the god of good, and Angra Mainyu, the god of evil. In this duel, mankind must contribute to the overcoming of evil through the renewal of life. The barrenness of male same-sex intercourse is therefore the likely reason why it was seen as a punishable sin in the Zoroastrian tradition (Skjærvø, 2012).⁸

Despite the condemnation of male same-sex intercourse in the Videvdad, classical sources insisted that some form of it was accepted among Persians at the time of the Achaemenids and even later. This contradiction was noticed by Voltaire, who could not believe Sextus Empiricus’ description of homoeroticism in Persia, since “(...) the laws of Zoroaster, which he did not know, are undeniable testimonies that this vice was never commended by the Persians” (Voltaire, 1878, p. 181-182).⁹ Scholars have tried to solve this apparent contradiction by proposing that Zoroastrianism and Indo-Iranian traditions coexisted at the time of the Achaemenids, with the former overcoming the latter at some point (Sergent, 1996, p. 521). However, Zoroastrianism was a very ancient Iranian

⁸Dershowitz postulates that the Videvdad could have influenced the prohibition of sodomy in the Holiness Code (Lev. 18; 20) during the Achaemenid Period (2017, p. 524-525).

⁹ The translations from modern authors are ours.

tradition, and the idea of a radical change provoked by the prophet Zoroaster is highly questionable (Skjærvø, 2014, p. 181). Thus, if we are to believe the evidence from Western sources, we must conclude that the condemnation of male same-sex intercourse found in the *Avesta* was possibly not yet widespread, entirely mandatory, or known in Achaemenid Persia – and the exact answers to why and how this happened are yet to be found.

Sources

The acceptance of male homoerotic relations in Achaemenid Persia¹⁰ is attested in Greek and Roman sources (Table 1). The nature of the evidence available to us is undeniably challenging, since Greek descriptions of Persia were instrumental in the legitimization of the rising Athenian Empire after the Greco-Persian Wars (490-480/79 BCE), as scholars have demonstrated. The negative representation of the barbarian “Other,” Persia (Hartog, 1980, p. 328-345), provided the Athenians with a justification for the continued mobilization of the League of Delos against the Achaemenids, achieved through the growing subjugation of Athens’ allied *poleis* (Hall, 1989, p. 59). Evidence from Attic drama, Greek historiography, and vase paintings (Miller, 2011, p. 123-153), with its derogatory image of “Asia”, seem to corroborate the existence of a general hostility towards Persia in Classical Athens. The same hostile attitude persisted in Hellenistic and Latin sources, when the Arsacids and Sasanians threatened Roman hegemony (Lerouge, 2007).

However, recent studies have mitigated the stark polarity drawn between Athens and Persia in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, providing a more nuanced image of their spheres of contact (Miller, 1997; Vlassopoulos, 2013). Additionally, scholars have shown that some Greek authors such as Herodotus were critical of Athenian imperialism, and that their works should not be simply read as Athenian “propaganda” (Payen, 1997; Gruen, 2011). Finally, considering the historical context of each Greek author, we should be

¹⁰ The table also includes descriptions of Arsacid Parthians and Sasanian Persians.

careful not to read anachronistically some descriptions of Persia as *a priori* negative, especially in the case of male homoerotic practices, which were accepted among Greeks, according to certain rules.

Table 1: Textual Sources on Persian Homoeroticism

Sources	Excerpt	Date	Information
Herodotus	Hdt. 1.135	5 th c. BCE	Persians allegedly borrowed the practice of pederasty from Greeks.
“P” - Hellenica Oxyrhynchia	<i>Hell. Oxy.</i> 21.4	4 th c. BCE	A rumour that the Spartan king Agesilaus was in love with Megabates.
Xenophon	<i>X. Hell.</i> 4.1.6; 28	4 th c. BCE	An elusive passage concerning Agesilaus’ affection for Megabates,

			Spithridates’ son. ¹¹
	X. <i>Hell.</i> 4.1.39-40	4 th c. BCE	It is said that the exiled son of a Persian satrap, Pharnabazus, was in love with an “Athenian” boy. ¹²
	X. <i>Ages.</i> 5.4-6	4 th c. BCE	It is said that Agesilaus loved Megabates.
	X. <i>Cyr.</i> 1.4.27-28; 8.4.26-27	4 th c. BCE	A love story between Cyrus the Great and a Median admirer, Artabazus.

