

Pax Persica and the Peoples of the Black Sea Region: Extent and Limits of Achaemenid Imperial Ideology

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The problem of the historical record

In contrast to ancient historians studying the Black Sea region in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, archaeologists appear to have a considerable amount of data on which to base scholarly debate. The finds emerging from Georgia and Azerbaijan are particularly striking. But, while archaeologists are able to hold on to undeniable factual evidence for Achaemenid presence in this region in the shape of Achaemenid column bases and entire palace-like structures, the attempt of ancient historians to provide a historical assessment of the Black Sea region in the Achaemenid period resembles a clutching at straws. To be sure, the evaluation of the archaeological evidence is not without its own problems, yet incorporating the Black Sea region into the historical discussion of our period poses a difficult challenge. Amongst other concerns there is a debate over the extent of the Persian controlled area,¹ the exact definition of its borders, the duration of Persian presence, the question of Persian naval communication across the Black Sea, the status of these regions within the Persian political structure, as well as that of the Greek cities of the Black Sea region and Persian rulers.²

The following observations aim to address some of these issues and contribute to the discussion on how we are to contextualize the evidence for the Black Sea region during the Achaemenid period and to evaluate the impact of the Persian presence there. To this end, the paper will look at Persian occupation of the west and east coast of the Black Sea, in order to move away from the ancient historian's traditional focus on Thrace.³ This approach seems appropriate not only in light of the recent evidence which has emerged from Georgia and Azerbaijan in particular, but also in order to view the Black Sea region as a whole⁴ – a perspective which may come closer to the way the Persians perceived the region, as opposed to the focus on Thrace which has been determined by the written Greek sources and Greek political interest in the region in the fifth and fourth centuries BC.

The question of the political status of the Black Sea regions

A central question for the Black Sea regions in the Achaemenid period is that regarding their political status within the Persian Empire and – following from that – whether we can distinguish between the status of satrapies (as governmental and administrative entities) and that of the different peoples a satrapy comprised, and who despite their overall incorporation into the Persian administrative organization were placed at different levels of official recognition. In other words, can we identify a kind of ranking among the different peoples within a satrapy, reflecting the fact that they held different statuses not only amongst themselves, but also in relation to the Persian ruling powers? That such differences existed among the different peoples of the Empire has been noted by Herodotos who remarked that the Ethiopians, the Colchians and their neighbours, as well as the Arabs brought gifts, but did not pay tribute.⁵ Josef Wiesehöfer comments on this intriguing phenomenon of subject peoples being only loosely linked to Achaemenid control: “Besonders überraschen mag der Umstand, dass bestimmte Bevölkerungsgruppen offensichtlich eine sehr lockere Verbindung zu den staatlichen Autoritäten pflegen konnten (...)”.⁶ In the case of the Colchians and Iberians, and, as will be argued here, in the case of the European Thracians, we seem to find a combination between being only “loosely linked” to the Persian system while being incorporated into the satrapal system.⁷ This ambiguous status must have had a bearing on the way these peoples were regarded by the Persian king (or, rather, within the Persian political and administrative system). The reasons which may have lain behind such an ambiguous situation of certain peoples could perceivably be found in an imperial distinction between “centre and periphery”. In regard to the Black Sea regions, however, it will be argued that this distinction can be pinpointed more precisely to a Persian ranking of the subject peoples which was based on the level of state formation.

Turning to the question of the political status of Thrace and the Caucasus region within the Persian Empire we can assert that both regions came under Persian control under Dareios I in the course of the Scythian campaign of 513/512 BC.⁸ The current view holds that the Persians integrated the land as far as the Danube in the west and to the Caucasus in the east. For a brief period, some areas beyond these natural borders were also included,⁹ but were relinquished after a period of time.¹⁰ As to the level of political incorporation into Persian administration, opinions differ, resulting in conflicting ideas of Thrace and Colchis either as satrapies or as autonomous regions. The views on Colchis are contradictory (with Iberia being hitherto largely omitted from the debate, but assuming on the basis of Hdt. 3.97 that it includes the entire region up to the Caucasus mountains):¹¹ Against Herodotos’ assessment of an only loosely connected Colchis and her neighbours, Bruno Jacobs classifies Colchis as a lesser satrapy under the umbrella of the main satrapy of Armenia.¹² As for Iberia, Burkhard Meissner’s erudite analysis of the Greek

