

Polygamy in Greek Views of Persians

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MORE THAN FORTY years ago, in his polemical work *Orientalism*, Edward Said argued that the image of the Orient had been constructed by Westerners in the 18th and 19th centuries in order to favour the latter's political domination.¹ In so arguing, he did not hesitate to consider that this process dated back to Aeschylus' *Persians*, and generally speaking, some similarities between modern and ancient views of Easterners may seem striking. However, in many cases it is worth checking the reality and depth of such analogies. At first glance, polygamy is one of them. In Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, the polygamy of the main figure is a striking feature of the Persian world that he contrasts with France. And in his classic book on *The Family in Classical Greece*, W. K. Lacey argued that Greek cities had "a common attitude towards family customs, monogamy, for example, and the refusal to adopt the oriental custom of the harem." His note shows unsurprisingly that the "Orientals" who practised polygamy were Persians.² On the back cover of Edith Hall's *Inventing the Barbarian*, it may be read that "incest, polygamy, murder, sacrilege, impalement, castration, female power, and despotism—these are some of the images by which the Greek tragedians defined the non-Greek, 'barbarian' world."³ Since, according to Strabo (15.3.23), Persians appear to be the most famous barbarians among the Greeks, it may be of interest to investigate the place of polygamy

¹ E. Said, *Orientalism* (London 1978).

² W. K. Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece* (Ithaca 1968) 218. The endnote reads "polygamy in Persia, Hdt III, 68–9, 88 etc."

³ E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian. Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford 1989).

in Greek views of Persians.

In fact, as is well known, proper Persian evidence is so scarce that it is not easy to discover information about the Persians, much less Persian women. Despite the availability of some—rather scarce—representations and a few references in administrative documents,⁴ we know Persian women for the most part through Greek literature. It is, then, always difficult to distinguish between how these Persian women actually lived and how our Greek sources saw them. My focus here is precisely what is easier to discern, that is to say, not so much Persian practices of polygamy as the importance and meaning of polygamy in Greek views of Persians.

In 17th-century French, *polygame* could designate a man who had been married *successively* to several wives, but nowadays polygamy means that a man has several wives *at the same time*. Except if one breaks the law, like Mr. Verdoux in Chaplin's film, today the word is generally used to designate practices outside the so-called Western world,⁵ and is even currently one of the disparaging themes used to exemplify the otherness of some parts of the non-Western world, especially some parts of the Muslim world.

An initial question would be whether the word polygamy is relevant to ancient Greek views of Persians, and my answer would be yes. Admittedly, the Greek πολύγαμος and μονόγαμος

⁴ Representations: M. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia (559–331 BC)* (Oxford 1996) 84–87. M. Brosius, “The Royal Audience Scene Reconsidered,” in J. Curtis et al. (eds.), *The World of Achaemenid Persia* (New York 2010) 141–152, at 141, and J. A. Lerner, “An Achaemenid Cylinder Seal of a Woman Enthroned,” in *The World of Achaemenid Persia* 153–164, at 153, point out that the absence of female representations is certainly true of Achaemenid palace reliefs, but that women were pictured on a variety of objects, such as tapestry, seals, or finger rings. Women in administrative documents: Brosius, *Women* 3, 9–10, 250–253.

⁵ Today polygamy is mainly practiced in “the least secularized Islamic countries of the Middle East and more generally sub-Saharan Africa”: W. Scheidel, “A Peculiar Institution? Greco-Roman Monogamy in Global Context,” *History of the Family* 14 (2009) 284.

are infrequent and late, and they may refer to successive marriages. But the earliest Greek text to mention the plurality of wives among Persians is that of Herodotus (1.135): “each of them marries (γαμέουσι) many (πολλάς) legitimate wives.” With the same lexical items as ours (*gam-* and *poly-*), this refers to men having several wives at the same time and describes this as one of the Persian customs (*nomoi*).⁶

Does that mean that polygamy was widely recognized as a distinctive feature of Persians in Greek eyes—a feature that would have distinguished Persians from Greeks, as well as from other alien peoples? And did (monogamous) Greeks generally use polygamy as a theme of disparagement in their descriptions of Persians? How did they interpret this custom, and how did they judge it? Such are the questions with which I would like to deal. In order to throw some light on the topic, I will first point out that Greeks distinguished wives from concubines. Then I will define the place of polygamy in Greek views of Persians. Finally, I will analyse Greek interpretations and value judgments of that practice.

1. *Wives and concubines: the main distinctions*

In his famous section on Persian customs, Herodotus mentions wives as well as concubines (1.135): γαμέουσι δὲ ἕκαστος ἀντῶν πολλάς μὲν κουριδίας γυναῖκας, πολλῶ δ’ ἔτι πλέονας παλλακὰς κτῶνται, “Each of them marries many legitimate wives and acquires still more concubines.”⁷ Both categories of women—wives and concubines—have two features in common: first that they are linked to a man, and second that they are many. But Herodotus and other Greeks after him also clearly distinguish

⁶ Hdt. 1.131, Πέρσας δὲ οἶδα νόμοισι τοιοσίδε χρεωμένους, “I know that Persians have the following customs”; 1.135, ξεινικὰ δὲ νόμια Πέρσαι προσίενται ἀνδρῶν μάλιστα, “Persians more than all men welcome foreign customs.”

⁷ Str. 15.3.17 writes nearly the same: γαμοῦσι δὲ πολλάς καὶ ἅμα παλλακὰς τρέφουσι πλείους πολυτεκνίας χάριν, “They marry many women, and maintain at the same time still more concubines, in a view to a numerous offspring”—probably after Herodotus.

wives from concubines. They have distinct words for them, γυναῖκες versus παλλακαί or παλλακίδες. And they ascribe to them different statuses. The words used by Herodotus himself actually imply two important differences from a Greek point of view: (1) The concubine is acquired (κτῶνται) by the Persians: that is a feature in common with the slaves of the Greek world.⁸ (2) The expression κουριδίη γυνή, “legitimate wife,” also suggests an analogy with the Greek world concerning the status of children: there, only the children of legitimate wives could be legitimate sons (γνήσιοι), and consequently full heirs and full citizens.

