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The Word of the King: Royal Truthfulness and some Cases of Royal Multilingualism in Ancient Eurasia

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Summary: The present article examines a selection of royal multilingual inscriptions, mostly from the Near East and Anatolia, as expression of the linguistic competence of the king, as shown in other documents, especially from Mesopotamia, from the Bronze Age onwards. It also argues that the truthfulness of the royal utterance is the other side of the coin of the king's linguistic competence.

Keywords: Royal Ideology, Multilingualism, Inscriptions, Truthfulness

For Hans-Joachim Gehrke
A small antidoron for 30 years of friendship

In the Iranian province of Kermanshah, on the ancient road from Ecbatana to Babylon, capitals of the Achaemenid provinces of Media and Babylonia, an outcrop of the Zagros Mountains protruding towards the south ends with a sheer limestone cliff, almost 200 meters high. The town close by still bears the ancient name, in a somewhat modernized form: Bisotun, echoing a reconstructed Old Persian word *Bagastana, documented for us in the Hellenized form of the name of Mount Bagistanon and the region of Bagistane.[1] Originally, the Persian name, which would have meant something like "abode of the gods", referred presumably to the mountain, which Greek authors say was sacred to Zeus, here most likely a Greek equivalent of the Iranian god Auramazda. In the area, the Achaemenid kings had set up a *paradeisos*, one of the famous semi-artificial parks that graced every province of their empire, with plants and trees selected in order to give a sense of luxuriant fertility, and animals for the royal hunt.[2] Close by, a ruined

1 Mount Bagistanon: Ktesias FGrH 688 F 1, 13.1–2, translated in Llewellyn-Jones – Robson 2009, 123, and see also Isidoros of Charax FGrH 781 F 2, 5; Diod. 17.110.5: Alexander on his way from Susa deviates for the purpose of sightseeing to an area called Bagistane, beautiful and full of plants, fruits and what not.

2 Briant 1996, 244–252 on the *paradeisos* and its meaning within Achaemenid royal ideology; see also Lincoln 2007, 178–179. Ktesias mentions a *paradeisos* of Semiramis in this place; Briant 1996, 136–137 thinks that this *paradeisos* was in fact established by Dareios.

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Sasanian palace may have taken advantage of pre-existing structures of Achaemenid times.[3]

The *paradeisos* of Bagastana is generally thought to have been set up by Dareios I, who ruled the Achaemenid Empire from 522 BCE until his death in 483. While no direct evidence supports this supposition, a very famous and striking monument in the area makes it as least highly plausible. About 70 meters from the ground, on the near-vertical façade of the rock, Dareios commissioned the sculpting of a bas-relief scene 3 by 5.5 meters, depicting him in the act of subduing a number of enemies, accompanied by two attendants carrying his bow and his spear, and looked upon by a flying figure usually identified with the god Auramazda. The king is depicted oversize compared to the other human figures, a feature common to many traditions of royal iconography. One of the enemies lies on his back on the ground under the left foot of the king, stretching his hands upwards in a gesture of supplication, while the other nine face the king in a row, their necks tied with a rope held by Dareios himself. An extensive inscription explains in detail the events that the scene alludes to.[4]

The story goes more or less as follows. Kambyses, Dareios' predecessor on the Persian throne, had conquered Egypt in 526 BCE.[5] After his successful expedition, Kambyses did not return to the imperial heartland, but stayed in Egypt for the following four years. This decision clearly destabilized the empire: in March, 522 a usurper seized the throne. Allegedly, although being himself a *magos*, that is, a priest, he pretended to be the king's brother, Bardiya, whom in fact Kambyses had secretly assassinated a few years before. This at any rate is the version promoted by Dareios in his inscription and found in Herodotos as well: several scholars, unimpressed by the story, think that in fact the usurper was none other than Bardiya himself – in which case, the true usurper would be Dareios. The inscription calls the *magos* Gaumata; he is the man under Dareios' foot in the relief. In September, 522 Dareios, a distant relative of Kambyses, leading a palace conspiracy of Persian noblemen, managed to murder Gaumata and seize (or as he puts it, recover) the throne.[6] But this was hardly the end of the story: almost every single province of the Empire rose in revolt

3 The area of Bisotun is rich in archaeological remains of different periods, including a fortress which might be identified with Paishiyauvada, the place where Dareios killed Gaumata according to the text of the inscription (DB 10 quoted infra), see Luschey 1990.

4 Ktesias describes a rock relief depicting Semiramis accompanied by one hundred bodyguards and inscriptions in Assyrian script – clearly a garbled description of our monument, see Llewellyn-Jones and Robson 2009, 123. For a comprehensive discussion of this monument and its intended audiences, see Finn 2011.

5 For the exact date of Kambyses' invasion of Egypt, see Quack 2011.

6 For an eloquent presentation of the skeptical view, according to which the man slain by Dareios was really Kambyses' brother, see Lincoln 2012, 375–380. Balcer 1987 provides a book-length comparison between Herodotos' version of the story (Hdt. 3.61–79) and the one found in the Bisotun

against Dareios, in several cases under the leadership of men who were or pretended to be offspring of local dynasties formerly subjugated by Kyros, the founder of the Persian empire. Several provinces, such as Elam, Persis and Babylonia, the very core of the empire, even revolted twice. Wars raged furiously. Dareios repressed the rebels brutally, cutting off ears and noses of the leaders, gouging their eyes and impaling what remained of them for good measure.[7] In the end, after a long series of battles won by him or by his lieutenants, he managed to restore the unity of the empire and secure the throne for his progeny. Even though Kyros was retrospectively coopted into Dareios' ancestry, this was in fact the beginning of the Achaemenid dynasty.

