

Fake Prostration in Late Antique Literature and the Ambiguities of Domination

ABSTRACT Ancient Greek literature transmits two episodes in which a petitioner before a king performs a fake act of prostration. The deceiver creates the appearance of a submissive bow, but he actually executes a different gesture unrelated to court protocol—or so he tells himself. A parallel tradition in late antique Jewish literature deploys the same motif: A persecutorial ruler urges a Jewish martyr to perform a fake bow in order to create the illusion of idol worship. Jointly considering these three cases for the first time, this article interprets the collective fake bowing tradition as a late antique meditation on the theatrics of royal power and their ability to coopt resistance. This reading is guided by Lisa Wedeen's *Ambiguities of Domination*, which advances a theory of how autocratic regimes employ public ceremonies as instruments of social control. Wedeen argues that authoritarians stage spectacles that are widely regarded as preposterous nonsense by their producers and consumers, but that nevertheless prove effective disciplinary mechanisms by inculcating habits of submission. It is of no avail to privately dissent from the meaning of such ceremonials, as their power comes from the choreography of compliance, not the manufacture of belief. Applied to the fake prostration scenes of late antique literature, Wedeen's theory enjoins a critical view of the fake bow as a form of resistance to imperial domination. **KEYWORDS** Greek literature, royal spectacle, political theory, Sasanian Empire, Jewish literature, martyrdom

Ancient Greek literature contains two episodes in which a petitioner before a king performs a fake act of prostration. The deceiver creates the appearance of a submissive bow, but he actually executes a different gesture unrelated to court protocol—or so he tells himself. The first episode is set at the Achaemenid Persian court in the fourth century BCE, but it is first attested in the *Artaxerxes*

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of Plutarch (late first or early second century CE) and the *Varia historia* of Aelian (third century CE). The Theban envoy Ismenias, faced with the humiliating imperative of bowing before Artaxerxes, discretely drops his signet ring and stoops to pick it up, thereby pantomiming *proskynesis*, or ritual adoration.¹ The second episode appears only in the *Wars* of Procopius (sixth century CE). In Central Asia, the Hephthalite Huns entrap and imprison the army of the Sasanian King Peroz. They then offer a bargain: They will spare Peroz if he prostrates himself before the Hephthalite king in full view of both armies. Peroz agrees to perform the ritual—but only facing east, and only at dawn, when Zoroastrians would be bowing anyway to the rising sun. Ignorant of this religious practice, the Hephthalites mistake Peroz's quotidian sun salutation for a bow of submission, and Peroz marches away delighted to have duped his enemy.²

A parallel tradition, also featuring a dropped ring, is found in late antique Jewish literature on the Seven Maccabean Martyrs, also known as the Seven Brothers. The earliest attestations are in *Lamentations Rabbah* and the tractate *Gittin* in the Babylonian Talmud; several derivative medieval texts reproduce the story.³ A Jewish mother and her seven sons are hauled before a persecutorial ruler, who orders them to worship an idol. They all refuse, and the king tortures and executes them one by one until only the seventh and youngest brother remains. Here the ruler tries a different tack: He will toss his signet ring on the ground, and the boy can simply bend over and pick it up. The onlookers will mistakenly conclude that he has engaged in idol worship, but he will be innocent of the actual deed. The boy declines the gambit and is martyred.

The objective of this article is not only to connect these three scenes, which have never been jointly discussed in a single study, but also to interpret the collective fake bowing tradition as a late antique commentary on the theatrics of authoritarian ceremonials and how subjects may resist them. Geoffrey Greatrex

1. Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 22.4, in *Plutarchi: "Vitae Parallelae,"* ed. Konrat Ziegler and Hans Gärtner, 4 vols. (Teubner, 1993–2000), 3.1:341; Aelian, *Varia historia* 1.21, in *Claudii Aeliani: "Varia historia,"* ed. Mervin Dilts (Teubner, 1974), 8–9.

2. Procopius, *Wars* 1.3.19–21, in *Procopius Caesariensis Opera Omnia*, vol. 1, "*De Bellis*" *Libri I–IV*, ed. Jakob Haury and Gerhard Wirth (Saur, 2001), 13–14.

3. Lam. Rab. 1:16, sec. 50, trans. A. Cohen, *Midrash Rabbah: Lamentations* (Soncino Press, 1939), 131; b. Giṭ. 57b, ed. and trans. Adin Steinsaltz and Tzvi Hersch Weinreb, *Koren Talmud Bavli*, vol. 21, *Gittin* (Koren, 2015), 326; Lam. Zut. 31a, trans. Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Name of the Ruse: The Toss of a Ring to Save Life and Honor," in *Follow the Wise: Studies in Jewish History and Culture in Honor of Lee I. Levine*, ed. Zeev Weiss, Oded Irshai, Jodi Magness, and Seth Schwartz (Eisenbrauns, 2010), 25–36 at 27; S. Eli. (30) 28, trans. William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein, *Tanna Dēbe Eliyyahu = The Lore of the School of Elijah* (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), 372; Yalqut Shimoni 1019 (on which see my note 29). For versions of the story without the ring ruse, see my note 26.

and Henning Börm note the parallel between Plutarch and Procopius, but they do not cite or discuss Aelian's version.⁴ The comparison is worthwhile, because Plutarch and Aelian reach opposite conclusions about the efficacy of the fake bow as a form of resistance. In the field of Jewish studies, Shaye Cohen connects the ring ruse of the Seven Brothers tradition with the one in Plutarch and Aelian.⁵ Yet he overlooks the contemporary echo in Procopius, as do Greatrex and Börm. By Late Antiquity, fake prostration stories spanned literary traditions (Greek historiography and Jewish rabbinics) and imperial spheres (the Roman Mediterranean and Sasanian Iran). Whether or not these various authors were conscious of their shared motif, joint consideration of all the relevant passages permits a fuller reading of the fake-bowing scene as a meditation on the duplicitous optics of power.

Those optics are interpreted here through a political theory of how authoritarian regimes use public spectacles as instruments of social control. The lodestar is Lisa Wedeen's *Ambiguities of Domination*, a study of the Syrian state cult attached to the ruler Hafiz al-Asad that conscripted mass participation in rallies, festivals, and spectacles.⁶ Wedeen seeks to explain the political utility of this cult given the widespread though tacit sentiment among Syrians that its adulation of Asad was patently ridiculous and its public ceremonies empty trumpery. Her thesis is that the cult was a form of control based on compliance, not legitimacy. Its rituals forced Syrians to go through the motions of venerating their ruler, acting "as if" they believed in the rites that they were compelled to perform. In Wedeen's view, the instillation of such behavior through spectacles conferred distinct benefits upon the regime:

A politics of "as if," while it may appear irrational or even foolish at first glance, actually proves politically effective. It produces guidelines for acceptable speech and behavior; it defines and generalizes a specific type of national membership; it occasions the enforcement of obedience; it induces complicity by creating practices in which citizens are themselves "accomplices," upholding the norms constitutive of Asad's domination;

4. Geoffrey Greatrex, "Procopius and the Persian Wars" (PhD diss., Oxford University, 1994), 59; Geoffrey Greatrex, *Procopius of Caesarea: The Persian Wars. A Historical Commentary* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 63; Henning Börm, *Prokop und die Perser: Untersuchungen zu den römisch-sasanidischen Kontakten in der ausgehenden Spätantike* (Franz Steiner, 2007), 104n2.

5. Cohen, "Name of the Ruse."

6. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (University of Chicago Press, 1999). An issue of the journal *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 55, no. 1 (2022), has recently commemorated the book's twentieth anniversary with several essays on its reception and legacy.

it isolates Syrians from one another; and it clutters public space with monotonous slogans and empty gestures, which tire the minds and bodies of producers and consumers alike.⁷

The masquerade of state cult is hollow, but not pointless. Cultic activities discipline the populace by inculcating a political orthopraxy, and they pulverize resistance by bludgeoning critical thought with ubiquitous and wearisome sloganeering. Most importantly, the cult implicates citizens in the reproduction of Asadist domination. Through rote participation in rituals that treat the ruler as supremely powerful, Syrians make him so in reality, despite the absurdity of the charade.

Wedeen's theory of the Asadist case supports a reading of ancient literature's fake prostration scenes as rich dramatizations of the subject's unwitting implication in the reproduction of imperial power. Through this lens, the stories of Ismenias, Peroz, and the Seven Brothers exemplify how rulers cement their authority by ensnaring audiences in bad-faith performances at public spectacles. Such a reading is not inescapable, and Aelian's text especially enjoins serious consideration of the tactic as effectively subversive.⁸ Other accounts, though, undercut that assumption. Do fake bowers truly avoid, through their clandestine acts of resistance, the glorification of the ruler at whose feet they are compelled to kneel? Or, for all their cleverness, are they nonetheless accessories in a ritual intended to produce not legitimacy, but compliance? The fake bowing tradition invites consideration of this question, and Wedeen's work suggests that even those who attempt to subvert the meaning of authoritarian ceremonies can be coopted by them in the end.

The story of the Theban statesman Ismenias at the Persian court is the earliest fake-bowing story in both chronological setting and textual preservation. The historicity of the episode is difficult to establish. It is set during the reign of the Achaemenid King Artaxerxes II, who ruled from 405/4–359/8 BCE. Two Thebans by the name of Ismenias are known for this period. The usual scholarly assumption is that Ismenias the fake bower was the second of the two, and that he joined his compatriot Pelopidas on a mission to Artaxerxes in 367 BCE. Dominique Lenfant has recently proposed a different reconstruction: The story

7. Wedeen, *Ambiguities*, 6, cf. 19–20.

8. See below on Aelian, *Varia historia* 1.21, by way of James C. Scott, "Lisa Wedeen: Appreciations and Queries," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 55, no. 1 (2022): 36–39.

is about the first Ismenias, and his embassy was separate from Pelopidas's.⁹ In either case, the general backdrop to the episode is foreign relations during the late classical period, when the poleis of mainland Greece vied for Achaemenid support against their neighbors, despite the cultural antagonism (mostly of Greek manufacture) between the Greek and Persian worlds.

