

2020 · BAND 102 · HEFT 2

KLIO

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0075-6334 · e-ISSN 2192-7669

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SATZ Dörlemann Satz, Lemförde

DRUCK Franz X. Stückle Druck und Verlag e.K., Ettenheim



Inhaltsverzeichnis

Eduard V. Rung

The Gestures of *proskynēsis* in the Achaemenid Empire — 405

Werner Riess

**Prolegomena zu einer digitalen althistorischen Gewaltforschung:
Gewaltmuster bei Solon, Alkibiades und Arat im Vergleich — 445**

Nathan Decety

Attrition-based *Oliganthrōpia* Revisited — 474

Elena Franchi

**The Ambivalent Legacy of the Crisaeans: Athens' Interstate Relations
(and the Phocian Factor) in 4th-Century Public Discourse — 509**

Michał Marciak – Marcin Sobiech – Tomasz Pirowski

Alexander the Great's Route to Gaugamela and Arbela — 536

Johannes Hackl

**Bemerkungen zur Chronologie der Seleukidenzeit: Die Koregentschaft
von Seleukos I. Nikator und Antiochos (I. Soter) — 560**

Miran Leydold

Wann eroberte Mithridates die Provinz *Asia*? — 579

Piotr Berdowski

Why Octavian Married Scribonia — 601

Geoffrey S. Sumi

**Nero and Britannicus in the *pompa circensis*: The Circus Procession as
Dynastic Ceremony in the Court of Claudius — 617**

Karol Kłodziński

***Procurator rationis patrimonii*: An Autonomous Equestrian Procuratorship or
an Alternative Title of the *procurator patrimonii*? — 665**

Josep Vilella Masana

Entre Tiro y Roma: las actividades sinodales sardicenses (343) — 676

Literaturkritik

Greg Anderson, The Realness of Things Past. Ancient Greece and Ontological History (*Uwe Walter*) — **711**

Stefan Rebenich (Hg.), Monarchische Herrschaft im Altertum (*J. E. Lendon*) — **717**

J. G. Manning, The Open Sea. The Economic Life of the Ancient Mediterranean World from the Iron Age to the Rise of Rome (*Sitta von Reden*) — **721**

Robert Parker (Hg.), Changing Names. Tradition and Innovation in Ancient Greek Onomastics (*Ana Isabel Blasco Torres*) — **726**

Alexandra C. J. von Miller, Archaische Siedlungsbefunde in Ephesos (*Maximilian Felix Rönning*) — **730**

Georg Petzl, Sardis. Greek and Latin Inscriptions, Part II: Finds from 1958 to 2017 (*Marco Tentori Montalto*) — **734**

Marie-Kathrin Drauschke, Die Aufstellung zwischenstaatlicher Vereinbarungen in griechischen Heiligtümern (*Víctor Alonso Troncoso*) — **740**

Christopher Pelling, Herodotus and the Question Why (*Benjamin Allgaier*) — **745**

Alice Borgna, Ripensare la storia universale. Giustino e l'Epitome delle Storie Filippiche di Pompeo Trogo (*Dagmar Hofmann*) — **748**

Frank Kolb, Lykien. Geschichte einer antiken Landschaft (*Ludwig Meier*) — **754**

D. Graham J. Shipley, The Early Hellenistic Peloponnese. Politics, Economies, and Networks 338–197 BC (*Emma Nicholson*) — **760**

Frank Daubner, Makedonien nach den Königen (168 v. Chr.–14 n. Chr.) (*Jens Bartels*) — **763**

Lindsay Driediger-Murphy, Roman Republican Augury. Freedom and Control (*Françoise Van Haepelen*) — **765**

Emma Dench, *Empire and Political Cultures in the Roman World*
(*Fred K. Drogula*) — **767**

Philipp Deeg, *Der Kaiser und die Katastrophe. Untersuchungen zum politischen Umgang mit Umweltkatastrophen im Prinzipat (31 v. Chr. bis 192 n. Chr.)*
(*Gerhard H. Waldherr*) — **770**

Philipp Pilhofer, *Das frühe Christentum im kilikisch-isaurischen Bergland. Die Christen der Kalykadnos-Region in den ersten fünf Jahrhunderten*
(*Christoph Begass*) — **775**

Ursula Quatember, *Der sogenannte Hadrianstempel an der Kuretenstrasse*
(*Anna-Lena Krüger*) — **778**

Christine Hamdoune, *Ad fines Africae Romanae. Les mondes tribaux dans les provinces maurétaniennes* (*David J. Mattingly*) — **782**

Annarosa Gallo, *Prefetti del pretore e prefetture. L'organizzazione dell'agro romano in Italia (IV–I sec. a.C.)* (*Mattia Balbo*) — **785**

Michel Festy (Hg.), *Anonyme de Valois II. L'Italie sous Odoacre et Théodoric*
(*Hans-Ulrich Wiemer*) — **788**

Ingemar König (Hg.), *Edictum Theodorici regis. Das „Gesetzbuch“ des Ostgotenkönigs Theoderich des Großen* (*Hans-Ulrich Wiemer*) — **790**

Walter Scheidel, *Escape from Rome. The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity* (*Bram Fauconnier*) — **793**

Eduard V. Rung*

The Gestures of *proskynēsis* in the Achaemenid Empire

<https://doi.org/10.1515/klio-2019-1001>

Summary: In October of 2018 a new trilingual Achaemenid inscription from Naqsh-e Rostam was discovered and in March of 2019 a detailed investigation of it with linguistic and historical commentary was published online in ARTA. The inscription includes a previously unknown Old Persian verb, a-f-r-[?]-a-t-i-y, which the first publishers Soheil Delshad and Mojtaba Doroodi read as **ā-fra-yāti* (perhaps “he comes forward to”) or **ā-fra-θāti* (“he speaks forth to”). They conclude that “an Old Persian verb with the meaning ‘to greet, to bless’ (etc.) seems to be called for”. It is clear that as a result of this discovery we get an Old Persian verb which could refer to an act which the Greek verb προσκυνεῖν may have described relating to the Persians. This new evidence stimulates further discussion about the practice and meaning of *proskynēsis* at the royal court in the Achaemenid Empire. My article shows that all literary and pictorial evidences on *proskynēsis* may be divided into two groups: 1) Greek authors’ information that represents *proskynēsis* mainly as prostration before the King; 2) Persian bas-reliefs that depict the scenes with *proskynēsis* as a hand-kissing gesture. It is supposed that the previously unknown Old Persian verb (like προσκυνεῖν in Ancient Greek usage) refers not only to specific gestures, but relates to a model of behaviour (‘salutation’, ‘obeisance’, ‘greeting’, ‘worship’, ‘respect’ etc.). It is argued that Achaemenid officials performed *proskynēsis* before the King as hand-kissing, while the rest of the people bowed down, kneeled or prostrated. Exceptions were made only for members of the royal family who did not perform *proskynēsis*, but kissed the King and got a kiss from him.

Keywords: Achaemenids, *proskynēsis*, Gestures, Prostration, Hand-Kissing

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1. DNf: a New Achaemenid Inscription from Naqsh-e Rostam

On the 23rd of October 2018 the Iranian linguist Mojtaba Doroodi visited Naqsh-e Rostam with a professional photographer, Mohammad Ali Mosallanezhad, and noticed a damaged inscription on the right side of the top register above the uppermost figure (fig. 1). Doroodi sent photographs of the inscription, along with images of the previously known inscriptions, to Soheil Delshad who confirmed



Fig. 1: The Relief from Darius' tomb in Naqsh-e Rostam (photo: M. A. Mosallanezhad, 27.01.2019).

that it is a new inscription. In March of 2019 Soheil Delshad and Mojtaba Doroodi published a new discovered trilingual Achaemenid inscription (DNf) in ARTA¹.

The Old Persian cuneiform text contains two lines and includes a previously unknown Old Persian verb, a-f-r-[?]-a-t-i-y, which the first editors prefer to read as **ā-fra-yāti* (“he comes forward to”) or **ā-fra-ḡāti* (“he speaks forth to”).² The word is only partly readable because one of its signs is corrupted (but it seems to be -y). The editors comment on the possible variants of spelling of this word as follows:

“The initial impression, from the picture taken from ground level on the 23rd of October 2018 led the authors to identify the sign ‘y’ between ‘r’ and ‘a’, hence ‘a-f-r-[y]-a-t-i-y (**ā-fra-yāti*)’ perhaps ‘he comes forward to’. Because of the difficulties in the proper analysis of such a verb, one may consider another possibility, i.e., ‘a-f-r-[ḡ]-a-t-i-y’ (**ā-fra-ḡāti*), ‘he speaks forth to’.”

The difficulties noted by the authors of the article are: (1) the root “*yā-*” is not attested in the Old Persian corpus and one would not expect it since there is already “*ay-*” (though in Avestan and Vedic texts it is attested with the meaning “to go, to drive”; “*frayāi*” is attested in the Avesta with the meaning “to go ahead, to proceed”); (2) the order of the preverbs *ā-fra-* before the root *yā-* has one parallel in the *Rig Veda* (RV 7.24.1), but this could be poetic word order, as it is never found in Vedic prose; 3) a more serious objection is syntactic as we would expect the goal of the movement expressed by this compound verb to be in the accusative, not in the dative. Meanwhile in the case of a-f-r-[ḡ]-a-t-i-y (**ā-fra-ḡāti*), “he speaks forth to”, a dative would seem possible after such a compound verb of speaking, and the simple verb *ḡā-* is followed by a dative/genitive at DB IV.55 and elsewhere. Delshad and Doroodi note that there is a great number of Vedic and Avestan verbs of speaking which can be prefixed with either *ā-* or *fra-*; but it is difficult to find examples of both these preverbs prefixed to the same verb of speaking. Rüdiger Schmitt, however, suggests that the verb was **āfra[y]āti* with the translation “he comes forward to”. He concludes that a dative would have been possible with the *verba movendi*.³ So, the presence of the verb **ā-fra-yāti* seems to be more preferable from epigraphical as well as a grammatical perspective. If one looks at the relief to which the inscription referred, the upper male figure is being

1 Delshad – Doroodi 2019.

2 Delshad – Doroodi 2019, 6, n. 7 could think of an Old Persian cognate of Avestan “*frāy-*” and read a-f-r-[i-n]-a-t-i-y (**ā-frînāti*). They note that from the point of view of Old Iranian historical verb morphology and sentence syntax, and also given *ikarrabi* in the Babylonian version, this would be the most plausible restoration of the verb. Epigraphically, however, this solution is not attractive: the fracture is simply too narrow to contain “-i-n-”.

3 Schmitt 2019, 48.

depicted in motion (as is to be expected if the verb would have been **ā-fra-yāti*). In the Old Persian language both prefixes, *a-* and *fra-*, were used in the meaning of direction, approaching and motion, and in conjunction with the root *yā-*, “to come”⁴, the compound verb **ā-fra-yāti* may have the meaning “he comes forward to”. Alternatively if the root of this verb is *fray-*, “to bless” (with a dative)⁵, then the verb is **ā-frināti* and may be translated as “to bless to someone”. This interpretation is also supported by the paralleled Akkadian verb used in the inscription.