In fact, Herodotus and other Greeks call the sons of the Persians’ wives *gnesioi*, “legitimate,” and the sons of their concubines *nothoi*, “illegitimate”: νόθον οὐ σφι νόμος ἐστὶ βασιλεῦσαι γνησίου παρεόντος, “it is not their custom for an illegitimate son to become king while a legitimate son exists” (3.2). As can be seen, Herodotus also points out that among the King’s sons those of his wives have priority for succeeding their father on the throne.

Several authors also insist on the hierarchy between concubines and wives, as it could be observed from the facts of everyday life. That is especially true of the fourth-century authors of *Persica*, like Dinon and Heracleides of Kyme.⁹ Both authors make a clear distinction between a legitimate wife and a

⁸ In the Greek world, *pallakai* were not always slaves, but they always had a lower status. Brosius rightly points out that the word *pallake* might minimize the real status of Persian concubines. In fact, it seems likely that all concubines did not enjoy the same place at the court. The term “concubine” is itself not satisfactory. Moreover, in Persia the acquisition of *pallakai* was not limited to capture: whereas the Kings’ wives came from noble Persian families, foreign women, even of high social rank, could only become their concubines. That is suggested by Herodotus’ story about Amasis who did not want to give his daughter to Cambyses for that reason (3.1), and is confirmed by all the known cases after Darius (Brosius, *Women* 32–33). In short, although inadequate, Greek terms remain convenient.

⁹ On concubines according to these two authors and beyond see Brosius, *Women* 35–69; D. Lenfant, *Les Histoires perses de Dinon et d’Héraclide* (Paris 2009) 231–237, 267–273.

concubine. According to Dinon, the concubines worship (θηρσκειν) the legitimate wife (γαμετή) of the King: they do obedience to her (προσκυνοῦσι γούν αὐτήν).¹⁰ This hierarchy is also dramatized in the King's dinner as pictured by Heracleides: many people have their part in that institution, each according to his rank and to royal favour. Concerning women, the King's wife sometimes dines with him, whereas "throughout the dinner his concubines sing and play the lyre."¹¹ This is a clear indication of their differing status, here in their relationship to the King. The distinction between their respective positions is also seen when they follow the King's army: as noticed by Maria Brosius,¹² in the military train of Darius III the King's wife "travelled in her own carriage, at the front of the women's carriages. Then followed the carriages with the royal children and their attendants, and finally those of the concubines."

Wife and concubine also have different duties: admittedly, the King may have sexual intercourse with both of them, but concubines are also described as a large group who were often employed as singers and musicians playing for the King's pleasure day and night (cf. Heracleides F 1, F 2).

As a result, the words *gyne* and *pallake* offer an *interpretatio Graeca* which may sometimes be misleading.¹³ Nevertheless, these

¹⁰ Dinon *FGrHist* 690 F 27 (Ath. 556B): παρὰ δὲ Πέρσαις ἀνέχεται ἡ βασίλεια τοῦ πλήθους τῶν παλλακίδων διὰ τὸ ὡς δεσπότην ἄρχειν τῆς γαμετῆς τὸν βασιλέα, ἔτι δὲ καὶ διὰ τὸ τὴν βασιλίδα, ὡς φησιν Δίνων ἐν τοῖς Περσικοῖς, ὑπὸ τῶν παλλακίδων θηρσκέεσθαι· προσκυνοῦσι γούν αὐτήν. Cf. Lenfant, *Les Histoires perses* 231.

¹¹ Heracleides *FGrHist* 689 F 2 (Ath. 145D): τὰ δὲ πλείστα ὁ βασιλεὺς μόνος ἀριστῶ καὶ δειπνεῖ. ἐνίοτε δὲ καὶ ἡ γυνὴ αὐτῷ συνδειπνεῖ καὶ τῶν υἱῶν ἔνιοι. καὶ παρὰ τὸ δεῖπνον ἄδουσί τε καὶ ψάλλουσιν αἱ παλλακαὶ αὐτῷ, "In most cases the King lunches and dines alone, but sometimes his wife and some of his sons dine with him. And throughout the dinner his concubines sing and play the lyre." Cf. Lenfant, *Les Histoires perses* 277–282.

¹² Brosius, *Women* 88, citing Curtius 3.3.22–24.

¹³ As already seen, Brosius also suspects that a *pallake* at the Persian court had a better status than in a Greek house, and this may have been true in some cases although not in every case.

words most likely translate real differences in status among Persians themselves.

In the last decades, historians of the Persian Empire like Maria Brosius and Pierre Briant have rightly pointed out that it was necessary to distinguish between wives and concubines.¹⁴ More recently, Llewellyn-Jones has preferred to use the term “harem” to designate all the women of the Persian court,¹⁵ a choice which in my view has many drawbacks, including an unconvincing assimilation with Muslim practices, the pejorative associations of the word in its Western use, and the confusion of the two categories of women, which our sources, even if Greek, show as clearly distinct, as we have seen.

Concubines are a different topic from wives, even if we consider the Greek point of view: admittedly those of the King are exceptionally numerous (maybe 360, one for each day, according to *Persica* writers and Alexander historians),¹⁶ but apart from that number, they may not be wholly strange compared to Greek customs, since, even if married, Greeks could use their female slaves as they wished, or support a woman (a *pallake*) in addition to a wife without exposing themselves to social disapproval.¹⁷ Concubines deserve to be considered separately, and

¹⁴ Brosius, *Women* 32–33 ; P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander* (Winona Lake 2002) 283–286. Brosius (27–28) points out that Persepolis texts use the word *dukšiš* which emerges as “a title used for women belonging to the family of the king, but it definitely was not confined to the king’s wife.” For this notion wider than “wife,” Brosius speaks of “royal women,” Briant of “princesses.” Elsewhere, Brosius specifies that the word may refer to the king’s daughters, to his mother, and his wife: Brosius, *Persians. An Introduction* (Oxford 2006) 41–43; see also Lenfant, *Les Histoires perses* 231–237.

