From Babylon to Sasanian Iran and Sogdiana: rituals of royal humiliation and substitute king

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Several rituals staging a fictitious subversion of the political order are documented in Babylon during the Achaemenian period, from close or more remote sources. All these rituals involved the royal function or the royal person himself. Their heritage can be traced in the Iranian culture as late as the Safavid period.[1]

Babylon, Scythians, Alexander

The first ritual I shall mention is attested by a direct source. It is the royal humiliation performed in the Marduk (Bēl) temple every year on the fifth day of the month Nisan, the first month of the year, corresponding to the 25th of March or around that date. It is described in a famous text in the Akkadian language, dealing with various festivals. This text, reconstituted from four fragmentary tablets, was compiled during the Seleucid period, from earlier material. I quote here the passage concerning the royal humiliation:

> "The king having arrived, the High Priest comes out of the sanctuary, he takes (from the king) the sceptre, the ring, the scimitar; he takes his royal crown. He presents them to Bēl and in front of Bēl he places them on a seat. Coming out of the sanctuary, he strikes the King's cheek (. . .), he places himself behind him, introduces him to Bēl (. . .), he pulls his ears, he makes him kneel on the floor (. . .). The king says, once only: 'I have not sinned, Lord of the Country, I have not neglected what is (required) by Thy divine reign. I have not destroyed Babylon, I have not ordered its downfall. I have not harmed the Esagil, I have not forgotten the rites. I have not slapped the cheeks of one of my subordinates. I have not humiliated them.' (. . .) [*The High Priest having lectured the king, the king resumes his dignified aspect. The High Priest leads him out of the sanctuary and gives him back his ornaments.*] The High Priest strikes the king's cheek. If tears follow when he strikes his cheek, Bēl is well disposed; if tears do not come, Bēl is angry; the enemy will surge and cause his downfall."[2]

Among the Babylonian festivals I am going to discuss here, this is the only one in which the king participates in person. The High Priest forces him into an inferior position (but possibly without other witnesses) and he molests him, first within the sanctuary, then outside, this time in a kind of ordeal aiming at checking the sincerity of the oath he has previously made in front of the statue of the god. The tears have also an oracular function as they represent the rain on which good harvests depend. The importance of the ears in the body language is understandable as well, for the good king is the one who listens to the commands of the gods and the complaints of his subjects. For this last detail it is tempting to compare the gallery of royal kinsmen or ancestors (a fragmentary label inscription mentions a "king's son"), discovered in recent years at the ceremonial site of

Akchakhan-kala in Khorezm (Chorasmia). They date from around the turn of the Christian era and are executed according to very conservative Achaemenian artistic traditions. All these royal characters, possibly involved in the Frawardīgān commemorative and purification festival at the end of the Zoroastrian year, present the strange feature of red ears contrasting with their white skin (fig. 1).[3]

A second ritual, which was also celebrated every year, is the one called "Sakaia" by the Babylonian scholar-priest Berossus, who wrote his *Babyloniaca* during the Seleucid period. It occurred around the 4th of July, a time which coincided with the *akitu* of Dumuzi, though descriptions of the latter in cuneiform texts do not contain the same details. In the form presented by Berossus in his Book 1 (*apud* Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* XIV.44.639C) it is not a strictly royal ritual, but a carnival where each household is ruled by a slave dressed as a mock king:

> "In the month Lōos, on the sixteenth day, there was held in Babylon a feast called *Sakaia*, extending over five days, wherein it was customary for the masters to be ruled by their slaves, and one of them, as leader of the household, was clothed in a robe similar to the king's; he was called the *zōganēs*."[4]

This last name sounds Iranian, at least superficially, but it has never been elucidated. The name of the festival itself is problematic, for it is also given by Strabo to another festival allegedly instituted by Cyrus after a victory gained in Pontus over Saka (i.e. Scythian) nomads, hence the name. It does not seem to have anything else in common with the Babylonian carnival except its annual and orgiastic character. In the case of the *Sakaia* described by Strabo, the dancers are dressed in Scythian garb, and it has been suggested that they would imitate or parody a real Scythian ritual of communal drinking, which is known from its depiction on a diadem from the Sakhnovka kurgan on the Dnepr (fig. 2).[5] No such features are mentioned by Berossus in his account of the Babylonian ritual. In addition, Strabo's *Sakaia* are celebrated under royal control in all temples of the Iranian goddess Anāhitā, while those described by Berossus are a private ritual celebrated in each household, though the king is symbolically present through the costume assumed by the slave who plays the overseer.