The text of the inscription is formulated as if uttered personally by Dareios, speaking in the first person singular, and the formula "Dareios the King proclaims", which opens every new paragraph, was meant to make sure that the point was not lost. Surely, this is one of the most impressive cases of words of the king, a royal utterance monumentalized for centuries to come. Monotonous and repetitive to our ears, with their formulaic and paratactic style, the words of king Dareios resonate in a traditional and stylized epic language, the appropriate diction for a king.[8] A quote brings it to the point:

> "The king appears to uphold inherited norms in the style of his speech, which on some occasions differs quite markedly from that of other speakers. It is an unstated principle of the king's speech (and a function of his office) that he is privileged to use an archaic, highly balanced phraseology with echoes of canonical texts."

These are the words used by David Schaberg to characterize the utterances of kings in the *Zuozhuan*,[9] but they apply just as accurately to Dareios' words, uttered in an

inscriptions. Shayegan 2012, expanding on Shayegan 2006, provides a fascinating exploration of the motives that structure the story of Gaumata and Bardiya and their roots in Iranian oral tradition.

7 This treatment was reserved to the two rebel kings in Media; see DB 32 and 33 and the comments of Lincoln 2007, 8. With their claim to descend from Uvakhshtra (Kyaxares in Herodotos), Kyros' own grandfather, they posed the most radical threat to Dareios in terms of legitimacy, as shown by Lincoln 2012 400, which is most likely the reason for the especially gruesome treatment meted out to them. Note that the absence of any such detail as regards Gaumata may have to be added to the indices of the fact that he was indeed Bardiya, the 'true Smerdis' and not the 'false Smerdis'. According to Herodotos (3.79.1), after murdering the two brothers the conspirators showed their severed heads to the other Persians – presumably, in order to prove their identity, since the false Bardiya (Smerdis in Herodotos) had no ears.

8 On the diction of Dareios' utterance and its roots in Iranic epic tradition, see Skjærvø 1998; on the dynamics of this tradition, Shayegan 2012 chapter 5 and Huyse 1990.

9 Schaberg 2002, 139. On the archaizing style of Dareios' words in their Old Persian version, see Schmitt 2000, 30; similarly stylized was the Babylonian version of the text according to Beaulieu 2006, 204–205.

archaizing form of Old Persian – except that in their case, the role of the canonical texts alluded to by Schaberg is taken, as far as we can tell, by the echoes of the traditional diction and language of Iranian religious tradition and of Mesopotamian royal utterances from the Bronze Age onwards – some cases will come up for discussion in a moment.

Among several striking aspects of this royal utterance is the way the rise of Dareios to supreme power is insistently represented as a conflict between lie and truth, or perhaps more appropriately, between the Lie and the Truth.[10] This is how the imperial crisis is depicted:

> "(10) Dareios the King proclaims: This is what was done by me after I became king. The son of Kyros, by name Kambyses, of our family, he was king here. This Kambyses had a brother, by name Bardiya; he had the same mother, the same father as Kambyses. Then Kambyses killed this Bardiya. When Kambyses killed Bardiya, the people did not know that Bardiya had been killed. Then Kambyses went to Egypt. When Kambyses had gone to Egypt, then the people became disloyal, and the Lie grew among the people, both in Persia and Media and among the other peoples.
> (11) Dareios the King proclaims: then there was a man, a magus, Gaumata by name; he rebelled in Paishiyauvada. A mountain, by name Arakadri, from there – fourteen days of the month Viyaxana had gone, when he rebelled. He lied thus to the people: 'I am Bardiya, son of Kyros, brother of Kambyses.' Then all the people became rebellious against Kambyses; they went over to him, both Persia and Media, as well as the other peoples. He seized the kingship;[11] nine days of the month Garmapada had gone.[12] After that, Kambyses died his own death".[13]

10 The translation is cited from Kuhrt 2007, 141–151. For an extensive discussion of the inscriptions and their relation to the sculptures, see Lecoq 1997, 83–96 and 187–217. The extent to which we may read lie and truth as hypostatized in Dareios' utterance is contingent on the extent to which we are prepared to interpret it in the light of the *Avesta*; see below n. 14.

11 "The word is xšaça- 'rule' (cognate with Av xšaθra-; Skt kṣatriya- 'warrior caste' is also cognate); could also be translated as 'empire' or '(royal) power' " (Y. Vevaina, personal communication).

12 These overly precise dates may indicate that the story was meant to function as a celebratory cycle of sorts according to Kosmin 2019; notice however that the motif of multiple victories all achieved in one and the same year had a long tradition in the celebration of Mesopotamian monarchy, see below n. 23.

13 The meaning of the expression that described Kambyses' death is debated, natural death and suicide both having had their advocates in the past, see Kuhrt 2007, 153 n. 21 with references and note the discussion of Lincoln 2012, 377–378 with references to Iranistic studies not present in Kuhrt; "This term is much debated and looks like it means 'a self death'[…] $^{(h)}$uvāmaršiyu- > $^{(h)}$uvā- meaning 'self' and maršiyu- is cognate with 'mortal' (-rt- clusters become -š- in OP)" (Y. Vevaina personal communication). Lincoln inclines towards 'natural death' as opposed to murder. More recently, Stolper 2015, considering the rendering of the expression in all three languages, has brought very strong arguments for an unmarked interpretation comparable to 'passed away'.