¹¹ See Kuhrt (2010, p. 376; 869-870).

¹² Bresson (2002) and Roy (2020) proposed an alternative reading for this passage.

	X. <i>Cyr.</i> 2.2.28	4 th c. BCE	Cyrus' the Great lieutenant Sambaulas is described as having an ugly "lover."
	X. <i>An.</i> 2.6	4 th c. BCE	It is said that Menon of Thessaly had a Persian favourite, Ariaeus, commander of Cyrus' the Younger non-Greek troops.
Plato	Pl. <i>Smp.</i> 182b-182c	4 th c. BCE	It is said that pederasty was not tolerated in the Greek <i>poleis</i> "under the sway of the barbarians."

Plutarch	Plut. <i>Ages.</i> 11.2; 5-7	1 st c. CE	Another description of the infatuation of the Spartan king Agesilaus with the Persian Megabates.
	Plut. <i>Ages.</i> 13	1 st c. CE	Pharnabazus’ son was in love with an Athenian boy.
	Plu. <i>De Herod.</i> 13	1 st -2 nd c. CE	Plutarch rebukes Herodotus’ claim that Persian pederasty was learnt from the Greeks, stating instead that “eunuchism” was a Persian institution.

	Plu. <i>Alex.</i> 67.4	1 st -2 nd c. CE	Alexander the Great publicly kisses the eunuch Bagoas.
Petronius	Petr. 119.20	1 st -2 nd c. CE	The excerpt seems to associate the practice of castration to Persian same-sex practices.
Q. Curtius Rufus	Curt. 6.5.22-23	1 st -2 nd c. CE	Bagoas, a eunuch, is described as a lover, first of Darius III then of Alexander the Great.
	Curt. 6.6.8	1 st -2 nd c. CE	Darius supposedly had a horde of eunuchs

			he had sexual relations with.
	Curt. 10.1.26	1 st -2 nd c. CE	The Persian noble Orxines is described as refusing to honor the eunuch Bagoas, saying it was not a “Persian custom” to associate with men.
Claudius Ptolemy	Ptol. <i>Tetr.</i> 2.3.64-65.	1 st -2 nd c. CE	Due to astrological influence, Ptolemy claims that some oriental peoples, including Persians and Parthians, are opposed to “association with

			<p>males.” This fact is contrasted with the alleged acceptance of homosexuality among Northern Europeans (2.3.62).</p>
<p>Dio Chrysostom</p>	<p>D. Chr. <i>Or.</i> 21.4-6</p>	<p>1st-2nd c. CE</p>	<p>It is claimed that Persians eunuchized boys due to their love for female beauty. By contrasting Persians with Greeks, the author says that boys and striplings do not often have associations among themselves.</p>

Aelian	Ael. VH. 12.1	2 nd -3 rd c. CE	A love story about Artaxerxes II and his eunuch Tiridates.
Athenaeus	Ath. 13.79.603a	2 nd c. CE	It is claimed that the Persians learned pederasty from the Greeks.
	Ath. 13.80.603a-b.	2 nd c. CE	We are presented to the narrative of Alexander the Great kissing the eunuch Bagoas in front of a crowd.
Sextus Empiricus	Sex. Emp. Pyr. 1.152; 3.199	2 nd -3 rd c. CE	The alleged acceptance of same-sex love in Persia is contrasted to its prohibition in Rome.