¹⁵ L. Llewellyn-Jones, *King and Court in Ancient Persia 559 to 331 BCE* (Edinburgh 2013). Incidentally, his definition of *harem* varies: it is used by turns to refer to “a specific unit [constituted by women] within the court” (100) or to “the women and the personnel of the Persian inner court” (102), which may obviously include in his eyes eunuchs and court doctors (111).

¹⁶ Cf. Lenfant, *Les Histoires perses* 270–272.

¹⁷ For that reason, W. Scheidel, “Monogamy and Polygyny,” in B. Rawson (ed.), *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Malden 2011) 108–

I would like to discuss here polygamy proper, that is to say, the plurality of wives for whom there has been a form of contract, even if that contract is a tacit agreement with the wife's family.

2. *The place of polygamy in Greek views of Persians*

Who is represented in Greek literature as being polygamous? The first point to make is that Herodotus' generalization, in which he attributes many wives to each of the Persians (1.135), stands entirely alone (except for a passage of Strabo, who draws upon him).¹⁸ If we set that passage apart, in the whole of Greek literature, only kings are assigned several wives. Some Persian aristocrats have concubines (e.g. Cyrus the Younger or Pharnabazus),¹⁹ but several wives are ascribed to none of them, including in the rest of Herodotus' history itself.²⁰ In other

115, at 109 and 111, labels Greek system "polygynous monogamy," a practice which reconciles formal (legal) monogamy with "effectively polygynous relationships in the social and sexual spheres," through sexual access to concubines and domestic slaves (married men were nevertheless meant to keep their concubines "physically separate from their main residences and hence their wives").

¹⁸ Str. 15.3.17; see n.7 above. Ael. *NA* 1.14 obviously draws on Herodotus as well.

¹⁹ In his account of Xerxes' expedition to Greece, Herodotus mentions the concubines of the Immortals (7.83.2), the concubines of the Persians (9.81), a concubine of the Persian Phrandates (9.76), or more generally the many concubines who follow Xerxes' army (7.187). Boges, the Persian governor of Eion, had concubines in addition to his wife (7.107). Cyrus the Younger, who was not married, had several concubines (Xen. *An.* 1.10.2–3; Ael. *VH* 12.1), likewise Pharnabazus (Xen. *Hell.* 3.1.10).

²⁰ Boges, when he was besieged by the Athenians, decided to cut the throats of his "children, wife, concubines, and servants" (Hdt. 7.107.2)—which means he only had one wife. Xerxes' brother Masistes obviously had only one wife (Hdt. 9.108, 110–111). Brosius carefully points out that "we know little about non-royal marriages of Persians" of Darius' time, and that "these marriages provide no evidence for polygamy among the Persians" (Brosius, *Women* 64 n.39). For Persian nobles such as satraps, polygamy was even less conceivable given that they had sometimes married a daughter of the King (on this practice see Brosius 70–82), who was certainly in a position to demand to be the sole wife. Xenophon actually explains that Pharnabazus intended to take Spithridates' daughter as a concubine, because he "was

words, if we consider Greek views in general, we should speak not of Persian polygamy, but rather of Persian royal polygamy.

But that is not all. If one examines systematically all the available allusions to different kings (see the Appendix), it turns out that only the first four kings, namely Cyrus, Cambyses, Smerdis, and Darius, are pictured as polygamous. Almost all the kings who succeed them are represented as having just one wife at a time. Only Artaxerxes II could be added to those four first kings, since, after the death of his first wife Stateira, he is said to have married one of his daughters, and then a second²¹—probably both his wives at the same time.²²

For its part, Darius III's case is misleading. In fact, on the one hand, he has been assigned two wives, since there is, first, the famous Stateira who was captured by Alexander, and was the Persian king's sister as well as his wife;²³ then there is Pharnakes' sister (Diodorus and Arrian allude to Pharnakes as the "brother of Darius' wife").²⁴ On the other hand, however, Darius III is never pictured as having two wives *at the same time*.²⁵

Hence, Xerxes, Artaxerxes I, Artaxerxes III, and Darius III are never pictured as being polygamous. All in all, the Persians who are pictured by Greeks as having several wives at the same time are five—which is not very many.²⁶

But there is something even more surprising: Persian kings are

negotiating for a marriage with the Great King's daughter" (*Ages*. 3.3). For his part, Briant nevertheless concludes from Herodotus' and Strabo's general statements that "like the kings, the heads of houses practiced polygamy" (*From Cyrus* 336).

²¹ Heracleides F 7a–b = Plut. *Artax.* 23.6, 27.7–9.

²² Lenfant, *Les Histoires perses* 310–314.

²³ Plut. *Alex.* 30.3–5, Arr. 2.11.9, Just. 11.9.12.

²⁴ Diod. 17.21.3, Arr. 1.16.3. Note that Brosius, *Women* 205, erroneously speaks of a daughter of Pharnakes.

²⁵ One cannot exclude the possibility that Pharnakes' sister was dead when Alexander invaded the empire; and above all, concerning Greek representations which are our concern here, it is never suggested that Darius III had several wives. See the Appendix, on Darius III.

²⁶ There were twelve kings in all, some of them admittedly little known.

generally represented by Greeks as if they were monogamous. The image of Persians as polygamous is almost peculiar to Herodotus, in his general point (on all Persians) as well as in his narrative (on such and such a king). Moreover, Herodotus does not say much about polygamy.²⁷

If one turns to other texts, it appears that there is no reference to several wives, and that Greeks very often mention “the wife” of the King as if they considered him to be monogamous. For example, Xenophon mentions several times “the brother of the King’s wife” (*An.* 2.3.17, 28). The *First Alcibiades* ascribed to Plato alludes to “the King’s wife” (121C, 123B).²⁸ Ctesias’ fragments never ascribe more than one wife to each king from Cyrus to Artaxerxes II. In the period when he lived at the court as physician, Ctesias, according to Plutarch, “treated [the King], his wife [singular], his mother, and his children.”²⁹ Dinon and Heracleides seem to consider the uniqueness of the wife as a norm. At least, in the fragments quoted above, they always contrast the concubines (plural) to the wife (singular). Throughout the *Persica* of these three last-mentioned authors, the King’s wives alluded to in some detail are in each case the only wife: that is true of Parysatis, wife of Darius II, and Stateira, wife of Artaxerxes II (until she is poisoned by her mother-in-law). As we have seen, only the late Artaxerxes II is possibly presented as having two of his daughters as his wives.³⁰

²⁷ D. Boedeker has observed that polygamy “causes few problems for characters in the ‘Histories’”: “Persian Gender Relations as Historical Motives in Herodotus,” in R. Rollinger et al. (eds.), *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich* (Wiesbaden 2011) 211–235, at 222–223. The only passages which allude to it are 1.135 (Persian custom), 3.68–69 (the Magus’ wives), and 3.88.2–3 (women married by Darius). R. Thomas also notes that in Herodotus’ “Persian ethnography” itself “the exotic and sensational fact of polygamy is barely present”: “Herodotus’ Persian Ethnography,” in *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich* 237–254, at 244.

