

BRUCE LINCOLN

From Artaxerxes to Abu Ghraib

On Religion and the Pornography of Imperial Violence

I

In the wake of September 11, 2001, much has been written about religious groups commonly called 'terrorist', building on an older literature whose equally tendentious buzzwords were 'cult' and 'fundamentalism'.¹ In general, the conclusions advanced within such works tilt sometimes in the direction of alarm ('They're dangerous and they're everywhere!'), and sometimes in that of reassurance ('These are quite marginal phenomena, and they're not really religions'). Particularly skilled, also particularly confused analysts (George Bush comes to mind) sometimes manage to have it both ways, which is rather a nifty trick.

Tempting though it is, I would rather not contribute to the enterprise of this growing cottage industry.² This is not to say the topic doesn't have its importance (surely it does), but the field is saturated. Besides, there is bigger, more interesting, and more important game. Simple utilitarian calculations suggest that the amount of academic attention devoted to a given threat ought reflect its seriousness, based on calculations of the likelihood that threat will be realized and the destruction it can unleash. By these standards, al Qaeda, Hamas, the Aryan Nations, Aum Shinrikyo, the Tamil Tigers, Gush Emunim, and all other non-state groups are relative pikers, whose capacity for violence is dwarfed by that of the larger states, who also use their formidable discursive capacities to normalize their own aggression, while stigmatizing that of all adversaries. State violence is, of course, held in check by numerous factors, including law, tradition, international institutions, political and economic costs, calculations of self-inter-

1 A sampling would include Bromley and Melton 2002, Abbas and Collins 2002, du Toit and Lubbe 2002, Lincoln 2003a, Selengut 2003, Weinberg and Pedahzur 2004, Makrides and Rüpke 2004, Ellens 2004, Wellman and Tokuno forthcoming.

2 For a sketch of my current thinking, see Lincoln 2005a: 12.

est, also – not least in importance – considerations of morality and religion. Should any of these militate in other directions, however, the likelihood of violence increases accordingly. Among the most dangerous of situations is that in which an extremely powerful state bent on conquest finds and deploys religious arguments that encourage its aggressive tendencies and imperial ambitions.

Without great difficulty, one can identify a contemporary case of this type, but its very proximity threatens to distort one's perception.³ Believing that it may be useful to consider data sufficiently removed from the present to afford some critical distance, I have devoted much of my research in recent years to the role played by religion in Achaemenid Persia (550–330 BCE), the largest, wealthiest, most powerful empire of antiquity before the emergence of Rome.⁴ As a convenient summary of that research, I propose to discuss two Achaemenian data, each of which can assume emblematic status. Only after that exercise will I return to contemporary materials and issues.

II

Wherever the Achaemenian empire spread, servants of the Great King built walled gardens, inside which they made every effort to create an atmosphere of perfect tranquility and well-being.⁵ Toward that end, they built irrigation canals to carry cool water that kept the environment moist and made all life flourish. They planted dense collections of shade trees to moderate temperatures and provide relief from the scorching sun. They arranged plantings in complex geometric patterns to create a sense of perfect order and exquisite beauty. They gathered plants 'of every species' – as they never tired of repeating – from every province of the empire, transplanted them, cultivated them and, on occasion, launched military

3 Much attention has been focused on the emergence of an imperial America. See, *inter alia*, Hahn and Heiss 2001, O'Hara 2003, Halper and Clarke 2004, Dorrien 2004, Vidal 2004, Magstadt 2004, Khalidi 2004.

4 Lincoln forthcoming a and forthcoming b.

5 These gardens are known chiefly from archaeological excavations at Pasargadae and from the reports of Greek historians. For thoughtful and thorough considerations of the evidence, see Fauth 1979; Stronach 1989 and 1990; Tuplin 1998; Bremmer 1999; Hultgård 2000; Briant 2003; Lincoln 2003b and forthcoming a.

campaigns to obtain exotic species unavailable inside their borders.⁶ They did the same with animals, including the most exotic species. Some of these served as game for royal hunts, while others were left to wander.⁷

At their leisure, the king and his nobles frequented such sites, which they understood as exquisitely pleasant spaces for repose and recreation, microcosmic models of the empire at large, and a prefiguration or foretaste of the ideal state they wished to establish wherever they spread their power. To these symbolically charged grounds they gave the name 'paradise' (Old Persian *pari.daida*; cf. Median **pari.daiza*, Avestan *pairi.daēza*), which most literally denotes a walled enclosure.⁸ Carrying much wider nuances, resonances, fantasies, desires, and connotations, this word spread widely from Persia. Particularly influential in this process of near-global diffusion was the Alexandrian translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, where the loanword *paradeisos* – and not the native Greek terminology – was used to describe the extraordinary features of Eden at Genesis 2.8–15, for which the Hebrew uses a much simpler term for 'garden' (*gan*, usually translated by Greek *kēpos*).⁹

6 The drive to include plants 'of all sorts' or 'of every species' is mentioned by Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.4.10 and 2.4.14, *idem*, *Economicus* 4.13–14, Arrian, *Anabasis* 6.29.4, *idem*, *Indica* 8.40.3–4, Diodorus Siculus 5.19.2 and 19.21.3, Longus 4.2. Abundance of vegetation is signalled in more general terms by Xenophon, *Hellenica* 4.1.33, *idem*, *Economicus* 4.14, Diodorus Siculus 14.79.2, and Achilles Tatius 1.15. Botanical collecting emerges as a motive for imperial expansion in the advice Mardonius gave Xerxes. When the latter wavered in his determination to invade Greece, his uncle and chief adviser urged him on by saying 'Europe was a very beautiful place and bore cultivated trees of every sort, a land high in excellence, and worthy to be possessed by the king alone among mortals.' ἡ Εὐρώπη περικαλλῆς εἶη χώρα, καὶ δένδρεα παντοῖα ἐρεῖ τὰ ἡμφερα, ἀρετὴν τε ἄκρη, βασιλεί τε μόνω θνητῶν ἀξίη ἐκτῆσθαι. Herodotus 7.5.

7 As regards the desire to include animals 'of every species', see Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.2.7, *idem*, *Cyropedia* 1.3.14, *idem*, *Hellenica* 4.1.15–16 and 4.1.33, Arrian, *Indica* 8.40.3–4, Diodorus Siculus 19.21.3, Achilles Tatius 1.15, and Quintus Curtius, 8.1.11. On the royal hunt, see Fauth 1979; Briant 1991: 211–55; Briant 1996: 242–4 and 309–12.

8 For linguistic analysis of the term and its significance, see Brandenstein and Mayrhofer 1964: 137, and Lincoln 2003b.

9 Other loanwords from the Persian include Akkadian *pardēsu*, Elamite *partētaš*, Hebrew *pardēs*, Armenian *partez*, and Arabic *firdaus*, and the European terminology – English *paradise*, French *paradis*, Italian *paradiso*, German *paradies*, etc. – that comes via Greek *paradeisos* and Latin *paradisium*.

This translator's choice is significant, for Eden is not in any sense a royal garden, nor a playground for weary nobles. Rather, in the first instance, it is a space of perfection, created by God at the beginning of time; second, a space to which humans had access in a corresponding time of perfection, but from which they became estranged as the result of a primordial drama; third, a space – and a quality of being – that humans hope to recover in some eschatological future.

In Genesis chapter 3, the Biblical text shifts its attention from the garden as an image of primordial perfection to narrate the Fall, detailing how perfection was lost. The Achaemenian myth of creation – which was given first place in twenty-three of the surviving royal inscriptions, and was repeated by every king from Darius the Great (r. 522–486) through Artaxerxes III (359–38) – is more concise than the Genesis account, and treats the loss of primordial bliss only in allusive fashion.¹⁰ Still, there are some important similarities between the two cosmogonies. The Achaemenian text reads as follows.

A great god is the Wise Lord, who created this earth, who created that sky, who created mankind, who created happiness for mankind, who made Darius king: one king over many, one commander over many.¹¹

Five separate acts of creation are mentioned in this brief passage. All are understood as unambiguously good, being products of a benevolent (but not omnipotent) Creator. The five creations are not equal in their age and status, however, since one is subtly set apart from the others. Thus, while

10 The inscriptions have been edited by Roland G. Kent (1953). All subsequent authors have followed the convention established by Kent, through which each inscription is identified by a three-letter sigla that lists the king responsible for the inscription first, the site second, and the sequence in which the inscriptions were discovered third. Thus, for example, DPa = Darius's first inscription at Persepolis. The cosmogonic myth appears as the first paragraph of DNa, DNb, DPg, DSe, DSf, DSs, DSt, DSab, DE, DZc, XPa, XPb, XPa, XPd, XPf, XPh, XPl, XE, XV, A¹Pa, D²Ha, A²Hc, and A³Pa. Improved translations have appeared in recent years, including Schmitt 1991 and 2000, and Lecoq 1997.