	Sex. Emp. <i>Pyr.</i> 3.199	2 nd -3 rd c. CE	The alleged acceptance of same-sex love among <i>Germani</i> (a Persian tribe?) is contrasted with its prohibition in Rome.
Diogenes Laertius	DL. 6.46	3 rd c. CE	Diogenes, the Cynic prevents a boy from dining with “satraps” (Persians?), possibly with a sexual connotation.
Eusebius	Eus. <i>PE.</i> 6.10.25-26	4 th c. CE	Following Bardaisan, it is said that “he who has sex with males” is regarded as

			shameful “from the Euphrates to the east as far as the Ocean,” contrasting it with the situation in Greece.
Ammianus Marcellinus	Amm. Marc. 23.6.76.	4th c. CE	It is said that Persians do not accept pederasty at all.

Early Sources

The first reference to Persian male homoeroticism in our sources is a general remark concerning the common Persian man. In the second half of the 5th century BCE, Herodotus illustrates Persian readiness to accept foreign customs with their adoption of Greek pederasty (1.135; see also Ath. 13.79.603a; Asheri, Llyod and Corcella, 2007, p. 170.¹³ This description could not possibly raise suspicions of Greek defamation based on a general hostility towards Persia, since both Herodotus and his (presumably) Athenian audience (Asheri, Llyod and Corcella, 2007, p. 1-5) did not reprove such practice.¹⁴

¹³ See also *Or. Sib.* 3.596–600 (Williams, 2010, p. 308).

¹⁴ *Pace* Gruen (2010, p. 74; 2011, p. 31); also see the discussion in Roisman (2014, p. 405-406); Lenfant (2019, p. 26-27). While Plutarch provided an alternative theory to the origin of Persian homoerotic practices in his attack on Herodotus’ *History*, as we will see below (*De Herod.* 13), he nevertheless accepted its existence.

Xenophon, who served as a mercenary under Cyrus the Younger (5th-4th century BCE), also reports homoerotic relations involving Persian men in several romantic narratives. In his *Cyropaedia*, a political treatise that was probably not intended to be read as a piece of historical work (Gruen, 2011, p. 54), Xenophon's Cyrus makes a joke about his lieutenant Sambaulas, who had adopted "the Greek way", having a favourite boyfriend (*Cyr.* 2.2.28). While the whole passage is satirical,¹⁵ it alludes to romantic conceptions of a chaste "true love between men" (Gera, 1993, p. 166). It is also suggestively close to Herodotus' theory of a Greek origin for Persian pederasty, for the story is set in the idealized early years of the Persian Empire. There is not the slightest sign of contempt for Asia in this passage (Gruen, 2011, p. 53) and even if the narrative is fictitious, it seems that Xenophon and his audience did not doubt the custom of male homoerotic relations among early Persians.¹⁶

Xenophon's object of admiration, Cyrus the Great, is also the protagonist of two homoerotic episodes in the *Cyropaedia*, albeit here the *erastes* is a Median nobleman. The first episode involves Cyrus' early life and seems to idealize Persian homoeroticism in the form of Greek homosexual courtship. While the young Cyrus said goodbye to his relatives – so the story goes –, kissing them on the mouth, following "the Persian way,"¹⁷ a Median admirer came to him and pretended to be his kin in order to receive a kiss (*Cyr.* 1.4.27-28). After Cyrus kissed him, the clearly infatuated man asked for more kisses on different grounds. As Cyrus questioned his last attempt, he complained that:

'(...) even the time it takes me to wink seems an eternity to me, because during that time I do not see you, who are handsome (...).' Then Cyrus laughed

¹⁵ Sambaulas' lover was mocked for being hairy and ugly.

¹⁶ Sergent (1996, p. 520-524) considered this story as proof of Persian homoerotic behaviour, romantic or sexual, but scholars do not generally agree with this view (Pontier, 2012, p. 621, n. 35).