²⁸ These allusions are probably what makes Brosius say that “references to the wife of the Persian king in Plato use the singular form” (*Women* 37).

²⁹ Ctes. F 15a = Plut. *Artax.* 1.4.

³⁰ I limit myself here to historical Kings as pictured by contemporary

In short, polygamy takes up a minor and marginal place in Greek representations of Persians. Therefore, I hesitate to follow Deborah Boedeker when she says that for Herodotus' audience "this was doubtless one of the most notable features of Persian culture."³¹

3. *The Greeks' interpretations and judgments*

So far as I know, modern historians have not explained Persian royal polygamy in general, but rather in some specific cases. For example, Maria Brosius has stressed that the early kings (from Cyrus to Darius) seem to have married several women as a way to secure alliances and loyalty from the wives' families (in fact, they married the daughters of earlier rulers and those of Persian nobles).³² With his six wives, Darius holds the record (see the Appendix), since, in addition to the wife he had married before his accession to the throne, he married two wives and two daughters of earlier kings, as well as his own niece. Maria Brosius shows very well that this exceptional case may be explained by the need to secure loyalty from different families through marriage alliances³³—and to seal access to power. Pierre Briant has also pointed out that Cambyses' polygamy was also endogamic, since the two sisters he married were also Cyrus' daughters: in doing so, Cambyses avoided their marriage to others who could have yearned for the throne.³⁴ This necessity to guard access to

Greeks, but it is significant that even a late Greek romance like Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe* represents the King of Persia as having just one wife.

³¹ Boedeker, in *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich* 222; see also Thomas, in *Herodot* 244, who holds that polygamy is one of "the elements we and Herodotus' audience might expect to be central." In the same way, Llewellyn-Jones feels obliged to explain why "in the Greco-Persian material evidence we do not see any images of a single man with a number of attendant wives"; according to him, Greek monogamic norm would have been imposed there upon Persian figures: "The Big and Beautiful Women of Asia: Picturing Female Sexuality in Greco-Persian Seals," in *The World of Achaemenid Persia* 165–176, at 170.

³² Brosius, *Women* 35–36, 42; on royal polygamy: 35–69.

³³ Brosius, *Women* 47–64. Cf. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander* 132, 144–145.

³⁴ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander* 93: "In these instances we can see the

the royal lineage undoubtedly also explains why Atossa, who was Cyrus' daughter, was successively the wife of Cambyses, Smerdis, and Darius. Thus, modern explanations especially concern the earlier kings, and turn towards political motives.³⁵ What about Greek interpretation? Did Greeks try to understand Persian polygamy?

First, it can be said that, unlike the moderns, Herodotus and others do not *explicitly* ascribe political motives to the practice of the earlier kings. However, Herodotus enumerates Darius' wives in a specific context, in the passage in which he explains how Darius consolidated his power, and this shows that the historian was conscious of the political function of these marriages.³⁶

Second, it has been suggested by Llewellyn-Jones that, when

institution of a policy of endogamy that was applied consistently by the Achaemenids throughout their history and that permitted them to wipe out the royal ambitions of any other great aristocratic family." In a way, the endogamic principle could also apply to the case of Artaxerxes II and his daughters: for the first one, Parysatis would have favoured the marriage in order to avoid a new wife who would not have been under her control.

³⁵ The same holds for king Philip II of Macedon, who according to Satyrus (Ath. 557B–E) had seven wives, among whom six helped him to consolidate his control over recently conquered lands (Illyria, Thessaly, kingdom of the Molossians, Thrace). On Argead polygamy see W. Greenwalt, "Polygamy and Succession in Argead Macedonia," *Arethusa* 22 (1989) 19–45; D. Ogden, *Polygamy, Prostitutes and Death. The Hellenistic Dynasties* (London 1999) 3–51. Alexander did the same (Ogden 41–51, and "Alexander's Sex Life," in W. Heckel et al. [eds.], *Alexander the Great. A New History* [Malden 2009] 203–217, at 204–207), probably imitating rather his Macedonian father (206) than Persian kings (as assumed by Brosius, *Women* 36, who does not take into account the Macedonian practice of polygamy and concludes that Alexander's practice was based on that of earlier Persians). Polygamy was also widely practised by Hellenistic kings to establish alliances. See Ogden, *Polygamy*, and "The Royal Families of Argead Macedon and the Hellenistic World," in *A Companion to Families* 92–107, who points out another possible motivation: "the king's will, conscious or otherwise, to express difference from the Macedonian, Greek and Hellenized commonalty and to project themselves as exceptional and as presiding over a family apart" (106).

³⁶ Otherwise, he alludes to particular wives only when they play a role in his narrative.

Greeks mentioned only one wife for a king, the reason was that they were uncomfortable with cultural differences that contrasted with their monogamistic norm.³⁷ Yet since the Greeks are far from systematically concealing Persian polygamy, it is debatable to ascribe to them an approach that assimilates Persian customs.

Maria Brosius points out that when the king had more than one wife, “the one wife of the king who was singled out above the others was the mother of the heir to the throne,”³⁸ i.e. the mother of the son whom the king designated as his heir. It does seem that when Greeks mention only one wife, she is the mother of the designated heir.³⁹ Perhaps in reckoning as wife only the woman who had given birth to that son who was recognised by the king as his heir, the Greeks were echoing the Persians themselves. In any case, this woman’s relation to the legitimate line of descent should have had some meaning for Greeks themselves, since, in their world too, a legitimate marriage was designed to secure legitimate descent.