11 DNa §1: *baqa vazrka Auramazdā, haya imām būnīm adā, haya avam asmānam adā, haya martiyam adā, haya šiyātīm adā martiyahyā, haya Dārayavaum xšāyaθiyam akunauš, aivam parūnām xšāyaθiyam, aivam parūnām framātāram*. This is the most common variant, which became the standard copied by later kings, who replaced Darius's name with their own, but there are also other versions. The full set of variants has been studied most extensively by Clarisse Herrens Schmidt (1977).

the first four creations came into being at some unspecified moment in primordial time, the Wise Lord made Darius king at a precise historic moment: 29 September 522, to be exact.¹²

The text further distinguishes between the four original creations and the fifth through a detail of vocabulary. Thus, for the Wise Lord's initial creative acts, it uses the verb ²*dā-*, 'to establish, set in place for the first time', a solemn verb that never admits any grammatical subject save the Wise Lord. When it turns to the moment this deity 'made Darius king', however, it employs a much less elevated verb: *kar-*, which takes both humans and gods as its subject, and can denote any act of doing, making, or shaping, including the most menial.¹³

The point is clear. The Wise Lord's first four acts form a set that includes inanimate and animate, natural and cultural components: heaven and earth on the one hand, mankind, and everything necessary for mankind's happiness on the other. Of these, the culminating item is the most interesting and elusive. Detailed studies of the term used to denote 'happiness' (Old Persian *šiyāti*; cf. Avestan *šyāti*, Latin *quies*) show it is a state of blissful tranquility that involves – and depends on – the presence of Truth, peace, and abundant foods (especially those derived from fresh water, healthful plants, and beneficent animals).¹⁴

Once the original four-part creation was complete, there followed an interval of indeterminate length, about which the text is silent. During this period, the world was perfect and no further action needed. But something happened that roused the deity to one more effort as a response to some danger. Darius's first and longest inscription helps resolve the question of what produced this situation.

Written shortly after the events it describes, the trilingual inscription at Bisitun describes how Darius seized the throne in September 522, suppressed nine rebellions, then embarked on a program of new conquests.¹⁵

12 The date is given according to the Old Persian and Babylonian calendars in Darius's trilingual inscription at Bisitun (DB §13 and DB [Bab.] §12, respectively).

13 On the meaning of these verbs and the significance of their contrast, see Herrenschiemdt 1984, Bianchi 1988, and Kellens 1989.

14 On the term for happiness, see Herrenschiemdt 1991, Kellens 1995, Piras 1994–5, and Lincoln forthcoming a.

15 The Bisitun inscription and the events of 522–1 BCE have been discussed repeatedly and at great length. The best literature includes Dandamaev 1976; Wiesehofer 1978; Bickerman and Tadmor 1978; Herrenschiemdt 1982; Balcer 1987; Dandamaev 1989: 83–113; Zawadzki 1994; Briant 1996: 109–27; and Pongratz-Leisten 2002.

The early passages hold particular interest, where Darius represented his (otherwise dubious) accession as the result of divine election. These are the same events he later construed as the Wise Lord's fifth act of creation. Mythic and historic discourse thus complement each other, providing different pieces of the same story. Bisitun omits the original creation – the prime focus of later inscriptions – but dwells on the crisis of 525–2 that brought happiness to an end, and all texts conclude when the Wise Lord responded to that crisis by making Darius king. The crucial passage at Bisitun reads as follows.

A man of our family named Cambyses, the son of Cyrus, was formerly king. His brother was named Bardiya and Cambyses slew him, *but it did not become known that Bardiya was slain*. Then Cambyses went off to conquer Egypt. While he was in Egypt, *the people became vulnerable to deception and the Lie became great throughout the land*. Afterwards, there was a Magus named Gaumata. He rose up in rebellion on March 11, 522. *He lied to the people, saying: 'I am Bardiya, son of Cyrus and brother of Cambyses.'* Then the people became rebellious. Persia and Media and other lands went over to Gaumata. On July 1, 522 he seized the kingship, and then Cambyses died. The kingship Gaumata took from Cambyses belonged to our family since long ago. No one was able to take the kingship back from Gaumata. *The people feared him mightily*. He killed many people who knew Bardiya, for fear they might recognize him. *No one dared say anything about Gaumata, until I rose up*. I prayed to the Wise Lord for assistance. *The Wise Lord bore me aid*. Along with a few men, on September 29, 522 I slew Gaumata the Magus and his foremost followers. I took the kingship from him. *By the Wise Lord's will, I became king.*¹⁶

16 DB §§10–13: *Kambujiya nāma, Kurauš puça, amāxam taumāyā, haṅ paruvam idā xšāyaθiya āha, avahyā Kambujiyahyā brātā Bṛḍiyam nāma āha, hamātā hamapitā Kambujiyahvā, pasāva Kambujiya avam Bṛḍiyam avāja, yaθā Kambujiya Bṛḍiyam avāja, kārahyā naṅ azdā abava, taya Bṛḍiya avajata, pasāva Kambujiya Mudrāyam ašiyava, yaθā Kambujiya Mudrāyam ašiyava, pasāva kāra arika abava utā drauḡa dahyauvā vsaṅ abava, utā Pārsaj utā Mādaj utā aniyāuvā dahyušuvā. θāti Dārayavauš xšāyaθiya: pasāva aiva martiya maguš āha, Gaumāta nāma, haṅ udapatatā hacā Pašiyāuvādā, Arakadriš nāma kauḡa, hacā avadaš, Viyaxnahya māhyā caçudaθā raucabiš θakata āha, yadi udapatatā, haṅ kārahyā avathā adurujiya: adam Bṛḍiya ami, haya Kurauš puça, Kambujiyahyā brātā, pasāva kāra haruva hamičiya abava hacā Kambujiyā, abi avam ašiyava, utā Pārsa utā Māda utā aniyā dahyava, xšaçam haṅ agrbāyatā, Garmapadahya māhyā navā raucabiš θakata āha, avathā xšaçam agrbāyatā, pasāva Kambujiya uvamṛšiyuš amariyatā. θāti Dārayavauš*

Darius goes on to explain that once established on the throne, he set about rectifying all the wrongs Gaumata had committed. Toward that end, he restored the institution of kingship, temples and cults, also pastures, livestock, and the bases of the economy.¹⁷ Other sources suggest he raised taxes and enforced demands for military conscription that Gaumata had alleviated.¹⁸ Such steps were unpopular, and serious doubts also existed regarding Darius's legitimacy. As a result, many revolts broke out, especially in provinces that wished to extricate themselves from Persian imperial domination. In general, these nationalist insurrections were led by men claiming to be rightful heirs of the old royal families the Achaemenians overthrew. Darius's response to them was consistent, for he insisted they

xšāyaθiya: aita xšačam, taya Gaumāta haya maguš adinā Kambujiyam, aita xšačam hacā paruviyata amāxam taumāyā āha, pasāva Gaumāta haya maguš adinā Kambujiyam utā Pārsam utā Mādām utā aniyā dahyāva, haṭ ayasatā, uvāṭpašiyam akutā, haṭ xšāyaθiya abava. θāti Dārayavauš xšāyaθiya: naṭ āha martiya naṭ Pārsa naṭ Māda naṭ amāxam taumāyā kašci, haya avam Gaumātam tayam magum xšačam dītam caxriyā, kārašim hacā dīšam atṛsa, kāram vasaj avājanīyā, haya paranam Bṛdiyam adānā, avahyarādī kāram avājanīyā, mātayamām xšnāsāti, taya adam naṭ Bṛdiya ami, haya Kurauš puça, kašci naṭ adṛšnauš cišci θanstanaj pari Gaumātam tayam magum, yātā adam ārsam, pasāva adam Auramazdām patiyāvvanhyaj, Auramazdāmaj upastām abara, Bāgayādaj mahya daθā raucabiš θakata āha, avaθā adam hadā kannajibiš martiyaṭibiš avam Gaumātam tayam magum avājanam utā tayajšaj fratamā martiya anušiya āhantā, Sikayuvatiš namā didā, nisāya nāmā dahyāuš Mādai, avadašim avājanam, xšačamšim adam adinam, vašnā Auramazdāha adam xšāyaθiya abavam, Auramazdā xšačam manā frābara.

In the interests of clarity and concision, I have provided a less than literal translation. Those interested in the precise details of diction should consult the editions of Schmitt and Lecoq.