This last feature is reminiscent of still another Babylonian ritual, namely that of the substitute king, abundantly documented since the Neo-Assyrian period and splendidly commented on by Jean Bottéro.[6] Contrary to the other rituals it is not annual but occasional: when bad omens tend to accumulate, the priests select a man of humble birth, or a prisoner, who is dressed in the royal costume, enthroned in the palace, and even provided with a virgin "queen," while the power continues to be exercised by the real king confined to a section of the palace protected from the impurity by ritual barriers made of reeds. When the substitute king is considered to have attracted upon him all the evil which had been predicted, he is executed together with his ephemeral consort, and everything he has touched is burned.

As recognized quite recently, this custom explains a strange incident which occurred in the Babylon palace shortly before Alexander's death. It is described in almost similar terms by Diodorus Siculus (XVII.116.1–7) and Arrian (VII.24.1–3): a local man of humble origin, or a criminal, managed to sit on the throne while it was empty and to put on the royal insignia which Alexander had left behind him. Instead of arresting him the eunuchs began to lament all around; put to the question, the man said he had acted on his own initiative, and he was executed. When they were eventually asked their opinion, the priests considered that the affair boded no good. While the religious background is clear, modern authors differ about how to interpret the incident itself: according to Pierre Briant it was fully controlled by Alexander himself in agreement with the Babylonian clergy in order to appease the local population after a succession of bad omens;[7] differently, Pierre Chuvin considers that the initiative came from the clergy and that something went wrong, possibly because the Greeks did not properly understand the implications of the ritual and put to death the poor fellow before he had been able to take all the evil upon himself.[8] Whatever the true explanation is, the stratagem did not help Alexander.

The ultimate association of this ritual with Alexander could have influenced the discourse allegedly addressed by Diogenes to Alexander, who visited him on the eve of his Persian expedition, and which is known through Dio Chrisostomus (*Oratio* IV.66–67):

> (Diogenes speaks): "Have you not heard of the festival of the *Sakaia*, which is celebrated by the Persians, against whom you are eager to make an expedition? (. . .) They take one of the prisoners who are under sentence of death, set him on a golden throne, give him the king's clothes and allow him to give orders and to drink and to indulge himself and to consort with the king's concubines during the days of the festival, nobody offering any opposition to his doing anything he pleases. After this they strip him and scourge him and impale him."[9]

This passage seems to combine two rituals which were actually distinct: the domestic seasonal ritual of the *Sakaia* and the palatial and occasional ritual of the substitute king. On the other hand, as the *Sakaia* were celebrated in each household, one may conjecture that they took place in the palace as well and that some kind of a mock king appeared there also on this occasion, though probably not with such dramatic consequences as in the occasional ritual. There is also some uncertainty about the interpretation of the words which Diogenes (or perhaps the transmitter Dio Chrysostomus) uses to qualify the mode of execution: ἀποδύσαντες καὶ μαστιγώσαντες ἐκρέμασαν. They are often translated "strip, scourge and impale," but Chuvin in his previously mentioned article on Alexander's death proposes "strip, whip and suspend," which, coming after the clothing of the mock king with royal ornaments, would suggest a fascinating continuity with the Passion of Jesus.[10]

Sasanian Iran

So much for the Babylonian rituals down to the time of Alexander. During the subsequent Seleucid and Parthian periods we do not hear of them being performed, though some of the texts which document them were compiled then. After centuries of silence they appear again in texts pertaining to the Sasanian period, both in Iran itself and in independent Sogdiana. They are no longer associated specifically with Babylon, though one can presume a certain degree of continuity from Babylon to the neighbouring Sasanian capital Ctesiphon. Some features have changed, while others appear strikingly similar.