¹⁷ Historians usually accept the historicity of this alleged custom (Hdt 1.133-134; Briant, 1988, p. 72-73; 1996, p. 235; 321; Kuhrt, 2010, p. 624; see, however, Pontier, 2012).

through his tears and bade him go and be of good cheer, for in a little while he would come back to them, so that he might soon look at him – without winking, if he chose (Xen. Cyr. 1.4.27-28; translated by Miller, 1914: 73-75)

Later, in Cyr. 8.4.26-27, the same Median noble, now named Artabazus, is jealous of Cyrus' gift to a Persian commander: a kiss (Pontier, 2012, p. 623-634).

While these passages are undeniably homoerotic, it is true that both episodes, as well as the whole *Cyropaedia* reflect a very Hellenized view of Achaemenid Persia (Tatum, 1989, p. 174; Gera, 1993, p. 134-135)¹⁸ and likely represent a literary creation. It is nevertheless remarkable that Xenophon, who had some firsthand knowledge of the Persians and their empire at the time of Cyrus the Younger, decided to paint Cyrus the Great as an *eromenos*.

That he indeed considered male homoerotic relations to be accepted among Persians is further demonstrated by several concrete cases. Xenophon mentions in his *Anabasis* a homoerotic relation between the Thessalian Menon and the Persian commander Ariaeus (An. 2.6). Of course, this description could be slanderous, linked to Xenophon's general contempt for both men and his implicit indication that Menon had betrayed the Greeks after the Battle of Cunaxa (401 BCE), especially if we consider his account of an unconventional homoerotic relation between Menon, as an *erastes*, and Tharypas, an older and bearded man, as his *eromenos* (Brown, 1986, p. 389; Shahbazi, 2011; Davidson, 2009, p. 354-355). However, Xenophon also claims that Ariaeus was fond of men in general (Davidson, 2009, p. 356), and nothing indicates that the author reproved homoerotic love *per se* (Hindley, 1999; *pace* Cantarella, 2016, p. 89-92). Additionally, Xenophon tells us that Pharnabazus' son with Parapita (unnamed), being a friend of the Spartan king Agesilaus and an exile, was helped by Agesilaus in his courtship of an "Athenian boy"¹⁹ with whom he was in love (*Hell.*

¹⁸ See, however, Tuplin (1994, p. 145-146).

¹⁹ Or a Spartan named *Athenaios* (Bresson, 2002; Roy, 2020).

4.1.40; Davidson, 2008, p. 342-343; Vlassopoulos, 2013, p. 131-132). Agesilaus is also described as being in love with a Persian boy, Megabates, son of Spithradates, in an episode in which his restraint and moderation (*enkrateia*) prevent him from greeting the Persian with a kiss on the mouth (Xen. *Ag.* 5.45).²⁰ Even if we are not told of Megabates's feelings towards Agesilaus, it is at least possible that his father Spithradates was using the ambiguity of the "Persian kiss" to press his political advantage by having his son as Agesilaus' *eromenos* (Hindley, 1994, p. 663; Davidson, 2008, p. 341-342; Pontier, 2012, p. 617-618).

Our earliest evidence, therefore, points to the acceptance of homoerotic relations among Persians, at least from what Herodotus and Xenophon could grasp from their eastern sources or empirical knowledge obtained mainly from easterners living in Greece or in the western provinces. It should be noted that plausible historical examples often involve a Persian and a Greek, and not two Persian men.²¹

One piece of contrary evidence deserves to be briefly addressed. Plato's Pausanias declares that it is "shameful" to "gratify the lovers" in Ionia and other regions that "live under the sway of the barbarians" (i.e., the Persians). This reproach, by its turn, is explained as a way of avoiding rebellious actions against the standing tyrannies (*Sym.* 182b-182c). Insofar as there is truth in this statement, considering there are known instances of Persians favoring democracies instead of tyrannies in Asia Minor (*Hdt.* 6.43), and how suspiciously it echoes Athenian democratic ideology (Skinner, 2014, p. 145), this would only be a pragmatic measure aimed specifically at Asian Greeks (Tuplin, 2018, p. 591, n. 47). Besides, the alleged reproach is not directed against homoeroticism generally, but against one particular behavior of the *eromenos*.

