A CONFLATION OF DIVINE AND ROYAL IMAGERY?

THE CASE OF THE WINGED SYMBOL IN ACHAEMENID PERSIA

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1. INTRODUCTION

"The most perplexing and often-debated question in the study of religious iconography of the Achaemenid Persians is the identification of the figure in the winged symbol." (Garrison, 2009: 25)

My interest: The conspicuous analogy between the vagueness of imagery in the figure of the winged symbol, on the one hand, and the vagueness of the function of the royal audience hall ("apadana") in Achaemenid architecture, on the other hand.

2. THE ACHAEMENID WINGED SYMBOL: FROM CLEARCUT IDENTIFICATIONS TO POLYVALENCE

Vagueness in identification:

"The winged disk/sun disk makes a good case study because it helps in understanding the dynamics of the transfer of ancient visual symbols. The symbol involved was not only adopted, but also adapted. … No attempt will be made to identify or name the deities which might be represented by or linked with the winged disks. Not in all cases does the disk represent only the sun or is it a symbol representing the sun god, but also a variety of deities … (T)he identification of the figure in the disk is disputed. Traditionally it has been linked to the god Ahura Mazda, but this view has been criticized. It might be 'a sign of legitimate kingship.' … In sum, this first case study has traced how the winged disk/sun travelled from Egypt to the East as far as Persia. The emblem/symbol of the winged sun was adopted from Egypt, but adapted locally and given other meanings. The royal symbolism (or some link with royalty) prevailed in most cases, from the Hittites to the Persians. In Assyria (and taken over by the Persians) a figure was added to the disk and the Assyrians made this figure a war deity." (Cornelius 2014: 144–145; 152–155).

Connections with kingship:

"*fravashi* (spirit) of the king" (Unvala 1950)

"royal *khvarenah*/glory" (Shahbazi 1974)

"Above the scene hovers the 'winged' man, who for a long time was believed to depict Ahura Mazda, the god frequently invoked by Darius in the inscription, but perhaps this image should rather be interpreted as the *daimon* of his royal ancestors." (Wiesehöfer 2001: 15)

"[T]he figure in the winged disc featuring so prominently on the reliefs of Achaemenid monumental architecture, including the royal tombs at Naqsh-I Rustam, has been identified as Ahuramazda, but another interpretation suggests that the figure represents Achaemenes, the eponymous founder of the empire. Most likely, however, is the suggestion that the image of the figure in the winged disc represented the 'good fortune', *khvarrah,* which symbolised the special status of the Achaemenid dynasty on which Ahuramazda had bestowed the kingship." (Brosius 2006: 67)

Representation of deity:

"the deity *Ahura Mazda*" (Root 1979: 169–176)

"High positioning of an element within a given image implies high rank in ancient Near Eastern art. Therefore, the winged disc seems a perfect choice for representing major deities, who served as heads of pantheons. It may even be postulated that it was its position within the image that determined the choice of this symbol for representing major deities." (Ornan 2005: 234)

(See also Lecoq 1987: 379–382; Briant 2002: 126; Stronach 2003: 233–248; Shenkar 2014: 47–65; Waters 2014: 59 and Compareti 2020, 157–169.)

Polyvalent interpretations:

"Many of these theories involve projecting religious concepts from much later periods backward to the Achaemenid period. … There exists … a concept documented much closer in time and space to the early Achaemenid period. This is the Elamite concept of *kitin*"" (Garrison 2009:36).

"*Kitin* is a hard-to-define abstraction that was crucial to (Neo-)Elamite religion and royal ideology. In broadest terms, *kitin* seems to refer to divine authority and power as it emanates from the divine down to the mortal world. 'Divine protection' is a translation that covers some of its occurrences, but is probably just a weak rendering of its full significance for an Elamite audience. Other uses of the term lead to supplementary interpretations such as 'god-given royal power,' 'divinely-enforced legal protection,' 'legal authority,' 'legal order, rules,' and 'divine symbol, emblem'." (Henkelman 2008: 292)

"[T]he winged symbol may have become polyvalent by the Achaemenid period, laden with historical associations … Finally, it is clear that the image in the Achaemenid period had exceptionally intense linkages with Achaemenid dynastic ambitions … From an ideological standpoint, such a polyvalent symbol as the figure in the winged ring/disk would have been an exceptionally powerful tool as Darius sought to legitimize both his specific seizure of power and his general dynastic program. The very restricted range of imagery in which the winged symbol occurs in both glyptic and monumental relief at the time of Darius, the very careful structural composition of those scenes, and the importance of the high frequency of the occurrence of the winged symbol with design elements that mark exceptionally

high status/rank … suggest that the occurrence of the winged symbol is not simply random. While its specific divine signifier may have varied with context, its political content is without question: the legitimacy of specifically Achaemenid rule. It then becomes especially intriguing to consider the possibility that the winged symbol was chosen as one of the central images of Achaemenid kingship owing to its very polyvalence. This polyvalence could have been perceived as a potential catalyst for inviting more fluid readings of the symbol within specifically royal contexts. As several commentators have noted, in many scenes the figure in the winged ring/disk and the king are essentially one and the same." (Garrison 2009: 38).

3. ACHAEMENID RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS/ROYAL ARCHITECTURE

"Πέρσας δὲ οἶδα νόμοισι τοιοῖσιδε χρεωμένους, ἀγάλματα μὲν καὶ νηοὺς καὶ βωμοὺς οὐκ ἐν νόμῳ ποιευμένους ἱδρύεσθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖσι ποιεῦσι μωρίην ἐπιφέρουσι, ὡς μὲν ἐμοὶ δοκέειν, ὅτι οὐκ ἀνθρωποφυέας ἐνόμισαν τοὺς θεοὺς κατά περ οἱ Ἕλληνες εἶναι:"

"Now, the Persian, to my certain knowledge, have the following practices. It is not one of their customs to construct statues, temples, and altars; in fact, they count those who do so as fools, because (I suppose) they do not anthropomorphize the gods as the Greeks do." (Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.131 – Translation of Waterfield 2008: 60).