The same contrast of truth and lie structures the rest of the long text, where the uprisings of all the other rebel leaders are introduced by the same formula: "Afterwards, a man named so-and-so raised a rebellion in region X; he lied to the people of X, saying: 'I am king in X' ". After a long list of victorious campaigns and battles, with their corollary of executions, targeted maimings and impalements, Dareios summarizes his achievement as follows:

> "(52) Dareios the king proclaims: This is what I have done, by the favor of Auramazda, in one and the same year, after I became king. I have fought nineteen battles. By the favor of Auramazda I defeated and took prisoner nine kings. One called Gaumata, a magus, lied saying: 'I am Bardiya, son of Cyrus.' He made Persia rebellious. One called Acina, an Elamite, lied saying: 'I am king of Elam.' He made Elam rebellious. One called Nidintu-Bel, a Babylonian, lied saying: 'I am Nebuchadnezzar, the son of Nabonidus.' He made Babylonia rebellious. One called Martiya, a Persian, lied saying: 'I am Imani, king in Elam.' He made Elam rebellious. One called Phravatish, a Mede, lied saying: 'I am Khshathrita, of the family of Uvakhshtra.' He made Media rebellious. One called Cicantakhma, a Sagartian, lied saying: 'I am king in Sagartia, of the family of Uvakhshtra.' He made Sagartia rebellious. One called Frada, a Margian, lied saying: 'I am king in Margiana.' He made Margiana rebellious. One called Vahyazdata, a Persian, lied saying: 'I am Bardiya, son of Kyros.' He made Persia rebellious. One called Arakha, an Armenian, lied saying: 'I am Nebuchadnezzar, son of Nabonidus.' He made Babylonia rebellious.
> (53) Dareios the king proclaims: These are the nine kings whom I took prisoner in these battles.
> (54) Dareios the king proclaims: these are the countries which became rebellious; the Lie made them rebellious, because these men lied to the people. After that Auramazda gave them into my hand; as was my desire, so I did unto them.
> (55) Dareios the king proclaims: You who shall be king hereafter, be firmly on your guard against the Lie; the man who shall be a follower of the Lie, punish him well, if you think, 'May my country be secure!'
> (56) Dareios the king proclaims: This that I have done, by the favor of Auramazda, in one and the same year I did. You, who shall read this inscription hereafter, let what (has been) done by me convince you. Do not think it a lie.
> (57) Dareios the king proclaims: I will take Auramazda's anger upon myself that I did this truly, not falsely, in one and the same year.
> (58) Dareios the king proclaims: By the favor of Auramazda, much else has also been done by me, that has not been written in this inscription. It has not been written down for this reason: for fear that, whoever should read this inscription hereafter, it should seem too much to him, (and so) it should not convince him, (but) he think it false".

In order to decipher Dareios' message, it is necessary to keep in mind that its ideological idiom, as is true of Achaemenid royal inscriptions more broadly, hearkens back to two very distinctive cultural traditions. The way the lie is hypostatized as 'the Lie' recalls the goddess Druj of the *Avesta*, pointing to an Iranian religious and cultural tradition that recent scholarship has increasingly gleaned in the back-

ground of Achaemenid royal ideology.[14] There is however another recognizable source that this ideology was also indebted to, namely the tradition of Mesopotamian monarchy, where after all upholding truth was a standard attribute of a good king.[15] Beate Pongratz-Leisten has shown that the use of the word 'lie' as an ideological equivalent of disloyalty had a long history in the language of power of Mesopotamian monarchy. In her words, in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions "the motif of the lie is either connected to the rebellion against an already existing overlord, and is thus linked to the breaching of a treaty, or addresses the claims of pretenders to the throne in crises occasioned by an irregular succession."[16] Her remarks go a long way towards explaining the language of Dareios' inscription, confirming a phenomenon that is otherwise much more visible in iconography, namely the continuity in the ideology of power between the Neo-Assyrian empire and the Achaemenids.[17]

The definition of lie that underpins Dareios' narrative, however, inflects this ideological language in what appears to be a new way. In the Neo-Assyrian documents analyzed by Pongratz-Leisten, the addressee of the lie, when specified, is the legitimate holder of royal power: it is to him that the rebels lie, in that they do not hold their word and violate their agreements, which involves at the same time disobeying divine will, as the inscriptions make clear. On the contrary, the 'liar Kings' defeated by Dareios lied to their own people, that is, to the inhabitants of the several regions which they stirred to revolt, and their lies did not consist in going back on something they had previously agreed to. So in what sense did they lie?

We might at first sight believe that the 'liar kings' were liars because, in a genealogical sense, they were not who they pretended to be: Gaumata was not Bardiya, Nidintu-Bel was not Nebuchadnezzar, Fraortes was not a descendant of Kyaxares and so on. While this is correct, and confirmed by Dareios' own insistence, elsewhere in the inscription, on his own dynastic legitimacy, genealogy is only part of the answer. For some of the liar kings, the lie did not consist in their not being actual descendants of kings, which they apparently did not pretend to be, but in

14 On the Iranian heritage of Achaemenid royal inscriptions, see Skjærvø 1985 and more broadly Skjærvø 2005. The Iranian roots of Achaemenid royal ideology are investigated in Lincoln 2012; see esp. 213–236 on the Iranian pedigree of 'the Lie'.

15 On the influence of the cultural legacy of Mesopotamian monarchic ideology on the Achaemenids, see Panaino 2000; for evidence of the interest of the early Achaemenids for their royal predecessors in Babylon, see the document published by Jursa 2007, 78.

16 Pongratz-Leisten 2002, with evidence going back all the way to the Bronze Age; the quote is from p. 231; see also Liverani 2017, 27–35.