²⁰ See X. *Hell.* 4.1.6; 28; *Hell. Oxy.* 21.4; Plut. *Ag.* 11.2; 5-7; Max. *Tyr.* 19.5; See also Foucault (2010, p. 28-29).

²¹Diogenes Laertius' account of the life of Diogenes the Cynic has the philosopher preventing a boy from "dining with the satraps," probably having a sexual connotation (*Diog.* 6.46).

Finally, it should also be noted that the famous *Eurymedon Oinochoe* (5th century BCE), seen sometimes as a representation of a Persian about to be sodomized by a Greek after the Battle of Eurymedon (Dover, 1978, p. 105; Cohen, 1991, p. 184; Root, 2010, p. 91-92; Miller, 2011, p. 136) and regularly interpreted as an allegory of “Greek manliness”, as opposed to “barbarian effeminacy” (Wenghofer, 2014, p. 533-534), is actually not unequivocally accepted as a portrayal of a Persian (Smith, 1999; Gruen, 2011, p. 42-44). Its interpretations vary widely, with some stating that it has nothing to do with domination and penetration, but rather with a humorous representation of a sexually insatiable *katapugon* (Davidson, 1998, p. 169-171; 180-182); and others claiming that the scene could have evoked the very tragic reality of wartime sexual violence, with forced penetration being used as a weapon (Arafat, 2002, p. 101-104; Llewellyn-Jones, 2017).

Late Sources

Sextus Empiricus (late 2nd century CE) is our main gate to the teachings of the Pyrrhonist school. He also believed that the “Persians” had the habit of “sexual intercourse between males.” In his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, he mentions Persia when explaining Aenesidemus’ “tenth mode,” that is, his tenth argument in favor of the suspension of judgment (*epokhe*), which concerned the diversity of habits, customs, and laws among peoples. In one example, the Persian “habit” of *arrenomixia* (i.e., “sex with males”) is contrasted with its prohibition under the Roman law (*Pyr.* 1.152). Further in the *Outlines*, Sextus reiterates that the *Germani* did not regard sexual intercourse between males as shameful (*Pyr.* 3.199). *Germani* have been variously interpreted as a particular Persian tribe (Bury, 1933, p. 460, see Hdt. 1.125) or merely the “Germanic tribes” from northern Europe (Bouché-Leclercq, 1899, p. 340-341, n. 2). Writing at the later time of the Arsacids,²² it is unlikely that Sextus drew this information from first-hand sources. This notion more likely came from the

²² Classical authors often conflated the Iranian Arsacids with the Achaemenid Persians (Lerouge, 2007, p. 149-165).

classical tradition, since he seemingly reproduced at least some of Aenesidemus own examples (ca. 1st century BCE).²³

On the other hand, Claudius Ptolemy (2nd century CE) says in his astrological treatise *Tetrabiblos* that the easterners, including Parthians and Persians, despised “associations” with males. According to his thought, this custom was rather linked to the northern Europeans (*Tetr.* 2.3.62; 64-65; see Bouché-Leclercq, 1899, p. 340-341, n. 2).²⁴ Dio Chrysostom (1st–2nd century CE) claimed that the Persian striplings and boys did not often wrestle naked in the gymnasia and did not have “much” homoerotic associations with one another, being more inclined to the eunuch’s “feminine” beauty (*Or.* 21.4-6). During the late Roman Empire, Ammianus Marcellinus, “a Greek and a soldier” who had fought alongside the emperor Julian against the Sasanians, implicitly “corrects” Herodotus’ claim (Devillers, 2002, p. 60) that pederasty was acceptable in Persia (23.6.76). He is corroborated, as it seems, by Eusebius’ (4th century CE) remark that being an *arsenokoites* was regarded as shameful in the East (PE 6.10.25-26; after Bardaisan, ca. 2nd–3rd centuries CE; see Bouché-Leclercq, 1899, p. 342). In these cases, we are probably dealing with a first-hand knowledge of Zoroastrian prohibition of male same-sex during the time of the Arsacids and Sasanians.