The Elamite and Babylonian versions of this inscription contain one well preserved line each. Delshad and Doroodi could not translate the Elamite text of the inscription; they believed that its interpretation depends on the Old Persian and Babylonian versions. As for the Akkadian verb *i-GA-ir-ra-bi*, it yields a Durative form of a non-existent verb **garābu*. The first editors proposed other variants of the irregular form of this verb such as *qerēbu* “to approach” (the sign of GA may be alternatively read as qā) or *karābu*, “to bless” (if the reading of GA is kà, but it appears in Elamite texts)⁶. Eventually they decide in favor of *karābu* (*i-kà-ir-ra-bi* in the inscription) and conclude that “an Old Persian verb with the meaning ‘to greet, to bless’ (etc.) seems to be called for”; “The discovery of DNf above the top unarmed figure and the act of the figure described in the text [...] would suggest that the figure invokes blessing upon the King.” Based on the Babylonian version of the inscription the first editors interpret it as referring to some Persian, who invokes blessing upon Darius the King. However, *karābu* can not only be translated as “to invoke blessings”, but may be also interpreted as “to make the gesture of adoration or greeting”⁷. The alternative Akkadian verb, *qerēbu* (one of its translations is “to approach”, “to come to”⁸ and it may also be similar to the meaning of the Old Persian verb **ā-fra-yāti* with the root *ya-*) should not be ruled out from consideration, because *i-qā-ir-ra-bi* may yield a form of *qerēbu*. Meanwhile, the relief depicts a person with his left hand raised to his mouth (fig. 1). This gesture probably means praying toward the King (possibly the dead King buried in the Tomb)⁹. It may be also considered as a kind of *proskynēsis* and be described by the new inscription. If one sees the *proskynēsis* scene in the relief, a meaning of the two verbs becomes more

4 Bartholomae 1904, 1282.

5 Bartholomae 1904, 1016 f.

6 Labat 1994, 245.

7 CAD, s.v. *karābu*: 1) to pronounce formulas of blessing; 2) to pronounce formulas of praise, adoration, homage and greeting; 3) to invoke blessing upon other persons before the images of the gods, to pray to the gods; 4) to make the gesture of adoration or greeting.

8 CAD, s.v. *qerēbu*: 1) to be near, close, adjacent etc.; 2) to come near, to come close, to approach, to come to, to arrive at; 3) to approach with the request etc., 11) to speak to, to address to someone.

9 On the Persian cult of the dead kings: Henkelman 2003, 102–115; Tuplin 2017, 94–102.

evident. They express blessing upon the King (as the first editors of the inscription conclude), and the relief figure does something like a hand-kissing gesture toward the King. So, this new evidence from Naqsh-e Rostam royal tomb may be a stimulus for discussion of the ceremony of *proskynēsis* in the Achaemenid Empire.

2. The Meaning of *proskynēsis*

The term προσκύνησις was derived from the Greek verb προσκυνεῖν and is literally translated as “to kiss towards” (κυνεῖν, “to kiss”). It originally referred to a ritual kiss, but then was used for other gestures of adoration.¹⁰ There is a long tradition of using this term from ancient Greece down to the period of the Byzantine Empire in the ceremonial aspect as meaning the obeisance to the ruler by the subject people.¹¹ This term was also used by ancient authors to describe not only obeisance to the rulers, but also worship of the gods (Aischyl. Pers. 400, Prom. 936; Soph. Phil. 533, 657, 776, 1408, El. 1374, OT 1327, OC 1654; fr. 738 TrGF; Aristoph. Plut. 771–3).¹² They considered that in public life *proskynēsis* was religiously motivated and demonstrated the sacred status of a ruler.¹³ Berthe Marti came to the interesting conclusion that both the Greeks and the Romans used words for obeisance before rulers which were also used for the worship of the gods, for two reasons: (1) the attitude of the Persians towards their rulers reminded them of their own gesture when adoring the Earth with prostration and a kiss; (2) since they thought that the Persians considered their kings gods, the Greeks and Romans attributed to the ceremony of

10 See A. B. Bosworth’s notion: “In both Greece and the Ancient Orient it was a simple ritual kiss, with the right hand brought up to the mouth [...]. In Greece, however, the gesture was confined to acts of worship, offered exclusively to deities, whereas in the near east it had a social as well as a religious connotation. *Proskynesis* could be offered by a commoner to his or her hierarchical superior. Above all it was the gesture of respect paid to a ruler, and for the Greeks the receiving of *proskynesis* was as much the characteristic of the Great King as the upright tiara [...]. But by the fourth century B.C. there was general acceptance by the Greeks that the Persian *proskynesis* did not imply worship, although the practice could create acute discomfort” (Bosworth 1995, 68 f.).

11 On Byzantine *proskynēsis* cf. Vojvodić 2010, 259, who writes: “All those who would approach the emperor, except the patriarch, as well as those the emperor was passing by, were obliged to prostrate themselves and kiss the *basileus*’ feet. Also *proskynēsis* was an especially important element of inauguration and coronation ceremonies.”

12 On usage of the verb προσκυνεῖν in Greek literature see: Marti 1936, 274–278; Bowden 2013, 57–59. The noun προσκύνησις occurs rarely in the classical Greek sources. Plato (Leg. 887e) mentions προσκυνήσεις of the Greeks and the barbarians directed to the rising and setting sun and moon. Aristotle (Rhet. 1361a) referred to the barbarian custom (τὰ βαρβαρικά) of προσκυνήσεις.

13 On links between *proskynēsis* and the religious sphere: Muccioli 2016.

obeisance a similar spirit of reverence, and προσκυνεῖν therefore expressed both the gesture and the feeling which they attributed to their Oriental neighbours.¹⁴

The first issue arising in my article is what *proskynēsis* in fact meant. Some historians accept that it meant mainly a hand-kissing gesture (sending a kiss by hand or kissing his own hand),¹⁵ others that it referred to bowing down, kneeling or prostration.¹⁶ There is also the opinion that any gestures of obeisance or worship may also have been labelled *proskynēsis*. Hugh Bowden, for example, notes: “It is clear that the word was not used consistently to describe a single specific gesture or action.”¹⁷ Similarly Takuji Abe argues that the term *proskynēsis* does not represent any single posture, but is used to refer to a range of different acts.¹⁸ My article also argues that *proskynēsis* could not be confined to only a single specific gesture (as most scholars suppose); it may have included a number of gestures, which expressed praying to the gods or a behaviour of one person in front of another (acts of worship, blessing, salutation, subjugation etc.),¹⁹ but their interpretation depends on a historical and literary context. It may also be used for other words which referred to the technique of *proskynesis* (προσπίπτειν, translated “to fall down” or “to prostrate oneself”). It is remarkable that in many modern English translations of classical authors the act of *proskynēsis* is interpreted as that of prostration, falling down, obeisance, worship, saluta-

14 Marti 1936, 282.

15 Scott 1921/1922, 403f.; Taylor 1927, 53; Frye 1972, 106; Wiesehöfer 2003, 448, consider the hand-kissing gesture as the primary meaning of *proskynēsis*. Fauth Wolfgang 1972, 1189 generally describes *proskynēsis* as “Gestus der Verehrung, eine Art Kußhand, meist mit bestimmten Körperhaltungen oder -bewegungen verbunden” (Gesture of worship, a kind of hand-kissing, mainly connected with certain posture or body movement); cf. Wiesehöfer 2006: “Ant. Gestus der Verehrung, eine Art Kußhand, der oft in Verbindung mit bestimmten Körperhaltungen oder -bewegungen vollzogen wurde” (English version: Ancient gesture of reverence, a kind of blown kiss, often performed in connection with particular postures or bodily movements (turning, bowing, etc.). Matarese 2014, 122, argues that hand-kissing was the usual Persian form of *proskynēsis*. Choksy 1990, 201–204, avoids naming this gesture hand-kissing. Instead he refers to it in a descriptive form as “the raised hand with the palm turned inward, toward the individual face”, and supposes that “the Iranian people adopted the raised hand with the palm turned toward the face from their Near Eastern neighbors”. Choksy thought that the Greek notion of *proskynēsis* as a gesture of raising the hand with the palm turned towards the face and lips coincided with Iranian practice, although the recipient was different.

16 Tarn 1948, 359; Bickerman 1963; Cotesta 2012.

17 Bowden 2013, 59.

18 Abe 2018, 4.

19 Cf. LSJ, s.v. προσκυνέω: I. 1. make obeisance to the gods and their images, fall down and worship; 2. esp., of the Oriental fashion of prostrating oneself before kings and superiors; II. later 1. kiss; 2. greet; 3. welcome respectfully, respect; προσκύνησις, adoration, obeisance.

tion, reverence, homage etc.²⁰ So, the second issue of my article is what kind of gestures took place during the performing of *proskynēsis*. My aim is to argue that the various gestures of *proskynēsis* may have been simultaneously in use at the Achaemenid royal courts.

If we compare the Greek sources reporting on *proskynēsis* with the evidence of Persian iconography depicting the scenes with *proskynēsis*, a contradiction appears between them, which Pierre Briant noticed as follows:

“A comparison of the classical texts and the reliefs nonetheless presents an interpretative problem. Exactly what act had to be performed by the person granted audience? In other words, what does the word *proskynēsis* mean? In the audience reliefs, the important person in front of the King bends forward and blows a kiss. But in many of the Greek authors, the reference is very clearly to an act – also familiar in the pre-Achaemenid Near East and with the Parthians – consisting of falling prone or to one’s knees before the royal throne.”²¹

Richard Frye suggested the different representations of Persian *proskynēsis* by the Persepolis bas-reliefs and classical sources may be due to the using of different gestures for various purposes. This author notes that for the nobility *proskynēsis* signified a bow with the kissing with one’s own hand as depicted on reliefs at Persepolis, or with knee-bending, or even, in the case of supplication or request, full prostration on the ground, especially for menials.²² So the third issue of this article is who did perform *proskynesis* at the Achaemenid royal court. Modern historians resolve this issue in different ways.

20 To do (make) obeisance (Hdt. 3.86.2; 7.14.1; 136.1; 8.118.4, transl. by G. C. Macaulay; Hdt. 1.119.1; 7.14.1; 136.1 transl. by H. Rawlinson, Hdt. 1.136.1; 7.14.1 transl. by A. D. Godley; Xen. Cyr. 8.3.14 transl. by H. G. Dakyns; Xen. Cyr. 4.4.13; 5.3.18 transl. by W. Miller; Xen. Anab. 1.6.10; 3.2.9 transl. by C. L. Brownson; Plut. Them. 27; Art. 22.4; 23.5 transl. by B. Perrin); to do reverence (Hdt. 1.119.1; 2.80.2; 121 transl. by G. C. Macaulay; Hdt. 2.80.2; 121; 3.86.2 transl. by H. Rawlinson; Plut. Art. 15.7 transl. by B. Perrin); to worship (Hdt. 1.134.1 transl. by G. C. Macaulay; Hdt. 7.136.1 transl. by H. Rawlinson; Hdt. 2.121 transl. by A. D. Godley); to prostrate (Hdt. 1.134.1 transl. by H. Rawlinson; Xen. Cyr. 8.3.14 transl. by W. Miller); to bow (Hdt. 1.119.1; 3.86.2; 7.136.1; 8.118.4 transl. by A. D. Godley; Xen. Cyr. 5.3.18 transl. by H. G. Dakyns); to salute (Hdt. 2.80.2 transl. by A. D. Godley); to bow in worship (Xen. Cyr. 2.4.19 transl. by H. G. Dakyns); to fall on their faces (Xen. Cyr. 8.3.14 transl. by H. G. Dakyns); to do homage (Xen. Cyr. 2.4.19; 7.5.32 transl. by W. Miller; Xen. Anab. 1.6.10 transl. by C. L. Brownson); to pay homage (Xen. Anab. 3.2.13 transl. by C. L. Brownson); to salute with homage (Xen. Anab. 1.8.21 transl. by C. L. Brownson); homage of bowing to the ground (Arr. Anab. 4.11.9 transl. by E. I. Robson); prostration (Arr. Anab. 4.11.9; 12.1 transl. by E. I. Robson); custom of bowing down (Arr. Anab. 4.11.2 transl. by E. I. Robson).