- 17 DB §14: 'The kingship that had been taken from our lineage, I put that in its place. I restored it in place. Just as they had been before, so I restored the cults that Gaumata the Magus destroyed. I restored the pastures and livestock and servants and houses of the people, of which Gaumata the Magus had deprived them. I set the people back in place, in Persia and Media and the other lands and peoples. Just as it was before, so I brought back that which had been taken.' *θāti Dārayavauš xšāyaθiya: xšačam, taya hacā amāxam taumāyā parābṛtam āha, ava adam patipadam akunavam, adamšim gaθavā avāstāyam, yaθā paruvamci, avaθā adam akunavam āyadanā, tayā Gaumāta haya maguš viyaka, adam niyačārayam kārahya ābicariš gaṭθāmcā mānīyamcā viθbišcā, tayādīš Gaumāta haya maguš adinā, adam kāram gaθavā avāstāyam Pārsamcā Mādamcā utā aniyā dahyāva, yaθā paruvamci, avaθā adam, taya parābṛtam, patiyābaram.*
- 18 According to Herodotus 3.67, upon accession to the throne, Bardiya (whom he calls Smerdis) proclaimed a three-year suspension of demands for tribute and military service, which made him extremely popular in all provinces, save Persia.

were not who they claimed to be. Not kings, but liars, imposters, and would-be usurpers. Not national heroes, but instruments of 'the Lie'.

All of this is consistent with the central principles of Achaemenian religion, which posits a historic struggle between the virtue of Truth, on which the order of the cosmos depends, and its antithetical adversary: 'the Lie'.¹⁹ The original creation, as we have seen, was characterized by perfect happiness, in which state the Lie was absent. Primordial perfection ended and history proper thus began, with three events of 525–2 recounted in the text just quoted. (1) The king – normally understood as the embodiment of Truth and protector of happiness – killed his brother and concealed this fact, said concealment being an act of deception, not quite a lie, but hardly the truth: a misrepresentation designed to mask reality and delude the people. (2) As a result of this half-truth, the people became 'vulnerable to deception': not yet liars and villains themselves, but confused, anxious, malleable creatures who could trust neither their king, nor their own senses and reason, from which reality had been successfully occluded. (3) These were the preconditions for the manifestation of evil proper, in all its force. And so, in Darius's words, 'the Lie became great throughout the land', after which there followed rebellion, war, scarcity; disorder, death, hunger; suffering, fear, doubt. In a word, unhappiness on a massive scale: the end of the perfect era.

Darius and his successors claimed they were chosen by God himself to set things right: that is, to restore creation to its pristine state by vanquishing the Lie in all its forms and all who were corrupted by it. That done, happiness could endure forever. Constituting themselves – and their armies – as champions of Truth and virtue, they offered other peoples the option of voluntarily becoming Achaemenian subjects, which obliged them to pay tribute, contribute soldiers, maintain roads, obey Persian laws, and accept moral leadership from the monarch who defined himself as 'King of lands and peoples of all races, King over this great, far-reaching earth'. All of these steps were intended, not simply to enrich the Persian center, but to help advance its imperial expansion, which it construed as a divinely ordained, supremely benevolent project of world salvation. Those who rejected such diplomatic overtures were construed as misguided creatures

19 On the dualistic opposition of Truth and the Lie as an organizing principle of Achaemenian religion, see Widengren 1965: 142–3; Boyce 1982: 120–3; Hasenfratz 1983; Schwartz 1985; Pongratz-Leisten 2002; and Herrenschildt and Lincoln 2004.

whose judgment was warped by the Lie. Their conquest represented advance of the Truth by Persian arms, assisted by the Wise Lord. So did the suppression of rebels.²⁰

Military expansion was thus construed as a religious and moral project, designed to establish righteousness, peace, prosperity, abundance, harmony, the flourishing of life and all its pleasures. In a word, 'happiness for mankind'. As a sign of what they intended – a sign directed both to themselves and others – the Achaemenians used a portion of their revenues to build the sumptuous gardens I described earlier, filled with exotic species of plants and animals imported from every corner of the globe, and designed to provide a foretaste of the absolute happiness waiting at history's end under a Pax Persiana. Those gardens were among the most idealized models of empire that ever existed: a story the Achaemenians told themselves about themselves, through which they justified and motivated violent wars of aggression, internal suppression of dissent, ongoing processes of extraction, and ambitions of global domination. To these gardens, they gave the general name of 'paradise', but we also know the name given one of these gardens, which confirms our interpretation, for this paradise-garden was known as 'All-happiness'.²¹

III

The charming image of the paradise-garden stands in sharp contrast with another, the torture administered to a soldier named Mithridates by Artaxerxes II shortly after the battle of Cunaxa (3 September 401). Here, the king quashed a rebellion led by his brother, Cyrus the Younger and, as reported by Ctesias (Artaxerxes's court physician),²² it was Mithridates

20 The formal procedures through the offer of submission was made and negotiated, failing which war might be declared, have been discussed by Amélie Kuhrt (1988). On treatment of rebels, see Lincoln 2005b.

21 The paradise-garden named *Vispa-šiyātiš* ('All-happiness') appears in Cameron 1948: Nos. 49 and 59, pp. 160 and 172, respectively. The significance of this datum was first recognized by Émile Benveniste (1958). New evidence has been added in support of his views by Prods O. Skjærvø (1994).

22 Ctesias's *Persika* has not been preserved, except in fragments. Plutarch cites him as his source repeatedly, especially with reference to the death of Cyrus the Younger (*Life of Artaxerxes* 11.1, 2, and 6) and the rewards distributed by Artaxerxes thereafter (*ibid.* 14.1).

who first wounded Cyrus and was responsible for his death. For this, the king rewarded him handsomely, but in a way that obscured his contribution, since Artaxerxes wanted personal credit for having killed his brother. When a drunk and decidedly indiscreet Mithridates let the facts slip regarding his role in Cyrus's death, Artaxerxes ordered him put to death in the following fashion.

Taking two troughs that were made to fit closely together, they laid the man being punished on his back inside one of them. Then they fit the other on top so the man's head, hands, and feet stuck out, while it covered the rest of his body. They gave him food, pricking his eyes to force him when he resisted. They also poured milk mixed with honey into his mouth, and they poured it over his face. Then they turned his eyes constantly toward the sun and a multitude of flies settled down, covering his face. Meanwhile, inside, the man did what it is necessary for people to do when they have drunk and eaten. Worms and maggots boiled up from the decay and putrefaction of his excrement, and these ate away his body, boring into his interior. When he was dead and the top was removed, people saw his flesh all eaten away and swarms of such animals surrounded his vitals, eating them and leeching at them. Thus Mithridates was gradually destroyed over seventeen days, until he finally died.²³

Ctesias, as cited by Plutarch, offered no interpretation for these procedures. Rather, both authors let the episode speak for itself as an example of Oriental despotism at its most sadistic and vile. Similarly, Achaemenian

23 Plutarch, *Life of Artaxerxes* 16.2–4: σκάφας δύο πεποιημένας ἐφαρμόξουν ἀλλήλαις λαβόντες, εἰς τὴν ἐτέραν κατακλίνουσι τὸν κολαζόμενον ὑπτιον εἶτα τὴν ἐτέραν ἐπάγοντες καὶ συναρμόζοντες, ὥστε τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὰς χεῖρας ἔξω καὶ τοὺς πόδας ἀπολαμβάνεσθαι, τὸ δὲ ἄλλο σῶμα πᾶν ἀποκεκρῦφθαι, διδόασιν ἐσθίειν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, κὰν μὴ θέλῃ, προσβιάζονται κεντοῦντες τὰ ὄμματα· φαγόντι δὲ πεῖν μέλι καὶ γάλα συγκεκραμένον ἐγγέουσιν εἰς τὸ στόμα καὶ κατὰ τοῦ προσώπου καταχέουσιν. εἶτα πρὸς τὸν ἥλιον αἰεὶ στρέφουσιν ἐναντία τὰ ὄμματα, καὶ μυιῶν προσκαθημένων πλήθος πᾶν ἀποκρύπτεται τὸ πρόσωπον. ἐντὸς δὲ ποιούντος ὅσα ποιεῖν ἀναγκαῖόν ἐστιν ἐσθιόντας ἀνθρώπους καὶ πίνοντας, εὐλαὶ καὶ σκώληκες ὑπὸ φθορᾶς καὶ σηπεδόνος ἐκ τοῦ περιτώματος ἀναξέουσιν, ὑφ' ὧν ἀναλίσκεται τὸ σῶμα διαδουμένων εἰς τὰ ἐντὸς. ὅταν γὰρ ἤδη φανερός ᾖ τεθνηκώς ὁ ἄνθρωπος, ἀφαιρεθείσης τῆς ἐπάνω σκάφης ὀρώσει τὴν μὲν σάρκα κατεδηδεσμένην, περὶ δὲ τὰ σπλάγγνα τοιούτων θηρίων ἐσμούς ἐσθιόντων καὶ προσπεφυκότων. οὕτως ὁ Μιθριδάτης ἑπτακαίδεκα ἡμέρας φθειρόμενος μόλις ἀπέθανε.

