The Legacy of Nomadism in the Achaemenid Persian Court

Abstract:

Studies of the Persian Empire have to grapple with the state of surviving evidence, which is somewhat lacking in the areas of the empire itself. Much of what is referenced comes from Greek sources, which are biased and tend to look down on Persia. A long-standing claim is that the Persian Court was nomadic because it changed location with the seasons. Further analysis, however, reveals that the court was more likely itinerant, in that it did move often, but not necessarily with the seasons. Other reasons included military needs and asserting control over the vast lands and number of peoples. The court had both permanent residences and tent encampments, showing the bridge between ancestral nomadism and what eventually became settled living. The Achaemenid Persian Court was itinerant, more likely moving strategically than with the seasons.

Whether or not the Achaemenid Persian Court was nomadic is a complex question that cannot be neatly answered. Since the Persian people had nomadic ancestors, they did not lose that tradition all at once. Like many customs, it seems to have persisted in some practices, though not in its entirety. Written evidence largely comes from Greek writers, who inherently have a perspective warranting critical inspection. Archaeological evidence is incomplete and still being discovered and researched. Consideration of evidence and context reveals motivations for a movable court other than nomadic history. The Persian court maintained some of the spirit of nomadism, but analysis of context and power reveals that the regular relocation was largely strategic.

First, the terms ‘court’ and ‘nomadic’ need to be defined clearly. Llewellyn-Jones lays out four definitions of the word ‘court’: (1) ‘a circle of elite people (“courtiers”) and servants’, (2) an

'environment of political, military, economic, and cultural structures' around the king, (3) the 'royal residences' and location of the court as it moved, and (4) 'a setting of royal ceremonial' and 'theatrical display.'[1] In this essay, I will largely be referring to definition (1) when discussing evidence of movement, and definition (3) will get its own section. 'Nomadic' also has complexity of definition. Essays about the court use adjectives such as 'itinerant', 'peripatetic', and 'movable' alongside 'nomadic', all of which are related but should not be used interchangeably.[2] Llewellyn-Jones explains that Iranian nomadic groups' movements 'have always been connected with clearly defined routes and destinations' for each season.[3] Therefore, in this essay, nomadic refers to a group of people who travel largely with the seasons and lack a permanent home, and itinerant refers to those who travel often and with a specific purpose. Here, peripatetic is not relevant, and movable encompasses nomadic and itinerant, acting as a generic indicator of relocation. Referencing an analysis by Boucharlat, Brosius addresses how the Achaemenid court 'may have continued to live traditionally as nomadic pastoralists, erecting their tents around the official buildings'.[4] This idea, which I will return to in my discussion of residences, situates Persian nomadism in the past, though it arguably continues into the empire. With clarified terms, the next step is looking at written evidence of relocation.

Most essays about the Persian court address the intrinsic problem of relying on Greek sources to learn about and understand Persian customs.[5] The consensus is that external sources are not to be discounted simply because they have a different lens; however, they must be read and treated carefully to account for their perspective, just as they would be today. 'To an overwhelming degree,' Brosius explains, 'the Greek sources were hostile to Achaemenid Persia' and 'often ideologically

[1] Llewellyn-Jones 2021: 1036-7.
[2] Among Llewellyn-Jones 2014: 74, 90 and 2021: 1041, he uses all four adjectives.
[3] Llewellyn-Jones 2014: 80.
[4] Brosius 2009: 47; Boucharlat publishes in French, so I could not access the work myself.
[5] See Llewellyn-Jones 2021: 1035; Wright and Hollman 2021: 1065-6; Brosius 2009: 18; Briant 2002: 256; and Tuplin 1998: 64 for examples of addressing this delicate balance.