21 Briant 2002, 222.

22 Frye 1962, 96.

Chiara Matarese suggests that the description of *proskynēsis* as prostration in some Greek circles was a misunderstanding that can easily be explained in the context of the opinion they had about the Persian kings and their subjects. She supposes that the central part of *proskynēsis*, which has to be seen as a single aspect of the Achaemenid court ceremonial, was the kiss, and that we do not speak about *proskynēsis* if we do not consider the kiss²³ (in her earlier article she even states that *proskynēsis* must be understood simply as a kiss sent with the hand from a distance)²⁴. According to Matarese, what is found in the reliefs from Persepolis is not a sign of prostration together with *proskynēsis* (in some of them, the performers are standing, in others, as in the Audience Relief, they do just a little bow), and it is the classical confusion between προσκυνεῖν and προσπίπτειν which is to be found both in the sources and among modern scholars.²⁵ However, she also makes the interesting point that prostration could be a phase of approaching the King, together with *proskynēsis*, only in a case of a deep social gap between the two Persians involved or between a Persian and a stranger, such as a Greek: this means that neither aristocrats nor imperial officials had to prostrate themselves in front of the King, sending a kiss to him instead.²⁶ Takuji Abe also argues that the specific form of *proskynēsis* as it was normally performed at the Persian court, was a bow with one hand raised up to the mouth. He draws attention to classical Greek writers who named prostration separately from *proskynēsis*, instead of choosing to mention the two practices side by side (Persians prostrate themselves and then perform *proskynēsis*).²⁷ My article will argue that most people were obliged to perform *proskynēsis* (the royal official in the form of hand-kissing with/without a small bow while the rest of the people performed it as prostration, bowing down or kneeling). Exceptions were made for members of the royal family who did not perform *proskynēsis*, but kissed the King and got a kiss from him.

²³ Matarese 2014, 132 f.

²⁴ Matarese 2013, 78 f.

²⁵ Matarese 2014, 133.

²⁶ Matarese 2014, 132.

²⁷ Abe 2018, 4.

3. Pre-Achaemenid Practices of *proskynēsis*

The Egyptian practice of obeisance to the King with prostration and kissing, which reminds scholars of the ceremony of *proskynēsis*²⁸, occurred from the period of the Old Kingdom onwards. One can learn from written sources and iconography that the royal officials regularly kissed the earth before the pharaoh. The Egyptian equivalent of the word *προσκυνεῖν* is *nd-ḥrt*, which literally means “to greet”, but some other terms occur also (*sn t3*, “kissing the earth”, *dbn t3*, “touching the earth” and *ks*, “bowing”).²⁹ As officials “kissed the earth” before the King, so the King humbled himself before the gods. And the same gesture was made to higher officials by lesser ones.³⁰ The Prophecy of Neferty repeatedly defines the royal audience in the following words: “they put (themselves) upon their bellies in the presence of his majesty.”³¹ An inscription from the period of the fifth dynasty reports that the pharaoh rewarded his official Ptahshepses (a high priest of Ptah at Memphis and the husband of the King’s eldest daughter) with the privilege of kissing the King’s foot: “His Majesty permitted that he should kiss his foot and His Majesty did not permit that he should kiss the ground.”³² Another royal official, Washptah, served as vizier of the King, also was invited to kiss the royal foot: “His Majesty saw him kissing the ground / [Then His Majesty said to him:] ‘Do not kiss the ground. Kiss my foot.’”³³ This evidence also confirms that kissing the earth before the monarch was regular practice at the royal courts, and kissing the foot was an exceptional honour given by the King to his officials for good service. In the context of the Egyptian imperial policy towards the Near East, we need not be surprised at meeting this expression of subordination also in the relationship between the Egyptian king and his defeated enemies. The texts from the New

28 On the practice of *proskynēsis* in Egypt see the testimony of Diodorus (relying most probably on Hecataeus of Abdera: Diod. 1.90.2–3 = Hecataeus of Abdera, FGrHist 264 F 25.1488–97): “[...] it seems, the Egyptians practise *proskynēsis* before their kings and honour them as being in truth gods, believing that they have not attained supreme power without the help of divine providence, and also that those who are willing to give the greatest benefactions and have the power to give such honours share in the divine nature” (transl. by Collins 2014, 841).

29 Fischer 1982, 1125–1127.

30 Fischer 1982, 1125–1127. Evidently kissing the earth was a religious ceremony in Egypt, as the paintings from the tombs of Pashedu and Irynefer (19th dynasty) clearly show. Cf. Dousa 2014, 130.

31 ANET, 444.

32 Breasted 1906, 118. Cf. new translation: “[... one more esteemed before the King than] any other [ser]vant. When(ever) his majesty praised him on account of a thing, his majesty had him kiss his foot, his majesty not allowing him to kiss the ground, Ptahshepses” (Dorman 2002, 102).

33 Picardo 2011, 95.

Kingdom mention bowing down at the feet of the King, which seems to refer to gestures of submission and servility. In the Annals of Thutmose III (ca. 1479–1425 B.C.) the defeat of the Syrian coalition at Megiddo and the consequent subjection of the enemy leaders is described as follows: “[they] came on their bellies to kiss the earth to the glory of His Majesty.”³⁴ The Amarna letters from the New Kingdom included some greeting formulas by which the vassal kings addressed the pharaohs:³⁵ “I fall at the feet of my lord”; “I indeed prostrate myself at the feet of the King, my lord, my god, my Sun, the Sun from the sky, seven times and seven times, on the back and on the stomach”. It is obvious that such an expression does not indicate the exact number of actions but a symbolic indefinite repetition of this action.

The obeisance to the King in Mesopotamia was defined as *karābu* that is translated to pronounce formulas of blessing, praise, adoration, homage and greeting, to invoke blessing upon other persons before the images of the gods, to pray to the gods, to make the gesture of adoration or greeting. These gestures included bowing down (*kanāšū*), kissing the feet (*našāqu šēpi*) or the ground before the King (*našāqu qaqqaru*).³⁶ People kissed the feet of the kings as the kings themselves kissed the feet of the gods’ images. Šamši-Adad I (ca. 1809–1776 B.C.) claims: “I entered his fortress. I kissed the feet of the god Adad, my lord, and reorganised that land”.³⁷ The letter of Hunni, “an adorer of the King his lord”, dated to the period of Sennacherib (705–681 B.C.), describes *proskynēsis* in Assyria: “May he [the King] see the workmanship of the temples of his gods and kiss their beautiful feet; may those (gods) whose temples you have made shine like sunrise bless the King my lord, and may we, the royal servants, kiss the feet of the King, our lord.”³⁸ The letter of Aha-lursi mentions kissing the ground before the King: “That the King my lord [invited me] to Babylon, that I am going to see Bel and present a votive gift to Bel [on behalf of the King my lord], that I am going to see the face [of the King, my lord] and kiss the ground [before the King, my lord].”³⁹ The royal documents from the Neo-Assyrian Empire show also that the kings demanded kissing of their feet from vassal governors in order to get from them the recognition of their superiority. Surely this was a part of the ceremony of swearing an oath of loyalty to the King from his subjects. The inscription of Sargon II (722–705 B.C.) clearly states: “The people of Assyria who had sworn alle-

³⁴ ANET, 237.

³⁵ Moran 1992. Morris 2006, 179–196, counted greeting formulas in 207 letters.

³⁶ For references to *proskynēsis* in Mesopotamia see Rollinger 2011, 23–40.

³⁷ RIM i, Šamši-Adad I, 1001.ii.1–2 (p. 64).

³⁸ ABL 216; Papola 1987, no. 133.9.

³⁹ ABL 842; Papola 1987, no. 131.11–12.

giance before me by the great gods came into my presence and kissed my feet.”⁴⁰ Esarhaddon (681–669 B.C.) describes his accession to the throne after years of dynastic rivalries as follows: “The people of Assyria, who had sworn by the treaty an oath bound by the great gods concerning me, came before me and kissed my feet.”⁴¹ This King refers to his appointment of Na'id-Marduk, the brother of the Elamite King, the governor of the entire Sealand: “(Now) he comes yearly, without ceasing, to Nineveh with his heavy audience gift and kisses my feet.”⁴² It is clear from this testimony that the oath of allegiance from the rulers of subject provinces was regular. Esarhaddon also states other cases of oath-swearing:

“Bēl-iqīša, son of Bunnannū . . . came to Nineveh, before and he kissed my feet. I had pity on him and encouraged him”⁴³;

“Hazael, the King of the Arabs, came to Nineveh, my capital city, with his heavy audience gift and kissed my feet”⁴⁴;

“Laiâlê, King of the city Iadi', who had fled before my weapons . . . came to Nineveh, before me, and kissed my feet. I had pity on him and put that province of Bāzu under him”; “Ba'alu, King of Ty]re, who dwells [in the midst of the sea, ...], who threw off [my] yo[ke, ...] ... kneeling and beseeched [my] lord[ship] ... (and) he kissed my feet”⁴⁵.

The relief scenes also prove the role of *proskynēsis* in the swearing of oaths of allegiance in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Thus the oath-swearing by Jehu, the King of Israel and Sua, the King of Gilzanu, is depicted on the “black obelisk” of Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.) as prostration before the King⁴⁶ (fig. 2). The inscriptions state:

“I accepted tribute from Sûa, the Gilzânite: silver, gold, lead, copper vessels, staves for the hand of the King, horses, and Bactrian camels”;

“I accepted tribute from Jehu, son of Omri silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden beaker, golden goblets, pitchers of gold, lead, staves for the hand of the King, and javelins.”

Both inscriptions mention a common detail: they refer to the *hu-tar-a-te* (in the Plural) and *hu-tar-tú* (in the Singular), usually translated in literature as stave(s).

⁴⁰ Lukenbill 1927, 2, 202.

⁴¹ RINAP iv 1.i.81.

⁴² RINAP iv 1.ii. 64.

⁴³ RINAP iv 1.iii.78.

⁴⁴ RINAP iv 1.iv.8.

⁴⁵ RINAP iv 1.iv.75.

⁴⁶ Ribeiro Santos 2014, 85–99.

