

Sources for the study of the Achaemenid Empire

by Pieter Alkemade

Introduction

At its peak the Achaemenid Empire stretched from northern Libya and Macedonia in the West to the Indus Valley in the East.



Map of the Achaemenid Empire around 500 B.C. (copyright original version Anton Gutsunaev 1983, copyright English version Uirauna 2009)

This vast area was inhabited by a variety of subjugated peoples that had their own local customs and (scribal) traditions. Hence, the textual material that has been found throughout the empire is diverse in character. Texts that provide information about the Achaemenid Empire and its organization pertain to various topics, they originate in different social contexts and they were written in different languages and on different writing materials. Although Aramaic was the official language for administrative communication, the number of available texts in this language is relatively low. The main reason for this is the fact that this Semitic language was mostly written on perishable materials, such as papyrus and leather.

This article presents a brief and general introduction into the various sources for the study of the Achaemenid Empire and their character.

The Babylonian sources

The cuneiform tablets from Babylonia (southern Iraq) form the largest group of sources that are available for study. The wedge-shaped script was impressed onto clay tablets which were then dried and occasionally baked, sometimes accidentally in a fire. As such clay tablets can easily survive for millennia buried under ruins and layers of earth. As a result tens of thousands of tablets have been found for the period of Achaemenid dominance and the preceding Neo-Babylonian period (626-539 B.C.), of

which over 20,000 can now be studied (the rest has not been published or read yet). The language used is the Neo-Babylonian dialect of Akkadian, a Semitic language that was already in use in the third millennium B.C.

The archival texts are administrative and legal records as well as letters. They come from private and temple archives dated to the late seventh, sixth and fifth centuries B.C. Information about the organization of the Achaemenid Empire can be gleaned from the contacts of the archive-holders (i.e. the urban elites including the priestly class, and the municipal and temple institutions) with the royal administration. These contacts were particularly intensive in the realm of the organization of taxation and corvée labor and the related organization of royal building projects, such as canals and roads.

A decisive break in our source material can be observed in the second year of the reign of Xerxes I (485-465 B.C.). In this year a Babylonian revolt against the Achaemenids was crushed and many archives from North Babylonia came to an end. It appears that the native urban elites that had supported the rebellions were removed from their seats of power and replaced by men with different backgrounds who were loyal to the Achaemenids. As a consequence, in the later archives and the archives from North Babylonia that do extend over the second year of Xerxes ties with the Persian aristocracy and administration play a much larger role in comparison.

Sources from Iran

The second-largest group of documents come from the Achaemenid capital Persepolis. The group consists of two sets of cuneiform tablets, mostly written in Elamite, a language that was used alongside Aramaic in the administration of the heartland of the empire. The texts were part of the regional Persepolis administration. One set, called the 'Fortification Archive', comprises 15,000 or more tablets with Elamite inscriptions, often sealed and sometimes with dockets written in Aramaic. 6,000-7,000 of these texts are useful for analytical study and of these around 2,400 have been published. They were written under king Darius I (522-484 B.C.) between 509 and 493 B.C.

Furthermore, 800 tablets with Aramaic writing and a few single texts in other languages (Old Persian, Babylonian, Greek and probably Phrygian) have been unearthed as well as 5,000 sealed unwritten tablets of which the exact function remains unclear. The archive documents the organization and control of the intake, storage and redistribution of foodstuffs in the imperial heartland. The recipients of these commodities were deities (as offerings), nobles (including the royal family), workers



*A Persepolis 'Fortification Tablet'
(copyright Persepolis Fortification
Archive Project, Oriental Institute,
Chicago)*