Third, that being said, Greeks do not give any explicit explanation for Persian polygamy. The only text which suggests an explanation of the Persians’ ideas about polygamy is the passage in which Herodotus mentions the Persian custom of having many wives and many concubines (1.135), where the context into which it is inserted might give some clues. Just before this

³⁷ Llewellyn-Jones, *King and Court* 114: “This is probably the result of the Greek preoccupation with the ‘norm’ of monogamy and their inability to put themselves comfortably into a different cultural mindset.”

³⁸ Brosius, *Women* 69.

³⁹ We cannot be sure that this wife was the only one, but the available evidence often gives that impression, especially for Stateira, wife of Artaxerxes II, and her homonym, wife of Darius III. In both cases (which we know through distinct sources), the King is presented as being in love with his wife, and there is no good reason to reject this idea in principle. If he had other wives, it may be thought that they were pushed into the background as soon as the first one was considered as the mother of the heir. That may be implied by Plutarch when he calls Stateira the “legitimate wife of the king” (*gnesia basileôs gyne*) who had with him children reared to reign (Plut. *Artax.* 18.6), although we should be cautious and avoid over-reading this statement which could be based on Greek practises.

sentence, the historian says that Persians practice all kinds of pleasures (εὐπαθείας παντοδαπάς) which they have learnt from other peoples, such as pederasty. Just after, he tells us that in Persian eyes “a man’s worth is demonstrated, after his valor in battle, by his bringing forward many children” (ἀνδραγαθίη δὲ αὕτη ἀποδέδεκται, μετὰ τὸ μάχεσθαι εἶναι ἀγαθόν, ὃς ἂν πολλοὺς ἀποδέξῃ παῖδας, 1.136). Although there are no logical links between these statements, this setting could at first sight suggest two possible explanations for the many wives: the search for pleasure, on the one hand, and the desire to have many children, on the other. Only this second explanation has been felt as such by Strabo, in the passage which obviously draws on Herodotus, but where he is more explicit: according to him, Persians “marry many wives and support at the same time more concubines in order to have many children.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Herodotus here speaks of Persians in general, and not of the kings (in fact, according to him, Persians would be rewarded by the king for their fertility). Furthermore, the desire to have many children is supposed to explain the great number of wives as well as of concubines.

In other words, Herodotus and Strabo suggest (or say) only that polygamy was a way to secure a numerous descent, which was for a Persian a source of prestige. But in these authors the same explanation applies both to wives and concubines, and especially to those of non-royal Persians. Thus, it does not apply to the polygamous men we know of, the kings.

Our last question is that of Greek value judgments on Persian polygamy. In the 1920s Louis Méridier wrote that “monogamy was considered by Greeks as one of the distinctive features of their civilization, by contrast with the barbarian world.”⁴¹ And more recently, Maria Brosius considered that Greeks described

⁴⁰ Strab. 15.3.17 (see n.7 above). It is striking that Strabo does not link these many women to the search for pleasure.

⁴¹ L. Méridier, *Euripide. Tragédies* II (Paris 1927) 120 n.1, on a passage of Euripides’ *Andromache*.

polygamy and incestuous marriages “to emphasize the monstrosity of the Persian king, his decadence, and his domination by women.”⁴²

Actually, in Greek literature polygamy is rather a stereotype related to Thracians,⁴³ or exceptionally to the Trojans of tragedy.⁴⁴ Furthermore, there is nothing to prove that Greeks found polygamy monstrous, in the way, for instance, that they found certain kinds of incestuous marriage monstrous.⁴⁵ Moreover, the idea that polygamy would be a sign of decadence seems all the more surprising inasmuch as polygamy is above all ascribed to early kings, especially to Darius, whom Greeks never

⁴² Brosius, *Women* 35.

⁴³ The three main allusions are Hdt. 5.5, Eur. *Andr.* 215–217, Men. fr.877 K.-A. (Strab. 7.3.4: in that comedy, where the stereotype is pushed to caricature, a Thracian says that among the Getae men usually have from ten to twelve wives, or even more). It is worth noting that Strabo draws on Menander, and asserts that other authors confirm his information, but without naming them. In the same way, modern commentators on Herodotus and Euripides also quote Menander as an illustration. Such stereotypes about Thracians may explain why Herodotus mentions Persian polygamy as an originally foreign custom (1.135, ξεινικὰ δὲ νόμια Πέρσαι προσίενται ἀνδρῶν μάλιστα).

⁴⁴ Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian* 43, shows that the *Iliad* does not clearly describe Priam as polygamist, since, apart from Hecuba, the women with whom he had many children seem to have had an inferior rank. Second, she points out (43 n.136) that tragedy, for its part, ascribes polygamy to Trojans only in one passage of Euripides’ *Andromache* (168–180). One could go even further, since even there it is said by Hermione—who is jealous of the Trojan Andromache and curses Barbarian customs—merely that “it is not good that one man holds the reins of two women (*gynaikes*)” (177–178). In fact, it is not certain that *gynē* means “wife” here, rather than “woman.” In the latter case, it would be an allusion not to polygamy but rather to polygyny, which would also be more relevant to the situation, since Neoptolemus and Andromache are not going to marry each other. In the same way, some other verses of the *Andromache* are not so much attacks against polygamy as against polygyny (465–470 “two couches,” 909 “one man who has two women”).