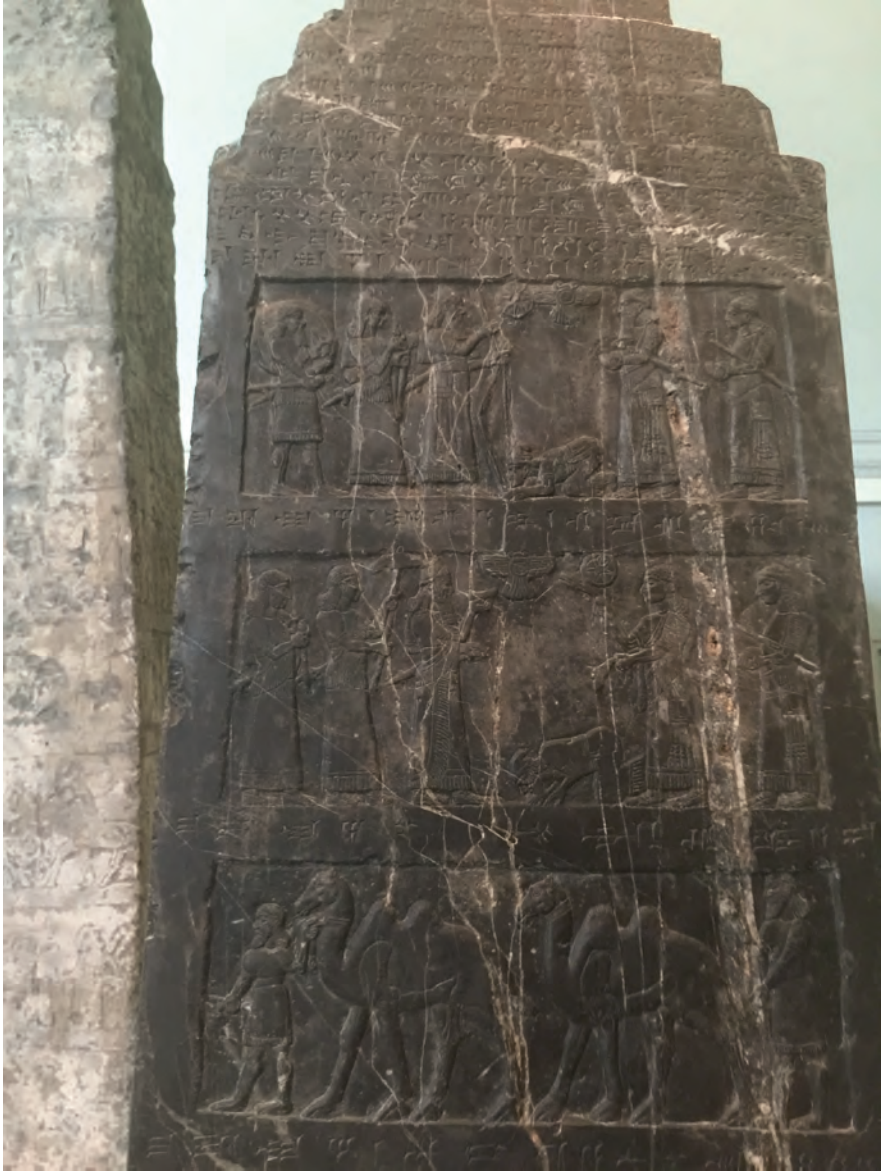


Fig. 2: The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III. The British Museum, London (photo: E. Rung, 07.07.2019).



Fig. 3: The Stone relief from the wall decoration of Tiglath-Pileser III's palace at Kalhu. The British Museum, London (photo: E. Rung, 07.07.2019).

This meant when Sûa and Jehu handed over *ḫu-tar-tû* to Shalmaneser III, they were symbolically placing their states (Bit-Humri and Gilzanu respectively) under the special protection of the King of Assyria. The stone relief from the wall decoration of the palace of Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 B.C.) at Kalhu shows prostration before the King by Hanunu of Gaza submitting to Assyrian rule (fig. 3). A Babylonian chronicle describes *proskynēsis* to Nabonidus as it was performed in Assyria to the Assyrian rulers: “In the Palace they found me and they all fell down to my feet and kissed my feet.”⁴⁷ But *proskynēsis* was not always prostration only.

Though prostration included kissing as a crucial element of many ancient near eastern court ceremonials, the sources attest that the two actions were not always related to each other. Kissing often occurred without prostration (among officials), and prostration did not necessarily include kissing. The hand-kissing ritual was used in Mesopotamia long before the Persians, both to worship the gods (as the famous stele of Hammurabi clearly shows), and to salute the kings. Often it

⁴⁷ Schaudig 2001, 525.

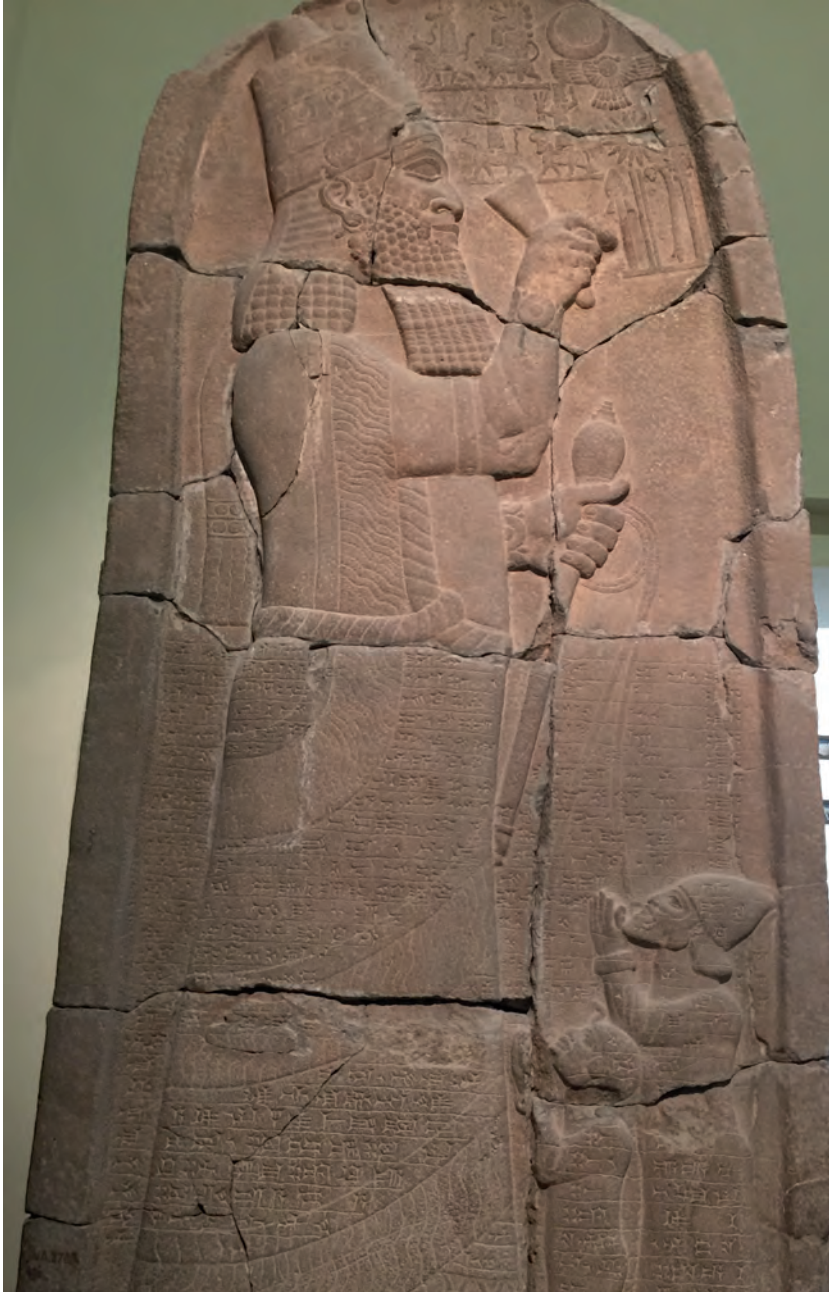


Fig. 4: The victory stele of Esarhaddon. Pergamon Museum, Berlin (photo: E. Rung, 16.10.2019).

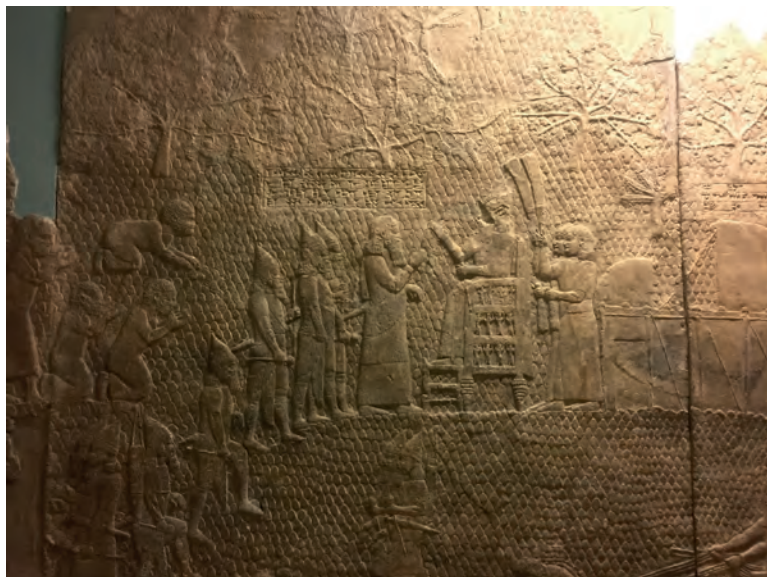


Fig. 5: The Lachish reliefs of the South-West Palace of Sennacherib in Nineveh. The British Museum, London (photo: E. Rung, 07.07.2019).



Fig. 6: A Detail of Balawat Gates decoration from Assyria. The British Museum, London (photo: E. Rung, 07.07.2019).

occurs in the iconographic data along with some other hand gestures such as forefingers pointing, hands clasped, lifting the hand gestures (as the victory stele of Esarhaddon attests) etc.⁴⁸ (fig. 4). On the one hand, the relief from Sennacherib's palace in Assyria celebrating the capture of Lachish has two groups of people giving their allegiance to the King: one group is prostrating, another is standing and lifting his hands (fig. 5). On the other hand, the decorated bronze band from Balawat Gates includes a scene of the salutation of the King by his subject people, in which some of them are depicted as prostrating, some as kneeling, but most as still standing⁴⁹ (fig. 6). The Assyrian royal officials and the King are lifting their right hands toward one another as the gesture of salutation. A wall painting from the Palace of Tiglath-Pileser III in Til Barsip, published by F. Thureau-Dangin and M. Dunand, includes the scene of the King being approached by his courtiers: one of them is depicted as performing the gesture of subjugation by prostrating before the King, who is seated on his throne, but another person is saluting the King by lifting his right hand.⁵⁰ It is reasonable to suppose that the difference in the gestures in front of the King may be due to the difference in social rank of attendants. The scenes presenting the persons saluting the King by lifting the hand may be seen also in other Assyrian iconographic evidence. It appears on another wall painting from Til Barsip that is now in the Louvre Museum (fig. 7), and on the Lachish relief of South-West Palace of Sennacherib from Nineveh, that is now in the British Museum (fig. 5). In all these scenes the King is also depicted as saluting his attendants by lifting his right hand. Marduk-apla-iddina II, King of Babylon in 715 B.C., depicted on a monument commemorating a royal land grant was saluted by his subordinate who lifted his right hand (fig. 8). The earliest iconographic evidence from Iran depicting the people's salutation to the King by a hand-kissing gesture is the Elamite rock relief from Kül-e Farah IV, dated to the end of the second or the beginning of the first millennium B.C.⁵¹

4. Greek views on Persian *proskynēsis*

The earliest Greek reference to the ceremony of *proskynēsis* comes from the *skolion* of Hybrias the Cretan, who was probably a mercenary in Persian military service in the last half of the sixth century. The poet uses the verbs *κυβεῖν* (in the Doric

⁴⁸ Choksy 2002, 7–29; Shafer 2007, 134–159; Calabro 2014, 143–157.