A kind of royal humiliation, occurring during the New Year festival as it did in Babylon, is described by Nizām al-Mulk, vizir of the Saljuks in the eleventh century, in his didactic treatise *Siyar al-Mulk* "Manners of the Kings," otherwise known in Persian as *Siyāsat-nāme* "Book of Government." Although he does not always mention his sources, Nizām al-Mulk puts together earlier material faithfully reproduced, some of which ultimately derives from genuine Sasanian Pahlavi sources. The passage which concerns us here runs as follows:

> "They say that it was the custom of the Persian kings to give special audiences for the common people at the festivals of Mihrjān and Nauruz, and nobody was debarred. (. . .) When the day came the king's herald stood outside the palace gate and shouted, 'If any man this day impedes another from submitting his needs, the king will be innocent of his blood.' The king then received the people's petitions and laid them all before him; one by one he looked at them, and if amongst them there was one complaining against himself he rose and came down from the throne and **knelt before the *mowbed-mowbedān***, saying, 'Before all other cases judge between me and this man, impartially and regardlessly.' Then the king would say to the *mowbed*, 'In the eyes of God there is no sin greater than a king's sin. (. . .) When a king is a tyrant all his courtiers begin to practise tyranny. (. . .) **Then the kingship is transferred to another house**.' (. . .) Then the *mowbed* considered the case and having decided between the king and his opponent, he awarded judgment in full to the winning party; but if anyone had made a false accusation against the king and had no proof, he was severely punished. (. . .) When the king had finished with these disputes **he returned to the throne and put on the crown**."[11]

Several details deserve a special comment. Besides Nowruz, the Zoroastrian New Year, the ritual is reported to take place during the festival of Mihrjān, in Pahlavi Mihragān, the second occasion when the Sasanian king gave audience to representatives of all classes of the population. It does not take place in a temple but in the royal palace, and the violence inflicted on the king is

now considerably reduced in comparison with the ancient Babylonian ritual. One can even suspect that the complaints are more a comedy than a reality, because of the threat of harsh punishment for anyone who would not be able to prove his claim. Despite all this, some essential features are retained: the king kneels in front of the high priest; he is explicitly threatened with a takeover by enemies if he does not observe justice; the fact that he puts on his crown at the end of the ceremony indicates that he has left it at the beginning, as was the case in Babylon, most probably because the dignity of the royal function must not be affected by the temporary humiliation of its incumbent.

Still according to Nizām al-Mulk, this ceremony had been observed by all Sasanian kings but was eventually abandoned by Yazdgird I, whom the Zoroastrian tradition portrays as a tyrant. Even if this information is true,[12] it appears that a similar procedure could be revived under the pressure of exceptional circumstances. One can deduce it from a story told in al-Bīrūnī's *Chronology* about Pērōz, Yazdgird's great-grandson. When Iran was affected by a terrible drought, as the story goes:

> "Pērōz went to the famous fire-temple in Ādharkhurā in Fārs; there he said prayers, prostrated himself, and asked god to remove that trial from the inhabitants of the world. Then he went up to the altar and found there the ministers and priests standing before it. They, however, did not greet him as is due to kings. So he felt that **there was something the matter with the priests.** Then he went near the fire, turned his hands and arms round the flame, and pressed it thrice to his bosom, as one friend does with another when asking after each other's health; the flame reached his beard, but did not hurt him. Thereupon Pērōz spoke: 'O my Lord, thy names be blessed! If the rain is held back for my sake, **for any fault of mine, reveal it to me that I may divest myself from my dignity**; if something else is the cause, remove it, and make it known to me and to the people of the world, and give them copious rain.' Then he descended from the altar, left the cupola, and sat down on a (seat) made of gold, **similar to a throne, but smaller** (. . .). Now the ministers and priests came near him and greeted him as is due to kings."[13]