That antagonism produces the dilemma that Ismenias confronts in the Roman-era accounts of Plutarch and Aelian: Ismenias wants an audience with the king to transact his city's business, but to obtain that audience he must first perform *proskynēsis*, a humiliating, outrageous, and profane ritual from the Greek point of view. *Proskynēsis* was a gesture of adoration before the Achaemenid king. Its precise choreography (a blown kiss? taking a knee? full prostration flat on the ground?) is a matter of debate, but Greek authors imagined that it entailed a bow, and they also ascribed a religious dimension to the rite: *Proskynēsis* signified the total abasement of the subject and the exaltation of the Persian king as a god. They were wrong on this point, for the Persians did not regard the Achaemenid kings as gods, and *proskynēsis* communicated respect, not worship. All the same, *proskynēsis* as a nod to Achaemenid godhood became a common topos in Greek literature on Persia.¹⁰ The practice is best known from the Alexander historians, who describe fierce Greek and Macedonian resistance to the attempted introduction of the ritual at the Argead court.¹¹ No free Greek

9. The traditional view is represented in John Buckler, *The Theban Hegemony, 371–362 BC* (Harvard University Press, 1980), 135; Carsten Binder, *Plutarchs "Vita des Artaxerxes": Ein historischer Kommentar* (De Gruyter, 2008), 304–5; James Romm, *The Sacred Band: Three Hundred Greek Lovers Fighting to Save Greek Freedom* (Scribner, 2021), 157–58. Contrast Dominique Lenfant, "Isménias et les ambassadeurs de Thèbes à la cour perse," *Ktema* 36, no. 1 (2011): 331–47 at 334–43; Dominique Lenfant, "The Role of *Xenia* in Diplomatic Relations Between Greek Cities and the Persian Empire," in *Shaping Good Faith: Modes of Communication in Ancient Diplomacy*, ed. Francesco Mari and Christian Wendt (Franz Steiner, 2022), 81–93 at 87–88.

10. Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Eisenbrauns, 2002), 222–23; Robert Rollinger, "Herrscherkult bei Teispiden und Achämeniden. Realität oder Fiktion?," in *Studien zum vorhellenistischen und hellenistischen Herrscherkult*, ed. Linda-Marie Günther and Sonja Plischke (Verlag Antike, 2012), 11–54 at 23–40; Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *King and Court in Ancient Persia, 559 to 331 BCE* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 71–72.

11. Arrian, *Anabasis* 4.9.9–12.7, in *Flavius Arrianus*, vol. 1, *Alexandri Anabasis*, ed. A. Roos and Gerhard Wirth (Sauer, 2002), 191–97; Plutarch, *Alexander* 54–55 (Ziegler and Gärtner, *Plutarchi*, 2.2:224–27); Curtius 8.5.5–22, ed. and trans. John Rolfe, *Quintus Curtius: History of Alexander* (Loeb Classical Library, 1946), 2:274–80; Justin 12.7.1–3, in *Epitoma Historiarum Philippicarum Pompei Trogi*, ed. Otto Seel (Teubner, 1985), 112. For discussion, see A. B. Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander*, vol. 2, *Commentary on Books IV–V* (Clarendon Press, 1995), 68–90; Hugh Bowden, "On Kissing and Making Up: Court Protocol and Historiography in Alexander the Great's 'Experiment with *Proskynesis*,'" *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 56, no. 2 (2013): 55–77; Chiara Matarese, "Proskynēsis and the Gesture of the Kiss at Alexander's Court: The Creation of a New Élite," *Palamedes* 8 (2013): 75–86.

would voluntarily submit to such a custom or validate the laughable proposition that a mortal could be a god—and yet those who sought Persian assistance had to bow if they wanted an audience with the king.¹²

The challenge for a Greek ambassador to Persia was negotiating this dilemma, and Ismenias the Theban pioneered the ruse of the fake bow in an effort to have it both ways. Plutarch, cursorily, and Aelian, more amply, describe the scene as follows:¹³

Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 22.4:

Ismenias the Theban and Pelopidas (who had just triumphed at Leuctra) also approached the king (Artaxerxes). Pelopidas did nothing shameful, but when Ismenias was ordered to make obeisance, he threw down his signet ring on the ground in front of him. He then bent down and picked it up, creating the appearance of making obeisance.

Aelian, *Varia historia* 1.21:

I would not wish to cover up a deed of Ismenias the Theban that was at once clever and Hellenic. On an embassy for his homeland to the king of the Persians, he arrived and wanted to meet with the king about the business he had come to discuss. The chiliarch in charge of taking messages to the king and admitting petitioners said to him, “Not so fast, Theban foreigner.” (The chiliarch, whose name was Tithraustes, said this in Persian, using an interpreter.) “The Persians have a native custom that those who come into the presence of the king cannot speak with him until they make obeisance. So if you yourself wish to meet with him personally, it’s time for you to act in accordance with this custom. If you won’t make obeisance, the same business will be transacted through us in your stead.” So Ismenias said, “Lead on!” When he approached and came into the presence of the king, he removed the signet ring he happened to be wearing and surreptitiously tossed it at his feet. He quickly bent over, as if he were making obeisance, and picked it up again. He created the appearance of bowing to the Persian, but he did nothing to incur shame among the Greeks. And in fact he accomplished everything he wished, and there was nothing he failed to obtain from the king.

12. Nepos, *Conon* 3.3, in *Cornelii Nepotis: “Vitae cum Fragmentis,”* ed. Peter Marshall (Teubner, 1985), 32; Plutarch, *Themistocles* 27–28 (Ziegler and Gärtner, *Plutarchi*, 1.1:188–90); Aelian, *Varia historia* 1.21 (Dilts, *Claudii Aeliani*, 8–9).

13. Translations by author. Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 22.4 (Ziegler and Gärtner, *Plutarchi*, 3.1:341); Aelian, *Varia historia* 1.21 (Dilts, *Claudii Aeliani*, 8–9).

A close reading of the passages reveals a disjuncture between them. Plutarch sees a contrast in the approaches of Pelopidas and Ismenias to the *proskynēsis* dilemma. On the one hand, he writes (*men* in the Greek), Pelopidas did nothing shameful in front of Artaxerxes. Ismenias, on the other hand (*de*), *did* act shamefully by bowing, despite his use of the ring ploy in an attempt to mitigate the ritual's attendant disgrace. That attempt was unsuccessful, in Plutarch's view; the illusory appearance of bowing was just as dishonorable as the genuine article. The author's use of Ismenias as a foil for Pelopidas's virtue comes as little surprise. A proud Boeotian himself, Plutarch wrote an admiring biography of Pelopidas, whom he saw as a great, if incautious, warrior and statesman.¹⁴ Due to that admiration, perhaps, Plutarch avoids the obvious question that emerges from the vignette: If Pelopidas did not bow, how did he gain an audience with the king? The author is silent on that account, voicing only his displeasure with Ismenias's tactic.

If Plutarch looks askance at Ismenias's fake bow, however, Aelian offers a different assessment. He excerpts the episode for his *Varia historia*, a miscellany of historical anecdotes that often exhibits the author's fondness for Greek culture.¹⁵ Ismenias's fake bow made the cut as a quiet victory for Greece over Persia. For Aelian, the maneuver was "both clever and Hellenic." There was something characteristically Greek about the Theban's evasion of *proskynēsis*, that most degrading of Persian customs. Aelian also includes a detail that Plutarch omits. In his version, the Persian court offers Ismenias a workaround: If the ambassador does not wish to bow, the chiliarch can conduct the business on his behalf.¹⁶ Ismenias forgoes this option, however, and insists on meeting the king himself. Aelian does not explain why, but the implication may be that the ambassador will more effectively conduct his city's business in a face-to-face meeting with the king rather than by proxy. Thus Ismenias tries to gain the advantage of a personal audience with the king while abstaining from the ritual required

14. Plutarch, *Pelopidas* 2.5 (Ziegler and Gärtner, *Plutarchi*, 2.2:62); discussion in Aristoula Georgiadou, *Plutarch's "Pelopidas": A Historical and Philological Commentary* (Teubner, 1997), 8–14, 30–31; Heinz Gerd Ingenkamp, "Moralia in the Lives: The Charge of Rashness in *Pelopidas/Marcellus*," in *The Unity of Plutarch's Work*, ed. Anastasios Nikolaidis (De Gruyter, 2008), 263–76.

15. On the work and its literary moorings, see Scott J. DiGiulio, "Ποικίλα Ποικιλως: Situating Aelian's Miscellanistic Programs Between Greek and Roman Models of Variety in the Second Sophistic," *TAPA* 153, no. 1 (2023): 213–51 at 213–14 with n2 for further literature.

16. On the office of chiliarch in Achaemenid Persia, see most recently Wouter Henkelman, "Irdumartiya and the Chiliarchies: The Contemporaneity of the Persepolis Fortification and Treasury Archives and Its Implications," in *The Persian World and Beyond: Achaemenid and Arsacid Studies in Honour of Bruno Jacobs*, ed. Mark B. Garrison and Wouter Henkelman (Zaphon, 2023), 235–300 at 262–67.

to obtain that audience. In Aelian's view, he succeeds, thanks to the ingenious trick of the covert ring toss.

