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“DAIVA INSCRIPTION” OF XERXES: HISTORICAL ACCOUNT, IDEOLOGICAL STATEMENT, OR PROPAGANDA?

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The so-called “Daiva inscription” of Xerxes found at Persepolis addresses the activity of this Achaemenid Persian king in two lands, one of which is said to have been in commotion, while the other is alleged to have been characterized by unacceptable religious practices. Xerxes stresses his involvement in the restoration of order in both countries but does not mention their names. Egypt, Babylon, Greece and Bactria were all adduced as candidates by twentieth century scholars, while the recent mainstream of scholarship tends to interpret the same accounts as abstract ideological statements without an anchor in time or space. The new approach advocated in this paper assumes that Xerxes resorted to historical narratives only in order to provide his own apologetic version of embarrassing events. In particular, his self-professed involvement in the destruction of the cults of evil gods is to be interpreted as a twisted account of the destruction of the Acropolis of Athens by the Persian army in 480 BC. In the wake of the disastrous war against the Greeks, Xerxes strove to present it as a successful special operation against the Greek deities.

Keywords: Xerxes, Achaemenid propaganda, Old Persian, Daiva inscription, Greek and Persian Wars

ИСТОРИЯ, ИДЕОЛОГИЯ И ПРОПАГАНДА В АНТИДЭВОВСКОЙ НАДПИСИ КСЕРКСА

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Текст, найденный в Персеполе и известный как антидэвовская надпись Ксеркса, содержит описание репрессий этого ахеменидского монарха в отношении двух стран, в одной из которых происходили волнения, а другая якобы запятнала себя недопустимыми религиозными культами (почитанием дэвов). Ксеркс подчеркивает свою роль в восстановлении порядка в обеих странах, при этом прямо не называя их. Ученые двадцатого века рассматривали Египет, Вавилонию, Грецию и Бактрию в качестве возможных кандидатов, тогда как большинство современных исследователей склонны рассматривать нарратив Ксеркса как абстрактный идеологический манифест. В настоящей статье предлагается новый подход, согласно которому исторический нарратив в надписях Ксеркса всегда представляет собой апологетическую пропаганду, призванную завуалировать неудобные для царя факты. В частности, рассказ о роли Ксеркса в борьбе с дэвовскими культами следует интерпретировать как пропагандистское описание сожжения афинского акрополя в 480 году до н.э. Иными словами, антидэвовская надпись пытается представить проигранную войну персов с греческими полисами как успешную специальную операцию, направленную против греческих богов.

Ключевые слова: Ксеркс, Ахеменидская пропаганда, древнеперсидский язык, анти-дэвовская надпись, греко-персидские войны

1. INTRODUCTION

The trilingual inscription attributed to the Achaemenid king Xerxes (ruled in 486–465 BC), commonly abbreviated as *XPh* and also known as the “Daiva inscription”, was discovered in Persepolis in 1935 in the course of the excavations funded by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and directed by Erich Schmitt¹. The slabs with the text of the inscription were found in a rather unlikely location: two copies of its Old Persian version and its Babylonian version were found in Room 16 of the Garrison Quarters². The four other slabs found next to them bore the text of another inscription of Xerxes, commonly abbreviated as *XPf* and also known as the “Harem inscription”³. Six of the seven slabs stood in an almost vertical position, while a row of

¹ I am deeply obliged to my students at the University of Oxford (2011–2012) and the University of Marburg (2013–2014) for asking many insightful questions in the course of the close reading of the *XPh* inscription, which made me undertake the task of its overall interpretation. The preliminary version of this paper was presented at the 8th European Conference of Iranian Studies (Saint-Petersburg, September 2015). The invited talks on the subject at the University of Hamburg (December 2014) and the University of Marburg (December 2018) were both conducive to improving my line of argumentation. I am grateful to Pavel Lurje (Saint-Petersburg), Ludwig Paul (Hamburg), Niels Hessel and Elyze Zomer (Marburg), who contributed to the organization of these presentations. I am no less obliged to Douglas Hitch (Whitehorse, Yukon), H. Craig Melchert (Carrboro, NC), and Florian Réveilhac (Paris/Marburg), who thoroughly checked the style of this paper, Norbert Oettinger (Erlangen), who helped me to formulate its historical conclusions, and Elizabeth Tucker (Oxford), who contributed to the discussion of both historical and linguistic matters.

² A copy of the Babylonian version of the “Daiva inscription” is now on display at the Oriental Institute Museum, Chicago.

³ A brief remark on the abbreviation of Achaemenid royal inscriptions is in order. Their first capital letter refers to the name of the king, while the second one abbreviates the discovery place. The final small letters represent indices reflecting the order of discovery or publication of the respective texts. Thus, both *XPf* and *XPh* belong to the inscriptions of Xerxes found in

three upright baked bricks stood parallel to some of those. The excavators quickly realized that the location and arrangement of inscriptional finds precluded their meaningful display: as hypothesized in Schmidt 1953, 209: “the discarded royal records, as well as the bricks, had simply been used to face a bench or benches of mud”. As for the Elamite version of *XPh*, its fragments were found in Room 5 of the Garrison quarters, likewise in a secondary context. Furthermore, the excavations at Tall-i Takht in Pasargadae revealed an additional Old Persian version of the text under discussion, reused as a makeshift drain-cover⁴.

Although the text of *XPh* is generally understandable at the linguistic level, its pragmatic content is arguably as obscure as the original location of the inscriptions. The usual set of formulae featuring the Achaemenid royal titles and the list of lands controlled by Xerxes are followed by the narrative part consisting of two episodes, which are apparently associated with two different lands. One of them is said to have been in commotion but was put by Xerxes in its place with the help of Auramazda, the turn of phrase that is compatible with an account of quenching a rebellion. Another land is presented as the place of worshipping the evil gods. The term *daiva-*, used by Xerxes with reference to these supernatural beings, represents a transparent Old Persian cognate of Avestan *daēuua-*, the designation of the evil gods in the Zoroastrian religion⁵. Xerxes remedied the situation by destroying the temples of evil gods (*daivadāna-*) and worshipping Auramazda in a proper way at the place of the destruction. The final part of the inscription contains an exhortation to future readers to worship Auramazda in a proper way.

What significantly complicated the understanding of this text was the unspecified identity of either of the lands. Below I provide the Old Persian version of the crucial passages together with their translation⁶. While I had to make choices in the instances of scholarly disagreement, none of them appears to impact the historical interpretations proposed below.

(*XPh* 28–35) y-θ-a: t-y: a-d-m: x-š-a-y-θ-i-y: a-b- When I became king, (there) is (a land) among those
v-m: a-s-t-i-y: a-t-r: a-i-t-a: d-h-y-a-v: t-y-i-y: u-p- lands that were recorded above, (which) was in com-
r-i-y: n-i-p-i-š-t-a: a-y-u-d: p-s-a-v-m-i-y: a-u-r- motion. Afterwards Auramazda brought me assis-
m-z-d-a: u-p-s-t-a-m: a-b-r: v-š-n-a: a-u-r-m-z- tance. By the strength of Auramazda I smote this
d-h-a: a-v-<a-m>: d-h-y-a-v-m: a-d-m: a-j-n-m: land and put it in its place.
u-t-š-i-m: g-a-θ-v-a: n-i-š-a-d-y-m:

Persepolis but *XPf* was discovered before *XPh*. The list of abbreviations used in the article: *DB* – Bisitun Inscription of Darius I; *DNa* – Upper inscription of Darius I from Naqsh-e Rostam; *DNb* – Lower inscription of Darius I from Naqsh-e Rostam; *DPe* – Inscription of Darius I on the southern wall of the Persepolis terrace; *DSe* – Inscription of Darius I commemorating the reparation of the city wall in Susa; *DSf* – Inscription of Darius I commemorating the construction of a palace in Susa; *XPf* – “Harem inscription” of Xerxes I; *XPh* – “Daiva inscription” of Xerxes I; *XPl* – Inscription of Xerxes I modelled on *DNb*.

⁴ Stronach 1965, 19.