"The origins of audience halls of this highly specific type (to which one may possibly limit the designation *apadāna*) [that is, those found at Susa and Persepolis] are to be sought above all in the four-sided columned halls which were introduced by Cyrus the Great at Pasargadae … which themselves represent an intriguing amalgam of native and foreign influences … The great halls of Darius differed from those of Cyrus, however, in numerous respects; notably in the elevated locations chosen for them (conceivably a borrowing from Neo-Assyrian or Neo-Babylonian building practice), in their square, not rectangular, plans, in their use of cement rather than stone floors, and in their more impressive dimensions. The porticoes in this new form of audience hall were carried, as in Greek and Egyptian architecture, up to the same height as the ceiling of the main hall; and, where the palaces of Cyrus had been strictly freestanding, the new *apadāna*s were very conveniently and closely adjacent to the residential quarters of the king. There appear to have been at least two practical functions of an *apadāna*: to serve as a royal audience hall of unmatched size (it has been calculated that the great halls of Susa and Persepolis could each have held ten thousand persons) and to constitute a suitable backdrop to the elevated, enthroned monarch when he reviewed ceremonies or parades on the plain below." (Schmitt / Stronach 1986: online version)

"There are very few installations in Achaemenid Iran that fit normative ideas of what constitutes a 'temple' as a structure for the housing of a deity and/or for the exercise of 'religious observances'. … "[There was] an inherent fluidity in the conceptualization between what we speak of as 'palaces' or audience halls in Persepolis and what may with equal validity be construed as 'temples' in the sense of being sites of religiously imbued observances focusing on the person of the king 'in residence'." (Root 2010: 170, 207)

"Imperial religious culture took a distinctive turn under the Persians, at least when compared with the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian empires … Notably, great temples and cults played virtually no

role within the dominant imperial system. … Despite these absences [of temples], there are strong lines of continuity between Achaemenid palace ideology and ancient Near Eastern temple ideology … While Persians evidently supported local cults and temples, it appears that the primary means of manifesting divine power was through the imperial palace." (Lynch 2014: 61–63)

4. ANY ANALOGY OUT THERE?

"Achaemenid royal ideology—let alone religion—evades anything but minimal scholarly consensus, despite its arguable importance for understanding the Persian Empire generally. To find a new way into the problem, this paper tries to analyze one narrow question: how did the Achaemenid Great Kings themselves conceptualize or portray their rule, particularly as this relates to 'religious' ideas?" (Silverman 2016: 172)

"Since such enquiry requires the evaluation of such diverse areas as mythology, cult, and imperial policy, this paper proposes using the over-arching term 'theology' rather than 'ideology'. This use is intended to emphasize the ways in which ideas interrelated within a particular religious and cultural tradition. While for analytical purposes it can be useful to distinguish between things political and religious, this distinction can be difficult to maintain meaningfully, particularly in an ancient context. Is the idea of divine royal patronage a political or a religious idea? It certainly has political implications and expediencies, yet it can only be effective within a system that accepts both the suitability and reality of said idea; there would be no point in claiming support from a god no subjects believed existed or if none accepted the idea of divine legitimation as reasonable. With this perspective, an investigation into the Achaemenid theology of kingship hopefully will lead to new insights for broader areas of Persian imperial ideology." (Silverman 2016: 172)

"[T]he kings play an integral part in Ahuramazda's plan, acting like *saošiiants* in bringing the world towards its final fulfilment, both through improvement and through foreshadowing … [T]he kings viewed themselves as making the world safe for Ahuramazda's religion, drawing good from things both good and evil. Their role as kings was non-priestly and heroic but still divinely sanctioned, one that enabled priests to do their job. They fostered useful and pleasant plants and animals and brought order to their realm by bringing unity and harmony to diversity. This role, however, did not negate the centrality of their Persian identity, at least from Darius onwards. The above has an additional nuance beyond the orderly … It is orderly, yes—just as in previous ancient Near Eastern empires—but it is a teleological order, a progressive order that contributes to the end (in both senses) of the world … [T]he teleological element makes the Achaemenid royal theology distinctive from the elements inherited from the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires. Similarly, the non-divinity but divine importance of the king as *saošiiant* adds a new emphasis. One might posit that the Achaemenids were responsible for the change of emphasis in Iranian traditions from multiple *saošiiant*s to individual *saošiiant*s par excellence … This overall paradigm is one that could accommodate and adapt to all kinds of situations and nuance in details; nevertheless, it is the kind of central, dominant paradigm that would radically alter elements assimilated by it." (Silverman 2016: 188–189)

5. CONCLUSION

I started this contribution by pointing out that there is often scholarly disagreement whether the winged symbol and figure are expressions of a deity, or rather of a king. Further investigation showed that there is an emphasis on their polyvalence in the present state of research. I continued my argument by indicating that the same tendency can be observed in studies on the interpretation of the apadana architecture. It is nowadays the consensus view that this monumental feature of some of the Achaemenid centres primarily had a royal audience function, but that it was not devoid of religious overtones. Both these images, the winged symbol and figure together with the apadana architecture, were then viewed against the background of the "royal theology" that Silverman has described in his contribution. We can conclude that both the winged symbol and the apadana architecture, when studied analogically, were excellent expressions of a complex system of ideological thought in the Achaemenid period.

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