Aelian's treatment shows why it is essential to assess both his text and Plutarch's on this episode: The Ismenias tradition was a contested one, and different commentators could identify different winners and losers in the exchange. For Plutarch, Ismenias's fake bow was an unworthy act that incurred disgrace. The author contrasts the maneuver with Pelopidas's abstention from such behavior; one Greek remained untainted by the humiliating theatrics of the Persian court, but the other did not. For Aelian, however, Ismenias succeeded at the double task of preserving his dignity and efficaciously conducting his city's diplomatic business. Moreover, not only did he uphold Greek pride in the face of Persian despotism, he did so in a way that was characteristically Greek. The two Ismenias accounts disagree, then, over the issue of effective resistance. Can a bower escape the ramifications of their bow if, by means of an artifice known only to them, they reject the formal logic of the ceremony? Or, to consider the question from the opposite vantage point, will a ruler be satisfied if a petitioner privately repudiates court ritual and only appears to bow, while explaining the gesture to themselves in a different way?

Wedeen's study offers an inroad into this question through the author's distinction between legitimacy and compliance as objectives for state-sponsored rituals. Wedeen surveyed political science scholarship on legitimacy and found that the concept did not help her explain the case of Asadist Syria. The theoretical literature defined legitimacy as the alignment of a regime with a higher authority such as God or natural law, or alternately, in Seymour Martin Lipset's formulation, as "the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society."¹⁷ On these definitions, the legitimate regime is one whose subjects believe its rule to be cosmologically ordained or optimally suitable for their society. Legitimacy, then, is a matter of belief, and political rituals that achieve legitimation will shape or reinforce belief.

Wedeen sees a different dynamic behind the operation of Asadist cult. By and large, Syrians did not think that Asad enjoyed divine imprimatur or that his regime was the "most appropriate" one for their society, and they widely *disbelieved* the outlandish claims of Asadist cultic spectacles. The utility of Asadist ritual came from its procural of compliance rather than legitimacy. Compliance

17. Wedeen, *Ambiguities*, 7–11, 74, 166n27, citing Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Doubleday, 1960), 77; John Schaar, *Legitimacy in the Modern State* (Transaction Publishers, 1989), 20.

was obtained through the subject's participation in the bombastic spectacles that underpinned Asad's cult without belief in their publicly professed meanings. Few Syrians actually thought that Asad was their country's "premier pharmacist" or that his reign would last "forever," for instance, even though such statements were ubiquitous public slogans.¹⁸ Forced participation in cultic activities began with physical compulsion and the threat of violence, but Wedeen's point is that the regular staging of mandatory spectacles became, over time, a self-sustaining disciplinary mechanism in its own right. Advertising "the potential for coercive power while economizing on its actual use," spectacles transform audiences into enactors of obedience, marshaling their bodies and securing their complicity in the reproduction of regime authority.¹⁹ When compliance rather than legitimacy is the aim of such exercises, the subject's disbelief in the ostensible meaning of the ritual is unimportant. Indeed, disbelief may even *add* to the impression of power that the ritual cultivates: The more outrageous and hyperbolic the claims of the spectacle, the more potent the regime appears in its ability to make its subjects publicly profess an obvious fiction. As Wedeen puts it, "Asad is powerful because his regime can compel people to say the ridiculous and to avow the absurd."²⁰ Unlike rituals that aim at legitimacy, rituals that aim at compliance are not predicated upon belief, but they can be expedient mechanisms of domination all the same.

A final dimension of Wedeen's analysis that is germane to the ancient cases under consideration is the elision of the categories of actor and audience in cultic spectacle: Syrians are made complicit in the reproduction of Asadist power through compulsory attendance at such events, whether they are formally "on stage" or off it. The opening ceremony of the 1987 Mediterranean Games, for instance, featured a group of twelve thousand Syrians, each holding a placard that collectively composed a giant portrait of Asad. For Wedeen, the experience of the massed placard-holders is typical of how cultic performances discipline the entire Syrian populace "by mobilizing men and women to produce the symbolic messages and perform the bodily gestures that glorify Asad."²¹ To be mobilized for such an event is to participate in it, which means that even audience members—who may be on stage tomorrow—become accessories in the propagation of the regime. This perspective is well suited to the fake prostration scenes of ancient literature, where bowers at courts are watched by other subjects

18. Wedeen, *Ambiguities*, 1, 17, 35, 41.

19. Quotation: Wedeen, *Ambiguities*, 156.

20. Wedeen, *Ambiguities*, 12.

21. Wedeen, *Ambiguities*, 20–24, quotation at 23.

who will later have to bow in their turn. Those who alternately perform the gesture and see it performed both dance in the choreography of royal authority.

Wedeen's distinction between legitimacy and compliance can help interpret Plutarch and Aelian's divergent conclusions about the efficacy of Ismenias's fake bow. As literati immersed in the classicizing currents of the Second Sophistic, the two authors imagine that *proskynēsis* affirms the idea that the Achaemenids are gods—precisely the kind of outrageous proposition that Wedeen sees behind Asadist spectacle. But they differ as to whether meaningful resistance to this sacrilege can come from a secret ruse that avoids validation of the ceremony's premise (as the Greeks understood it). For Aelian, the covert ring toss is successful because it deprives *proskynēsis* of belief and thus legitimacy. To bow is to accept the Achaemenid pretension to divinity and to incur disgrace both for oneself and for Greeks in general. To escape from this ignominy, it is not enough to simply withhold belief while performing the act; a formal counternarrative is necessary to supply an alternate explanation for kneeling. That is the genius of the ring toss, in Aelian's view. The maneuver allows Ismenias to go through the motions without assenting to the theological proposition that they signify. Ismenias can claim that he has withheld belief, which robs the ritual of its power—a victory not just for the Theban, but for all Greeks with an interest in resisting the profane logic of Persian despotism.

Plutarch's assessment is different. He contends that going through the motions brings inherent and inescapable humiliation, even if the bower wields a counternarrative that allows him to maintain disbelief in the king's divine status. The fake prostrator may inwardly reject the professed meaning of the *proskynēsis* ritual—the hailing of the Persian king as a god—but his participation in the charade plays into the Persian ruler's hands all the same. Plutarch's text suggests, then, that *proskynēsis* is not about legitimacy, in the sense that its power does not derive from the belief of bowers in the king's divine status. Rather, the ritual inscribes authority through compliance, through its demonstration of the regime's ability to make people openly affirm propositions that they privately repudiate. For Plutarch, as for Aelian and all Greek writers who treated the Persian Empire, the proposition at stake is Achaemenid godhood—a blasphemous idea, in their eyes, and one that Greeks are duty-bound to reject. Ismenias tries to win this game through cleverness, but the regime anticipates and coopts his resistance. The Theban thinks that he wins by creating the appearance of a bow, but appearances are the coin of the Persian court's realm. The only way to win this game, Plutarch suggests, is not to play. That is why Pelopidas earns praise in his account, and Ismenias only scorn.

Plutarch's skepticism about fake prostration as a means of resistance is not the only viable interpretation of the episode, to be sure, and one of Wedeen's critics might be unwilling to discount Aelian's delight at the trick. In a recent retrospective on *Ambiguities of Domination*, James Scott mounts a challenge to Wedeen with his reading of an episode from the life of Ned Cobb, a Black sharecropper in 1920s Alabama. When faced with the need to apply for a loan from a white hardware store owner, Cobb knew that a "convincing performance of racial deference" would be needed to secure the money in the white supremacist environment of the Jim Crow South.²² He duly performed it, thereby securing the loan. Scott expects Cobb to feel shame and disgust at the need to ingratiate himself in this manner, but instead "[Cobb] returns home in a triumphal mood, not only for having gotten the loan he needed but also for having put on a consummate performance of (bad-faith) deference, for having so mastered (I choose the verb 'mastered' deliberately!) the racial code of rural Alabama as to be able to manipulate its nuances to achieve his objective. He has the sense of having 'put something over' on the hardware storeowner. In his own eyes, he is the 'winner' of the encounter."²³ Cobb is assured that he has manipulated his white interlocutor into dispensing the loan by artfully performing racial deference and concealing his true feelings about the charade. His sense of triumph complicates Wedeen's contention that the regime wins when it elicits bad-faith performances from its subjects, thereby drilling them in the habits of obedience. Scott is not prepared to take Cobb's testimony as the final word on the matter. He does insist, however, that "a subject's self-description of action may not be the whole truth, but it must be the point of departure for further analysis."²⁴ No firsthand account of Ismenias's embassy survives, but it is hard to imagine a version more complimentary of his ruse than the one Aelian offers. Scott's rejoinder to Wedeen is a salutary call to take Ismenias's self-satisfaction seriously, even if not at face value. At a minimum, Aelian's testimony problematizes the idea that spectacles of compliance instill "knowledge of oneself as someone who will obey" in the subject, at least in the case of Ismenias.²⁵

However, Plutarch's skepticism about Ismenias's pseudo-*proskynēsis* is buttressed by another branch of the fake bowing tradition, namely the Jewish story of the Seven Maccabean Martyrs, or the Seven Brothers. The original setting

22. Scott, "Appreciations and Queries," 36 (Scott's words, not Cobb's).

23. Scott, "Appreciations and Queries," 36.

24. Scott, "Appreciations and Queries," 37.

25. Wedeen, *Ambiguities*, 79, discussing Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 178–80.

for this tale is the Maccabean Revolt. As first told in 2 Maccabees, the Seleucid King Antiochus IV arrested a mother and her seven sons and demanded that they eat pork. When they refused, he tortured and killed the brothers one by one until only the seventh was left. The king tried to tempt this child with status and wealth, but he was rebuffed, and the seventh brother too was executed along with his mother. 4 Maccabees expands on the story, and later Jewish literature preserves many unique versions across several genres.²⁶ In later retellings, the tradition was unmoored from the history of the Maccabean Revolt. Antiochus was replaced by other tyrannical and impious rulers, and the story transformed into an abstract, decontextualized exemplum of Jewish resistance to gentile persecution that could work in other temporal settings.