texts offer little that would help us make sense of the punishment, save perhaps Darius's injunction to future kings: 'You who may be king hereafter, protect yourself boldly from the Lie! The man who is a liar, *punish him so that he is well-punished* if you would think thus: "Let my land and people be secure".'²⁴

This, of course, raises the question what it would mean to be 'well-punished' (*u-fraštam*), and here Zoroastrian doctrines offer some help. This follows whether or not one accepts that the later Achaemenians had adopted Zoroastrianism, as most now believe.²⁵ Even those who remain skeptical on this point will readily acknowledge that close comparison of the Achaemenian inscriptions and Zoroastrian texts reveals similarities so numerous and so strong that the two must be regarded as heirs to a common pan-Iranian linguistic, religious, and cultural tradition that each one developed in its own fashion.²⁶

Virtually every detail of Ctesias's account finds clarifying analogues in Zoroastrian scriptures: the milk and honey; the flies, maggots, and worms; the excrement and its horrific stench, which the text tactfully leaves to one's imagination. Even the enclosure formed by the two troughs reminds us of another enclosure described in a passage of the Videvdāt (an Avestan text concerned with issues of law, purity and pollution) that bears the same

24 DB §55: *tuvam kā, xšāyaθiya haya aparam āhi, hacā draugā dṛšam patipayauvā, martiya, haya draujana ahati, avam ufraštam pṛsā, yadi avaθā, maniyāhaj: dahyāušmaj duruvā ahati*. Cf. DB §64: 'You who may be king hereafter: That man who is a liar or who is a deceit-doer, do not be a friend to them. Punish them with a good punishment.' *tuvam kā, xšāyaθiya haya aparam āhi, martiya, haya draujana ahati hayavā zūrakara ahati, avai mā dauštā biyā, ufraštādiš pṛsā*.

25 When scholars were inclined to date the earliest Zoroastrian texts in the 6th Century BCE, the majority felt there was not enough time for them to have diffused from eastern Iran to Achaemenid Persia in the west. As a date *circa* 1000 BCE has come to be widely accepted, that objection no longer holds and opinion has shifted accordingly. The evidence, however, is ambiguous and debate is likely to continue forever, without definitive resolution. For a convenient summary of discussions through 1980, see Herrenschildt 1980. Since then, Mary Boyce (1982) has argued most forcefully, if not most convincingly for the Zoroastrian identity of the Achaemenians. More recently, Prods Oktor Skjærvø (1999) has offered important support for this position.

26 Among recent discussions, note especially Jean Kellens 1997 and 2002. The latter piece contains a very pointed – and apt – response to Skjærvø, 'Avestan Quotations in Old Persian?', cited in the preceding note: 'Il ne s'agit en réalité ni de citations, ni de sources, mais de parallèles, et non seulement avestiques, mais indo-iraniens' (p. 423, n. 6).

name as the Achaemenian ‘paradise’ (Avestan *pairi.daēza*; cf. Old Persian *pari.daida*).²⁷ Whereas the latter is an ideal space of happiness, abundance, and the flourishing of life, that of the Videvdat is a space of death and bodily corruption. Inside its walls is the driest, most desolate terrain, devoid of plant, animal, and human life. There, corpse-bearers – i.e. those unfortunates most soiled by the filth of dead bodies – are imprisoned for the duration of their mortal existence so their threat of contaminating pollution may be safely contained.²⁸

27 I have discussed this enclosure more fully on two previous occasions, see Lincoln 1991: 110–11, and forthcoming a.

28 Videvdat 3.15–21: “Righteous creator of bodily beings! Where should be the place of the man who has carried a corpse?” Then said the Wise Lord: “It should be the place on this earth that is most devoid of water, most devoid of plants, whose soil is most purified, driest, and where animals, small and large, traverse its paths in fewest numbers to the Wise Lord’s fire, to the righteous sacrificial strew that has been spread out, and toward a man who is righteous.”

“Righteous creator of bodily beings! How far [should he be] from the fire? How far [should he be] from the water? How far [should he be] from the strew that has been spread out? How far [should he be] from a righteous man?”

Then said the Wise Lord: “Thirty steps from the fire. Thirty steps from the water. Thirty steps from the strew that has been spread out. Three steps from a righteous man.”

There, the Mazda-worshippers enclose a “paradise” (*pairi.daēzan pairi.daēzayan*) out of this earth. There, those who are Mazda-worshippers establish him with food. There, those who are Mazda-worshippers establish him with clothes. In the very poorest and most run down places, he must eat these foods and he must wear these clothes, until he becomes old or decrepit or one whose bodily fluids are exhausted. Then, when he becomes old or decrepit or one whose bodily fluids are exhausted, on the most powerful, most bold, most knowledgeable mountain top, the Mazda-worshippers should flay his skull down to the bottom of his hair. His body should be consigned for the food of vultures, the body-devouring creatures of the Beneficent Spirit, saying thus: “May he renounce all evil thought, evil word, and evil deed.” And if there are other evil deeds committed by him, his punishment has been settled. And if there are no other evil deeds committed by him, things are settled for this man for ever and ever.’

dātarə aēθanəmyṃ astvaitinəmyṃ ašāum. kva aētahe narš gātuš aṇhat yat iristō.kašahe. āat mraot ahurō mazdā. yat aṇhat aiṅhā zəmo vī.āpō.təməmca vī.urvarō.təməmca yaozdātō. zəmo təməmca huškō.təməmca kambištəmca aēte paθā frayən pasvasca staorāca atrəmca ahurahe mazdā barəsmaca ašava frastarətəm narəmca yim ašavanəm. dātarə gaēθanəmyṃ astvaitinəmyṃ ašāum. cvat drājō haca aθrat cvat drājō haca apat cvat drājō haca barəsmən frastairyāt cvat drājō haca nərəbyō ašavabyō. āat mraot ahurō mazdā. θrisata.gāim haca aθrat θrisata.gāim haca apat θrisata.gāim haca barəsmən frastairyāt θrigāim haca nərəbyō ašavabyō. aētada hē aēte mazdayasna aiṅhā zəmo pairi.daēzan pairi.daēzayan.

With the exception of the Videvdat, which is concerned with issues of purity, the older Zoroastrian scriptures (i.e., those written in Avestan) are mostly liturgical in nature. It is thus the younger, Pahlavi scriptures that provide the fullest testimony. Many of these contain lists of mortal sins (*marg-arzān*), i.e. actions so grievously wrong that those who commit them ought be put to death. While these lists vary somewhat, they always prominently feature the crime of which Mithridates was convicted: Untruth. In a multitude of forms – perjury, heresy, slander, breach of contract, *et al.* – untruth is always a capital offense.²⁹ Those guilty of it can also expect postmortem torment, as is described in the Dadestan i Denig.

From all the demons, there comes to him heavy pain, trouble, *devouring and many things, like stench and biting, tearing, cutting in pieces*, all harm and misfortune. *His own choice created these things for him in hell, and there will be evils for him until the cosmic renovation.*³⁰

x^v arəθaēibyō pascaēta āstayanta aēte yōi mazdayasna. vastraēibyō pascaēta āstayanta aēte yōi mazdayasna. draējištōtəmaēšvaca niuruzdōtəmaēšvaca aētā x^v arəθā x^v arati aētā vastrā vaŋhatu. vīspəm ā ahmāt yat hanō vā zaururō vā pairištā.xšudrō vā bavāt. āat yat hanō vā zaururō vā pairištā.xšudrō vā bavāt. aojištəmca dim pascaēta mazdayasna tancištəmca vaēdyōtəmca upa.maitim barəzəŋhəm pəstō.fraθəŋhəm hē kamərəðəm vīnāθayən. aš.x^v arətəmaēibyō spəntō.mainyavanəm dāmanəm kərəfš.xvārəm kərəfš paiti nīsrinuyat vayəm kaŋrkāsəm uityaojanō. avā hīm paiti miθnāiti vīspəm dušmatəmca dužuxtəmca dužvarštəmca. yezica hē anya aga šyaoθna fravaršta paitita hē ciθa. āat yezi.šē anya aga šyaoθna nōit fravaršta paititəm ahe narš yavaēca yavaētātaēca.