and medieval sources for this region allows the conclusion that there is no evidence for the existence of an Iberian Kingdom in the third century BC.¹³ Whatever political set-up existed there at that time, it must have been remote from forming a system sufficiently advanced to support a king. Thus it may be argued that, except for the Greek poleis there, no strong form of indigenous government can be identified for the Caucasus region at the time of the Persian occupation. Archaeologically, Persian presence left a decisive mark on the region, especially on Iberia, leading us to assume that there must have been a considerable impact of Achaemenid political and cultural influence there. Continued Achaemenid control until the collapse of the Empire meant that political directives came first and foremost from Persia. On the strength of the archaeological evidence, therefore, Herodotos' assessment cannot be accurate, yet the question of the political status of the Caucasus regions of Colchis and Iberia still remains open.

In regard to Thrace, scholarship has tended to identify the region (together with Macedon) as a satrapy in its own right. A. Fol and N.G.L. Hammond treat the conquest of Thrace as the acquisition of a new satrapy called Skudra.¹⁴ The inhabitants of the satrapy were the Skudra (Thracians), the *Saka paradraya*, or Scythians beyond the sea, identified as the Getae, and the *Yauna takabara*, the Ionians with the shield-like hat, i.e. the Macedonians. Philippopolis, modern Plovdiv, has been tentatively suggested as a satrapal centre.¹⁵ Bruno Jacobs regards Thrace as initially being autonomous, but then being more closely linked to the Empire.¹⁶ How and when this change should have occurred within the 35-year duration of Persian overlordship is not clear. In my view, it is difficult to bring these different statuses into accord with the fact that Thrace is said to have formed part of the main satrapy of Lydia. Herodotos 3.90 mentions the Asian Thracians, but not the European Thracians, in the list of tribute-giving peoples.¹⁷ The Thracians and Macedonians,¹⁸ and the Colchians and their neighbours¹⁹ were obliged to provide military service.²⁰ European Thrace is also mentioned in the lists of lands of royal inscriptions, including DSe, DNa, DZa-c (Suez canal inscriptions) and XPh. Thracians are identified among the gift-bearers on the Apadana relief, though it is not clear whether these are Asian or European Thracians.²¹ However, as has been recognized by several scholars,²² neither the lists of lands nor the Persepolis reliefs aim to reflect political administrative units, but merely provide an impression of the extent of the realm. As B. Jacobs himself points out, it is Lydia, not Thrace, which is marked in the inscriptions as the northwest corner of the Empire.²³ Equally, Herodotos' list is no accurate reflection of satrapal units. Evidence for Thrace as a separate satrapy then becomes rather slim, not helped by the fact that we cannot conclusively identify a satrap there, only the presence of Megabazos as *strategos*²⁴ under Dareios I, and both Mascames in Doriskos²⁵ and Artayctes in Sestus²⁶ as *hyparchoi* under Xerxes. The terms may have been used by Herodotos to describe the office of satrap, but not exclusively so, as they also appear in a military context referring to commanders of fortresses.

These are the arguments recently put forward by Jan Stronk who thus expresses his scepticism in regard to Thrace's status as a satrapy.²⁷ He adds his voice to similar concerns expressed by Zofia Archibald.²⁸ Their view, I think, needs to be given serious consideration. As in the case of Colchis and Iberia, the political status of Thrace within the Persian administration remains unclear. What can be ascertained is that both regions west and east of the Black Sea came under Persian control at the same time. Also, in both cases – though we know even less for the societies of the Caucasus region than we do for those of Thrace – the Persians were dealing with areas wealthy in natural resources, but at an early stage of political development. In Thrace, the beginnings of the Odrysian Kingdom were only just emerging. On the basis of this evaluation it could be argued – and this is the suggestion put forward here – that, unlike the former kingdoms which possessed a fully functioning political organization and administrative set-up when they were reverted into satrapies, or the city-kingdoms which were self-governing and held a semi-autonomous status, the Black Sea regions presented to the Persians societies which had less experience of political self-governance and that this may have been the reason for integrating them into existing satrapies.