One branch of this sprawling tradition must be put in dialogue with Plutarch and Aelian, for it too involves the toss of a ring and fake prostration—but this time with a twist. The variant in question appears in the midrashic collections Lamentations Rabbah, Seder Eliyahu, Lamentations Zuta, and Yalqut Shimoni, and also in the Babylonian Talmud. This is a diverse set of texts composed at different times, in different places, and even in different languages: The early compilation of Lamentations Rabbah and the Babylonian Talmud happened in Late Antiquity, but the former work is a mostly Hebrew text from late Roman Palestine, while the latter is mostly in Aramaic from Sasanian Babylonia. Seder Eliyahu, Lamentations Zuta, and Yalqut Shimoni are later collections of uncertain dates (perhaps from the ninth, eleventh, and fourteenth centuries CE, respectively), and derivative of the Babylonian Talmud in any case.²⁷ Their varying composition dates notwithstanding, the texts are united by their transposition of the Seven Brothers story onto the Roman period. The persecutor is now the emperor/Caesar, and the demand made of the seven brothers is that they bow

26. 2 Maccabees 7, in *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum*, vol. 9.2, *Maccabaeorum Liber II*, ed. Robert Hanhart (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 74–79; 4 Maccabees 8–17, in *Septuaginta, Id Est Vetus Testamentum Graece iuxta LXX Interpretes*, vol. 1, *Leges et Historiae*, ed. Alfred Rahlfs (Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1962), 1168–83. Neither features the ring ruse; nor does Pes. Rab. 43:17–18, in *A Bilingual Edition of Pesiqta Rabbati*, ed. and trans. Rivka Ulmer (De Gruyter, 2022), 2:512–13. Two late folkloric versions, one with the ring and one without, are found in Micha Josef Bin Gorion, *Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales* (Indiana University Press, 1976), 272–73.

27. On the dating and interrelationship of these texts, see Hermann L. Strack and Günther Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, 7th ed. (Beck, 1982), 187–90, 264–65, 305–7; Gerson D. Cohen, *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures* (Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 55–56n3; Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity* (Routledge, 2002), 135–37; Paul Mandel, “Ekah Rabbah (EkhR),” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception Online*, ed. Constance M. Furey et al., vol. 7 (De Gruyter, 2013), cols. 553–56; Martha Himmelfarb, “The Mother of the Seven Sons in Lamentations Rabbah and the Virgin Mary,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (2015): 325–51 at 326.

before an idol, not that they eat pork. The first six brothers are executed after refusing to comply. The emperor then attempts a bargain with the seventh and youngest. The key quotations run as follows:²⁸

Lamentations Rabbah 1:16, sec. 50:

The emperor said to him, “See your brothers are slain before you. Behold, I will throw my ring to the ground in front of the image; pick it up so that all may know that you have obeyed my command.”

Babylonian Talmud, tractate Gittin 57b:

The emperor said to him: “I will throw down my seal before you; bend over and pick it up, so that people will say that he has accepted the king’s authority.”

Seder Eliyahu (30) 28:

Thereupon the king said: “If you will not bow down, then I will throw this ring before the divinity, so that when you [bend over] {to pick up the ring}, [it will seem that you are bowing down], and the onlookers will say: ‘Look, he listened to Caesar’s command and bowed down to the divinity.’”

Lamentations Zuta 31a:

He [the Caesar] said to him, “Come, I will throw you my signet ring before the idol; you go and bring it. Let them [the onlookers] see you and say, ‘It is on account of the Caesar that he is worshiping the idol.’ Thus you will save yourself and we shall not kill you, the way we have killed your six brothers. But please do me honor before my enemies.”

Yalqut Shimoni 1019²⁹

[The Caesar] said, “Come, and I will place for you my signet ring in front of the idols, and you will save yourself, and we will not kill you as we have killed your six brothers. Rather, when they ask you, do me honor in front of my enemies.”³⁰

28. Editions and translations as cited in my note 3.

29. Translation by author, with grateful acknowledgment to Simcha Gross and Daniel Falk for their assistance. The translation and numbering follow the text of the *editio princeps* (Salonika, 1521) in *Yalqut Shimoni: Prophets and Hagiographa*, facsimile ed. of the 1st ed., vol. 2 (Makor, 1973), para. 1019. Note that, in texts of Yalqut Shimoni that follow the Venice edition of 1566, this paragraph is numbered 1029. On the different numbering systems, see Dagmar Börner-Klein and Beat Zuber, ed. and trans., *Jalkut Shimoni zu Threni (Klagelieder)* (De Gruyter, 2021), vi–viii.

30. The sense seems to be “when they (my enemies at court) ask you (why it is that you have bowed down to the idols), do me honor before my enemies (by confirming their mistaken impression

In all five versions, the emperor tries the same tack. His efforts with the first six brothers have proven unavailing, so he attempts to enlist the seventh brother in the perpetration of a ruse. He will throw his signet ring (the word in the Babylonian Talmud and its derivatives is *gūšpanqā*, a notable Iranian loan) on the ground before the statue.³¹ When the boy stoops to pick up the ring, he will create the appearance of bowing to the idol. For the emperor, it will be enough to create the impression that his command has been obeyed, even if he and the seventh brother will know otherwise. Yet the young boy denies him even this, for he proves as unbending as his brothers. He too is executed.

These passages make explicit what is only adumbrated in Plutarch and, as will soon be shown, in Procopius: Not only do rulers not care if subjects bow under false pretenses, they may even suggest the artifice themselves. Why would the king be complicit in the subversion of his own ceremony? The answer, it turns out, is that fake prostration is not subversive. It is a tactic that rulers themselves will encourage in order to maintain the fictions on which their regimes depend. Those fictions are recognized as such by the kings, who are acutely aware of the fragility of their own position and the gossamer-thin strings from which the royal puppet show dangles. In Lamentations Rabbah, Seder Eliyahu, and the Babylonian Talmud, the emperor's main concern is that the people of his court *see* the seventh brother's act of submission. The religious issue at stake, namely idol worship, is of no interest to the ruler, except insofar as it is a normative practice that his authority is supposed to backstop. What matters is the appearance of public submission. Lamentations Zuta and Yalqut Shimoni contain an even stronger formulation. The king implores the seventh brother to help him save face in front of his "enemies." These onlookers are monitoring the proceedings to see whether the defiance of the seventh brother will expose the weakness of the king—a weakness they will exploit if they can, it seems. In the face of such threats, the actual beliefs of the seventh brother are, in the king's eyes, entirely immaterial. What he needs is public prostration, and he is ready to resort to deception in order to get it.

Wedeen's distinction between legitimacy and compliance once again offers insight into the relevant texts. In this variant of the Seven Brothers tradition,

that you sincerely worshipped the idols at my command)." Zuber in Börner-Klein and Zuber, *Jalkut Schimoni zu Threni*, 62, translates the final words בעלי דבב as "Türhüter," but "enemies" better fits the court context of the tale.

31. On the etymology of *gūšpanqā*, see Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 273; Jason Sion Mokhtarian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers, Kings, and Priests: The Culture of the Talmud in Ancient Iran* (University of California Press, 2015), 191n25.

the ruler's willingness to accept a fake bow belies the expectation that he is interested in legitimacy. The king is no missionary interested in religious conversion. He does not care which god (or God) the brothers revere in their heart of hearts. Sincere belief in idol worship is not the foundation on which his power rests, and once the fake bow has played out, the seventh brother will be free to resume his practice of Judaism as he sees fit. In the meantime, though, the king's investment in the production is total, and he is prepared to use torture and capital punishment to force the actors in the drama to play their appointed parts before the spectators. He craves not belief but compliance. The seventh brother must act "as if" he, a Jew, consents to the blasphemy of idol worship—an absurd contradiction in terms. He must play-act a charade that everyone knows is a charade, but which may never be acknowledged as such in public. Shaye Cohen is only half right when he says of the persecutor's objectives that "formal compliance, even if insincere and via a ruse, suffices."³² Not "even if," but "especially if": The ruler's power appears all the greater if he can force a pious Jew to openly affirm a religious practice, namely idol worship, that the Jew manifestly disavows and indeed numbers among the most un-Jewish acts one could perform. The very absurdity of the spectacle furnishes the prime exhibition of the ruler's power.