⁴⁹ Schachner 2007.

⁵⁰ Thureau-Dangin – Dunand 1936, pl. XLVII d–f.

⁵¹ Álvares-Mon 2013, 207–248.



Fig. 7: Wall painting from the Palace of Tiglath-Pileser III in Til Barsip (tell Ahmar, Syria). Louvre Museum, Paris (photo: E. Rung, 30.08.2014).



Fig. 8: The stele depicting Marduk-apla-iddina II as the King of Babylon. Altes Museum, Berlin (photo: E. Rung, 17.10.2019).

form of the third person plural, κυνέοντί) and πίπτειν (in the form of the perfect participle, πεπτηῶτες), translated literally as “to kiss” and “to fall down” respectively; it seems these verbs were earlier forms of προσκυνεῖν and προσπίπτειν, used by the later authors to designate *proskynēsis*.

Hybrias’ reference to *despotes* and the Great King surely indicates the Persian context, which was probably well known to the author. This song was cited by Athenaeus (15.695F–696A) in his *Deipnosophistae* as follows:

“I have great wealth, a sword, and spear, / And trusty shield beside me here; / With these I plough, and from the vine / Squeeze out the heart-delighting wine; / They make me lord of everything. / But they who dread the sword and spear, / And ever trusty shield to bear, / Shall fall before me on their knees, / And worship me whene’er I please, / And call me mighty lord and King” (transl. by C. D. Yonge).

Hybrias’ phrasing πάντες γόνυ πεπτηῶτες ἐμὸν κυνέοντί δεσπότην καὶ μέγαν βασιλῆα φωνέοντες refers to a *proskynēsis* which looks like kneeling before the King. C. M. Bowra suggested that the song was written after the accession of Cyrus:

“How long after we cannot say, but it need not have been very long. The song seems to have been written by a Cretan soldier of fortune who had seen service under the Persian king and returned home to glory in his success and declared his intention of applying his Asiatic method to Crete.”⁵²

The famous so-called “Darius’ vase” from Apulia seems to include painted scenes from the life of the King’s royal court and to depict three Persians kneeling before Darius who is represented as seated on his throne⁵³ (fig. 9).

In Aeschylus’ “Persians” *proskynēsis* to Xerxes was seen as prostration when the chorus claimed that as a result of the Persian defeat by the Greeks those who dwell throughout the length and breadth of Asia will not now for long abide under the sway of the Persians, nor pay further tribute at the compulsion of their lord, nor prostrate themselves to the earth: οὐδ’ ἐς γὰρ προπίτνοντες (589). The term *proskynēsis* is not used in this verse; it does, however, occur once in this play, in a religious context, when it is said that the Persians who were retreating

⁵² Bowra 1961, 403. Page 1965, 65, supposed that the reference to the Great King offers a *terminus post quem*, the foundation of the Persian Empire by Cyrus in the mid sixth century; a plausible *terminus ante quem* is given by Alexander’s defeat of the last Great King; there is nothing in the style, dialect, metre or contents inconsistent with any specific period within these wide limits.

⁵³ Naples 3253. Cf. Hirschmann 1997, 324; Llewellyn-Jones 2017, 5–9. For other audience scenes see Allen 2005, 39–62.



Fig. 9: The Darius Vase. The Archaeological Museum of Naples (photo: CC Carlo Raso https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3e/Darius_vase_Napoli_Museum_without_background.jpg, last accessed 20.07.2020).

from Greece and suffering at the River Strymon did *proskynēsis* to the Earth and Sky: γαῖαν οὐρανόν τε προσκυνῶν (400).⁵⁴

Herodotus used the word προσκυνεῖν nine times (1.119.1, 134.1; 2.80.2, 121; 3.86.2; 7.14.1, 136.1 [twice]; 8.118.4), and on six of those occasions for the Persians (1.134.1; 3.86.2; 7.13.3, 136.1 [twice]; 8.118.4). However, two of his references to *proskynēsis* are particularly significant. In Book 1 the historian reports on the *mores* of the Persians. He describes *proskynēsis* as the usual custom of one person

⁵⁴ In other verses (Aeschyl. Pers. 152, 154–5) the chorus performed prostration before the queen (βασιλεια δ' ἐμή-προσπίτνω) and hailed her with the words: ὦ βαθυζώνων ἄνασσα Περίδων ὑπερτάτη, / μήτηρ ἢ Ξέρξου γεραία, χαῖρε, Δαρείου γύναι· / θεοῦ μὲν εὐνάτειρα Περσῶν, θεοῦ δὲ καὶ μήτηρ ἔφυς. Couch 1931, 318, concluded that Aeschylus referred to the act of προσκύνησις as a seemly supplication of the gods, while giving it an unfavourable or cowardly connotation as it pertains to mortals. In the former instance it may be interpreted as “obesance”; in the latter as “deprecation”, or by some other words of derogatory signification.

bowing in front of another (he uses the verb προσκυνεῖν along with προσπίπτειν to describe this custom)⁵⁵ in a social context, when considering it as a part of the Persian ritual of greeting (1.134.1):⁵⁶

“When one man meets another on the road, it is easy to see if the two are equals; for, if they are, they kiss each other on the lips without speaking; if the difference in rank is small, the cheek is kissed; if it is great, the humbler bows and does obeisance to the other (προσπίπτων προσκυνέει)” (transl. by A. D. Godley).

Herodotus distinguishes *proskynēsis* from the normal kissing that was used among the Persians of equal rank for greeting. Strabo (15.3.20 C. 734–5) also resembles Herodotus’ judgement on *proskynēsis* though he does not refer to it as prostration. According to this author, on meeting persons of their acquaintance, and of equal rank with themselves, on the road, they approach and kiss them, but to persons of an inferior station they offer the cheek, and in that manner receive the kiss. But to persons of still lower condition they do only *proskynēsis* (προσκυνοῦσι).

In Book 7.136.1 Herodotus used the word προσκυνεῖν twice (again in conjunction with προσπίπτειν) when referring to *proskynēsis* in his story about the Spartan delegates Sperthias and Bulis who came to Xerxes’ royal court. The historian states that when the envoys came to Susa, into the King’s presence, and the guards commanded and would have compelled them to perform *proskynēsis* by bowing down (προσκυνέειν βασιλέα προσπίπτοντας), they said they would never do that. The envoys replied to the Persians that they would refuse this even if they were thrust down headlong, for it was not their custom to do *proskynēsis* to mortal men (οὔτε γάρ σφι ἐν νόμῳ εἶναι ἄνθρωπον προσκυνέειν). So Herodotus also followed the common Greek belief that *proskynēsis* was a ritual reserved for the worship of the gods.

⁵⁵ Balsdon 1950, 374, considered that an exact expression for such physical abasement was προσπίπτειν προσκυνεῖν. Matarese 2014, 131 f., comments on this report by Herodotus. She notes that in some passages a participial form of προσπίπτειν was to be found, when the main verb was προσκυνεῖν. Therefore προσπίπτειν must be read just as possessive, a specification which indicates what kind of movement the body does or which position it assumes in the moment when “the kiss is sent”. Alternatively one can propose that προσκυνεῖν in Herodotus was not yet a *terminus technicus* and it did not indicate the sending of a kiss towards the King. This term could have been translated simply as “doing *proskynēsis*” (i.e. worship, obeisance). In this case προσπίπτειν must be a *terminus technicus* indicating the manner of performing *proskynēsis*.

⁵⁶ Similarly Herodotus (2.80) supposed that the Egyptians do not address each other, but salute by lowering the hand to the knee when one man meets another on the road (ἀντὶ τοῦ προσαγορεύειν ἀλλήλους ἐν τῆσι ὁδοῖσι προσκυνέουσι κατιέντες μέχρι τοῦ γούνατος τὴν χεῖρα).

Some other references of Herodotus to *proskynēsis* in the Persian Empire do not provide us with details about this ceremony. In Book 3 the historian simply reported that the six Persians, when Darius was elected King, leapt from their horses and saluted him with *proskynēsis* (3.86.2: προσεκύνεον τὸν Δαρεῖον). In Book 7 he said that the people rejoiced and performed *proskynēsis* before Xerxes (κεχαρηκότες προσεκύνεον) after his decision about the expedition to Greece was known (7.13.3). In Book 8 Herodotus told the story about Xerxes being saved during the voyage from Greece to Asia (8.118.4). The storm was threatening to destroy a ship because it was full of Persians, so the King was afraid and cried to the ship's helmsman asking him if there was any way of deliverance. The helmsman answered to Xerxes that they should rid themselves of the many men who were on board. Xerxes said to the Persians that they should prove their concern for their King. At this they did *proskynēsis* (προσκυνέοντας) and leapt into the sea. The ship, much lighter, came safe to Asia. Despite the fact that in Book 1 *proskynēsis* was to be seen as a normal custom of greeting, used among all the Persians, other passages of Herodotus strongly suggest this ceremony was only used to salute the kings.

Xenophon referred to *proskynēsis* in Persia thirteen times (Xen. Cyr. 2.4.19; 4.4.13; 5.3.18; 7.5.32; 8.3.14 [twice]; Anab. 1.6.10 [twice]; 8.21; 3.2.9, 13; Hell. 4.1.35; Ages. 1.34). In the *Cyropaedia*, in 2.4.19, the historian made Cyrus perform *proskynēsis* to Zeus the King: προσεκύνησε Δία βασιλέα. In other passages Xenophon narrated that prisoners of war performed *proskynēsis* in front of Cyrus (4.4.13); the eunuch Gadatas, the commander of a fortress in Babylonia, sided with Cyrus and also greeted him with *proskynēsis*, performing it according to the custom (τῷ νόμῳ προσκυνήσας) and saying: Χαῖρε, Κύρε (5.3.18). After the capture of Babylon both commanders, Gadatas and Gobrias, when approaching Cyrus first saluted the gods with *proskynēsis* and then kissed the hands and the feet of the King. Xenophon's phrase καὶ θεοὺς μὲν πρῶτον προσεκύνουν [...] ἔπειτα δὲ Κύρου κατεφίλουν καὶ χεῖρας καὶ πόδας surely denotes two actions of *proskynēsis* performed one after another, the first used to worship the gods, and the second to salute the King (7.5.32). Therefore the historian mentions the action which the ceremony of *proskynēsis* surely included: kissing the hands and feet of the King. There is no mention in this passage of Xenophon that Gadatas and Gobrias prostrated themselves before Cyrus, but technically it was impossible to kiss someone's hands and feet without bowing towards him.

The mention of *proskynēsis* occurs again in Xenophon's description of Cyrus' splendid procession (8.3.15): when the people saw the King, all performed *proskynēsis* before him (πάντες προσεκύνησαν), either because some had been instructed to begin this act of homage, or because they were overcome by the splendour of his presence, or because Cyrus appeared so great and so goodly to

look upon. Xenophon notes that none of the Persians had ever done *proskynēsis* towards Cyrus before (πρόσθεν δὲ Περσῶν οὐδεὶς Κῦρον προσεκύνει).⁵⁷

In the *Anabasis* Xenophon says that the followers of Cyrus the Younger rejoiced and greeted him with *proskynēsis* as if he was already king (ἡδόμενος καὶ προσκυνούμενος ἤδη ὡς βασιλεὺς ὑπὸ τῶν ἀμφ’ αὐτόν; 1.8.21); the noble Persian Orontas, who held the fortress of Sardis against Cyrus, when he was arrested and condemned to death was also saluted in such a manner (1.6.10):

“And when the men who in former days were wont to do him homage (πρόσθεν προσεκύνουν) saw him, they made their obeisance even then (τότε προσεκύνησαν), although they knew that he was being led forth to death” (transl. by C. L. Brownson).