There can be no dispute over the contrast which existed between the advanced Persian political and administrative system and the political state of development of Thrace, as the impact of Persian presence there demonstrates: "Das Aufeinandertreffen mit der fortgeschrittenen persischen Zivilisation löste eine intensive Entwicklung der in den Anfängen stehenden staatsbildenden Prozesse in Thrakien aus".²⁹ Persian impact on the political development of the Caucasus region differed slightly, in that Achaemenid control remained in Iberia until 330 BC and the fact that independent rule only occurred there several centuries later.³⁰ Yet, if we are to interpret the impressive substantial official-looking buildings in Iberia in particular, Persian presence led to considerable political and economic progress.³¹

In contrast to these regions, the incorporation of former kingdoms into the Persian Empire as satrapies had been achieved with a minimum of effort to alter existing conditions, as centres of administration, an infrastructure and an advanced economic state were well established. The existence of long-established courts meant that there was an aristocracy and a social elite which could be linked to the ruling Persian elite. This could not be said to have been the case for the societies of the Black Sea region, whose ruling elite may have appeared less distinguished than that of the former empires.³²

If we accept that these regions were incorporated into existing satrapies, not as lesser satrapies, but merely as additional lands, and if the reasons for this were due to the political situation found there at the time of conquest, then the question arises as to whether this did result in a different level of integration of these regions within the Persian political system. In other words, is it possible that, while the satrapies of Armenia and Lydia each held an officially recognized status within the Persian administrative system, this status

might not have been extended to the different peoples belonging to it, or, in the case of the Black Sea regions, adjoined to it?

The ideology of pax persica and the Black Sea regions

A way of assessing whether there was a difference in the treatment of these regions is to investigate to what extent the ideology of the Empire, manifested in the idea of *pax persica*, was applied to them. This ideology emphasized the inclusion of the subject peoples into the Persian imperial organization. The idea to be conveyed was that the individual peoples were part of a whole, which together supported the king. In return, or as a result of this support, the king guaranteed peace in the Empire, i.e. stability for its people. The way to achieve the co-operation of the subject peoples was to respect their cultural, religious and linguistic identity. Judging from the Persepolis reliefs of the Apadana and of the throne-bearing peoples of Naqsh-e Rostam and the 100-Column-Hall, as well as from the royal inscriptions, no seeming distinction was made between core lands and those on the periphery of the Empire. This premise places each people on a seemingly equal footing.³³ Yet, as already pointed out, neither the inscriptions nor the reliefs reflect political administrative units, but are means of propaganda, aiming to give exactly this impression of the “equality” of the different peoples. We ought to be aware, therefore, that these do not represent historical reality.

The ideological inclusion into the Empire, or, if you like, integration, could not succeed merely by maintaining the cultural identity of the peoples, or by representing them officially as equal lands. Something more needed to be offered in order to ensure their co-operation. The idea of *pax persica* could not function with a strict separation between the Persian ruling class and the subject peoples. It required – to an extent and at a certain level – the integration of the local elite into the political apparatus, as local officials and administrators. By bestowing high office and privilege to members of the local aristocracy they were woven into the intrinsic network of the Persian meritocratic system. It included the exchange of gifts fashioned in Achaemenid court art,³⁴ while mixed marriages between members of the Persian and local elite aided the incorporation of the latter into the Persian “machinery”. The example of Amyntas of Macedon giving his daughter Gygea in marriage to Bubares, son of Megabazos,³⁵ is a good example of this practice occurring at the earliest date after the inclusion of a client-kingdom into the Persian Empire. Beyond that, it also benefited from the king’s involvement in cultural and religious life, whether it was his concern for the land’s religion, as we see in Egypt or Babylonia, with the king’s participation in the Babylonian New Year celebration, or in his concern for the temple in Jerusalem, as well as in the travels to royal residences. It also was apparent in the dissemination of court images, for example the audience scene or the image of the royal hero, which are well attested for the satrapies of western Asia Minor.³⁶ The “suc-

cessful integration” of the local elite into the Persian ideology may also be grasped in the adoption of Persian values by the local elite, expressed in the depiction of activities such as banqueting and hunting on a variety of media (for example, funerary objects, sarcophagi, tombs).