Eunuchs and Homoeroticism in Achaemenid Persia

In later authors, court eunuchs are prominently depicted as homoerotic lovers of Persian kings (Briant, 1996, p. 280). Eunuch, from the Greek *eunoûkhos* (Akk. *ša-rēši*, “he of the head”), was

²³ Cf. Bury (1933, p. xlii); Annas & Barnes (2000, p. xv). See, however, Machuca (2008, p. 39-40). Maybe this idea could be related to the tradition of ascribing the practice of “eunuchizing” to Iranians (D. Chr. *Or.* 21.4-6; Claudian, *Against Eutropius* 1.342-345; also see Tougher, 2013, p. 50; 66).

²⁴ Ptolemy thought some men were naturally inclined to “association with males” (*Tetr.* 4.5).

likely the designation of castrated men that usually held important positions in the Assyrian and Achaemenid courts.²⁵

The sexual role of castrated men in Persia is a recurrent *cliché* of the classical sources. In the Neronian Age, Petronius' *Satyricon* describes the castration of boys as the "custom of Persians" and associates it with sexual desire (119.20). Later, Plutarch questions Herodotus' view of Persian pederasty as a Greek borrowing by saying the Persians had known eunuchs a long time before reaching the Aegean (*De Herod.* 13). He therefore implies that the institution of eunuchs was tied to male homoerotic sex. Curtius Rufus' history of Alexander reports the existence of numerous eunuchs that allegedly served as sexual partners of Darius III (336-330 BCE), comparing them to the royal concubines (6.6.8).

Classical sources name two eunuchs as "homosexual" lovers of Achaemenid kings. A certain Tiridates is described by Aelian (2nd century CE) as the favourite of Artaxerxes II (Guyot, 1980, p. 228). This story is part of a larger romance involving Aspasia, a concubine first of Cyrus the Younger, then of Artaxerxes II.²⁶ Scholars believe that in his description of Aspasia Aelian probably consulted Deinon (4th century BCE), a source he shares with Plutarch's *Life of Artaxerxes*. However, Plutarch does not mention Tiridates or the entire Aspasia novel, which seems to spring from a folkloric motive. The story is apparently instrumental in reinforcing Aspasia's

²⁵Some authors have proposed that not every dignitary who was called eunuch should be considered a castrated, but that this designation could be used for non-castrated officials as well (Oppenheim, 1973; Briant, 1996, p. 285-288; Pirngruber, 2011). However, this hypothesis is not widely accepted (Tougher, 2008, p. 1-35; Lenfant, 2012, p. 281-282; Llewellyn-Jones, 2013, p. 38-39; Peled, 2016, p. 211-235; Groß, 2020, p. 255-257). Scholars still discuss which Old Persian and Elamite words were equivalent to Akk. *ša-rēši*, likely OP: *vaçabara*; AB: *ustarbaru*; AE: *lipte kutira* (Jursa, 2011, p. 168; Waters, 2017, p. 41-44). The etymology of *ša-rēši* is debated (Frazer, 2022). Scholars generally believe *ša-rēši* could mean eunuch at least in the Assyrian dialect and from the Middle Assyrian Period on (Brinkman, 1968, p. 309-311).

²⁶ According to Aelian, Aspasia comforted Artaxerxes after the passing of Tiridates by coming regularly to the monarch's chamber dressed in the eunuch's clothes (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002, p. 35).

Greekness as contrasted with Asian customs (Lenfant, 2011, p. 170-171), and therefore should be read cautiously.