- 29 For such lists, see Denkard 5.9.10 (delivering a false legal decision [*drō dādwarīh*], teaching falsehood [*drō-cāšnīh*], perjury [*zūr-gugāyīh*]); Pahlavi Rivayat accompanying the Dadestan i Denig 41 (perjury [*zūr-gugāyīh*], false teaching [*drō-cāš*], repudiation of true statements [*nakkīrā*]), Menog i Xrad 36 (Manichaean forms of heresy [*zandikīh*], 36.16; other forms of heresy [*ahlomōgīh*], 36.18; breach of contract [*mīhrōdrujīh*], 36.21; slander [*spazgīh*], 36.25; speaking falsehood and untruth [*kē drō ud anāst gōwēd*], 36.29). That the opposition of truth and falsehood had similar salience in Achaemenian culture is suggested by the place of ‘the Lie’ (Old Persian *Drauga*; cf. Avestah *druj*, Pahlavi *druz*) in the royal inscriptions, also by the report of Herodotus 1.136 that Persian nobles received fifteen years of education in three subjects only: riding a horse, shooting a bow, and telling the truth.
- 30 Dadestan i Denig 40.4: *ka a-petitīgīhā a-pašēmānīhā andar ān ī abārōn-dādīh frōd mīrēd ēg-iš ruwān gāh andar ān ī wattom axwān u-š pādīfrāh ān ī was marg-arzānān u-š az dēwān garānīhā dast pad dast rasēd dard ud sējišn ud jōyišn ud was ēwēnag gand ud gazišn darrišn ud kirrenīšn hamist anāgīh ud dušxwāragīh u-š pad awēšan dād [ud] wurrōyišn andar ān ī wattom axwān anāgīh ast tā ān ī abdom axwān wardīšn ka frašgird pad kāmag andar axwān dahīhed.*

The first point to observe is how closely these otherworldly afflictions resemble the death-torments inflicted on Mithridates, complete with biting, tearing, devouring, cutting in pieces and, of course, the stench. Two other details also merit attention. First the evildoer is made fully responsible for his suffering, it being asserted that his own choice (*wurrōyišn*) – i.e., the wrong moral decisions he made – created these woes for him.³¹ Second, those who inflict the pain on the victim's body are hellish demons. This prompts us to observe that Mithridates's sufferings came most directly from the attack of lowly creatures, while the humans who managed his torture did almost nothing violent. Indeed, the affair was organized such that they could – and no doubt did – construe their actions as beneficent, since they chiefly consisted of providing food and drink. Nor was this just any food and drink, for milk and honey were understood as the purest forms of nourishment, associated with goodness, light, innocence, and peace, since milk is the food of newborn babes, while these two foods – and no other, save water – are procured without harm to the life of any plant or animal.³²

31 Cf. *Dadestan i Denig* 31.4–5, which describes the torments of the liar (*druwand*) as his soul is led to hell. The crucial passage states: 'With him there are spiritual demons, which came into being from the evil he did in many forms and places. They resemble spoilers, harmers, killers, destroyers, scoundrels, evil-bodies, wrong-doers, those who are unseemly, most stingy, filthy, biting, and tearing vermin, stinking winds, dark, stinking, burning, thirsting, hungry, inexpiable sinful, and other most sin-causing and harm-causing demons, who become causes of pain for him in the material, as in the spiritual creation. They have strength and power given them by his sin, as much as it is great. And they ceaselessly cause him pain and suffering until the time of the Renovation.' *u-š abāg bawēnd mēnōg dēw ī hambust az ān ī ōy wināh pad was cihrag ud gāh mānāg ī wimuštārān-iz rešidārān ōzanišngarān murnjēnidārān marān duškīrbān bazaḡ-ēwēnagān ud anabāyistān an-iz-rātīgān rēmān gazāgām darrāgān xrafstarān gandagān wādān tārigān gandagān sōzāgān tišnīgān + gušnāgān + anabuhlān ud abārīg frahist wināhēnāgān ud dardēnāgān kē-š pad hangōšīdag ī gētīg beš-kardārān mēnōgīg abāg bawēnd. u-š ham handāzag zōr nerōg i-šān az ān ī ōy wināh ud dad ān ita bē ō frašgird zamān anāsānīhā dardēnēnd bēšīšnēnēnd.*

32 Milk is discussed at *Dadestan i Denig* 27.2 and 30.13, *Denkard* 3.374, *Zad Spram* 6.1, 10.11, 16.3, 30.58, 34.40, *Greater Bundahišn* 14.17–19 and 34.1, *Pahlavi Rivayat* accompanying the *Dadestan i Denig* 23.17. Honey is mentioned much less frequently, the chief source being *Greater Bundahišn* 22.29 [TD² MS. 146.13–15], which makes it an excellent product derived from an odious source, by virtue of the Wise Lord's power: 'In his omniscience, the Wise Lord turns many of these vermin back to the advantage of his creatures, like the bee that makes honey and the worm that makes silk.' *ēn xrafstarān pad harwisp āgāhīh was abar ō sūd ī dāmān wardēnēd ciyōn magas kē angubēn kunēd, kirm kē abrešom ud kunē.*

Mithridates's execution thus organized feeders and fed in a set of interlocking binary oppositions. The feeders were vertical, above, and free to move as they liked; the victim horizontal, below, deprived of mobility. They gave abundantly; he took, with reluctance. That which they gave served as a mark of their (putative) goodness and innocence, while that which he made of their gifts – the dark, foul, death-dealing excrement his body produced, the crawling vermin it spawned and the flying vermin his body attracted – revealed and punished his (putative) guilt. It is as if his body, or some interior, hidden quality thereof, transformed the stuff of life into the terrible instruments of death.

Throughout ancient Iran, maggots, worms, and insects were regarded as monstrous beings, and Herodotus describes Achaemenid priests as having waged ceaseless war against them.³³ For its part, Zoroastrianism has quite an extensive theology of vermin, which draws on cosmological, demonological, and physiological discourses. All of these are grounded in a myth of creation that resembles the Achaemenian cosmogony. Like the latter, the Pahlavi texts describe the Wise Lord as having produced an original creation whose perfection was disrupted by the Assault (*ēbgat*) of an independent, utterly malignant force: 'the Evil Spirit' (Ahriman), also known as 'the Adversary' (*hamēstār*, *peṭyārag*) and closely identified with 'the Lie' (*druz*). Working in the infinite darkness that is his own, this spirit fashioned two kinds of being as an antithesis to the good creation: demons (*dēwān*) and vermin (*xrafstarān*). The latter category includes insects, reptiles, snakes, worms, and those creatures that swarm, crawl, and bite.³⁴

With these as his troops, the Evil Spirit attacked the Wise Lord's creatures with a will-to-annihilation. His power being inadequate to that task, however, he could only damage and corrupt, but never destroy them. Accordingly, his Assault yielded a synthesis of good and evil, light and darkness, being and non-being, which the Pahlavi texts call 'the mixed state' (*gumēzišn*), in which all the originally pure creations – heaven, earth, water, plants, animals, humans, and fire – now contain flaws, ambiguities, and destructive potential as a consequence of the Assault.

33 Herodotus 1.140: 'The Magi ... wage this great struggle, killing in equal measure ants and serpents and other reptiles and insects.' *Μάγοι αὐτοχειρήν πάντα πλὴν κυνὸς καὶ ἀνθρώπου κτείνουσι, καὶ ἀγώνισμα μέγα τοῦτο ποιεῖνται, κτείνοντες ὁμοίως μύρμηκας τε καὶ ὄφεις καὶ τᾶλλα ἔρπετὰ καὶ πετεινά.*

34 See Dādestān ī Denīg 36.40; Greater Bundahišn 1.47, 4.15, and 22.1; Zad Spram 2.11. The Evil Spirit himself takes the form of vermin to mount his initial assault: a snake according to some sources (Zad Spram 2.5), a fly according to others (Greater Bundahišn 4.10).