Unfortunately for the ruler, however, Jewish law is also highly attuned to the optics of bowing, as Cohen points out. A passage from the Jerusalem Talmud distinguishes between coerced acts of sacrilege committed in public versus those committed in private: "If a Gentile tells a Jew to transgress any commandment of the Torah except those concerning idolatry, incest and adultery, and murder, he should transgress and not be killed. That is in private, but in public he should not follow him [the Gentile] even for the slightest commandment, as exemplified by Julianus and his brother Pappos whom they gave water in a colored glass and they did not accept."³³ The rabbis display a sensitivity here to the context in which a forcible violation of Jewish law occurs. If the persecutor is interrogating the Jew in private, the Jew should acquiesce and save his own life, whereas if the proceedings take place in public, he should set an example for other Jews and meet his death, regardless of the infraction that the gentile

32. Cohen, "Name of the Ruse," 28.

33. y. Šeb. 4:2, 35a, trans. Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, *The Jerusalem Talmud. First Order: Zeraim. Tractates Kilaim and Ševiiit* (De Gruyter, 2001), 430. The same passage appears in Sanh. 3:3, 21b, trans. Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, *The Jerusalem Talmud. Fourth Order: Neziqin. Tractates Sanhedrin, Makkot, and Horaiot* (De Gruyter, 2010), 120. Cf. b. Sanh. 74a, ed. and trans. Adin Steinsaltz and Tzvi Hersch Weinreb, *Koren Talmud Bavli*, vol. 30, *Sanhedrin, Part Two* (Koren, 2017), 164. On Julianus and Pappus, see ahead.

demands. However, there are limits to the rules that can be broken even in private, and idolatry is one of them. The emperor was misguided, then, when he pled the public nature of the interrogation as an inducement for the seventh brother to yield. For a follower of Talmudic law, publicity would have had the opposite implication, enjoining compliance with the law rather than conditional violation. Even if the interrogation were private, moreover, the emperor wants his victim to disregard the Jewish prohibition of idolatry—one of the few issues where no circumstantial compromise is possible. An additional passage from the Babylonian Talmud legislates against not only the actual practice of idolatry, but even the mere appearance of it:

If a thorn became imbedded in one's foot while he was standing before an object of idol worship, he may not bend down and remove the thorn, because he appears to be bowing down to the object of idol worship; but if he is not seen, it is permitted. If one's coins were scattered while he is before an object of idol worship, he may not bend down and pick them up, because he appears to be bowing down to the object of idol worship; but if he is not seen, it is permitted. Likewise, if there is a spring that runs before an object of idol worship, one may not bend down and drink from it, because he appears to be bowing down to the object of idol worship; but if he is not seen, it is permitted. With regard to figures of human faces that spray water in the cities, i.e., fountains, one may not place his mouth on the mouths of the figures and drink, because he appears to be kissing the object of idol worship.³⁴

Once again, Talmudic law distinguishes between acts with audiences and those without. Idolatry is forbidden, but so is creating the impression of idolatry among viewers who happen to be in the vicinity. Thus, if a Jew finds himself with a thorn in his foot as he stands before an idol in public, he must endure the thorn in his foot, because onlookers might interpret his stooping to remove it as a bow to the idol. If there are no onlookers, however, he is permitted to remove it on the spot. This Talmudic injunction sheds further light on the impasse between the emperor and the seventh brother. The former requires the appearance of submission, which for him is just as good as actual submission; but the latter cannot submit because, in doing so, he would appear to transgress, which for him is just as bad as actual transgression.

This branch of the popular Seven Brothers tradition would have integrated fake prostration into a wider contemporary discourse about seductive but

34. b. *Avodah Zara* 12a, ed. and trans. Adin Steinsaltz and Tzvi Hersch Weinreb, *Koren Talmud Bavli*, vol. 32, *Tractate Avoda Zara; Tractate Horayot* (Koren, 2017), 63.

ultimately self-defeating compromises with imperial power over matters of religion. By Late Antiquity, the “Maccabean Martyrs” were widely venerated by Christians as well as Jews. Their cult had begun at Antioch in the fourth century CE, and several references in late antique sources attest their popularity among Christians as resisters of state persecution who made the ultimate sacrifice in pursuit of their faith.³⁵ Indeed, the Talmudic versions of the Seven Brothers story reviewed earlier can be read as part of a conversation with the Christian tradition, as the rabbis responded to Christian martyrdom discourse by reworking earlier Jewish tales of persecution at the hands of imperial authorities.³⁶ These issues were no less immediate in the Sasanian Empire, and the inclusion of the Seventh Brother story in the Babylonian Talmud shows that, just as Roman Christians could ponder martyrdom through stories of Persian persecution of their co-religionists, the Jews of Sasanian Babylonia could do the same by reflecting on tales in which the Roman emperor featured as the oppressor.³⁷ The appending of the fake-bowing motif to the lively Maccabean Martyrs tradition is no trivial curiosity, then. The scene speaks to a vital question among Jewish and Christian populations in the Roman and Sasanian Empires: How is a subject supposed to act when their imperial master asks them for a religious concession that seems acceptable on its face but, on closer inspection, threatens to sully their integrity? The omnipresent martyrdom narratives of the period offer an answer, with the Seven Brothers as a banner example.

As a tool of the persecutor, moreover, fake prostration would have evoked other passages from martyr narratives in which religious heroes show the infallibility of their faith by rejecting accommodation, however tempting, with imperial

35. On the cult's emergence in Antioch, see Johannes Hahn, “The Veneration of the Maccabean Brothers in Fourth Century Antioch: Religious Competition, Martyrdom, and Innovation,” in *Dying for the Faith, Killing for the Faith: Old-Testament Faith-Warriors (1 and 2 Maccabees) in Historical Perspective*, ed. Gabriela Signori (Brill, 2012), 79–104. Literary sources: see Margaret Schatkin, “The Maccabean Martyrs,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 28, no. 2 (1974): 97–113 at 98–105.

36. Hayim Lapin, “Pappus and Julianus, the Maccabaeen Martyrs, and Rabbinic Martyrdom History in Late Antiquity,” in *Legal Engagement: The Reception of Roman Law and Tribunals by Jews and Other Inhabitants of the Empire*, ed. Katell Berthelot, Natalie B. Dohrmann, and Capucine Nemo-Pekelman (Publications de l'École française de Rome, 2021), 133–56 at 144; cf. Himmelfarb, “Mother of the Seven Sons,” 326–27.

37. On Roman Christians writing on Persian persecutions, see Kenneth G. Holum, “Pulcheria's Crusade A.D. 421–22 and the Ideology of Imperial Victory,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 18 (1977): 153–72 at 155–57; Kyle Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia* (University of California Press, 2016), 17–64, 145, 163–69. On Sasanian persecution, see further Richard Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (University of California Press, 2015), esp. 38–48; Simcha Gross, “Being Roman in the Sasanian Empire: Revisiting the Great Persecution of Christians Under Shapur II,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5, no. 3 (2021): 361–402.

authority. Jewish literature offers parallels. In 2 and 4 Maccabees, the torturers at the court of Antiochus IV propose a similar ploy to the martyr Eleazar. When the king commands Eleazar to eat pork, they say, Eleazar can substitute lawful non-porcine meat that he has prepared himself beforehand. It will look like he is eating pork and fulfilling the king's command, but he will not violate any Jewish laws.³⁸ Yet another such ruse seems to have figured in the story of Julianus and Pappus, set during the reign of Trajan but known from oblique references in later texts. As described in the Jerusalem Talmud passages cited earlier, the Roman authorities "gave water [to Julianus and his brother Pappus] in a colored glass and they did not accept."³⁹ The apparent background is that the pair was commanded to drink idolatrous libation wine, but they refused, as Jewish law forbade its consumption.⁴⁰ The persecutors then suggested that the brothers drink water from a (presumably red) colored glass, which would give the water the appearance of wine and thus create the impression that they had obeyed.⁴¹ Such ruses do not appear in Christian martyr narratives, but the persecutors in those texts do employ various blandishments to seduce the martyr into apostasy. Interrogators wheedle the martyr with the argument that idol sacrifice is a trifling matter, not a serious one; they offer gifts of wealth and status if the martyr repents; and they offer to take the blame so that it will be common knowledge that the martyr acted only under duress.⁴² Whether Jewish or Christian, the martyr always declines these gambits, displaying in the process their incorruptibility and steadfastness in the faith. In a major literary genre of Late Antiquity, then, fake prostration would have taken its place in the arsenal of insidious techniques that imperial persecutors employed to chip away at the rectitude of the persecuted.

The final fake-prostration scene of ancient literature comes from Procopius, an East Roman author roughly contemporary with the early redactions of Lamentations Rabbah and the Babylonian Talmud. In the first book of his *Wars*, Procopius narrates an episode from the reign of the Sasanian King Peroz

38. 2 Maccabees 6:18–28 (Hanhart, *Maccabaeorum Liber II*, 72–73); 4 Maccabees 6:12–23 (Rahlf's, *Septuaginta*, 1165–66).

39. See my note 33. For dating and other sources in the tradition, see Lapin, "Pappus and Julianus," 135–39.

40. On Jewish regulations and interdictions concerning wine, see Jordan D. Rosenblum, *Rabbinic Drinking: What Beverages Teach Us About Rabbinic Literature* (University of California Press, 2020), 67–72.

41. For this interpretation of the passages in the Jerusalem Talmud, see Cohen, "Name of the Ruse," 30; Lapin, "Pappus and Julianus," 138. Lapin catalogs other Jewish texts that refer to the pair, though the colored wine glass story is nowhere fully explained.

42. All techniques employed by the prefect Maximus in the *Passio Iuli Veterani* 2, trans. Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Clarendon Press, 1972), 260–63.