⁴⁵ It is not justified to associate here polygamy with incest, since, as Brosius herself points out (36), what is monstrous is incestuous marriage (more precisely between ascendant and descendant, or between siblings with the same mother).

depicted as a decadent king.⁴⁶ In their pictures of decadent Persia, neither the author of the *Cyropaedia* (8.8), nor Isocrates says a single word about the King's wives. Plato, in the *Laws*, admittedly deplores the education of the King's sons by women and eunuchs, but these women are not said to be the several wives of a king.⁴⁷ Last, Brosius' idea that polygamy would secure the domination of kings by women may seem puzzling. These are in fact modern distortions of Greek views of Persians.⁴⁸

In conclusion, it can be said that in Greek eyes Persian polygamy was certainly exotic, but neither a striking feature nor a monstrous one. One can doubt that Greeks considered monogamy "as one of the distinctive features of their civilization, by contrast with the barbarian world," first, because most barbarians, including Persians, were in their eyes monogamous, and second because polygamy is rarely mentioned. As a result, whatever was the extent of the practice of polygamy, we should not say that it was a major distinguishing feature in Greek eyes. One possible reason for this is that polygamy concerned, at the most, the King, that is, one man at a time among all Persians. Another possible reason is linked to Greek social norms, which were not the same as those of modern Western societies. Greeks were monogamous, but not legally obliged to conjugal exclusivity, and often polygynous.⁴⁹ Finally, I would say that Persian polygamy should not be interpreted simply as an inversion of Greek monogamy, as the reverse of civilization in their eyes⁵⁰ or a

⁴⁶ On Darius' Greek image see Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander* 388, 479, 516–517.

⁴⁷ Plato speaks of "the women" (*gynaikes*, *Leg.* 694D), "royal women" (*basilides gynaikes*, 694E), "women and eunuchs" (695A). Brosius, *Women* 37, rightly points out the vagueness of 694E.

⁴⁸ Likewise, polygamy is not given as an illustration of lust. Admittedly, Herodotus says that the Magus' wives slept with him in turn, but this is not at odds with the purpose of procreation. Given that the kings had concubines at their disposal, sexual desire required polygamy even less.

⁴⁹ That is why Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, speaking of women in ancient Greece and admittedly using notions which we would today avoid, that "du gynécée au harem la différence n'est pas grande."

⁵⁰ See Méridier quoted above.

feature of a depreciated “anti-Greek” according to the interpretative framework of François Hartog or Edith Hall. Polygamy is sometimes felt by Greeks as a real difference from their own practices, but all in all not a crucial one. It is anything but an obsessive stereotype, to the point that in many writings on Persia after Herodotus it is not mentioned at all.

These conclusions help to show why we must resist anachronistic projections: it is sometimes difficult not to ascribe to ancient Greeks modern Western values, and it is tempting, but not particularly relevant, to ascribe to them modern Western views about the ancient East or stereotypes of the modern ‘Orient’.

I would end with a final illustration of such a process, this time in the field of Greek pictorial representation. In an excellent paper on images of Persians in vase paintings,⁵¹ Margaret Miller points out that some of these pictures are conventional genre scenes, like the warrior’s departure, where figures of ‘Persians’ replace the usual figures of Greeks. She suggests that in the pictures of Persian warriors’ departures, like that on an Attic oenochoe of the Vatican (*fig. 1*),⁵² the number of women may signal a special interest of Greeks in the institution of polygamy (140). In departure scenes with *Greek* figures, the warrior is often between a woman and an old *man* (as in *fig. 2*).⁵³ Margaret Miller points out that “in the version with Persians, the departing figure is attended by women (plural)” (141) and she exemplifies this with the Vatican oenochoe.⁵⁴

⁵¹ M. Miller, “Imaging Persians in the Age of Herodotus,” in *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich* 123–157.

⁵² Attic oenochoe, ca. 460–450, Vatican 16536, *ARV*² II 1065.8, photograph Miller 141, *fig. 12*, after A. Furtwängler and K. Reichhold, *Griechische Vasenmalerei* (Munich 1904–1932) pl. 168. W. Raeck, *Zum Barbarenbild in der Kunst Athens im 6. und 5. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* (Bonn 1981) Abb. 58, P 591.

⁵³ Stamnos, British Museum E448, *ARV*² II 992.65. F. Lissarrague, *La cité des images* (Paris 1984) 40, *fig. 61*.

⁵⁴ She also refers to other vases, such as Raeck, *Zum Barbarenbild* Abb. 42, P 585 (pelike, Louvre Camp. 11164; cf. K. Schauenburg, “EYPYMEΔΩΝ

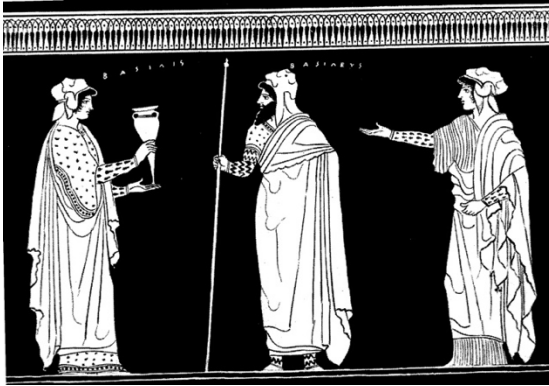


Figure 1: Attic oenochoe, Vatican 16536.

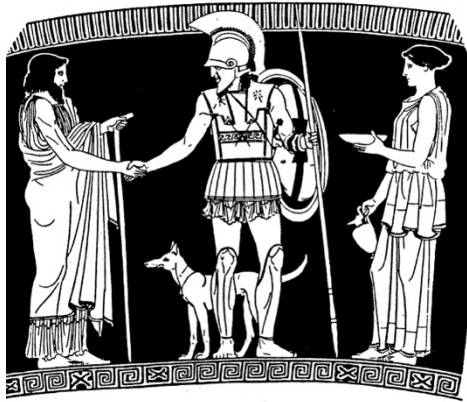


Figure 2: Stamnos, British Museum E448.

EIMI,” *MDAI* 90 [1975] 97–121, plate 40.1), where a Persian king is surrounded by two women. Another picture of a Persian king surrounded by two women is Raeck P 567 (lekythos, Laon 371048, *CVA* Laon 1, plate 41.3–4). On Persian departure scenes see Raeck 138–147.