Here again some details are very consistent with the earlier information. The king is met coldly by the priests to whom this temple, the Ādharkhurā or Ādur-Farrbay, belongs specifically. His behaviour with the sacred fire is not that expected when the ritual is celebrated by priests: during the embrace his beard comes in contact with the fire, a polluting accident which the mouth-cover worn by Zoroastrian priests is intended to avoid. The situation is actually an ordeal, as it was in the Babylonian ritual, and the fact that the king has not yet passed the test is probably the main explanation for the priest's initial coldness. He begs for the coming of rain, in the same way as the Babylonian king was forced to shed tears to obtain rain from Bēl-Marduk. At the end of the ceremony he takes a humble position, seated on a low stand instead of a proper throne. Only at that moment the priests greet him.

Sogdiana

Let us now turn to Sogdiana and its main city Samarkand, a country which was never part of the Sasanian empire but where the Zoroastrian calendar had remained in use since the Achaemenian period, as well as some Mesopotamian customs linked with the royal cult of the goddess Nana, in part assimilated to Anāhitā. From the early seventh century onwards Chinese envoys left precise descriptions of various ceremonies celebrated there as well as in neighbouring principalities. One at least is strongly reminiscent of the Babylonian *Sakaia* and their New Year King. I quote here the account of the envoy Wei Jie, who visited Samarkand in 607:

> "They make the first day of the sixth month the start of their year (. . .). In the forest east of the capital city on the seventh day they shoot arrows from horseback until they feel like stopping. On that day they set up a gold coin on a placard and the archer who hits it **becomes king for one day.**"[14]

In 607 the seventh day of the sixth month of the Chinese calendar (the one the text refers to) coincided or nearly coincided with the fourth of July, the date of the Babylonian *Sakaia* according to Berossus. One can however, doubt that a solar date could have been kept completely consistently during one millennium, while the Zoroastrian calendar in use

Fig. 1. A figure from the royal portraits gallery, Akchakhan-kala (Khorezm), end 1st c. B.C./beginning 1st c. A.D. Photo: © Karalpak-Australian Expedition in Chorasmia.

Fig. 2. Diadem from the Sakhnovka kurgan, 4th c. B.C. After Bessonova 1983: fig. 25.

Fig. 3. "Ambassadors Painting," Samarkand, c. A.D. 660: left part of the southern wall, showing the procession of sacrificial animals to the mausoleum of royal ancestors. Photo: © MAFOUZ-Sogdiane.

was based on the "vague" year or 365 days which receded by one month every one hundred and twenty years. More probably, the ritual of the New Year King was appended at the end of the six days Nowruz cycle and moved together with it, coincidentally reaching again its ancient Babylonian date by the beginning of the seventh century.

A detail possibly inherited from the ritual of the temporary substitute king (but which might have also existed in the Babylonian yearly *Sakaia*) is the withdrawal of the real king. It is mentioned in another Chinese account, that concerning the principality of Chāch, today Tashkent, preserved in the chronicles *Beishi* and *Suishu* (the last source mentions the sacrifice to the shrine of the royal ancestors at Samarkand as well, but without details):

> "To the southeast of the capital there is a building with a seat in the middle. On the sixth day of the first month [*here the reference is to the Zoroastrian calendar*] they take the ashes of the father and mother of the king, they put them in a golden urn and they place it on the stand. (. . .) The king followed by his dignitaries leaves a sacrificed animal on the spot. Once the ceremony is accomplished, **the king and his wife leave and go to a tent pitched at a distance**. The dignitaries and the others sit in order, enjoy a banquet and conclude the ceremony."[15]

