

PERSIAN GENDER RELATIONS – Ancient Period

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview The Achaemenid Empire in its early days, prior to the sixth and seventh centuries B.C.E., clearly revealed its roots in the mountainous country of northern Persia where, as perhaps in the Wild West of the old United States, the winning virtues were horsemanship, masculine toughness, and readiness to defend yourself. The growth of a gender-sensitive state, from these origins, took time.

The diversification of early Persian society The society of the Achaemenids (550-330 B.C.E.) is the most information-rich source, for us, for understanding the character of early Persian society. As we meet that society, under the reigns of a succession of ‘enlightened Kings’--Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes--we see a familiar social transformation: from a warrior society to that of a more centralized kingdom, with a new burden--administering the territories it has made subject to itself. With that new administrative burden the composition of social actors starts to grow more complex, with prominence given to civil servants, artisans, maintainers of religious institutions, merchants. With this often rapid development comes an inevitable growth in the public presence of women in society.

The Fortification and Treasury Texts Archeologists have turned up troves of clay tablets, from the ancient Persian capital of Persepolis, from which we have learned the bulk of our information about the status of women in Achaemenid Persia, or rather, to be more exact, about the status of royal, royally foreign, or high placed women in the imperial court. There is occasional individual evidence, as in the case of a wealthy Achaemenid woman, Irdabama, who owned and directed her own workforce, several hundred employees of both sexes, and who had her own seal, evidence of her high birth. Reference is made, in the same tablets, to non-royal women managers, who owned and managed their own property, and who saw to it that female employees enjoyed the same benefits--rations, salary--as their male co-workers.

Within the royal circle Within the royal circle, as we learn from these Persepolis (and Susa, and Babylon) tablets, women of privilege, court members enjoyed both freedom and respect. These women were beneficiaries of large estates or financial enterprises, and had leisure to travel and visit the villages subject to them, as well as parity with their mates in protecting and directing their children and assets. While the family structure was male oriented--patriarchal, polygamous, and concubine friendly--high born women were respected, free to divorce if they wished--and probably freer than the cloistered wives of (for instance) fifth century B.C.E. Athenian husbands.

Notes on the little woman By the nature of the case, we know relatively little about ‘ordinary Persian women’ and their interface with their male counterparts. Marriages among ‘commoners’ were usually monogamous, though under certain circumstances husbands could take other wives, and enjoy sex with servants or slaves. (The husband did not have the right to pawn his wife, in order to pay debts; the husband did have the right to pawn his own children, to pay debts.) The woman could initiate divorce, take legal action, and demand a return of her initial dowry.

Final observation Women were (apparently) never veiled in ancient Persia. We see in them much apparent liberty and public presence.

Readings

Arberry, A. J., *The Legacy of Persia*, Oxford, 1953.

Brosius, Maria, *Women in Ancient Persia, 559-331 B.C.E.*, Oxford, 1998.

Discussion questions

Women were not active in temple maintenance or supervision in Persia, as they were in Mesopotamia. Why do you think this was true? Could it have to do with the nature of the religions dominant in the two different cultures?

Is it of general human relevance, that the burdens of administration lead a culture to make more room for the feminine principle? Can you think of other cultures than Persia, which reacted in this fashion?

Parks, gardens, and plantations played a significant role in Achaemenid society. Do some research into the relation of Persian women into the beautification projects of ancient Persia. Surprised?