(r. 459–84 CE). During a campaign in Central Asia against the Hephthalite Huns, Peroz leads the Persian army into a trap. As he abandons all hope of resistance, an offer arrives from the enemy: The Persians may leave unharmed if Peroz himself agrees to bow in public submission before the Hephthalite King Akhshunwar.⁴³ Peroz consults with the Zoroastrian priests in his army, and they contrive a stratagem that will allow Peroz to escape with his life and his dignity:

The magi replied that he should manage the matter of the oath as he saw fit, but as for the rest, he should circumvent his enemy through cleverness. They had a custom of prostrating themselves before the rising sun each day. Peroz should pay close attention to the time of day and meet with the Hephthalite leader at dawn, and make obeisance having turned toward the rising sun. In this way, he could escape the subsequent dishonor of the deed. So Peroz both gave the assurances of peace and bowed before the enemy just as the magi suggested, and he marched homeward in good spirits with the entire Persian army intact.⁴⁴

Peroz can proceed with the ceremony, the priests say, but it must take place at dawn, when Zoroastrians make daily obeisance (once again, Greek *proskynēsis*) to the rising sun. Thus he will bow to the Hephthalite king only in appearance. In reality, he will carry out a routine morning prayer. Peroz executes this plan, and Procopius's final sentence has him marching away "in good spirits," well pleased with the outcome.

For the present purposes, the historicity of the passage is less important than its literary and historiographical features. It is true that the powerful if short-lived empire of the Hephthalites was the predominant military challenge of Peroz's reign, and the king led several expeditions against this Central Asian people before his death in 484 CE.⁴⁵ The wars are attested in many late antique

43. The word *Akhshunwar* is in fact a title, but Sasanian and postconquest sources understood it as a name. It does not appear in Procopius. For sources and discussion, see C. J. Brunner, "Akšōnvār," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Routledge, 1984), 1.7:729–30; Khodadad Rezakhani, *Reorienting the Sasanians: East Iran in Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 127–28.

44. Procopius, *Wars* 1.3.19–21 (Haury and Wirth, *De Bellis*, 13–14); trans. author.

45. On the Hephthalite kingdom as a "short-term" empire, see Josef Wiesehöfer and Robert Rollinger, "The 'Empire' of the Hephthalites," in *Short-Term Empires in World History*, ed. Robert Rollinger, Julian Degen, and Michael Gehler (Springer, 2020), 317–29. On Peroz's relationship with the Hephthalites, see further Richard Payne, "The Reinvention of Iran: The Sasanian Empire and the Huns," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 282–99 at 287–93; Robert Haug, "Pērōz and the Hephthalites . . . and the Kidarites, Alkhans, and Sasanians: Warfare, Diplomacy, and the Complexity of the Sasanian East in the Fifth Century," in *Brill's Companion to War in the Ancient Iranian Empires*, ed. John Hyland and Khodadad Rezakhani (Brill, 2024), 506–37 at 513–30.

and postconquest sources. Some of the relevant authors wrote, like Procopius, in Greek and under Roman rule, while others wrote in Middle Persian, New/Classical Persian, Syriac, Armenian, and Arabic.⁴⁶ Numerous though these texts are, however, no other authority transmits the story of Peroz's fake bow, which appears in Procopius alone. To be sure, lack of attestation elsewhere need not mean that the event itself was unhistorical. One point in favor of its historicity is its apparent accuracy on a matter of Persian ritual: By all indications, ancient Zoroastrians really did prostrate themselves before the rising sun, which means that Peroz's stratagem is anchored in Zoroastrian practice.⁴⁷ Even if the story itself is unhistorical, moreover, it may nonetheless be a genuine Sasanian production, a "face-saving counternarrative" propagated by Peroz to salvage his reputation in the face of military defeat.⁴⁸ Historical or not, though, the appearance of the fake bow only in the *Wars* raises the question of how to read and

46. A comprehensive list, difficult to find elsewhere, is offered here. Greek accounts besides Procopius: Agathias 4.27.3–4, trans. Averil Cameron, "Agathias on the Sassanians," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23/24, (1969/70): 67–183 at 126–29; Priscus fr. 41.3, trans. R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicizing Historians of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. 2, *Text, Translation and Historiographical Notes* (Francis Cairns, 1983), 348–49; Theophanes, *Chronographia* AM 5967–68, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284–813* (Clarendon Press, 1997), 187–88. Middle and New Persian sources: *Bundahišn* 33.23, trans. Domenico Agostini and Samuel Thrope, *The Bundahišn: The Zoroastrian Book of Creation* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 173; Bal'ami, *Tarikh*, in *Tarikh-e Bal'ami*, ed. Mohammad-Taqi Bahar and Mohammad Parvin Gonabadi (Hermes, 1974), 2:952–61, trans. H. Zotenberg, *Chronique de Abou Djafar-Mo'hammed-ben-Djarir-ben-Yezid Tabari, traduite sur la version persane d'Abou 'Ali Mo'hammed Bel'ami* (Imprimerie Nationale, 1869), 2:131–42; Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, in *Abu'l-Qasem Ferdowsi: The Shahnameh*, ed. Djafar Khaleghi-Motlagh and Abolfazl Khatibi (Persian Heritage Foundation, 2007), 7:15–27. Armenian sources: Lazar P'arpec'i 85, trans. Robert W. Thomson, *The History of Lazar P'arpec'i* (Scholars Press, 1991), 214–17; [Sebeos] 67, trans. Robert W. Thomson and James Howard-Johnston, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos* (Liverpool University Press, 1999), 5. Syriac sources: (Pseudo-) Joshua the Stylite 9–11, trans. Frank R. Trombley and John W. Watt, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite* (Liverpool University Press, 2000), 9–11. Arabic sources: Tabari 1.872–77, trans. C. E. Bosworth, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 5, *The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen* (State University of New York Press, 1999), 109–17; Mas'udi, *al-Tanbih wa-l-ishraf* 101, trans. Robert Hoyland, *The "History of the Kings of the Persians" in Three Arabic Chronicles: The Transmission of the Iranian Past from Late Antiquity to Early Islam* (Liverpool University Press, 2018), 97; Ya'qubi 184–85, trans. Hoyland, *History of the Kings*, 114; Tha'alibi, *Ta'rikh Ghurar al-siyar*, ed. and trans. H. Zotenberg, *Histoire des rois des Perses par Abou Manşour 'abd al-Malik ibn Moḥammad ibn Ismā'il al-Tha'alibi* (Imprimerie Nationale, 1900), 578–83; Eutychius 16.7–8, trans. Bartolomeo Pirone, *Eutychio, Patriarca di Alessandria (877–940), Gli Annali* (Franciscan Centre of Christian Oriental Studies, 1987), 272–75; Ibn Zafar, *Consolation for the Ruler During the Hostility of Subjects*, trans. Joseph A. Kechichian and R. Hrair Dekmejian, *The Just Prince: A Manual of Leadership* (Saqi, 2003), 181–88.

47. Jake Nabel, "Tiridates in the Forum, Peroz on His Knees: Religion and Reputation in Ancient Iranian Diplomacy," *Anabasis: Studia Classica et Orientalia* 10 (2019): 214–36 at 219–20.

48. Matthew P. Canepa, "Sasanian Iran and the Projection of Power in Late Antique Eurasia: Competing Cosmologies and Topographies of Power," in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity*:

understand the episode in the context of that work. These are historiographical issues that merit consideration even if the tale itself is a complete fabrication.

Procopius's well-known classicizing tendencies raise the prospect that he knew and sought to evoke the Ismenias story, but the question of intentionality is less important here than his reuse of the fake-bowing motif to reflect on the staging of royal authority and the attempt to circumvent it through a clandestine ruse. The Peroz narrative of the *Wars* evokes a long tradition of Persian Logoi in Greek historiography. The gold standard was Herodotus's *Histories*, and several scholars have demonstrated Procopius's sustained engagement with that work in this section. Peroz and his Hephthalite enemies are modeled on Herodotus's Darius and the Scythians whose territory (across the Danube in the northwestern Black Sea region) the Persians invaded in 513 BCE.⁴⁹ The parallel is a close one: In both cases, a wily enemy of the steppe frustrates the efforts of an overconfident Persian king. Herodotus used the same formula in narrating Cyrus the Great's campaign against the Massagetae, a Central Asian people whose name East Roman writers continued to apply to steppe populations in Late Antiquity.⁵⁰ Ismenias lived after the Greco-Persian wars, and his embassy was recorded by authors of lesser repute than Herodotus, who enjoyed a large readership in Procopius's circles. But Ismenias's story still dated to the celebrated classical period, and its preservation by at least two Second Sophistic authors means that it must have circulated to some degree. It is imaginable, though of course not provable, that Procopius knew it. Even if he were wholly ignorant of the Ismenias tradition, though, his redeployment of the fake-prostration motif shows its continued ability to raise questions about the theatrics of power and how to resist them. What answers to those questions emerge from Procopius's treatment of Peroz and the Hephthalites?

The interstate dimension of the Peroz episode adds a new variable to the domestic calculus of Wedeen's study. Peroz's bow involves not one but two audiences, the Persians and the Hephthalites. The spectacle has also been choreographed by two regimes. While Akhshunwar has dictated the main lines of the event, Peroz has been allowed to select the time (morning) and direction

Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe, ca. 250–750, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo and Michael Maas (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 54–69 at 65.

49. Herodotus 4.1–142, in *Herodoti "Historiae,"* vol. 1, *Libri I–IV*, ed. N. G. Wilson (Oxford University Press, 2015), 335–406. See Anthony Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 71–75; Conor Whately, *Battles and Generals: Combat, Culture, and Didacticism in Procopius' "Wars"* (Brill, 2016), 70–71.

50. Herodotus 1.201–16 (Wilson, *Herodoti*, 118–26). *Massagetae* used by Byzantine authors: Daniel T. Potts, *Nomadism in Iran: From Antiquity to the Modern Era* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 127.