A eunuch named Bagoas is better known to us, for he is described as the favourite not only of the Persian king Darius III, but also of Alexander the Great. Once thought to be an invention of Dicaearchus (late 4th century BCE) in an alleged effort to denounce Alexander's gradual degeneration, it is now out of question that Bagoas was a historical figure (Badian, 1958, p. 153; Briant, 2015, p. 349). Three sources mention this eunuch Bagoas. Two of them, Plutarch and Athenaeus (who quotes Dicaearchus) tell us that Alexander publicly kissed Bagoas during a contest (Plut. *Alex.* 67.4; Ath. 13.79-80), but they do not say anything about Bagoas and Darius III. Although Curtius Rufus does not mention the incident with the kiss, he introduces Bagoas through the story in which Nabarzanes offers him to Alexander to buy his safety after the death of Darius III (Curt. 6. 5. 22-23; Badian, 1958, p. 144-145). In this passage, Curtius remarks that Bagoas had formerly been the Persian king's favourite (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002, p. 35). In another passage, Curtius reports that the satrap Orxines attacked Bagoas, saying that male same-sex intercourse was not a Persian custom (10.1.26).

While Curtius' claim that Darius III and Bagoas had a homoerotic relationship is not entirely unbelievable, Orxines' speech condemning it is most likely a literary creation. It probably reflects the concerns of Curtius' own historical context, possibly a projection of contempt for Roman court eunuchs (Briant, 2015, p. 353; Williams, 2010, p. 157; Tougher, 2013, p. 68; 2015, p. 152, n. 17; 2021, p. 47-48).

The idea of eunuchs as (passive) sexual partners is perhaps influenced by Greek and Roman conceptions about castration, gender, and sexuality. Besides, as eunuchs in the Roman world were often slaves, they would be "fit" for passive homoerotic intercourse. This would explain the late stories about sexual relations or romantic love of Achaemenid kings for their eunuchs, usually with a more negative tone (Lenfant, 2012, p. 275, n. 94; p. 428-438; p. 438, n.

2).²⁷ But there is also some indirect evidence to indicate that earlier authors also thought eunuchs were used as sexual slaves in the empire or assumed the position of a passive male homoerotic partner. Herodotus refers twice to Greek boys being selected to be castrated by their handsomeness, once in the account of the suppression of the Ionian Revolt (Hdt. 6.32) and afterward in the account of Hermotimos' castration by the Greek Panionios (Hdt. 8:105; see Tougher, 2013). In Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, two eunuchs from a Persian delegation are described as actually two disguised Athenians. One of them, Cleisthenes, is mocked by his effeminacy and described as a *kinaidos* (*Ach.* 117-112; Lenfant, 2014, p. 427). Many of Ctesias' eunuchs are associated with feminine attributes (Guyot, 1980, p. 37-42). By this association it was thought that "the eunuchs behave sexually like a woman, i.e., are passive homosexuals" (Guyot, 1980, p. 40).²⁸

Overall, it is questionable whether Greek and Roman perceptions of eunuchs reflected Near Eastern realities and ideas. While Greek and Roman sources think of eunuchs as effeminate and describe their sexuality in terms of homoeroticism, it seems that, in Assyria at least, eunuchs were ascribed masculine attributes (Grayson, 1995, p. 97; N'Shea, 2016; 2018; Peled, 2016, p. 290). Since the Persian institution was much likely a Mesopotamian heritage (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002, p. 22) and considering the important role eunuchs played in the Achaemenid society, it is possible that the Persians did not differ considerably from the Assyrians in this respect (Guyot, 1980, p. 62; see, however, Madreiter and Schnegg, 2021, p. 1132-1133).

Origins of Achaemenid Homoeroticism

As in the case of Greek Homoeroticism, it is possible that the Persian one sprung originally from an Indo-European "institution" of ritual initiation that involved pederasty. This thesis was developed by

²⁷ See, however, Llewellyn-Jones (2002, p. 35).

²⁸ Also, see Cohen (1991, p. 189).

authors such as Jan Bremmer (1980) and Bernard Sergent (1996).²⁹ Sergent described a sort of pre-historic ritual marking the entry of young boys into adulthood through insemination by an older member of the group. Sergent thought this was the origin for the specific manifestation of “Greek Love” in the Archaic and Classical Greek World. In the case of the sources for Persian pederasty (which he believed were not “explicit” enough), Sergent argued that they probably reflected a heritage the Persians shared with the Greeks (Sergent, 1996, p. 519).

