

Luxury and power

Persia to Greece

James Fraser, Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, Henry Bishop-Wright

An eye-opening publication that contrasts perceptions of luxury – together with its positive and negative connotations – in imperial Persia, democratic Athens and the Hellenistic world between 600 and 200 BCE.

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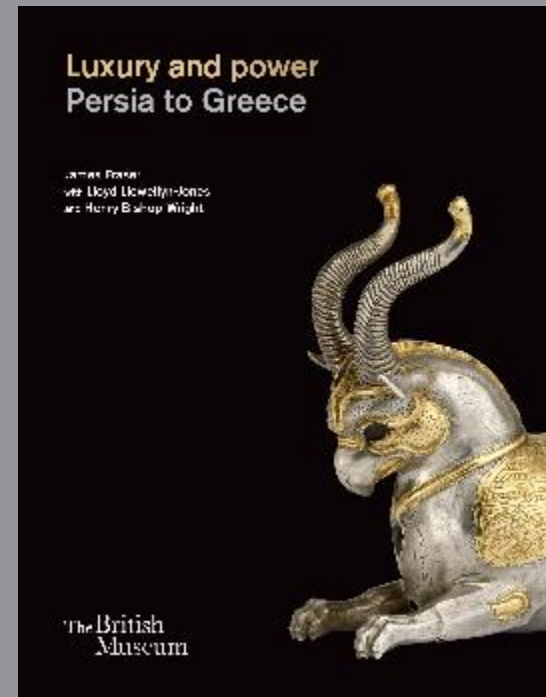
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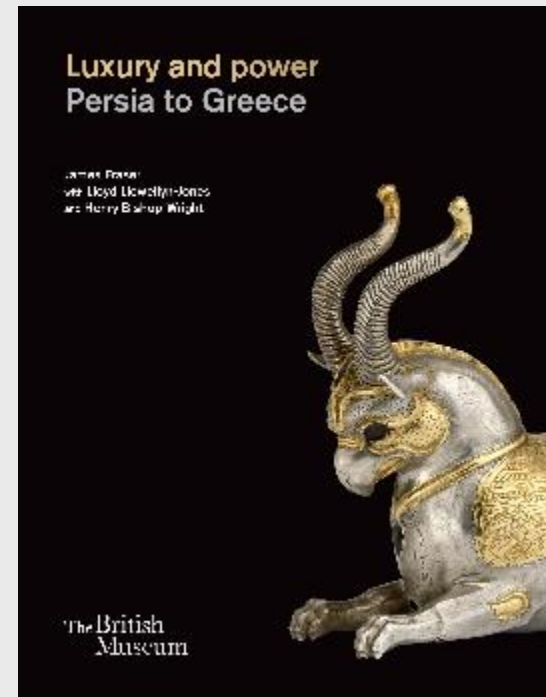


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Book

Key Sales Points

- Accompanies a major exhibition at the British Museum in April 2023.
- An accessibly written text from specialist authors, which will appeal to audiences with a general interest in the ancient world.
- Showcases a dazzling selection of objects, including the loan of the spectacular Panagyurishte treasure from the National History Museum in Sofia, Bulgaria.
- Introduces the reader to a world of intrigue and splendour over a span of 400 years– from the Persian court, with its extravagant displays of excess, to the Athenian critics of Persian decadence in the fifth century BCE, to Alexander the Great imitating Persian kings in Macedonia and beyond.





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James Fraser
with Lloyd-Llewellyn-Jones
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The British
Museum



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1

THE ART OF BEING PERSIAN: LUXURY AT THE ACHAEMENID COURT

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones



I

THE ART OF BEING PERSIAN: LUXURY AT THE ACHAEMENID COURT

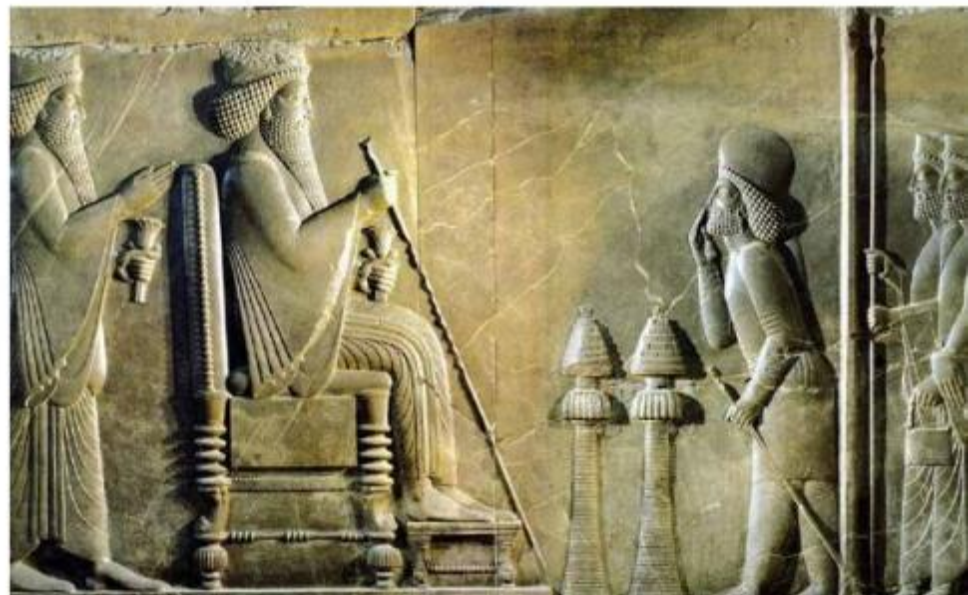
Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones

Made up of some thirty lands, the Achaemenid Persian empire (559–330 BCE) stretched from Libya to India and from southern Russia to the Indian Ocean, making it, at its height, the biggest empire the ancient world had ever seen (fig. 1.1).¹² The period 559–465 BCE saw the rapid expansion of the empire under a series of conquering kings (Cyrus II, Cambyses II, Darius I and Xerxes) and thereafter the empire matured and continued to flourish until its conquest by Alexander of Macedon in 330 BCE.