17 On the relation between Assyrian and Persian court iconography and style, with specific reference to the Bisotun relief, see Root 1979, 213–224. For precedents of Dareios' relief in the iconography or royalty in Mesopotamia, see Feldman 2007, 268–270.

something altogether different, namely, in their not being true kings. Of course, in order to absorb the meaning of this statement we need for a moment to distance ourselves from a disenchanted and rationalistic worldview in which one becomes a king by virtue of being recognized as such by (a relevant portion of) one's subjects, typically after certain ceremonial steps have been taken. Instead, we need to look at kingship with the eyes of cultures for which monarchy is the only possible form of political order and is of one piece with the cosmic order itself: from that perspective, one is a king in an ontological sense, and rituals only confirm and formalize what is in essence an intrinsic feature of an individual.[18] When we look at kingship from an emic perspective we see that, as is often the case, ideology rests on tautology: Dareios is the true king because he is the true king, and his rivals are untrue kings because they are untrue kings. In other words, Dareios is the true king not only because he upholds Truth, but also because, empirically, his record shows that he is indeed the chosen one of Auramazda, as his inscription claims.[19] Both his spectacular achievements and the truthfulness of his report thereof rest on the foundation provided by divine grace. By contrast, the liar kings obviously lack divine support, or else they would not have been wiped away by Dareios.

Put in another way, a true king is at the same time a truthful king. And if we think that Dareios' words seem to betray some insecurity, and his insistence that, far from overstating his deeds, he has actually left something out in order not to strain credulity too much, we may remind ourselves that he was not exactly the expected successor of Kambyses, and his dynastic credentials have looked suspicious to many a scholar.[20] This contingent aspect need not detain us now, except to point out that, even here, the temptation to advance a specific explanation, one having to do with Dareios' questionable legitimacy, has to be tempered by due reference to the traditional language of Mesopotamian royal inscriptions. Dareios' repeated references to the kings of the future are perhaps the most obvious sign of its presence in the ideological toolkit of whoever formulated the text.[21] But even invoking a god as witness of extraordinary royal achievements which strained credulity was not a total novelty. A little less than a century before Dareios, Nabopolassar of Babylon, proud of having shaken the yoke of Assyria from his land, used

18 On the sacredness of kingship, see the classic Bloch 1924; recent discussions, with abundant case studies, include Oakley 2006 and Graeber – Sahlins 2017. On the nature of the false kings, see the remarks of Lincoln 2012, 233.

19 We see here the effect of the connection between victory and royalty investigated in the classic article by Hans-Joachim Gehrke (2013).

20 The paradox is pointed out among others by Pongratz-Leisten 2002, 233, with reference to Rollinger 1998.

21 See DB 55 and 64, with numerous precedents in Mesopotamian royal inscriptions; see Jacobs 2012, 105.

similar language as a guarantee of the truthfulness of his words – although there the god receiving the oath was Marduk and of course not Auramazda. As in the case of Dareios, Nabopolassar was faced with a latent question of legitimacy, and his royal truthfulness was part of his ideological offensive to remedy that potential deficit.[22] The *topos* itself appears to go back even further, to the kings of Akkad of the third millennium, when king Rimush, son and successor of Sargon, swore to the gods Shamash and Ilaba to confirm the truthfulness of his own military exploits, including a reference to victories in the same year – a reference his second successor Naram-Sin will expand in his signature claim of having won nine battles in one year, capturing three kings, an even closer precedent to Dareios' claims.[23]

Our first takeaway point from the Bisotun inscription is indeed a tautology of sorts: the word of the king is intrinsically truthful; the king speaks the truth because he is a king. His truthfulness is based on his privileged relation to the gods, who at the same time guarantee his true royal nature. This is a *topos* that recurs in different forms in the ideology of several monarchic systems, in fact probably in most of them. Its formulation, however, reflects the specific notions of monarchic legitimacy of the relevant cultural context. The differences can be remarkable, as some examples will show.

In his preface to a history of Alexander's expedition, Arrian of Nicomedia, consul and governor of the Province of Cappadocia under the Emperor Hadrian, explains his choice of sources as follows: his two preferred authors were Aristoboulos of Kassandreia and Ptolemy Soter king of Egypt, because both had been eyewitnesses to Alexander's deeds, and on top of that, Ptolemy, being a king, was less likely to lie, because lying for a king is more shameful than for anybody else. The meaning

22 Nabopolassar inscription C 32, in Da Riva 2012, 93–104, dated between 622 and 612; these are the words of Nabopolassar in Da Riva's translation: "I, in order that no future king whosoever remove my well-chosen words, (and) in order that no words are made to supersede my orders, I swore the oath of my lord Marduk, and of my god Shamash: '(Woe on me) if my utterances are lies and not true!'" See Pongratz-Leisten 2002, 217. The ideological meaning of Nabopolassar's inscriptions is elucidated by Beaulieu 2003, who also points to the Bronze-Age models it hearkened back to. On the tradition of the oaths of truthfulness attached to narratives of royal deeds and signaling "a discourse universe in which the narrative is subject to questioning", see Selz 2019, 61.

23 Rimush' inscription celebrating his victorious campaign in Elam, E 2.1.2.6 in Frayne 1993, 54, includes the words (lines 73–78) "By the gods Shamash and Ilaba I swear that (these) are not falsehoods, (but) are indeed true". The same oath is associated to the narrative of Rimush' extraordinary victories also in E 2.1.2.4, E 2.1.2.7 and E 2.1.2.8. For the reference to the single year, E 2.1.2.6 lines 68–77. Originally on a statue of Rimush that the king himself dedicated to Enlil, the inscription is known to us from a later Old Babylonian copy, attesting to the circulation of the text in later periods. Rimush reigned from 2278 to 2270 BCE. The motif of the nine victories in the same year appears on several inscriptions of Naram-Sin, E. 2.1.4.9–13, including Old Babylonian copies on clay tablets and the base of a statue later transported to Susa, see Frayne 1993, 111–118.

of this statement is explained by an earlier text, the so-called "Letter of Aristeas to Philokrates", a second-century BCE pseudepigraph purporting to be an eyewitness account of the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek by 72 Jewish experts commissioned by none other than our Ptolemy Soter, at some point in the early third century BCE. A large part of the letter reports a long conversation between Ptolemy and the wise Jews on the topic of sole rulership. There, when the king asks how should he go about upholding the truth, the answer was "By recognizing that a lie brings great disgrace upon all men, and more especially upon kings. For since they have the power to do whatever they wish, why should they resort to lies?"[24]