imbued'.[6] Therefore, Briant warns, 'we must distinguish the Greek interpretative coating from the Achaemenid nugget of information'.[7] Greek writers' claims about Persian culture must be deconstructed to reach the seed of truth. Extant sources say that Cyrus' court changed location throughout the year with the seasons. This explanation, as Briant highlights, fits with nomadism and is worth considering.[8] Christopher Tuplin analysed relevant external and indirect evidence alongside information garnered from the Persepolis Fortification Archive, and most subsequent essays on this topic cite him. From all variants of seasonal migrations, Tuplin decides that 'we have a choice between' two: Xenophon's and Athenaeus'.[9] Xenophon writes that Cyrus spent winter in Babylon, spring in Susa, and summer in Ecbatana, so that 'he enjoyed the warmth and coolness of perpetual spring-time' (Xen. *Cyr*. 8.6.22). Athenaeus' version states that Cyrus 'spent winter in Susa, spring in Babylon, summer in Ecbatana, and autumn in Persepolis'.[10] Such clear schedules seem unlikely to work in practice, given the reality of relocating that many people and of other reasons for travel; however, the two are worth considering. Tuplin systematically breaks down the evidence available and makes a few key points about the problems with both options. Athenaeus' inclusion of Persepolis is vital, but '"autumn" is not a climatically valid concept for Fars'.[11] This flaw exposes one issue in relying on non-Persian sources to learn about Persia: Athenaeus is unlikely to have personal experience of the area and culture if he gets that wrong. Xenophon's breakdown of the number of months spent in each location does not make much sense, 'neglects the time for travel', and 'omits Persepolis', emphasising Babylon instead.[12] Again, he appears to lack inside information necessary for understanding the practicality of this custom. Tuplin concludes that these versions 'are simplifications of reality, which is unlikely to have conformed to any one pattern in every year and

[6] Brosius 2009: 18.
[7] Briant 2002: 256.
[8] Briant 2002: 186.
[9] Tuplin 1998: 66.
[10] Tuplin 1998: 64-5.
[11] Tuplin 1998: 68.
[12] Tuplin 1998: 69-71.

might well in principle have conformed to different essentially fixed patterns at different times or in different reigns'.[13] While these are certainly simplifications that were unlikely to have been followed every year as planned, the idea of changeable fixed patterns is questionable because it is a contradiction. Jacobs highlights that different kings had different preferences regarding the residences.[14] Therefore, they likely changed where and when the court relocated. Diplomatic and military issues would also disrupt patterns. In these cases, they are not moving in a fixed pattern. If the court did, in fact, move with the seasons, that would be a continuation of Persian nomadic history. However, that does not seem to be the case; the court seems more itinerant.

Evidence from the Persepolis Fortification Archive is the best option for viewing the court's movements from within the culture. Lewis acknowledges that whether the available information at Persepolis applies to 'other areas is perhaps likely to remain one of the main methodological problems for Achaemenid scholarship'.[15] Consequently, the problems of source quantity and quality apply within the empire as well. Tuplin's analysis, in a book dedicated to Lewis, takes up the work of applying the Persepolis information to critique of the Greek sources. The archival material confirms that the patterns of movement were not perfectly regular – as expected – and the flaw of Xenophon's exclusion of Persepolis; yet, there would need to be much more material to 'be sure that these generalizations were or were not justifiable'.[16] Ultimately, there still is not enough evidence or information to fully explain the custom as related to the seasons or not. Tuplin concludes that 'the model of seasonal relocation is not in principle undermined'.[17] Simultaneously, it is not clearly supported, and the two best Greek attempts at explanation are both innately flawed. If movements were largely determined by season, it seems likely that the evidence would support that more explicitly, even if not perfectly. If the remaining nomadic elements of court culture were symbolic

[13] Tuplin 1998: 71.
[14] Jacobs 2021: 1008.
[15] Lewis 1990: 5.
[16] Tuplin 1998: 87.
[17] Tuplin 1998: 89.

more than specific, it seems likely that the evidence of movement would be messier, as it is. Including Persian evidence with Greek, the court's habits appear still more itinerant than nomadic.