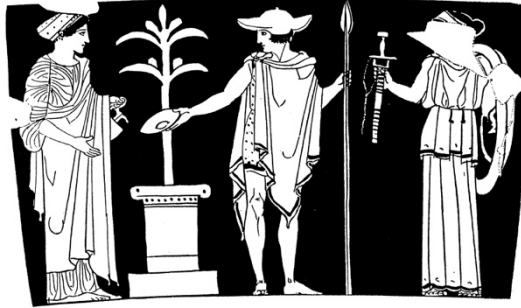


Figure 3: Crater, Niobid painter, Tübingen E 104.

However, one can be sceptical about interpreting this as a reference to Persian polygamy, for at least two reasons. First, on the oenochoe the man is explicitly designated as *basileus*, “the King,” and the woman facing him (on the left) as *basilis*, “the Queen” (singular), whereas the female figure on the right has no caption and must be a secondary figure (for example, a daughter?).⁵⁵ Second, there are also images of Greek departures where the man is standing between two women, so for example on a crater in Tübingen (*fig. 3*).⁵⁶ Under these circumstances,

⁵⁵ W. Raeck, *Zum Barbarenbild* 143, points out that the queen’s chiton indicates her higher rank.

⁵⁶ Crater, Niobid painter, Tübingen E104, *ARV*² I 603.35. T. B. L. Webster, *Der Niobidenmaler* (Leipzig 1935) plate 20; F. Lissarrague, *La cité* fig. 62. Another example of a Greek warrior surrounded by two women is indicated by W. Raeck, *Zum Barbarenbild* 141: stamnos, Kleophon painter (Munich 2415, P.E. Arias and M. Hirmer, *A History of Greek vase painting* [London 1962] plate 193, *ARV*² II 1143.2). In addition to departure scenes, there are Greek interior scenes where a man is surrounded by two women (e.g. red-figure hydria, Syracuse painter, BA 205843, British Museum E 211), which nobody would see as allusions to polygamy. Conversely, there are Persian departure scenes where the warrior is facing only one woman, e.g. a lekythos in Frankfurt, Raeck P 565 plates 59–60. Raeck himself points out that the scenes with a Persian man between two women as well as the different versions of the Persian departure scene follow the same patterns as the Greek departure scenes (140–142).

the number of women on such pictures may not be conclusive.

In the same paper, Margaret Miller casts doubt on her earlier interpretation of the number of women in Persian scenes: “I have previously taken the abundance of women in Persian scenes as a symptom of Greek Orientalism, by which the Persian rulers were ‘effeminized’ by being surrounded by women,” but adds that “perhaps this was an over-reading” (140–141). Maybe she would likewise be ready to suspect that the interpretation of an image with two women as an allusion to polygamy might also be an over-reading, the result of a projection of modern stereotypes onto antiquity.⁵⁷

APPENDIX: The Kings’ Wives

Below is a systematic presentation of surviving Greek mentions of each King’s wives. As our concern is Greek views of polygamy, it is important to distinguish each source’s particular view. Note that we do not have any non-Greek source giving some indication about the plurality of wives.

Cyrus

According to Herodotus, Cyrus was married to Cassandane, who is the only wife he names and was Cambyses’ mother (2.1, 3.2–3), that is, the mother of the heir; but at one point the historian also alludes to “Cyrus’ wives” (*hai Kyrou gynaikes*, 3.3). In other words, Herodotus presents Cyrus as polygamous, even if one of his wives enjoyed a privileged status.

According to Ctesias as he is (incompletely) known through fragments, Cyrus would have married Amytis (F 9.1–2). She was the daughter of the Median Astyages (Astuigas), whereas Cassandane was the daughter of the Persian Pharnaspes (Hdt. 2.1). Brosius (*Women* 36, 44, 204) considers that she was a second wife in addition to Cassandane, but it is not possible to reconcile Herodotus’ version with Ctesias’, as Amytis in Ctesias is Cambyses’ mother too (F 13.1.1). More-

⁵⁷ In the book that she is preparing on Attic images of Persians, M. Miller intends to comment the Poulydamas base, where the spectators of the athlete’s achievement are the King and a group of four women. I would suggest that these women were not necessarily meant to be the King’s wives, but could include the King’s wife, mother, and daughters (women called *dukšiš* in Elamite texts, cf. n. 14 above). I thank Margaret Miller very much for sending me the present state of her fascinating chapter on Persian women.

over, Ctesias—as far as we can say—does not seem to ascribe any other wife to Cyrus, and the fragments of his *Persica* give the impression that Cyrus was monogamous.

Cambyses

According to Herodotus, Cambyses was married to Phaidymie, the daughter of Otanes, a Persian noble (3.68), and he also married two of his sisters (3.30–31)—one of them followed him in Egypt and died because of his violence (3.32), the other is not named by Herodotus in 3.32, and may be Atossa (who is further said to have been Cambyses' wife before becoming that of the Magus: 3.88). This clearly explains why Herodotus mentions “Cambyses' wives” in the plural (3.68).

For his part, Ctesias mentions Rhoxane as a wife who gave birth to a child without a head (F 13.14). The reader does not know whether that woman is meant to equate with one of the sisters mentioned by Herodotus, but it is worth noting that she is the only wife of Cambyses to be mentioned in Ctesias' fragments.

Thus, if we follow Herodotus, Cambyses had at least three or four wives, but note that none of them gave birth to a potential heir, which could have distinguished her among the different wives.

The Magus

According to Herodotus, the Magus Smerdis had several wives—and among them Phaidymie and Atossa, who had been Cambyses' wives before (3.68, 88). The historian specifies that “their wives visit the Persians in sequence” (3.69).

Darius

According to Herodotus, Darius was married to a daughter of Gobryas before becoming King, and he had three sons with her (7.2). After his accession, he also married Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus, who had previously been Cambyses' and the Magus' wife (3.68, 88), and had four sons with her, the eldest being Xerxes (7.2). And:

Artystone, another wife of Cyrus (3.88);

Parmys, daughter of the son of Cyrus called Smerdis (3.88);

Phaidymie, daughter of Otanes, who had earlier been the Magus' wife (3.88);

Phratagoune, Artanes' daughter, who gave him two sons (7.224).