In order to maintain their control over the conquered territories, the Achaemenids divided their vast empire into numerous 'satrapies' to ensure efficient administration and the ability to levy taxes and tribute.¹³ Estimates of the size of the empire's population range from a conservative 17,000,000 people to a more extravagant 35,000,000. Whatever the reality, it is fair to say that the peoples of the wider Persian empire certainly mattered to the Achaemenid centre, based in south western Iran, and therefore in royal rhetoric the empire was envisaged through its people. Indeed, the Old Persian word *dabya* (plural *dabiyatai*) means both 'land' and 'people'. In official Achaemenid art the structure of the empire as well as its

ethnic diversity is given physical form through the representation of the *dabiyatai* – the peoples who inhabited the king's lands. On door jambs at Persepolis' Hall of a Hundred Columns, built by Xerxes, the enthroned king is lifted high on a *taštar* (throne platform) by representative of his empire (fig. 1.2), a motif repeated on the facades of the royal tombs at the necropolis of Naqš-e Rostam and at Persepolis, where the throne-bearers work together to lift high the image of the Great King who rules over them. This might be interpreted as a joyous act of reciprocal collaboration – the peoples of the empire exalting their monarch – but it is possible that the emphasis is not so much on willing togetherness but on political subjugation. An inscription (DNa) accompanying such a scene on the tomb of Darius I invites the viewer to contemplate the meaning of the relief and suggests this domineering agenda:

If you shall now think, 'How many are the lands which king Darius held?', then look at the sculptures of those who bear the throne, and then you shall know, then will it become known to you: the spear of a Persian man has gone far, then shall it become known to you: a Persian man has delivered battle far indeed from Persia.'



12
Scene with Xerxes on his throne, supported by the people of his empire, from the Persepolis relief. DATE, Achaemenid, Persepolis, Iran, Stone, Dimensions, National Museum of Iran, Tehran, collection number

THE ART OF TRAVEL

In the case of the Achaemenids, however, it is important to recognise that the court was not fixed to a single palace or any one location because the Persian court was a peripatetic entity and moved around

the Iranian plateau (and even into Mesopotamia) on a regular, seasonal, basis. In the winter, the king and his entourage resided in the warm climes of Susa (which during the summer became a scorching inferno of a place); in the autumn he was to be found in Babylon (the site of the Achaemenid palace has recently been found in the city). Ecbatana, located in the cool mountains of Media in northern Iran, was where the court resided throughout the summer. And in the spring, having travelled through central Iran via Isfahan, the Great King turned up at Persepolis (close to modern Shiraz), the great ceremonial palace which was the site for the celebration of *Nowruz*, the Persian New Year, celebrated at the spring equinox.¹⁴ The Achaemenids were essentially nomads, and thus the regular progression of the royal court around and across the empire

should be regarded as a migration on a par with the relocation patterns typical of nomadic peoples generally.¹⁵ Nomadism has a deep antiquity in Iranian culture and the people we know as 'the Persians' were originally horse-riding nomads who migrated from their ancestral homelands in Central Eurasia into the south west of the Iranian Plateau around 1500 BCE.

Between palace-sites, whenever the imperial procession came to a halt, a huge but luxurious camp was set up. Tents were erected and a royal city of cloth, leather, and wood appeared.¹⁶ The royal tent was a colossal structure made from colourfully woven textiles and leather panels supported by a framework of pillars and in all respects, the king's tent was a collapsible version of a palace throne-hall and it is reasonable to think of the Apadana at Persepolis or Susa as stone versions of the royal tent. It was the ultimate expression of glamping. Several descriptions survive of the state-tents utilised by Alexander after his conquest of Persia and it is clear that the Macedonian monarch was making good use of Achaemenid tents which were possibly captured after the defeat of Darius III at the Battle of Issus in 333 BCE. Alexander's Persian tents are described as truly colossal, with the textile roof supported by 50 golden pillars and enough space to hold a hundred couches.¹⁷ While it is difficult to pronounce firmly on the shape of the royal tents, it has been proposed that they were rectangular and with a circular canopy at the centre – this helps make sense of Greek texts that specifically speak of an *Osonon* ('heaven'). The Greeks knew about Persian state tents because several had been taken as war booty during the period of the Persian Wars and its aftermath and they were clearly a staggering sight in the eyes of the Greeks.¹⁸ Should we doubt the scale and grandeur of Persian state tents, then we should recall the Ottoman-period Turkish Imperial tents which still survive which testify to the luxury of their Achaemenid ancestors (Fig 1.5).¹⁹

The logistics of the court shifting locations required enormous organisation and colossal resources since many thousands of people would have been affected by, or responsible for, the move. Members of the royal family, such as princes and queens, might travel independently of the king, taking with them their own miniature courts or households and that here too precision planning would have been tantamount. Virtually the whole royal establishment shifted with the Great King – his administrative staff and councilors, his harem of wives and concubines moved with him, so did his artists and artisans, musicians and dancers, and even his livestock.



1.4
The Darius Seal, 6th – 5th century BCE, Achaemenid Probably Thebes (modern Luxor), Egypt Chalcidony or prase, H. 2.7 cm, Diam. 1.7 cm, British Museum, London, 1835.0630.1