⁵ The English translation of Avestan *daēuua-* as ‘evil gods’ follows the practice adopted by P. O. Skjærvø in his numerous contributions to the study of Iranian religion (see e.g. Skjærvø 2012). An additional reason why this translation is extended here to the Daivas of the *XPh* inscription is that they are explicitly called *lemnu*^{MES} ‘the evil ones’ in its Babylonian version (Filippone 2010, 70).

⁶ For the photograph of the relevant passage, see Schmitt 2000, plates 43b and 44a. The tablet on the photograph is *XPh* 1, one of the copies of the Old Persian version of the *XPh* inscription found at Persepolis. It is now kept in the National Museum of Iran (inventory number B.K. 805). I am grateful to Gian Pietro Basello for this valuable information.

(*XPh* 35–41) u-t-a: a-t-r: a-i-t-a: d-h-y-a-v: a-h: And among those lands (there) was (one) where formerly the evil gods were worshipped. Afterwards, by the strength of Auramazda I destroyed this temple of evil gods⁷ and proclaimed: “The evil gods shall not be worshipped”. Wherever⁸ formerly the evil gods were worshipped, I worshipped Auramazda, sincerely and in the right fashion.

It would be certainly incorrect to assign the lack of consensus on the identity of the lands mentioned in *XPh* to a want of trying. The intervening years saw multiple attempts to position the content of this inscription in time and space or, as the case may be, to argue against the necessity of such a positioning. Huayna Ávila 2020 contains a useful synopsis and classification of the previous hypotheses, as well as a discussion of their potential shortcomings. The ten-page bibliography of secondary sources quoted in this paper effectively documents the previous scholarly involvement with the issues treated here. Against such a background, it might look presumptuous to advance a new interpretation that is not based on new empirical discoveries.

Nevertheless, I believe that the new methodological stance of the present paper warrants tackling once again the content of *XPh*. The common denominator of the previous research on the subject appears to have been the focus on what the inscription actually says. The plausibility of its reference to the known historical events/facts was evaluated in light of its congruence with the description of the same events/facts in other sources; the identified discrepancies were used as an argument for dismissing the respective hypotheses. The approach advocated in this paper implies that the “Daiva inscription” represents a specimen of royal propaganda, and thus says truth but not the whole truth. The positive argument for such a genre assignment is the omission of the names of lands in the narrative part of the text. If one accepts this basic methodological premise, then the facts that Xerxes attempted to suppress and reasons for their suppression may themselves become subjects of a meaningful enquiry.

The rest of the paper will be organized as follows. Section 2 contains the review of those interpretations of the “Daiva inscription” that linked the lands mentioned there to specific geographic locations. Section 3 will be devoted to the evaluation of the claim that the inscription under discussion has no historical relevance. Section 4 will introduce the readers to the better-known species of Achaemenid propaganda and discuss the mode of its operation. The concluding section 5 features my own analysis of *XPh* as a propagandistic account of the early years of Xerxes’ rule and addresses potential objections against the proposed interpretation. Since Huayna Ávila 2020 can still be used as a handy guide to the early scholarship on the topic of the “Daiva inscription”, I intend to be more frugal in references to secondary literature, focusing on the most recent research papers, some of which did not find their way into the previous surveys.

⁷The stem *ava-* belongs to the paradigm of the distal demonstrative pronoun in Old Persian and therefore is conventionally translated as ‘that’, but in the phrases *a-v-<a-m>*: *d-h-y-a-v-m* ‘this land’ and *a-v-m*: *d-i-v-d-a-n-m* ‘this temple of evil gods’ it is clearly used in the anaphoric function, therefore the translation ‘this’ appears to be more idiomatic.

⁸For the interpretation of *y-d-a-y-a* as a free choice pronominal adverb ‘wherever’, I tentatively follow Schmitt 2014, 288–289 but do not consider the issue settled. The alternative interpretation ‘where’, typical of earlier translations, also remains possible.

2. EGYPT, BABYLON, GREECE, OR IRAN?

The initial years of the reign of Xerxes I, son of Darius I are reasonably well documented, but the sources coming from different traditions do not always agree with each other. Thus, the *Histories* of Herodotus (VII. 1, 7) mention a rebellion in Egypt, which started late in the reign of Darius and which Xerxes had to suppress shortly upon his accession to the throne. Unfortunately, the matching evidence on the Egyptian side is extremely meagre: we have only a handful of documents arguably dated to the second regnal year of the interloper Psamtik IV⁹. Nevertheless, the reality and serious character of this uprising is accepted by Egyptologists, who mostly argue about its chronology. The documents dated to the first regnal year of Xerxes are entirely missing in the Egyptian record, although there is a text assigned to January of 484 BC, early in year two of the reign of Xerxes¹⁰. The suppression of a rebellion that lasted more than a year and involved an important satrapy may well be reflected on general grounds in an Old Persian royal inscription. In the discussion of *XPh*, however, the events in Egypt only played a marginal role¹¹. A possible reason for such a scholarly attitude is the lack of evidence for the destruction of Egyptian temples by Xerxes, or indeed any shift in cultural policy in Egypt in the wake of the revolt. Naturally, this should constitute a difficulty only for those scholars who assume that both episodes mentioned in *XPh* occurred in the same land (cf. section 3).

In contrast, the two rebellions in Babylonia that took place early in the reign of Xerxes are primarily documented in indigenous sources. Numerous cuneiform tablets bear witness to two individuals, Shamash-eriba and Bel-shimanni, who both acted as supreme rulers in various Mesopotamian towns in lieu of the Persian king in 484 BC. The rebellion of Bel-shimanni had a very short span, but Shamash-eriba exercised power in certain locations for some three months¹². Arguably more important than these short-lived revolts were their consequences for Babylonian society: Xerxes availed himself of their suppression for tightening his grip over the rebellious satrapy. Although his retaliation did not amount to the destruction of the local temples, some of his measures concerned them directly: thus, the Babylonian priests were deprived of their prebends and provided instead with ration-based remuneration, which directly impacted their autonomy¹³. Ctesias is the only Greek historian whom we can credit with direct knowledge of the Babylonian uprising against Xerxes, but several others were vaguely aware of Persian reprisals. They appear, however, to have overstated his response: thus, Strabo and Arrian attribute to him the destruction of Babylonian religious installations¹⁴.

A source of disproportional impact on the interpretation of the “Daiva inscription” was the statement of Herodotus (I. 183), according to which Xerxes removed a large

⁹ Wijnsma 2019, 49–53.

¹⁰ Wijnsma 2019, 39.

¹¹ Huayna Ávila 2020, 139 with n. 36. Cf., however, Wijnsma 2019, 34: “Xerxes invaded Greece only after he had captured Egypt, which suggests that Egypt had rebelled in or before Xerxes’s early reign. Something similar is suggested by a royal inscription from Xerxes’s reign, which claims that one of the Empire’s satrapies was in rebellion when he became king – after which Xerxes subdued the unrest”.

¹² Waerzeggers 2018, 12.

¹³ Waerzeggers 2018, 7 with the sources cited.

¹⁴ Huayna Ávila 2020, 141–142.

golden statue from the precinct of the Babylonian supreme god and killed a priest who tried to protect it. This act of pillage was widely taken as perpetrated against the statue of Bel-Marduk, which would be consistent with the claim that the temples of evil gods mentioned in *XPh* were the temples of Babylon, or perhaps Mesopotamian temples in general. Such a hypothesis was indeed promulgated almost immediately after the discovery of the inscription¹⁵ and continued to enjoy scholarly favour for several more decades, even though some researchers mentioned Egypt alongside Babylon¹⁶. Its popularity dropped after Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1987 demonstrated that the relevant passage of Herodotus need not refer to a divine statue. As for Strabo and Arrian, one can argue that their exaggerations reflected the overall negative image of Xerxes in Greek tradition, understandably prompted by the memories of his expedition against the Greeks¹⁷.