Darius may then have had six wives at the same time. Two of them stand out in Herodotus' history:

Artystone is said to have been the favourite wife of Darius (7.69): he ordered a statue of her to be made in hammered gold. Her importance is confirmed by Elamite Fortification texts of Persepolis which

give evidence for her personal wealth and power.⁵⁸ She had a son with Darius (7.69).

Atossa is pictured by Herodotus as powerful (7.3): she manages to impose her son as the King's heir against the eldest son of Darius' first wife, the daughter of Gobryas, married before Darius' accession (7.2). According to Herodotus (3.134), she was the one who incited Darius to attack Greece. This power has sometimes been considered as a Greek fiction designed for denigrating Persians,⁵⁹ but one should not forget after all that Darius did not follow her advice, as he attacked the Scythians just as he initially intended to do.

Xerxes

According to Herodotus (7.61, 114; 9.109) and to Ctesias (F 13.24), Xerxes was married to Amestris (but for Herodotus she was the daughter of Otanes, whereas Ctesias presents her as the daughter of Onophas). She is the only wife of Xerxes we hear of, and her behaviour when she learns of Xerxes' love for his niece (9.108–113) is not that of a woman accustomed to sharing her husband. She is the mother of the future King Artaxerxes.

Artaxerxes I

According to Ctesias, he was married to Damaschia (F 15.47), and he had one son by her, the future Xerxes II. He also had 17 bastards with his concubines, especially with three Babylonian concubines.

Xerxes II

Xerxes II had a very short and poorly known reign (Ctesias F 15.47–48). No wife is ascribed to him in the surviving evidence.

Darius II

Darius II had married his half-sister Parysatis before his accession (Ctes. F 15.47). Both were bastards of Artaxerxes I with two different concubines as mothers.

⁵⁸ R. T. Hallock, *The Persepolis Fortification Tablets* (Chicago 1969) 24, 29 (see also Glossary s.v. 1. Irtašduna for the references to the texts); Brosius, *Women* 50; F. Bouzid-Adler, "Note sur la statue de la reine perse Artystonè (Hérodote, 7, 69)," *Rationes rerum* 4 (2014) 55–67.

⁵⁹ H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, "Exit Atossa. Images of Women in Greek Historiography on Persia," in A. Cameron et al. (eds.), *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London 1983) 20–33.

Artaxerxes II

Artaxerxes II had married Stateira, Idernes' daughter, before his accession (Ctes. F 15.55). Only after her death, the King is ascribed two marriages with his own daughters, first Amestris, then Atossa (Heracleides F 7 = Plut. *Artax.* 23.3–7, 27.7–9).⁶⁰ Although it is not clearly stated, it seems that he had both as wives at the same time. Note that 360 concubines are ascribed to him (Plut. *Artax.* 27.2), including Aspasia of Phocaea (26.5).

Artaxerxes III

According to Valerius Maximus (9.2 ext. 7), Artaxerxes III married a daughter of his sister Atossa, whom he is said to have buried alive head downward.⁶¹ He had another wife at the time of Alexander's expedition, for Curtius mentions among the women captured at Damascus by Parmenion the wife of Ochus (the original name of the king before his accession), who was also the daughter of Oxathres (Curt. 3.13.13).⁶² Supposing that both sources are reliable, there is nothing to suggest that the King had both wives at the same time. Moreover, each author writes as if he had only one. That is, Artaxerxes III is never pictured as polygamous.⁶³

Darius III

According to Plutarch, Arrian, and Justin, Darius III was married to Stateira, who was his sister.⁶⁴ She is the one who was captured by Alexander's men in the wake of the battle of Issos, at the same time as the King's mother Sisygambis. Since the latter is never presented as the mother of Stateira, one may think that Darius and Stateira had the same father (Arsanes), but not the same mother.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Lenfant, *Les Histoires perses* 310–314.

⁶¹ *Apertior et taetrior alterius Ochi cognomine Artaxerxis crudelitas, qui Atossam sororem atque eandem socrum vivam capite defodit*, "More open and abominable was the cruelty of the other Ochus, surnamed Artaxerxes, who buried his sister (also his mother-in-law) Atossa alive head downward" (transl. Shackleton Bailey)

⁶² *In eodem grege uxor quoque eiusdem Ochi fuit Oxathrisque—frater hic erat Darei—filia.*

⁶³ Brosius, *Women* 36, instead takes these two wives as evidence for the practice of polygamy.

⁶⁴ Only Plutarch (*Alex.* 30.3–5) mentions her name, but the others like him say that she was also the king's sister (Arr. 2.11.9, Just. 11.9.12).

⁶⁵ Cf. Brosius, *Women* 68; W. Heckel, *Who's Who in the Age of Alexander the*

Darius had another wife, who was Pharnakes' sister: Diodorus (17.21.3) and Arrian (1.16.3) identify Pharnakes as the "brother of Darius' wife." Brosius concludes that the King had two wives,⁶⁶ but it is striking that ancient authors always speak of *the* wife of the King in the singular and—in Greek texts—with the definite article. None of them suggests that the King had several wives at the same time.⁶⁷ It cannot be excluded that Pharnakes' sister had been Darius' wife before⁶⁸ and was no longer alive at the time of Alexander's invasion.⁶⁹ In any case, Darius III is not pictured as polygamous.⁷⁰

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Great (Malden 2006) 255–256, s.v. Stateira [1].

⁶⁶ Brosius, *Women* 36, 69, 205.

⁶⁷ The singular is used for Pharnakes' sister, but also for the wife who followed Darius' army (Curt. 3.3.22, *coniunx*) and was captured after Issos (Curt. 3.11.24, Diod. 17.36.2, Arr. 2.11.9, Plut. *Alex.* 21.1). Cf. Arr. 4.20.1.

⁶⁸ That is also conjectured by Heckel, *Who's Who* 274 (F5), who describes the sister of Pharnakes as "an earlier wife of Darius III."

⁶⁹ In fact, Diodorus and Arrian mention only his brother.

⁷⁰ I would like to warmly thank Edith Foster for looking over the English of this paper, a previous version of which was delivered at the University of Cyprus at the invitation of Antonis Tsakmakis and in the Istituto per la storia antica in Rome. I am very grateful to the colleagues who helped me discuss the topic on these occasions.