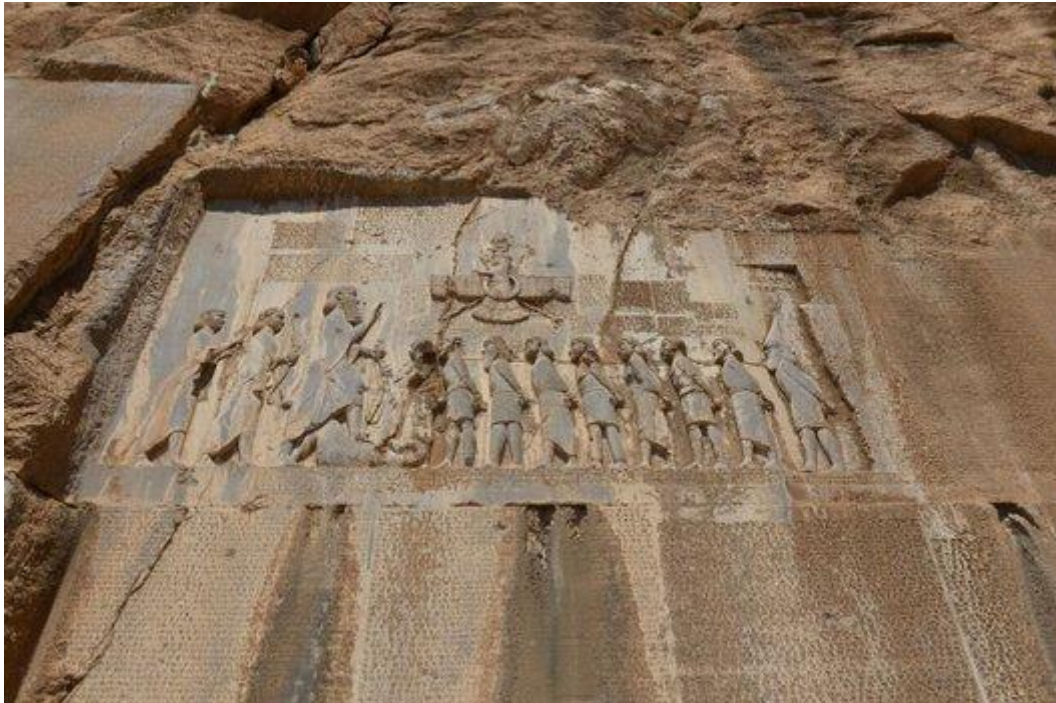
(as wages in kind) and animals (as fodder). The many sealings inform us about those involved in the transactions and as such functioned to identify, authenticate and verify.

The other set, the 'Treasury Archive', consists of tablets and fragments, of which 139 tablets have been published. All of these were written in Elamite with the exception of one Akkadian text. In addition, 199 unwritten sealed tablets and small pieces of clay called 'bullae' belong to this group. The Elamite texts are dated to the first half of the fifth century (492-458 B.C.), that is, between the thirtieth year of Darius I and the seventh of Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.). They record (partial) silver payments that were sometimes expended in place of rations in kind or to supplement the rations.

The 'Fortification Tablets' and 'Treasury Tablets' are particularly important for the study of the Achaemenid Empire as they provide us with information on a regional administration that has a strong connection with the royal sphere, a realm about which Babylonian sources tell us very little. Moreover, knowledge of the bureaucracy of the heartland is paramount to understanding the developments of the administrative structures in the various subjugated regions of the empire.

There are also some indications that the Persepolis administration was not the only one in Iran, but that there were other regional administrative systems of institutions near the Persian heartland.

Following ancient Near Eastern customs, Achaemenid kings had monumental inscriptions fashioned. These texts were mostly found in Iran. Most of these texts do not tell us much about historical events and conquests but they provide us with information on (the ideology of) Achaemenid kingship. Exceptional is the Bisotun-inscription of king Darius I which was written in three languages: Old Persian (written in an alphabetic cuneiform script and almost solely used for royal inscriptions), Elamite and Babylonian. The text portrays this king's background and his rise to the throne.



Part of the Bisotun-inscription. The third figure from the left represents king Darius I. To his left stand two of his servants. The nine bound figures to his right represent conquered peoples. A tenth figure (the throne pretender Gaumata?) is trampled under the king's foot. (copyright photo Persepolis Fortification Archive Project, Oriental Institute, Chicago)

Sources from Egypt

From Egypt come hundreds of Aramaic texts and hundreds of documents written in a cursive script known as 'Demotic Egyptian', many of which remain unpublished. The



An Elephantine papyrus

texts have a variety of topics and backgrounds. Several smaller collections of texts and scattered texts have been found, but I will focus on the largest collections here. Two sets of Aramaic documents have a background in the Achaemenid military sphere. One of them is a collection of papyri and ostraca (inscribed sherds of pottery) that originated in a Jewish community of soldier-families that

were stationed at Elephantine (modern Aswan). It documents aspects of their daily life (including the religious sphere) and their contacts with the royal administration. The other set of papyri comes from Hermopolis and are letters of soldiers to their families in the south. Another archive consisting of papyri and ostraca comes from Saqqara (Memphis) and is presumed to have a background in the Achaemenid administration of the region. Sadly the texts are damaged and most remain

unpublished. The texts that can be read deal with a variety of topics, including taxation.

The most important set of texts from Egypt for the study of the Achaemenid Empire is the so-called Aršama archive. It consists of 26 undated Aramaic letters written on leather that were discovered in a pouch. Since the texts were purchased on the antiquities market, we do not know where they came from. The documents revolve around a Persian provincial governor (satrap) and estate-holder, Aršama. The letters allude both to his functions as a satrap and to the management of his estate. In addition to these letters, a number of other significant references to Aršama have been identified (sometimes tentatively) in Babylonian, Greek, and a number of other Egyptian texts from Elephantine, Saqqara and unknown sites. These texts together with the 26 letters from the pouch (a total of 54 texts) constitute what is referred to as the 'Aršama dossier'.