This brings us to the campaign of 480–479 BC as yet another candidate for the historical events behind the “Daiva inscription”. Xerxes’ invasion of continental Greece culminated in burning the Acropolis of Athens with its temples (Hdt. VIII. 51–53), which could be conceivably called *daivadāna*- in the subsequent account of the Persian king. “Greeks dwelling beyond the sea” (Old Persian *y-u-n-a ... t-y-i-y p-r-d-r-y d-a-r-y-t-i-y*) are mentioned in the list of subject peoples at *XPh* 23–25, so it is again conceivable that Xerxes referred to the Greeks living in Europe as his rebellious subjects (see section 5 for more details). The main difficulty of such an identification is, of course the well-known outcome of the Persian campaign: shortly after Xerxes captured the Athens, the Persian fleet was destroyed at Salamis in September 480, upon which Xerxes chose to depart home, leaving his remaining land troops to suffer a decisive defeat in the Battle of Plataea in the following summer. Therefore, if Xerxes was sincere about claiming victory over the Athenians, he had a fairly short time span for ordering the execution of the “Daiva inscription”.

This is precisely the scenario advocated in Lévy 1939, the only paper known to me that explicitly argues for the *interpretatio graeca* of *XPh*. According to this paper, Xerxes had reasons to treat Athenians as both disloyal subjects and religious criminals¹⁸. Yet, the

¹⁵ Hartmann 1937, 158–159; Nyberg 1938, 365.

¹⁶ A testimony to the lingering appeal of this hypothesis is its endorsement at the *Encyclopedia Britannica* website (URL: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Xerxes-I>; accessed on: 19.06.2022). For a list of scholars reading the *XPh* inscription through the lens of the events of Babylon, see Huayna Ávila 2020, 140, n. 41. One name in this list appears, however, to represent a misattribution: although Muhammad Dandamaev did emphasize the repressions of Xerxes against Babylon, he persistently linked the content of the “Daiva inscription” with the alleged religious reform in Iran (see e.g. Dandamaev 1976, 226; 1985, 175).

¹⁷ The arguments against the destruction of Babylonian temples by Xerxes were recently summarized in Kuhrt 2014. For the (negative) reception of Xerxes in Greek historiography, see in general Bridges 2015. Compare Scheer 2003, 67–73 on the artificial opposition between the religious tolerance of Darius and the intolerance of Xerxes, which was constructed in modern scholarship following in part the Greek example and mostly based on Greek sources.

¹⁸ “Tous les indices convergent sur Athènes, que Xerxès pouvait traiter de tributaire indocile, car elle avait rejeté les Pisistratides, féaux du roi... En représailles du sacrilège que les Athéniens avaient commis à Sardes en brûlant les bois sacrés et les temples, il ne s’arrêtera pas avant d’avoir pris et incendié Athènes. Il prépare longuement une guerre de revanche qui est une guerre sainte ; la ville conquise, il incendie l’Acropole et ses temples — le daivadana” (Lévy 1939, 120).

content of the inscription, if taken at face value, implies its fairly specific dating between the first Persian occupation of Athens and the Battle of Plataea¹⁹. This perhaps explains why Lévy’s hypothesis failed to convince scholars in the long run: an assumption that a stone inscription addresses an interim state of a military campaign obviously requires much special pleading. The lack of its immediate reception may have a more mundane explanation: it had the ill fate to appear on the eve of a war that silenced most academic discussions for six long years²⁰. Be it as it may, Lévy’s hypothesis “had neither a positive nor a negative impact on the further academic debate”²¹.

Finally, there is a school of thought that does not seek to establish a connection between any known war/rebellion against Xerxes and the content of *XPh* but takes the mention of the evil gods (Old Persian *daivā*) as its principal historical clue. The religious dualism associated with the Iranian prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster) famously emphasizes the existential fight between the forces of good and evil, where a decisive role is allotted to the humans. One of the poems belonging to the Gathas of Zarathustra (Yasna 32) portrays the evil gods (Avestan *daēuuā*, nom.pl.) as those who were led astray by the destructive spirit Angra Mainyu and thus chose the wrong side in this struggle. In historical terms, Avestan *daēuuā* and Old Persian *daivā* both represent a reflex of Indo-Iranian **daiuās*, the designation of a class of deities. The pejoration of this term is the peculiarity of the Iranian languages, while in Old Indic (Vedic) religion *devās* evolved into the main designation of divine beings. Scholars tend to agree that the Gathas of Zarathustra (the core part of the Avesta) stigmatize an inherited group of supernatural beings, not some foreign deities encountered by Iranians in the course of their migrations²². Whether or not one treats the Achaemenid religion as a variety of Zoroastrianism, one can argue that Xerxes shared the disdain for those traditional deities that fell out of favour (either permanently or temporarily) as a result of religious reforms in Iran²³.

¹⁹ “La proclamation de Xerxès ne peut être postérieure au désastre de Platées, rapidement suivi de l’évacuation de toute la Grèce d’Europe; elle suppose accompli le sacrifice sur l’Acropole. Elle a donc été rédigée au plus tôt fin septembre 480, au plus tard vers le 27 août 479” (Lévy 1939, 121).

²⁰ It might also be worth mentioning that the academic career of Isidore Lévy ended with him being forced to retire from Collège de France as a part of the Nazi effort to eliminate Jews from public life at the time of the German occupation of Paris (URL: <https://archibib-scdf.hypotheses.org/7614>; accessed on: 16.02.2023). Is it possible that other contemporary researchers felt less need to respond to someone whom they no longer considered an active scholar in the field?

²¹ Huayna Ávila 2020, 147.

²² An indirect linguistic argument against the foreign (e.g. Indo-Aryan) origin of the deities classified as evil gods stems from the recent study of the so-called “Daevic” vocabulary in the Avesta (Tucker 2022). While a number of Avestan lexemes tend to be associated with the description of the *daēuuā*, one cannot generalize as to whether they represent archaisms or innovations vis-à-vis the Proto-Iranian lexicon. Furthermore, different stages of the Avestan language exhibit different sets of lexemes that qualify as “Daevic”, and their use in the relevant contexts is not obligatory. These data are consistent with the status of the “Daevic” vocabulary as a literary convention and do not yield support to tracing it back to a situation of diglossia.

²³ Since the Achaemenid royal inscriptions never mention Zarathustra, the question whether the Achaemenid state religion can be regarded as a variety of Zoroastrianism was

In fact, the attempt to seek the *daivā*-worshippers among the Iranians represented one of the first responses to the discovery of *XPh*. It was inaugurated with Herzfeld 1937, which makes it an early rival of the Babylonian hypothesis, while Riminucci 2006, Abdi 2007, and Gnoli 2011 bear witness to its lingering allure in the 21st century. The hypotheses accommodating the Iranian origin of the evil gods differ in their nuances. On the one hand, Boyce²⁴ draws a bridge between the theories of Zarathustra and the practices of Xerxes without specifying the identities of the evil gods: “Old Persian ‘daiva’ is equivalent to Avestan ‘daeva’; and the natural interpretation of Xerxes’s words is that, as a Zoroastrian, he was recording the destruction of an Iranian sanctuary devoted to the worship of those warlike beings condemned by the prophet”. On the other hand, Dandamaev identifies the evil gods as the god Mithra and the goddess Anahita²⁵. These two Iranian deities are indeed never mentioned by Xerxes and his father Darius, even though they emerge in the fourth-century inscriptions of Artaxerxes II. Neither do they appear in the Gathas, even though the hymns (Yashts) devoted to Mithra and Anahita were eventually incorporated into the Avesta. While the link between the extension of the Achaemenid pantheon and the formation of the Avestan canon is certainly a leap of faith, its appeal lies in the hope to pin down a milestone event in the history of Zoroastrianism, which otherwise defies chronological interpretation.