The procession and the king and his court accompanying sacrificial animals to the memorial building out of the city is actually depicted on the famous "Ambassadors Painting" at Samarkand, executed in about 660 (fig. 3). On the southern wall of the painted hall, the king accompanied by dignitaries rides behind a cortege of sacrificial animals (a harnessed horse, four geese), themselves preceded by three co-spouses and the queen (on an elephant, figure missing); the aim of the procession is a small building which can be identified as the royal mausoleum.[16] Though the Chinese passage does not mention the One Day King, a possible reason why the king and queen withdraw from the ceremony is that their substitute is about to come (this is the sixth day of the Nowruz Cycle, and according to the above-mentioned account by Wei Jie the One Day King was appointed on the seventh day, at the end of the archery contest).[17] One cannot forget that in Babylon, during the fictitious rule of the substitute king, the real king was relegated to a ritual enclosure made of reeds. In this respect I would like to draw attention to the castle *Qala-i Navruzshāh*, "the Castle of the King of Nowruz" thirty kilometers to the east of Panjikent,[18] which might have been the place where the One Day King of Panjikent held his "court" every year, or the place where the real king withdrew.[19]

Postscript: Safavid Persia

Nothing in our post-Alexander documentation suggests a circumstantial use of the substitute king, who functions only in cyclic rituals. Or, rather, two such episodes are recorded, but they belong to a considerably later period. In 1593, when the court astrologers feared for Shāh 'Abbās I's life because of an inauspicious conjunction of Mars and Saturn, a man condemned to death as an "unbeliever" sat for three days on the Safavid throne before he was executed.[20] In 1669 the young Shāh Safi II became severely ill.

> "The doctors were blamed; they in their turn blamed the astrologers for having made a mistake in casting the horoscope from the time the Shah ascended the throne. So they thought to correct this by a piece of buffoonery. Having discovered, to their notion, an unlucky day to be followed by a lucky one, they placed a Gabr [*a Zoroastrian*], who boasted of being descended from Rustam, on the throne, clad in royal robes with, behind him, a statue in wood resembling him. The nobles came to do homage to him as long as the hour was unlucky, but, when it became lucky, the Gabr fled and one of them cut off the wooden head with a sword. Then in ordinary clothing appeared the king, who, seated on the throne, was robed and placed there with the name of Sulaiman."[21]

The substitute, a Zoroastrian, thus belonging to the lowest social status (except that of slave) in Iran at that time, was not a criminal and was fictitiously linked to a prestigious lineage in order not to offend the throne he was to occupy briefly consequently he was executed only in effigy. In this case at least civilization had progressed since ancient Babylon.

So far I have been unable to discover another such episode in the earlier periods, which is very surprising considering the extreme importance of astrology in all Iranian courts. Any relevant information is welcome.

Notes

1. A first version of this paper was presented at the workshop "Picturing Royal Charisma in the Near East," organized by Arlette David and Rachel Milstein at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on 12–15 January 2015, where it benefited much from the discussions. I also thank my colleagues Samra Azarnouche, Mihaela Timuş and Antonio Panaino for valuable suggestions and references they gave me when finalizing it.

2. My translation from the French version by Thureau-Dangin 1921: 14445. For the Mesopotamian background of Achaemenian kingship generally see Panaino 2000.

3. Kidd and Betts 2010: 657–66, figs. 8–9, and my remarks: 868.

4. Athenaus, *Deipnosophists* 14.44.639C, trans. C. B. Gulick, Loeb Classical Library. On the various festivals called "Sakaia" in ancient literature see de Jong 1997: 379–83, with a discussion of the relevant texts.

5. Boyce and Grenet 1991: 292. On this image and some related ones see the excellent description and commentary in Schiltz 1994: 184–89, figs. 134–38. The attendants drink but, contrary to the *Sakaia* described by Strabo, they do not dance, and the only woman is the enthroned goddess who holds a human-faced mirror and presents the cup, possibly as a symbol of investiture. According to Schiltz she could well be Hestia-Tabiti, a goddess particularly linked with Scythian royalty (see Herodotus IV.7, 59, 127, and generally on this question Dumézil 1978: 125–45); in this case her role would have been transferred to Anāhitā in the Iranian version of the festival. Compare, however, Bessonova 1983: 40, 98–107, and Shenkar 2014: 86–87, who interpret some details differently and keep to Rostovtzeff's old identification with Aphrodite-Artimpasa.