In this Xenophon confirms Herodotus’ notion that *proskynēsis* was performed not only before the King, but also before every noble Persian by those who were inferior in social status.⁵⁸ In another passage Xenophon says that in the time of Xerxes’ expedition the Greeks did not perform *proskynēsis* to a human *despotes*, but to the gods alone (οὐδένα γὰρ ἄνθρωπον δεσπότην ἀλλὰ τοὺς θεοὺς προσκυνεῖτε; 3.2.13). In this sentence the historian expresses the same idea as Herodotus (7.136) does in the story of Sperthias and Bulis (in 3.2.9 Xenophon mentions that the soldiers did *proskynēsis* to a god).

Plutarch mentions *proskynēsis* in the Persian Empire in various of his works. First of all let us turn to his “Lives” devoted to Artaxerxes and Themistocles. Plutarch in his *Artaxerxes* narrated that this King himself did *proskynēsis* to the goddess Hera by touching the earth with his hands (τῇ Ἥρᾳ προσκυνῆσαι μόνην θεῶν ἐκείνην, ταῖς χερσὶ τῆς γῆς ἀψάμενος; 23.7), and later called on other Persians to do *proskynēsis* to the Sun (τὸν Ἥλιον προσκυνῆσαι; 29.12). But more striking is Plutarch’s testimony in Art. 15.7: he is describing a banquet of the Persians in which the householder called on guests to eat and drink doing *proskynēsis* to the deity of the King (πίνωμεν ἐν τῷ παρόντι καὶ ἐσθίωμεν, τὸν βασιλέως δαίμονα προσκυνούντες). It is uncertain whether the King’s deity was personified in an image or if it was only the invisible spiritual essence of the King. There is some evidence for the worship of the deity (δαίμων) of the reigning kings as well as for a hero cult of the dead kings.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ On other features of Persian/Median ceremonial rites in Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* cf. Azoulay 2004, 147–173.

⁵⁸ Petit 2004, 182, referred to the case of Orontas to argue for homage practices in the Achaemenid Empire. The Septuagint’s Book of Esther (3.5; 4.17d) refers to refusing to perform *proskynēsis* by Mordechai before the Persian official Haman.

⁵⁹ Taylor 1927, 56 was of the opinion that there was both a cult of the living King and a hero-cult of the dead King in the Persian Empire. She argued the Persians worshipped the *fravashi* of the

Indeed, a version of a story about Esther cited by the Suda (ε 3139 Adler Ἐσθήρ) records that King Artaxerxes I proclaimed by the royal edict that the Hebrews should give up the worship of God, replacing it with *proskynēsis* in front of his own image (προσκυνεῖν δὲ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ εἰκόνα). But other facts rather support the view that the King's deity could have been considered by the Persians as a spiritual essence.⁶⁰ The worship of the deity of the King is confirmed by Athenaeus, referring to the behavior of Nicostratus the Argive, leader of the mercenaries in the army of Artaxerxes III Ochus. Every day when Nicostratus was about to go to supper he had a table set apart, to which he gave the name of the table of the King's deity, loading it with meat and all other requisites; because he heard that those who lived at the doors of the royal palace among the Persians did the same thing, and thought that by this courtier-like attention he should get more from the King (Athen. 6.252B–C).

This piece of evidence lets us think that Nicostratus wished to show his respect to some spiritual essence of the King, which may also have been honoured with *proskynēsis* by the Persian courtiers. One also needs to cite Polyaeus' interesting statement that Datames, the Persian satrap, when besieging Sinope, had received a message from the King and after reading it did *proskynēsis* immediately to the royal letter: προσεκύνησε τὴν ἐπιστολὴν (Polyain. Strat. 7.21.5). All this evidence suggests that *proskynēsis* went beyond the usual greeting of two Persians when they met on the street.

Plutarch in his *Themistocles* says that this Athenian politician when he was approaching the King performed *proskynēsis*, saying that by his example he would encourage other Greeks to do this action: καὶ δι' ἐμὲ πλείονες τῶν νῦν βασιλέα προσκυνήσουσιν (Plut. Them. 27.3–4).⁶¹ When Themistocles was seeking an audience with the King, the chiliarch Artabanus addressed him with the words:

“Now you Hellenes are said to admire liberty and equality above all things; but in our eyes, among many fair customs, this is the fairest of all, to honor the King, and to pay obeisance to him as the image of that god who is the preserver of all things (ἡμῖν δὲ πολλῶν νόμων καὶ καλῶν ὄντων κάλλιστος οὗτός ἐστι, τιμᾶν βασιλέα καὶ προσκυνεῖν ὡς εἰκόνα θεοῦ τοῦ τὰ

King, which they depicted as a winged disc and the Greeks referred to as βασιλέως δαίμων. There is an opinion in scholarship that the so-called winged disc with a male figure was the symbol or emblem of the Achaemenids, expressed as *Farnah* (av. Xʰarənah), and could have been interpreted by the Greeks as the δαίμων of the King. Cf. Shabbazi 1980, 119–147; Binder 2008, 244–246. A fragmentary poem from Susa dated to the Parthian period referred to the worship of the deity of Phraates the God: Φραάτου τε θεοῦ δαίμονι (Cumont 1930, 212).

⁶⁰ Isocrates notes that the Persians performed *proskynēsis* to a mortal man and did salutation to his deity (θνητὸν μὲν ἄνδρα προσκυνούντες καὶ δαίμονα προσαγορεύοντες: 4.151).

⁶¹ Frost 1980, 215, thinks that *proskynēsis* was prostration before the King.

πάντα σφύζοντος). If, then, you approves our practice and will pay obeisance (προσκυνήσεις), it is in you power to behold and address the King; but if you otherwise minded, it will be needful for you to employ messengers to him instead, for it is not a custom of this country that the King give ear to a man who has not paid him obeisance (μὴ προσκυνήσαντος)” (transl. by B. Perrin).

Plutarch seems to have been one of the classical authors who followed the Greek popular opinion that the Persian officials refused to grant access to the King for audience to those of the Greeks who had not done him *proskynēsis*. Aelian (V.H. 1.21) writes of the attendance of Ismenias of Thebes at the royal court at Susa in company with another Theban envoy, Pelopidas. He tells us that Ismenias would himself have spoken to the King about his business, but the chiliarch Tithraustes, whose office it was to report business to the King,⁶² and to conduct such as were admitted to his presence, told him that the law of the Persians was, that he who comes into the King’s presence should not speak with him till he has first performed *proskynēsis* to him: νόμος ἐστὶν ἐπιχώριος Πέρσαις, τὸν ἐς ὄφθαλμοῦς ἐλθόντα βασιλέως μὴ πρότερον λόγου μεταλαγχάνειν πρὶν ἢ προσκυνῆσαι αὐτόν. If therefore Ismenias would go to the King in person, he must do what the law required (τὰ ἐκ τοῦ νόμου δρᾶν); otherwise his business would be done by the chiliarch. Ismenias agreed on these terms and was granted access to the King. Both authors, Plutarch (Art. 22.4) and Aelian (V.H. 1.21), describe the behaviour of Ismenias at the royal court which they see as obsequious, and they thereby pass judgment on *proskynēsis* as bowing down before the King. These authors report a curious story that Ismenias, when ordered to perform *proskynēsis* to the King, threw his ring down on the ground in front of him, and then stooped and picked it up, thus giving men to think that he was doing *proskynēsis*:

προσελθὼν καὶ ἐμφανῆς τῷ βασιλεῖ γενόμενος, περιελόμενος τὸν δακτύλιον ἔρριψεν ἀδήλως παρὰ τοὺς πόδας, καὶ ταχέως ἐπικύψας, ὡς δὴ προσκυνῶν, πάλιν ἀνείλετο (Aelian); προσκυνῆσαι κελευόμενος ἐξέβαλε πρὸ αὐτοῦ χαμᾶζε τὸν δακτύλιον, εἶτα κύψας ἀνείλετο καὶ παρέσχε δόξαν προσκυνούντος (Plutarch).⁶³

Nepos and Justin also record that Conon of Athens received the same treatment from the Persians when he went to the King. According to Nepos (9. Conon 3.2–4),

⁶² On the office of the chiliarch and its role at the Persian royal court see Keaveney 2010, 499–508.

⁶³ Scott 1928/1929, 374, supposed that *proskynēsis* here meant bowing down and not prostration or waving a kiss. One can suggest that Ismenias could have performed *proskynēsis* as he understood it, but not as Persian custom required (i.e. Ismenias’ *proskynēsis* probably was technically incorrect from the Persians’ point of view).

on his arrival, Conon, according to Persian manner (*ex more Persarum*), came to the chiliarch Tithraustes, who held the second place in the empire, and signified that he wished to speak to the King; for no one is admitted without this ceremony. Tithraustes answered him that there was no objection on his part, but Conon should consider whether he would rather speak with the King or be treated by letter. If he came into the royal presence, it would be necessary for him to pay adoration to the King (which the Greeks call *proskynēsis*: *venerari te regem quod προσκύνησιν illi vocant*); otherwise Conon might state his business through him. Conon replied that it was not disagreeable to him to pay any honour to the King, but he was afraid that it would be objectionable to his country. So, he delivered to the King in writing what he wished to communicate. As Justin also reports, Conon was debarred from any interview or conference with the King, because he would not do him homage after the manner of the Persians: *a cuius aspectu et conloquio prohibitus est, quod eum more Persarum adorare nollet* (Just. Epit. 6.2.12–16).

5. *Proskynēsis* at the Court of Alexander the Great

The description of *proskynēsis* performed at Alexander's royal court during his expedition to Asia can be found almost in all the Alexander historians. Arrian (Anab. 4.10–12) referred to a dispute between Anaxarchus and Callisthenes about the introduction of *proskynēsis* to worship Alexander like a god. The first man supported the idea of gratifying the Macedonian king with divine honours, while the latter objected to the proposition. Callisthenes even made a distinction between honours for living men and those for the gods, representing in his speech *proskynēsis* as a form of divine honours:

“I openly declare that there is no honour which Alexander is unworthy to receive, provided that it is consistent with his being human; but men have made distinctions between those honours which are due to men, and those due to gods, in many different ways, as for instance by the building of temples and by the erection of statues. Moreover for the gods sacred enclosures are selected, to them sacrifice is offered, and to them libations are made. Hymns also are composed in honour of the gods, and eulogies for men. But the greatest distinction is made by the custom of prostration (τῷ τῆς προσκυνήσεως νόμῳ). For it is the practice that men should be kissed by those who salute them; but because the deity is located somewhere above, it is not lawful even to touch him, and this is the reason no doubt why he is honoured by prostration (τῇ προσκυνήσει γεραίρεται). Bands of choral dancers are also appointed for the gods, and paeans are sung in their honour. And this is not at all wonderful, seeing that certain honours are specially assigned to some of the gods and certain others to other gods, and, by Zeus, quite different ones again are assigned to heroes, which are very distinct from those paid to the deities. It is not therefore reasonable

to confound all these distinctions without discrimination, exalting men to a rank above their condition by extravagant accumulation of honours, and debasing the gods, as far as lies in human power, to an unseemly level, by paying them honours only equal to those paid to men” (Arr. Anab. 4.11.1–9, transl. by E. J. Chinnock).