Despite this advantage, the hypothesis that the *XPh* inscription refers to a holy war under the leadership of Xerxes never gained universal recognition. The information that is scarcely compatible with such an assumption comes from tablet archives in the Elamite language, which reflect the administrative practice at the time of Darius I and Xerxes I and were likewise discovered in Persepolis in the course of the Oriental Institute excavations. The accounts of periodic food offerings to a variety of deities contained in these archives are in stark contrast with the role of Auramazda in Achaemenid royal inscriptions: here he receives more modest oblations than the Elamite god Humban²⁶. A number of other deities never mentioned in the royal inscriptions, such as the Babylonian Storm-god Adad or the local mountains, likewise receive food offerings²⁷. It stands to reason that the early Achaemenid rulers failed to implement their declared henotheism in the state cult, which casts doubt on their inclination to do so in a distant land without a particular reason.

and remains a matter of debate. Those who identify King Vishtaspa, the patron of Zarathustra mentioned in the Gathas with Vishtaspa, father of Darius I mentioned in the Bisitun inscription, naturally tend to favour the view that the Achaemenid kings considered themselves as the prophet’s followers. Nowadays this hypothesis has lost most of its partisans, since linguistic considerations lend multi-pronged support to moving the composition date of the Gathas at least several centuries before Darius I (Hintze 2015). Nevertheless, one cannot a priori rule out that the rulers of Persepolis were orthoprax Zoroastrians even if their family was not historically connected with the prophet. See Bianchi 1977 for a particularly thorough attempt to interpret the *XPh* inscription as a testimony to the Zoroastrian faith of its author.

²⁴ Boyce 1982, 175.

²⁵ “Xerxes verbot den Kult Mithras, Anahitas, und der anderen von Zarathushtra verworfenen Gottheiten, die unter der Bezeichnung *daēva* bekannt werden, und zerstörte ihre Tempel” (Dandamaev 1976, 225).

²⁶ Henkelman 2008, 216.

²⁷ See e.g. Henkelman 2008, 218.

But the uncertainties do not end at this point. Even if we limit ourselves to the royal inscriptions, there is no evidence for religious proselytizing on the part of the Achaemenid kings. This is aptly observed in Tuplin 2017, 34 with regard to *XPh*: “Suppression of *daivā*-worship is followed by Xerxes worshipping Ahuramazda. But the *daivā*-worshippers are not made to worship Ahuramazda”. The hypothesis that the real focus of the Persian campaign was the punishment of the *daivā*-worshippers rather than their conversion can be fleshed out with the more transparent rhetoric in the Bisitun inscription of Darius I. Upon describing a suppressed rebellion of the Elamites under the leadership of a certain Athamaita, Darius adds: “Those Elamites were disloyal and by them Auramazda was not worshipped. I worshipped Auramazda; by the strength of Auramazda, as was my desire, so I treated them” (*DB V* 14–17, cf. Schmitt 1991, 75)²⁸. At this point it must be recalled that the *XPh* inscription likewise mentions an unsuccessful uprising. These facts are consistent with the pragmatic interpretation of the evil gods on the part of the Achaemenids: “If a rebellious country worships god who back such a rebellion against the Achaemenid reign and Auramazda’s will, these gods are daivas, opposing Auramazda and the (political) truth”²⁹.

Naturally, it is impossible to refute the hypothesis of a quelled uprising against Xerxes in the eastern part of the empire³⁰. The lack of literacy outside the state bureaucracy among the Iranians of the Achaemenid period precludes the possibility of any records coming from the opposite side, while the inhabitants of the western part of the Achaemenid Empire would have little interest in recording the events of an inner-Iranian strife³¹. But as long as one accepts the use of the term *daivā* as a value judgment, the advantage of reconstructing an otherwise unknown rebellion over linking *XPh* to the known campaigns of Xerxes becomes no longer clear.

We have seen that part of the problem with assigning the content of *XPh* to specific regions is the embarrassment of the choice. Yet, on top of the pros and cons concerning

²⁸ The rebel Athamaita (*ʾaʿ-θ-m-i-t*) of the Bisitun inscription has been identified with Atta-hamiti-Inšušinak, son of Hutran-Tepti, the last one in the line of Elamite kings (Tavernier 2004, 22–29 with ref.). Therefore, Athamaita’s rebellion presumably amounted to asserting his fully independence from the Persians, as opposed to the earlier “loyal” Elamite kings, who pledged allegiance to Cyrus and Cambyses.

²⁹ Hutter 2021, 1289. For fairness’ sake, one must mention that the similarity between the stances of *DB V* 14–17 and the *XPh* inscription prompts a quite different conclusion in Abaev 1963, where the militant proselytism is attributed to both Darius and Xerxes. The significance of the Persepolis administrative texts for the study of the Achaemenid religion had not yet been fully appreciated at the time.

³⁰ An archaeological argument against such a hypothesis would be the absence of excavated temples with sculptures or pictorial representations of deities in eastern Iran that could be dated to the Achaemenid period (Shenkar 2017, 2–3). It seems less likely that an aniconic religious installation would be called *daivadāna*- by Xerxes, although he could certainly do it if he had ulterior reasons.

³¹ There was one attempt to link the rebellion mentioned in the *XPh* inscription with the alleged claims to the throne by Ariamenes, satrap of Bactria, the eldest son of Darius I (Olmstead 1948, 231–232). The objections against this hypothesis are summarized in Huayna Ávila 2020, 164–165. For our present purposes it is enough to state that Olmstead did not connect the destruction of the temples of evil gods with these alleged events, and therefore we are not dealing here with an additional historical scenario having religious implications.

individual historical scenarios addressed in this section, there is also a more general problem, which was succinctly formulated in the recent survey. “Should the public embarrassment and punishment of a specific rebellious population have been the paramount consideration for *XPh*, the question arises by itself: why then did not Xerxes order his officers to explicitly name that treacherous province so everyone could undoubtedly know to whom *XPh* is referring? By doing so, Xerxes not only could have set a prime example on how to deal with insubordination through public humiliation but also could have allowed him to present himself as a more active ruler and eager to defend the interest of his empire no matter what”³². The issue becomes particularly clear if one contrasts the narrative of *XPh* with the detailed account of the Bisitun inscription (*DB*), which lists not only all the rebellious provinces but also the place and time of each battle that led to their submission. If *XPh* were conceived as *res gestae*, Xerxes would surely have been tempted to imitate the annalistic style of *DB*³³. This is probably the main reason for the paradigmatic shift, which is manifest in the recent treatments of the “Daiva inscription” and will be addressed in the next section.

3. ONE LAND = TWO LANDS = EVERY LAND?

In recent years there has been a near-consensus about the interpretation of the “Daiva inscription”, at least among the historians of the Achaemenid Empire. Neither the commotion in a subject country and its pacification nor the worship of evil gods and its punishment are to be associated with known historical events. The passages in question in *XPh* are rather to be read as illustrations of eternal ideological truths. This interpretation appears to have been first promoted in Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1980, 29–31, but in the twenty-first century it was iterated in several monographs, as illustrated by the citations below:

Xerxes had no specific event in view, he proclaimed once and for all: “Whoever defects from the king will be punished, and the holy places of rebels will be destroyed”. This is an ‘ideological and programmatic’ declaration, not a reaction of the king that can be historically pinpointed (Wiesehöfer 2001, 54).

In the *daivā* inscription, Xerxes makes no allusion to a rebellious country or to royal activities specifically located in space and time. His inscription is instead intended to illustrate the permanence of his power and the transcendence of his royal virtues. The repetition of formulas borrowed from Darius contributes to anchoring this impression of permanence and at the same time further legitimates Xerxes’ power (Briant 2002, 553).

In those places where the *daivā* were worshipped – and, by extension, where Ahuramazda was not worshipped – Xerxes made certain that the proper worship of Ahuramazda was (re?)-instituted. What does that mean? Is Xerxes referring to Babylonia, Greece, Egypt, somewhere else? Perhaps

³² Huayna Ávila 2020, 171. This objection is also fully applicable to a lesser-known interpretation of the *XPh* inscription, which looks for the worshipers of evil gods in India (Valetov 1998). Since Vedic *devá-*, originally used with reference to a type of supernatural beings but eventually extended to the whole pantheon, is a transparent cognate of Old Persian *daiva*-‘evil god’, the author argues that the Achaemenid could regard the Indian cults as inherently offensive (“demonic”).

³³ A particularly salient example of Xerxes availing himself of his father’s formulaic repertoire is the inscription *XPl*, which closely follows the context of *DNb* (see Schmitt 2009, 21 and the respective editions in the same volume).

the best answer is all of them and none of them — by that it is meant that Xerxes’ expression is an idealized one: a powerful, but generalized, expression of the royal ideology that may not apply to one specific episode or place. We cannot say that Xerxes did not specifically apply these sentiments to one or more of his conquests, but we also cannot find evidence that the compulsory worship of Ahuramazda was instituted anywhere (Waters 2014, 119).