This theory was criticized on several grounds (Dover, 1978, p. 205-206; Lear, 2014, p. 118-119), and its frequent anthropological comparisons with the initiatory practices from some groups in Papua New Guinea (Bremmer, 1980, p. 280) have not been widely accepted. Greek homoeroticism was public and monumental, whereas other insemination rites are closed and secret (Davidson, 2008, p. 507-508). A common Indo-European background for a practice of homosexual formal troth-plighting, attested among peoples such as the Celts, has also been proposed (Davidson, 2008, p. 508-516; 2009, p. 355). However, since modern scholars are generally sceptical towards the idea of “Indo-European institutions” (Davidson, 2008, p. 514), this remains a pure speculation.

From a non-essentialist perspective, the idea of a Greek influence over Persian customs, as mentioned by Herodotus, could theoretically bear some truth. Although homoeroticism is indeed “universal” (Sergent, 1996, p. 520), its acceptance and some of its conventions surely changed over time, and according to inter-cultural relations, as happens even today. The fact that we are ill-informed about homoerotic relations between Persian men and men outside the empire’s Western regions may obviously derive from the nature of our sources. In any case, one wonders if the cultural atmosphere of the Western provinces did not interfere in how Persians manifested homoerotic love.

²⁹ For an overview, see Davidson (2008, p. 503-504) and Lear (2014, p. 104).

Conclusion

Early Greek sources (5th-4th century BCE) indicate that Persian men normally engaged in homoerotic relations (sexual and/or romantic) during the Achaemenid Period not only with Greek men, but probably with other Persian and non-Greek men too. Persian male homoerotic relations are usually “Hellenized” in Greek descriptions, but there are hints they were not precisely analogous to Greek pederasty. No concrete cases of male same-sex relations between Persians are mentioned. This could mean that only non-Persians and slaves could ideally assume certain positions in homoerotic sex or in a romantic relationship.³⁰ Ariaeus is described as having many male lovers, and this possibly falls short of the mark of Greek *enkrateia* (Davidson, 2008, p. 363).³¹ Persians themselves had little to say about same-sex love, which means their homoerotic ideals were not monumentalized like the Greek ones. Finally, the gestures and practices of Greek love were alien to the Persians, what is made clear, for instance, with the ambiguity of the “Persian kiss.”

All in all, there is no evidence that every sort of homoerotic practice was regarded as shameful at this time. Later, possibly due to the growing influence of Zoroastrianism and the imposition of the rules contained in the *Avesta*, male homoerotic relations seem to have been broadly and gradually banished. This prohibition may be reflected in some later sources.

The alleged relation of Achaemenid kings with eunuchs can only be labelled “homoerotic” once we fully understand the issue of the eunuch’s “sex/gender.” Achaemenid eunuchs were important dignitaries in the royal court and were held to be trustworthy servants of the king, as in the Assyrian Empire. The role of eunuchs as passive “homosexual” partners could be an exaggeration, a product of Roman

³⁰ As in Rome. Note that Menon was Ariaeus *eromenos*, and an “Athenian” boy was the *eromenos* of Spithridates’ son. Megabates’ feelings towards Agesilaus, on the other hand, are not clear.

³¹ The description of the Persian Ariaeus by Xenophon implies he was seen as mainly interested in men (Davidson, 2008, p. 455; see Cohen, 1991, p. 171-202).

and Hellenistic realities (and anxieties) rather than a widespread practice.³²

Achaemenid same-sex love could have its roots in common practices among other Indo-European speaking groups, but this idea is highly conjectural. Anyway, it is possible that Greek conceptions about love between men could have influenced how Persians in the empire's Western parts behaved and manifested their love.

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³² Moreover, eunuchs were probably not always ethnic Persians.

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