Perhaps at this point a difference between satrapies and adjoined lands/peoples begins to emerge more clearly: We possess no information as to any attempts at integrating the Thracians into the Persian Empire *at that level*. Likewise, no literary reference exists attesting to the relationship between the Persian ruling elite and the peoples of the Caucasus region. If these regions were regarded as politically less advanced, then their local elite may not have been considered to be on the same level as, say, the elites of Lydia or Babylonia. In the case of Thrace, the fact that the satrapal centre was across the straits in Asia Minor, and thus physically separated, possibly added a further obstacle to achieve affinity with Achaemenid political life. No Achaemenid building structure has so far been excavated in Thrace. Being forced to withdraw from the region after ca. 35 years meant that possible ties with the Odrisian court could not be forged.³⁷

The case of Colchis and Iberia is outwardly decidedly different from that of Thrace, as the physical remains of official Achaemenid-style buildings point to a direct presence of Achaemenid officials. The archaeological evidence in the Caucasus region suggests that the Persians invested far more in terms of assuring their presence, and, if the administrative buildings signal anything to go by, would have provided the possibility of local involvement in this administration. But in this case, the extension of the Armenian satrapy posed no difficulty. Geophysically, it was much easier to integrate the Caucasus region into the Empire by extending the overland routes from Armenia. And, of course, Achaemenid control remained until the end of the Empire. Yet regardless of the different intensity of Persian building activities in both regions, politically they were regarded at the same level, in that both became part of another satrapy, and in both cases we may identify a less developed political society as a reason for this decision. Both regions may have been secured by the Persians for their strategic and economic importance. Politically of lesser interest, the Persians may have foregone the opportunity to integrate European Thrace into the Persian ideological thinking in the ca. 35 years of Persian control there.

The Persians and the Greek cities of the Black Sea region

One further point ought to be made. Within the debate about the Black Sea region in the Achaemenid period the question of the possible impact Persian presence might have had on the Greek cities of the Black Sea region is rarely considered. The cities may have been politically autonomous, but economically they were dependent on the local hinterland and thus there must have been at least indirect Persian influence on these communities. Our main glimpse

onto Greek-Persian contact there is through the fine Achaemenizing luxury metalware produced by Greek craftsmen for their local clientele. Few objects can be identified as deriving directly from Achaemenid craftsmen; most have been produced locally, merely pointing to the existence of a close contact with Persian goldsmiths and silversmiths at some point in time. Select Achaemenid motifs and Achaemenid-style vessels (phialae, rhyta, jugs) as well as jewellery (bracelets, torques, earrings) appear from the mid-fifth century onwards in Thrace, indicating an adaptation of Persian luxury objects after the Persian retreat from there.³⁸ Such objects likewise are amply represented for the Caucasus region and the north Pontic coast. The finds from all around the Black Sea of Persian-inspired luxury objects show that an intensive Persian-Greek exchange must have taken place at the level of artistic ideas and metal production on the demand of the Thracians, Scythians and Caucasians. Thus, through the Greek craftsmen and the production of Achaemenizing luxury goods in many of the Greek cities of the Pontos we may identify these as a key figure in the interaction between Persia and the local region.