With the question of when and where they moved left blurry, the next topic to address is how the king and members of the court lived, since that is directly related to nomadism. Their living situations can be split into two categories: the permanent royal residences and the tent encampments when they were away from the residences. Jacobs breaks down archaeological evidence at what he refers to as 'the royal residences that are presented as capitals of the empire by classical sources': Ecbatana, Pasargadae, Susa, Persepolis, and Babylon.[18] These locations were clearly important to the court, but he is hesitant to agree with the label of capital. Briant seems to second this hesitation when he says 'custom led to the extension and relativization of the very notion of a capital in the Achaemenid Empire' because '[p]ower was where the king was'.[19] I will therefore refrain from calling them capitals in this essay without indication of the debatable nature of the term. The concept of mobile power is integral to the Persian court as an institution, but these places were undoubtedly important permanent structures of power as well. Jacobs skims past Ecbatana due to the lack of evidence; he summarises the others as '[t]he "empty cities" Pasargadae and Susa and the citadel of Persepolis', as well as calling Babylon the only one 'that can be termed *urban*'.[20] They were not sprawling or established cities based on current evidence. The image of these 'capitals', now adjusted from expectation to reality, might support the idea of a nomadic court. So far, Pasargadae, Susa, and Persepolis lack sufficient residence buildings for the court.[21] They are stable structures that the court can return to, but they are not full developments that support a community on a permanent basis. One theory suggests that the majority of the court would use open land near the residences to set up their tents and wagons, as though they were on the road.[22] Since they were regularly on the

[18] Jacobs 2021: 1007-15.
[19] Briant 2002: 189.
[20] Jacobs 2021: 1015.
[21] Jacobs 2021: 1016.
[22] Llewellyn-Jones 2014: 109 summarises how this might have looked.

move, they certainly had the resources to do so, which leaves the question of whether it seems likely that they would. According to Jacobs, this 'idea of camping grounds' or 'tent cities' when the king stayed at these residences 'certainly cannot be brushed aside'.[23] Everyone who travelled with the king would need a place to stay, no matter which residence he inhabited at the time. However, Briant warns that 'these interpretations rely on gaps in the archaeological record'.[24] Like with written evidence, archaeological evidence is fragmented and must be approached cautiously. If they stayed in their encampments even at the royal residences, that would be a continuation of nomadic tradition. That being said, moving among permanent residential complexes is not the same as existing without a specific home.

The second category of residences, the travelling encampments, were certainly steeped in custom. Once again, Greek writers are the main source of information because, unlike buildings, these settlements did not leave material remains. Xenophon describes how Cyrus 'first took up his position in the middle of the camp in the belief that this situation was the most secure' and then ensured everyone knew their position around him (Xen. *Cyr*. 8.5.8-14). This design not only protected the king but also physically represented the rings of access to the king and each courtier's standing. Greeks, in collecting spoils, saw the Persian camps for themselves, and they found 'tents adorned with gold and silver, and couches gilded and silver-plated, and golden bowls and cups', and plenty more (Hdt. 9.80-3). As usual, caution in accepting these claims as fact is recommended because these writers 'considered most characteristic of the Great King's court […] its opulence, which they took as both a manifestation of its power and proof of its weakness'.[25] This bias pervades their writing. However, Briant also explains, the 'general agreement [is] that the Persian royal tent was as exact a replica as possible of the palaces at Susa and Persepolis' and therefore 'became the

[23] Jacobs 2021: 1023.
[24] Briant 2002: 257.
[25] Briant 2002: 255.

center of power' because it was synonymous with the king.[26] As a replica, it certainly contained much luxury, which the Greeks would find for themselves and report. Since the king and court had to display power even on the road, of course they retained the level of luxury that the residences had; it served as a visible manifestation of power and control over such a large empire. Even the ability to travel with that many people was a show of 'enormous organization and colossal resources'.[27] Both categories of residences, permanent and impermanent, demonstrated tangible power. The permanent ones largely go against the spirit of nomadism, though the potential encampments outside them align more with the tradition. The impermanent ones fit into the custom much more clearly and directly.

With proof that the court moved, shifting focus to reasons why reveals prevalent political and historical motivations. Jacobs go so far as to say that the court's itineraries were 'generally dictated by political necessity or strategy […] and the climate will only exceptionally have played a role'.[28] Although the degree to which different elements contributed to decisions about moving cannot fully be determined, the fact that he can make this claim means that the Greek sources' climatic explanations cannot be the only factor to consider. Briant addresses other reasons for the court's migration, such as leading the army and remaining connected to 'their roots in Media or Persia'.[29] Previously, Sancisi-Weerdenburg had made the argument for remaining connected to the homeland in order to retain a modified cultural identity.[30] It follows, then, that the king and court would need to oscillate between contact with the various places and peoples in the empire and time spent in their own space. Briant summarises that the court's movements 'took on major political and ideological significance' because the usually distant king flaunted 'the might and wealth of his court and army'.[31] To control and rule the empire, the king had to remain both above everyone and close enough to be real to them. Moving the court resulted in what Llewellyn-Jones calls being 'integrated

[26] Briant 2002: 258, 188.
[27] Llewellyn-Jones 2021: 1042.
[28] Jacobs 2021: 1021.
[29] Briant 2002: 187.
[30] Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1990: 268.
[31] Briant 2002: 191.

into the lands of the Empire'.[32] A plethora of political strategies motivated the king and court to stay on the road in such a manner, which stands quite in contrast to nomadic motivations.