(eastward) of his prescribed gesture. After the completion of the ceremony, the two rulers will maintain divergent interpretations of its meaning to their domestic audiences. Here Peroz faces a major difficulty, though. Whereas Ismenias and the Seven Brothers were forced into ceremonies undergirded by absurd principles—Achaemenid godhood (as the Greeks saw it) and Jewish idol worship, respectively—Akhshunwar's spectacle is predicated on a viable claim anchored in his military victory: The Hephthalite king has dominated his Persian counterpart. Peroz would like his audience to regard this as a laughable proposition, of course, but the plain facts of his surrender militate against the idea. In these ways, his challenge is different from the one that Ismenias and the Seventh Brother confront.

Yet Peroz's case is also connected to those of his fellow fake bowers, because he attempts to circumvent his antagonist by reframing his prostration in a way that subverts its professed meaning—or so he intends. In light of the other fake-bowing passages and Wedeen's distinction between legitimacy and compliance, however, Peroz's hopes appear misplaced. The critical tradition represented in Plutarch and Talmudic commentary suggests that Peroz has inadvertently buttressed Hephthalite power despite his conviction that he has undermined it. Peroz thinks that he has escaped Hephthalite hegemony because the Zoroastrian practice of sun salutation offers a clandestine way to avoid "actually" bowing to Akhshunwar. But just as the ring ruse offered Ismenias no true refuge from disgrace before Artaxerxes (in Plutarch's eyes at least), and just as the same ploy was the persecutor's tool in the story of the Seven Brothers, so too now, one may conclude, Peroz's feeble counternarrative is no real alternative to the story that plays out on the main stage. The Persian king's performance of his assigned choreography must ultimately redound to the Hephthalite king's glory. Peroz may believe that he has effectively resisted or subverted his own humiliation. But his belief is of no interest to Akhshunwar, not after compliance has been rendered.

In fact, the passage's intertexts with classical historiography lend additional support to this reading. As discussed, Procopius's engagement with earlier Greek literature in this passage runs deep. The parallel between Peroz and Ismenias is only part of the story, since the Persian campaign against the Hephthalites also evokes those of Cyrus against the Massagetae and Darius against the Scythians.⁵¹ Greatrex notes a textual echo from Herodotus's treatment of the Massagetae expedition that has troublesome implications for

51. See my notes 49–50.

Peroz's self-congratulatory bearing after he executes his fake bow.⁵² After Cyrus wins an initial victory over the Massagetae, Herodotus attributes the following quotation to their Queen Tomyris, whose son Cyrus has just captured: "So now heed my words as I advise you well: Give me back my son and leave this land unpunished, despite your shameful treatment of one-third of the Massagetan army. If you do not do this, I swear on the Sun, the Lord of the Massagetae, I will slake your insatiable thirst for blood."⁵³ In her threatening message to Cyrus, Tomyris underlines her conviction by appealing to a divinity so honored among the Massagetae that he is called their "lord": the sun. The Massagetae, it emerges, are sun worshippers. A few chapters later, Herodotus makes the point himself: "The sun is the only god whom they worship, and they sacrifice horses to it."⁵⁴ The remark matters for the case of Peroz. Procopius has modeled the Persian-Hephthalite encounter on the Persian-Massagetan encounter in Herodotus. If the Massagetae are sun worshippers, might not the Hephthalites be sun worshippers as well? And if so, would they not readily recognize a bow to the sun when they see one? Herodotus cannot be used as evidence for religious practices in late antique Central Asia, of course. But since his text supplies some of the raw material from which Procopius's narrative is fashioned, the reader may see the irony in using a sun-prostration trick on the king of a people whose historical predecessors worshipped the sun.

Moreover, there is one late antique source that may attribute morning sun prostration to the Hephthalites themselves, even if the value of its testimony is doubtful. Hephthalite religion is treated by a passage in the *Liáng Shū* (Book of Liang), a seventh-century CE history of the Liang Dynasty (502–57 CE) compiled by the Chinese statesman and scholar Yao Silian. One book of this work contains ethnographies of the peoples who dwelled along the periphery of China or further afield in Central Asia. The Hephthalites are included here under the name *Hua*, a variant transcription of *Hun* and one of several ethnonyms used to refer to the Hephthalites in Chinese sources.⁵⁵ In this section,

52. Greatrex, *Procopius of Caesarea*, 63.

53. Herodotus 1.212 (Wilson, *Herodoti*, 124–25), trans. author.

54. Herodotus 1.216.4 (Wilson, *Herodoti*, 126), trans. author. For other references to horse sacrifice in classical sources and Zoroastrian literature, see Touraj Daryaei, "Alexander at Pasargadae and the Frawaši of Cyrus," in *The World of Alexander in Perspective: Contextualizing Arrian*, ed. Robert Rollinger and Julian Degen (Harrassowitz, 2022), 357–67 at 358–62.

55. On the Chinese terminology, see Kazuo Enoki, "On the Nationality of the Ephthalites," *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko* 18 (1959): 1–58; Taishan Yu, "Records Relevant to the Hephthalites in Ancient Chinese Historical Works," *International Journal of Eurasian Studies* 2 (2015): 205–73 at 205.

Yao Silian writes, “They are without walled towns, and live in felt tents with a door open to the east. . . . They worship the God of Heaven and the God of Fire. Every day they go outside [of their tents] to sacrifice to the gods and then they take breakfast. They prostrate themselves only once.”⁵⁶ The remark that the Hephthalites have no “walled towns” does not accord well with Procopius, or for that matter with archaeological and documentary evidence from the region itself; internal sources suggest that the Hephthalites presided over urban settlements that were “nodal points of communication and administration, taxation and minting, self-representation and political performance.”⁵⁷ There is no doubt, however, that tent-dwelling pastoralism was also in use among the Hephthalites, who had a mobile court that alternated among various residences. It is therefore significant that Hephthalite tents are pitched “with a door open to the east,” which would face the rising sun. Incidentally, the same tent orientation is attributed by Xenophon to Cyrus the Great and subsequent Persian kings.⁵⁸ The *Liáng Shū* also says that the Hephthalites exit their tents each morning to perform a religious ritual before their first meal of the day and that this rite involves prostration. It does not say that they bow toward the sun, but the eastward orientation of their tents is suggestive. A potential overlap emerges between Hephthalite religious practice and the morning rites of Persian kings.

The intercompatibility of Persian and Hephthalite religious beliefs is also evident in the *Bundahišn*, a Middle Persian Zoroastrian text composed in the Abbasid period (ca. ninth century CE) but incorporating much pre-Islamic material.⁵⁹ After Peroz’s death in battle against Akhshunwar, this text says, the following Sasanian king, Kavad, “brought a fire to the Hephthalites by way of a pledge.”⁶⁰ Fire is a holy element in Zoroastrianism, and the maintenance of sacred fires in temples was a mainstay of Sasanian religious architecture. Some fires were associated with particular kings or other members of the ruling

56. *Liáng Shū* 54, trans. Yu, “Records Relevant to the Hephthalites,” 208.

57. Wiesehöfer and Rollinger, “‘Empire’ of the Hephthalites,” 319, 327 quotation.

58. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.5.3, in *Xenophontis Opera Omnia*, vol. 4, *Institutio Cyri*, ed. E. C. Marchant (Oxford University Press, 1910), VIII.v.3. On Xenophon as a source for Persian religion, cf. Albert de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Brill, 1997), 366–67.

59. On the date of the *Bundahišn*, see Touraj Daryaei, “Middle Persian (Pahlavi),” in *A Companion to Late Antique Literature*, ed. Scott McGill and Edward J. Watts (Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 103–21 at 106–7; Agostini and Thrope, *Bundahišn*, xix–xxii.

60. *Bundahišn* 33.23, in *Bundahišn: Zoroastrische Kosmogonie und Kosmologie*, ed. Fazlollah Pakzad (Centre for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia, 2005), 367, trans. author. The translation offered here reads, with Agostini and Thrope, *Bundahišn*, 208n12, *ātaxš-ē* (“a fire”) instead of Pakzad’s *’ihwšb*.

dynasty, as the *Bundahišn* itself describes.⁶¹ The passage does not expand on what it meant for Kavad to offer a fire to Akhshunwar, though the context requires a sign of deference and subordination. In any event, the text presupposes a shared custom of fire worship or at least reverence, and such a practice tallies with the report of the *Liáng Shū* that the Hephthalites worshipped a god of fire. The testimony of the *Bundahišn* is no guarantee that Akhshunwar or the Hephthalites understood Kavad's gesture in the same way that the Persians did, of course, since the work preserves an Iranian historical tradition aligned with Sasanian kingship. But there is clearly a memory in that tradition of religious common ground with the Hephthalites.

Taken together, the *Liáng Shū* and the *Bundahišn* raise a question that discomfites Peroz's version of events: Has the Persian king attempted to weaponize morning sun worship to fool a people who shared that practice? The story of Peroz's trick trades on Hephthalite religious difference from the Persians and ignorance of Persian customs. The fake bow is premised on concealed knowledge; without concealment, the underlying logic makes no sense. But the *Liáng Shū* and the *Bundahišn* raise the possibility that Persian and Hephthalite religions overlapped and that morning bows to the east were observed in both cultures. Convergence on the practice of sun salutation need not mean that the Hephthalites practiced Zoroastrianism in the same way as the Iranians of Late Antiquity, to be sure. The absence of internal texts mires the religion of the Hephthalites in obscurity, and the meager references in external sources suggest a diverse assemblage of Zoroastrian, Christian, Hindu, and Manichaean beliefs and practices.⁶² But ethnographic testimony in a near-contemporary source attributes to them a rite that sounds a good deal like morning sun worship, and if the *Liáng Shū* is creditable on this point, the ruse of fake prostration is undercut. One cannot make secret use of a practice that the enemy not only knows about, but shares.