Many of the objects appear in the context of the court, especially the court of the Odrysian kings. The Greek inscriptions on phialae naming Thracian kings are reminiscent of the inscribed phialae and other vessels of the Persian kings, and may allude to their similar use as royal gifts as a practice adopted from Persia. Other objects, like the rhyta, were adapted into shapes very different from the Persian original and may hint at an independent artistic development.³⁹



Fig. 1. Ring with the figure of a seated Persian carved in intaglio. Gold; cast and carved. Length of bezel 2.3cm. Bosporan Kingdom, Pantikapaion. Late fifth century BC. Inv. no. P-1854.26. Courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

While the production of known luxury goods related to the court and courtly banquets fits in with the demand for Achaemenizing objects in the Greek world, I should like to draw attention to one object which is not easily identified as Achaemenid court art. It is a gold ring from Pantikapaion, dated to ca. 420-400 BC (Fig. 1). Produced in a Greek workshop, the ring bears a Greek inscription, "Athenades", but its image appears Persian, depicting a seated male figure wearing Persian dress, with trousers and tunic, and a soft cap, checking his arrow with his bow beside him.⁴⁰ This image pre-dates by ca. 50 years that on the coins of Datames, whose striking similarity allows the assumption that both images either must have been based on the same original or the motif of the Pantekapaion ring itself provided the model for the later Persian coins. Who created this image of the foreigner as a seated bowman, which is absent in Achaemenid imperial iconography but finds first expression in a Greek artefact? We are dealing here with an object, made by a Greek, for a (Greek?) client of the north Black Sea market, of a Persian depicted in a hitherto unknown scene. It is intriguing to ask what this might be telling us in regard to the possible influence – artistic and otherwise – of the Pontic Greeks on Persian culture.

Notes

- 1 Cf. Fol & Hammond 1988; Archibald 1994.
- 2 Cf. Fol & Hammond 1988, 247.
- 3 The regions at the southern Pontic shore, Bithynia and Paphlagonia, belonged to the satrapies of Phrygia-on-the-Hellespont and Kappadokia respectively. Bithynia was the home of the Asian Thracians. For Persian influence on Paphlagonian art, see von Gall 1966.
- 4 Cf. Fol & Hammond 1988, 239: "Rather, the area from central Thrace to Georgia and from the Ukraine to the north-east Mediterranean formed a whole with mutual economic interests between Scythians and Ionians or Thracians and Iranians".
- 5 Hdt. 3.97. Cf. Wiesehöfer 1993, 99.
- 6 Wiesehöfer 1993, 97.
- 7 According to Jacobs (2006), Colchis was part of the main satrapy of Armenia, with its eastern extension unknown, while Thrace was one of several satrapies presided over by Lydia. Jacobs points out that despite Thrace being mentioned in the lists of lands, it is the main satrapies which are named as the corners of the Empire, Kushiya/Nubia, Hindush/India, Suguda/Sogdia and Sparda/Lydia. In his assessment, Skudra was initially autonomous with Amyntas of Macedon as *hyparchos* (Hdt. 5.17-20), but was then more firmly linked to the Empire (Jacobs 2006). Yet the sites and types of buildings excavated in Georgia and Azerbaijan contradict the idea of this region being only loosely connected (cf. Knauss 2001; Knauss et al. this volume).
- 8 The case for a two-sided attack is made by Jacobs 2000.
- 9 Hdt. 4.124. Dareios crossed the Danube and built fortifications at the Oaros, variously identified, but possibly the Sal river (Jacobs 2000, 96).
- 10 Jacobs 2000, 98. In the west the Persians returned to the Danube, in the east the border was marked by the fortifications at the Sal river. The time of the loss of

the area north of the Caucasus is unknown, but is thought to have occurred in the early fifth century (Jacobs 2000, 99). Even the area south of the Danube had to be defended from Scythian attacks after the conquest of 513/512 BC.