The obvious peculiarity of this hypothesis — which can be evaluated as its advantage or disadvantage depending on one’s methodological perspective — is that it cannot in principle be falsified by adducing historical arguments. As long as one compares events situated in space and time, it is possible to use objective criteria with the intention of establishing the historical episode that represents a better match to a particular narrative. Once the option “all of them and none of them” is introduced, one can no longer argue for or against using the historical methodology. The only possibility of continuing the discussion is checking whether such an interpretation is warranted on linguistic grounds.

This issue is addressed in Filippone 2010, a paper that scrutinizes the discourse structure of the relevant passages of the “Daiva inscription” based on all three versions. The author argues that both the Old Babylonian and the Elamite version are compatible with the plural reference to the regions mentioned in both episodes, namely in connection with the suppression of a rebellion and the confrontation with the worship of evil gods. In particular, she stresses the use of the Elamite pronoun *appin* ‘them’ as an equivalent of Old Persian *=šim* ‘it’ with reference to the land in the first episode (p. 67) and Elamite *ap* ‘to them’ as the addressee of Xerxes order in the second episode (p. 71). Furthermore, she acknowledges that the Babylonian version features KUR.KUR^{MEŠ} ‘the lands’ in the first episode (p. 62) and hypothesizes that É *lemnu*^{MEŠ} ‘house of the evil ones’ may have been used as an abbreviated spelling of É^{MEŠ} *lemnu*^{MEŠ} ‘houses of the evil ones’ in the second episode (p. 71).

The Elamite plural pronouns hardly constitute a conclusive argument, because they could be used with reference to the population of the respective lands, while the abbreviated spelling in Akkadian is a mere possibility, but KUR.KUR^{MEŠ} ‘the lands’ is clearly a discrepancy vis-à-vis *av<ām> dahyāvam* ‘this land’ in the Old Persian version of the first episode. Consequently, one must acknowledge that the Akkadian translator misunderstood the grammar of the Old Persian original, which was all the easier given that the Old Persian version begins the narrative here with an unusual elliptical construction (see below). This is, however, a far cry from accepting that the plural reference to the lands is required for all the three versions of the two episodes: despite the necessary emendation, Old Persian *a-v<-a-m> d-h-y-a-v-m* ‘this land’ prompts singular interpretation, and so does *a-v-m d-i-v-d-a-n-m* ‘this temple of evil gods’³⁴.

Another question of no less importance is the status of the elliptical presentational constructions *a-s-t-i-y: a-t-r: a-i-t-a: d-h-y-a-v: t-y-i-y: u-p-r-i-y: n-i-p-i-š-t-a: a-y-u-d* ‘there is (a land) among those lands that were recorded above, (which) was in

³⁴ It is claimed in the paper under discussion that singular nouns are unmarked with regard to number in Old Persian and can be interpreted as plural *ad sensum* (Filippone 2010, 67–68). This argument, however, is not applicable to *av<ām> dahyāvam* ‘this land’, since the underspecification of singular forms is cross-linguistically typical of unidentifiable nouns. Filippone (2010, 68) preempts this objection by stating: “In fact, “identifiability” is not a discrete character and a referent may be identifiable to a degree”. The readers are invited to decide for themselves whether they consider this observation cogent in the context of the present discussion.

commotion' and *a-t-r: a-i-t-a: d-h-y-a-v: a-h: y-d-a-t-y: p-r^u-u-v-m: d-i-v-a: a-y-dⁱ-i-y* 'among those lands there was (one) where formerly the evil gods were worshipped'. In Filippone's view, the ellipsis of the relative pronoun in the first case is akin to the similar phenomena in colloquial English sentences, such as *there is nothing pleases me more* or *there was a farmer had a dog* (p. 65). This may well be a partial answer but it hardly goes to the heart of the matter: the colloquial constructions of the type listed above normally do not occur in English monumental inscriptions. There must surely have been a way to present new geographic settings while spelling out the number of the lands involved. If Xerxes (or the person who commissioned *XPh* on his behalf) failed to do it, this means that backgrounding this information was acceptable or even desirable for him. Assuming the latter scenario, his strategy was successful, because the Akkadian and perhaps the Elamite translators partially misunderstood the message. Yet again, it is a far cry from saying that the number of lands involved in both episodes were not familiar to Xerxes.

The linguistic dilemmas addressed thus far in this section reflect a more basic distinction between non-specific and specific indefinite nouns. If a noun is non-specific, its reference is not known to the speaker, if it is specific but indefinite, its reference is familiar to the speaker but not disclosed to the addressee³⁵. For example, (1) *the unicorn is extinct* and (2) *I saw a unicorn at the zoo yesterday* feature respectively non-specific generic and specific indefinite reference to the same animal. The languages without definite articles, such as Old Persian, do not have standard means of distinguishing between the two categories, which must therefore be differentiated based on contextual cues. The presentational constructions display predilection for specific referents: generic notions (like the unicorn species) tend to be described rather than presented. Another test for setting apart the two groups is the use of demonstrative pronouns, which are expected to modify the specific nouns. For instance, *this species* and *this unicorn* are the appropriate anaphoric expressions resuming the sentences (1) and (2) respectively.

Thus, both the presentational constructions and the anaphoric expressions ('this land' / 'this temple of evil gods') suggests that the lands of both episodes mentioned in the *XPh* inscription were familiar to Xerxes but not disclosed to the readers of the inscription. The interpretation of either of the two settings as generic lacks linguistic foundation. In fact, the specific indefinite referents in the passages under discussion can be contrasted with the common use of generic referents in Achaemenid royal inscriptions. For example, a formula stating that Auramazda *š-i-y-a-t-i-m: a-d-a: m-r-t-i-y-h-y-a* 'created happiness for man', which occurs at the beginning of most Old Persian texts (also in *XPh* 3–4), clearly uses 'man' with reference to the totality of human beings. In a similar fashion, *DNb* 10 *n-i-m-a: a-v: k-a-m: t-y: t^u-[u]-n^u-w-a: s-k-u-θ-i-š: r-a-dⁱ-i-y: mⁱ-i-θ: k-r-y-i-š* 'It is not my wish that the rich be mistreated because of the poor' implies the non-specific reference to both the rich and the poor (expressed by singular adjectives). Therefore, if Xerxes resorts to specific referents to locate his campaigns in the "Daiva inscription", this must have reflected his communicative intent.

Under such circumstances, one cannot help wondering why an interpretation that plainly contradicts linguistic evidence became almost mainstream in modern Achaemenid studies. A part of the explanation probably has to do with the fact that the majority

³⁵ Baker, Hengeveld 2012, 201.

of its proponents are not linguists, but a more nuanced answer should pay attention to the prerequisites for its genesis. In fact, its embryo can already be spotted in the much earlier belief that the events of both episodes, namely the suppression of a rebellion and the destruction of a temple of evil gods, took place in the same area³⁶. Nothing in the structure of the text under discussion can promote such a view either. The presentation of the rebellious land as one of the Achaemenid satrapies in the first episode is followed by the anaphoric reference to ‘that land’. If Xerxes wished to dwell on his activities in the same region in the second episode, it would be sufficient to renew the same anaphor at its beginning. Instead, we find one more presentational construction, which presumably refers back to the list of satrapies belonging to the empire, and introduces one of them as the land of evil gods. On unprejudiced reading, we are dealing with two distinct lands characterized by two different vices.

It would be, of course, useful to know the reasons why Hartmann 1937, Nyberg 1938, Lévy 1939, and Riminucci 2006 concur in assigning both episodes to the same area, even though they differently identify it as Babylon (Hartman, Nyberg), Greece (Lévy) and Iran (Riminucci). Yet the first three authors appear to take this identity for granted, while Riminucci seems to accept it on the authority of previous scholarship. For fairness’ sake, one must also acknowledge voices of dissent. Thus, both episodes are assigned to two separate locations, namely Bactria and the land of the Dahae, in Olmstead 1948, 231–232, while an agnostic stance about the number of locations involved is taken in Briant 2002, 552. But the majority of scholars followed the unitarian approach. A retrospective attempt to justify this approach is undertaken in Huayna Ávila 2020, 132, but the only argument adduced in the defence of such a scenario is the phrase *a-t-r: a-i-t-a: d-h-y-a-v* ‘among those lands’, which introduces both sections. I fail to see how this repetition can promote the identity of settings in the respective episodes, given that the phrase under discussion refers back to the comprehensive list of satrapies presented earlier in the same text.