It is also said in this speech that Cyrus, son of Cambyses, was the first man to whom the honour of *proskynēsis* was paid, and that afterwards this “degrading ceremony” continued in vogue among the Persians and Medes: δὲ ὑπὲρ Κύρου τοῦ Καμβύσου λέγεται πρῶτον προσκυνηθῆναι ἀνθρώπων Κύρον καὶ ἐπὶ τῷδε ἔμμεῖναι Πέρσαις τε καὶ Μήδοις τήνδε τὴν ταπεινότητα (4.11.9). As Arrian explicitly states, Alexander was annoyed with Callisthenes’ speech, but nevertheless sent to prevent the Macedonians from making any further mention of the ceremony of *proskynēsis* (4.12.1).⁶⁴

Arrian further narrates some other episodes relating to Alexander’s action aiming at the introduction of *proskynēsis*; however, his description of this ceremony looks strange. First of all, he writes that the Persians at Alexander’s royal court continued to perform *proskynēsis*. When one of the eldest Persians seemed to have performed the ceremony in an awkward way (οὐκ ἐν κόσμῳ προσκυνησαι), Leonnatus, one of the Companions, laughed at his posture as a wretched humiliation (τῷ σχήματι τοῦ Περσοῦ ὡς ταπεινῶ; 4.12.2).⁶⁵ Anyway, it is unclear what the phrase οὐκ ἐν κόσμῳ προσκυνησαι means in this particular context: Chiara Matarese, for example, proposed that this Persian could have performed an act of prostration, while Alexander demanded only hand-kissing.⁶⁶

According to another story, Alexander drank from a golden cup and handed it first to those with whom he had arranged the ceremony of *proskynēsis*. The first

⁶⁴ Justin simply notes that Alexander gave orders that he should not be approached with mere salutation, but with adoration: *salutari, sed adorari*. Among those who refused to obey, the most resolute was Callisthenes; but his opposition proved fatal, both to himself and to several other eminent Macedonians, who were all put to death on the pretence that they were engaged in a conspiracy. The custom of saluting their King was however retained by the Macedonians, adoration being set aside: *retentus tamen est a Macedonibus mos salutandi regis explosa adorazione* (Epit. 12.7.1–3). On Callisthenes’ opposition to Alexander about the introduction of *proskynēsis* see: O’Sullivan 2020.

⁶⁵ Curtius ascribes this episode to Polyperchon (8.5.22). Heckel 1978, 459–461, demonstrated that it was impossible for Polyperchon to participate because he was not present when the *proskynēsis* affair took place. Plutarch narrates a similar story in the relation to Cassander, the son of Antipater: “Cassander, had only recently come to Babylon, and when he saw some Barbarians doing obeisance to Alexander (δὲ βαρβάρους τινὰς προσκυνοῦντας), since he had been reared as a Greek and had never seen such a sight as this before, he laughed boisterously.” (Plut. Alex. 74.2–3).

⁶⁶ Matarese 2013, 84.

who drank from the cup performed the act of *proskynēsis*, rose up and received a kiss from him. This ceremony proceeded from one to another in due order. But when Callisthenes' turn came for the pledging of health, he rose up and drank from the cup, and drew near, wishing to kiss the King without performing *proskynēsis*. When Callisthenes was approaching to kiss him, Demetrius, son of Pythonax, one of the Companions, said that he was doing so without having done *proskynēsis*. So the King would not permit him to kiss him; whereupon the philosopher said that he was going away only with the loss of a kiss (Anab. 4.12.3–5). It is doubtful that Arrian described the ceremony of *proskynēsis* as it was used in the Persian Empire, but rather he presents an amalgam of the Macedonian ritual of *symposia*, a Persian ritual of kissing and the ceremony of *proskynēsis*.⁶⁷ This episode, including some new details, is also reported by Plutarch (Alex. 54.4) quoting Chares of Mytilene.⁶⁸

Elias Bickerman argued that Alexander did not demand prostration from his Macedonian friends and he would have been satisfied only with the gesture of hand-kissing from them.⁶⁹ Brian Bosworth saw a dilemma as to whether or not the act of *proskynēsis* included full prostration, physical abasement before a ruler (in Greek and Oriental cultures this was a possibility). Having referred to

67 Richards 1934, 168–170, concluded that the ceremony desired at Bactria was the pledging of the king's health coupled with the traditional Persian kiss and *proskynēsis*, which to the Macedonians (Leonnatus) appeared degrading, and to Callisthenes an appearance of abasement before a divinity,

68 Plutarch's story of the *proskynēsis* affair (Alex. 54.4) differs from Arrian's. In Plutarch we read: "Chares of Mitylene says that once at a banquet Alexander, after drinking, handed the cup to one of his friends, and he, on receiving it, rose up so as to face the household shrine, and when he had drunk, first made obeisance to Alexander, then kissed him, and then resumed his place upon the couch" (τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον ἐν τῷ συμποσίῳ πίνοντα φιάλην προτεῖναι τιμὴν τῶν φίλων· τὸν δὲ δεξάμενον πρὸς ἐστίαν ἀναστῆναι, καὶ πίνοντα προσκυνῆσαι πρῶτον, εἶτα φιλήσαι τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον [ἐν τῷ συμποσίῳ] καὶ κατακλιθῆναι). The question arises: what was the *ἐστία* before which the people were standing, drinking and making *proskynēsis* during a banquet? Taylor 1927, 58, thought that the *proskynēsis* that Chares described was not an obeisance before Alexander himself, but was an act of worship to Alexander which took place before the altar of the household gods. However, her notion seems to be very hypothetical: "It represented the sending of a cult kiss toward the statue of the King on the altar" (Taylor referred to the opinion of P. Schnabel and concluded that it was an adaptation of a regular Persian banquet custom of honouring the King's *daimon*, one form of the Persian *proskynēsis*). There is no evidence that the ceremony that Chares described involved actions in relation to Alexander's statue. Tarn 1928, 207, accepted the viewpoint (originally expressed by W. Otto) that the function of the *ἐστία* was to carry the external fire which burned before the Persian Kings. However, there is also an opinion that the *ἐστία* was related to Greek cult practice. For discussion see Hamilton 1969, 152.

69 Bickerman 1963, 241–255. Hamilton 1969, 150, however, states that there is no doubt that Alexander proposed to introduce "prostration".

some evidence suggesting that *proskynēsis* did not necessarily mean prostration in Greek eyes, he further concluded that it would be possible to argue that Alexander did not insist on full abasement, which his courtiers might well have found intolerably humiliating, but allowed them to remain standing.⁷⁰ Chiara Matarese suggests that the Macedonians when performing *proskynēsis* to Alexander did not prostrate themselves before him, but saluted him with hand-kissing. She writes as follows:

“Introducing the Persian ceremonial, Alexander asked the *hetairoi*, at first, to maintain a distance from him and not to give a kiss but to send it. And just after that they were allowed to kiss him. I think that Alexander had planned to preserve the kiss in that context, just as a sop to the *hetairoi*. The kiss is the (false) pledge to have their privileges granted. The *conditio sine qua non* to receive is to accept what the King was asking for, and that was the *proskynēsis*.”⁷¹

However, Arrian’s description of the sequence of actions in Bactria seems to suggest that *proskynēsis* was the act of prostration before the King: τὸν δὲ πρῶτον ἐκπιόντα τὴν φιάλην προσκυνῆσαί τε ἀναστάντα καὶ φιληθῆναι πρὸς αὐτοῦ. It is clear from this report that someone approaching the King first drank from the cup, then did *proskynēsis*, then rose up and received a kiss from Alexander (Anab. 4.2.2). Curtius more certainly describes *proskynēsis* to Alexander as prostration performed before the King: he reports that Alexander ordered the Macedonians to pay their respects to him in the Persian fashion and to salute him by prostrating themselves on the ground: *iussitque more Persarum Macedonas venerabundos ipsum salutare prosternentes humi corpora* (Curt. 8.5.6).⁷²

70 Bosworth 1995, 70.

71 Matarese 2013, 80.

72 Polyaeus (Strat. 4.3.5) tells of a stratagem: that Alexander, advancing against Darius, ordered the Macedonians to fall down on their hands and knees (εἰς γόνυ κλίναντες ταῖν χερσῶν διατρίβετε τὴν γῆν). and, as soon as the trumpet sounded the charge, to rise up and vigorously attack the enemy. They did so; and the Persians, considering it as an act of *proskynēsis* (οἱ δὲ Πέρσαι σχῆμα προσκυνήσεως ἰδόντες), relaxed their impetuosity, and their minds became softened towards their prostrate foe. Darius too was led to think he had gained a victory without the hazard of a battle.

6. The Achaemenid Representation of *proskynēsis*

Cyrus the Great, the famous founder of the Achaemenid Empire, in his Cylinder referred to the ceremony of salutation of the King in order to get recognition of his lordship from the Babylonian people, as well as the governors from other countries which submitted to him after his capture of Babylon in 539. The Cyrus Cylinder runs: “All the people of Babylon, of all Sumer and Akkad, nobles and governors, bowed down before him and kissed his feet, rejoicing over his kingship and their faces shone” (18). The following record of this inscription is made in the name of Cyrus: “From every quarter, from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea, those who inhabit [remote distric]ts (and) the kings of the land of Amurru who live in tents, all of them, brought their weighty tribute into Shuanna, and kissed my feet” (29f.).

Certainly, the salutation of Cyrus was performed according to the ceremony used long before in Mesopotamia, but this is well explained also by Cyrus’ politics in Babylon, aimed at the adoption of local Mesopotamian traditions. Besides, the Cyrus Cylinder reflected Persian propaganda; it was written in Akkadian and it was intended for the people of Babylonia.⁷³ There is no testimony coming from Iran that the Achaemenid kings followed such a ceremony as that represented by Cyrus the Great in his Cylinder.

The Achaemenid relief scenes show the salutation of the King only as a hand-kissing procedure rather than as prostration, falling down or kneeling. The most famous are the Achaemenid reliefs from the Apadana in Persepolis: one of them on the North Stairs and the second on the East Stairs, which depict the court scenes when the King receives one of his officials, possibly the chiliarch (*hazarapatiš*) or chamberlain / usher, who is depicted as performing the ceremony of salutation by slightly bowing and hand-kissing⁷⁴ (fig. 10 and 11). These reliefs also depict the King’s heir, probably Xerxes, standing behind the King Darius seated on his throne and lifting his right hand as the gesture of salutation of the attenders. Similar Persian court scenes were discovered on bullas from Dascylaeum, which have been published by Deniz Kaptan.⁷⁵ Finally, the scenes from the Stairs of the Apadana show processions of the Medes and the Persians at the royal court where some visitors salute the King by hand kissing (fig. 12).

⁷³ Finkel 2013, 4–34.

⁷⁴ Schmidt 1953, 133; Kuhrt 2007, 536–538.

⁷⁵ Kaptan 2002, 28–40.