- 11 Hdt. 3.97: "(...) the Colchians and their neighbours as far as the Caucasus mountains (which is as far as the Persian rule reaches, the country north of the Caucasus paying no regard to the Persians)".
- 12 He identifies a "Kleinsatrapie" of Colchis as part of the "Hauptstrapie" Armenia, which only for a brief period may have been under Persian control.
- 13 Meissner 2000; cf. Furtwängler 2000.
- 14 Briant 2002, 145 refers to a "Thracian-Macedonian satrapy".
- 15 Fol & Hammond 1988, 247.
- 16 Jacobs in press.
- 17 Hdt. 3.96 states vaguely that Dareios received tribute from the peoples in Europe as far as Thessaly.
- 18 Hdt. 7.185.
- 19 Hdt. 7.79.
- 20 Only the Asian Thracians pay tribute according to Hdt. 3.90: the Hellespontians on the right side of the straits, the Phrygians, Thracians of Asia, Paphlagonians, Mariandynians and Syrians, paying 360 talents of tribute, forming the third satrapy. In regard to military service, Hdt. 7.75 (after listing the Paphlagonians, Phrygians and Lydians) states that the Thracians wore fox-skin caps and tunics, and were equipped with javelins, little shields and daggers. They were commanded by Bassakes, son of Artabanus. According to Hdt. 7.79, the Mares and Colchians were commanded by Phanadates son of Teaspis. They appear alongside the Alarodians and Saspis, commanded by Masistius son of Siromitres.
- 21 Cf. Fol & Hammond 1988, 247; Briant 2002, 145.
- 22 Wiesehöfer 1993: 94-95; Briant 2002, 177.
- 23 DH 4-6; DPh 5-8.
- 24 Hdt. 4.143, 5.14.
- 25 Hdt. 7.105-106.
- 26 Hdt. 9.116.
- 27 The reason, however, as Jan P. Stronk argues, can hardly be because "the Persians evidently lacked sufficient power to exercise effective control" (Stronk 1998-1999, 68). Surely, it cannot be suggested that an empire with unlimited resources of military and administrative power, with equally unlimited material resources reaching from the Indus valley to Egypt, lacked the power to control a region of the size and political formation such as Thrace?
- 28 Archibald 1998, 79-90, 102.
- 29 Kitov 2007, 39. Cf. Fol & Hammond 1988.
- 30 See the discussion by Meissner (2000).
- 31 See also the contribution by Knauss et al. this volume.
- 32 One problem is the lack of literary sources outside some core satrapies of the Empire (Persis, Babylonia, Egypt) which would shed light on the introduction of administrative mechanisms. The recently published material from Bactria gives us a glimpse of the administrative procedures which were introduced in eastern Iran during the fifth and fourth centuries (Shaked 2003). We possess nothing comparable for the Black Sea region, and the reason for this deficiency may confirm that these regions were integrated into other satrapies and thus part of larger administrative units. As later on Thracian kings adopted the Greek script

- as their official language, while their court was modelled on that of the Persian king, the question is, where did the Thracians place themselves?
- 33 That said, when looking more closely at these official monuments of Persian ideology it is somewhat striking that for some regions, including Thrace, the otherwise systematic grouping of lands seems partially suspended. The last peoples in DNA are listed as European Scythians, Thrace, *petasos*-wearing Ionians, Libya, Ethiopia, Makran, Carians, while on the Apadana reliefs the Thracians (European or Asian?), Arabs, Carians(?), Libyans, and Ethiopians take their place not on the central panel, but in smaller scale on the wall of the staircase. This arrangement may be far from accidental. Their position at the end of the list of peoples may be a reflection of the campaigns undertaken by Dareios I, but it is also possible that these are peoples who held a different status among the lands of the Empire.
- 34 The one genuine Achaemenid artefact found in Thrace is the amphora-rhyton from Duvanlij (National Archaeological Institute and Museum, Sofia, inv. no. 6173).
- 35 Hdt. 5.18.1, 21.2.
- 36 Cf. Kaptan 1996.
- 37 A fact which does not exclude the Odrysian kings' modelling of their court on that of the Achaemenids; see below fn 39.
- 38 For a survey of the artistic influence on gold and silver objects from Thrace, see Archibald 1989.
- 39 For the change in understanding and use of Achaemenid objects, see Ebbinghaus 1999.
- 40 Hermitage P.1854.26. The suggestion was made during the conference discussion that the figure could be Scythian rather than Persian, which remains possible. But even if we take it as a generic image of the "barbarian", the fact still remains that the later Persian coins of Datames bear a striking similarity to this image and that therefore this Greek artistic creation became a model for Persian art.

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