⁂ Hydration, Ancient Persian-Style

Jake Nabel (*Penn State University*)

Hydration seems basic, simple, and fundamental. Drinking water is a universal human need. It cuts across cultures, regions, and religions, humbling people of all stations before thirst. In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly declared access to clean water to be "a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights." Not a single nation voted against the resolution (though 41 abstained).[1]

As with every resource, however, the provision of water is a matter of power. Still fresh in American memory is the 2014 crisis in Flint, Michigan, where a cost-cutting initiative to switch water sources (spearheaded, in part, by unelected emergency managers) sprayed water "dark as coffee" through the city's aging pipes, afflicting its residents with lead poisoning and other ailments. Elsewhere in the

1- United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/64/292.

United States and throughout the world, conflicts over water, some violent, are increasing while reserves diminish. Even a trip to the supermarket reveals the social stratification behind the distribution and packaging of this essential resource: a confounding array of variably-priced brands greets the thirsty consumer, who pays several hundred times the cost of tap water for a slickly-marketed bottle of humble H_2O.[2]

In ancient Persia, too, water was connected to politics. The kings that ruled the Iranian plateau in pre-Islamic times used water management as a tool to build and preserve their empires. Many forms of evidence shed light on their beliefs and practices. Zoroastrian texts show the place of water in Persian religion. Archaeology uncovers irrigation systems and infrastructure. Contracts and law codes document the legal mechanisms that regulated water use for private enterprise and in the public interest. All life in ancient Persia depended on access to water, but access to water depended on the kings.[3]

In spite of all their power, though, even kings get thirsty. The rulers of Iran had to hydrate just like their subjects – but that is not to say that they met the need in the same way. A few pieces of ancient evidence preserve detailed information about the water that the Persian kings selected for their tables both at home and abroad. But there is a catch. These sources were not composed by the kings themselves, and they do not come from the Iranian plateau. They were written by Greeks and Romans outside of Persian territory. Their reliability is thus unclear: Mediterranean authors were key witnesses to Persian history, but their works preserve many half-truths (and not

2- On Flint's water crisis, see Hanna-Attisha 2018; Clark 2019 (quotation on 1). For conflicts related to water supply, see the "Water Conflict Chronology" dataset assembled in Pacific Institute 2019.

3- On water in Zoroastrianism, see Boyce 1979: 43–4; de Jong 1997: 101; Cama 2019. On archaeology and irrigation, see Soroush 2016. For water provisions in legal documents and law codes, see e.g. Avroman 1–2 for the Parthian period (Hackl et al. 2010: 2.467–76), and *The Book of a Thousand Judgments* for the Sasanians (Perikhanian 1997: 65, 95, 105, 201, 237, 239).

a few outright falsehoods) about the empires of the ancient Near East.

Right or wrong, the Greek traditions are at least specific. The earliest reports date to the Achaemenid era (c. 550–330 BCE). Several Greek authors of this period maintain that the Achaemenid kings only drank water from one particular source, and no other. This was the Choaspes river, known today as the Karkheh. From sources high in the Zagros mountains, the course of the Choaspes wound past the ancient city of Susa (modern Shush), one of the many places where the Persian kings took up residence. The king's household, the Greek sources say, would draw water from this river, boil it, and pour it into silver vessels for storage. Wherever the king went, this water went with him, sloshing about in rumbling wagons reserved exclusively for its transport.[4]

If the Greeks are right about this, then the Choaspes was surely the most well-traveled river in the ancient world. Its waters would have accompanied Cyrus the Great to Asia Minor in the west where his world empire began, and to Central Asia in the east where he met his end. In its silver vessels, the river would have trundled across the pontoon bridge of Darius I to refresh him as he chased Scythians around the Black Sea. It would have marched to Greece with Xerxes; perhaps he sipped it as he watched Athens burn. It would have fled across the Iranian plateau with Darius III, who may have downed it with thirsty gulps in his escape from the advancing armies of Alexander the Great. All this because no other water could be the king's beverage. Only the Choaspes would do.

What made the waters of the Choaspes the drink of kings? "A light and pleasant taste," according to one Greek source, though of course that does not seem like the whole story. It may be that the river enjoyed a reputation for salubriousness. A medical text in Babylonian

4- The two main Greek sources are Herodotus (1.188) and Ctesias (*FGrHist* 688 F 37; see Llewellyn-Jones / Robson 2010: 217 for translation). Related traditions are preserved in other fragmentary Greek historians; see Nabel 2019: 777 for sources.

that predates the Achaemenids enjoins sufferers of disease to drink from the river, which could be evidence of an old belief that its waters were thought to be therapeutic. Another view is that the Choaspes was important to Achaemenid religion, but no other source clarifies what its significance would have been. Medicine and religion were not completely separate spheres in ancient Persia, so perhaps both of these explanations have some merit. It is hard to say, because while the Greeks were convinced that the Achaemenids only drank from the Choaspes, they don't quite seem to have known why.[5]