All in all, the early summary treatment of the rebellious land and the land of evil gods appears to be rooted in the cognitive challenge offered by the newly found *XPh* inscription. We have seen in the previous section that the geographic context of this text posed unsurmountable difficulties for the mid-twentieth-century researchers, so one can make an educated guess that they chose to avoid multiplying entities any further. I submit, however, that such an application of Occam’s razor ultimately represented an error. It promoted the false view that as long as country X and country Y were identified with reference to the same list but not mentioned by name, one is allowed to conclude that $X = Y$. From this assumption there was just one step to the inference that both countries not mentioned by name have the generic reference. Interpreting the narrative of the “Daiva inscription” as an abstract ideological statement had a perceived advantage of cutting through the Gordian Knot, as one no longer had to cope with a seemingly unsolvable problem. Yet, from the linguistic viewpoint, it was the just one more arbitrary decision. It follows that if one is able to find a solution that is both linguistically and historically plausible, it must be given preference to the one addressed in this section.

³⁶ Huayna Ávila 2020, 132 with the sources cited.

4. ACHAEMENID PROPAGANDA AT WORK

It is a well-known fact that the bulk of inscriptions of Darius and Xerxes celebrate the royal building projects, as befits their monumental appearance. The longer representatives of this genre tend to go beyond a mere mention of the objects constructed but engage in a variety of digressions that can be fairly labeled propagandistic. Arguably the best known among them is the trilingual *DSf* inscription, which dwells on the harmonious cooperation of various parts of the empire in the construction of the royal palace in Susa³⁷. This building project, to which individual satrapies contributed their respective natural resources and/or skilled artisans, emerges from this text as a culmination of the imperial project. The rhetorical strategies deployed in *DSf* have even been regarded as inspiration sources for some specimens of Ptolemaic court poetry³⁸. At the same time, the main historical event addressed in the inscription is well-grounded in time and space: the palatial complex of Darius I was excavated in the course of French diggings in Susa, and several copies of *DSf* were found on premises.

The assumption that the building inscriptions of Achaemenid kings combine factual and propagandistic content appears to be reasonably uncontroversial³⁹. The same, however, cannot be said about those inscriptions of the same corpus that are traditionally classified as historical. Thus Rollinger⁴⁰ follows Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1999 in reconstructing several stages of the Achaemenid perception of history. While Columns I–IV of the Bisitun inscription of Darius I “reflect the classical view of history as a sequence of events”, already Column V of the same inscription contains a different message “since world dominion has been accomplished in its ultimate form in the reign of Darius, history has reached an end”. Against this background, the *XPh* inscription reduces historical events “to an archetypal dichotomy between order and disorder in a static world ruled by a universal king who is guided by his god Auramazda”, while the later Achaemenid kings exhibit a completely timeless attitude toward history. Rollinger’s analysis of the *XPh* inscription must have been influenced by its common but unwarranted pragmatic interpretation, which was addressed in the preceding section⁴¹.

There is, however, one more quasi-historical text associated with Xerxes and mentioned in the same paper, namely the so-called “Harem inscription” (*XPf*). The key

³⁷ Schmitt 2009, 127–134.

³⁸ Petrovic 2014. Not being a specialist in Hellenistic poetry, I do not take it upon myself to judge the substance of the hypothesis offered in Petrovic 2014. My point does not go beyond concurring with the author that the rhetorical structure of *DSf* is remarkable enough to prompt the possibility of external comparison.

³⁹ Cf. Huayna Ávila 2020, 166–167, n. 136.

⁴⁰ Rollinger 2014, 195–202.

⁴¹ The only original linguistic argument supporting the “timeless” interpretation of *XPh* in the paper under discussion is the alleged contrast between the Old Persian verb *yaud-* ‘to be in turmoil’, allegedly indicating “an archetypal perspective”, and the phrase *hamiçiya abava* ‘became rebellious’, used in the historical narrative of the Bisitun inscription (Rollinger 2014, 200–201). The expression “archetypal perspective” is not fully clear to me in linguistic context, but the assumption that *yaud-* is a stative verb in no way contradicts its use as a background for specific historical events. In the instance of *XPh*, this must have been the ascension of Xerxes to the throne (cf. the translation of the relevant passage in section 1).

passage of this text is dealing with the problem of royal succession: “Darius had other sons also; (but) this was the desire of Auramazda: Darius, my father, made me the greatest after himself. When my father Darius went to his (allotted) place, by the favour of Auramazda I became king in my father’s place”⁴². The content of this passage could perhaps be taken as a mere rhetorical exercise, were it not for an independent account of the troubles surrounding the transition of power from Darius to Xerxes, offered by Herodotus (VII. 2–3). Xerxes was not the eldest son of Darius, but he was the eldest son of Atossa, daughter of Cyrus, whom Darius married after he became king. Xerxes claimed the status of heir apparent arguing that he was the eldest son of Darius the king, allegedly at the advice of Demaratus, the emigrant king of Sparta. This cunning strategy helped him to convince Darius, who designated Xerxes as future king instead of his elder half-brother Artabazanes. Another, and perhaps more important reason for the same decision was the influence of Atossa upon her husband.

This was not the only instance where the agency of Auramazda was invoked for hedging the problematic aspects of power transition in Ancient Persia. An inscription of Darius from Naqsh-e-Rustam contains the following laconic statement: “When Auramazda saw this land in commotion, he granted it to me, he made me king. I am king: by the strength of Auramazda I put it in its place” (*DNa* 31–36; cf. Schmitt 2009, 102–103). This short passage presumably refers to the state of affairs described at length in the Bisitun inscription (*DB*). Darius came to power by slaying the preceding ruler Smerdis, whom he claimed to be a usurper⁴³. The first years of the reign of Darius were marked by numerous rebellions in various parts of the empire, which were all suppressed by the new king. One can debate whether the narrative of *DNa* 31–36 only alludes to Smerdis’ usurpation or includes the local rebellions under the umbrella of “the land in commotion”. Whichever answer one chooses, it is clear that the narrative of *DNa* dispensed with all the details of the account presented in *DB*. Jacobs 2014 convincingly compares it to the narrative of *XPf* on the grounds that the rhetoric of both inscriptions obfuscates the relevant historical episodes and bleaches out to the extreme their dramatic character⁴⁴. Yet this does make these narratives generic: both Darius and Xerxes were keenly aware of the events that called them into being.

One can, however, stress an additional similarity: the events addressed in both *DNa* and *XPf* can fairly be called embarrassing for the respective rulers, as they had the potential of

⁴² Rollinger 2014, 200 after Schmitt 2009, 160–63.

⁴³ The present paper leaves aside the question whether Smerdis was indeed an interloper or a legitimate heir to the throne, the last member of the dynasty founded by Cyrus II. The latter hypothesis was defended at length in Dandamaev 1976 and has gained wide albeit not universal acceptance in the years to follow. Its consequence is that the main claim of the Bisitun inscription is a lie or, using modern parlance, “fake news”. It is, however, to be stressed that *DB* would then reflect a kind of royal propaganda that is very different from the half-truth one, which is addressed in the rest of this paper. In addition, *DB* is replete with factual details, while the other Achaemenid historical texts strive to omit them, as argued in the rest of this section.