With regard to the human body, for instance, original perfection was compromised to admit mortality, pain, disease, and sexual reproduction (which offers species-immortality in place of individual). Three further points hold particular interest in the present context. First, the body comes to have two material components that are radically different in nature: bone, which endures, and flesh, which is subject to putrefaction.³⁵ Second, if left to decompose, dead flesh spawns vermin that reveal its innate corruption.³⁶ Decaying bodies also produce a terrible stink, as do living bodies that have fallen into a state of moral and physical corruption.³⁷ Third, the fleshly body must sustain its life by eating, itself a morally ambiguous practice. Some texts maintain that eating good foods in moderation produces health and well-being, while gluttony – characterized as the demonic form of eating – produces disease and stench.³⁸ Others focus on the process of digestion, which, according to their analysis, converts the pure components of food into everything that supports life (breath, blood, thought, energy, etc.), while transforming its impure components into excrement, the chief form of filth, pollution, darkness, and stench that is present in every living body.³⁹

35 Dādestān ī Denīg 16.10: ‘The flesh that surrounds the bone ... reaches a state of foulness and stench when the soul departs, due to its loss of moisture, and vermin germinate in it.’ *pid ī pērāmōn ast kē pad āsnidārīh ī zīwēnag gyān tarr [ud] waxšišnīg būd <ud> pas az gyān-šāwišnīh tarrīh a-dostīh rāy ō pūdagīh ud gandagīh rasēd u-š xrafstarān andar hambūšēnd.*

36 Ritual practices of corpse disposal are designed to control this tendency and the resultant dangers of pollution and contagion. Thus, for instance, Dādestān ī Denīg 17.2: ‘If the flesh of a corpse is not eaten by body-eating birds, it becomes foul, corrupt, and teeming with vermin.’ *ka murwān ī kirbxwārān ān ī pid ī ka nē xwarīhēd pūdag winastag xrafstarōmand bawēd.*

37 Denkard 3.361 (Madan 345.1–3): ‘When, as a result of inattention to their duty, people commit mortal sins, their bodies become as good as dead, given their uselessness, and their souls become hellish in their foulness.’ *ud ōzadagīh gēhān arz ān ī ka pad axwēškārīh margārzān bawēnd u-šān tan pad anabēdānīh azīndag ud ruwān pad pūdagīh dušōxtīg bawēd.*

38 Denkard 3.235 (Madan MS. 260.12–15): ‘The body has its own perfume inside as a result of nature, and it has its own stench as a result of its appetite. The perfume that extends from outside to the innermost space of the body results from moderation in food – bread and meat – and from consumption of wine in legal amounts. The corresponding stench is poison, excrement, and it comes from voracious devouring.’ *hād tan andarōn xwadīg bōy az cīhr u-š gand az āz. ud az ān ī berōn ō andarōntom tan az xwarišn rasād bōy az paymān nān ud gošt xwarišn ud may dādīg xwarišn. ud gand wiš ud hīx jōyišn.*

If pollution is a part of all life in the mixed state, it is not equally present in every life and body. As an important passage from the Denkart observes, 'Filth is entirely demonic; it all comes from demons. *The more one's body is inhabited by demons, the more filth there is.*'⁴⁰ The text goes on to discuss what happens at death.

When the body is dead, the death-making demon, the author of powerlessness, the defeater of the soul, comes to it triumphantly. He seizes it and he brings his brothers to the body, to inhabit its every place of life. *These are the stench-makers, creators of foulness, and other demons who make the body useless and who drive off the opponents antithetical to themselves, like sweet fragrance, purity, good conduct, beauty and others that are necessary. Residing in the body, they increase, so there are more of them all together in the body, so that they breathe corpse-pollution and all illnesses. One can say, without dispute, that the residence of demons is in that filth.*⁴¹

-
- 39 Greater Bundahišn 28.10 (TD² MS. 192.6–12): 'In material existence, people commit sins and good deeds. When someone dies, they calculate his sins and good deeds. All those who are pure go to heaven. All those who are liars are thrown into hell. Homologous to this is people's eating of food. All that is good goes to the brain, where it becomes pure blood. All that is mixed with poison goes from the stomach to the intestine and they throw it outside through the anus, which is just like hell.' *owōn ciyōn andar gētiḥ mardōm wināh ud kirbag kunēnd. ka mīrēd wināh ud kirbag āmārēnēnd. harw cē abēzag ō garōdmān šawēd. harw cē druwand ō dušōx abganēnd. hamgōnag mardōm-iz xwarišn xwarēnd. harw cē abēzag ō ī mazg ī sar šawēd xōn ī pāk bawēd. ō dil rasēd hamāg tan nērōg u-š bawēd. harw cē wiš gumēxtag az kumīg ō rōdiḡ šawēd pad +kūn bērōn abganēnd. handāzag ī dušōx.* Note that at Greater Bundahišn 28.4 (TD² MS. 190.12–13), the anus is also homologized to hell ('The anus is like hell under the earth, for the anus is the lowest seat of the body,' *kūn ciyōn dušōx andar zamīg, ud kūn azērtar nišēn ī tan*).
- 40 Denkart 5.24.19 (Madan ed. 463.6–7): *ud rēmanih hamāg dēwih az dēwān harw kū dēw mehmāntar rēmanih wēš.*
- 41 Denkart 5.24.19a (Madan ed. 463.7–16): *ud tan ka murd abarwezihā madan +margihkardār ud agārēnidār Astwihād stōwēnidār ī gyān u-š abāz grift i-š gyāg gyāg ī zindagih ud pad mehmānih andar burdan i-š brādarān gandēnidārān +pudagēnidārān abārīg ān-abēdān kardarān dēwān ō tan +ānāftan i-šān jud judxwēš hambadīg ciyōn hubōyih pākih huburdih hucihrih ud abārīg ī abāyīšnīg az tan mehmānihā wālidān i-šān andar ham tan owōn frāyihā kū ō-iz bē nasuš wisp wēmārth +damēnd ud ānōh kū dēwān mehmānih pad ān ewēnag rēmanih guftan abē-pahikār spēd bawēd.*

This passage from the *Denkart* treats death as the moment when the body, bereft of its vitality and of the soul that gives it moral guidance, can no longer defend itself against demonic assault. In life, the choices that the soul makes affect the body's nature and welfare, rendering the flesh – its most vulnerable member – either more, or less able to resist the destructive forces ever-present in the mixed state. And here, it is relevant that things modern discourse treats as impersonal abstractions – things like appetite (*Āz*), anger (*Xēšm*), and falsehood (*Druz*, 'the Lie') – Zoroastrianism personified as demons.⁴² These are the forces against which moral people must defend themselves, and these are the forces that tear them apart when their defenses are weak. People who permit their bodies to harbor appetite, anger, falsehood, and the like find themselves corrupted by these demons, who turn their flesh foul and useless to good causes. Ultimately, they bring death, after which they make the stinking corpses that remain into an object lesson about the nature and power of evil.

The exquisite torture inflicted on Mithridates seems to have been a similar, if somewhat more pointed object lesson designed to reveal the man's guilt by making spectacular display of his state of corruption. 'Who and what caused his death?', we are meant to ask. Surely not the king, a voice whispers in response, nor the men who fed him milk and honey. No, Mithridates was killed by the vermin who devoured his flesh. 'And where did they come from?' Clearly, from the stinking filth of his body. 'And that filth, what caused that?' His demons, my dear, the terrible demons who permeated his being as a result of his moral failings. 'What sorts of demons, and what sorts of failings?' Probably the Lie. Probably the Lie, the very worst of them all.

IV

From Artaxerxes's perspective, the physical horror of Mithridates's death was thus justified and mitigated by its discursive significance, since the victim's mortal agonies effectively proclaimed his guilt, while confirming that the king was precisely what royal ideology asserted and demanded: the champion of truth and guardian of the moral order.⁴³ For his part,

42 The fullest discussion remains Christensen 1941.

43 Regarding Achaemenian royal ideals and their political utility, see above all Ahn 1992.

Ctesias inverted the signs of this story, thereby turning it bitterly ironic. In his version – designed to confirm the harshest Greek stereotypes of things Asiatic – the king is a coward and a liar, who tortured the brave Mithridates for having dared tell the truth.⁴⁴

Having been raised to consider ourselves heirs of the Greeks, and having Ctesias's text still available in all its persuasive power, we are probably inclined to accept his version of the events. But were we exposed to the spectacle of Mithridates's execution at first hand, and were we sufficiently steeped in Persian culture to appreciate its nuances and values, we might well reach different conclusions. As it is, there is no way to know who really killed Cyrus the Younger and, as a result, we can make no secure judgments about the truth or falsity of the story, the guilt or innocence of the accused. Which is fine, since these are not the issues that ought concern us.

Of infinitely greater importance than adjudicating any of the particulars is to observe what happens when a powerful state develops the capacity to persuade itself, its citizens or subjects, and perhaps also others, that the world is divided between the forces of good and evil; further, that its leaders have been divinely ordained to lead the good in battle. As an occasional fantasy, this is bad enough. As a core belief, sustained in and by a well-wrought body of discourse, broadcast widely through all available media and genres, it becomes infinitely more dangerous. This is so, whether it is done cynically or if the propagators are themselves fervent believers. An important part of this process is the state's ability (and its proclivity) to stage impressive spectacles that confirm – to its own satisfaction and benefit – its own delusions of grandeur.