Clearly, this particular instantiation of the notion of royal truthfulness is a far cry from Dareios. But we should not expect otherwise. Unlike Dareios, or for that matter Queen Elizabeth the Second, Hellenistic kings did not rule *dei gratia*, by divine appointment. Their legitimacy rested on performance, measured mostly in a very traditionally Greek way. As shown long ago by Hans-Joachim Gehrke, the kernel of their legitimacy, in a radically charismatic framework, was military victory: defeating the enemy on the battlefield confirmed or revealed the kingly nature of the king.[25] As for everyday life, Hellenistic kings had to satisfy the standards of pride and shame of Greek aristocratic ideology, only to a higher degree: they were supposed to be lavish in their relations with the Greek *poleis* and to uphold the pursuit of excellence that was at the core of Greek elite ideology. That not all of them were capable of living up to these standards was an acknowledged fact of life.

The absence of a true ideology of monarchy from the political culture of ancient Greece – and the Roman Principate would largely fall within the same boundaries – is an important if often misunderstood fact. A careful reading of Plato and Aristotle shows that for Greek political thinkers monarchy could only be a utopia, or else it was tyranny, by any other name.[26] But what is important for the present argument is that truthfulness as an intrinsic quality of a king, rather than as a royal virtue in need of being cultivated, turns out to be a characteristic feature of monarchic systems in which the rule of the king was strongly rooted in religious notions, be those the support of Auramazda or Shamash, as the case might be – and *a fortiori*, also of systems in which the king himself was seen as divine, like the Egyptian Pharaoh.[27]

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24 Arrian, "History of Alexander" 1. Proem 2; the statement appears to go back to Ptolemy himself, cf. FGrH 138 F 11. See also Alexander's statement on his truthfulness in Arrian, "History of Alexander" 7.5.2. Still on the side of the Ptolemies, alongside "Letter of Aristeas" 206, see Diodorus Siculus 1.70.6 (most likely derived from the Ptolemaic court historian Hekataios of Abdera).

25 Gehrke 2013.

26 I made this point more in detail in Luraghi 2013.

27 Several contributions assembled in Brisch 2008 provide perspectives on the religious foundations of Mesopotamian monarchy at different points in time; Jones 2005 offers a clear and concise

Royal truthfulness provides an angle from which to look again at the inscription of Dareios, and then at some other royal utterances that share with it a fundamental feature, namely the parallel use of different languages. While using the millennia-old cuneiform writing system throughout, the inscription of Bisotun is in fact written in three different languages, namely Old Persian, Elamite, and Neo-Babylonian. The three versions are clearly meant to be translations of each other, the Elamite one being usually thought to be the original one.[28] In any case, the differences are minor, if certainly interesting. In practical terms, in the inscription the voice of Dareios the king speaks in three different languages. This case of royal multilingualism deserves perhaps more attention than it has received so far.[29]

Nowadays, when a text is translated from one language to another the purpose in general is to make it intelligible to an audience who do not understand the language in which it was originally formulated. At first sight, there is more than one reason to exclude that this straightforward explanation might apply to the Bisotun inscriptions. Even if we are prepared to resist the modern tendency to underestimate the extension of literacy in pre-modern cultures,[30] nobody, I suppose, would claim that in the ancient Near East, possibly with a few exceptions, the cuneiform writing system was familiar to more than a tiny elite of scholars and scribes. This objection, however, is somewhat superficial, in that it confuses the stated purpose for which somebody performs an action with the effectiveness of the action itself with regard to the stated purpose – we will come back to this. But more to the point, we ought not to forget that the whole monument was engraved on the cliff over 60 meters above ground level, making it definitely impossible to read the inscriptions for anybody except Auramazda.

The location of this monument, whatever its original purpose, was probably responsible for the fact that, within a century of its execution, the connection between the bas-relief and its originator, King Dareios the First, had apparently been forgotten. This much is suggested by a passage from the "Persian History" of Ktesias of Knidos. Ktesias was the doctor who tended to the wound inflicted by Kyros the Younger on his brother King Artaxerxes the Second at the battle of Kunaxa in 401 BCE. He is normally and with good reason regarded as a somewhat unreliable author when it comes to historical narratives, but when he describes the

statement of the problem. On Egypt, see Frandsen 2008 with further references. For the religious background of Achaemenid monarchy, see Lincoln 2012.

28 See Schmitt 1990; Lecoq 1997 provides a translation of all three versions, and also of the Aramaic one, on which see below.

29 An important exception is represented by Jacobs 2012, a study which, beyond some disagreements, has been a rich source of inspiration for this part of my own study.

30 Against the skeptical views of Harris 1991, see e.g. Pébarthe 2006 and Clanchy 2013.

monument of Bagistane attributing it to the legendary queen Semiramis, the suspicion that the Persians themselves no longer knew that that monument, meanwhile over a hundred years old, had actually been executed for Dareios grows stronger.[31] This however does not mean that the text itself had been forgotten, far from it.