⁴⁴ “Ohne die durch die Bisutūn-Inschrift resp. Hdt. VII 2–3 vermittelten Vorkenntnisse wäre der konkrete Hintergrund der in *DNa* § 4 und *XPf* § 4 so vage angedeuteten Vorkommnisse kaum zu eruieren. Der undramatische Charakter der Inschriften bedingt, dass selbst Ereignisse von entscheidender Bedeutung oder krisenhaften Ausmaßen wie beiläufig einfließen” (Jacobs 2014, 346).

undermining their legitimacy. Darius and Xerxes chose a uniform strategy of asserting their credentials: they emphasize the positive impact that their ascension to the throne had for the country, with the implication that it was divinely sanctioned. Darius is explicit about “putting in place” the empire that “was in commotion” at the point of his coming to power. Again, one can debate whether it refers to the restoration of social order shaken at the time of Smerdis (cf. *DB* I 61–71; Schmitt 1991, 53), to the suppression of the rebellions, or to both activities: in any event, the success of the new ruler could be retroactively interpreted as proof that Auramazda had sanctioned the transfer of power⁴⁵. Xerxes is no less explicit: “when I became king, I did much that was outstanding: what had been made by my father, I protected, and I added other works” (*XPf* 36–40; cf. Schmitt 2009, 162). In this case, the allusion is apparently made to the construction projects, the favorite topic of the Achaemenid inscriptions. The success of the building program could likewise be interpreted as a confirmation of Auramazda’s unflinching support.

At the same time, one cannot agree more with Rollinger 2014 that the Old Persian inscriptions after *DB* do not contain conventional historical narratives, thus offering a sharp contrast with the annalistic traditions reflected, for example, in Neo-Assyrian and Urartian royal inscriptions, or in *DB* itself. The uncomfortable events are the only ones that deserve to be mentioned in this tradition. The purpose of such a mention in *DNa* and *XPf* appears to have been twofold: trivializing the dramatic events and providing their retrospective justification. Both purposes justify the extension of the term ‘propaganda’ to the content of the relevant texts, with the caveat that its target audience, as well as the target audience of the other Achaemenid royal inscriptions, was assumed to belong at least in part to future generations⁴⁶. On face value, this follows from several addresses to future readers that are found in this corpus (notably *DNa* 38–47; Schmitt 2009, 103). An additional rhetorical device that supports the same conclusion is the omission of any details associated with the problematic episodes. The circumstances of “commotion” are not mentioned in *DNa*, while the names of Xerxes’ brothers are omitted in *XPf*. This was an efficient strategy only if one expected that the missing details could not be easily retrieved, which would be a futile hope if the target audience were limited to the king’s contemporaries.

It is now time to return to the “Daiva inscription”. We have seen that both historical episodes addressed in this text emphatically resist localization, while what follows

⁴⁵ Cf. also *DNa* 41–47 (Schmitt 2009, 103), where the further extension of the empire by Darius is apparently invoked, again in very vague terms, as an additional piece of evidence for the divine sanction of his rule.

⁴⁶ The question about the remaining part of the target audience is a complicated one. I personally favour the view that it was Auramazda, on the assumption that the Achaemenid kings did not bother as a rule to present the alternative versions of problematic historical events to their subjects. This hypothesis, which is fleshed out below in connection with *XPh*, correlates with numerous invocations to Auramazda in the relevant corpus. It would, however, draw one more boundary between the bulk of this corpus and the Bisitun inscription, which probably had a wide contemporary readership. The discovery of the Aramaic version of *DB* in Elephantine indicates that its content was made known in various parts of the empire. Furthermore, the version of the events that brought Darius to power are similar in *DB* and the *Histories* of Herodotus, which suggests that if we are dealing with “fake news”, it was an efficient tool of spreading such news. There is even some evidence for an oral-written continuum in the transmission of the relevant version of the events (David 2017).

features an address to future readers (*XPh* 46–56; Schmitt 2009, 168). Under such conditions, it is legitimate to wonder whether we are dealing with another instance of royal propaganda geared at least in part to future generations. A proper way of checking this hypothesis is to look for the uncomfortable events that took place in the reign of Xerxes and examine them for compatibility with the content of our text.

5. A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE “DAIVA INSCRIPTION”

The most well-known event associated with the reign of Xerxes nowadays is his defeat in the war against the Greeks in 480–478 BC. Our knowledge of this conflict is mainly based on the *Histories* of Herodotus and thus primarily reflects the Greek perspective. The contemporary Persian account of the same events has not been identified up to now. It is nonetheless instructive to take a look at the account of the Greek and Persian wars attributed to a certain “Mede” in the *Trojan Discourse* of Dio Chrysostom.

I heard, for instance, a Mede declare that the Persians concede none of the claims made by the Greeks, but maintain that Darius dispatched Datis and Artaphernes against Naxos and Eretria, and that after capturing these cities they returned to the king; that, however, while they were lying at anchor off Euboea, a few of their ships were driven on to the Attic coast – not more than twenty – and their crews had some kind of an engagement with the inhabitants of that place; that, later on, Xerxes in his expedition against Greece conquered the Lacedaemonians at Thermopylae and slew their king Leonidas, then captured and razed the city of the Athenians and sold into slavery all who did not escape; and that after these successes he laid tribute upon the Greeks and withdrew to Asia. Now it is quite clear that this is a false account, but, since it was the natural thing to do, it is quite possible that the king ordered this story to be spread among the inland tribes in order to keep them quiet (D. Chr. 11, 148–149; Cohoon 1932, 558–559).

It is, of course, unlikely that this account, which was written in the late first century CE and belongs to a rhetorical exercise striving to demonstrate that Greeks have never captured Troy, directly reflects the Achaemenid Persian perspective on the wars against the Greeks. One may even doubt whether the author actually met the “Mede” (a Parthian?) or the whole story represents an additional rhetorical exercise. Yet, the rhetorical dimension of this passage is in itself important: it shows that if Xerxes looked for a suitable account of the expedition of Xerxes against the Greeks, emphasizing the interim success and downplaying its ultimate failure was a perfectly logical thing to do. Naturally, his exact choice of what to say and what to gloss over would have been different from that of Dio Chrysostom.

It was argued that burning the Acropolis of Athens with its temples in 480 BC was conceived as an act of retaliation for the Athenian ravage in Sardis at the time of the Ionian Revolt⁴⁷. Whatever the exact motivation, the symbolic significance of this act appears to be confirmed by the conciliatory offer of rebuilding the same temples, allegedly made by Xerxes via Mardonius to the Athenians in 479 BC (Hdt. VIII. 140; cf. Briant 2002, 542). After the Persian army was driven out from Greece, Xerxes could regard the ashes of the Acropolis as the only long-lasting achievement of his Greek campaign. Its official account could then present it as a kind of successful special operation whose ultimate goal was destroying the sanctuaries of evil gods in Athens.

⁴⁷ Lévy 1939, 120.

As discussed in section 2, Isidore Lévy was the first and seemingly only scholar to advance the connection between the Greek campaign of Xerxes and the content of the “Daiva inscription”⁴⁸. The interpretation of the *XPh* inscription offered here assumes his hypothesis as its starting point but modifies it in two respects. On the one hand, the focus on the destruction of the Acropolis is not a testimony to the inconclusive results of the war at the point of the composition of the inscription but a carefully considered strategy of coping with the military defeat. On the other hand, only the second of the two historical episodes related in *XPh* has to do with the Greek campaign. The linguistic reasons for this assumption were addressed in section 3, but it also appears to make better sense from the historical viewpoint. Xerxes need not have endorsed a direct lie by describing Athens as a rebellious land when he could merely juxtapose the accounts of his expedition to Greece and the suppression of an actual rebellion early in his reign⁴⁹. In rhetorical terms, this represented a way of saying “to each his own”: Xerxes pacified the rebellious land, and punished the land of evil gods by destroying their temples. Since the first endeavour was obviously a success, the readers are prompted to believe that the second one likewise represented a spectacular accomplishment.

The determination of the land “in commotion” referred to in *XPh* 28–35 must remain provisional. Egypt and Babylonia are obviously the best candidates, as the satrapies where rebellions demonstrably took place at the beginning of Xerxes’ reign. The lack of evidence for the destruction of the temples in either of the countries no longer qualifies as an objection once the temple destruction is assigned to a different historical episode. One could argue that the rebellion in Egypt lasted longer and had more outside impact, because it was known to Herodotus, but from the perspective of Xerxes the Babylonian rebellions may have been more important because they were closer to the Persian core area. A linguistic test could help to determine whether the rebellion started before Xerxes became king (as was the case in Egypt) or during his reign (as was the case in Babylon), but the researches show no agreement on this account⁵⁰. One can, however, say that whichever identity is assigned to the land of the first episode, this would not affect the identification of Athens (or continental Greece in general) as the setting of the second one.

