

Propuesta de comunicación para el X Congreso Internacional de la Sociedad Española de Iranología, Tblisi (Georgia), 20-21 de octubre de 2022

Title: *The world upside down: The Achaemenid queens in the work of Ctesias of Cnidus*

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Summary: Ctesias of Cnidus was a Greek physician and writer who lived between the second half of the 5th century and the first half of the 4th century. He is therefore a contemporary of Plato and Xenophon, although his life unfolded in a completely different context, since an important part of his life, which will mark the content of his work, took place in the courts of the Persian king Artaxerxes II Mnemon, who reigned from 404 to 358 BC, far away, therefore, from his native Cnidus. After leaving the Persian court, he wrote his Histories of Persia in 23 books dealing with the Achaemenid Empire with a long introduction of six books on the Assyrian Empire; his other great work is the Wonders of India, a book about the extraordinary things in India that could be known at the Persian court through the information of Indian and Bactrian travellers who came to the capitals of the empire, Susa, Ecbatana, Persepolis or Babylon. He was able to study the different periods of the year of the Achaemenid kings and to come into contact with these travellers himself. Unfortunately, his works were lost and what we know of him has always come down to us through other authors.

The Achaemenid queens are usually said to appear as the prototypical perfidious women who characterise the collection of court scandals that would be the story of Ctesias. However, if for example Queen Parysatis herself was Ctesias' informant, what interest did she have in appearing as the evil one in the story? Were Parysatis' parameters the same as ours or as those of Ctesias himself? Are we not judging too harshly, or in a gender-oriented way, a woman's acts of cruelty simply because she is a woman when we do not do the same for other men who have held absolute power and who have been as cruel, if not more so?

It is necessary to revisit Ctesias' accounts of the Achaemenid queens in order to better understand the character and her function within the Cnidian author's work.

Greece and Persia had two totally different concepts of the public spheres that could be occupied by women: in Greece, in fact, virtually none. Although Ctesias of Cnidus has been severely criticised as a historian, we believe that his historical work had a strong

motivation: to show that Persia and Persian institutions were never the model to follow for Greek people. This aim has been achieved for centuries: a success for the work of a writer of whom only fragments have survived. He therefore endeavours to show –and he certainly succeeds– women, especially the Achaemenid queens, acting with great independence of mind, political autonomy, strong character and great freedom in their conduct and decision-making, exactly the opposite of what would be expected of a Greek woman. A critical reading of her work leads us to see between the lines of Ctesias that, beyond the message she wants to send to the Greek reader of her time, namely that women should be far removed from political influence and that the subversion of this order is the cause of the decline of the Achaemenid Empire, there is a historical truth in the behaviour of women who know that they are holders of monarchical legitimacy and the sacredness of kingship and who act, sometimes with extreme violence, in defence of these attributes.