6. Bottéro 1978; republished in Bottéro 1992: 138–53. The Neo-Assyrian texts published since do not appear to contain any new material of this subject (the text 250 in Hunger 1992, dated 672 B.C., mentions a "substitute for the king," but in this particular case his role is only to supervise the cutting of dikes at night: a flood is predicted and such hazardous preventive action cannot be assumed by the king himself).

7. Briant 2002: 726, 863.

8. Chuvin 2006.

9. Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* IV.66-67, trans. J. W. Cohoon, Loeb Classical Library.

10. Chuvin 2006: 61. The relevance of this passage to Jesus as a "mock king" had already been noticed in Eddy 1961.

11. Trans. Darke 1978: 43. Christensen 1934:151–53, had already translated and commented this text, but only in relation to Berossus' *Sakaia* and not knowing of the Babylonian ritual of royal humiliation.

12. Some other sources ascribe this decision to his grandson Yazdgird II, see Christensen 1944: 283, 302–3.

13. Trans. Sachau 1879: 215 (text 228).

14. Trans. C. B. Wakeman, quoted in Compareti 2016: 274–75. On this festive cycle see Grenet and Marshak 1998, ignored by Cristoforetti 2006/2007 (who draws much on a comparison with the Chronicle of Arbela, a source which, even if not a forgery as assumed by some, is suspected to have been heavily manipulated by its successive redactors and by its first modern editor, see especially Jullien 2001).

15. From the French translation by the late Joël Thoraval in Grenet 1984: 254 (more literal for this specific passage than that of Wakeman quoted in Compareti 2016: 253).

16. Marshak 1994; Compareti 2016: 126–50; Grenet 2020.

17. This was also the opinion of Boris Marshak (in a discussion at the conference *Royal Naurūz in Samarkand*, Venice, Centro Studi e documentazione della Cultura Armena, 14 March 2005).

18. Iakubov 1988: 50–54, figs. 12–12a; Iakubov 1996: 14–20, figs. 8–9. In Western Iran and among the Kurds a folkloric survival of the New Year King is recorded as late as the last century, with the clownish *Mir-e Nowruzi* "elected" on the sixth day of Nowruz and "ruling" from one to five days (Epinette 2014).

19. Another custom, though seemingly unrelated to the New Year described by the Chinese, shows that a yearly rite akin to a "royal ordeal"—in this case a champion ordeal—existed at Samarkand. This custom of the "Horseman of Soghd" (i.e. the Knight of Samarkand, the State's champion who must expose his life every year to defend his position) is mentioned by the Arab chronicler Ṭabarī under the year 704 (A.H. 85; ii.1146), in relation to Mūsā ibn 'Abdallāh, an Arab rebel and soldier of fortune who had taken control of Termez and was visiting Samarkand, which had not yet been conquered**.**

> "Now the people of Soghd have a table on which are put greasy meat, bread, and an ewer of something to drink. On a particular day every year that is set out for the Horseman of Soghd, and no one but he may go near it; it is his food on that day. If anyone else eats from it, he fights a duel with him, and the table goes to whichever kills the other" (trans. Hinds 1990: 91).

The continuation of the story shows that the competition was not open to foreigners: a companion of Mūsā challenges the Horseman and kills him, infuriating the king of Samarkand, who declares: "I accommodated you and honored you, and you have killed the Horseman of Soghd. Had I not given you and your companions a safe-conduct, I would kill you. Get out of my territory!"

This occurrence is the only one which could testify to a survival of that cruelty which had once characterized the Babylonian ritual of the substitute king, while the Sogdian New Year ritual previously discussed does

not imply any violence inflicted on the substitute after he has finished his office.

20. Epinette 2014. This episode is related in Shayegan 2012: 39, n. 13, from a British source (Sir Hohn Malcolm, *The History of Persia*, London, 1829: 346). Shayegan's book deals with ideological conceptions he considers as later reflections of the ancient Mesopotamian rituals, but for the rituals themselves he describes only the Babylonian "substitute king," not the royal humiliation or the Sasanian and Sogdian testimonies.

21. *Carmelites* 1939: I. 405.

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