The same uncertainty remained when Persia came under the sway of a new empire ruled by the Arsacids of Parthia (c. 248 BCE–224 CE), who drove the successors of Alexander the Great from the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia. While the Arsacids were taking over Iran, the Roman empire conquered Greece and absorbed not only its territory, but also its literary traditions about Persia. The Arsacids may or may not have considered themselves the successors of the Achaemenids, but there is no question that the Romans thought of them in this way. And one aspect of this Achaemenid inheritance – or so the Romans were convinced – was the royal habit of drinking exclusively from the Choaspes. The report appears in many Roman sources over the course of many centuries. The details vary. Some authors substituted Arsacids for Achaemenids, while others spoke in general terms of "the kings of the Persians." But the basic idea remained the same: the rulers of the vast empire beyond Rome's eastern border would hydrate only with the waters of the Choaspes.[6]

5- "Light and pleasant taste" comes from Ctesias (above, n.4). For the Babylonian medical incantation, see Farber 1990: 314–5 for text and translation, and Horowitz 1998: 304; Potts 1999: 28 for discussion. Potts shows that the *Ulaya* river mentioned in this text (cf. *Eulaeus* in Greek and Latin) is the pre-Achaemenid name for the river that was subsequently renamed the Choaspes (*Huwaspa* in Old Persian) under Persian rule. For explanations rooted in medicine and religion, see Briant 1994, *contra* Béquignon 1940; Lincoln 2012: 207–10.

6- On the Arsacid relationship to the Achaemenids, see Shayegan 2011; Nabel 2020. Primary sources for the Choaspes tradition in Roman literature are collected in Nabel 2019: 778 n.13.

It is again unclear whether these passages contain reliable ethnography or literary clichés. The Achaemenids counted southwestern Iran as their homeland, so the idea that they drank only from the Choaspes fits reasonably well with the region's geography. But the Arsacids hailed from the northeast, where Iran meets Central Asia. Perhaps they adopted the practice after conquering Susa and the surrounding region. It is at least as likely, however, that Roman authors simply reproduced a story that they found in earlier Greek literature about the drinking habits of the Persian kings. From a Roman viewpoint, the Arsacids ruled a continuation of the empire that had once belonged to the Achaemenids. Why assume, then, that their water supply would be different? Greek literature about Persia may have filled in the blanks where Roman knowledge about Parthia was deficient.[7]

If the Choaspes tradition says anything about Iranian rulers (and not just the Greeks and Romans who wrote about them), then it helps explain how the body of the king was transformed from a frail human frame into a totem of imperial power. The king embodied the might, sovereignty, and legitimacy of Persia's ancient empires. As such, every aspect of his corporeal existence was micro-managed and laboriously curated for political effect. His hair, his beard, his eyes, his feet and hands, his clothing, his furniture – all were meticulously cultivated by a large retinue of attendants, artisans, and courtiers who collectively worked to turn a mere man into a simulacrum of world rule. This intense concern with empire made flesh applied to the king's diet, as well, right down to the water that he drank. From this perspective, the Choaspes tradition makes sense. The kings didn't *have* to drink this river alone, of course. But the idea that they did nourished the mystique and exclusivity of kingship on which their empires depended.[8]

7- On Parthia in Roman literature, see Lerouge 2007; Wiesehöfer / Müller 2017.

8- On the body of the king in ancient Persia, see Llewellyn-Jones 2015. A classic study of kingship and corporeality is Kantorowicz 1957.

Even something as simple as water, then, was pressed into the service of the Persian kings. Water was a natural resource, but a political one too, re-inscribing social order even as it fulfilled the basic requirement of hydration. And while the reign of the Achaemenid, Arsacid, and Sasanian kings has long since come to an end, the ability of the powerful to manage water in their own interest has not. Water is rarely the focus of a culinary occasion. Like a table, or chairs, or plates, it is part of the backdrop to a meal, not the meal itself. But this basic resource is deceptive in its simplicity. In the eddying draughts of the Choaspes bottled in the Persian king's silver vessels, power flowed, every drop a reflection of the intimate relationship between political authority and resource management. The same waters circulate today, and the same forces shape their course.

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Preparing, serving, and consuming food can be political, as it was arranged in the royal banquet of the great kings. It could also be considered as a ritual, both in the frame of the greater ritual practices in the banquets for the gods, as well as according to a set of family costumes and gestures, which endures from one generation to the next. All these aspects have been one of the major human's activates during the history of the civilizations and have fascinated the scholars to investigate and decode the culinary customs of the peoples during the history. The contributions of this volume present a small collection of writings, which put focus on various aspects of culinary and dining practices in the Greater Iranian World from the ancient period to the contemporary religious feast of Sufi Orders in the Balkans. They aim to overview the recent developments in the field and discuss selected aspects of the rich variety of culinary practices.

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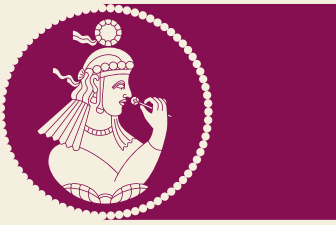


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Sultan Ġīyāṣ ad-Dīn Khaljī (r.1469-1500) supervises his cooks preparing condensed pudding (*Ḥabīṣ*, lit. "mixed") for him. *Neʿmatnāme-ye Nāṣeršāhī* ("Nāṣer Shah's Book of Delights"), Mandu, ca. 1505, 14 × 13 cm; I.O Islamic 149, f.115v., detail © The British Library (after Muqarnas Online 36, 1, 2019).