Sources from Syria-Palestine

The sources from Syria-Palestine consist mostly of small concentrations and scattered finds of papyri and bullae. In addition, over 1,600 (possibly over 2,000) Aramaic ostraca have been found in Idumaea (Edom), of which 1,380 are considered legible and around 800 have been published. The vast majority can be dated to the fourth century B.C. The texts record transactions of mostly agricultural products. It is likely that they have a connection to the Achaemenid administration of the region: most ostraca probably record taxation in kind.

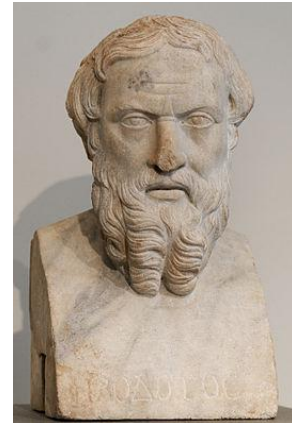
Another important source from the Syro-Palestinian region is the Hebrew Bible. In most of the relevant books (2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel; the book Esther has its setting in Achaemenid court) we find reflections on Persian rule over the region and literary depictions of Achaemenid kings with a distinctly moral undertone. The image of the kings is generally positive. This view also appears in the work of the Jewish-Roman writer Flavius Josephus (37-±100 A.D.) whose work was heavily influenced by the Old Testament.

Sources from Bactria

Bactria was a region in and around the northeast of Afghanistan. An archive has been identified in this remote part of the empire. It consists of 48 texts in Aramaic, 30 of which were written on leather. The remaining 18 are tallies (wooden sticks with markings and some lines in Aramaic) that reflect a system of bookkeeping. The texts come from the third quarter of the fourth century B.C. with the exception of two texts that are dated a century earlier. They are mostly accounts that have a background in the court of the satrap of Bactria, Ahvamazda, and letters from this satrap to his subordinate governor Bagavant. As such the archive provides us with insight in the highest sectors of bureaucracy and administration of Achaemenid Bactria and its neighboring region Sogdiana.

The Greco-Roman sources

The last group of texts under discussion comes largely from outside the Achaemenid Empire (with the exception of Herodotus and a few other authors such as Ctesias, Dinon and Heracleides of Cyme) and many of these sources postdate the period of Achaemenid rule. Still the Greco-Roman texts remain invaluable to our understanding of political history. Unlike the sources from the Near East, with the exception of parts of the Old Testament, they are literary narratives that focus on a variety of historical and cultural topics. An interest in historical analysis is reflected in many of the historians' work but they were often too uninformed, biased (for example the idea of the effeminate and arrogant 'Easterner') or inclined to embellish their accounts with fantastic stories. Scepticism is required, in particular when a historical account was written by an author who lived long after the fall of the Achaemenid Empire. Of the historians that could have been eyewitnesses Herodotus (±484-±425 B.C.) is the most important because of his interest in Achaemenid history and society. However, Herodotus' histories are filled with inaccuracies and fantastic tales. Other important historians of the time were, in chronological order:



*Bust of Herodotus
(copyright Marie-Lan Nguyen)*

- Thucydides (±460-±400 B.C.) who only illuminates the involvement of the Persians on the sidelines in the Peloponnesian War.
- Ctesias of Cnidus (fifth-fourth century B.C.) whose work is only known to us from excerpts in the works of later authors such as Diodorus Siculus (first century B.C.), Plutarch (50-120 A.D.) and Photius (ninth century A.D.).
- Xenophon (±430-±354 B.C.) who presents us with important information on Persian institutions and on certain regions of the empire, but who is not always objective or free of bias.

Two other contemporary historians can furthermore be mentioned here as they wrote histories of Persia (*Persica*):

- Dinon (±360-±340 B.C.).
- Heracleides of Cyme (±350 B.C.).

In addition to these historians Pseudo-Aristotle (lived around the same time as Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)) should be mentioned here. His *Oeconomica*, in which he discusses the economies of states, contains valuable information on taxation in the late Achaemenid to the early Seleucid period.

The following authors lived in later times, but also give us important information on the Achaemenid Empire in their works:

- Cornelius Nepos (first century B.C.).
- Diodorus Siculus (first century B.C.).
- Strabo (64-±24 B.C.).
- Curtius Rufus (first century A.D.?)
- Plutarch (50-120 A.D.).
- Arrian of Nicomedia (second century A.D.).
- Polyaeus (second century A.D.).
- Aelian (± 170-230 A.D.).
- Athenaeus (±200 A.D.).
- Justin (mid-second century to late fourth century A.D.)

Further reading

General

Books/articles

- Kuhrt, A., 2007 *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, Abingdon. (chapter 1 (p. 6-15) in particular provides a good starting point for anyone interested in the source material, whether in general or for specific regions)

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