However, *proskynēsis* in the Achaemenid Empire also had religious connotations and went beyond the audience court ceremonies. Mark Garrison has recently investigated the Persepolitan glyptic and draws our attention to the scenes with the attendants who hold a hand over / near the mouth, and proposes that it would suggest to a contemporary viewer a processional scene within a religious context – a ritual procession.⁷⁶ Meanwhile the reliefs on the right side wall on the tombs of Darius I, Xerxes, Artaxerxes I and Darius II from Naqsh-e Rostam and of Artaxerxes II & III from Persepolis depict some noble Persians praying toward the King by raising their hands to their mouths (fig. 13). The recently discovered trilingual Achaemenid inscription from this site lets us abandon the popular opinion that persons who were depicted in Naqsh-e Rostam reliefs with their left hands raised to their mouths were Mourners,⁷⁷ but instead we can propose that these Persians invoked blessings upon the King.⁷⁸ Rüdiger Schmitt suggests that the relief may depict an official defined by the Greeks as εἰσαγγελεύς who served as chamberlain or usher introducing visitors at the Persian royal court.⁷⁹

If one considers the literary sources explaining *proskynēsis* as a hand-kissing gesture, but not as prostration or falling down, a *glossa* of Hesychius (α 5513 Latte ἀντίχειρε) may be worth citing: “Salute with the thumb: sometimes barbarian peoples put their thumbs under their chins and by straightening the fingers do *proskynēsis* before their rulers.”⁸⁰

Xenophon (Hell. 2.1.8) refers to a Persian ritual of greeting the King by some noble Persians that at first glance may remind us of *proskynēsis*:

⁷⁶ Garrison 2017, 410.

⁷⁷ Schmidt 1970, 87a. Root 1979, 179 regarded these scenes as “the act of respect” rather than “mourning”. Garrison 2017, 403–412 compared them to the Persepolitan glyptic and proposed that they should be understood as the ritual procession in the religious context.

⁷⁸ Delshad – Doroodi 2019, 15 state: “The discovery of DNf above the top unarmed figure and the act of the figure described in the text could help researchers discuss such a gesture with more appropriate information [...]. The verbal analysis in DNf (based mostly on the Babylonian verb *karābu*) would suggest that the figure invokes blessing upon the King.”

⁷⁹ Schmitt 2019, 48. Schmitt (2019, 45) convincingly shows that this person was Otanes (*Utāna* in Old Persian), which seems to be a plausible solution from an epigraphical as well as historical perspective (Otanēs’ name fits well into the lacuna in DNf; two other persons mentioned in DNC and DNd were Gobryas and Aspathines, both associated with Otanes in Herodotus’ account: 3.70.1–2).

⁸⁰ ἀντίχειρε· ἔνια τῶν βαρβάρων ἔθνῶν τοὺς ἀντίχειρας ὑποτιθέντα τοῖς γενεῖοις καὶ τοὺς δακτύλους ἐκτείνοντα προσκυνεῖ τοὺς ἡγουμένους αὐτῶν. Some other Greek authors, when reporting on the use of hand-kissing, include it in a religious context. Thus Pseudo-Lucian (Dem. Enc. 49) referred to Demosthenes’ death saying that when he lifted his hand to his mouth, he performed *proskynēsis*.



Fig. 10: The Central Relief of the North Stairs from the Apadana in Persepolis. The National Museum of Iran, Tehran (photo: E. Rung, 22.02.2020).



Fig. 11: The Relief of the eastern staircase from the Apadana, Persepolis (photo: E. Rung, 22.02.2020).



Fig. 12: Details of a Group of Medes and Persians, Persepolis
(photo: E. Rung, 22.02.2020).

“Cyrus put to death Autoboesaces and Mitraeus, who were sons of Darius’ sister – the daughter of Darius’ father Xerxes – because upon meeting him they did not thrust their hands through the *corē*, an honour they show the King alone (ὅτι αὐτῷ ἀπαντῶντες οὐ διέωσαν διὰ τῆς κόρης τὰς χεῖρας, ὃ ποιῶσι βασιλεῖ μόνον) (The *corē* is a longer sleeve than the *cheiris*, and a man who had his hand in one would be powerless to do anything)” (transl. by C. L. Brownson).⁸¹

However, one can imagine that these noble Persians “thrust their hands through the *corē*” by means of lifting their hands to their mouths. That is why Xenophon’s testimony may reasonably be considered as evidence of performing *proskynēsis* by the Persian nobility that was also reflected on the processional reliefs scenes at Persepolis (fig. 12).

⁸¹ Cf. Xen. Cyr. 8.3.10: “And all the cavalry-men had alighted and stood there beside their horses, and they all had their hands thrust through the sleeves of their doublets, just as they do even to this day when the King sees them” (καὶ διεϊρκότες τὰς χεῖρας διὰ τῶν κανδύων, ὡσπερ καὶ νῦν ἔτι διεῖρουσιν, ὅταν ὄρῃ βασιλεύς).



Fig. 13: The Relief from the Tomb of Artaxerxes III. Persepolis (photo: E. Rung, 22.02.2020).

7. The Significance of *proskynēsis*

There is a discussion in scholarship whether *proskynēsis* was an expression of divine honours for the Persian kings or not. Geo Widengren argued for divine honours;⁸² but most scholars have challenged this interpretation. Richard Frye notes that for the Achaemenids *proskynēsis* did not signify abject humility before a god, but rather a sign of respect towards royalty.⁸³ Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones writes:

“The misunderstanding of the Persian act of *proskynēsis* as a veneration of divine monarchy (a claim never made by the Achaemenid kings themselves, nor understood that way by the Persians) accounts for several Greek tales which take the distaste for this act of social submission as their theme.”⁸⁴

Arthur Keaveney suggests:

“*Proskynēsis* is the gesture of respect one Persian makes to another whom he regards as his superior in their hierarchical society. The King, of course, is at the very pinnacle of this society and as a result is very often mentioned in our sources as receiving this honour.”⁸⁵

However, the Achaemenid glyptic and the reliefs on the Tombs of the Persian kings may include *proskynēsis* to the King in the Persian Empire in a religious context.

Certainly, the customary Persian ritual of greeting and the ceremony of salutation of the King in Persian minds could have been reported and described as *proskynēsis* by the Greeks. In the east all these ritual actions were expressions of the universal custom of salutation, commonly used for people and for gods (among them, prostration was a gesture of salutation as well as of submission). In Greece the same gestures of greeting were reserved for the gods only, so in the case of them being used for mortal men the Greeks considered them as self-humiliation and inappropriate for mortals. It is not surprising that classical authors referred exclusively to falling down or prostration, but did not touch upon other forms of salutation of the King by the people (normal kissing is an exception to the rule because it was not considered *proskynēsis* by the Greeks). Greek visitors to the royal courts in the Persian Empire paid attention only to such actions as they witnessed during their audiences with the King. As a result they saw the Persian ceremony of *proskynēsis* as taking forms of prostration, falling down or

⁸² Widengren 1959, 242–257.

⁸³ Frye 1962, 96.

⁸⁴ Llewellyn-Jones 2013, 72.

⁸⁵ Keaveney 2012, 37.

kneeling, and they interpreted it in terms of their own mentality, as reminding them of their actions towards the gods when they were praying. A distinct form of *proskynēsis* found in the iconographic evidence from the territory of the Achaemenid Empire looked like hand-kissing gesture.

It is possible that the technique of *proskynēsis* to the King may have depended on the social status as well as the official position of those attending on the King. The Persian noble officials who always occupied higher positions probably were obliged to make a hand-kissing with (or without) a small bow, as the Achaemenid reliefs clearly show. The rest of the people were required to perform *proskynēsis* as prostration or bowing down. Foreigners, including envoys, at the Persian court probably belonged to the second group. The difference in the salutation of the King appears in reports by classical authors who refer to the royal kinsmen as performing the ceremony of salutation by kissing the King and receiving a kiss from him.⁸⁶

Kinsmen as a special social group at the royal court are known from the sources. According to Xenophon, it is said that when Cyrus was going away, his kinsmen bade him good-bye, after the Persian custom, with a kiss upon his lips, and that custom has survived, as the historian notes, for the Persians do it even to his day: λέγεται, ὅτε Κῦρος ἀπήει καὶ ἀπηλλάττοντο ἀπ' ἀλλήλων, τοὺς συγγενεῖς φιλοῦντας τῷ στόματι ἀποπέμπεσθαι αὐτὸν νόμῳ Περσικῷ· καὶ γὰρ νῦν ἔτι τοῦτο ποιοῦσι Πέρσαι (Xen. Cyr. 1.4.27). Arrian narrates that Alexander summoned the select Persians and made a rule that only those whom he had proclaimed his kinsmen should have the honour of saluting him with a kiss: καλέσας εἶσω τῶν Περσῶν τοὺς ἐπιλέκτους τὰς τε ἡγεμονίας αὐτοῖς τῶν τάξεων διένειμε καὶ ὅσους συγγενεῖς ἀπέφηνε, τούτοις δὲ νόμιμον ἐποίησε φιλεῖν αὐτὸν μόνοις (Arr. Anab. 7.11.1, 7).

So, it was the third social group, the royal kinsmen, who probably did not perform *proskynēsis*, but instead kissed the King. This was in agreement with Persian views on the ritual of salutation depending on the social hierarchy, and it is confirmed by Herodotus' report of the Persian ritual of greeting (Hdt. 1.134).⁸⁷ The fact that *proskynēsis* was the ritual of salutation by people of inferior status to a superior is confirmed by the evidence that it was also used among the royal women (ap. Athen. 13.3 Kaibel). The queen received respect from the concubines with *proskynēsis*: τὸ τήν βασιλίδα... ὑπὸ τῶν παλλακίδων θρησκέυεσθαι προσκυνοῦσι γοῦν αὐτήν (Deinon fr. 17 FHG [ii. 92] ap. Athen. 13.556B).⁸⁸ It is clear that *proskynēsis* at the Achaemenid royal court was a ceremony which almost

⁸⁶ Frijhoff 1993, 210–252.

⁸⁷ Pontier 2012, 611–630.

⁸⁸ Lenfant 2009, 235, emphasises that Deinon used the verb “to worship” (θρησκέυεσθαι), which is usually reserved for the gods. Persian iconography knows some female audience scenes, but

all attenders performed (except members of the royal family). However, the technique of *proskynēsis* was different and depended on the social status / official position of people coming to the court.

To conclude: The linguistic analysis of the new-discovered inscription from Naqsh-e Rostam and literary and pictorial evidences on *proskynēsis* in the Achaemenid Empire propose that the DNF inscription may include the verb (in both Old Persian and Akkadian languages) which described the gesture of *proskynēsis* as it was seen by the Persians.

Acknowledgements: This study was performed with financial support of the Russian Science Foundation, project No. 20-18-00374, implemented on the basis of Lobachevsky University of Nizhni Novgorod, while myself being an affiliated member of the Kazan Federal University, Russia. My special gratitude is addressed to †Dr. Arthur Keaveney (University of Kent) for polishing my English in this article. This article is dedicated to his memory.

Abbreviations

- ABL R. F. Harper (ed.), *Assyrian and Babylonian Letters*, 14 vols. Chicago 1892–1914.
 ANET J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, Princeton 1950.
 CAD *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, 20 vols., Chicago 1956–2010.
 LÄ *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, 7 vols., Wiesbaden, 1975–1992.
 LSJ H. G. Liddle – R. Scott – H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., with new supplement, Oxford 1996.
 RIM *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia*, 4 vols., Toronto 1990–2008.
 RINAP *The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period*, 5 vols., Winona Lake 2011–2018.

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none of them includes what may be certainly defined as *proskynēsis*. On these scenes see Brosius 2010, 141–152.

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