As mentioned in section 4, the omission of geographic names in both episodes finds direct parallels in the historical narratives embedded in *DNa* and *XPf* inscriptions and thus constituted a common device of Achaemenid propaganda. The parallel between *XPf* and *XPh*

⁴⁸ An indirect endorsement of Lévy’s hypothesis appears to be offered in Konijndijk 2021, 1145: “The text of *XPh*, for instance, gives no indication that Xerxes failed to conquer Greece, and Dio Chrysostom related a “Persian version” denying that this failure ever occurred”. Later on, Konijndijk refers to the relevant passages of *XPh* as “open-ended”.

⁴⁹ One could object that referring to Athens as one of the lands under Achaemenid sway already constitutes “fake news”. The actual situation was, however, more nuanced: the Athenians may have been merely identified as part of the “Greeks beyond the sea”, while certain other “Greeks beyond the sea” (for example, the Boeotians), did submit themselves to the Persians at the time of Xerxes’ campaign.

⁵⁰ Cf. Filippone 2010, 63. My slight preference for Egypt as the rebellious land of *XPh* is prompted by the assumed parallelism between both historical episodes mentioned in this inscription. Since the worship of evil gods in the second episode is clearly addressed as the pre-existing condition, there are more chances that the rebellion in the first episode had likewise begun before Xerxes became king.

appears to be particularly close, since the apologetic content lies in the focus of both texts. Another similarity concerns their diplomatics: neither *XPf* and *XPh* represent monumental inscriptions in the conventional sense, since they were inscribed on stone slabs imitating clay tablets. This observation is consistent with a hypothesis that the apologetic propaganda of Xerxes was not meant for public display, unlike his monumental building inscriptions, but represented a sort of deposit for future generations. The obscure presentational constructions addressed in section 3 presumably served the goal of complicating fact-checking on their part. The archaeological context of the discovery of *XPh* suggests, however, that the future generations remained unimpressed by this composition (cf. section 1). Was it because the memories of the disastrous Greek campaign were still too vivid in the wake of the assassination of Xerxes in 465 BC to lend any credibility to the message of the “Daiva inscription”?

An additional probable addressee of *XPh* was Auramazda. The account of Xerxes’ piety in the land of evil gods is followed by the promise that those who exhibit similar behaviour in the future will enjoy divine favour both when alive and after death (*XPh* 51–56; Schmitt 2009, 168). It stands to reason that Xerxes claimed similar benefits for himself, which in turn suggests implicit bargaining with Auramazda, who was expected to accept the propagandistic version of the events in Greece. In fact, had it not been for his god, Xerxes might not have at all needed to dwell on his Greek debacle: focusing on his accomplishments, such as building projects, would arguably represent a more successful rhetorical strategy geared toward posterity. Auramazda, however, could not be reasonably expected to forget the humiliating defeats and required a finer approach. Portraying the Greek pantheon as evil gods and presenting the goals of the military operation in Greece as essentially religious could both have served the cause of reconciliation between Xerxes and his divine patron.

I submit that the scenario offered in this section has the triple advantage of taking linguistic evidence at face value, finding distinct historical counterparts for both episodes addressed in the *XPh* inscription, and offering non-trivial motivations for the rhetorical strategies of their presentation. For the sake of fairness, one must also acknowledge its potential weaknesses addressed in previous scholarship. Since the scenario under discussion has never been published in its present shape, one has to focus on those objections advanced against the scenario of Lévy 1939 that will also be relevant here.

One potential difficulty is the reference to the Greeks as *yaunā*, the term that is borrowed from Ἰωνες, the self-designation of the Ionian tribe of the Greeks, who did not live on the Greek mainland⁵¹. Ionians were certainly the first Greek tribe to become familiar to the Persians, but there is evidence that they quickly extended the same designation to the other Greeks. Thus, the “Daiva inscription” refers to *y-u-n-a: t-y<-i-y>: d-r-y-h-i-y-a: d-a-r-y-t-i-y: u-t-a: t-y-i-y: p-r-d-r-y: d-a-r-y-t-i-y* ‘the Greeks that live in the sea and that live beyond the sea’ (*XPh* 23–25; Schmitt 2009, 166); the latter category, on unprejudiced reading, refers to the continental Greeks. There is definitely no other word for the Greeks in the Achaemenid inscriptions, and other terms that are probably derived via Old Persian *yauna-*, for example Sanskrit *yavana-* ‘Greek’ or Parthian *ywn’w* ‘the Greek language’, likewise show no trace of tribal affiliation⁵².

⁵¹ Hutter 2021, 1288.

⁵² It is remarkable that the inscriptions of Darius portray the region “beyond the sea” as multi-ethnic. Thus, *DPe* contains the mention of “the Greeks of the plain and the sea and

A stronger objection concerns the passage of Herodotus (VIII. 54) where Xerxes orders the Athenian exiles in his camp to go to the Acropolis shortly after its destruction and offer sacrifices in their usual manner. This attitude was widely regarded as incompatible with the tenor of the “Daiva inscription”, where Xerxes mentions his dictum: “The evil gods shall not be worshipped”, which provided the rationale for destroying the temples. This incongruence is frequently cited as a decisive argument against identifying the daivas of *XPh* with the Greek deities⁵³. While a contradiction between the two sources must be acknowledged in this case, the hypothesis that the actual attitudes of Xerxes in Athens were different from his later propagandistic stance does not strain credulity. As someone who must have felt very close to winning the Greek campaign, Xerxes could afford gestures of reconciliation toward the Greek gods after the capture of Athens⁵⁴. In contrast, the “Daiva inscription” emphasizes the piety of Xerxes at the time when the destruction of Athenian temples was arguably perceived as the main accomplishment of his lost campaign. No equivocation regarding the status of the Greek deities was possible in such a situation⁵⁵.

Finally, modern scholarship frequently criticizes “a futile effort to assign the same prominence to the Greek-Persian conflict for both the Greek and Persian world view”⁵⁶. In this connection one may wonder whether the Persian defeats in 480–478 BC represented a sufficient reason for apologetic propaganda⁵⁷. While I broadly agree with the necessity to overcome the Hellenocentric bias in the interpretation of the Greek-Persian wars, I submit that the failure of a military campaign personally led by a King of Kings had a potential of dealing a heavy blow to the Achaemenid Empire. The aftermath of the Japanese-Russian war of 1904–1905 provides a good illustration of how a debacle at a remote frontier can shake the foundations of an absolute monarchy. While the known consequences of Salamis and Plataea were less significant for the power structures of the defeated empire than those of Mukden and Tsushima, Xerxes’ attempt to hedge his defeat does not strike me as over-reaction.

the lands beyond the sea”, while *DSe* features a block of “Sakas beyond the sea, Thracians, and Greeks beyond the sea” (Briant 2002, 183). Presumably, the latter nomenclature reflects the experience of Darius in his expedition against the Scythians. In contrast, the European campaign of Xerxes focused on Greece, and therefore Greeks represent the only ethnic group mentioned in connection with the sea in the *XPh* inscription.

⁵³ See e.g. Huayna Ávila 2020, 149–150.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Tucker (pers. comm.) indicates an additional possibility: the invitation of the Greek exiles to the Acropolis was conceived as a way of exposing them to the powerlessness of the Greek gods, who turned out to be unable even to defend their own temples.

⁵⁵ There is little doubt that the royal celebration of Auramazda did take place after the capture of Athens, because the occasion called for a thanksgiving prayer. I leave it open, however, whether it was accompanied at the time by any official proclamation directed against the Greek deities. As a possibility, Xerxes had uttered something similar to the dictum of Darius about the Elamites (*DB V* 14–17, cf. the discussion in section 2) and later tried to convince Auramazda that it amounted to a proclamation of religious intolerance.

⁵⁶ Huayna Ávila 2020, 129.

⁵⁷ This statement reformulates a question posed after my talk in Hamburg in December 2014, while the previous citation from Huayna Ávila 2020, 129 belongs to the section of this paper that addresses the date of the “Daiva inscription”.

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