For a productive discussion of Dareios' multilingual text in terms of intended audience, we need to set aside altogether the question of literacy within the Achaemenid empire, which turns out to be a clear red herring. While it is true that the presence of three languages in the Bisotun monument can be seen as a rhetorical statement, there is no doubt that this was a statement about the addressee of Dareios' words. Among other things, Dareios namely tells his audience the following:

> "(70) Dareios the king proclaims: By the favour of Auramazda, this (is) the form of writing, which I have made, besides in Aryan. Both on clay tablets and on parchment it has been placed. Besides, I also made the signature (?); besides, I also made the lineage. And it was written down and read aloud before me. Afterwards, I sent off this form of writing everywhere into the countries. The people strove (to use it? abide by it?)".[32]

In spite of all the problems of interpretation affecting this section, one thing is clear: copies of the text were circulated broadly in the empire, a statement for which we happen to have external evidence. In Babylon, on the processional way that led to the Ishtar Gate, a stele of grey basalt about 3 meter tall carried a reduced version of the Bisotun relief, depicting Dareios, Gaumata and probably the two liar kings of Babylon, accompanied by the Neo-Babylonian text of the inscription. That the political meaning of this monument was not lost on its audience may be confirmed by the fact that at some point the stele was intentionally smashed into very small fragments.[33] Moreover, fragments of papyri from Elephantine in Upper Egypt document at least two copies of the text in Aramaic translation.[34] These documents in particular are of crucial importance for two reasons: first, they prove that

31 Ktesias and the remains of his writings are treated in Llewellyn-Jones – Robson 2009; on Ktesias' biography, see esp. 11–18.

32 This section of the text, preserved only in Old Persian and Elamite, includes multiple problems of interpretation. The beginning is often taken to mean that Dareios had the cuneiform writing system for Old Persian devised especially for this inscription – the objections of Lecoq 1997, 213 do not seem decisive to me, but notice that he translates all the verbs of doing in this section as 'to translate'. The last sentence is translated as "das Volk kooperierte (dabei)" in Schmitt 1999.

33 For all of the above, see Seidl 1999. Intentional destruction of royal monuments had a tradition in Mesopotamia, showing that their symbolic value could attract resentment on them; see Van De Mieroop 2011, 335–336 on the intentional smashing of monuments of Hammurabi at Ur.

34 The standard edition is Greenfield – Porten 1982; the texts are collated alongside the other versions in Lecoq 1997.

indeed the text had been translated in more languages than documented on the Bisotun monument; second, since the two papyri date to the late fifth century BCE, they prove that the text itself was still circulating at that point in time. In fact, the passage just quoted points indirectly to the existence of versions of the text in other languages: this much is implied by the reference to clay tablets and parchment, the former indicating indirectly languages that used cuneiform writing and the reed, like the three in Bisotun, the latter languages that used alphabetic writing and the brush, like Aramaic.[35]

To sum up, the three languages represented in the Bisotun inscription did not exhaust Dareios' multilingualism. They may even have been selected ad hoc in relation to the positioning of the monument, on the royal road from Ecbatana to Babylon.[36] In any case, the text of Dareios' utterance circulated more broadly and in more languages. Notionally, every subject of the empire was supposed to hear the truthful words of the king in her or his own language. These renderings were certainly presented and perceived as the king's own words. We hear from the books of Esther and Daniel that it was a law for the Persians that the word of the king could not be altered.[37] From the point of view of both the author and the addressee, the words of Dareios in Babylonian or Aramaic were still the words of Dareios.

This multilingual utterance disseminated all over the empire defines its intended audience, and in so doing, it defines its author. Regardless of how many subjects of the Achaemenid empire could and did come in contact with the words of the king, the fact of being in principle understandable for all of them thanks to the king's mastery of languages is a defining property of the royal utterance itself. Dareios inserted himself in a long and distinguished lineage of royal polyglots.[38]

In the ideology of monarchy, superior linguistic competence turns out to be a more widespread *topos* than we might have thought. Towards the end of the

35 Compare the frequent depictions on Assyrian palace reliefs of couples of scribes, one holding reed and tablet, the other holding parchment and brush; see Radner 2021, 149–150 with further references.

36 But the point should not be pressed: these same three languages appear side by side in other inscriptions from the early reign of Dareios. Regarding the addressee of the Bisotun inscription, I disagree slightly with Jacobs 2012, 105, who restricts them to Dareios' royal successors (which is not to deny that messages to kings of the future were often included in royal inscriptions from Mesopotamia, as they are in Dareios' inscription, too: DB 65). The reference to the empire-wide circulation, confirmed by the evidence, seems to point in a different direction; Jacobs himself seems to come to this conclusion, 2012, 114.

37 See Schmitt 1980, 107 with reference to Esther 1.19; 8.8 and Daniel 6.9.16. More to the point is Esther 1.22, cf. also 3.12 and 8.9: "He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language". Some observations Greenfield 1991, 173–185.

38 For this decisive point, see Jacobs 2012, 113–114.

Neo-Assyrian empire, Ashurbanipal prided himself on being able to "read complicated texts, whose Sumerian is obscure and whose Akkadian is hard to figure out."[39] A veritable philologist-king, Ashurbanipal was also responsible for a significant expansion of the Assyrian royal library of Ninive. In the early eighth century, Yariris of Karkemish, a regent rather than a king, had boasted of his ability to read four different writing systems and speaking twelve languages – and had done so in a monumental inscription in Luwian hieroglyphs.[40] The most striking statement of royal multilingualism is however much earlier and goes back to king Shulgi of Ur, certainly one of the most striking royal self-promoters in history. Shulgi ruled at the end of the third millennium BCE. In one of the hymns in which he, speaking in the first person, praised himself as the ideal king, Shulgi claimed that he knew the languages of his enemies better than they themselves did, and when he administered justice he was able to address litigants in all the five languages of the Sumerian empire without using interpreters:[41]

> "When I ….. like a torrent with the roar of a great storm, in the capture of a citadel in Elam ….., I can understand what their spokesman answers. By origin I am a son of Sumer; I am a warrior, a warrior of Sumer. Thirdly, I can conduct a conversation with a man from the black mountains. Fourthly, I can do service as a translator with a man of Martu, a man of the mountains ……I myself can correct his confused words in his own language. Fifthly, when a man of Subir yells ….., I can even distinguish the words in his language, although I am not a fellow-citizen of his. When I provide justice in the legal cases of Sumer, I give answers in all five languages. In my palace no one in conversation switches to another language as quickly as I do".[42]