Achaemenian religion involved three constructs that I have come to understand as ideally conducive to the aggressive pursuit of imperial ambition. These are: (1) A starkly dualistic ethics, in which the opposition good/evil is aligned with self/other; (2) A royal theology that grounds the ruler's legitimacy in divine right, charisma, and election; (3) A sense of soteriological mission that recodes aggression as salvation (or liberation) and one's victims as one's beneficiaries. Moreover, the Achaemenids were past masters in the art of staging spectacles that reproduced, and seemingly validated these convictions. Their architecture and art, their banquets and festivals, their gardens and their tortures, all demonstrated to themselves – and to anyone who would listen – that they were good, their enemies

44 Regarding the biases Ctesias regularly introduced in his texts, see Momigliano 1969, Bigwood 1978, Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987, and Lenfant 1996.

evil, and that their king was committed to vanquishing the Lie, restoring human happiness, and rescuing all of creation.⁴⁵ Some of the spectacles they staged were extraordinarily lovely in their aesthetics, as in the case of the paradise-gardens. Others were equally horrific. This notwithstanding, they all served the same ends by reconstituting (what passes for) reality to advance the project of imperial conquest.

The Persians, of course, were not alone in this enterprise, and successful empires almost inevitably engage in something similar. One might mention any number of recently staged spectacles like the April 9, 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square (a name derived from Persian 'paradise', Figures 1, 2 and 3) or President Bush's 'Top Gun' landing on the USS Abraham Lincoln just three weeks later to proclaim that he and the American military had accomplished their divinely ordained mission to liberate Iraq and to bring God's gift of freedom to that nation's benighted people (Figures 4 and 5).

Also relevant are the infamous photos taken by members of the 372nd Military Police Company shortly after they assumed control of Tier 1A at the Abu Ghraib prison on October 15, 2003. Over the next month, members of this unit staged and photographed various scenes that construed Iraqi captives as bestial and lowly (Figure 6), dark and demonic (Figure 7), sexually repressed, but secretly lascivious and perverse (Figure 8), filthy (Figure 9), weak and easily scared (Figure 10). In most instances, the Iraqis were naked and cowering; in all, they were – or were made to seem – humiliated, demoralized, craven, and thoroughly dominated by the superior power of America, as represented by its tall, strong, happy soldiers.⁴⁶

Unlike the earlier photos, those made at Abu Ghraib were not produced by professionals in the art of public relations, nor were they intended for general consumption. Rather, these are the low-budget, aesthetically de-

45 Achaemenian art and architecture were spectacles of this sort, as were banquets and the ritual presentation of gifts and tribute, on which see Root 1979, Lewis 1987, Walser 1966, and Jamzadeh 1992. Briant 1996: 177–368 offers a splendid synthetic discussion.

46 An incident that occurred *circa* January 3, 2004, which was mentioned in testimony, but not photographed, is also worth citing: Soldier 17 witnessed an MP dog handler allowing his black dog to 'go nuts' on two juvenile detainees on Tier 1B, permitting the dog to get within about a foot of the two juveniles. The juveniles were screaming and the smaller one tried to hide behind the bigger one. Afterward, Soldier 17 heard the handler say he had a competition with another handler to see if they could scare detainees to the point that they would defecate. (US Army report 2004.)

graded – indeed, the obscene version of the story: the prurient record of titillating events that took place discreetly offstage. Here, bored soldiers made use of the bodies and means at their disposal to make some of the same points, employing some of the same codes as did their colleagues higher up in the chain of command.

Few explanations have been offered for these photographs, save Pfc. Lynndie England's sworn testimony 'it was just for fun',⁴⁷ and an Army investigator's retort that the soldiers did these things 'simply because they could'.⁴⁸ Beneath these banalities, the photos show low-level GIs deploying the same binary oppositions that organized the other data we have considered: High/Low, Us/Them, Mobile/Immobile, Lordly/Bestial, Clean and pure / Filthy and polluted, Powerful/Powerless, God's chosen / God's forsaken, Champions of Truth and Freedom / Dupes and Slaves of 'the Lie'. Read from the perspective of those who staged them, these vignettes did not degrade otherwise fully human subjects, any more than did the torture and execution of Mithridates. Rather, the impromptu mini-dramas at Abu Ghraib revealed that as 'terrorists', 'fanatics', 'diehard ex-Baathists', and so forth, the Iraqi prisoners were always already degraded, and therefore deserved the treatment they received.

Only when Seymour Hersh, our modern Ctesias, secured publication of these photos were the signs of hero and villain inverted, so that a broad audience could read the story as one of moral depravity. While I share that reaction at a visceral level, for analytical purposes I find it important to combine the initial intent of the photos with their subsequent reinscription to make a more complex point, with which I will conclude this essay. What we see here is the way moral depravity and moral confidence (or the simulacrum thereof) are dialectically related: how they produce and reproduce each other through a variety of discourses (spectacular, obscene, aestheticizing, parodic, solemn, carnivalesque, official, improvised, etc.), all of which help relieve the leaders and foot soldiers of empire from those inconvenient reservations and qualms that might otherwise inhibit their effective, relatively guilt-free exercise of the brutish and brutalizing power necessary for the conquest and maintenance of empire.

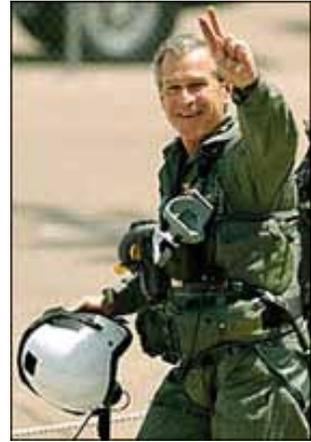
47 Testimony at the court martial of Lynndie England, August 3, 2004, by Paul Arthur, the military investigator who first questioned Ms England. <http://www.cnn.com/2004/LAW/08/03/england.hearing>.

48 Testimony at criminal proceedings in Baghdad, May 1, 2004, by army special agent Tyler Pieron, who investigated events at Abu Ghraib for the Criminal Investigation Division. Higham, Stephens and White 2004.



Figures 1, 2, and 3. Firdos Square, Baghdad, April 9, 2003.





Figures 4 and 5. Aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, April 30, 2003.



Figure 6. Abu Ghraib Prison, October 24, 2003.



Figure 7. Abu Ghraib Prison, November 5, 2003.



Figure 8. Abu Ghraib Prison, November 8, 2003.



Figure 10. Abu Ghraib Prison, December 12, 2003.



Figure 9. Abu Ghraib Prison, November 18, 2003.

References

Abbas, Amanat, and John Collins (eds)

2002 *Apocalypse and Violence*. New Haven, CT: Yale Center for International and Area Studies.

Ahn, Gregor

1992 *Religiöse Herrscherlegitimation im Achaemenidischen Iran: Die Voraussetzungen und die Struktur ihrer Argumentation*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Balcer, Jack Martin

1987 *Herodotus and Bisotun*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Benveniste, Émile

1958 Notes sur les tablettes élamites de Persépolis. *Journal asiatique* 246: 57–8.

Bianchi, Ugo

1988 Dieu créateur et vision universaliste: Le cas de l'empire achéménide. In: Philippe Gignoux (ed.), *La Commémoration*; pp. 192–3. Louvain: Peeters.

Bickerman, E. J., and H. Tadmor

1978 Darius I, Pseudo-Smerdis, and the Magi. *Athenaeum* 56: 239–61.

Bigwood, Joan Mary

1978 Ctesias as Historian of the Persian Wars. *Phoenix* 32: 19–41.

Boyce, Mary

1982 *A History of Zoroastrianism. Vol. 2: Under the Achaemenids*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Brandenstein, Wilhelm, and Manfred Mayrhofer

1964 *Handbuch des Altpersischen*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

Bremmer, J. N.

1999 Paradise: from Persia, via Greece, into the Septuagint. In: Gerard P. Luttikhuisen (ed.), *Paradise Interpreted: Representations of Biblical Paradise in Judaism and Christianity*; pp. 1–20. Leiden: Brill.

Briant, Pierre

1991 Chasses royales macedoniennes et chasses royales perses. *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 17: 211–55.

1996 *Histoire de l'empire perse de Cyrus à Alexandre*. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard.

2003 À propos du roi-jardinier: remarques sur l'histoire d'un dossier documentaire. *Achaemenid History* 13: 33–49.

Bromley, David G., and J. Gordon Melton (eds)

2002 *Cults, Religion, and Violence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Cameron, George G.

1948 *Persepolis Treasury Tablets*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Christensen, Arthur

1941 *Essai sur la démonologie iranienne*. Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab.