61. *Bundahišn* 18 (Pakzad, *Bundahišn*, 228–35). On Sasanian fire temples and dynastic fires, see further Yumiko Yamamoto, “The Zoroastrian Temple Cult of Fire in Archaeology and Literature (II),” *Orient* 17 (1981): 67–104; Jamsheed K. Choksy, “Religious Sites and Physical Structures,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 393–406 at 396–99; Matthew P. Canepa, *The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity Through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE–642 CE* (University of California Press, 2018), 263–64, 283–90.

62. Enoki, “Nationality of the Ephthalites,” 45–49; B. A. Litvinsky, “The Hephthalite Empire,” in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol. 3, *The Crossroads of Civilizations: A.D. 250 to 750*, ed. B. A. Litvinsky (UNESCO, 1996), 135–62 at 150–51; Aydogdy Kurbanov, “The Hephthalites: Archaeological and Historical Analysis” (PhD diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 2010), 232–38.

The possibility of Hephthalite comprehension once again recalls Wedeen's conception of political spectacles that aim at compliance, not legitimacy. Akhshunwar may well have recognized that Peroz was asking to perform his bow at the very time (dawn) and in the very direction (east) that he would have performed a bow anyway—and yet, the Hephthalite king allowed the ceremony to proceed. Why would he acquiesce to a ruse that he had seen through? Wedeen's analysis of Asadist cult points to an explanation. Rulers can be perfectly content with subjects who participate in ostentatious rituals without investing a solitary ounce of belief in the avowed meaning of the ceremony. Peroz didn't have to believe that he was bowing to Akhshunwar; he just had to appear to. So long as the Persian king kneeled, he could maintain whatever palliative explanation he favored for his gesture of submission that just so happened to take place at Akhshunwar's feet. The appearance of his submission would remain, and it was the realm of appearances—not belief—that the ceremony targeted.

To be sure, much of this background would have been unknown to Procopius, but his authorial knowledge and intentions are less important here than the way that history and text combine to raise vexing questions about fake prostration and its implications for power. Chinese scholarship was, of course, inaccessible to the inhabitants of the late Roman Mediterranean, and the absence of sun worship in Procopius's own ethnography of the Hephthalites might indicate that he was wholly unaware of the practice. Yet there is no question that he analogizes the Hephthalites with the Central Asian peoples of earlier Greek historiography, and one such tribe, the Massagetae, had been memorialized as sun worshippers by Herodotus. One need only recognize Procopius's indisputable classicizing tendencies, then, to detect the possibility that the Hephthalites, like the Persians, bowed to the sun at dawn. Those same tendencies encourage joint consideration of the Peroz and Ismenias traditions, since the ruses involved are so similar that Peroz's story must have recalled Ismenias's. In its vital engagement with the classical past, then, Procopius's text invites the reader to think critically and comparatively about whether fake bows are effective, and whether private counternarratives can actually shake off the appearance of submission that comes with prostration.

Such considerations would not have been an arid thought experiment for Procopius, for the regime of Justinian gave the author ample cause to reflect on the apparent importation of Persian customs like *proskynēsis* into the protocol of the Roman court. While most Roman authors saw Diocletian as the first Persianizer of the emperorship, Procopius thought that Justinian had taken the

trend to new depths of despotism.⁶³ Under his reign, performers of *proskynēsis* now had to prostrate themselves flat on the ground, kissing the feet of the emperor *and* the empress, an innovation that especially rankled Procopius.⁶⁴ The sections of the *Wars* that featured *proskynēsis* in Persia could therefore serve as reflexive self-commentary on the reduction of Roman subjects to the state of servitude that classical Greek authors had once seen as a peculiar mark of the barbarous east.⁶⁵ Peroz's bow before Akhshunwar inverted the usual order of things: The Persian king was supposed to be the recipient of *proskynēsis*, not the performer of it. Readers who were steeped in classical Greek historiography on Persia—as Procopius himself manifestly was—might have seen another inversion of the norm in their own prostration before Justinian and his successors.

Moreover, while there is no particular reason to think that Procopius was familiar with the ring-ruse variant of the Maccabean Martyrs tradition, a work of Christian historiography in Greek contains a passage that offers a conceptual bridge between the fake bow of Peroz and the one suggested by the persecutor of the Seventh Son. The text is the *Ecclesiastical History* of Sozomen, a fifth-century CE author from Roman Palestine.⁶⁶ In one chapter of his work, Sozomen treats the alleged persecution of Christians in Persia by the Sasanian King Shapur II (r. 309–79 CE), and he narrates at length the case of Simeon, archbishop of Seleucia and Ctesiphon.⁶⁷ During an interrogation, Simeon refuses to perform *proskynēsis* before Shapur, even though he had performed it on prior occasions. He explains that he had been happy to adore the king when he had religious freedom, but now, under persecution, he cannot comply. Then, Sozomen writes: “Once Simeon had spoken along these lines, Shapur ordered him to do *proskynēsis* to the sun. Shapur also promised that, if Simeon obeyed, he would give him many gifts and show him honor; but if

63. On Diocletian as the supposed introducer of Persian ways into the Roman court, see Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire, AD 284–430* (Fontana Press, 1983), 42; Alexander Demandt, *Die Spätantike: Römische Geschichte von Diocletian bis Justinian, 284–565 n. Chr.*, rev. ed. (Beck, 2007), 261–62.

64. Procopius, *Secret History* 30.21–24, in *Procopius Caesariensis Opera Omnia*, vol. 3, *Historia Quae Dicitur Arcana*, ed. Jakob Haury and Gerhard Wirth (Saur, 2001), 184–85.

65. Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea*, 128–42; Rodolphe Guiland, “Autour du Livre des Cérémonies de Constantin VII Porphyrogénète. La cérémonie de la προσκύνησις,” *Revue des études grecques* 59–60 (1946): 251–59.

66. For background on Sozomen and his work, see Glenn F. Chesnut, *The First Christian Histories: Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Evagrius* (Éditions Beauchesne, 1977), 192–200. On his text's relationship to older Syriac accounts of Simeon's martyrdom, see Simcha Gross, *Babylonian Jews and Sasanian Imperialism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 46–47.

67. See the literature cited in my note 37.

he disobeyed, Shapur threatened him and the entire race of Christians with execution.”⁶⁸ Is Shapur suggesting yet another fake bow? Not obviously so, as there is no explicit reference to trickery or deceit in the text. Still, Shapur’s quick pivot from a bow before the king to a bow before the sun makes the latter seem almost compensatory for the former, and the combination offers a rough parallel to the Peroz section in Procopius. At the same time, Shapur’s persecutorial mission and his coaxing tone cannot help but recall the proposer of the ring trick in the Maccabean Martyrs tradition. Procopius almost certainly did not write with that tradition in mind, but his Peroz narrative nevertheless speaks to a theme that was highly resonant in the late antique Near East, namely the relationship between religion and the degrading authoritarian ceremonials that threatened to compromise it.

To conclude, the apparent ingenuity of ancient literature’s fake acts of prostration is undercut by a comparative reading of the tradition and by the theoretical outlook on offer in Wedeen’s *Ambiguities*. The divergent treatments of Ismenias’s ring ruse in Plutarch and Aelian show that fake bowing could be differently assessed. Commentators like Aelian could impute cleverness to the deed and cite Ismenias as a shrewd defender of Hellenic dignity in the face of Persian despotism. If Ismenias and his fellow Greeks saw such acts as meaningfully insurgent, as Aelian holds, then one must, following Scott, take them seriously as oppositional to Achaemenid domination. But Plutarch saw in the Theban’s actions a desperate ploy that failed to obviate disgrace and ultimately played into the Persian king’s hands. Late antique rabbinic sources align with Plutarch on this point. For them, the fake bow was a way for the powerful to achieve compliance, not a way for the powerless to escape it. Whether or not the Ismenias story or the Seven Brothers tradition were known to Procopius, his readership—conversant with classical Greek historiography on the one hand, and steeped in martyrdom discourse on the other—might easily have compared the older stories with the new fake bow of Peroz. If they did, they would have had ample grounds to question the Persian king’s happy mood at the conclusion of the episode.

The ease with which fake bows are coopted by imperial hegemony comes into clearer focus through the heuristic of Wedeen’s spectacles of compliance. Wedeen shows how authoritarian ceremonies require subjects to openly affirm statements that they privately find preposterous—and yet their disbelief does

68. Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.9.5, in *Sozomène: “Histoire Ecclésiastique,”* ed. J. Bidez (Du Cerf, 1983), 268, trans. author.

not rob the ceremony of its power. For the regime, such rituals are useful because they secure the complicity of the subject in the production of state power, regimenting and implicating their bodies in the ruler's choreography. Regimes do not legitimate their authority through these displays, since legitimacy depends on belief. Rather, spectacles of compliance instill obedience by mandating bad-faith performances from subjects who do not believe but act as if they do. Like Ismenias before him, Peroz does not imagine that his bow before Akhshunwar might be a spectacle of this sort. He thinks that the Zoroastrian ritual of prostration before the rising sun, ostensibly unknown to the enemy, can foil the Hephthalite king and save him from subjection and dishonor. But the divided reception of Ismenias's fake bow problematizes that assumption, and the Seven Brothers story suggests that fake prostration redounds to the benefit of the ruler, not the resister. However clever the fake bower's ruse, if it looks like he has complied, he has. ■