39 Cooper 2010, 327–328; on Ashurbanipal's image as an erudite polyglot, see now Santini 2021, 25.

40 See Santini 2021, 7–12. KARKEMISH A15b, lines 19–20: Yariris could (read? Write?) in the City's writing (i.e. hieroglyphic Luwian), the Tyrian writing (i.e. Phoenician), the Assyrian writing (i.e. cuneiform), the Tamani writing (Aramaic?), and knew twelve languages. The text is most conveniently consulted in Payne 2012. On Yariris' position in Karkemish and his monumental legacy see Denel 2007, 194–197. Royal bilingual or trilingual inscriptions from Cilicia and nearby areas, typically in Phoenician alphabet and Luwian hieroglyphs, occasionally including also cuneiform Neo-Assyrian, imply on a somewhat more modest level a similar claim of royal multilingualism; see Payne 2006, 120–125 and Cornelius 2021.

41 The hymns of Shulgi, who reigned from 2094 to 2047 according to the currently accepted chronology, represent a fascinating and somewhat problematic corpus of evidence. The available manuscripts are much later than the king himself, dating to the Old Babylonian period (c. 1894–1595). For an introduction with essential references, see Lämmerhirt 2012, 17–22. See also Klein 1981b. On Shulgi's bid for divine kingship, see Michalowski 2008, 34.

42 Shulgi hymn B, 206–220, translation from "The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature" (http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.4.2.02#, last accessed 26.01.2025); see also Klein 1981a, 16.

In another hymn, we read:

> "Since I am also wise and highly intelligent, … Also I know the Martu language as well as I do Sumerian. ….. mountain people walking in the hills ….., they greet me and I reply to them in the Martu language. Also I know the Elamite language as well as I do Sumerian. ….. in Elam ….., they greet me and I reply in Elamite".[43]

On an immediate level, these multifarious claims of royal multilingualism confirm that the actual ability of the intended audience to read and understand the royal utterance is quite secondary: what really matters is the ability of the king to pronounce it. On a deeper level, they may point to an enduring cultural continuity within the monarchic ideology of the Near East, a phenomenon of which we may see the results but cannot quite fathom the means of transmission. Long after Dareios, King Mithradates VI Eupator of Pontus, scion of a dynasty of Iranian origin and mortal enemy of the Romans, was admired for his ability to speak all the 22 languages spoken in his empire, so that he, like Shulgi, could communicate without interpreters with every single one of his subjects.[44] The same ability was attributed to Kleopatra VII, the last queen of the dynasty of Ptolemy Soter, who could talk to ambassadors without interpreters in Arabian, Syrian, Median, Parthian, Ethiopic, and even in the language of the Troglodytes.[45]

In the powerful and multifaceted ideology of royalty first formulated in Mesopotamia in the third millennium, the king's ability to cross linguistic barriers and address subjects and others each in their own language may not have been the most frequent *topos*, but it certainly had its own place. It expressed a strongly charismatic claim, attributing to the king properties specific to him, not inherited from his predecessor, and for this very reason it may have been deployed more often to prop the legitimacy of one specific king, who may have happened to need

43 Shulgi hymn C 115–126, translation from "The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature" (http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.4.2.03#, last accessed 26.01.2025); see also Klein 1981a, 16 n. 64.

44 See especially Plinius nat. 25.3.6–7; shorter references are to be found also in nat. 7.24.88–90 as well as in Val. Max. 8.7. ext. 16 and Quint. inst. 11.2. Mithradates' gift for languages has attracted scholarly attention for a long time (Summerer 2009) but it has not, to my knowledge, been seen as a component of his royal persona. Note that the 22 languages he mastered were the languages of his subjects; Latin, rather widespread at that point in the Mediterranean, does not seem to be included.

45 Plut. Life of Mark Antony, 27.2–4. See Roller 2010, 169 on Plutarch's possible source – most likely directly acquainted with Kleopatra – and 44 and 49–50 for intriguing observations on possible contacts between the scholarly circles of the court of Kleopatra and those of Mithradates. Again, there seems to be no sense that Kleopatra could be connected to a much longer lineage of royal polyglots.

some boosting in this quarter, by elevating him to a superhuman stance, hovering between omniscient gods and monolingual mortals. It was one of the many ways, albeit perhaps not the most prominent one, in which the king resembled the immortals, and here some readers must be thinking already of the famous passage at the beginning of the "Acts of the Apostles" that describes the miracle of Pentecost (2:1–11, as per King James' Bible):

> "(1) And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.
> (2) And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.
> (3) And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.
> (4) And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.
> (5) And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.
> (6) Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because every man heard them speak in his own language.
> (7) And they were all amazed and marveled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans?
> (8) And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?
> (9) Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia,
> (10) Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes,
> (11) Cretans and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God".

Having become the mouthpiece of the King of Kings, the Apostles acquire his prerogative, uttering the divine message in all the languages of their audience.