Dandamaev, Muhammad A.

- 1976 *Persien unter den ersten Achämeniden*. Trans. Heinz-Dieter Pohl. Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert.
- 1989 *A Political History of the Achaemenid Empire*. Trans. W. J. Vogelsang. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Dorrien, Gary

- 2004 *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana*. New York: Routledge.

Ellens, J. Harold (ed.)

- 2004 *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Fauth, Wolfgang

- 1979 Der königliche Gärtner und Jäger im Paradies: Beobachtungen zur Rolle des Herrschers in der vorderasiatischen Hortikultur. *Persica* 8: 1–53.

Hahn, Peter L., and Mary Ann Heiss (eds)

- 2001 *Empire and Revolution: The United States and the Third World since 1945*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Halper, Stefan, and Jonathan Clarke

- 2004 *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hasenfratz, Hans-Peter

- 1983 Iran: Antagonismus als Universalprinzip. *Saeculum* 34: 235–47.

Herrenschmidt, Clarisse

- 1977 Les créations d' Ahuramazda. *Studia Iranica* 6: 17–58.
- 1980 La religion des Achéménides: État de la question. *Studia Iranica* 9: 325–39.
- 1982 Les historiens de l'empire achéménide et l'inscription de Bisotun. *Annales ESC* 37: 813–23.
- 1984 Deux remarques sur les inscriptions royales achéménides. *Studia Iranica* 13: 151–5.
- 1991 Vieux-perse šiyāti. In: Jean Kellens (ed.), *La religion iranienne à l'époque Achéménide*; pp. 13–21. Ghent: Iranica Antiqua.

Herrenschmidt, Clarisse, and Bruce Lincoln

- 2004 Healing and Salt Waters: The Bifurcated Cosmos of Mazdaean Religion. *History of Religions* 43: 269–83.

Higham, Scott, Joe Stephens, and Josh White

- 2004 Dates on Prison Photos Show Two Phases of Abuse. *Washington Post*, 1 June, p. A1, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A4810-2004May31.html?nav=rss_world.

Hultgård, Anders

- 2000 Das Paradies: vom Park des Perserkönigs zum Ort der Seligen. In: Martin Hengel, et al. (eds), *La Cité de Dieu / Die Stadt Gottes*; pp. 1–43. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.

Jamzadeh, Parivash

1992 The Apadana Reliefs and the Metaphor of Conquest. *Iranica Antiqua* 27: 125–47.

Kellens, Jean

1989 Ahura Mazda n'est pas un dieu créateur. In: C.-H. de Fouchécour, and Ph. Gignoux (eds), *Études irano-aryennes offertes à Gilbert Lazard*; pp. 217–28. Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes.

1995 L'âme entre le cadavre et le paradis. *Journal asiatique* 283: 34–8.

1997 Les Achéménides dans le contexte indo-iranien. *Topoi*, Supplement 1: 287–97.

2002 L'idéologie religieuse des inscriptions achéménides. *Journal asiatique* 290: 417–64.

Kent, Roland G.

1953 *Old Persian: Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*. 2nd ed. New Haven: American Oriental Society.

Khalidi, Rashid

2004 *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Kuhrt, Amélie

1988 Earth and Water. *Achaemenid History* 3: 87–99.

Lecoq, Pierre

1997 *Les inscriptions de la Perse achéménide*. Paris: Gallimard.

Lenfant, Dominique

1996 Ctésias et Hérodote, ou les réécritures de l'histoire dans la Perse achéménide. *Revue des études grecques* 109: 348–80.

Lewis, David

1987 The King's Dinner (Polyaenus IV.3.32). *Achaemenid History* 2: 79–87.

Lincoln, Bruce

1991 *Death, War, and Sacrifice. Studies in Ideology and Practice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2003a *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2003b À la recherche du paradis perdu. *History of Religions* 43: 139–54.

2005a Theses on Religion and Violence. *ISIM (Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World) Newsletter* 15 (Spring 2005): 12. Available at http://64.233.167.104/search?q=cache:MsCRNdUK8LgJ:www.isim.nl/files/Review_15/Review_15-12.pdf+Bruce+Lincoln,+University+of+Chicago&hl=en&ie=UTF-8.

2005b Rebellion and Treatment of Rebels in the Achaemenid Empire. *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 7: 167–79.

(Forthcoming a) *La politique du paradis perse*. Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner.

(Forthcoming b) *From Artaxerxes to Abu Ghraib: Some Lessons from Achaemenian Persia on Religion, Empire, and Torture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Magstadt, Thomas M.

2004 *An Empire If You Can Keep It: Power and Principle in American Foreign Policy*. Washington: CQ Press.

Makrides, Vasilios, and Jörg Rüpke (eds)

2004 *Religionen in Konflikt: Vom Bürgerkrieg über Ökogevalt bis zur Gewalterinnerung im Ritual*. Münster: Aschendorf.

Momigliano, Arnaldo

1969 Tradizione e invenzione in Ctesia. In: *Quarto contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico*; pp. 181–212. Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura.

O'Hara, Daniel T.

2003 *Empire Burlesque: The Fate of Critical Culture in Global America*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Piras, Andrea

1994–5 A proposito di antico-persiano šiyāti. *Studi Orientali e Linguistici* 5: 91–7.

Pongratz-Leisten, Beate

2002 “Lying King” and “False Prophet”: the Intercultural Transfer of a Rhetorical Device within Ancient Near Eastern Ideologies. In: A. Panaino, and G. Pettinato (eds), *Ideologies as Intercultural Phenomena*; pp. 215–43. Milan: University of Bologna.

Root, Margaret Cool

1979 *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essay on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Sancisi-Weerdenburg, Heleen

1987 Decadence in the Empire or Decadence in the Sources? From Source to Synthesis: Ctesias. *Achaemenid History* 1: 33–45.

Schmitt, Rüdiger

1991 *The Bisitun Inscriptions of Darius the Great. Old Persian Text*. London: Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum.

2000 *The Old Persian Inscriptions of Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis*. London: Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum.

Schwartz, Martin

1985 The Religion of Achaemenian Iran. In: Ilya Gershevitch (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran. 2. The Median and Achaemenian Periods*; pp. 685–6. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Selengut, Charles

2003 *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.

Skjærvø, Prods O.

1994 Achaemenid *vispašiyātiš, Sasanian wispšād. *Studia Iranica* 23: 79–80.

- 1999 Avestan Quotations in Old Persian? Literary Sources of the Old Persian Inscriptions. *Irano-Judaica* 4: 3–64.

Stronach, David

- 1989 The Royal Garden at Pasargadae: Evolution and Legacy. In: L. de Meyer, and E. Haerinck (eds), *Archeologia Iranica et Orientalis. Miscellanea in honorem Louis van den Berghe*; pp. 475–502. Ghent: Peeters.
- 1990 The Garden as a Political Statement: Some Case Studies from the Near East in the First Millennium B.C. *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 4: 171–80.

du Toit, C. W., and G. J. A. Lubbe (eds)

- 2002 *After September 11: Globalisation, War and Peace*. Pretoria: University of South Africa, Research Institute for Theology and Religion.

Tuplin, Christopher

- 1998 The Parks and Gardens of the Achaemenid Empire. In: Christopher Tuplin, *Achaemenid Studies*; pp. 80–131. Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag.

US Army report

- 2004 US Army report by Gen. Paul J. Kern, Lt. Gen. Anthony R. Jones, and Maj. Gen. George R. Fay, released August 25, 2004, as summarized in ‘A Chronicle of Abuse’. *Washington Post* 26 August 2004, p. A17, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A33963-2004Aug25.html>.

Vidal, Gore

- 2004 *Imperial America: Reflections on the United States of Amnesia*. New York: Nation Books.

Walser, Gerold

- 1966 *Die Völkerschaften auf den Reliefs von Persepolis. Historische Studien über den sogenannten Tributzug an der Apadanatreppe*. Berlin: Deutsche archäologisches Institut.

Weinberg, Leonard, and Ami Pedahzur (eds)

- 2004 *Religious Fundamentalism and Political Extremism*. London: Frank Cass.

Wellman, James, and Kyoko Tokuno (eds)

- (Forthcoming) *Religion, Violence and the State: Patterns across Time and Tradition*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Widengren, Geo

- 1965 *Die Religionen Irans*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer.

Wiesehofer, Josef

- 1978 *Der Aufstand Gaumatas und die Anfänge Dareios I.* Bonn: Rudolf Habelt Verlag.

Zawadzki, Stefan

- 1994 Bardiya, Darius and Babylonian Usurpers in the Light of the Bisitun Inscription and Babylonian Sources. *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 27: 127–45.