The king and court had reasons to be on the move other than tradition, and they are not to be discounted. The king's table played a notable role. Wright and Hollman conclude that 'gift-giving and commensality […] established a network connecting potential political opposition […] to the king's table'.[33] With such a large empire in terms of land area and number of peoples, the king needed a way to stay in contact with his subjects. This travel was made possible by the empire's infrastructure, particularly the Royal Road.[34] The road and its use demonstrate connection with subjects and dominion over them, as discussed above. Ceremony accompanied the king and court as they reached various cities.[35] The feasts that he held in each place were remarkable. Generally, the king and court relied on goods from across the empire to maintain them on the road.[36] Showing this command over material goods made visible the king's command over his empire. Drawing on Herodotus, Briant, Wright, and Hollman explain that the king maintained the feasting table as he travelled by requiring each city to supply it as part of what they owed the king (Hdt. 1.188, 7.118-20).[37] Llewellyn-Jones explains that '[r]efusal to present gifts was taken by the king as proof of insubordination'.[38] Eating in each city with each people was a practical custom that sustained the moving court's people and power. The king's table tied his needs and wants to those of his subjects. He needed his court to be fed and wanted his power to be shown; his subjects needed to stay in his good graces and wanted to make their cities look good. A movable court benefits all involved.

The relationship between nomadism and the court is not limited to its movements. Another relevant element of court life was the hunt. Like many ceremonies, the royal hunts held significance

[32] Llewellyn-Jones 2014: 75.
[33] Wright and Hollman 2021: 1072.
[34] Llewellyn-Jones 2014: 79.
[35] Briant 2002: 189.
[36] Wright and Hollman 2021: 1066.
[37] Briant 2002: 289; Wright and Hollman 2021: 1070.
[38] Llewellyn-Jones 2014: 87.

for the king and court, each in different ways. Briant describes the hunt as 'one of the privileged loci for aristocratic and court sociability'.[39] Being chosen to hunt alongside the king was another sign of status, since proximity to the king was always a statement. For the king, 'hunting game […] was set alongside [his] prowess in warfare or his rationality in the council chamber,' according to Llewellyn-Jones.[40] The event was a performance of power and skill with a specific script. Briant summarises the atmosphere by stating that 'hunting was less of a sport *per se* than an art form'.[41] There were regulations and expectations, all under the performative umbrella. Briant and Llewellyn-Jones disagree over whether traps were allowed, the former saying that they were; regardless, there were certainly rules to abide by.[42] While hunting is an action connected with the land, predetermined roles and results demonstrate a separation from the nomadic tradition in which hunting is a more practical matter. The royal hunts took place in both well-tended royal enclosures and the wild.[43] In the wild, this sits better in nomadic culture because the aristocracy does not have full control of nature in the way that they can control architecture and image. Royal enclosures straddle the line between historical nomadism and contemporary settlement. Like many of the discussed elements of the court, the royal hunt continues the custom in spirit but only partially in practice.

Analysis of Greek and Persian sources demonstrates that the king and court relocated often, though leaves the patterns they followed less clear. The royal residences stood permanently in important locations, but the king and court moved among them and seem to have lacked enough housing at most. Encampments while on the move were court settings of their own. Aspects of court life such as feasts and hunts straddle the line between nomadism and settlement, practicality and ceremony. The king and court maintained customs that paid homage to their nomadic history, but much of their movement can be attributed to politically strategic motivations.

[39] Briant 2002: 297.
[40] Llewellyn-Jones 2014: 147.
[41] Llewellyn-Jones 2014: 129.
[42] Briant 2002: 298; Llewellyn-Jones 2014: 129.
[43] Brosius 2009: 44; Briant 2002: 297.

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