But let us turn to conclude to a different king of kings, or Shahanshah, a mere mortal to be sure, but still a rather exalted person: King Shapur the First, who ruled the Sasanian empire from 240 to 271 CE and is famous among ancient historians for having slain one Roman emperor in battle and having captured another one alive. This warrior king if there ever was one has left a remarkable inscriptional record of his achievements. Dubbed *Res gestae divi Saporis* by Mikhail Rostovzeff, by analogy with the *Res gestae divi Augusti,* Shapur's inscription has actually very little in common with Augustus'. While the latter presented itself as an account given by the Princeps at the end of his life of how he used republican magistracies and public money, Shapur's inscription described the extension and structure of his empire, narrated some of his military exploits, especially his victories over the Romans, and listed some honors bestowed on distinguished members of the royal court, both living and dead. One common point between Augustus' *Res gestae* and the inscription of Shapur, to be sure, is multilingualism. Famously, the *Res gestae*

are preserved in the most complete version in a long bilingual Latin-Greek inscription from the temple of Augustus and Rome in Ankara, Turkey.[46] The inscription of Shapur is tri-lingual, with one version in Middle Persian, one in Parthian, and one in Greek. As with Dareios' inscription at Bisotun, scholars have been hotly debating for years which one of the three was the original from which the other had been translated, although in this case the priority of the Middle Persian versions appears now to be well established.[47]

In any case, Augustus was not Shapur's model. His inscription was engraved on a 12-meter high rectangular tower known as the Ka'ba-ye Zartosht, or 'Cube of Zoroaster', in fact a structure of Achaemenid times, most likely attributable to Dareios, whose original usage is unknown. Located twelve kilometers northwest of Persepolis, the edifice faces the rock cliff of Naqsh-e Rustam, where the graves of four Achaemenid kings, from Dareios onwards, are excavated in the rock, decorated by bas relief sculptures and cuneiform inscriptions in Old Persian, much like the Bisotun monument. In the same cliff, closer to the ground, a bas relief represents King Ardashir the First, Shapur's father and the founder of the dynasty, receiving his royal investiture from Auramazda, and is followed by six more celebrating Shapur himself and his successors.

Whether or not the Sasanian kings represented themselves as restoring the glories of the Achaemenid empire is a hotly debated topic among specialists. Roman historians repeatedly record Sasanian envoys presenting territorial demands on the Romans in terms of rights rooted in the Achaemenid past, but scholars have doubted that the Achaemenid precedent had a real role in legitimizing their power vis-à-vis their subjects.[48] On the other hand, there is no denying the intentional continuity with Achaemenid monuments established by the first Sassanian kings, who carved the rock of Naqsh-e Rustam with multiple reliefs celebrating their victories.[49] To be sure, we cannot take for granted that the specifically Achaemenid associations of the site were as clear to them as they are to us as evidenced by the fact that the local place names actually refer the dramatis personae from the Iranian epic tradition, starting with Rustam, the hero of the *Shahnameh*. The misinterpretation of the Bisotun monument already at the end of the fifth century invites caution.

46 For a comprehensive and authoritative introduction to this text, see Scheid 2007.

47 See Huyse 1999, vol. II, 191–201.

48 Cass. Dio 80.3.3; Herodian. 6.2.1–5; Amm. 17.5.3–8. For a *status quaestionis*, see Kettenhofen 2002. The extent to which Arsacids and Sasanians regarded the Achaemenids as specifically their predecessors has been investigated in several contributions by M. R. Shayegan, see Shayegan 2008 and especially 2017, and in a broader framework Shayegan 2018.

49 The monumental continuity established by the Sasanian kings with the inscriptions and reliefs of their Achaemenid predecessors has been studied recently by Canepa 2010 and 2015.

One may wonder, in other words, what kind of memory of the Achaemenids might have survived for the Sasanians to fashion themselves after.

On the other hand, the Aramaic papyri from Elephantine show that Achaemenid texts had a life independent of the monuments themselves, which was not necessarily conterminous with the ability to read cuneiform. This, if nothing else, suggests that, before setting aside Achaemenid assonances, one should take a second look at Shapur's inscription. It is the very fact that scholars are still debating on the addressees of the various versions of Shapur's utterance that makes one wonder whether we should not simply interpret it as primarily a statement of royal multilingualism, and thereby an heir, if distant, of Dareios' own multilingual utterance. But there may be more. The general family resemblance in the titles of Shapur and Dareios and in the way the Sasanian king speaks in the first person may not be enough to prove Achaemenid inspiration, but then, what to say of the fact that Roman aggression is described as 'lie'? "And Caesar lied again and did wrong to Armenia. And so I attacked the Roman Empire…" says Shapur, using the Middle Persian correspondent of the word used in the Bisotun inscription.[50] Matthew Canepa comments:

> "Although separated from the Achaemenids by centuries, composed in a much changed Persian language, and written in an entirely unrelated script, the structure, themes and even lexical choices of the Middle Persian version of Shabuhr I's inscription are incredibly close to features that are common across many of the Old Persian inscriptions. At this stage we can only speculate whether these close correspondences arose from oral tradition or some other origin, but they reflect a wider cultural and political urge to collapse the gulf of centuries separating the Sasanians from their ancient and half-understood predecessors".[51]

We should not, it seems, reject too quickly the possibility that indeed, through channels that we cannot quite reconstruct, Shapur himself, or more likely his spin doctors, might have been harkening back to an ideological language that may have seemed to them traditional and legitimate twice over, as it were. Hear how Shapur turns to his successors, in the best Mesopotamian tradition of addressing the kings of the future:

> "Now as we serve and worship the gods with zeal, since we are the wards of the gods and with the aid of the gods we have searched out these peoples, have dominated them and have acquired fame for bravery, also whoever comes after us and rules, may he also serve and worship the gods with zeal, so the gods may aid him and make him their ward".[52]

50 The Middle Persian word is related to the one used in DB 1.39 etc., as pointed out by Huyse 1999, vol. II, 53.

51 Canepa 2015, 25.

52 Translation from Frye 1984, 373.

Once again, divine favor, empirically proven by military success, is the ultimate guarantee of the truthfulness of the king and of every royal utterance; his voice reaches across boundaries of language and time, to proclaim that indeed he is the one who enjoys the protection of Shamash, the favor of Auramazda, or the Mandate of Heaven – royal, and therefore truthful.

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